

# Women Directors in ‘Global’ Art Cinema: Negotiating Feminism and Representation

Despoina Mantziari

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University of East Anglia  
School of Film, Television and Media Studies

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## Women Directors in Global Art Cinema: Negotiating Feminism and Aesthetics

The thesis explores the cultural field of global art cinema as a potential space for the inscription of female authorship and feminist issues. Despite their active involvement in filmmaking, traditionally women directors have not been centralised in scholarship on art cinema. Filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac, Agnès Varda and Sally Potter, for instance, have produced significant cinematic oeuvres but due to the field's continuing phallogentricity, they have not enjoyed the critical acclaim of their male peers. Feminist scholarship has focused mainly on the study of Hollywood and although some scholars have foregrounded the work of female filmmakers in non-Hollywood contexts, the relationship between art cinema and women filmmakers has not been adequately explored. The thesis addresses this gap by focusing on art cinema. It argues that art cinema maintains a precarious balance between two contradictory positions; as a route into filmmaking for women directors allowing for political expressivity, with its emphasis on artistic freedom which creates a space for non-dominant and potentially subversive representations and themes, and as another hostile universe given its more elitist and auteurist orientation. The thesis adopts a case study approach, looking at a number of contemporary art films from diverse socio-political contexts. It thus provides a comprehensive account of how women are positioned within art cinema as subjects and as filmmakers. The thesis uses a social historical approach in looking at the texts as well as the contexts these texts operate within. In analysing how female directors voice feminist concerns through a negotiation of political and artistic preoccupations, the thesis aims to reclaim art cinema as a cultural field that brings the marginal closer to the mainstream and thus functions for feminism as the site of productive ideological dialogue.

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## Introduction

Upon starting research for my thesis the first thing that became apparent during informal conversations both within film studies but also outside academia was how difficult they found naming more than a couple of women directors. It was surprising how even the most well known and highly visible figures such as Jodie Foster, Kathryn Bigelow, Barbara Streisand, Jane Campion and Sofia Coppola were sometimes absent from my interlocutors' responses. More often than I would like to admit I was faced with a long pause and a shrug of resignation. Similarly, when people would find out that I was doing a PhD in a "cool" discipline such as film studies, I would often be faced with the much-dreaded question: "who is your favourite director?" or "which is your favourite film?" And I say much dreaded question because on the one hand I find it impossible to have a definite singular answer on the subject and on the other, if pressured I would answer Sally Potter and *Yes* (2004) to which most people would assume a blank expression and say that they had not heard of her or the film. Of course, having studied film for a couple of years before embarking on my PhD I was very much aware that women filmmakers are not only a tiny percentage of the whole but they are also less visible and marginalised within a male-dominated industry. This becomes most obvious when one looks at the history of the Academy and other festival awards. These are not only important in the way they celebrate and acknowledge the contribution of filmmakers within the global cultural sphere, but also in the way they render visible and promote the careers of those who manage to garner such awards. Through a quick search on the Internet, I discovered that when it comes to women directors, the figures are rather depressing. The Academy Awards were instituted in 1929 and since then only four women have been nominated for the Best Director category: Lina Wertmüller in 1976, Jane Campion in 1993, Sofia Coppola in 2003 and finally Kathryn Bigelow in 2009, who was the first ever female director to win the

award. This is an outrageously small number if one thinks of the amount of women who have worked within Hollywood and generally within American cinema. Yet at the same time it is no wonder that women have been systematically excluded from a traditionally white, male, heterosexist Academy where any female and/or feminine attributes are deemed inferior.

Having said that, it is worth noting that there is another category in which female directors seem to have more visibility, namely the Best Foreign Language Film category. This category was first implemented in 1956 although between 1947-1955 there were Special Honorary Awards given to some foreign films. This award is somewhat controversial in terms of the restrictive rules for film selection and it appears as a rather condescending gesture on the part of the Academy towards non-Anglophone cinematic production. This all-encompassing award is given for excellence in world cinema, which is a complicated term in itself. However, what I would like to point out in connection to women's visibility within award ceremonies is that this particular category seems more open to the inclusion of women among its nominees. The first nomination appears in 1959 for Danish director Astrid Henning-Jensen and her film *Paw*. Following a 17-year gap, there are the nominations of Lina Wertmüller (1976), Diane Kurys (1983), María Luisa Bemberg (1984), Agnieszka Holland and Coline Serreau (1985), Mira Nair (1988) and the first award to be won by a woman director as recently as 1995 by Marleen Gorris competing against two other women directors, Nana Dzhordzhadze and Berit Nesheim. The award was again given to a woman director in 2002 (Caroline Link) and most recently to Danish director Susanne Bier, a director whose work I explore in one of my case studies. The difference between the more 'mainstream', All-American awards of the Academy and this 'other' category is quite important for the argument I will be making throughout this thesis. Mainstream high-budget filmmaking, as exemplified most notably by Hollywood

and its studio structure, has been and still remains rather reluctant to include women directors within its ranks. In contrast, when looking at other national contexts the situation is a lot more varied, and especially in the case of, for instance, France, Germany and Denmark there is a significant number of women working within both the mainstream and the independent sector of filmmaking and getting at least some recognition for their work. This is reflected also in the fact that their films get selected to represent their countries' cinematic excellence at the Oscars. Of course this is a positive contrast compared to Hollywood but the situation offers little cause for celebration since, as said earlier, this category, with its significant marking of 'otherness', seems to be able to contain more comfortably the gendered 'other' of an-'other' industry.

