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A Body Is Not a Metaphor: Barbara Hammer's X-Ray Vision

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*This article examines three films by legendary experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer that deal with the sick, aging, or dying body: *Optic Nerve* (1985), *Sanctus* (1990), and *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008). By analyzing films that do not explicitly confront sexual identity, this article questions the continuing usefulness of the designation “lesbian filmmaker” when considering Hammer’s diverse body of work. Tracing the “double consciousness” through which Hammer approaches the body and its construction in patriarchy—particularly in the discourse of medicine—this article argues that Hammer’s is a thoroughly corporeal, but not exclusively lesbian, cinema.*

KEYWORDS *lesbians, film, filmmakers, feminism, female body, medical technology*

Since the emergence of her filmmaking career in the late sixties, Barbara Hammer remains best known for her early films that documented the taboo subject of lesbian sexuality, including the groundbreaking *Dyketactics* (1974) as well as *Women’s Rites* (1974), *Superdyke* (1975), *Women I Love* (1976), and *Sappho* (1978). Frequently described as the “best” or “most prolific lesbian filmmaker in history,” Barbara Hammer has forged an experimental film practice that is inseparable from her ongoing political commitment to overcoming the patriarchal and heteronormative biases of mainstream cinema.

For many years, Hammer’s oeuvre has been familiar only to a small audience of experimental film fans and queer communities. With the publication of her autobiography *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, forthcoming 2010) as well as major retrospective of her films that will travel from the Museum

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of Modern Art to the Tate Modern and then on to the Reina Sofia in Madrid, Hammer may be on the verge of joining the ranks of the few women artists whose names can be described as “household” without deliberately invoking the traditionally feminine realm of domesticity.¹

Pausing to applaud these worthy accomplishments, this article aims to celebrate Hammer’s immense contribution to the history of experimental cinema. Through analysis of three films by Barbara Hammer that can be said to “queer” the sick (although not necessarily lesbian) body, this article asserts the importance of the alternative perspective that Hammer’s sexuality has undoubtedly helped to define and articulate in her filmmaking. And yet, by concentrating on films that do not focus specifically on lesbian identity, this article aims to quietly call into question the very usefulness of the term “lesbian filmmaker” to describe a career as protean as Hammer’s.

This article certainly does not aim to deny the centrality of lesbian identity, same-sex intimacy, or queer politics in Hammer’s oeuvre. By allowing the artist to regard mainstream culture from the point of view of someone outside the dominant regime of heterosexuality, Hammer’s identity as a lesbian feminist activist has enabled her to see the body—and its fraught construction across contradicting regimes of power and pleasure—with a kind of X-ray vision. And yet, in the hopes of demonstrating the often under-recognized breadth and diversity of Hammer’s work, I have deliberately chosen to buttress my more lengthy analysis of *Sanctus* (1990), with an analysis of two other films that also do *not* privilege lesbian identity or sexual content but approach the aging, sick body in ways that are consistent with what I would like to call Hammer’s “double consciousness”: *Optic Nerve* (1985) and *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008).

Before submitting the moniker “lesbian filmmaker” to our own X-ray vision, it is important to understand why it was such important distinction when Hammer first emerged as a filmmaker. While many other experimental filmmakers of her generation worked in collaboration with male artists and heterosexual romantic partners, Hammer’s emergence as a filmmaker coincided with and was inseparable from the declaration of her homosexuality. In this, as in many ways, Hammer is quite unique. Unlike other “lesbian filmmakers” of her generation, such as avant-garde filmmaker and choreographer Yvonne Rainer, who is hardly ever described as a lesbian filmmaker, having only “come out” in her sixties and acknowledged her sexual identity in a single film *MURDER and murder* (1996), and Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who publicly refuses to be described as a lesbian filmmaker and does not allow her films to be screened in lesbian and gay film festivals, Hammer has always embraced her sexual identity as a meaningful part of her artistic practice.

From her own account, the light into which Hammer stepped on her way out of the proverbial closet was a projected one. As the artist herself has asserted, “I didn’t start making 16-millimeter [films] until I came out.

I was 30 years old and married and teaching at the community college in Santa Rosa. This woman came into my [consciousness-raising] group, and I came out the next day—as soon as I heard the word ‘lesbian,’ I was in bed!” (quoted in Olson). As Hammer has often noted, when she first came out as an artist and a lesbian in the early 1970s, it was “a political act to work and speak as a lesbian artist in the dominant art world, and to speak as an *avant-garde* artist to a lesbian and gay audience” (Still in Motion).

