

Gender Studies and Film Studies in France: Steps Forward and Back

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In this article I won't repeat the initial points I raised more than ten years ago in the introduction to an issue of the journal *Iris* called "Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Film Studies" (1997). Instead, I'll use the definition of "gender" that Joan W. Scott proposed (1986): "Gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes, and one of the most basic ways to convey power relations." In addition, I will use the English-language term "gender" in writing about film studies, for the same reason I did in 1997, that is to avoid any confusion with the word "genre" in references to types (i.e. genres) of films.

If we take as our starting point the first anthology published in France on *Vingt ans de théories féministes* (Reynaud and Vincendeau 1993), we can try to make an initial assessment of our progress, no doubt uneven. The articles that appeared in *Cinémaction* were all partial translations from English (British and American), and this is already a sign of the imbalance between France and English-speaking countries. The asymmetry has increased rather than decreased over the years; even as scholarly approaches have evolved and have sparked a number of controversies in Britain and the US, French film studies have remained largely unaffected by gender studies. The purpose of this article is not necessarily to deplore that fact (or even less to applaud it!) but instead to try to understand the nature and the cause of resistance to it and also its perceptible, albeit halting, progress.

There are two main issues impeding the adoption of a gender studies approach in French film studies:

- The French idea of "highbrow culture" still significantly dominates the academic performing arts departments where cinema studies are housed; this view limits the number of filmmakers who merit scholarly attention to a pantheon of "white males" who make up the cultural elite. The "auteurist" perspective disseminated by the journal *Cahiers du cinéma* is the film-world's version of this cultural prejudice.

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- The French notion of universalism presumes that culture, like politics, has no gender. The very word "gender" is still considered an atrocious neologism by the cultural elite just as converting masculine film vocabulary to its feminine equivalents, or any other language modification that would equalize feminine and masculine elements. The "masterpieces" of the "seventh art" are considered, much like literary works, as coming from a universal "he" understood as transcending all sex distinctions. In French, a masculine form is considered the sex-neutral one, thereby relegating feminine forms to the status of special cases, in all senses of that phrase.¹

We know that feminist approaches to the analysis of culture originated in Great Britain in cultural studies that seriously challenged the scholarly canon and critical-analytical approaches in academic milieu (Mattelard and Neveu 2008). The founders of the "Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies" at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s employed an explicitly political perspective when they opted to explore the cultural practices of members of subordinate social classes and not only those of the dominant one. Critical methodologies were revolutionized, from literary analysis to ethnographic studies based on participatory observation. It is in this context that, since the 1970s, scholars have investigated the gendered dimensions of culture, and not only the influence of social class.

It's not surprising that cinema, as a form of popular culture, would soon be subjected to this type of approach. In addition, the importance of film stars with whom male and female viewers could identify, serving also as sex-role models promoting societal norms, has led British scholars, first and foremost Laura Mulvey (1975), to look critically at mainstream Hollywood films and produce an analysis of male domination influenced by both cultural studies and psychoanalysis. Her first article, titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" still retains the status of a manifesto in feminist film studies, even if it has subsequently been criticized by its own author and others. In that article Mulvey hypothesized that Hollywood studio films' narrative and cinematic codes constructed a male gaze as the means of identification for the audience. The male gaze simultaneously structured the film's narration, point of view and action, whereas the films' female characters, who were mainly passive, were shown as (beautiful) bodies, the object (most of the time fragmented) of the male gaze. Mulvey argued that this film architecture corresponds on the one hand to a naturalization of male domination, and on the other to a displacement of the fear of male castration onto images of women. Despite all the nuances incorporated later on, this initial analysis has the great merit of having laid bare the fact that narrative cinema is less a reflection of social reality than a purveyor of sexual norms; it also uncovered the tactics of domination that underlie these films (since the Hollywood studio film industry is globally dominant, it serves as a model in this analysis, even though each nation's film industry introduces an infinite number of variations to it – if male domination is a socio-cultural reality that no society escapes from, each society and era has its own way to impose it and elicit resistance to it).

