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Performing Gender behind the Camera: Women Directors in Commercial Cinema

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It is a well-known fact that, as in many other artistic areas, in the film industry women have been traditionally assigned what we can arguably call less prominent roles. Directing and producing films are still male-dominated areas, especially, in mainstream cinema. This article aims at assessing the way feminist filmmakers have dealt with the issue of film and women, especially, after the 1970s. We propose to look, more specifically, at the way women have performed as directors in mainstream cinema and whether and how gender may influence filmmaking. The article will use the study cases of contemporary film directors Jane Campion and Gurinder Chadha to illustrate some issues raised.

At a time when popular media culture likes to display a seemingly post-modern pride in postfeminism (with a strong emphasis on the post), a time that seems to celebrate the "pastness" of feminism (as is stressed by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in their Introduction to the book *Interrogating Postfeminism*, which they edited),¹ and which, as far as commercial film is concerned, hails such widespread popular successes as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and its sequel *Bridget Jones, the Edge of Reason* (2004), or *Sex*

¹ See Tasker and Negra (2007: 1-25).

and the City (2008) (to name but a few popular *chic flicks*), there seems to be a need to interrogate both postfeminism and feminism alike. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra remind us, “[p]ostfeminist culture works to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer” (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2). So, living as we do in this postfeminist moment, which also entails a silencing, or as Tasker and Negra state, an “othering” of feminism, “its construction as extreme, difficult, and unpleasurable” (id.: 4), it is, nevertheless, vital to address, as this essay proposes to do, the impact of feminism on film, taking into account the effect it has had on filmic culture.

Thus, the main issues I would like to discuss here have to do with the presence and/or absence of women in cinema, particularly, commercial cinema, taking into account their presence as directors and, particularly, the possible impact their films might have on the representation of women in mainstream cinema. In this sense, this paper will try to make a brief overview (necessarily condensed and limited) both of the history of the presence of women in commercial cinema, particularly in America, and of the development of feminist film theory from the 1970s to our days. Finally, the paper proposes to look briefly at the specific cases of two contemporary women directors who have made a successful career in commercial cinema, namely, Jane Campion and Gurinder Chadha.

As in all other areas of artistic and cultural production, we can look back into the history of film to discover a story of nearly absence of women from the active roles of aesthetic production. Be it as producers, directors or writers, women have been prominently absent from either commercial or art/experimental cinema for a major part of the twentieth century. If this is a given in most forms of artistic and cultural production, in the case of films, however, women's absence from these roles can be slightly obscured by their very visible presence on the screen as stars and cultural icons. Throughout the twentieth century cinema has flourished also by flaunting women as iconic images, however secondary their role in the production processes might be.

According to the histories of Hollywood film, for example, in the first half of the twentieth century few jobs, other than those of script girls and the usual secretarial jobs, were available to women. However, in this, the history is also more complex than may seem at first glance, for in the very first decades, when the cinema industry was not completely established yet, many

women had access to the creative jobs of screenwriting and directing.² Moreover, according to Benshoff and Griffin “(...) as early as 1912, at least 20 independent film companies were being run by women” (2004: 214). However, the jobs that had started up to a certain point to be open for women, were soon reduced, with the rise of the studio system of production in the subsequent decades, when women were increasingly pushed back to their more obvious “girls’ jobs”. The 1920s and, especially, the 1930s, with the development of the talkies, saw the rise of a considerable number of powerful film stars, which were to become iconic images of Classical Hollywood cinema; women like Greta Garbo, Mae West, Barbara Stanwyck, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford or Katherine Hepburn became the *femmes-fatales* of American cinema. Nonetheless, there were virtually no women directors working in the studios at this time, the almost single successful exception being Dorothy Arzner. Work has been done by feminist film critics on the oeuvre of the few female directors working in Hollywood at this time, Claire Johnston’s analysis of Arzner’s work being a case in point.³ Indeed, in a more recent essay, Judith Mayne states that Arzner is a very good example of a successful “woman director working within the Hollywood system who managed, in however limited ways, to make films that disturb the conventions of Hollywood narrative” (Mayne, 2004: 160)⁴.

In Hollywood, after the second World War and throughout the 1950s, the situation for women as directors or producers did not change greatly, the only obvious change being at the level of the iconic imagery of the stars, where we can perceive a replacement of the *femme-fatale* for the “blonde bombshell”, who had a rather more naïve look than her 1930s counterpart, thus being virtually presented as a body emptied of any individuality (the obvious images that come to mind here being Marilyn Monroe or Jane Mansfield). As is stated by Benshoff and Griffin, although “curvaceous and alluring, the blond bombshell was never very bright, but she had the ability to stop men cold in their tracks because of her sex appeal” (2004: 223).