In our present context, in which the visibility of gay men and lesbians has dramatically increased in mainstream media and the art world,² identifying an artist on the basis of her sexuality has come to seem a bit old-fashioned if not counterproductive. For sure, Hammer has been more than a “lesbian filmmaker” for nearly forty years—if we are to understand the notion of a lesbian artist as somebody who is not only a lesbian in their private life, but makes work that is primarily concerned with aspects of lesbian identity. To continue to describe Hammer as the “reigning,” “best,” or most “prolific” lesbian filmmaker is to reduce her broad, complex investigations of the corporeal body to the relatively narrow realm of identity politics. It is also to misunderstand the very nature of experimental film, which has been intimately and primarily concerned with the personal lives of its creators—including their often-unconventional sexual fantasies—since its inception. To be an experimental filmmaker, as Hammer is, is almost by definition to acknowledge one’s own subjective desires—corporeal, sexual, aesthetic, ethical, and political—in one’s cinema.

In this article, I have preferred to avoid these kind of sexuality-based distinctions in order to consider the ways in which the work of differently sexually oriented filmmakers of the postwar period ought to be considered *in relation to each other*, in the larger context of their ongoing exploration of the body. Like many of her contemporaries, Hammer has wielded her camera as an extension of her body, consistently attempting to figure the intimacies of corporeal experience outside of the constraints of mainstream cinema. She has done this formally, through the use of experimental, non-linear forms that avoid the objectifying male gaze, and economically, by frequently serving as her own distributor and establishing certain frames that help shape the exhibition context of her films. Certainly, Hammer’s strategies of economic self-determination and filmic experimentation have been crucial to the historic articulation of a lesbian gaze in the cinema. But they have been equally as effective for the development of a cinema that pushes the boundaries of corporeal representation in ways that do not immediately reference sexual identity.

Like her mentor Stan Brakhage, Hammer often relies on personal experiences to construct new ways of seeing in the cinema. But while the rituals of the traditional (albeit bohemian) nuclear family were the source of Brakhage’s inspiration, for Hammer, her experiences outside of heteronormative institutions have been formative to her creative process. In

analogous ways to the roles played by heterosexual sex, childbirth, child-rearing, and coupled domesticity in Brakhage's work, Hammer's travels with female friends and lovers, participation in the feminist movement and lesbian collectives and conferences, same-sex erotic adventures and romantic partnerships, AIDS activism, and the exploration of the natural world have served as dependable inspiration for more than four decades. Yet if Brakhage discovered a new phenomenological approach to seeing, in which habitual practices of vision could be unlearned through the manipulation of the filmic image, Hammer applied this method not only to individual sensory experience but also to the social and political experience of being-[an-Other]-in-the-world.

Like W. E. B. DuBois's notion of blackness as productive of an alternative lens through which to view white supremacist society, Hammer's lesbian identity has enabled a kind of "double consciousness,"³ allowing her to observe in keen detail the ways in which the body and its desires are implanted, disciplined, and regulated in capitalist patriarchy. A conduit to her development of a thoroughly corporeal cinema, rather than its ultimate expressive goal, Hammer's lesbian identity has served as means rather than an end to her cinematic strivings.

Nevertheless, it would be unreasonable to diminish the significant ways in which gender and sexual identity have provided a framework for Hammer's cinematic experiments. For Hammer, postwar experimental film's historically privileged connection to the representation of female subjectivity favored the cinema over other art forms, like painting, which Hammer had originally determined to pursue. Remember that between legendary filmmakers Maya Deren and Germaine Dulac, avant-garde cinema already had two mommies by the time Hammer came of age as an artist and came out as a lesbian. In an interview with Jacquelyn Zita, published in a 1981 issue of *Jump Cut* devoted to "Lesbians and film," Hammer describes the impact of discovering experimental cinema's matrilineal heritage, specifically the work of Maya Deren.

The diminished presence of male figures in Hammer's creative heritage and in the subject matter upon which she most often focuses has fully enabled her artistic voice to remain independent and vibrant. By focusing on lesbian love and sexuality, Hammer has been able to short-circuit the presence of man both in front of and behind the camera that was so problematic (and also generative) for other female experimental directors of her generation. Until Hammer's bold interventions, the representation of lesbian lovemaking remained the provenance of sexploitation or porn films geared toward heterosexual male viewers. As feminist film scholar E. Ann Kaplan has noted, experimental form was a way for lesbian filmmakers to "avoid the co-optation of their images by male spectators reared to view lesbian love-making as pornographic" (Kaplan 89). It is within this context

that we can better understand Hammer's controversial decision to restrict the premiere of her groundbreaking film *Dyketactics* to exclusively female audiences. Challenging the exclusive right of the male viewer to have all the mummies to himself, Hammer asserted the controversial desire for women spectators to have access to the figuration of the erotic female body without male mediation.