Since the publication of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975, theoreticians in mainly English-speaking countries have proposed a number of gendered

analyses of different types of films (the work of a particular filmmaker, a specific genre, a star, a period, an audience . . .) and have employed various approaches (psychoanalytic, semiotic, esthetic, ethnographic, sociological, cultural history . . .). Without downplaying the importance of more recent advances in gay, lesbian and queer studies, the development of feminist and gender studies has been fostered by the women's liberation and civil rights movements that have shaken contemporary society, as well as an anthropological perspective on culture that is widely accepted in most universities. Except in France . . .

Let's try to understand the reasons why:

- First of all, there is the weight of cultural patrimony in a country where this inheritance has become the incarnation of our national identity, in particular since the loss of the colonial empire, and France's devolution to the ranks of a lesser world power. This notion is widely held in our country and abroad, that the realm where France still reigns supreme in the world is in culture, meaning high culture and France's historical treasures. Since the Second World War, through the influence of Henri Langlois and André Malraux, cinema has become one of the most prominent symbols of French culture.² France's national policy regarding cultural heritage has adopted the task of preserving films as it does castles and churches, and the Cannes film festival is meant to be not only a great showcase for the French film industry but also for all the world's productions of the "cinema d'auteur" whose invention is credited to French New Wave filmmakers.
- The spirit of revolt, including revolutions in culture, that have affected French society and the university system since 1968 gave rise to a kind of radicalism that privileges the avant-garde, thus formal research and violating conventions are considered liberating, both from the bourgeois influences of mainstream society, but also mass culture as understood by Adorno and his school to be pure alienation (Adorno and Horkheimer 1974). Filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Philippe Garrel or Jean-Marie Straub epitomize that avant-garde, and the prestige they enjoy in French universities has changed them into unsurpassable models of artistic radicalism, providing material for critical commentaries whose abstraction rivals the hermeticism of the directors who are their subjects.
- More than elsewhere, the French university system has institutionalized a structural separation between "cultural production" and "artistic creation." Academic studies of the arts, including film, are classified in Division 18 of the Conseil National des Universités (CNU), while sociology is in Division 19, media and communication studies (abbreviated as SIC) are in 71, and cultural history (in Division 22) are charged with studying popular culture (of the past) and cultural production (in the present time). These kinds of disciplinary distinctions have a strong influence on the direction of academic research, in the extent to which they keep scholars within the boundaries of their particular fields or divisions. Nevertheless, in this particularly French patchwork, gendered approaches have made inroads although with some difficulty in the fields of history, sociology and more recently in media and communication studies (SIC). But these approaches have remained taboo in the performing arts, which includes film, and are regarded as an eccentric perspective on artistic creation. Critical analyses

of a film are conceived of as exegeses focusing on work's esthetic qualities rather than situating them in a context of production and reception that might bring out how they express social contradiction and power relations. So French film studies' resistance to gendered approaches is structural, both on the institutional level (the organization of academic research within French universities) and on political and ideological levels (in the French definition of culture).

However, for the last fifteen years a few breaches have been made in the walls of the cinematic canon's fortress. Here, we can even point to some instances where French scholars have made original contributions in areas dominated by Anglo-American scholars. In fact, while Anglo-American gender studies have produced a number of film analyses informed by a psychoanalytic approach,³ their use of a historical framework has been relatively rare.

