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Cybelle McFadden. Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maiwenn. Lanham: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2014. xii + 233 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Cybelle McFadden. *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maiwenn*. Lanham: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2014. xii + 233 pp.

Keywords

Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Sophie Calle, Maiwenn, Dominique Cabrera, French cinema, Female filmmakers

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The trope of filmic self-representation, or when directors make cameo appearances in their own films, is neither new nor avant-garde. What has not been sufficiently theorized are the stakes of self-representation by female filmmakers in France. Even more critical is the question of how such practices grant greater visibility to the underrepresentation of female filmmakers in a male-dominated profession where a “celluloid ceiling” still looms (4). McFadden theorizes the avant-garde approaches to self-portraiture of five French female filmmakers spanning three generations—Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, and Maiwenn from 1987 to 2009—and the assertion of their image as *auteur* to reveal the filmic mechanisms by which their work engages with issues of canon formation. Her study explores the notion of a cinematic body on two levels: first, by foregrounding filmmakers that visualize their physical bodies on-screen, and secondly, by showing how these reflexive practices produce a filmography that not only widens the representation of women in French film but also demonstrates a desire for recognition of their status in the profession. Though by no means a comprehensive survey of work by female filmmakers in France, her study suggests that the ongoing authorial preoccupation of the five filmmakers discussed is a sign that self-representation is still necessary in order not only to grant legitimacy to the images of female bodies (intellectual, depressed, working) that audiences are less accustomed to seeing on-screen but also to understand “sociocultural stakes through form,” or the effect of formal signifying practices that alter meaning surrounding women’s bodies (214).

The book consists of two sections—“Self-Authorization through Self-Representation” and “Self-Construction Through *Faux* Narratives”—and proceeds chronologically. The introduction provides an overview of theories of the body by feminist film critics. To underscore the historical and cultural factors that cause women’s lack of recognition in the filmmaking profession in France, McFadden links the practices of Varda, Cabrera, Akerman, and Maiwenn to Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of the body as a “constant state of becoming” and to Judith Butler’s theory of materiality over that of performativity (11). Here, the primary objective is to apply Beauvoir’s idea of embodiment as a framework for understanding the female filmmaker’s gaze—her subjectivity, agency, and power—that disrupts the male gaze theorized by Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, and others. The introduction is also indicative of ample research regarding the lack of gender parity in French cinema, and thereby claims that despite the rich tradition of female filmmakers in France, the statistics regarding output among female French filmmakers tell a counter-narrative: “in recent years there are not

even ten female French directors who have made as many as ten feature-length films” (5). In addition, McFadden’s book is quick to distinguish that the practices of the five filmmakers in her study differ from directors associated with the *cinéma du corps*, an aesthetic movement in contemporary French film that visualizes radical bodily practices.

Chapter 1 argues that Agnès Varda’s films *Les plages d’Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès*), *Jane B. par Agnès V* (*Jane B. by Agnès V.*), and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and The Female Gleaner*) employ mirrors and frames within frames to show “how she wants to be seen by others as a filmmaker,” a growing concern for Varda toward the end of her career (71). This chapter invites readers to view these films more as a curatorial practice celebrating Varda’s work on her own terms in contrast to narratives constructed by critics that have inscribed her place in cinematic history as the “godmother of the New wave,” a label defined by her relationships with men (Jacques Demy’s spouse, etc). Chapter 2 argues that because Chantal Akerman’s filmic self-portrait presented in *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (*Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman*), which was made for a television film series, is a montage of her filmography, it enacts her reflexive approach to filmmaking. Chapter 3 discusses Dominique Cabrera’s video diary in which she reveals her depressed body “in hybrid form: half body and half camera” that in turn produces a “third representational body,” melding the physical body with her camera (107).

The second half of the book develops around *faux* narratives, a term McFadden defines in Chapter 5 when discussing Maïwenn’s desire “to tell a story that feels real” regarding her role as an actress and a director yet acknowledges the “fictionalized frame” of storytelling (187). Highly original and tightly constructed, McFadden’s reading of Maïwenn’s filmography as a professional “migration from desired object to creative subject” casts her in a new light and makes a strong case for Maïwenn’s intervention in debates surrounding contemporary female filmmakers in France (188). In contrast, the examination of “orchestrated reflexivity” in Sophie Calle’s projects in Chapter 4 pales in comparison to the chapters before and after (145). A footnote to the first sentence of the introduction states that Calle is not a filmmaker but a narrative artist; accordingly, the chapter on Calle includes only one section about a film (*No Sex Last Night*) and thus even though it reads as a *catalogue raisonné* (a compilation of an artist’s body of work) of a wide range of her artistic projects instead of focusing on her cinematic body, it leaves many questions unanswered (29).

McFadden’s book contributes invaluable and original information to an often under-discussed issue—parity—facing the status of French female filmmakers, while offering speculation for future applications of reflexivity and embodiment to Francophone contexts and social media of the millennial generation. She is also honest about the extent to which she may be projecting her

own concerns onto her object of study. Nevertheless, these anecdotes, rather than distracting the reader, work as signposts to create an enjoyable narrative map. They also show her interstitial praxis as a filmmaker in her own right. This study is a long overdue introduction to the theoretical, formal, and professional implications of visibility for female filmmakers in France, and a welcome addition to the libraries of both French cinema scholars and feminist film critics.

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