

## **Commitment and desire in Sharon Hayes' *Ricerche: three*.**

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In this article, I address how Sharon Hayes' *Ricerche: three*, 2013 represents and mediates the often-painful psychic processes of group formation, here propelled by a dialectical relationship between internal and external social pressure. I analyse the film through histories of separatism and the breakdown of feminist groups, the notion of gender as a 'serial' in the work of philosopher Iris Marion Young, and ideas drawn from the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion on groups. These categories – the serial and the group– map onto the film's central engagement with the possibilities of an affirmed, shared politics and how this is driven, determined and disrupted by commitment and desire.

*Ricerche: three* is a thirty-eight minute video shot at Mount Holyoke, a women's college in Massachusetts. It is loosely based on Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Comizi d'amore* (Love Meetings) 1964, a documentary that surveys changing social mores around sex in post-Marshall Plan Italy through interviews with groups in a variety of locations from Bologna to Sicily, Naples to rural Emilia Romagna. Pasolini asks questions about sexual freedom, marriage and love. By interviewing peasant families in the South, the Northern bourgeoisie, proletarians, students and teenage girls, we gain a picture of the uneven nature of Italian society. Nation, sexuality, religion, gender, family and class all stand as determining factors driving the answers to Pasolini's questions. The film is structured into four sections and between each, Pasolini analyses the group interviews in relation to broader social and political issues alongside interlocutors including the novelist Alberto Moravia, psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti, poet Giuseppe Ungaretti and journalist Oriana Fallaci.

In *Ricerche: three* Hayes draws from the group interview structure and the focus on gender and sexuality in *Comizi d'amore*, frequently borrowing from Pasolini's questions, provocations and interview style. In *Comizi d'Amore*, Pasolini's subjects are drawn together because they are all Italian, and the film repeatedly returns to the question of how to locate the 'true Italy' across the vectors of class, religion,

sexuality and gender that inform his subjects' responses. In the case of *Ricerche: three*, the individuals on screen are nominally drawn together by fact they are all women, and Hayes mobilises the form of the group interview to explore ideas of consensus, group formation, identity, sexuality and gender at Mount Holyoke. Both films attempt to locate smaller allegiances and groups within larger structures, with these being nation in the case of Pasolini and womanhood in the case of Hayes. In an interview at the Havana Biennale about *Ricerche: three*, Hayes explained that 'though it's a particular group of thirty-six students at an all women's college in the US, I am also trying to speak to a larger way in which we form ourselves as collectives ... across or cutting through national identities.'<sup>1</sup> This exemplifies the relationship between Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore* and *Ricerche: three*. If Pasolini seeks to use national identity to cut across class, gender, and religion in order to discover the 'real Italy', Hayes poses womanhood as the potential means through which a collective subject with political agency might be located.

In *Ricerche: three*, it is the tension between choice and the biological and social determination of one's subjectivity that serves to radically transform the meaning of womanhood from the historical grounds upon which Mount Holyoke was 'women only'. Founded in 1837, Mount Holyoke was the first of the 'Seven Sisters' women-only liberal arts colleges in the Northeast United States; others include Bryn Mawr, Vassar and Smith. Historically an elite institution, in recent years the college has seen growing activism around race and trans politics. In 2014, Mount Holyoke began accepting applications from anyone who is not a biologically born male who identifies as a man, or in shorthand, a 'cis man'.<sup>2</sup> This followed many instances of woman students transitioning to men whilst enrolled at the college, developments that pressured the administration to change their admissions policy to also include trans women, and biologically born males who identify as women.<sup>3</sup> The students within the group interviewed by Hayes includes trans men, masculine identified and gender fluid individuals, alongside a diverse group of cis women.

If previously the definition of 'woman' for the purposes of admission at Mount Holyoke was defined in a passive sense, propelled by biology, patriarchal laws and

societal conventions, *Ricerche: three* evidences an active process by which gender identification is being tested and put on trial in the same way the possibility of discovering the 'real Italy' is stretched in Pasolini's *Comizi d'Amore*. This contributes to the production of a particular temporality; various students explain that outsiders to Mount Holyoke will dismiss their non-binary gender identification as 'just a phase'. As one trans man explains, his family's view of his gender is reduced to a passing fad, time limited to a four-year college degree, thus standing as a variation on the 'lesbian-until-graduation' stereotype, as discussed by Julia Bryan-Wilson.<sup>4</sup> If a political praxis of testing the limits of gender is operative at Mount Holyoke, but often understood as a 'phase' by the external 'real world', this indicates the difficult dynamic between the particular, self-defined group and the category 'woman'.

This is an issue taken up by Iris Marion Young through the concept of the 'serial' which I introduce here to foreground the specificity of *Ricerche: three* as a film about groups, as much as it is about the changing dynamics of the identity 'woman'.<sup>5</sup> Young explains her use of the term 'serial' to describe 'woman' as resulting from the fact that:

Without some sense in which "woman" is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women who feminists ought to include.<sup>6</sup>

Young goes on to argue that without being able to designate certain people within the category 'woman', 'it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process', and appeals to multiple categories risks falling into liberal individualism.<sup>7</sup> As a solution to this problem, Young proposes the concept of the serial, drawn from Jean Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* 1960 as an alternative to the 'group', and the infinite regress of producing neologisms and new categories.