Now, under the influence of the monumental five-volume *Histoire des femmes en Occident (Women's History in Western Civilization)* edited by Michelle Perrot and Georges Duby (1991), the series that legitimized academic gender studies in France, a historical approach to research into women and gender in literary and artistic fields has prevailed; among the earliest studies we can cite *La Poétique du mâle (Male Poetics)* by Michèle Coquillat (1982), *La petite sœur de Balzac (Balzac's Younger Sister)* by Christine Planté (1989) or *Marguerite de Valois* by Eliane Viennot (1995). The same importance given to gender construction in historical studies can be seen in French academic writing on film; even if Ginette Vincendeau was educated and works in a British university, her close ties to French research make it possible to claim her work on Gabin in popular film of the 1930s in citations of French film studies. She was the first to propose the analysis of a star as an expression of social contradictions in France at a specific historical period (Vincendeau 2007). She examined the construction of masculinity in films that made Gabin a star, since *La Bandera* in 1935, its connection with national identity and with the idea of nostalgia as an expression of the difficulties pre-war society had with the pressures of modernization. While historical analyses of "poetic realism" in film have tended to highlight its "progressive" aspects, Vincendeau also reveals its regressive side and the misogyny that underpins the construction of this ideal masculinity. The ambivalence of gender roles in film (which Modleski (1988) had already pointed out in her discussion of Hitchcock's films) is developed in Vincendeau's analysis within the historical context of the films' production and reception.

The critical dimension of gender studies entails laying bare the tactics of domination that structure gender distinctions in society, and simultaneously, deconstructing conventional notions of masculinity and femininity that conceal this domination.

In the same way, Noël Burch and I explored the "phoney war between the sexes in French cinema" (Burch and Sellier 1996). Our goal was to examine the entire output of popular film of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, not limiting ourselves to the handful of "masterpieces" of the accepted film canon, in order to bring to light the dominant representations of identity and male-female relations, to focus on turning points and try to understand their implications. The focus on gender of our critical approach was inherent, it came out of the material itself since French cinema of the time is so rich in love stories and tales of seduction between men and women. French

cinema distinguished itself from Hollywood films in its relatively thorough gender integration, in terms of images and audience, in most film genres. We know that Hollywood studios in the classic era tried to segment their viewers by gender – on one side were the more masculine genres like detective films, crime thrillers, westerns, war stories or action movies; on the other were the more feminine genres such as melodramas, musical comedies, and sophisticated dramas. However, in France the different genres of sound films, at least, targeted their audience by socio-cultural level (that was the main consideration, but not the only one), having inherited these distinctions from the live entertainment of previous decades: serious plays and light comedies as well as vaudeville were aimed at urban upper middle class audiences; barrack room humor and specific regional cinema (i.e. Pagnol for the south of France) were destined for working class viewers; detective films, war movies and action films set in the colonies or other exotic locations appealed to a wider general audience; but what the film canon has identified as “poetic realism” didn’t exist as a distinct genre for film viewers of the time.

We found that the image of an “incestuous couple” predominates (an older man in a loving “protective” relationship with a much younger woman) in all film genres in the 1930s until it disappears as such with France’s war-time defeat in 1940. The image reappears and is inverted in the films produced under the [Nazi] Occupation, where a young woman holds the fate of a community in her hands, in the place of a weakened or discredited patriarch. After the war, there’s another change – the dominant trend in “gritty realism” centers on the image of a scheming bitch bent on destroying the often young men who fall under her spell.

This initial observation led us to hypothesize a close link between world history and the narratives produced by the film industry; this linkage is no doubt due to the collective character of film (in both production and reception) and its transitory nature (film libraries didn’t yet exist and the life span of a film was limited to its time on the screen). For these reasons, film was at the time both a captive to and a primary producer of the “Zeit Geist.”

But our review of dominant images in the cinema of these years included another discovery; some films, including several “masterpieces” in the canon, work against the social consensus by bringing to light contradictory or oppressive aspects. Before the war this was mainly the function of the characters played by Jean Gabin, the only young male actor to attain star status: in some films by Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, Jean Grémillon, he was a working class hero who fought tragically against an older man portrayed as oppressive. During the Occupation, young actresses (Marie Déa, Odette Joyeux, Micheline Presle) incarnated a subversive element by their celebration of autonomy. After the war, a few films inverted the paranoid male fantasy of the bitch in order to reveal the oppression that women suffered (for example *Madame de . . .*, *Casque d’or*, *La Vérité sur Bébé Donge*, *Les Grandes Manœuvres*). In other words, we found that popular cinema is both a site for the construction of gender norms and also (more rarely) a place to question them, and these norms are always being reconfigured in times, however brief, of political upheaval and social change. A few English-language film studies –such as those by Krutnick (1991); Kaplan (1998); Harvey (2007) on “film noir” –have revealed the same responsiveness toward political and social changes in Hollywood films, but such historical

approaches are hard to find in the vast English-language bibliography of gendered film analyses.

