



A photograph of a young woman with brown hair, wearing a green jacket and a red hat, holding a smoking pipe. The image is slightly out of focus, with a soft, natural light.

Feminism at the Movies

Understanding Gender in
Contemporary Popular Cinema

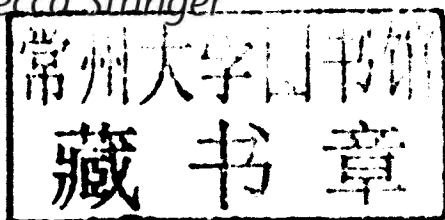
Edited by

Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer

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FEMINISM AT THE MOVIES

Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema examines the way that contemporary film reflects today's changing gender roles. The book offers a comprehensive overview of the central issues in feminist film criticism with analyses of over twenty popular contemporary films across a range of genres, such as chick flicks, teen pics, hommecoms, horror, action adventure, indie flicks, and women lawyer films. Contributors explore issues of masculinity as well as femininity, reflecting on the interface of popular cinema with gendered realities and feminist ideas. Topics include the gendered political economy of cinema, the female director as auteur, postfeminist fatherhood, consumer culture, depictions of professional women, transgender, sexuality, gendered violence, and the intersections of gender, race, and ethnic identities.

The volume contains essays by the following contributors: Taunya Lovell Banks, Heather Brook, Mridula Nath Chakraborty, Michael DeAngelis, Barry Keith Grant, Hannah Hamad, David Hansen-Miller (with Rosalind Gill), Kelly Kessler, Christina Lane (with Nicole Richter), JaneMaree Maher, Gary Needham, Sarah Projansky, Hilary Radner, Rob Schaap, Michele Schreiber, Yael D Sherman, Janet Staiger, Peter Stapleton, Rebecca Stringer, Yvonne Tasker, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek.

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INTRODUCTION

“Re-Vision”?: Feminist Film Criticism in the Twenty-first Century

Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer

A primary preoccupation that marks contemporary culture is the question of gender: who are we, and to what extent do biological divisions of male and female continue to inform our sense of identity? The questions routinely raised by feminist scholars within the academy during the last 20 years of the twentieth century have become the stuff of popular narrative in the twenty-first century—with contemporary movies continuing to provide a collective locus for the expression of cultural concerns within the largely comforting and reassuring framework of established genres in hybridized form. This volume does not attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of gender and film; rather, its mandate is to air issues surrounding the cinematic representation of gender that continue to be the object of both popular and scholarly attention.

The volume pursues the task of feminist film criticism as initially defined in works such as *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, originally published in 1984; we propose to continue, within the landscape of popular movies of the twenty-first century, the project set forth by the editors of that volume, whose goal was “re-vision,” with the purpose of

seeing difference differently, re-visioning the old apprehension of sexual difference and making it possible to multiply differences, to move away from homogeneity.¹

Maintaining a focus on the woman’s film, a productive topic of analysis for feminist film theory over the past 30 years, the essays gathered together provide an entrée into current debates on gender as they inform movies that address the female audience. Each chapter offers analyses of specific films *familiar* to today’s students, films that each author re-views, that is, subjects to the process of

re-vision in the full sense of the word as intended by the authors quoted above—films such as *The Secret Life of Bees* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2008) and *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), but also *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007) and *A Single Man* (Tom Ford, 2009)—in other words, films that have sparked debate in a number of different quarters while remaining accessible to mass audiences. By covering a wide range of films (we include 21 chapters; *Re-Vision* only eight), the volume moves beyond the traditional delineation of women's cinema. Indeed, as Rob Schaap observes in “No Country for Old Women,” unlike male viewers, who are reluctant to choose films that fall under the rubric routinely referred to as “femme fare,” women watch a wide variety of films, and, if fans of the woman's film, they rarely confine themselves to that genre. While industry figures on gay audiences are difficult to find, responses to films like *Sex and the City: The Movie* (Michael Patrick King, 2008) suggest that their viewing habits are closer to that of the “female demo” than to those of the male viewer; this glaring absence of information supports Schaap's further contention that global Hollywood's division of audiences into four quadrants disadvantages groups that do not neatly correspond to its preferred category of males under 25, in spite of the fact that many of these so-called “minority” groups may be regular film-goers.²

