THE BODY AND THE SCREEN: FEMALE SUBJECTIVITIES IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S CINEMA

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For some, feminist film studies still rings synonymous with inquiry on the gaze and spectatorship. Feminist film studies did come to a slow down in the 1990's through to the mid 2000's, and if perhaps there is any doubt that feminist film studies needs to be revitalized, then perhaps the slight oversight of feminist film studies from Robert Sinnerbrink's account of film philosophy's lineage in *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*[1] is reason enough. As Cate Ince (2017) herself points out, Sinnerbrink "includes gender studies and queer theory in his cultural-historicist current, but makes no mention of feminist film studies as a separate set of approaches with its own distinct history" (28). No longer focused on spectatorship and representation, contemporary feminist film theorists are taking up interdisciplinary approaches and inquiring into the feminine or female consciousness, subjectivity, embodiment, agency, and ethics. Feminist film studies has had a particular resurgence within the burgeoning field of film philosophy. Contemporary feminist film theorists who have taken up female and feminist philosophers include: Boulé and Tidd[2] on Simone de Beauvoir; Caroline Bainbridge[3] and Lucy Bolton[4] on Luce Irigaray; and, Katherine J. Goodnow[5] on Julia Kristeva. Of these, Cate Ince's feminist phenomenology, *The Body and the Screen*, is the first to "scrutinize *embodied* female subjectivity in film, either as it is represented or as it may be reinforced or constituted by the act of viewing such representations" (26).

Ince's opening chapter serves to trace the feminist development of a female subject, and her desire. Ince brings together Beauvoir, Irigaray and Battersby's work on embodiment and the ethical in conjunction with female subjectivity to form a feminist ethic of embodiment. With chapters entitled body, look, speech, performance, desire, and freedom, Ince takes up a broad range of existential and phenomenological concerns related to the female subject. The challenge, as she sets out, for feminist phenomenologists is to des-

cribe female desire in feminine terms, and the challenge for feminist filmmakers is how to portray female body without falling back onto male-coded forms.

Ince begins her phenomenological feminist analysis with the body. Ince aligns herself with Elena Del Rio[6] who strives to both: focus on the female body as a lived materiality, rather than "a written and spoken sign" (quoted 50); and, combine psychoanalytic, semiotic, and phenomenological approaches in order to acknowledge that "bodily action [is] not only inherently significant, but also indivisible from symbolic and discursive structures" (quoted 50). She introduces Andrea Arnold, Sally Potter, Agnès Varda, and Catherine Breillat as the book's four main film-makers, whose films

> all feature what might be called a "primary look" between women that precedes the viewer's look at a film, and this look may be understood as a duality within femaleness corresponding to its openness beyond what Derrida or Irigaray terms "the economy of the proper" — the realm of self-identity. (26)

Her readings of *Fishtank* (2009), *Orlando* (1992), *The Tango Lesson* (1997), *The Beaches of Agnes* (2008), *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), and *Romance* (1999) describe the protagonists' "pleasure in movement and bodily action, while also considering the meanings offered by their living, acting bodies and the symbolic frameworks within which their agency and physical actions take place" (50). Arnold's *Fishtank* is heralded by Ince as feminist phenomenological theory in practice with its emphasis on Mia's (Katie Jarvis) physical exertion and vitality by framing her shoulders and torso, and the sound of her breath. In *The Tango Lesson*, Sally Potter plays the tango-dancing protagonist who manages through her own physical performance to convey the experience of dancing. In a phenomenological — though not specifically feminist — analysis, Ince draws a parallel between Merleau-Ponty's awareness of the body via space and Varda's attention to the lived conditions of the physical female body in relation to its environment and the continued attention to her own body (not to mention the close attention given to the skin of her dying husband, Jacques Demy in *Jacquot de Nantes* [1991]). Ince's commentary on *Romance*, one of Catherine Breillat's "dramas of female subjectivity" (69), focuses closely on Marie's (Caroline Ducey) embodied experience, the division she feels between the upper and lower halves of her body, and how this division is resolved during a sexual quest for liberation

which reaches its conclusion with the birth of her son and the killing of her husband. The phenomenological inquiry in this chapter, like in the chapters that follow, does not proceed from a set of unified texts, but rather each section is approached with a different set of texts and highlights a different aspect of female embodiment. Nevertheless, Ince successfully illustrates how feminist phenomenology brings out the "embodied agency, movements, and actions of the films' female protagonist better than any other form of reading" (72).