Young distinguishes the serial from the group through the way members of a group usually 'share certain goals, projects, traits and/ or self-conceptions'. In contrast, 'members of series pursue their own individual ends without necessarily having anything at all in common.'<sup>8</sup> As a series, woman can be identified through the relation 'their actions have to material objects and practico-inert histories.'<sup>9</sup> This produces an amorphous, indeterminate unity, one that slips, shifts and whose 'qualities and characteristics are impossible to pin down because they are an inert result of the confluence of actions.'<sup>10</sup> As Young explains, being part of a series does not define individual identity, and allows room for multiple identifications beyond 'woman', which may indeed be more important to an individual, such as class, race, religion, sexuality, political commitment and so on. Yet, the series 'woman' is 'enabled and constrained by the structural relations of enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labour.'<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, in *Ricerche: three*, it is precisely this violently 'passive unity' that drive the group's desires to place pressure on normative understandings and experiences of womanhood, thus moving from the series to a group.

As such, the film unfolds as a microcosmic exploration of how collaboration takes shape in small groups. This process is shaped by a dynamic between the internal world of Mount Holyoke and the external 'real' world, with the central crisis of the group lying in disagreements over how the world inside the college bears upon the world outside, and vice versa. The 'real world' is variously figured through the institutions of the state, family and nation, as well as more amorphously through references to hegemonic and often violent social norms. Notably, the proliferation of language around sex and gender in *Ricerche: three* acts as a protective barrier between internal and external worlds. Frequently underscoring difference, complexity and the right to self-definition, language forms a crucial component in articulating commitment and desire towards the group, and the larger 'world' of Mount Holyoke. The terms deployed by the students multiply and decentre meaning in a manner that exemplifies the blending of academic language with the often covert syntax of radical politics. By covert syntax, I mean neologisms like 'herstory' instead of 'history' and the way words contextually signal particular political

meanings such as the place of 'privilege' or 'saviours' in current feminist discourse or for example, the specifically Maoist meaning of 'self-criticism.' Despite multiple points of disagreement, the group consistently collaborates in making meaning through this language, building up the image of Mount Holyoke as in conflict with the world outside, and allowing them to explore, as one student explains, the possibilities of upholding the 'morals of a society run by women'. Rather than gesturing towards a clichéd notion of women as 'peaceful', I take this to stand for desires towards an identity and a social formation that is chosen, instead of produced through passive unity. Yet, by the end of the thirty-eight minute film, the dynamic between Mount Holyoke and the 'real world' is reinforced and reproduced internally by a growing conflict between students, communicated through a language and political imaginary that is variously utopian, persecutory, wild and closeted.

### **I: Commitment and Desire**

The tenor of Hayes' performance as interviewer in *Ricerche: three* is comparable with Pasolini's jolly yet confrontational style in *Comizi d'Amore*. She appears curious about life inside the college but is never completely neutral in her questioning, frequently she returns to the significance of an all-woman environment. This shapes *Ricerche: three* into a synecdoche for Mount Holyoke as a site for examining separatism in an ongoing process that never results in a simplistic affirmation of womanhood. As the film progresses tensions build and the voices in the group increasingly overlap, talk over one another, and become oppositional and antagonistic. Hayes does not obviously appear to push for conflict between different group members, but the camerawork and editing certainly exacerbates the tension. The film's crescendo is marked by an increase in camera cuts, while the content of the discussion moves to focus on who gets to decide what liberation looks like. By the final ten minutes, Hayes' voice begins to dissolve and she is gradually reduced to moving the microphone across the group. The film severs voice from the bodies on screen and a narrative arc emerges through the shift from a playful and almost flirtatious mood, towards a melancholic and impotent atmosphere.

This illustrates the fraught, tightly wound form that discussions often take among individuals who are drawn together and supposedly 'united' by a particular alliance, identity or experience. If 'womanhood' is the ground upon which these individuals are institutionally bound together, any assumption of an affirmable uniting or shared experience of what this might mean is repeatedly disrupted. By the end of the film the viewer can identify the most vocal individuals with particular political positions, but they are also defined in terms of their role within the group. This dynamic is as redolent of Hollywood teen movies (the jock, the cheerleader, the nerd, the rebel) as it is of political meetings (the reformist, the extremist, the leader, the person who gets up to make tea, and the feminist who must complain about the lack of engagement with women's issues).

Rather than appearing as flat gambits, *Ricerche: three* presents a dialectical view of the relationship between political commitment and group dynamics. This is particular to the nature of the film as an artwork that potentially caricatures various positions *into* gambits, an aspect fruitfully compromised by its formal procedure of camera cuts and disjuncture between voice and image. These qualities amplify the real speed at which roles are prescribed, how they form, are shifted and might transform, how they are pleasurable and how they are constricting. In other words, the film seriously explores how political thought and action is produced through the experience of being in a group as much as it is by abstract allegiance or personal experience. This, as I will elaborate on shortly, is why I believe Bion can help us in analysing this film as a compelling exploration of the psychic element within intense social experiences of collaboration that attempt to exist outside of, and to challenge, the patriarchal family, the state and the nation.

