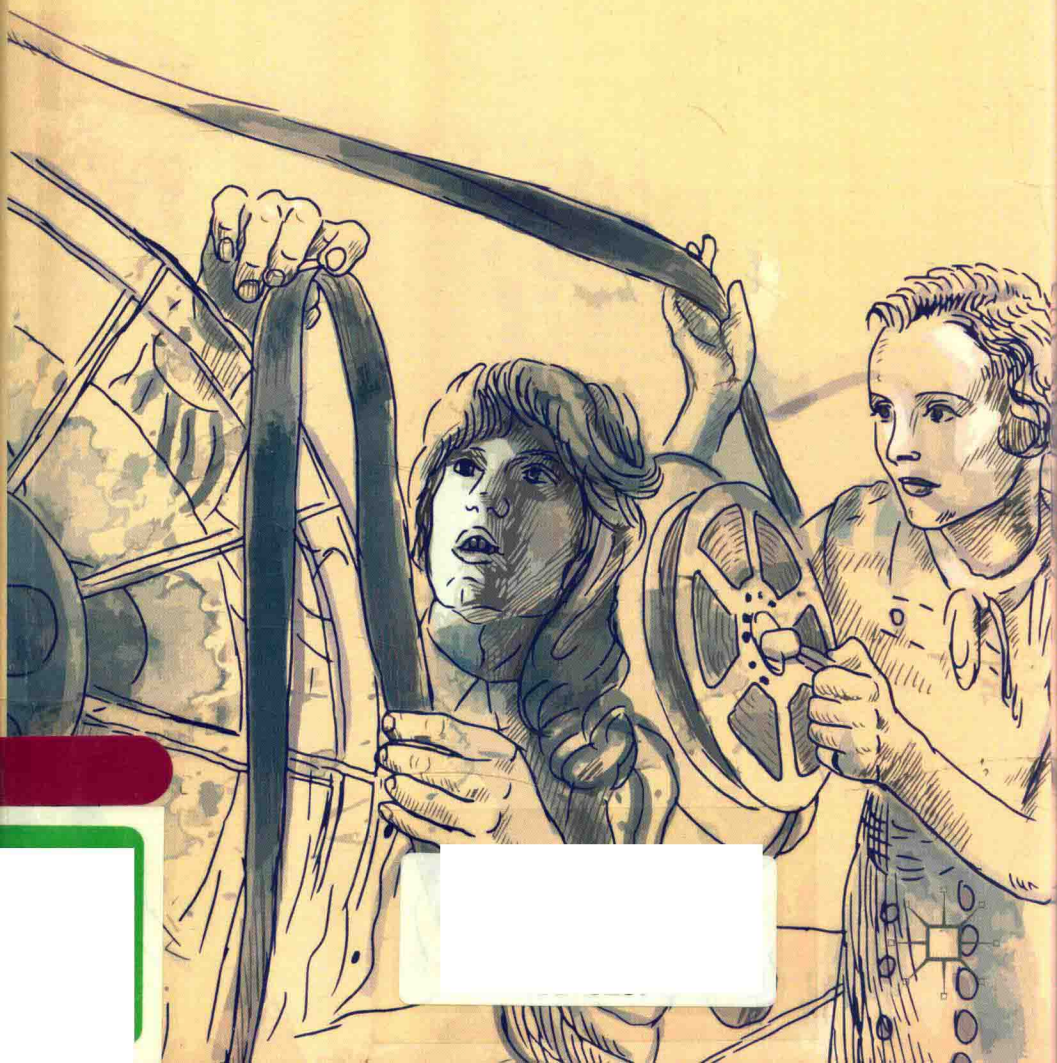

Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers

Shelley Cobb

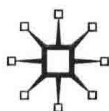


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Shelley Cobb

University of Southampton, UK

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Introduction: Agency, Adaptation, and Authorship

This book examines contemporary film adaptations directed by women (often working with women screenwriters, producers, and sometimes editors) that foreground the figure of the woman author. All but one are adapted from novels by women writers. The woman author in the film does not always correspond to a figure of the woman author in the novel; and in two films, the figure of the woman author is tangential to the characters' fantasy of an historical woman author. Mary Eagleton, in her book, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, argues 'the need for women to claim cultural legitimacy through authorizing themselves in various ways is indisputable' (2005: 2). In all the films examined in this book, I see the figure of the woman author in the text functioning as both a representative of female agency and as a vehicle for representing the authorizing of the woman filmmaker, thereby making a claim for the cultural legitimacy of female film authorship. As such, I am following, to an extent, Timothy Corrigan's argument that 'Authors on films are only ... metaphoric displacements of the real agents of film: sometimes actors but, usually and more effectively, *auteurs*' (166). Where I differ with Corrigan is with his unqualified use of the term *auteur*. Though I am sympathetic to his desire to disrupt the traditional weighting of literary authorship over film authorship in adaptation studies, *auteurism* is still an exclusionary model of authorship. It is a term that, because of its masculine connotations, has neither been readily available for women filmmakers nor wholly accepted by feminist film theorists. Consequently, I want to think about how women have sought to establish their authority as film authors in other ways. The fact