Hammer has adjusted the radical separatist stance that characterized her early career. Nevertheless, she has not diminished the political inflection of her work. Yet as her politics have evolved, so has the context in which her work has been received. The vicissitudes of Hammer's career neatly parallel the tumultuous evolution of the discourses in which her work is habitually situated: feminism, identity politics, lesbian sexuality, and experimental film practice. Although Hammer's work has always been exemplary of these traditions, she has often found herself an outlaw within them. Constantly troubling recognized categories with her marked lack of sexual and cinematic inhibitions, Hammer has been criticized for both her emphasis on lesbian sexuality and her move away from it. Often excluded from the male dominated canons of avant-garde cinema, or included superficially as a particularly useful token because she is both a woman and a lesbian, Hammer has been a polemic figure even in feminist camps.

With their unabashed focus on taboo aspects of lesbian identity at a time when desire between women was effectively silenced, Hammer's early films were groundbreaking. Nevertheless, as the vernacular idiom of second-generation feminism gave way to a more theoretical, academic discourse, Hammer's work was critiqued for being too "essentialist" (Juhasz 77–78). Indeed, by celebrating a female power that was derived from biological functions, female ritual, and the forms of women's organs and orgasms, Hammer's early films insisted on a female (and lesbian) specificity. Yet as Alexandra Juhasz points out, this approach fell out of favor by the late 1970s, as feminist theoretical interest shifted from a "celebration of the representation of women's 'truth' by female filmmakers to an interrogation of how the cinema was complicit in 'creating a patriarchal way of seeing'" (Juhasz 78). In this context, Hammer's "body work" was criticized for not sufficiently investigating how discourses of power shape notions of identity and corporeal consciousness.

For female experimental filmmakers whose access to the apparatus has always been fraught, falling into disfavor with cultural gatekeepers, academics, and theorists can have detrimental effects on one's career. The dismissal of Hammer's work by both the art world and the academy in the late seventies and eighties restricted her ability to get shows and grants, both of which were crucial to bringing her work to public consciousness. Yet as Hammer's work moved away from what may be seen as its naïve but necessary origins towards an investigation of the social construction of identity,

sexuality, and the body, she was again criticized—this time for not being rigorous enough.⁴

Rather than belabor the moments when Hammer's artistic ambition has noticeably overwhelmed her available resources, I would like to turn to an analysis of three films that address the production of discursive meaning through, on, and about the body. Hammer's focus on the female body is paramount in *Sanctus*, *Optic Nerve*, and *A Horse is Not a Metaphor*. Yet in these films, Hammer pivots away from *Eros* toward *Thanatos*, supplanting the erotic body, which was the hallmark of her early career, with a focus on aging, sick, and dying bodies. By using an optical printer to create multi-layered, skewed, and processed images, Hammer "queers" the image, poetically suggesting the way in which the body is always mediated, constructed and open to new interpretations. Less didactic than much of Hammer's later, documentary explorations, these films rely exclusively on visual and musical language to communicate subtle revelations about the fragility of the human body, its discipline and imprisonment in (male) institutions of science and medicine, and the imminence of its extinction. Satisfying the formalist's desire for aesthetic beauty and the achievement of harmony between form and content, these films are nonetheless profoundly political works.

For women artists, the aging female body—as subject and as reluctant condition of being—is a particularly fraught issue in a culture that privileges physical beauty and youthfulness. Not only do very few feature films feature aging female stars, but in a visual culture obsessed with youth, luxury, and vitality, the very representation of sickness and death remains taboo. When the aging female body is referenced, it is usually transformed into a site of the grotesque, macabre, or comic. In our desire to associate sickness and death as unfortunate conditions that happen exclusively to someone else, we are reluctant to identify with aging characters, both onscreen and off.

This tendency to quarantine or otherwise render invisible the aging female body is particularly problematic for the generation of female artists who used their own bodies as both their primary artistic tool and political weapon. While many of the female "body artists" who came to prominence in the 1960s and '70s have unfortunately passed away,⁵ many of the artists who survive from that generation, like Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer, have made visible, in poignant and provocative ways, the evolution of their own bodies as a means of expression.⁶ Refusing to give up the physical vocabulary of the body in spite of their increasing age, these artists continue to enact performances that require incredible physical strength and stamina. And yet fore-grounded in their more recent practice is the new recognition of the body's fallibility, as well as an acknowledgment of the duress occasioned by submitting one's own body to the arduous regimes practiced by younger versions of oneself. Finally, their continuing practice broaches the difficult question of what happens to a female body artist when the body they have used in an activist way to counter male objectification

ages and comes to represent something quite different in the social and personal imaginary.

