

## Women on the Other Side

### Week 1: Introduction

#### Women in Cinema History

Women have been making films for a very long time. In fact, arguments have been made for a woman as the first person to direct a full-length fiction feature film (*The Life of Christ* in 1906) (See Acker: 1991<sup>1</sup>). Alice Guy Blaché (1873-1968) was head of production at Gaumont in France and then Solax, a company in which she was a partner, in the US after she married. Over a 25 year period, ending in 1922, she was involved in the production of over 700 films.

However, after the new 'cinema industry' became fully professionalised and institutionalised in the early 1910s and the Hollywood studio system began to slowly emerge, women found it increasingly difficult to climb into the director's chair. Lois Weber (1882-1939) was the only major female director to emerge in the 'silent era'. Weber worked on 'social realist' films from 1913 to 1934. These appear to have been controversial and possibly sensational with topics such as birth control and child labour. Working for both Paramount and Universal, Weber was at one point the highest paid director in Hollywood.

In the era of 'Studio Hollywood' (1930-1950), the number of women who managed to direct more than one or two films is very small. Dorothy Arzner (1897-1979) is the only major studio director, working first at Paramount from the mid 1920s and then later as a director for hire for some of the other majors. Her directorial career lasted from 1927-1943. As a fairly visible lesbian, Arzner was a controversial figure who worked successfully with many of Hollywood's female stars including Katherine Hepburn (*Christopher Strong* 1933), Rosalind Russell (*Craig's Wife*, 1936), Joan Crawford (*The Bride Wore Red*, 1937) and Lucille Ball/Maureen O'Hara (*Dance, Girl, Dance*, 1940).

The other significant woman director from the end of the studio period took a different route. Ida Lupino (1914-1995) became a star at Warner Bros in the late 1930s, but in 1947 left to become freelance. She first wrote and then directed and produced her own low-budget melodramas in the early 1950s. She continued acting, but then moved into television direction in the 1960s. Her best known writer/director credit was on *Outrage* (1950) dealing with the devastating impact of rape on a young woman.

In the UK in the same period, things were a little better with Wendy Toye (b. 1917) working consistently at Rank in the 1950s on romantic and 'family' comedies. Toye had originally been a choreographer. Muriel Box (1905-1991) was a writer-director working on again

mainly comedies between 1949 and 1964, often with her husband, Sydney Box as producer. She won an Oscar for her script for the famous melodrama *The Seventh Veil* in 1945. Betty Box, sister of Sydney was a major British producer of this period (1946-75) working on many productions including the Doctor series of comedies at Rank.

The end of the studio period (in the 1950s and 1960s in Hollywood and the 1970s in the UK) allowed for the possibility of more independent productions and therefore more potential opportunities for women outside the studio structures and in the 1970s, the impact of feminism in North America, Western Europe and Australasia encouraged more women to get involved. Even so, the legacy of the studio period was a set of assumptions about the most likely roles for women in film production. These have to be challenged, but progress has been slow.

#### The credits test

To check out the problem you can do two things. First, a glance at the main production credits for any group of films on the Internet Movie Database, or just when they scroll past on a television screen will reveal how few jobs are held by women. Of course, there may be many women who could do those jobs (i.e. they are qualified and skilled, but don't get hired). To get an overview of employment in the film industry by gender, go to Skillset's website ([www.skillset.org](http://www.skillset.org)). Skillset is the 'Sector Skills Council' for Film and Broadcast in the UK, responsible for training and career development. The latest report on the Feature Film Workforce in the UK is for 2004 (the 2005 Report). The 2007 Report is currently being compiled.

Fig 1 overleaf shows that women's roles in film are still heavily 'typed'. Costume design and make-up are predominantly female roles. (As is casting director – not separately shown on the chart.) Production assistant/script editor etc. and art direction are closer to parity with men, but the most glaring imbalance is in camerawork and sound. This is partly explained by the technical qualifications required for camera and sound training which traditionally included physics (not available to many young women at school). On the other hand the intensive computer work now involved in post-production work doesn't prevent something closer to parity. The bizarre explanation for this is that film editing has long been seen as open to women. One suggestion is that in early cinema, producers considered the splicing together of lengths of film to be akin to sewing! Whatever the reason, there is a strong history of female editors, perhaps the most high profile is Thelma