The speed at which certain positions emerge within the group is where the Hollywood teen movie and political group comparison proves useful. The pace often lies close to adolescent extremes, and the melodrama of trying out different roles, but this cannot be reduced to the fact that the group is primarily composed of fairly young students. A violently strong association with a certain position or identification is often what drives adult nostalgia for adolescence, with its loss

marked as the disappearance of the capacity to become wholly enamoured – minus cynicism – with a particular object. In Catherine Grant’s account of feminist nostalgia, this state is associated with ‘fan-dom’, and she describes how ‘to be a fan of something often indicates an over-attachment, an excessive engagement that goes beyond the intellectual.’<sup>12</sup> Grant pre-empts criticisms that being a ‘fan of feminism’ may appear trivialising or embarrassing, defending the potential of this concept through her discussion of Hayes’s *In the Near Future* 2005. This work involved Hayes standing in public places with placards from previous political protests (Fig. 1), a gesture which Grant situates as ‘the act of a fan’ through its testing of the ‘relationship between different moments in history ... in ways that do not collapse into a golden political past and an apathetic present.’<sup>13</sup> Thinking along the lines suggested by Grant, Hayes may indeed be adopting the position of a ‘fan’ in *Ricerche: three* through her attachment to the continued existence of women-only colleges as separatist spaces. However, in focusing on the rift between Mount Holyoke and the external world, and how this is produced through language, the dynamics of the group and the form of the film, I instead want to stress the structure of feeling here as one of a yearning ‘commitment’ and ‘desire’ towards the group as a site for the sublation of existing relations, rather than marking an attachment to prior social formations.

The maintenance of political militancy through the construction of a perilous external world is a thread running through Hayes’s oeuvre, also present in works such as *Symbionese Liberation Screeds* 2003 and *We Knew We Would Go to Jail* 2004, both of which deal with underground political organisations. In the former, Hayes attempts to read from memory Patty Hearst’s letters to her father, the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, after she had been kidnapped by the revolutionary Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). (Fig. 2) Patty Hearst famously became sympathetic to the SLA, and joined the organisation two months after being kidnapped, adopting the pseudonym Tania and later robbed a bank in San Francisco.<sup>14</sup> In *We Knew We Would Go To Jail*, which I return to further along, underground political organisations such as the SLA are discussed from a distance in terms of why one would want to be part of such a movement. (Fig. 3) Clearly, the

worlds of such organisations need to be produced through desire, and the belief they might prefigure a revolutionary shift. A group of students at a private liberal arts college is obviously a far less tense environment, yet similar issues emerge over the relationship between two conflicting psychic and political spaces, namely the 'real world' and Mount Holyoke.

## **II: 'I don't think the world is like Mount Holyoke.'**

Hayes's interest in the group relates to the history of radical social organisation as a means to prefigure new ways of relating in a projected, post-revolutionary society. One example is the primacy of the consciousness raising (CR) group within the Women's Liberation Movement. These generally attempted to produce a social situation beyond the workplace and family and strove to contest the reproduction of social hierarchies. In the late 1960s, a women's collective in Connecticut identified six types of groups that they wanted to subvert and why. These included:

- Social: killing time; jockeying for position in the status hierarchy; confessional.
- Action: to achieve a specific goal.
- Business: combinations of #1 and #2.
- Therapy: the cost may be too high.
- Religious: philosophical or mystical.
- Political: may be any or all of the above.<sup>15</sup>

The Connecticut collective went on to affirm that the CR groups was 'not any of the above' as the goal of such formations was firstly to understand 'one's self in relation to one's society' and secondly, to understand 'what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society that oppresses women.'<sup>16</sup>

Like the CR group, at crucial moments in *Ricerche: three* the psychic experience of life at Mount Holyoke is registered as in almost painful disjuncture with the world



outside. One student states that 'I don't think the world is like Mount Holyoke', and another describes leaving the campus, explaining that 'your brain does this massive explosion ... there's so much else going on...it can be very painful.' The 'brain explosion' theme recurs, with another participant stating 'it's weird in my head ... I'm still the same person, I just feel more comfortable here.' This conflict between Mount Holyoke and the 'real world' is, as I have suggested, a separation overwhelmingly marked by language the fear of how the principles of Mount Holyoke falter, or fail when confronted with external pressures. Students describe how the language they use inside Mount Holyoke encounters misunderstandings outside; one student jokes that 'four years ago I would've been like "sex" – oh yeah – "doin it!" but now – what is sex now?' Within Mount Holyoke words, ideas and phrases take on multiple and contentious meanings that have to be struggled over, but this complexity is understood as impractical and unmanageable when it comes to existing in the 'real world'.