Like these artists, Hammer has been particularly sensitive to issues of aging and illness, paying careful attention to the way the body becomes reshaped and re-signified. In both *Sanctus* and *Optic Nerve*, Hammer rejects the distinction between Self and Other that has been the hallmark of interpersonal relations within our capitalist, patriarchal, sexist, racist, and age-ist society. By establishing an empathetic rather than fetishistic or oppressive relationship between bodies, Hammer's work strives to create new types of collective experience that can serve as the occasion and site for political action. Refuting the traditional "objective" relationship between documentary filmmakers and their subjects, Hammer takes an intimate approach to the subjects of her films, merging emotional transparency and corporeal closeness with a critical awareness of the power of the apparatus to frame and construct meaning.

Optic Nerve, which Hammer made in 1985 and which was included in the Whitney Biennial in 1987, uses the processes of optical printing and image re-scanning to produce a meditation on aging that both depicts and attempts to recreate the sensory experience of her 97-year-old grandmother Anna during her final stages of life. Functioning as an unseen eye, Hammer's camera follows Anna, as she glides on her wheelchair through the labyrinthine hallways of medical centers, nursing homes, and the incandescent aisles of supermarkets. By using an optical printer⁷ to process the images, Hammer is able to present fragmented and layered imagery that is indicative of Anna's internal consciousness.

In addition to being an allusion to the optical apparatus that is cinema, the title of Hammer's film more literally refers to the second cranial nerve, which transmits visual information from the retina to the brain.⁸ Damage to the optic nerve, which Anna suffered, typically causes permanent and potentially severe loss of vision, as well as an abnormal papillary reflex. By mimicking Anna's medical condition in an obscured, multi-layered, and flickering film-making style, Hammer approximates the sensory experience of her beloved subject, creating a palpable, nearly corporeal empathy between herself, the viewer, and her grandmother. By asking viewers to see the world through what Hammer imagines as her grandmother's eyes, the filmmaker forges a phenomenological bond between subject, filmmaker, and audience.

Hammer's later film *Sanctus* (1990) is a nineteen-minute, found-footage meditation on this traditional relationship between Self and Other—here expressed through the relationship between a (male) doctor and his (female) patient. (Like the term *objet trouvé* in art history, "found-footage" refers to material that is not created by the artist but borrowed from another context and transformed.) In this film, Hammer re-photographs moving X-rays originally shot by Dr. James Sibley Watson and his colleagues in the 1950s. Although Watson remains best known for directing *The Fall of the House*

of *Usher* in 1929, he was also an important, albeit neglected, pioneer of American avant-garde cinema as well as a medical doctor.⁹

Illicitly “borrowed” from the George Eastman House film archive in Rochester, NY, when Hammer sidestepped from an official tour, Watson’s medical footage fills a perceived hole in both artistic and scientific images of the body. Making the invisible cavities of the body visible, Watson’s original X-ray footage reveals the skeletal structure of a woman’s body as well as the bodies of other sentient creatures, including a frog and rabbit. Like Eadweard Muybridge’s famous animal locomotion studies from the late nineteenth century, Watson’s imagery serves to illustrate the mechanics of the body as it performs simple motions. Yet whereas Muybridge documented human and animal movements in still photographs where only the outer gestures of the body were visible, Watson’s footage presents the X-rayed body in motion.

Surprisingly, the simple addition of movement—to the images themselves, as well as to the bodies documented—to Muybridge’s Victorian-era toolbox completely re-invigorates the spectacular quality of the kinetic body. Although Watson’s cinefluorographic experiments were made in the 1950s, when moving images no longer constituted a spectacle in itself, the ability to see what the body moving looks like from the inside retains the power to de-familiarize, startle, and delight.

Suddenly, the most banal activities arrest the viewer’s attention. A body turns. A hand pours liquid from a pitcher into a glass. A human throat contracts as it swallows. A see-through apparition adjusts its face cosmetically, gendering its otherwise neutered body through the application of lipstick. Rendered in the same shimmering translucence as the pitcher from which she pours, the woman’s body is transformed into a lucid, glassy flask. There, the milky white substance passes through the mouth, before taking the long, vertiginous plunge down the throat. How vain she looks applying her lipstick and checking her appearance in a compact! Does she not know she’s just a loosely sewn sac of organs? How comical to watch a skeleton attempt to disguise itself with Max Factor fantasies! (See Figure 1).

Watching the woman attempt to disguise herself in a format where nothing can be concealed makes the viewer painfully aware of the violence of total exposure. Here, there is no possibility of evading the camera’s gaze, for even the potentially emancipatory possibilities of the female masquerade are rendered futile.¹⁰ Finally, the ancient desire of the cinema to penetrate the interiority of woman’s body can be realized. Like luggage passing through the surveillance camera, the clandestine orifices of the woman’s inner space are made visible in Watson’s footage, so that they may be scrutinized, approved, and moved seamlessly through the apparatus.