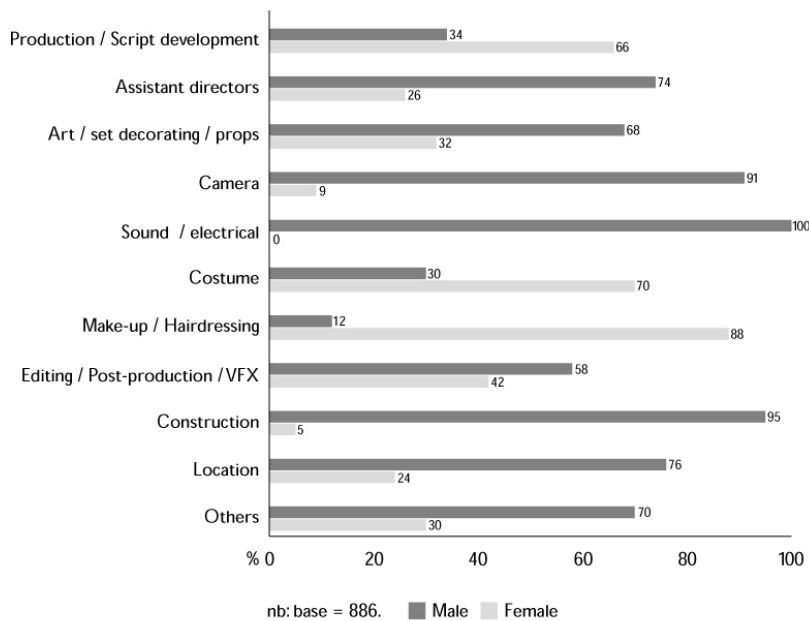


Fig 1. Occupational groups in UK film production by gender.

Schoonmaker, for many years the editor of choice for Martin Scorsese. Even her reputation pales however next to that of Anne V. Coates who began in 1952 and has worked on over 50 features (including *Lawrence of Arabia* in 1962). At the age of 81, she is currently editing the adaptation of Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*.

Since the 1970s, a number of women have developed careers as producers, writers and directors. The lack of women on camera and sound has perhaps sometimes made their work on set more difficult and has possibly hampered the representation of their vision on screen. Some women directors have responded by seeking out other women to hire as crew – whilst others have decided to ignore ‘gendering’ the work. For all the films we show we will either provide production credits or point out when there are women on the crews.

### The ‘Other’ side

The point of this course is to look outside mainstream Hollywood. In some cases, such as Europe, Australasia etc. the same political and social contexts have offered opportunities (and barriers!) in much the same way as in North America. In much of the rest of the world, however, women filmmakers face a double set of problems. The situation varies from country to country and the results of prejudice towards women are not always the same, but social and cultural barriers to women’s work in film have tended to make it more difficult than in the West/North. As the course develops we’ll look at some examples of what this might mean.



*The Piano* (Australia/New Zealand/France 1993)

As an ‘icebreaker’ tonight we’d like you to look at the opening sequence of *The Piano*. This film

was the subject of intense interest by audiences and feminist film scholars and it won three Oscars and several more nominations. Everyone seems to have accepted it as almost defining what a successful film made by a woman might be – even if some audiences disliked it as much as others adored it. Written and directed by Jane Campion, produced by Jan Chapman and starring Holly Hunter, it is largely the work of a female team, apart from Stuart Dryburgh’s camera and Michael Nyman’s music.

Please discuss the extract in small groups for a few minutes, asking yourselves:

“What is there about this story, and its presentation, that makes it a ‘woman’s film’?”

### How do we Look?

#### Finding the feminine in Film Analysis

What makes a woman’s film?

- Women in the audience
- Women on the screen
- Women behind the camera
- Women on the page
- Women in the university

#### Women in the Audience

Why do we need the discussion of what is a woman’s film at all? Well, in a way, we can’t avoid the idea of a woman’s film because it is enshrined in the Hollywood genre machine, from melodrama to chick flick. Women’s films, in the Hollywood institutions, have been defined by what women are perceived as wanting as audiences. Certain tropes of story and then cinematic form are conventionally held to appeal to women.

The UK Film Council figures for 2006 includes analysis of films receiving the greater female audience share: *Brokeback Mountain* appears with a share of 66% women. Despite its ‘ground-breaking’ portrayal of a homosexual relationship, it has components of the truest melodrama, particularly in the way that melodrama’s intense emotion acts as a challenge and release from bourgeois family structures: “The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated in the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance is traditionally expressed in the music and in the case of film in certain elements of the mise-en-scène”

To extend our enquiry, though, it might be useful to consider some of the thinking of how men and women might ‘look’ at films differently, and how this might make for a different kind of filmmaker when they are behind the camera.

## The Art of Looking (Women on the Screen)

The 1970s saw the development of cine-psychoanalysis; based on Freudian theory, it was concerned to establish the action of looking and the pleasures of looking in the cinema.

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* became a seminal work in its contention that the cinematic gaze is, by definition, male. She claimed that the effect of this was to objectify and fetishise the women shown on screen. Mulvey's essay was a political call to arms, for filmmakers actively to disrupt the gaze and defeat this perceived patriarchal pleasure.

Mulvey talks about the presentation of the female star on camera and how particular moments can be suspended to allow the admiration of the female form. The narrative (masculine?) drive ceases whilst this spectacle is revealed for the male audience. According to Mulvey, women have to adopt a masculine position to enter the drama in the same way.