For Ince, "Looking is not inevitably power laden" (73); ocular desire is not controlling, but ambivalent. Ince grounds her chapter on the look against the pervasive assumption of the gaze. She cites Joan Copjec as a representative Lacanian and Marian Keane's (2009) close reading of Freud's work on scopophilia to refute the commonplace assumptions that germinated from the work of Metz and Mulvey. For phenomenologists, with the exception of Hegel and Sartre, looking is an exercise of freedom. This is particularly true of Beauvoir, for whom the intersubjectivity of looking is an example of "mutually supporting freedoms" (85). Ince offers an analysis of Arnold's short film *Wasp* (2003) as well as *Fish Tank* to argue that active female looking and desiring that cannot be explained by psychoanalytic film theory, or previous modes of decoding the mise-en-scene. Further, Ince references a fluid camera movement which connects Orlando's eyes and body during an intimate moment with Shelmerdine (Billy Zane) as a feminist strategy to depict embodied active looking. In *Brève traversée* (*Brief Crossing*, 2001), Breillat uses the looks shared between a 17 year old boy and a 30 year old married woman as a means of observing an embodied male-female intersubjective relationship while depicting intimacy. Ince's intention is a shift toward an ethical vision as suggested by Beauvoir's notion of *devoilement* (disclosure). The ethical dimension of looking is not simply within and between the filmed looks, but the looking implied with the director's camera. The artist is not detached from the world; on the contrary, their art is an expression of their engagement with the world.

In the fifth chapter, Speech, Ince continues her inquiry into ethical and intersubjective relationships. Indeed, she deliberately uses speech instead of voice since voice implies interiority, where speech is social. Unlike the previous chapters which focus on female subjectivity and phenomenology, here Ince engages with Irigaray's socio-linguistic work on gendered speech and *parler femme*. As Rachel Jones explains, "*Parler femme* speaks of a way of articulating the female sex that would allow women to take up the position of speaking subjects

themselves, and thereby to relate to one another as women, whose differences and similarities can be registered without mediation through a male voice" (16). Ince suggests that the ethical and embodied speaking female subjectivity illustrated by the protagonists in the works of Breillat and Marleen Gorris' *The Hours*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, might be considered post-patriarchal female speaking subjects because of the way they struggle and succeed to articulate the truth of their experiences.

Where previous chapters made some reference to the relationship between the director and the filmic content, the fifth chapter, Performance, focuses closely on the relationship between the director and the female protagonist. This inquiry is intensified by a sample of films (*No Sex Last Night* [1995], *My Little Princess* [2011], *Tango Lesson* [1997], *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* [*Why (not) Brazil*?, 2004]) in which the director herself is the protagonist and the subject matter is taken from a given time in her life. Ince argues that this semi-autobiographical account allows the directors to self-reflect on female subjectivity more closely. Through her analysis, Ince suggests that women's control over the performance of women in the Symbolic order is needed to shift the representation of female subjectivity. Considering the role of the director, Jeanne (Anne Parillard), in the film within the film of Breillat's *Sex is Comedy* (2002), Ince comments that "Breillat's representation of the directing of desire in *Sex is Comedy* offers a mise-en-scene of the enacting of desire (the drives) in a context where the activity *is* representation, and vitally, artistic representation of which a woman is in charge" (148). Ince returns once more to the activity of the director when considering the attitude and methods that Jeanne uses when directing in the following chapter.

Of the chapters which make up this book, Ince perhaps offers her greatest contribution to feminist film theory in the chapter on desire. It is here where she more deeply engages in feminist phenomenological work by taking up Irigaray's proposition that women need to be able to relate to each other in non-phallic ways in a culture of their own. Curiously, she begins the chapter by drawing upon the inseparability of desire, subjectivity, and ethics in the work of Deleuze and Guattari before delving into Irigaray. For Irigaray, women's desire is stunted because of the phallogocentrism of the Symbolic order. The "lack of an auto-erotic, homo-sexual economy" (quoted 132) of women results in blockages and tensions, manifesting in behaviours such as hypernarcissism, difficult relations with the mother and other women, and a lack of social interest. Women require an alternative libidinal economy in order to support the formation of a feminine subjectivity.