Throughout the course of her mesmerizing short, Hammer subjects Watson’s footage to a series of Warholian color modifications, superimpositions, and repetitions by meticulously working the footage through an



FIGURE 1 How vain the skeletal woman looks checking her makeup in Barbara Hammer's found-footage film *Sanctus* (1990). The footage is borrowed from Dr. James Watson's cinefluorography (moving X-ray) experiments from the 1950s, which exposed both its subjects and the doctors who made them to the prolonged effects of radiation. Courtesy of Barbara Hammer; www.barbarahammer.com. (Reprinted with permission.)

optical printer. The results convert the exposed insides of the human body into a stunning hieroglyph. Sometimes, the screen is divided into quadrants, in which four candy-colored images of the balletic body compete for the viewer's attention. Transforming Watson's black and white cinefluorography into a kaleidoscope of color and light, Hammer offers the woman's body as a kinetic spectacle for the viewer's visual consumption. Like the experimental animation films of Len Lye, Oskar Fischinger, Marie Menken, or Harry Smith, Hammer's images exude a magical effect on the viewer, as they seem to enliven a substance that otherwise seems vaguely mechanical or automatous.

Without the distinguishing characteristics of face and skin that are so privileged in Western notions of personality and psychology, Watson's animated skeletons seem like human puppets performing a delightful *danse macabre*. Like Menken's beads or Smith's patterned shapes, Watson's X-ray figures seem like abstract forms, animated by the technology, rather than *a priori*. Indeed, when seduced by the enchanting tableau of figures, it is easy to forget that both the subjects of the film and the medical professionals who created them were exposed to the prolonged effects of radiation.

While Watson's footage seduces the viewer with its phantasmagoric display of the body's innermost cavities, Hammer's adjustments further beautify and aestheticize the original images. Yet there is more at stake in Hammer's project than the formal enhancement of the image. Hammer intercuts

Watson's fascinating footage of women performing banal actions with images of a beautiful woman's face, as well as images of a type-written text in which certain words are highlighted. Weaving together a collage of images, a discourse of medical pathology begins to emerge in Hammer's film. A woman's eyes gaze worriedly to the side; the word "metastasized" is glimpsed as if under a pointed beam of light. If the structuring absence of Watson's footage is the suffering body, then Hammer restores an awareness of the anguish—both physical and emotional—that remains repressed in the pyrotechnics of scientific imagery.

Whereas Watson's footage seems designed to create astonishment at his remarkable medical and cinematic accomplishments, Hammer's interventions create empathy for the anonymous subjects upon whose bodies his experiments are propped. By suggesting an imaginary identity for the women whose insides we have viewed detachedly, Hammer allows viewers a partial identification through which to realize the exploitations that are often at the heart of medical progress. What originally seems to celebrate the exhibitionistic side of a pure "cinema of attractions"¹¹—look what film can do!—subtly transforms, in Hammer's hands, into a feminist critique of the apparatuses of surveillance within patriarchy.

While we are perhaps naively accustomed to thinking of medicine's scientific gaze and cinema's scopophilic gaze as resolutely distinct, Hammer's film illustrates the conjunction of these two desirous regimes in Watson's footage. Although the ostensible reason for Watson's X-ray experiments may have been "scientific," it is clear from Hammer's footage that the woman exists, as film theorist Laura Mulvey has famously stated, "to-be-looked-at" (Mulvey). Ostensibly designed to reveal the hidden secrets of the body for medical purposes, Watson's images, like Muybridge's before them, exceed their medical function, appealing as compellingly to a prurient gaze that is intent on surveying the exposed, vulnerable body. And as in Muybridge's footage, the woman's body is particularly fetishized and narrativized. As Linda Williams has argued about Muybridge's work, the inclusion of unnecessary props (such as the makeup case and the lipstick) and the performance of gender-specific activities in Watson's footage constitutes a "gratuitous fantasization and iconization of the bodies of women" in which the female objects of scientific scrutiny are compelled to play an assumed role that is nonetheless naturalized by its ubiquity in dominant cultural forms of the period (Williams).

Hammer's lens re-narrativizes the bodies collected in Watson's laboratory. We do not learn any real biographical information about the unknown women whose inner and outer spaces we examine. Nevertheless, Hammer's collage approach suggests a composite identity for the mysterious protagonist(s) by including images of a young starlet's beautiful face gazing seductively at the camera. The woman's face we see belongs to the oddly designated "China Girl," one of many anonymous actresses whose

faces habitually appeared for two to four frames on reel leaders in order to assist film processing lab technicians with color calibration.¹² Inter-cutting between the caucasian “China’s Girl’s” face, and Watson’s forensic footage of the body, Hammer subtly weaves the fate of these anonymous subjects together, suggesting an ominous narrative for the women whose bodies and faces have been instrumentalized for the sake of “clarity” in the medical and cinematographic apparatus.

