



THE CARNEGIE  
MUSEUM OF ART

YVONNE RAINER FILM SERIES  
DEPARTMENT OF FILM & VIDEO  
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**PRIVILEGE** (1990) USA, 100 minutes. Directed by Yvonne Rainer. Screenplay: Yvonne Rainer. Editor: Yvonne Rainer. Photography: Mark Daniels. With: Alice Spivak, Novella Nelson, Blaire Baron, Rico Elias, Gabriella Farrar, Tyrone Wilson, Dan Berkey, Claudia Gregory, Yvonne Rainer, Mark Niebuhr, Minnette Lehmann.

Yvonne Rainer was born in San Francisco in 1934. She trained as a modern dancer in New York from 1957 and began to choreograph her own work in 1960. She was one of the founders of the Judson Dance Theatre in 1962, thus beginning a movement that proved to be a vital force in modern dance in the following decade. Between 1962 and 1975 she presented her choreographic work throughout the U.S. and Europe, most notably on Broadway and in Scandinavia, London, Germany, Italy, and Paris. In 1968 she began to integrate slides and short films into her live performance. In 1972 she completed her first feature-length film, *Lives of Performers*. Four more followed: *Film About a Woman Who . . .* (1974), *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (1980), and *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985). *Journeys From Berlin/1971* won first prize in independent film from the Los Angeles Film Critics' Association and *The Man Who Envied Women* played extensively at theatres and media centers across the U.S. Retrospectives of her films have been presented at the Whitney Museum in New York City, the Städtisches Museum, the Arsenal in Berlin, the Other Cinema and Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Prints of her films are in the archives of the Pacific Film Archive, Friends of German Cinema, The British Film Institute, the Walker Art Center, Georges Pompidou Museum, Otis Art Institute, the National Gallery of Australia, and The Carnegie Museum of Art. Rainer has taught at the New School for Social Research, Goddard College, Connecticut College, George Washington University, Vancouver Art Gallery, School of Visual Arts, University of California at Santa Cruz, Fresno and San Diego, San Francisco Art Institute, California Institute of the Arts, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, New York University, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The MacArthur Foundation of Chicago named Rainer as a recipient of one of its annual "genius" awards in July 1990.

Rainer is the avant-garde's most important woman filmmaker since Maya Deren (herself a former dancer); more likely, she's the most influential American avant-garde filmmaker of the past dozen years, with an impact as evident in London or Berlin as in New York. As a filmmaker, Rainer suggests Godard without his lyricism -- or his glibness. At times, her stolid cinema of ideas resembles that of the West German director Alexander Kluge. There's a similar visual awkwardness -- a mistrust of the appealing image coupled with an avoidance of the trashy one. The excitement in Rainer's films derives from shifts in tone and the genuine clash of ideas.

-- Excerpted from *The Purple Rose of Soho* by J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*, Vol. XXX NO. 14, 4/8/90.

Yvonne Rainer's films are as complex as thought, filled with unexpected images, snippets of sound and statements profound and silly -- all competing for attention on the same plane of perception. It's an approach that lets her meld wildly divergent topics into one film, to experiment with the limitations of the medium. In her latest work, *Privilege*, the topics are rape, racism, and a woman's "change of life"; the voices in it range from disarmament advocate Helen Caldicott to militant writer Eldridge Cleaver. Though *Privilege* has a more mainstream feel than Rainer's earlier movement/sound explorations, it retains the quality of a private rumination. "Like my other films, there's no plot to speak of," Rainer said during a recent interview. "People have asked me how I can put menopause and racism in the same film. Well, as an aging woman I live in a racist society, and I experience that every day, especially in New York, where I live." By dovetailing the two subjects, Rainer has produced a film about power -- who has it, who uses it, who loses it.

Her cinematic vocabulary violates as many taboos as the subjects she chooses. She eliminates sound, imposes voice-overs of stiffly-read script and employs dialogue that runs counter to the images onscreen. She uses several actors to play one character, lights them with a single harsh spotlight, relays their images to a video monitor and films that -- or abandons them entirely, filling the frame with a wall's texture or moving the lens randomly around a room. The result is "a disruption of the glossy, unified surface of professional cinematography . . . films where in every scene you have to decide anew

the priorities of looking and listening." Silence is an important component of *Privilege*, which begins with an onscreen interpreter for the deaf "signing" the introductory narration. Moreover, it addresses "the silence that emanated from friends and family regarding the details of my single middle age," Rainer continues in the film's introduction. "Now that I did not appear to be looking for a man, the state of my desires seemed of no interest to anyone." Desire, however, is a central issue in the film. The protagonist, Jenny, is interviewed (by a character named Yvonne Washington) about a dreaded subject -- menopause. Jenny doesn't want to discuss it. "Keeping your dignity as you enter menopause is like fighting City Hall," she says. Rainer explained, "It's a feeling that you've lost everything, especially if your identity is very invested in how you look." Instead, Jenny describes a "hot flashback" of a near-rape that occurred in her apartment building when she was a young dancer in New York. The incident, based on an event in Rainer's life, encapsulates the connections between gender, race, and power.

"Subjecting Jenny's life to that kind of scrutiny clarified things in my life. There were a lot of things I had to examine about the '60s, the factors that were attendant on my own success at the time -- the white-dominated art world which supported my work, the kind of single-minded ambition that excluded realities of social inequity. The film provides a kind of clearinghouse for thinking about those privileges."

Her experimental narrative format has been recognized by a MacArthur Lifetime Achievement Award, a substantial grant over the next five years that will help pay for her next film. The award frees her from dependence on federal sources such as the National Endowment for the Arts -- which partially funded *Privilege* -- but which, she acknowledges, would not have done so under its current "grossly censorious" restrictions against homoerotic content. At a time in her life when she, like her subjects, is facing middle age, Rainer is able to ensure her freedom. "I've been dealing with my own menopause off and on for a couple of years," she mused, "and there is a point where you realized you're more at the end of your life than at the beginning, [and] a sense of mortality that inevitably comes. But there's also a way of looking at your life as a set of accretions and achievements and completions, rather than an ending. I'm having a good time right now, now that this film is finished."

-- Excerpted from *Rape, Racism, and Menopause: Avant-garde filmmaker explores middle age* by Chiori Santiago, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9/9/90.

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