² As stated in Benshoff and Griffin (2004), “(...) although it was still plainly a male-dominated environment, the slapdash organization of early filmmaking did afford some opportunities for some women to become filmmakers. (...) Historical evidence indicates that during these years it was much easier for a white woman to move into and excel within institutionalized filmmaking than it was for a man of color”

³ Cf., for example “Dorothy Arzner: Critical Strategies”, in Kaplan (2004: 139-48).

⁴ In her essay, Judith Mayne explores the extent to which feminist film theorists have consistently overlooked the lesbian persona in the way they assessed her films.

With the transformation of women's social roles in the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s, it should be expected that more women would be in the first line of the filmic creative processes, which is true up to a certain point. In the case of Hollywood though, only very slowly has the industry been opening up to women directors and, even so, in a way that reflects little, if any, changes in women's social roles.

If this is true as far as Hollywood is concerned, it is also noticeable in other national film industries where a film is expected to make profit. Conversely, it is true that women have had a difficult time to make their way into the canon, or any of the filmic canons you might think of. It may not be enough to look solely at the way women have performed in film festivals, but it is still an intriguing exercise to look at the names who have won the two most prominent film awards in America and in Europe, arguably, the Academy and the Cannes Film Festival awards, and find out that not many women are listed. As is well-known the Oscar for best film has never been attributed to a woman director⁵ and Jane Campion is still the only female director to have won the *Palme d'Or* with the film *The Piano* (1993). This is, *per se*, a notable absence, one that may be indicative of how hard it is to accept the "transformation of vision" (to borrow a phrase from Teresa de Lauretis [1990: 292]) feminist cinema has been engaged on.

Feminist film theory has, from the start (and the start is roughly speaking the 1970s), made work that foregrounds both the dominance of the masculine in film-making and the need to develop a feminist counter-cinema. Two of the most influential and ground-breaking essays of feminist film theory, Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (first published in 1973) and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (first published in 1975)⁶, have argued, either using a semiotic or a psychoanalytical model, that the representation of women in the cinema was throughout the twentieth century dominated by a perspective that drained them of a subject position outside either mythical structures or the projection of the "male

⁵ In-between the moment when the essay was first written and its revision, it must be stated, Kathryn Bigelow has finally achieved this feat with *The Hurt Locker*, having won the Oscar both for Best director and Best Picture (she directed and co-produced the film).

⁶ For the influence of these essays in feminist film theory and also for a very personal but simultaneously very insightful description of the development of feminist film theory in Great Britain and in America, see Jane Gaines' essay "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory" (2004).

gaze". Both of these theorists further argued, in very distinct ways, for the need to create filmic forms that could tear down the ways traditional mainstream cinema has found to promote such a passive vision of the female. (It is important to bear in mind that feminist film theory, as opposed to feminist film criticism, developed arguments well beyond the stereotypical representation of women on the screen, by focussing on the analysis of film forms and styles, from the perspective of film theory specifically).

The female, as Laura Mulvey argues in her essay, only exists in mainstream cinema through the male gaze, in a dichotomy that ascribes the female to the passive image looked upon and the male to the active bearer of the look. Thus, according to Mulvey, the double pleasure of looking afforded by cinema (the scopophilic/ voyeuristic pleasure of looking at and the narcissistic pleasure of identifying with the image) is male-dominated, in the sense that it rests, firstly, on the gaze of the active hero toward the passive heroine and, secondly, on the gaze of the spectator who identifies with the hero, which accounts for his double scopophilic-narcissistic pleasure. However, as Mulvey states, the pleasure of the look which is afforded by cinema rests on three different looking stances: first, the look of the camera; second, the look of the spectator; third, the look of the characters in between each other. The look of the characters inside the screen creates an illusion of unity which works to neutralize the visibility of the two first looks, promoting the pleasure mechanism upon which the dichotomy active-male/ passive-female rests. Thus, according to Laura Mulvey, the only way to destroy the dichotomous active/passive mechanisms of mainstream film is by introducing forms of resistance to this pleasure-looking apparatus, for example, by conspicuously making the process of recording more visible (which can be achieved through the intrusive camera), something that only avant-garde cinema can explore. As is stated in the conclusion of her essay:

The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest', and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/ passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for

this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret. (Mulvey, 2009: 27)