And yet, Hammer also allows us to view them from both a lesbian and a feminist point of view. In Hammer’s hands, the bodies are transformed from guinea pigs of a lethal medical apparatus, to subjects who have at least the hypothetical capacity to return the viewer’s gaze. Hammer re-establishes empathy, but she also restores the possibility for a desirous exchange of looks, in which the body of the subject can signify something other than a medical statistic. The imaginary identity Hammer creates is not a passive body to be diagnosed and discarded, but something between an alluring *femme fatale* and a demure damsel in distress. She is the woman of Hammer’s fantasies, a working-woman’s Ava Gardner in need of protection from the Man by her lesbian sisters. Like Agnes Varda’s extraordinary film *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), in which a beautiful woman spends two revelatory hours waiting for medical test results to inform her whether she has a life-threatening illness, Hammer’s film exposes the way in which the fetishization of the female body goes hand in hand with the oppression of women. And like the real-life pop star Corrinne Marchand, whose face decorates Varda’s brilliant tale of a woman discovering her own identity beneath her polished surface, Hammer’s anonymous “star” must contend with being a body rather than a metaphor.

Hammer is an avowed admirer of Watson’s innovative work.¹³ Nevertheless, *Sanctus* implicitly critiques the way his footage pathologizes, specularizes and exploits the female body for “medical” purposes. In a trajectory that includes the rampant misdiagnosis and obscene photographic documentation of female hysterics at Charcot’s infamous clinic at the Salpêtrière, and the exploitative display of Saarjite Baartman—the so-called “Hottentot Venus”—the modern “medical” treatment of female patients has been unforgivably compromised by the racist and sexist attitudes that have animated it. While the development of X-ray and other internal imaging technology have vastly improved the process of diagnosis—since it allows doctors to see inside the body without cutting it open—it cannot be extricated from the categorization, control, and discipline of the human body that is central to the project of medicine.

This is especially true of Watson’s technique of cineflurography, which exposed individuals to the toxic effects of radiation for prolonged, medically unjustified experiments. In revealing herself to us, the subject(s) of Watson’s footage unwittingly endangered her own body. Yet if Watson’s contemporaries were ignorant of the dangers of radiation—Watson and his colleagues all died of cancer—contemporary audiences are certainly aware of this unsaid

dimension of Hammer's film. Indeed, the old adage that equates the camera with a weapon reaches its apotheosis in medical photography. Everyday medical tests and procedures marry lens and knife—not self-reflexively to reveal the violence of the apparatus, but as an unexamined matter of course. In the context of radiation's devastating effects on the body, Watson's prurient gaze is literally toxic. By making woman visible, he threatened to extinguish her.

By applying a range of her signature de-familiarizing techniques to the footage, Hammer transforms the visible record of disease into a beautiful, but ultimately resistant document of a body in need of protection from external assault. Thanks to Hammer's interventions, which obscure the anatomical "truth" that the X-ray footage attempts to reveal, the woman's body can resist yielding its corporeal secrets to the male gaze that has been authorized to interpret them.

As with *Optic Nerve*, the title of *Sanctus* is significant. The Latin word for holy, "Sanctus" is also the name of an important hymn of Christian liturgy.¹⁴ Enhanced by a stunning liturgical score by composer Neil Rolnick, *Sanctus* consecrates the flesh rather than the spirit. Hammer's film re-mystifies the sacred, and presumably ill flesh that has been stripped of its aura by scientific technologies.

Like both *Sanctus* and *Optic Nerve*, Barbara Hammer's recent film *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008) is a hymn to the fragility of the human body. Made to document Hammer's battle with ovarian cancer, *Horse* primarily consists of intimate footage of the medical procedures Hammer endured in the course of her treatment, footage of two horses that also experienced disease simultaneous to the filmmaker's illness, as well as images of the recovering filmmaker re-asserting her spiritual and corporeal self in the midst of natural surroundings.

Formally, *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* is a less beautiful film than *Sanctus*, or for that matter, many of Hammer's other works. There is something rough around the edges that stems, it seems, from the film's unapologetically personal insistence on its subject matter. Its heroine is not always beautiful, and nothing is done to disguise this fact. At different points of the film, the artist's body is presented swollen, naked, pierced, wrinkled, balding, and bruised. Unlike Hammer's exuberant film *Dream Age* (1979) in which the forty-year-old artist imagined the character of a seventy-year-old lesbian feminist in search of her forty-year-old self, in *Horse*, the artist has become a seventy-year-old lesbian feminist battling for her life.