This critical perspective isn't intended to tear down the "pantheon" of the film canon nor to claim that all films have equal merit, but instead to explore the gendered dimensions of a "good film"; often this is a film that manages to convey, but not in a one-sided manner, the socio-sexual contradictions of a period, and one that arouses an esthetic emotion in the broadest sense of the term.

Analyzing New Wave films through the perspective of gender (Sellier 2005) raises different issues because the film movement that developed in the 1960s did so by rebelling against the conventions of popular film, and is considered by academics and by the cultural elite in France and elsewhere as the origin of the "auteur" cinema – synonymous with the artistic avant-garde and even with the subversion of bourgeois culture as well as that of alienated mass culture. To show that this film movement, despite its innovative style, rearranges without fundamentally questioning the structures of male domination, is often taken as an attack against the cinema per se . . .

More generally, analyzing popular film (or any kind of mass entertainment) with a gendered perspective elicits little reaction in academic film departments, other than polite indifference; that type of culture isn't "authentic" culture and so exposing how it's ideologically structured doesn't raise many objections. But it's a different story for highbrow culture (which is the status of "auteur" films nowadays, even though which films belong in this category varies according to different critics). These works "deserve" an esthetic analysis rather than a socio-cultural one that lays bare their underlying assumptions. To suggest that male writers and directors (who constituted the New Wave, with very few exceptions) are not only imbued by but also active agents of male domination, comes close to being sacrilegious . . . Academic studies of the "auteur" cinema in France (which are prevalent, and may in fact be the majority) still ignore gender issues, for the most part.

Among film journals that do use a gender studies perspective, we can point to the pioneering work done by *Tausend Augen*⁴ which was founded by some of Noël Burch's former students at the University of Lille 3. Since 1995 they have translated significant English-language articles (Catherine Driscoll, Dennis Bingham, Christine Holmlund, Robin Wood, John Hess) but they have also produced their own analyses of a wide variety of topics, films, actors and filmmakers using gender studies approaches: Clint Eastwood, David Lean, super-heroes and heroines of contemporary Hollywood films, Joe Dante, Takashi Miike, Manuel de Oliveira, David Lynch, Woody Allen, Orientalism in Film (with *Lawrence of Arabia*), Peter Watkins, André Téchiné, Luc Moullet, James Stewart, the image of the monster in horror films, *La Chienne* by Renoir, *Pola X* by Carax, Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Fight Club* . . . For fifteen years, published irregularly as one might expect in a quasi-activist enterprise (the editors also work as volunteers in cultural and social activities in the Lille region) *Tausend Augen* demonstrates how productive a gendered analysis can be to explore Hollywood's most commercial productions as well as the purest "auteur" cinema. These are not formalist approaches but instead works that always take into account the socio-cultural context of production and reception.

At the same time, the translation of English-language books and significant

articles on Hollywood and on French film has continued, usually as a sign of political commitment. The collection "Champs visuels étrangers" that I founded in 1991 at L'Harmattan, and that Brigitte Rollet now co-directs with me, focuses entirely on translations (Modleski 2001; Turk 2001; Dyer 2004; Lang 2008; Vincendeau 2008); the collection of articles Noël Burch translated, published by Nathan in 1993; the special issue of the journal *Champs de l'audio-visuel* titled "Far from Paris: Cinemas and Societies, Texts and Contexts" edited by the same Noël Burch in 2001 – all of these taken together constitute a kind of anthology that enables French students who may not be fluent in English to have access to gender studies theories and methods and to evaluate their validity.