It is precisely this increased complexity that acts as a meaningful, forensic lens through which to examine the 'real world'. This constitutes a central praxis within revolutionary struggle and thought, but it is also one that can become melancholic, as articulated in a text published by the militant separatist group, Cell 16 in 1969<sup>17</sup>:

After several female liberation meetings, everything one reads, sees, and hears takes on a whole new dimension ... Films, books, and plays become revelations. Every conversation and transaction with a man is seen in a new light. The role-playing and unnaturalness of one's own actions are revealed. It is like being reborn. The exhilaration one feels at this awakening of consciousness soon recedes and cold reality sets in. The situation is revealed as tragic and destructive. One's new consciousness allows one to see the damage being done daily to millions of women (and men surely), and then the frustration, anger, depression (not the housewife variety, but the existential misery of a Dostoievski) sets in. One can never go back, but she feels distinctly that she cannot change the situation.<sup>18</sup>

Even more troubling than the existential angst described by Cell 16, is when the distinctions between these two worlds, or modes of consciousness and relating begin to collapse. As one student describes in *Ricerche: three*: 'We're in this community which is a fantasy and a bubble but we still have the same problems we'd have in the outside world!' And despite their challenge to the outside world, CR and other small political groups can of course end up mimicking, or reproducing more familiar social dynamics. In 1976, Jo Freeman published the now notorious article "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood" which described the breakdown of groups. As she wrote:

Among women there are two roles perceived as permissible: the "helper" and the "helped." Most women are trained to act out one or the other at different times. Despite consciousness-raising and an intense scrutiny of our own socialization, many of us have not liberated ourselves from playing these roles, nor from our expectations that others will do so.<sup>19</sup>

One way of illuminating this problem – of how the external world reproduces itself internally within the small group – might be explore through the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's proposition that in each group there are always two functions present. As Bion describes, the 'work group' designates the task of the group and directs it towards a common idea. This is how Young understands the group in distinction to the series; as a formation that shares goals, projects, traits, and self-conceptions. But as Bion describes, each work group also contains a 'basic assumption' group with this term used to describe the emotional life of the group, and how the psychic processes that go beyond a work group's given project will shape interactions between group affiliates.<sup>20</sup> For Bion, there are three basic assumptions, which exist alongside the work group, and he calls these 'dependency', 'pairing' and 'fight-flight'.<sup>21</sup>

The 'dependency' basic assumption describes a situation where there is a leader upon which the rest of the group relies and compels to respond to its needs. When

the leader falters, the group search for a replacement that is perceived to be more effective.<sup>22</sup> The second permutation, the 'pairing' assumption, is based on hopeful expectations, often around a couple perceived as leaders. This pair needs not be romantically involved, but they function for their potential to bring forth a messiah-type saviour. Alternatively, a pairing group might place hope in the idea that they will 'revolutionise society' when their ideas have sufficiently spread, that an improved group will eventually emerge, or more prosaically, that the 'coming season, spring, summer, autumn, or winter, as the case may be, will be more agreeable.'<sup>23</sup> As Bion describes, this hope effects a temporal displacement in order to counter guilt, destructive feelings and despair. For hope to be sustained, it is essential that the 'leader' of the group should be unborn, the Messianic hope unfulfilled, with this clearly linking to those desires for prefiguring social transformation already mentioned in relation to CR groups.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the 'fight-flight' basic assumption is one that operates through the notion of the group being produced by an exterior enemy that it has either run away from, or is preparing for battle with. All these 'basic assumptions' are flexible, and Bion understands all groups as having the potential to move between them.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the work group, the basic assumption group does not necessitate cooperation over a declared goal from members, but rather, depends on 'valency'; meaning the capacity for an involuntary, unconscious sharing and acting upon a basic assumption between members.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the basic assumption group may undermine or contradict the activity of the work group.

In *Ricerche: three*, there is a clear work group whose task is education, the making of the video and more diffusely, the inculcation of tolerance and liberal values as driven by the institution of Mount Holyoke. By thinking about basic assumption as dependent upon 'valency' my speculative proposal here is that the basic assumption group shifts around through the 38 minutes of *Ricerche: three*, and often drives desires and commitments that exceed and disrupt the work group in ways that are damaging, but also perhaps radical, or militant. I don't want to attempt – amateurishly – to 'diagnose' the basic assumption at play in the group for the duration of the video, but rather to draw on Bion's work in order to think through

*Ricerche: three* as an investigation into collaboration that goes beyond a straightforwardly celebratory or functionalist staging of political collectivity. Instead, this work is able to draw out moments of negativity and desire that present a dialectical view of the external and internal pressures that form these people into a group, beyond the 'passive unity' of the serial. In *Ricerche: three* the process towards the melancholic feeling described in the Cell 16 text cited above is initially produced by conflict, which comes to a crescendo and registers a rift in the group. But by the end of the film the conflict dissipates, resulting in something closer to impotence, which as I will stress, we could also see as an assertion of the work group's tasks. In order to convey this arc, let us turn to a closer discussion of the film.