Ince's chapter contributes to thinking about changing and disrupting the current libidinal economy. She cites Margaret Whitford's (1991) incisive reading of Irigaray's call for a re-organization of the death drive at the level of the symbolic which re-distributes the death drive between the sexes. Mia in *Fish Tank*, Morvern (Samantha Morton) in *Morvern Callar* (2002), Maria Vial (Isabelle Huppert) in *White Material* (2009), and Jeanne in *Sex is Comedy* are all protagonists who exhibit aggression and violence in order to survive, escape, or achieve a degree of independence from their immediate social situations. If within a patriarchal ethics women's death drives are used to sublimate and represent the male death drive, and not their own, then the challenge these violent women pose to "conventional 'civilized' (patriarchal) morality might just represent the beginnings of a new and *sexuate* ethical moral order" (151). By acting in antagonistic, aggressive, and violent ways they inhabit a 'zone' in which the "symbolic and social reorganization of sexuate desire is taking place, and a modification of the economy of masculine subjectivity is going on" (151). The moral and ethical quandaries posed by the violence of the protagonists is a "new moral 'territory' acquired for female subjectivity by the reorganization of economies of sexual subjectivity envisaged by Irigaray" (142).

Where the chapter on the look made mention of looking as a freedom, the final chapter considers how women's freedom has been represented by the directors Breillat and Denis. Freedom is an important concept for existentialism and Beauvoir in particular. Ince's examination focuses on sexual freedom. She notes in her conclusion that this chapter does "not affirm its title in as thoroughgoing a manner as the preceding chapters, since it approached freedom as a value and a praxis rather than as a foundation concept, but it did maintain that women's sexual freedom has been a major theme and a narrative element of film directed by Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis in the 2000s" (174). *Romance's* Marie is partly estranged from her body and refused intimacy by her partner, Paul (Sagamore Stevenin), who attempts to control her femininity; her sexual quest allows her to reconnect with her body, experience pleasure, and construct an embodied subjectivity. Despite the limits that Marie encounters, "we have to ask whether such representations of female desire do not open up unimagined ways of understanding sexual subjectivity and erotic relationality" (quoted 159). Ince analysis of Claire Denis' *Friday Night* (2002) focuses on camera technique and style where the freedom of embodied female subjectivity made is visible through "use of dissolves, travelling shots of varying speeds, and extreme close-ups on skin and textured clothing" (164). The intensity registered in Breillat and Denis'

films as the sensory representation of female freedom as an expression of desire is a successful example of not relying upon male coded representation; and, underscores the importance of women filmmakers and women directors in control order to shift the representation of the female subject.

Ince's book concludes with some notes on genealogy, suggesting that the development of ethical female subjectivity is not linear, but open and "in formation — the kind of self-formation, perhaps, that is suggested by Foucault's characterization of ethics as a practice of freedom" (176). It seems curious that Ince concludes her text this reference to Foucault rather than returning to the Irigarayan feminist genealogical work taken up by Whitford and Jones on the relationships between women, and the culture of women among themselves. An Irigarayan genealogy might be helpful when considering the relationship between *Fishtank's* Mia and her mother, and Mia's decision to have sex with her mother's boyfriend; *Romance's* Marie whose entry into motherhood coincides with the murdering her partner and son's father; Morvern's relationship with her best friend; and, other relations between women mentioned in the text.

Ince offers a vital contribution to feminist film studies in general, and feminist film phenomenology in particular. Her detailed descriptive analyses are exemplary of film phenomenology. This text would be a useful contribution to courses across disciplines: women's studies, media studies, cultural studies, and philosophy.

The Body and The Screen is part of "The Thinking Cinema" series published by Bloomsbury which examines film, philosophy, and theory. The Thinking Cinema series includes books by Elena Del Rio and Thomas Elsaesser. Bloomsbury has likewise published two other texts on feminist film theory in 2016: Mari Ruti's *Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Women* and Hilary Neroni's *Feminist Film Theory and "Cleo from 5 to 7."*

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1. Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

2. Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd (eds.), *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvoirian Perspective* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

3. Caroline Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

4. Lucy Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women* (London: Palgrave, 2011).

5. Katherine J. Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010). In her own literature review on contemporary film philosophy, Ince does not mention Goodnow's book on Kristeva. Goodnow's text is an exploration of female consciousness and experience, and gives considerable insight into how we can approach and question the representation of female consciousness and the filmic medium.

6. Elena Del Rio, "Rethinking Feminist Film Theory: Counter-Narcissistic Performance in Sally Potter's *Thriller*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21:1 (2004): 11-24.