The selection of films here reflects, then, the eclectic tastes of the expanded femme fare audience: Janet Staiger opens the volume, in her chapter “The First Bond Who Bleeds,” with a discussion of older women's investments in films typically thought to target a young male audience, which she re-dubs “‘Pretty Boy’ Action Movies,” emphasizing their appeal to viewers who want to look at men. This chapter is followed by Michael DeAngelis on *A Single Man*, a narrative that revolves around a gay male protagonist and his lost love, echoing the classical romantic melodrama as a genre that typically spoke to “femmes.” Although viewers' experiences may be dominated by global Hollywood, certain genres, such as horror, even when produced nationally, attract an international “niche” audience. Independent films such as *The Secret Life of Bees* that are produced and promoted by a celebrity, such as Queen Latifah, also offer alternative discourses to another type of niche audience, remaining nonetheless within the popular. It is this range and complexity, we argue, that define the circulation of discourses about gender in cinema today. Examining a broad compendium of films, not only “chick flicks,” such as *Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie, 2000), but also spy films, *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), or even horror, *Haute Tension* [*High Tension/Switchblade Romance*] (Alexandre Aja, 2003), as a group, the analyses included here offer a “thick” and diverse articulation of the figuration of gender within contemporary cinema as a plurality of positions that are inherently contradictory.

Through the scope of films considered and its engagement with popular cinema as a form of ideological interrogation, *Feminism at the Movies* suggests a break with feminist film scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, the need to define a feminist counter-cinema, an authentic woman's cinema,

a representation of "woman as woman,"³ or a woman's voice or "look," no longer serve as primary impetuses behind these current assessments of popular cinema. Movies are accepted as important and complex social documents in their own right, serving a variety of functions, not all of which are in the interests of a hegemonic status quo. Notwithstanding, the volume also testifies to the continuing legacy and influence of *Re-Vision* as a landmark publication: notably, Linda Williams's "When the Woman Looks"⁴ provides the foundation for Barry Keith Grant's current contribution, "'When the Woman Looks': *Haute Tension* (2003) and the Horrors of Heteronormativity." The larger list of topics and authors comprising the volume's table of contents testifies, however, to the shifting terrain of research in feminist film criticism, marked by the increased participation of male scholars; by the heightened visibility of lesbian, gay, and queer analyses and questions surrounding masculinity; by the focus on contemporary history, particularly as it informs "raced" and postcolonial subjects; by a more pronounced interrogation of the links between violence and gender; by the assumption that popular films, popular culture, and consumer culture are complex and ambivalent social forces in the production of gender.

Structures of heteronormativity and of inclusion and exclusion remain a substantive concern, as do maternity and kinship, now inflected by changes in the politics and technologies of reproduction. Though psychoanalysis (as it did for scholars in *Re-Vision*) provides the vocabulary with which a number of contributors describe the symbolic fields through which gender is generated as such, psychoanalysis does not dominate thinking about feminist film scholarship as was the case in 1984. Contributors today call upon a range of different paradigms, such as reception theory, neoliberalism, and postfeminism, within which to situate their analysis, demonstrating the ways in which cinema has become a fruitful object through which to examine and discuss feminist issues relating to fields beyond cinema studies itself, such as sociology, legal studies, political studies, and philosophy, echoing the home disciplines of the authors themselves.

Following the recent flourishing of feminist research on contemporary feminine culture, such as Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* and Diane Negra's *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, many of these chapters return to some of the topics that marked second wave feminist writing such as that of Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen, which attempted to evaluate the types of images offered by film, often described as "the 'image of' tradition of feminist film criticism."⁵ While popular feminism has never abandoned these issues, feminist film scholarship, under the influence of ciné-psychoanalysis, sought to move beyond this framework in order to interrogate the role and specificity of cinema as medium and institution in generating the structures and circulation of fantasy and desire.⁶ On the one hand, there are very few chapters that do not bear the mark of this research; on the other, chapters such as those by Taunya Lovell Banks on the representation of

women lawyers, or Yael D Sherman on the presentation of new patterns of femininity, suggest that the “images of women” mode of analysis remains both pertinent and necessary. To fail to question the models of femininity that cinema produces and circulates would be to subscribe to a postfeminism that posits the second wave modalities as outmoded and unnecessary. Indeed, as legal scholar Taunya Lovell Banks explains, the battle for representation in a literal sense has yet to be won, as shown by films such as *Michael Clayton* (2007), which perpetuates the stereotyping that historically characterizes “women lawyer” movies. Similarly, Kelly Kessler demonstrates how popular cinema fails to adequately represent lesbian sexuality as something other than a transitory experiment and a deviation from the heterosexual norm. The relative homogeneity exhibited by the protagonists (most are “white,” young, thin, and middle-class) of the films considered by this volume (with a number of notable exceptions, such as *The Secret Life of Bees*) demonstrates that cinema continues to rely upon established stereotypes in generating popular narratives.