Like artist Hannah Wilke's heart-wrenching work *Intra-Venus* (1994), a posthumously published photographic documentation of the artist's own deterioration from lymphoma and its ultimately ineffective treatment via chemotherapy, *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* presents the artist's own besieged, violated, and damaged body as a site to be surveyed. Bravely railing against



FIGURE 2 The septuagenarian filmmaker takes a triumphant swim while recovering from ovarian cancer in her recent diary film, *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008). Swerving from the contemplation of Eros to Thanatos, Hammer refuses to render the aging body invisible—even when it is her own. Courtesy of Barbara Hammer; www.barbarahammer.com. (Reprinted with permission.)

the tendency of clinical procedures to hide the patient as if illness were a personal shame, *Horse* invites the viewer to watch intimate aspects of Hammer's treatment. It also invites the viewer to share moments of Hammer's recovery, as we witness her walking naked through the woods, swimming, and riding horses at a Wyoming ranch (See Figure 2).

Although it punctuates a lifetime of defiant gestures, *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* is in a category of defiance all its own. If taboos are transgressed here, they are not done so ostentatiously, but matter-of-factly. Lacking the sense of brazenness that characterizes some of the filmmaker's earlier work, there is a new humility here, a sense of the filmmaker gratefully feeling her way through material that is as familiar as it is life-threatening. When Hammer shows the nude body of an old woman, it is not to insist that the aging body of a lesbian is beautiful—although it is that, too—but because it is her own body, the only one she has left.

Yet if the filmmaker has become the subject of medical attention, the film is the director's refusal to become its anonymous object. It is a bold, unadorned statement of personal idiosyncrasy, a deliberate refusal to disappear as a subject. Like Jasper Johns's late paintings, the film is a compendium of its artist's signature gestures. Much of the film's iconography will be familiar to fans of Hammer's cinema: moving water, the nude female form, close-ups of hair and skin, and images of sun-speckled trees remind

the viewer of Hammer's abiding fascination with the textures of the natural world. But there are other images here as well that cannot be accommodated into the perhaps essentialist vision of "woman as rustic goddess" that Hammer has been juggling for decades. Hospital beds, chemotherapy bags, and hypodermic needles form a dystopian circle around Hammer's vision of being-in-the-world. And yet the film is not afraid to show its seams; it is neither conceptually neat nor tidily edited. Trading the director's occasional use of theoretical quotation for the inclusion of plain-spoken titles about the dangers and often unrecognized symptoms of ovarian cancer, *Horse* is an undisguised bit of activism, a frank plea for survival, and an everyday chronicle of what a person must endure, regardless of how they imagine themselves. The film is a touching portrait of a body that has given up its pretenses but not its desire to live. Like many meaningful lives, *Horse* is not a grand piece of art, but a courageous, deliberate, and honest one.

Confronted by an experimental film community in which male directors figured female subjectivity through phallogentric conventions and lesbian sexuality was relegated to the wet dream factory of heterosexual porn, Hammer decided to make her own cinematic documents of the female body. Over the course of forty years, she has created a formally innovative and intensely personal cinematic vocabulary with which to depict a thoroughly embodied female subjectivity. Rejecting the fiction that the camera can ever be a neutral apparatus that can record the truth of women's lived experience, Hammer has interrogated the very language of cinema in order to counter the objectification of women.

Hammer is undoubtedly a feminist filmmaker and a lesbian filmmaker. Yet by emphasizing both experimental aesthetics and the exploration of individual pleasure and pain, Hammer has moved away from the truth-telling, consciousness-raising goals of more straightforwardly feminist filmmakers whose work directly documented the harsh social realities of lived female experience.¹⁵ Like many of her contemporaries, including Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Curtis Harrington, George Kuchar, James Broughton, Coni Beeson, and Su Friedrich, Hammer has explored aspects of same-sex desire in her films, often as a way of troubling the norms of the patriarchal apparatus, but just as often as a way of celebrating the sensual, erotic pleasures of queer bodies that have been eclipsed by Hollywood cinema's compulsory focus on heterosexual romance. Her filmmaking career was borne with her ecstatic discovery of an alternative sexual identity liberated from the constraints of marriage and compulsory heterosexuality, and much of her work has been dedicated to the representation of lesbian sexuality. Yet the importance of her work to me has always been the way she models how to live in the world: boldly, curiously, adventurously, honestly, and unapologetically. By using the body in all of its stages as her primary artistic tool, Hammer has created a corpus of work that exceeds the fraught category of "lesbian filmmaker."