The destruction of narrative and visual pleasure here proposed by Laura Mulvey was not a new question and entangles with the debate over the need to destroy bourgeois ideology in cultural production, ranging from literature to the theatre and film; as is brilliantly stated by Teresa de Lauretis in the essay "Rethinking Women's Cinema", this essay "hails an established tradition, albeit a radical one" (Lauretis, 1990: 290). As de Lauretis further argues, Mulvey's arguments clearly intertwine with "the historic left avant-garde tradition that goes back to Eisenstein and Vertov (if not Méliès) and through Brecht reaches its peak of influence in Godard, and on the other side of the Atlantic, the tradition of American avant-garde cinema" (Lauretis, 1990: 290). De Lauretis views this movement of women's films towards the avant-garde tradition as a fruitful and necessary one, but understands that this movement must not be the same that has been tried on by their male counterparts. So, as far as the representation of women is concerned, she distinguishes the films by Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, or Jean-Luc Godard from the films by Yvonne Rainer, Valie Export, Chantal Ackerman, or Marguerite Duras. So, for Teresa de Lauretis, in order for a woman's cinema (or a woman's feminist cinema) to emerge, the question to be asked is not one that deals with any purported formal feminist aesthetics, that is, in her own words: "(...) to ask whether there is a feminine or female aesthetic, or a specific language of women's cinema, is to remain caught in the masters' house and there (...) to legitimate the hidden agendas of a culture we badly need to change (...)" (Lauretis, 1990: 292). By the end of the same essay, De Lauretis asserts that films made by feminist filmmakers must establish a transformation of vision "by inventing the forms and processes of representation of a social subject, women, that until now has been all but unrepresentable" (id.: 305).

Laura Mulvey's argument proposes a destruction of the traditional film form as the only way to counter the cinematic appropriation of women as passive subjects. This solution is concerned, exclusively, however, with the avant-garde or art house cinema, which does not circulate widely. As is stressed by Sue Gillett, in an article on Jane Campion's films: "As the antidote to mainstream patriarchal cinema, this reaction was doomed to be marginal in the sense that it promoted an avant-garde, political cinema in which

women need not, even should not, be good to look at, and the drive to know, characteristic of narrative, should be denied" (Gillett, 2001).

Conversely, in "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", Claire Johnston argues for a counteractive cinema that works within, rather than outside of, mainstream cinema. Thus, instead of proposing a radical cinema that would break with the traditional film form, Johnston believes that commercial cinema or, as she states, entertainment films can and should be used as a political tool for countering women's objectification by mainstream cinema. Using a very pragmatic approach to the problem of women and film, Johnston's recognizes that "a strategic use of the media, and film in particular, is essential for disseminating our ideas" (Johnston, 2004: 28). Unlike Mulvey, Claire Johnston does not view the art film *per se* as notably more feminist than entertainment film. In her own terms, what she calls the European art film is not particularly more prone to promote an image of woman outside the conventions of the myth, which she sees as working to 'naturalize' woman outside of the historical. In this sense, and concomitantly with collective work by women, she proposes a strategy that "embraces both the notion of film as a political tool and film as entertainment".

Taking into account Claire Johnston's proposal I would like to stress the significance for women to be able to have access to the means of production, that is, women must be able to ascertain the possibility of getting the financial support they need to make their films. For women who work inside Hollywood it does not seem a very easy task to get financial support for films that disrupt the usual narrative structures and formal coding of mass marketed films. As Benshoff and Griffin state in *America on Film*:

However, even though more and more women are now writing, directing and producing Hollywood films, this does not necessarily mean that those films are feminist, or that they promote new ideas or understandings about gender. In fact, women filmmakers in Hollywood, if they want to be successful in the mass marketplace, are obliged to work within the same narrative structures and formal codings as are male filmmakers (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004: 282).

The point made by Benshoff and Griffin, however, eludes the fact that even at the level of the art film, it is probably no less difficult for women to assert a woman's position, let alone a feminist position, and still be included in the canon. I would like to stress both these points by focussing on two dif-

ferent women directors, the New-Zealander Jane Campion and the British Gurinder Chadha.

Jane Campion is, to my view, one of the few commercially successful women directors who has consistently addressed the centrality of women on the screen. It is true that Campion's films are still grounded in the kind of narrative-bound style which does not attempt to destroy the pleasure of narrative cinema, and in that sense does not disengage the image of woman from the gaze of the spectator – something that for Muirvey would constitute an unbridgeable gap for a feminist counter-cinema; in opposition, Campion's cinema does not condone a male-centred gaze, much less, a comfortable looked-at-ness for the images of women that appear on screen. Besides being driven by female desire (it must be added, heterosexual desire), Campion's narratives are also driven by an exposure of the female gaze, as it is directed, for example, toward the exposed and vulnerable naked male body, as happens, for example, in *The Piano* (1993) – with both male characters, George Baines (Harvey Keitel) and Alasdair Stewart (Sam Neill) being looked at, both by Ada's character and the audience –, *Holy Smoke* (1999) – where we have the same Harvey Keitel fall from a parody of a self-assured macho to a vulnerable transvestite lost in the middle of the Australian desert – or in *In the Cut* (2001). As is mentioned by Sue Gillett (2001), "Campion's construction of an active female gaze is an important strategy through which she is able to invoke female desire as more than simply narcissistic, inwardly focussed and magnetic (in the sense of attracting the desire of others)" (Gillett, 2001: 5).