that these films are adaptations inevitably complicates the representation of the woman filmmaker's authorship and agency: the woman filmmaker now has one more collaborator, the woman writer, in the already collaborative art of filmmaking. However, the overriding view put forward in this book is that in opposition to the individualistic and masculine image of the auteur, collaborative authorship makes space for the woman author to authorize herself. It is my contention that in their identity as adaptations and their representation of the woman author, these films made by women uniquely represent the difficulties of female agency in the contemporary, postfeminist period.

Women's authorship and cinema

Virginia Woolf is famously (mis)quoted as saying, 'For most of history, Anonymous was a woman'. The actual quote from *A Room of One's Own* is more specific: 'I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was a woman' (1929: 41). The misquote turns Woolf's canny retort about the historical lack of female poets of genius into a feminist axiom about the resistance to women's authority and genius across all forms of authorship. From poetry to science to historiography to cinema and more, historically, women's authorial signatures have been hidden and obscured. In the twenty-first century, when feminism's first inroads into the academy are now 40 years past and terms like 'gynocriticism' and 'herstory' have fallen out of fashion, reclaiming women's authorship may seem redundant to some. However, in an interview in the *Guardian* about her new series of portraits of forgotten women artists, Annie Kevans says, 'For hundreds of years there was this very strong control over the canon and [the male-dominated establishment] didn't want women written into it ... As a contemporary artist, there are still concerns. I do think, what if that happened to me?' (Frizell, 2014). I, too, have concerns that when it comes to women's artistry and authorship that what has happened before can easily happen again. This concern in regards to contemporary women filmmakers is the impetus for my looking closely in this book at 11 film adaptations made by women since 1990. My concern, of course, is politically motivated by my feminist politics. The lack of status for women in the contemporary film industry has become an increasingly urgent issue in the media. Every year during award season, articles are written lamenting the numbers of women directors nominated for awards and the

major festivals get rightly taken down for not including many films by women in their programmes. As I write this introduction, the 2014 Cannes Film Festival is about to begin. Jane Campion, the only woman to have won the Palme d'Or (which she shared with Chen Kaige) heads a jury with a majority of women that includes the directors Sofia Coppola and Jeon Do-yeon; however, only two films directed by women are up for the Palme d'Or this year, and though the festival boasts a total of 15 women directors, five of them contributed to the multi-directed documentary *Bridges of Sarajevo*.¹ Often these articles on women directors mention the Annual Celluloid Ceiling Report which is produced by the Center for Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. Each year the report shows the percentage of directors, writers, producers, exec-producers, editors and cinematographers (working on the top 250 grossing films) who are women: in 1998 women constituted 17% of the total of all those roles, and in 2013 they constituted 16%. As Sue Thornham has suggested, these numbers show 'how far we should be from complacency' (2012: 2). It seems to me that for feminist academics our main weapon against complacency – in the face of the low numbers of women who get to make films and the potential exclusion of those films from canonical histories – is to write about films made by women.

And we do write about films made by women. Claire Johnston's and Pam Cook's work on Dorothy Arzner and Annette Kuhn's and Charlotte Brunsdon's work on women in the feminist filmmaking movement were foundational in establishing feminist film criticism. More recently, there is a veritable industry in academic analysis of Jane Campion and her films (there are at least four monographs and four edited collections, as well as innumerable articles and chapters). Other directors of English-language cinema like Sally Potter and Kathryn Bigelow also receive a lot of academic attention. In addition to the focus on individual directors, there are several books that consider women filmmakers in groups based on national identity, especially in countries like France, Australia, and Canada that at different points in recent history have had strong state support for women's filmmaking. Most recently, Sue Thornham, in her book *What if I Had Been the Hero: Investigating Women's Cinema*, argues that:

it remains important, it seems to me, to explore in terms of feminist theory these films which, to borrow Nancy Miller's words,

bear the signature of women, since by their very nature they must engage with those issues which have been of concern to feminist theorists: questions of subjectivity, of narrative and its relation to gender, of fantasy and desire, of the gendered ordering of space and time, and of regulation and agency. (2012: 1)

I am also concerned with analysing films that 'bear the signature of women', and it is my contention that the films in this book negotiate the feminist concerns of subjectivity, narrative, fantasy and desire, space and time, and, most importantly, agency through the figure of the woman author.