NOTES

1. See Jerry Saltz's "Where Are All the Women Artists at MoMA?" (*New York Magazine*, November 18, 2007) for some troubling statistics on the slim percentage of women artists represented at the Museum of Modern Art. <http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/40979/> Also see Linda Nochlin's classic feminist essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (Westview Press, 1988, 147–158).

2. See Larry Gross, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

3. W.E.B. DuBois first originated this term in an 1897 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "Strivings of the Negro People." It was later republished and slightly edited under the heading "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in his 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York/Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1994).

4. In an otherwise celebratory account of her career, film scholar Chuck Kleinhans offers a persuasive critique of Hammer's later documentary work, including *History Lessons*, which he faults for the director's "slippery notion of history and what historical investigation is or could be" ("Barbara Hammer: Lyrics and History," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007; pp. 167–187, 175).

5. I am thinking here of the tragic, premature deaths of Eva Hesse (1936–1970), Ana Mendieta (1948–1985), Gina Pane (1939–1990), Hannah Wilke (1940–1993).

6. To cite one example, Serbian-born artist Marina Abramovic has consistently explored the limits of the body through legendary performances that involve cutting, burning, and otherwise subjecting herself to the harm produced by external stimuli (*Rhythm 10*, 1973 and *Rhythm 5*, 1974) as well as inviting audience members to apply a range of potentially dangerous objects to her body in any way they chose (*Rhythm 0*, 1974). In November 2005, Abramovic recreated some of the most seminal works of performance art from the 1960s and '70s at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in a week-long performance piece entitled *Seven Easy Pieces*. Subjecting herself to the conditions demanded by the original performances for seven hours on seven consecutive nights, Abramovic's work was intended as an homage to groundbreaking performance work that, because of its very nature as ephemeral and participatory, had eluded complete forms of documentation when it was originally performed.

7. An optical printer is a device consisting of one or more film projectors mechanically linked to a movie camera. It allows filmmakers to re-photograph one or more strips of film. The optical printer is used for making special effects for motion pictures, or for copying and restoring old film material.

8. The optic nerve is the second of twelve paired cranial nerves but is considered to be part of the central nervous system. This is an important issue, as fiber tracks of the mammalian central nervous system (as opposed to the peripheral nervous system) are incapable of regeneration and hence optic nerve damage produces irreversible blindness.

9. James Sibley Watson, Jr. (1894–1982) was a philanthropist, publisher, and early experimenter in motion pictures. He produced, directed, and served as cinematographer and art director for two films: *The Fall of the House of Usber* (1928) (credited as J.S. Watson Jr.) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933). Made in collaboration with Melville Weber, Watson's film *Lot in Sodom* is one of the earliest pioneers of gay experimental cinema.

10. See Mary Ann Doane's theory of the female masquerade, in which she borrows earlier ideas from Joan Riviere, in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23, 3–4 (1982) and "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator" *Discourse* 11 (Fall–Winter 1988–89): 47. Doane argues that there are two ways for the female spectator to experience classical cinema: to masochistically over-identify with the image, or to narcissistically become one's own object of desire. Doane proposes that the flaunting of femininity may provide an alternative way for female viewers to distance themselves from the image and thus possess it.

11. Film scholar Tom Gunning has described the early period of cinema, from 1895 to approximately 1908, as a "cinema of attractions" in which an exhibitionistic desire to astonish takes precedence over the desire for narrative. See his essays "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser. London: BFI, 1990 and "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator." *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989).

12. There is some debate about the origin of the phrase “China Girl.” Many contend that its origin dates back to the pre-sound days of lab operations, when a lab worker spliced into the leader of a finished negative two or three frames from a properly exposed negative from a camera test of a young starlet for a quick check of print quality. Supposedly, the girl was wearing a straw Chinese peasant hat. <http://www.cinematography.net/OriginsOfChinagirl.htm>

13. Made in the same year as *Sanctus*, *Dr. Watson's X-Rays* is a documentary Hammer made about his contributions to the diverse fields of literature, medicine, experimental cinema, and industrial film. Likewise, *Nitrate Kisses* (1993), Hammer's documentary about the marginalization and repression of homosexuality since World War I, visually cites *Lot in Sodom* as one of the central Ur-texts of gay and lesbian cinema.

14. In Western Christianity, the Sanctus is sung (or said) at the heart of the eucharistic prayer, the prayer of consecration of the bread and wine.

15. Here I am referring to first-wave “feminist” documentaries like *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur, 1971) and *Growing Up Female* (Jim Klein and Julie Reichert, 1971), which use cinema verité strategies to more realistically render the conflicts that besiege their working-class female subjects.

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