### **III: Can we work together here?**

The video begins with a slow pan across the group whose members variously raise their eyebrows, nod, laugh, stroke each other's hair, look disgruntled, appear thoughtful, shift their weight, fidget and smile at one another. The image is similar to a moving tableau vivant, the gestures appear choreographed, and the scene is silent. Hayes' voice is the first sound, cutting in with 'is sex important to you?', a line uttered in a similarly jocular, lively manner to Pasolini's performance in *Comizi d'Amore*. Various students respond as Hayes moves the microphone around the group. Some say it isn't, because they are 'straight' at a women's college or because they are religious and waiting for marriage. Others stress that it is 'super important' because they are young or because it's 'another way of connecting to people.' Differences immediately surface as a young butch woman giggles and raises her eyebrows at the idea of waiting for marriage, and casually states that she 'doesn't really talk to girls that are virgins'. Hayes's third question 'do you feel like you have the same kind of sex or a different kind of sex than your mother?' is lifted directly from Pasolini, and the group have more difficulty responding. The answers, however, produce a similar effect to the relationship established in *Comizi d'Amore* between social class, cultural difference and sexuality. In Pasolini's film, this question has a particularly marked response from a family of farmers in rural Emilia Romagna who comment extensively on shifting social mores around sex. In *Ricerche: three* one

student shrugs off the question, unable to detect much of a shift between her mother's experiences at college and her own. In contrast, another young woman stresses a significant difference, explaining that her mother came from a different country and married at sixteen.

Hayes's interventions link sex, politics and freedom. She asks 'do you feel you can be as free as you want in your daring adventures?' and the response comes that 'outside of this campus, probably not.' Later Hayes poses 'can you be freer sexually than you can politically, religiously, ideologically?' One voice, disconnected from any of the individuals appearing on screen at that moment, describes how nationalism is mapped out more on women's bodies than men's. The camera, however, crops in on a group huddled together; one starts playing with another's hair, pulling something out as a few others peer over (Fig. 4). Due to the separation between speech and image, this interaction almost appears like an ethnographic study of human socialisation. We see women with their arms around each other, some shaking their head, and the fact the film is shot outdoors feels important in certain moments as a tangible breeze runs through the group, cooling the mood. At points, smaller groups nod to one another and are completely absorbed in their own interactions, remaining disengaged from the main, audible discussion. This separation forms a distinct motif that functions to emphasise ambivalence, an aspect that gains pace as the discussion gets more heated and some in the group become increasingly committed, while others drift off.

The rift between the group's more involved members and those who choose to disengage is heightened roughly around the point where one individual who I will call Student A explains that she doesn't know how conservative or how liberal she is on the spectrum of Islam. This is prefaced by her description of how frustrating and aggravating the responses to the Boston bombing and feminist protests in France had been.<sup>27</sup> Student A describes how she feels she has to constantly 'apologise for Islam', but then people are confused because she is gay, drinks and goes to parties. (Fig. 5) She discusses this battle between conflicting parts of her identity, a theme that follows on from other (mostly South Asian) students' discussion of similar

experiences. This disjuncture is manifested by a split between the world of Mount Holyoke and the 'real world', which for Student A is a home that is not in the United States. Student A is a central character, perhaps even the lead role. The camera work rarely severs her voice from her image and she therefore appears to command more attention when she speaks, unlike the bubble of chatter that occasionally accompanies statements by other students.

The struggle to identify wholly with any one category propels Hayes's next question as to whether the group 'feels connected to a feminist movement'. If Pasolini's central question in *Comizi d'Amore* is about finding the 'true Italy', the place of feminism in the formation of a collective subject is Hayes' underlying inquiry in *Ricerche: three*. However, the question fails to prompt much enthusiasm. The butch woman who earlier in the film said she 'doesn't really speak to virgins' explains that of course she 'believes in equality' but that she wouldn't go on a feminist march. (Fig. 4) Others are more cynical about the ability to define or affirm feminism. A punky girl complains that Mount Holyoke is not what she expected, describing it as too square, allegorising the student experience as akin to having milk and cookies rather than being like 'yeah, women!' as she makes a devil horns hand gesture to illustrate her desire for something more than just 'talking about how women are oppressed'. (Fig. 6) The second 'beat' of cynicism occurs with the statement that 'there's all this "activism" on campus, but the whole goal is to 'bring awareness' which I feel is not really the same ... they're not trying to do anything about it they're just trying to make people "aware".' (Fig. 7) The punky girl nods along, as a quiet voice protests that becoming "aware" is 'the first step'. Hayes moves the microphone around, only for the swift pan of the camera to fail to catch the rejoinder of 'but we never take the second step', contesting the possibilities and limits of what might happen on campus.

Student A jumps in with 'the second step is what we have to take when we graduate', again marking a difference between what is possible within Mount Holyoke, and what will be demanded of them when they leave. This interjection is followed by comments from two black women, who both explain that they have

encountered new ways of thinking at Mount Holyoke they would not have found elsewhere. Neither student is from the United States, which contributes to the growing fissures in how the world outside can be understood. Student A then exclaims that 'I think it's important to identify academically that patriarchy has killed off all forms of feminism ... and how the man is so obsessed with penetrating female bodies.' Her friends giggle a little in the background, perhaps at the boldness of the commitment to an idea such as patriarchy, as well as the word 'penetrating'. The giggle serves to distance them a little from Student A, who elaborates by mentioning the attempt to ban the burqa as a form of this penetration. Like much of the specialised language in *Ricerche: three*, this idea inherits sentiments from what might now be considered feminist classics. For example, on the notion of patriarchy as the penetration of women's spaces, we might mention Adrienne Rich's pronouncement that 'women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise.'<sup>28</sup> The commitments within *Ricerche: three* stand as partly produced through academic experience (the reading of Rich, et. al.) and partly through the amorphous and problematic references to the 'real world', where burqas are banned, and feminism feels hard to connect with.