Beyond that, "star studies" first undertaken by the British academic Richard Dyer, then by Ginette Vincendeau, have inspired a great deal of new work. Alain Brassart's book (2004) on the leading men of the 1960s, Gwenaëlle Le Gras' thesis on Catherine Deneuve (recently published), others underway on topics such as the leading men and women in films produced during the Occupation, Danielle Darrieux and Gérard Depardieu, put an emphasis on historical and socio-cultural aspects of mainstream films as well as "auteur" films and the way they bring out contradictions in a society and a period. What we find in these studies is the unique trajectory of French movie stars' careers, at least since the New Wave in the 1960s; their image, including its gendered aspects, is constructed in the interplay between mainstream and "auteur" films.

There is another salient aspect to these recent publications informed by gender studies – this is the recognition that made-for-television films and series need to be given equal weight in any consideration of image-making and audience reception with popular film from the classic era. For example, a number of cop shows have featured one or more women lead characters (*Julie Lescaut*, *Femme d'honneur*, *Sœur Therese.com*, *Femmes juge et flic* . . .); they reconfigure gender-role norms by combining traits traditionally designated as female (generosity, commitment, tact) with a typically "male" job in order to "humanize" it (Sellier and Beylot 2004). These heroines, however, whose private life often centers on their role as "good mothers" do not have an "active" sex life most of the time, as if female sexual desire were incompatible with a career in law enforcement. But the proliferation of programs with women lead characters results in a constant reconfiguring of gender norms, and reveals the existence of what one could call a popular feminism.

In recent work in gay, lesbian and queer studies in France, the same types of resistance are evident but two recent publications on film and homosexuality should be noted (Brassart 2007; Roth-Bettoni 2007) as well as Brigitte Rollet's book (2007) on images of homosexuality in French television fiction between 1995 and 2005 – those dates were chosen because they correspond to the timeline of debates over the PACS and then gay parents' rights.⁵ Rollet found that if gay men and lesbians are no longer stigmatized in television dramas, they are nonetheless still marginalized; in most cases a heterosexual character is the main focus for the audience.

The final paradox of the situation in France concerns the growing number of women directors, who for the most part deny any "feminist" inspiration (seen as a stigma in contrast to the value accorded a masculine image of the "artist"). But the feminist movement of the 1970s gave women filmmakers their original motivation;

members of the movement soon recognized film as a means of consciousness-raising and a weapon in the struggle for equal rights.⁶

The system of public subsidies for film production (especially advances on receipts) has enabled some women to break into feature films. Even if the percentage of films made by women is modest,⁷ their visibility is relatively significant and some women have succeeded in making a career directing films. That's true for Coline Serreau, Diane Kurys, Josiane Balasko, Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis. Nothing similar exists in Hollywood, or in other national film industries. Paradoxically, it's thanks to public policies that recognize the artistic dimensions of film that funding comes from various sources, and keeps alive the low-budget film invented by the New Wave; this has enabled women to lead film productions in an environment that has been traditionally hostile to their taking charge.

Finally, over thirty years ago the first and only international women's film festival was held in France, first in Sceaux and then in Créteil. Even if one feels that this major festival doesn't receive the amount of media recognition that it should, it has become an important stop for women filmmakers from all over the world, a place to make connections and enhance their visibility.

Nevertheless, as Monique Martineau (1993: 7) observed: "even though the Créteil Festival has arguably become the most important one in the world in its category, fifteen years later there still aren't any Women's Studies courses in French universities." If the situation has changed today in some academic disciplines in the social sciences and at the CNRS⁸ Martineau's observation still holds true for cinema studies. Most of the writing at the university level about French women filmmakers is in English⁹ while the rare French-language works in the field don't use a gender studies approach (for example, Vasse 2004) or don't incorporate feminist theories (Audé 2002). Again we must acknowledge certain cultural barriers. The women directors that are studied in universities are the ones who most closely hew to the "auteur" model in its narrowest definition. For instance, Breillat and Denis – their films and their public statements distance them from feminism, understood here as a social movement. Breillat claims an "essentialist" perspective that sees the "war between the sexes" as a natural fact, tragic and unavoidable. As a general rule, French women filmmakers view any references to their own gender as a stigma, something confirmed by the fact that, in their discourse, critics and academics have canonized their work in a gender-free, simply esthetic category.