Though still at times caught in some of the conundrums that excited the ire of second wave feminists, current cinema itself has become much more self-conscious in its treatment of gender. While in general the direct political references to feminism associated with films like *Nine to Five* (Collin Higgins, 1980) or *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) are rare, movies in the twenty-first century are aware of their role in the social production of gender, and commonly represent, and deliberately reflect upon, the dilemmas that face the contemporary subject. While as popular films their conclusions generally serve to reassure viewers that singles, parents, and kids “are alright,” they also raise questions about gender that undermine our understanding of it as being biologically ordained, or a “natural” category. JaneMaree Maher points to the ways that new reproductive alternatives give rise to new family structures in *Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers, 2008); Heather Brook suggests that bridal culture may be about new, and enduring, forms of female friendship that may sit alongside heterosexuality, but also question its centrality; and Gary Needham argues that what he calls the “transgender figure” destabilizes normative and essentialist definitions of gender.

The topics with which these chapters engage are varied but uniformly center on the dilemmas of gender, particularly femininity, including: the undoing of masculinity in the face of evolving gender roles; the emergence of gay and queer sexualities and identities; postfeminism and consumer culture; the neoliberal feminine subject; feminine adolescent sexuality; the continued cultural ambivalence surrounding the professional woman; the vexed permutations of gender, race, and ethnicity with regard to the postcolonial subject; a new feminine narcissism; the hegemony of gender-oriented consumer culture in conglomerate Hollywood; the female event film and its soundtrack; the politics of feminine independence; the re-articulation of intimacy, affective relations, and kinship; the containment of lesbian sexuality; female friendship and consumer culture; postfeminist

fatherhood; history, race, and violence; rape narratives; and the pathologizing of violent masculinity. The book includes five broad sections that define the central issues addressed: Masculinity in Question; New Feminine Subjects; Consuming Culture(s); Relationships, Identity, and Family; and Gender and Violence. The chapters exhibit a strong consistency in themes; the examination of consumerism is prevalent across all sections, for example, with those grouped in the section "Consuming Culture(s)" focusing more specifically on consumer culture as a central concern of the analysis. In many cases, chapters might easily fall into one section or another—this is because these larger *topoi*, such as family relations or consumerism, cut across contemporary cinema in a systematic fashion as central and recurring concerns.

Masculinity in Question

Contemporary deliberations about femininity throw into relief the ways in which masculinity as its analytic other is itself an unstable and contested category. Janet Staiger, in her analysis of *Casino Royale*, considers the evolution of the action film in terms of an increasingly marked tendency towards melodrama and "tears," and its implication for both female and male spectators. In so doing, she suggests the need to revise received views about gender and its impact on a viewer's relations to the screen image and narrative. In "Queer Memories and Universal Emotions," Michael DeAngelis examines how *A Single Man* presents a "paradoxical" version of "queerness—as both gay specific and universally accessible." While *A Single Man* offers a gay romantic hero, the heterosexual male, as David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill argue in "'Lad Flicks': Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film," is presented as a figure of fun in a recent cycle of comedies that center on a man, no longer young, as in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005), who struggles with "immaturity, neurosis, lack of success or social power." For Hansen-Miller and Gill, the comic mode suggests how masculinity constitutes "a troubled cultural category" in contemporary culture. In a similar vein, Gary Needham claims in *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005) that the main character Bee (Felicity Huffman), as a "transgender figure," highlights "the cultural construction of gender, but also assumptions about sexualities and bodies." According to Needham, the transgender figure then calls both masculinity and femininity into question as modes of being that can be undone and re-done—or re-viewed—in which the "queering of the road movie" becomes "a model for thinking about the gendered body and identity as a journey, or in theoretical terms the process of becoming rather than being." These chapters are united, then, in the way that they demonstrate how contemporary cinema has called into question notions of a stable masculine identity, and by extension femininity—in which masculinity is understood in terms of what Hansen-Miller and Gill call "its difficulties," and in which social hierarchies, including those involved in regimes of looking, are not monolithic.

New Feminine Subjects: A Space for Women?