The cynicism, and slight melancholy that entered the discussion at the point where simply 'raising awareness' was criticised does not go unchallenged. A voice jumps in to counter the suspicion of just talking about feminism, stating that 'I truly believe that just by being here and studying and being who we are, we are smashing the patriarchy every day.' This is voiced with a kind of earnestness that perhaps exemplifies a form of self-affirmation that the punky girl characterised as conveying a 'milk and cookies' feel. The milk and cookies analogy serves to describe the lack of *real* danger Mount Holyoke poses to the patriarchy. Another student relates the enfeebled quality of this very 'wholesome' to the location of Mount Holyoke in the United States. She describes how 'this is not like learning about feminism in South Asia. Here it's about whether you can shave your legs or not...But in South Asia we are still at the point where women are being *raped* in the *streets*.' At this pronouncement, which continues with horrific details from the Delhi rape case, an

audible 'woaaah' ripples through the group. The same woman continues by arguing that 'even the people who claim they're huge feminists didn't hear about this.' The stakes are viscerally raised through the introduction of global issues around sexual violence, race, religion and feminism.

The contrast between hair removal and rape as coordinates of feminist struggle relates to the fact that several students describe 'safety' as the reason they came to the college. One South Asian woman explaining that 'back home people thought a women's college was safer' and less 'morally corrupting'. Such comments exemplify Hayes' interest in staging *Ricerche: three* at Mount Holyoke as partly inspired by the way women's colleges 'point backwards and forwards' in terms of thinking about liberation.<sup>29</sup> For some in the group, the notion of Mount Holyoke as 'safe' seems to illuminate what makes it an inadequate site of struggle against oppression and exploitation, and this underpins the emergent schisms within the group over what liberation should look and feel like. One voice contributes: 'what if I don't agree with your idea of empowerment ... being south Asian I don't support the burqa'. In response, Student A raises her arm, desperate to speak, as her friend pulls her arm down. Student A's arm shoots right back up, her friend yanks it down and they both crack up laughing, as the speaker continues that she does not want to be 'clumped' as South Asian, as a woman, as gay or straight, concluding with that crucial line mentioned earlier that stresses 'Yes, we're in this community which is a fantasy and a bubble but we still have the same problems we'd have in the outside world!' Her voice wavers and the atmosphere feels burdened with a loss of hope and belief that Mount Holyoke could prefigure something better, as had been articulated earlier in the statement about the college seeking to 'uphold' the 'morals of a society run by women'.

Another separation of image from voice emerges now, as the same woman who complained about feminism as just being about 'raising awareness' pleads for tolerance. The final five minutes of the video proceed with a discussion of abuse and how 'complete tolerance can slip into intolerance.' Hayes's voice is totally absent here, and as the mediator, she is mostly present through moving the microphone



around the group, as blurry camera pans try and track the discussion. A woman who has not yet spoken (Student D) stresses that 'just because we are in the US doesn't mean we don't have issues ... I grew up on a Navajo reservation and there are issues where people are getting raped and there is substance abuse and domestic abuse ... I grew up in an area that is highly impoverished'. She explains that because the Navajo community is isolated, no one from outside says anything, introducing another seemingly closeted 'world' into the discussion. We see student A again, ready to interject. A brief dialogue follows, the only one in the video uttered with raised voices, taking place around three minutes before the close of the film:

Student A: Why is there a need to say something!?

Student D: Yes there is!

Student A: Why!?

Student D: Because you shouldn't have someone being abused ... that's just wrong, you shouldn't take someone's human rights away

Student A: So if my mum beats me it's your right (*pointing*) to get me (*pointing at self*) justice?

Student D: No! Well...yes!

Student A: That's exactly what we are saying, we don't need saviours!

At this crescendo some within the group look anxious and concerned by the pitch the conversation has reached. (Fig. 8) Hayes continues moving the microphone around the group and most of the speakers talk about the need to protect children. However, these comments are overlaid with laughter, perhaps out of the pleasure of the discussion reaching a peak, or out of anxiety. Smaller conversations begin to override the central thread before student A is briefly able to command the group's attention again as she talks about the imposition of cultural norms as an act of violence, also returning to the theme of penetration. The group then falls silent before entirely dissolving into smaller conversations, and a quiet voice, barely audible, asks 'can we work together here?'

Formally, the discussion ends with a tacit agreement that ‘we are talking about different “wes”’. Laughter ripples across the screen, which plays down the urgency of the preceding dialogue. However, this does not trivialise the debate, but instead acts as a valve in order to delimit and restrict the tension. This acceptance of ‘different wes’, most viscerally captured in the comparison between the politics of hair removal and the Delhi rape, collapses the tension in a melancholic way. The group dissipates by the end, retreating into their friendship groups and away from an articulable group, back into something more closely resembling a serial. The film ends with the sound cutting out, as with the beginning, and the group smiles, laughs and claps to mark the close of the discussion. (Fig. 9) A camera pans around, and the smaller groupuscles become clear, particularly one that is composed by the most vocal members of the group. (Fig. 10) Eventually, everyone walks out of shot, and the viewer is left with an image of the lawn, a mock-gothic college building and a car park. (Fig. 11) Through the architecture captured on screen, this scene devoid of bodies returns Mount Holyoke to its origins as a college for the white, wealthy elite. It is ordinary America and it is a world away from Delhi, Lagos, Navajo reservations or America’s ghettos. This acts as a reminder of where the group are situated and the limits and possibilities of what they can do in this ‘fantasy’, this ‘bubble.’ As Bryan-Wilson stresses of *Ricerche: three*, this ‘community of speakers, to use Saussure’s term, does not, in the end, share a language. The various factions concede that they are talking, irreconcilably, at cross purposes.’<sup>30</sup>