This centrality of the female look and of the female is inherent to Campion's films, which, although clearly commercial films, threaten to disrupt the traditional forms of imaging women on screen, thus providing a quite consistent example of a director that, from a postfeminist perspective, can and does work within commercial cinema, seeking to promote an enquiry into a female expression of desire in ways that disrupt the traditional male gaze.

This is a project that will inevitably lead to equivocation on the part of the audiences that go to her films and which may, ultimately, prevent Campion from getting all the funding that she would like to have for her films. Following the success of *The Piano* in 1993 (a film that was completely funded by a French company, which, according to Campion did not impose any conditions on her), she could manage to make *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), in a joint English/American production, backed by Polygram Filmed Entertainment. This was a lush production, indeed Campion's first engagement with

the kind of big money that characterizes Hollywood's productions. The film, however, would not pay off as well as was expected, both at the box office and on the part of the critical appreciation. *The Portrait of a Lady* is, however, a notable rewriting of Henry James novel of the same title, from the perspective of a postfeminist author, who wants to question the underlying sexual drive of Henry James's Isabel Archer that leads her to make the choices that she makes. Yet, the fact that the critic and the public did not really take to this very long film was probably reflected on Campion's next film, *Holy Smoke* (1999), which was a much smaller undertaking and which went unnoticed in most parts of the world (for example, it was not released in Portugal); it was an American and Australian production, produced by India Take One Productions and by Miramax. The next film, *In the Cut*, was Campion's engagement with a mainstream genre, and a rather masculine one at that; a noir detective thriller, it explores the darker side of female sexuality and centres on unveiling the dangers of romantic love at the centre of patriarchal society. Again, the disruption undertaken in this film, which attempts to rewrite the form of a well-established genre, was equivocally taken by critics and audience alike.

Campion's latest film, *Bright Star*, is, like her first feature film *An Angel at My Table* (1990)⁷, an incursion into the realm of the literary biography, centring, as it does, on the love affair between the Romantic English poet John Keats and the young Fanny Brawne. Apparently very far apart from a film like *In the Cut*, in the sense that, unlike this film, *Bright Star* explores the rewards of romantic love, it never falls into the stereotype of the idealised romantic image of woman. Although the best-known figure of the film is undoubtedly the poet John Keats, the film portrays a wonderful figure of a determinate young woman (slightly evocative of Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady*), whose centrality dominates the film, in Jane Campion's manner.

Gurinder Chadha provides a much more complex example to argue from a feminist perspective. Contrarily to Jane Campion – a director who I see as consistently sustaining a project that, if not declaredly feminist, at least, engaging seriously with a woman's perspective –, most of Chadha's films, although concerned with the promotion of that postfeminist pretence which

⁷ *An Angel at My Table* (1990) is based on the autobiography of the New Zealander writer Janet Frame

goes by the name of "woman's power" or "girl's power", does not, on the whole, aim at any sort of disruption of conventional narrative forms or at a "transformation of vision". The reason why I invoke her in this paper is that her films do, nevertheless, engage with a declared feminist assumption of a need for women to become empowered, socially and politically. However, from her first long feature film, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) to the last *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*, a film unmistakably aiming at a teenage audience, Chadha's films seem to perform a movement towards an ever larger worldwide audience, which may account for the increasing reductionist and stereotyping quality of her films.

Although her films are not as widely known as, for example, Campion's (who is truly a renowned film director worldwide), in the UK, at least, most of her films had a great success, making good revenues at the box-office, particularly, the film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2003), which takes a definite post-feminist stance to tell the story of an Anglo-Indian girl, Jessica, who wants to be a football player, but must face the impossibility of this desire because of her family's expectations about her; being from an Indian family, she is expected to settle in an arranged marriage and become a dutiful wife and housewife. In the end, as might be expected in such a film, she manages to go to the USA to integrate a female soccer team and, in the process, falls in love with her Irish coach. The obvious multicultural agenda of this film has been derided as working to promote the hypocritical multiculturalist agenda of Tony Blair's government. In an article entitled "The Rhetoric of Multiculturalism", for example, Rajeev Balasubramanyam criticizes Gurinder Chadha's films, namely, *Bend It like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice* for participating in what he denominates "the rhetoric of multiculturalism". In his article, Balasubramanyam lists several forms taken by the multiculturalist propaganda, one of which being "assimilation", that is, the elimination of cultural difference; this is the category, according to the author, films like *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice*, would fit in. In the case of *Bride and Prejudice*, a film that brings together the filmic codes of Bollywood to rewrite such a quintessentially English novel such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the multiculturalist agenda seems indeed a little too obvious.