The women directors who produce more accessible genre films (Kurys, Balasko, Marshall, Serreau) are not studied in universities for that very reason (genre films like comedies are not in and of themselves considered a legitimate subject in university curricula, only the "auteurs" able to "transcend" them.)¹⁰ The esthetic and socio-cultural model of "auteur" cinema overlooks the gender factor, whether in essentialist terms or constructivist ones, to cite the two opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum of feminist criticism.

Publications on the margins of academia reveal younger generations' increasing interest in gendered approaches, but they often do so in a way that's insufficiently informed by theory, in order to remain accessible to a wider readership; as examples, one can point to two issues of *CinémAction*, "Machoism on the Screen" edited by Françoise Puaux and "Women and Power" edited by Penny Starfield in 2008.¹¹

As a result of politicians' and public policy analysts' recent interest in "studies of gender," the Institut Emilie du Châtelet was created in 2005 in the Ile de France region to disseminate studies on women, sex and gender and to award doctoral and post-doctoral grants each year. Several studies on film and television have been included, which is an encouraging sign of recognition for these fields.

"Gender studies" has begun making inroads in the social sciences, as the conference on "Cultural Studies" held on March 20, 2009 by the Public Information Library (BPI) at the Pompidou Center shows. There are also a number of translations of significant English and American articles that deal with gender studies and cultural studies (see in particular Glévarec, Macé, Maigret 2008) as well as work in French in various journals in the fields of history, sociology, and media and communication studies.¹² It seems that cultural studies and gender studies will continue to be linked. We should welcome this because it means that analyzing questions about gender and its representation will be accompanied by a critical re-thinking of the substance of our university curricula. By using a gendered approach, cinema studies will encompass a wider range and include popular films of the past and present (including made-for-television films), as it takes a fresh and newly critical look (in the best sense of the word) at the work in the film "pantheon." This is not the least of its contributions.

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Translated from the French by Nancy Cadet

Notes

1. The term "7th art" is commonly used for the cinema. [Translator's note].
2. Even if the "Cinémathèque Affair" in 1968 changed Malraux into an adversary of the film enthusiasts and filmmakers who united to defend Henri Langlois, it was the founding of the Ministry of Culture and Malraux's policies that enabled public financing for the Cinémathèque française. Today the Archives du film are mainly responsible for preserving France's film heritage.
3. To cite only those whose work has been translated, partially or completely, into French: Tania Modleski, Gaylyn Studlar, Carol Glover, Robert Lang . . .
4. See their website tausendaugen.com for information about issue 32.
5. The PACs, a legal "Pact of Civil Solidarity" enabling civil union between two adults regardless of gender was ratified by France's Socialist government in 1999. Court cases regarding child custody and/or adoption of children by gays and lesbians present a mixed, mainly negative, picture for homosexual parents' rights in the current French legal system [Translator's note].
6. Director Coline Serreau's first film was an activist documentary that featured women of all classes and types, *Mais qu'est-ce qu'elles veulent?* (*What Do Women Want?*). On feminism and film, see *CinémAction* 9, 1979.
7. According to Rollet and Tarr (2001) at the beginning of the twenty-first century it was no more than 15%.
8. Centre national de la recherche scientifique, or National Scientific Research Center [Translator's note].
9. Manchester University Press and Continuum in Great Britain, as well as the journal *Studies in French Cinema* edited by Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie.
10. Raphaëlle Moine (2002 and 2004) has introduced studies of genre films, but her cultural and anthropological approach remains unique.

11. *CinémAction* numbers 99 and 129.
12. See for example issue 24 of the journal *Société et représentations*, "(En)quêtes de genre" 2007; issue 24–25 of the journal *MEI*, edited by Bernard Darras, "Études culturelles & Cultural Studies" 2007; see also *Nouvelles Questions féministes*, "Figures du féminin dans les industries culturelles contemporaines," 28 (1), 2009.

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