Focusing on adaptations might seem an oblique approach to women's authorship, since adaptation studies has long been marginalized in film criticism – though that has been changing recently – and when the dominant approach to adaptations has been fidelity criticism, which, as many adaptation scholars have shown, subordinates the film to the authority of the novel. So, to be clear: the thing I spend the least time exploring in this book is the translation of the novel to film, which would require a 'comparative stylistics of the two media [to decide] which features are "translatable" and which are not' (Stam, 2004: 40–41). What I am most interested in is how the women who made these films use adaptation to foreground authorship; how these adaptations are places from which the female voice, to use Kaja Silverman's phrasing, 'can speak and be heard' (2003:192). Much of the time this means analysing the representation of authorship in the text, but it also means analysing the representation of authorship outside the text, which includes both the novelists and the filmmakers (usually directors, but also, in some cases, screenwriters, producers and other production personnel). The amount of time spent on analysing each of these varies from chapter to chapter. Whichever comes to the fore has depended on a combination of things: how prominent the representation of authorship is in the text, how much the filmmakers have talked about the writers' whom they have adapted, and how culturally prominent are the women authors, both of the novel and the film. Approaching film adaptation in this way is my attempt to situate my feminist political interest in women's authorship at the intersection of the texts with their contexts. I have been influenced by Claire Johnston's statement

of the value of studying women's film authorship while recognizing its limits:

Polemics for women's creativity are fine as long as we realise they are polemics. The notion of women's creativity *per se* is as limited as the notion of men's creativity. It is basically an idealist conception which elevates the idea of the 'artist' (involving the pitfall of elitism), and undermines any view of art as a material thing within a cultural context which forms it and is formed by it. (1999: 36)

For me, to recognize that cultural context forms art and art is informed by cultural context requires the recognition of the status of the woman author, or, more to the polemical point, her lack of status.

The rhetoric around women filmmakers and the analysis of their authorial identities necessarily has to contend with their exceptionalism; in other words, because there are relatively few female filmmakers, they cannot be talked about, reviewed, analysed, or appreciated in the same way as male filmmakers. This is in part due to the masculinized discourse and image of the auteur as well as to the conspicuousness of the few, well-known women film directors. Their conspicuousness functions to make manifest the gendered nature of authorship. The period in which the films in this book were made and exhibited is specifically post-feminist (I use the hyphen in this instance to emphasize the chronological meaning of the term) in that the production and financial contexts that allowed for a feminist avant-garde filmmaking movement during the 1970s and 1980s no longer exists. This period of films by women has been well documented by B. Ruby Rich, Annette Kuhn, and others, and the uniqueness of that era for developing women's filmmaking is evidenced by the government funding (in both the US and UK) for alternative cinema; the benefit of this funding for women's groups, organizations, and coalitions that made films; the exhibition of these films at women's community centres and at universities, especially those with growing women's studies departments; and the connections between the feminist avant-garde movement, academic theory, and identity politics of the period. The loss of much of this support system throughout the late 1980s meant that by the 1990s women

filmmakers had to find new provisions for making and exhibiting films. In the 1990s, some women filmmakers who had made films associated with the feminist filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s moved into the independent sector to make more 'mainstream' narrative fiction films.² One of the most high profile of these women is Sally Potter, whose first 'mainstream' narrative film was an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, with which this book begins.

The postfeminist context

In her article 'From Female Friends to Literary Ladies: The Contemporary Women's Film', Karen Hollinger notes that 'many classic adaptations [of the 1990s] represent attempts by female screenwriters, directors, and production executives to recapture for a contemporary female audience the distinctive voices of prominent women of the past, either real or fictional' (2002: 78). She lists as examples *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995), *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *Mrs. Dalloway* (Marleen Gorris, 1997), *Washington Square* (Agnieszka Holland, 1997), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1997).³ Since then, of course, women filmmakers have made several more adaptations of classic novels from *Mansfield Park* (Rozema, 1999), which I consider in Chapter 1 alongside *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992), to *Vanity Fair* (Mira Nair, 2004) and *Wuthering Heights* (Andrea Arnold, 2011). In her article, Hollinger implicitly draws on early feminist film scholarship on 'the woman's film' and women's films made by feminist filmmakers. A prominent example of this kind of work that links the analysis of women's production with women's representation, in both mainstream and counter cinemas, is Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, published in 1982. In it, she gives two sections to the reading and analysis of dominant cinema and its representations of women. The last section, 'Replacing dominant cinema: Feminism and film practice', focuses on the feminist countercinema of the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which many female filmmakers made documentary and avant-garde films about women and women's stories. Hollinger has chosen films that are too mainstream in their narrative forms and content to have any parallel with Kuhn's countercinema. The connection I am suggesting is more abstract. Hollinger never explicitly names any of the films as feminist. But by