While Part I offers a view of masculinity as troubled and fragile, Part II posits an equally fraught and vexed position for the feminine subject. Yvonne Tasker in her analysis of *Enchanted* (Kevin Lima, 2007) concludes that as a postfeminist film it seems to advocate empowerment for women while actually encouraging them to adopt roles that will leave them with little economic or political clout, a form of what Diane Negra has called “retreatism.”⁷ Foreshadowing the subsequent section on consuming culture, Tasker also observes that the film emphasizes consumerism as the privileged and legitimate form of self-fashioning available to women—that again repositions them in terms of conventional femininity. Yael D Sherman on *Miss Congeniality* links what she calls neoliberal femininity to consumption and a concern with appearance. In “Neoliberal Femininity in *Miss Congeniality* (2000),” she argues that the film demonstrates how neoliberalism has generated a new model of femininity that attempts unsuccessfully to reconcile feminism and femininity, leaving the feminine subject in an untenable position, echoing Yvonne Tasker’s analysis of *Enchanted*. Sarah Projansky examines the franchise that grows out of the novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, which includes further novels and two films. While Projansky sees the franchise as offering possibilities for a feminist reading by looking across the various texts and examining their contradictions, she also sees its stories as “missed opportunities.” In the final instance, these texts fail to empower young women to understand and engage with their own sexuality, and fall back on ethnic and gender stereotypes. Taunya Lovell Banks argues that *Michael Clayton* (2007), as a recent example in a long line of “commercial films that treated women lawyers harshly,” “tells viewers that the powerful twenty-first century corporate/legal world remains a decidedly male environment ill-suited for women.” Mridula Nath Chakraborty offers a similarly pessimistic view of *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), which she understands as replicating “the primacy accorded to marriage and family in feminist subcontinental films that have explored the theme of same-sex love,” while promoting an ethos of assimilation. In her discussion of *13 Going On 30* (Gary Winick, 2004), Hilary Radner explores how the film represents a new feminine pathology in which narcissism, grounded in consumer culture, takes the place of hysteria. Contemporary cinema’s new subjectivities are neither, perhaps, as new or as radical as second wave feminism might have hoped, with consumer culture taking an increasingly dominant role in the definition of femininity.

Consuming Culture(s)

Part III continues the volume’s exploration of consumer culture as fundamental to feminine identity, echoing earlier chapters by Tasker and Radner. While most chapters see films for women as advocating participation in consumer culture in

the form of acquiring fashionable garments, etc., the authors are not unified in their view, with some arguing that so-called independent, low-budget and mid-budget films may allow female directors to critique the tyranny of feminine consumer culture and the validity of the assumption that it is intrinsic to feminine identity, thereby generating alternative positions. This section also highlights how film as an object that is consumed inevitably positions it and its viewers in relation to larger economic structures. Thus, Rob Schaap describes how the institutional and economic structure of conglomerate Hollywood discourages the production of films targeting a female audience, especially those over 25. Peter Stapleton examines the soundtrack of *Sex and the City: The Movie*, illustrating how the demands of Conglomerate Hollywood in terms of synergies and product tie-ins constrain the kinds of music employed, with significant ideological implications that result in the promotion of "old fashioned values" and heteronormativity. Michele Schreiber posits that films like *Friends With Money* (Nicole Holofcener, 2006), which she describes as produced outside the Hollywood system, offer the possibility of questioning and even de-legitimizing the consumeristic discourses of films like *Sex and the City*. Similarly, Christina Lane and Nicole Richter see Sofia Coppola, in films such as *Marie Antoinette* (2006), interrogating the position of woman as both looking and being looked at, while self-consciously exploiting her own situation as a "name brand" director, in which she must circulate her image as a marketing device. For Lane and Richter, Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* uses consumption to create herself as a spectacle, her primary form of self-expression, paralleling Coppola's own aesthetic as an auteur filmmaker.

Relationships, Identity, and Family

In spite of a focus on consumerism and self-fulfillment at the individual level in many contemporary films, issues surrounding family and motherhood remain central to contemporary cinema for women, while female friendship film continues as a significant genre. JaneMaree Maher's analysis of *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) and *Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers, 2008) raises questions about the relationship between economic status and motherhood, with motherhood, particularly in *Juno*, seemingly reserved for the economically privileged; however, Maher also demonstrates how the films also move their characters towards new relations and articulations of family that are outside traditional patriarchal structures. Kelly Kessler expresses her disappointment in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), which ultimately posits the lesbian relationship as de-sexualized, a form of female friendship that asserts the ascendancy of heterosexuality. She posits the film as a cinematic inversion of a "hetero bait-and-switch," in which the film promises a lesbian union, but ultimately concludes with a heterosexual couple. In contrast, Heather Brook finds that in *Bride Wars* (Gary Winick, 2009), female friendship may provide stability, when