Fredric Raphael's memoir (*Eyes Wide Open*) of working with Stanley Kubrick on *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) contains the following: "She [Kidman]'s agreed to give me a couple of days when she takes off her clothes. I guess we'll close the set. Might be a good day to happen to drop by the studio, if you wanted to."

The title proclaims it as a film that examines or critiques many forms of looking and voyeurism. Kubrick does give us several suspended moments in his film. These constantly critique the male gaze on women, but also act to tantalise his audience. It consciously engages with the art of looking, yet its director still appears to have a 'default' masculine mode of looking himself. (Raphael says he declined the offer).

### Female Performances

Mulvey doesn't, initially, identify specific film texts but it's tempting to think back to the stars of the 40s and 50s. Their 'performed' glamour has a conscious knowingness about it. It could be said to disrupt the suspended moment with its tangential energy, as this description of a queen of 40s/50s melodrama summarises:

"Millions of moviegoers responded to the challenge of her headstrong, neurotic heroines who, like Frankenstein's monster, were made of mismatched parts and bolts of electricity. Her cluster of quirks attracted as they repelled: jerky movements suggesting carburetor trouble; the catapulting of consonants from her lips with invisible hyphens placed between syllables; volcanic outbursts accompanied by fire breathing and smoke



Kidman and Cruise in *Eyes Wide Shut*

swallowing; that throaty, defiant laugh. One must search the animal kingdom to find a creature so strangely arresting."<sup>2</sup>

*All About Eve* (US 1950), even as it is a conventional Hollywood glamour vehicle for Bette Davis and Ann Baxter, never seems to allow the suspension and contemplation that Mulvey criticised. All the women, including Phoebe in the classic last sequence, perform the looked-at female with a disrupting self-consciousness. Bette Davis's kinetic performance makes for breathtaking 'action-adventure': "Fasten your seat-belts....

### Female Gazes (Women on the Page and Behind the Camera)

Arguments have been made for the existence of the female gaze within the cinema, one that can be more disruptive and transgressive than the male. This is an essentialist view, arguing for it to be an innate trope of feminine creativity to act on the margins and to create an alternative perspective on material.

Kathryn Bigelow forms an interesting figure, a women director working within the Hollywood system. However, despite her mainstream credentials, the work of theorists (women in the university) has attributed a different form of looking in Bigelow's work. Certainly, her (deeply unsuccessful) adaptation of Anita Shreve's *The Weight of Water* (2000) seems very consciously to examine these modes of cinematic looking (in Alice Arlen's screenplay and Bigelow's shooting of it): "That Bigelow uses Hurley, then, to play Adaline ... underlines the sense that Bigelow may be using to explore the objectifying power of the cinematic gaze again. Hurley is "iconic ... born of the paparazzi and the still image."<sup>3</sup>

### Shared Female Gazes?

"It's sensual, fleshy, erotic, primitive, hypnotic, voyeuristic, communal. The cinematography is rich in visual imagery, very mesmerizing. Desire is violence." (User comment on *Beau Travail* (1999))<sup>4</sup>

Is something like *Beau Travail* the work of one woman/ women collaborators, or indicative of a feminine cinematic style? Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* and *L'Intrus* certainly focus on traditional sites of male power and question their ability to survive. Agnès Godard's cinematography makes poetry out of domesticity, suspending time in a way that arguably fetishises the male form in exactly the same way as Mulvey contended happened to the female.

## Essentialising through Theory

“What is a masculine subject, what is a feminine subject? These notions tend to ghettoise men and women and ghettoisation is unproductive. I don't mean to gloss over it, but there's nothing more counter productive than the notion of gender-specific filmmaking.”<sup>5</sup>

By seeking these links, we have to accept the approach that essentialises the operation of cinema and the people working within it. We have to agree that there is such a thing as the 'gendered gaze', that can appear across different women, working in different institutional contexts across different cultures.

Some questions to consider might be:

- Do we think women can make different films?
- Do we detect a different gaze, even where the material presented is similar to male creators?
- Can women's perspectives actually be linked to their institutional or cultural context? Is there more in common with the idea of 'otherness' of being outside of the system – either due to cultural or social marginalisation.
- Have women, anyway, always had the ability to disrupt the gaze through their performances?

### Notes

1. Ally Acker (1991) *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema*, London: B.T. Batsford
2. 'A Talent for Hysteria' by Howard Mandelbaum (<[www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18\\_bette.html](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18_bette.html)>
3. *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow, Hollywood Transgressor*, Jermyn, Deborah and Sean Redmond, eds., (London: Wallflower: 2003)
4. 'TemporaryONE-1': Wed Apr 27 2005 09:22:01: ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) – user comments)
5. *Interview*, 'Big Bad Bigelow', Graham Fuller, Nov 1995, 25, 11, 42-5.

Depending on time, we may finish the session with two short extracts from *Morvern Callar* (dir. Lynne Ramsay, UK 2002) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (dir. Gurinder Chadha, UK/Ger/US 2002)

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford, 2/10/07