invoking the genre of the woman's film, she implicitly makes the connection by evoking feminist scholarship like Kuhn's that exhibits early feminist film theory's interest in both the classical Hollywood 'woman's film' and the women's films of the feminist filmmaking movement, suggesting the possibility of a feminist reading of women's production in a mainstream context.

Other feminist scholars, such as Christina Lane, in her book *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break*, have made similar and more explicit claims in relation to directors like Kathryn Bigelow and Darnell Martin who have made films with Hollywood studios. Lane makes the argument that feminists need to consider women filmmakers 'who overtly engage feminist politics as well as those who are not easily linked with feminism' and to take into account 'the many dilemmas confronted by women, not just feminists, given the indication of discrimination by industry statistics' (Lane, 2000: 10). Though the classic-novel adaptations that Hollinger lists and the two I consider in Chapter 1 are not mainstream films (they are independent productions), other films in this book are, including *How to Make an American Quilt* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1995) and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Callie Khouri, 2002). These mainstream cinema adaptations based on contemporary popular novels, as well as the classic-novel adaptations mentioned above, appear in the context of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century growth of the 'chick flick', described by Roberta Garrett:

from the first big cycle of women's melodramas in the early 1980s, through the persistent stream of high-profile costume dramas, and, in particular, the continuing triumph of new romantic comedy, female-oriented and identified cycles have continued to flourish throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. (Garrett, 4)

Some of the highest grossing films of the early 1990s include *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990), *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991) *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), *A League of Their Own* (Penny Marshall, 1992), and *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993); it is also important to remember that the controversial and seminal 'chick flick' *Thelma and Louise* was released in 1991.⁴ Throughout

the decade and into the early 2000s, the differing elements of melodrama and comedy have coalesced to produce what are now quintessential chick flicks like *Just Like Heaven* (Mark Waters, 2005) and *P.S. I Love You* (Richard LaGravenese, 2007) where death, comedy, and romance are all integral elements of the plot. The important point is that all of these chick flicks evoke the classical Hollywood genre of the woman's film in which the narrative belongs to the female character and male characters are, to an extent, sidelined. The 'popular' adaptations in this book are a part of this trend.

Focusing on women filmmakers and women's narratives of the 1990s and the 2000s inevitably means engaging with the changing image and place of feminism in Anglo-American society. The cultural 'backlash' discourse against feminism during the 1980s, articulated by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash* published in 1991, had by the early 1990s begun to transform into the 'postfeminist' cultural discourse that has continued to develop through the early twenty-first century. In her article 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', Angela McRobbie reflects back on this early period of the 1990s as a significant historical moment for feminism. She writes, 'we could say that 1990 (or thereabouts) marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory ... In feminist cultural studies, the early 1990s also marks a moment of feminist reflexivity ... The year 1990 also marked the moment at which the concept of popular feminism found expression' (2007: 29). She cites popular women's magazines' growing attention to long-term feminist concerns such as domestic violence and equal pay as evidence of feminism's wider influence, while pointing to important developments in feminist scholarship at the time, which further raised feminism's profile in the academy, such as influential work by postcolonial theorists, new theories of the body, and critiques of the distinction between 'ordinary women' and feminists. This 'feminist success' both inside and outside the academy raised both contention and promise within feminism:

With feminism as part of the academic curriculum (i.e., 'canonized'), then it is not surprising that it might also be countered ... and [feminists should] not be so surprised when young women students decline the invitation to identify as a 'we' ... (Following Judith Butler) I saw this sense of contestation on the part of young

women ... as one of potential where a lively dialogue about how feminism might develop would commence. (2007: 30)

However, as McRobbie goes on to show, the contentious possibilities were overtaken in the 1990s and early 2000s by postfeminist discourses that constructed feminism as redundant. My conception of postfeminism coincides with that articulated by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra:

Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated ... What appears distinctive about contemporary postfeminist culture is ... the extent to which a selectively defined feminism has been so overtly 'taken into account'. (2007: 1)