*In Ricerche: Three* cynicism and melancholy is continually contested by appeals for tolerance towards such ‘cross purposes’, which is probably what leads the video to dissipate rather than end in further conflict and upset. As Bion explains, an increase of stress may change the mentality of the basic assumption group, particularly if there is an extraneous group present. He writes: ‘If the pairing group is active, the tendency is to schism’ in moments of tension that emerge from the insufficient realisation or failure of the hope driving the group.<sup>31</sup> We see something resembling this ‘schism’ in the emergence of smaller allegiances in the final moments of the film. Yet, crucially, the group in *Ricerche: three* ultimately desire ‘development’, as Bion understands this category. Because their discussion closes with an

acknowledgment of ‘different opinions’ they can continue to learn, which is what drives their work group as contained by the institution of the university.

To return to the internal/external dynamic, I also want to suggest that this point where the discussion fizzles out could be viewed in relation to descriptions of heightened consciousness, such as those cited earlier by Cell 16. As Cynthia Burack writes, ‘unlike most group psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic political theorists, feminists usually theorise the painful aspects of group situatedness as a less ambiguous function of social oppression and harm to individuals.’<sup>32</sup> The idea of the internalisation of patriarchy (as exemplified in the Cell 16 text), alongside other forms of oppression (race, class, sexuality to greater or lesser extent depending on the politics and composition of the group), is crucial to feminist social critiques, with internalisation often enabling a group to continue to understand their internal disagreements as forced by outside pressures. The blame for conflict, in other words, can ultimately lie in the ‘real world’ rather than with each other. Perhaps it is this kind of view that drives those final moments of *Rcherche: three*. However, as Freeman’s discussion of trashing suggests, and as anyone who has been involved in a political group knows, such displacements can often contribute to festering the rifts fuelling such conflicts. Whilst the ‘work group’ of *Ricerche: three* perhaps understands the breakdown of discussion through the internalisation of oppressive structures, and stipulates tolerance as a resolution, we can speculate that this will be metabolised in more visceral terms – centred on fear and desire – by the basic assumption group.

The ideas explored in Hayes’s earlier work *We Knew We Would Go to Jail* approximate similar issues, again played out in relation to the university. A two-channel installation, one screen shows pairs of 20–24 year olds facing the camera and discussing their impressions of 1960s and 1970s radical politics. On the second screen, we see a series of shots of university buildings and classrooms. The affect of the pairs in *We Knew We Would Go to Jail* is more performative towards the camera than in *Ricerche: three*. (Fig. 3) One pair, Mike and Mark, ask each other questions like ‘would you ever consider being part of an underground political group?’ and

'how many people can a group be?' 'How many do we need Mike?' Mike replies decisively, saying six, but more often, the dialogue is deadpan yet flirty, vague and giggly, almost like they are high, or as if there is an inside joke on the go. Mark says 'I would ... I would' to being part of an underground political organisation but then explains that he is 'frightened of the idea of having to be so *resistant*.' Mike says 'I think sometimes, for some reason, I make a connection, this is only sometimes, but a connection between a cult and a radical underground group in terms of living a specific lifestyle like a real *passionate devotion* to a certain ideology ... or *sacrifice*.'

*We Knew We Would Go to Jail* analyses desire, sacrifice and commitment to the group, and why this is frightening in a more contrived, humorous manner than the dramatisation of commitment within the 'live' group situation of *Ricerche: three*. In exploring 'passionate devotion' so explicitly, *We Knew We Would Go To Jail* asks how commitment might be pleasurable as well as frightening. As Bion explains, when a group is overwhelmed by basic-assumption mentality, whether dependent, pairing, or fight-flight, they no longer seek to develop through their work group function.<sup>33</sup> Most of the group in *Ricerche: three* appear *not* to be overwhelmed and it is probably a corresponding push towards development that drives Mike and Mark's fear of the 'underground political organisation' in *We Knew We Would Go to Jail*. A similar note is struck in the letter that Shulamith Firestone wrote to her sister in 1970, describing the break-up of the New York Radical Feminists group. Confessing to the stresses of the situation, Firestone compensates by explaining that "Basically, I don't believe finally that the revolution is so imminent that it's worth tampering with my whole psychological structure, submitting to mob rule, and so on, which is what they're all into."<sup>34</sup> Shortly after, Firestone would withdraw altogether from the Women's Liberation Movement, yet as we know, this did not save her 'psychological structure'. Moreover, as Bion describes, the thrilling compensation for being overwhelmed by basic assumption mentality produces an exhilarating 'increase in a pleasurable feeling of vitality'.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, I want to stress that this 'vitality' signals a potentially destructive, wild abandonment that underpins much of Hayes' interest in the relationship between