From a feminist perspective, on the other hand, a film like *Bend it Like Beckham* does indeed celebrate sisterhood and solidarity among women, although, sadly enough, it does give in, up to a certain point, to the traditional and stereotypical conception of the girls' rivalry over the hot coach.

The topic of women's solidarity is something that, in spite of the concessions made to commercialism and global marketing, must be taken into account in our analysis of Gurinder Chadha's films. Dengel-Janic and Eckstein, however, in their analysis of Gurinder Chadha's films argue that films like *Bend it Like Beckham* or *Bride and Prejudice* denote what they call "a transcultural 'common moral denominator'", which may be appealing to a global audience but clearly indicative of an ideological trade with the patriarchal world order. In *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (2005), Yasmin Hussain states that "[a]s the first British South-Asian woman to direct feature films, Gurinder Chadha occupies an important role as spokesperson for South Asia women" (71); given the increasing concessions to a certain view of women, one may wonder whether she is using that privileged position to the full. However, this may eventually say a lot more about the current state of the politics of film funding than about the actual beliefs of a specific woman director or, at least, of a woman director who aims at a global mass audience.

Taking into account her first feature film, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), a film that focussed on a community of South Asian women as they went on a day off journey to the seaside (Blackpool), a film that brings to the fore in a moving manner the different problems that afflict these women, such as domestic violence, teenage pregnancy and interracial coupling, a film that won Chadha attention from the milieu by winning some prizes and getting a BAFTA nomination for best film, it seems indeed that her development as a successful director was made at the expense of serious concession to the ideology of postfeminist popular culture.

According to Katrien Jacobs, in an essay that assesses "The Status of Contemporary Women Filmmakers", the tendency today is increasingly following the "populist aesthetics" of the "big budget film". As the author states:

Following the film industry's global trend toward privatization, corporate ideologies and populist aesthetics, women filmmakers today have to strive towards the production of 'big budget films' suitable for international audiences and the demands of the free market (Jacobs, 1998).

In such a climate, there seems to be no room in commercial cinema for new experiments in feminist filmmaking. Does this indeed signal that our western society has truly assimilated the revolutionary ideology of feminism

and in so doing made it redundant? In face of an apparent demand for the populist aesthetics of postfeminist culture, one may indeed wonder whether there is any real assimilation of the feminist ideologies in society. If films like the ones mentioned at the beginning of this essay or TV series such as *Desperate Housewives* or *Sex and the City* are to signify any social change in women's lives at the beginning of the Twenty-first century, then this change it seems is only partially inspired by any of the feminist movements that have been at work in society.

The fact that even filmmakers who are definitely moved by an underlying feminist ideology may feel constrained to give in to a worldwide mass audience for whom there seems to be a need to provide a basic "common moral denominator" (in the wording of Dengel-Janic and Eckstein), as the case of Gurinder Chadha so aptly testifies, seems to indicate that there is still not room for the transformation of vision which was envisioned by art house feminist filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, it is an indisputable truth that more and more women are entering the film market, which in itself is a major step for the transformation of the panorama of film worldwide. The question remains whether this will be sufficient for a transformation of the impact of women directors on film.

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Fluid Performances: women travel writers and their changing political roles

REBECCA KIRSTEIN HARWOOD
CEHUM

*Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?*

*What childishness is this that while there's a breath of life
In our bodies, we are determined to rush
To see the sun, the other way round?*

(Elizabeth Bishop, *Questions of Travel*)

Given the sustained popularity of travel writing as a literary form, its extensive readership and the powerful relationship of complicity between that readership and the authors of these texts, the real significance of travel writing to the study and practice of global politics seems largely underestimated and often ignored in favour of the cultural and psychological aspects of travel. In the case of women travel writers, political performance is made complex by the demands of negotiating ever changing discourses of femininity and the sometimes disparate models of identity which have always restricted their movements on the public stage. This article, therefore, considers the importance of politics in the travel writing of selected British women travel writers between the years 1840 and 1940. In particular, I will look at how these women engage with the political events and ideologies of