In their anthology *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Tasker and Negra and their contributors largely focus on issues of gender representation in twenty-first century popular culture; therefore, my use of the term modifies and specifies theirs through my choice to focus on women's production and the representation of women by women filmmakers during the period in which the term, as Tasker and Negra argue, 'concretized' (8). This also means that my use of the term develops and changes with each chapter as the film texts are products of the intensifying postfeminist culture. In the early 1990s, 'postfeminism' was still, for some, interchangeable with 'backlash'. For example, within the reception of Sally Potter's *Orlando*, the term is often used to signify a negative view of her move from feminist avant-garde filmmaking into mainstream narrative filmmaking, as well as to signify a distinction between her apparent postfeminism and Virginia Woolf's 'authentic' feminism. In the mid-1990s, when the difference between third-wave feminism and postfeminism as a neo-conservative discourse was not yet distinct, mainstream films like *Little Women* and *How to Make an American Quilt* incorporate more explicit gestures to feminist ideals through their representations of sisterhood than do more recent postfeminist chick flicks. At the turn of the millennium, postfeminism's emphasis on individual female success as an indicator

of feminism's redundancy is the context in which three female auteurs – Kathryn Bigelow, Lynne Ramsey, and Jane Campion – make adaptations that highlight the dangers of women's authorship. At this time, the successful, white, bourgeois female begins to develop as the representative image of postfeminist culture.⁵ By the early 2000s, postfeminism in mainstream media products had become the set of assumptions Tasker and Negra describe above, understood as a neo-conservative discourse of popular media culture. The two Austen-related adaptations examined in the final chapter of this book, clearly articulate postfeminist culture's current ambivalent relationship with feminism and its dependent relationship with women's consumer culture (which includes the fan culture around Austen's authorship).

Adaptation as conversation and collaboration

It is my contention in this book that adaptations can be particularly productive texts for thinking about film authorship and the cultural politics of gender, but we must shift our view of adaptation away from the source as the standard and, instead, 'explore the particular ways in which [film] adaptations make their own meanings' (Geraghty, 2008:4). Robert Stam has declared that we cannot only reject fidelity criticism but that 'we need ... a new language and a new set of tropes for speaking about adaptation' (Stam, 2004: 24). I have argued elsewhere that no one trope or metaphor will be able to replace the language of fidelity for all adaptations without again reducing some or even many to the binary of source and adaptation (Cobb, 2011). In this book, I think about women's adaptations as a conversation. As a critical tool, the metaphor of conversation is invoked by Bakhtinian theory and the concept of dialogism:

Dialogism refers to the relation between the text and its others not only in the relatively crude and obvious forms of argument – polemics and parody – but also in much more diffuse and subtle forms that have to do with overtones, pauses, implied attitude, what is left unsaid or is to be inferred. (Stam, 1989: 14)

It is a model that privileges a multiplicity of voices in and between texts and theorizes the necessity of that multiplicity for the

meaning-making of texts. It makes room in the analysis of adaptations for influences on the process of adaptation that have largely been ignored in favour of an almost obsessive search for narratological equivalences. Uninterested in one-to-one correspondences, dialogism promotes ways of 'restoring voice to the silenced' and the critic using Bakhtinian theories is compelled to 'call attention to the voices at play in a text, not only those heard in aural "close-up", but also those voices dominated, distorted, or drowned out by the text' (Stam, 2004: 14). The critical intent to restore voice to the silenced is akin to the interests of feminist theory and practice and a feminist view of dialogism would be interested in also listening to those textual voices marginalized by virtue of their gender, sexuality, class, and race.⁶

Conversation, as metaphor for a dialogical approach, does not necessarily depend on agreement or any kind of understood final outcome, decision, or solution. It depends, rather, on interaction and exchange. A conversation is not a monologue, a soliloquy, an oration, an address, a sermon or a lecture. A conversation may be an interaction between two people or amongst several people, but it always requires more than one. When we label an experience of speaking with (an)other(s) as conversation, we have understood it as something very different than if we labelled that experience an argument or debate. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their *Metaphors We Live By*, make it clear that we not only understand argument through the metaphor of war but that it also structures how we engage in it: 'We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his decisions and defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies' (1980: 14). Although participants in a conversation may have differing ideas on the topic discussed, in the end they may come to agree or continue to disagree but they do not view each other as either having won or lost. Consequently, sometimes conversations can be banal and unremarkable and, even, forgettable, which may be the biggest weakness of the metaphor, especially as adaptations, in many instances, have been regarded as redundant, bland, safe (if not conservative), and unexciting. However, these possible qualities do not preclude conversations from being important, meaningful, exciting, inspiring, even illuminating and very possibly troubling. A conversation demands the ability to share, meaning both the ability