politics and desire. Paul Hoggett also captures this pleasure in his suggestion that the valences of group desire stands as the 'real meaning' of Karl Marx's enigmatic phrase 'the association of labour'.<sup>36</sup> As Hoggett describes, most organisations and groups are 'held together by guilt and terror; many more are held together by bureaucracy and self-limiting assumptions. Just a few (and they are worth waiting for) are vehicles for collective desire.'<sup>37</sup> This captures the kind of yearning towards a committed, collective politics that *Ricerche: three* documents, and also mediates, as Hayes seeks to map 'political desire and personal desire on top of each other.'<sup>38</sup> Commitment in *Ricerche: three* thus emerges not as an unswerving adherence to an individual position or object which might be capable of being possessed, but rather as a pledge to one's place in a group, and therefore to the meaning of the group as determined by the group itself, as well as the outside world. What remains irresolvable are those pacifying structures that lie beyond the bounds of one's own identification (religion, cultural norms), particularly where they are operative in social formations and places that lie far from Mount Holyoke. The film's interest lies in dramatising the affect and coping strategies of those within the group when faced with the reproduction of such structures internally within the group, rather than simply documenting the declared resolution of appeals to mutual understanding, and the concurrent return to the order of the work group.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hayes at the Havana Biennial. Available at <http://www.labiennale.org/en/mediacenter/video/55-b28.html> (Accessed 14/10/2015)

<sup>2</sup> See Mount Holyoke website: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/policies/admission-transgender-students> Accessed 2/10/2015.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk Carpezza, 'Students react to decision to admit transgender students at Mount Holyoke' *PBS Newshour*, October 15, 2014 Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/transgender-applicants-welcome-mount-holyoke-womens-college/> (Accessed 5/10/2015)

<sup>4</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Sharon Hayes Sounds Off" in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* March 2015, Vol. 38, p. 25

<sup>5</sup> In her article, Young uses the terms 'serial', 'series', 'seriality' somewhat interchangeably, and I have done the same here.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective" in *Signs*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring, 1994), p. 714.

<sup>7</sup> Young, p. 718.

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- <sup>8</sup> Young, p. 733.
- <sup>9</sup> Young, pp. 727-8
- <sup>10</sup> Young, p. 787.
- <sup>11</sup> Young, p. 730.
- <sup>12</sup> Catherine Grant "Fans of Feminism: Re-writing Histories of Second-wave Feminism in Contemporary Art" *Oxford Art Journal*, 34.2, 2011, p. 265.
- <sup>13</sup> Grant, p. 269
- <sup>14</sup> For an overview of the Hearst kidnapping and its cultural significance see William Graebner *Patty's Got a Gun : Patricia Hearst in 1970s America*, Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> The Women's Collective, *Consciousness Raising*, undated, ca. 1968. Pamphlet text reproduced on the Chicago Women's Liberation Union website, hosted by the University of Illinois Chicago. <https://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUArchive/crguidelines.html> (Accessed 30/10/2015)
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> For a history of Cell 16, see talk by Dana Densmore at "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014. Available online at <http://www.bu.edu/wgs/files/2013/10/Densmore-Cell-16-Gender-and-Agency-with-Digressions-into-Naming.pdf> (Accessed 24/05/2016)
- <sup>18</sup> Cell 16, 'What do Women Want?' in *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1969, p. 6.
- <sup>19</sup> Joreen (Jo Freeman), "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood" in *Ms.* April 1976, pp. 49-51, 92-98. Available online at <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm> (Accessed 24/05/2016)
- <sup>20</sup> Wilfred R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups And Other Papers*, London: Tavistock, 1961, pp. 145.
- <sup>21</sup> Bion, pp. 146-152.
- <sup>22</sup> Bion, pp. 146-148.
- <sup>23</sup> Bion, p. 151
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Bion, p. 154.
- <sup>26</sup> Bion, pp. 153-4.
- <sup>27</sup> I presume the reference is to FEMEN, who staged a protest they dubbed a 'topless jihad' outside the main mosque in Paris in April 2013. See Anna Lekas Miller, 'FEMEN's Topless Jihad' in *The Nation*, July 1 2013. Available at <http://www.thenation.com/article/femens-topless-jihad/> (Accessed 30/10/2015)
- <sup>28</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (Summer, 1980), pp. 632.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Hayes, Op. Cit.
- <sup>30</sup> Bryan Wilson, 2015, p. 27.
- <sup>31</sup> Bion, p. 155.
- <sup>32</sup> Cynthia Burack *Healing Identities: Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Groups*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 95
- <sup>33</sup> Bion, p. 159.

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<sup>34</sup> Shulamith Firestone cited in Susan Faludi, "Death of a Revolutionary", *The New Yorker*, April 15 2013. Available online at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/death-of-a-revolutionary> (Accessed 24/05/2016)

<sup>35</sup> Bion, p. 158-9.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Hoggett, *Partisans in an Uncertain World: The Psychoanalysis of Engagement*, London: Free Association Books, 1992, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, "We Have a Future: Interview with Sharon Hayes" in *Grey Room 37*, Fall 2009, p. 81.