Therefore it seems that the American filmmaking industry, especially as represented by its annual ceremony, is particularly unwelcome to women, a point that has been reiterated by several feminist film scholars. For instance, this is expressed by Yvonne Tasker who observes that “the position of women filmmakers is typically both marginal and precarious” (213) adding that there is the “crucial question of the *visibility* of women filmmakers to be addressed” (“Vision” 214). My thesis explores precisely this crucial issue and one of the main objectives is to foreground the role and importance women directors hold within contemporary global art cinema. Not only, I argue, are they contributing significantly to this artistic cultural sphere but they also help enrich cultural representations by offering alternative viewpoints, which are informed by their variable national, racial, gender and social class identity. In this way I would argue a feminist goal is achieved, one that relates to a wider inclusion, a polyphony in the creation of cultural products within a predominantly male cultural universe. At this point of the introduction, it is crucial to define the way feminism is invoked for my study. The sense in which I locate feminism in this field is not so much as a methodical, organised feminist film practice resembling

feminist documentaries of the 1970s or other overtly marked feminist film movements. Instead, the feminist potential of the art films I examine lies on the one hand in foregrounding a female artistic voice within a male-dominated industry and on the other in the unprecedented diversity and depth of female representations that can be found therein. In the pages that follow I will proceed to explain the way this feminist perspective is located in my readings of the case study films I have chosen. Yet before I move on to this topic, it is important to provide an initial definition of the cinematic field I am exploring, global art cinema, which will be developed further in chapter 1.

The reason I have chosen global art cinema for this exploration is its potential for a combination of artistic and political expression aided by its ambiguous position between avant-garde and mainstream practices within the contemporary postmodern era of globalisation. According to Marijke De Valck, “the globalized world and postmodernity are characterized as networks in which local elements are linked to global structures and heterogeneity and plurality are the preferred ideological projects” (69). Following this logic, I argue that the film industry surrounding this alternative to the Hollywood prototype cinema is an optimum space for the exploration of women’s contribution within global filmmaking. Yet it is not an easy task to define the term ‘global art cinema’ due to its discursive nature that is affected by a number of textual as well as extra-textual factors. According to Dudley Andrew, art cinema “is by definition pan-national, following the urge of every ambitious film to take off from its point of release, so as to encounter other viewers, and other movies, elsewhere and later” (vi). The international network of film festivals, which can be viewed as its driving force and its primary support system, allows for encounters with and between films from diverse socio-political contexts, providing a valuable primary exhibition platform and promoting the films that win accolades as suitable for further exhibition and distribution. Therefore I have chosen to use the term



global to further qualify this cinematic space, which is primarily defined here by the film festivals as the loci of exhibition and distribution creating a network that covers the entire globe. Accordingly, all the case studies I have chosen to focus on form part of global art cinema based on their prominent position within the film festival network. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, film festivals “[a]ll have Hollywood, and (since the 1970s) the commercial film industry, as both their ‘significant other’ and their ‘bad object’” (100). The relationship between these two filmmaking spaces will be further addressed in chapter one, where, in the process of delineating the cinematic field under consideration, I discuss some of its defining characteristics as a distinct filmmaking context. However, what is important to foreground at this stage is that due to their antagonistic relationship it might be possible to assume that since Hollywood is often regarded as an exclusive male club, art cinema will operate differently, allowing women greater opportunities. In this respect Elsaesser observes that since the 1970s film festivals have provided a “platform for other causes, for minorities and pressure groups, for women’s cinema” (100) and other types of marginal and/or politically engaged groups. Therefore one could expect, if not a demand for films made by women, a more inclusive attitude in the name of global art cinema’s tendency towards experimentation and renewal both in terms of form and content. As I will go on to argue it is art cinema’s ability as a cultural industrial context to contain and perpetually negotiate a number of artistic and political tensions that allows women directors to penetrate an otherwise largely impermeable cultural sphere.

However, the situation in this field, regarding women directors’ recognition and visibility especially before the 1970s, is not as encouraging as the above assumptions might indicate if one considers as an example the most high profile – indeed glamorous - event of the international film festival circuit. Cannes Film Festival was first held in the immediate post World War II era, and its most prestigious award, the Palm d’Or, is given

to the director of the best feature film of the competition. Immediately this is a sign of its more auteurist orientation compared to the Oscars, in which the Best Film award goes to the film producer, and as Elsaesser acutely remarks, “Cannes remained the kingmaker of the festival circuit, and retained the *auteur* as the king pin at the center of the system” (91). Throughout its glamorous history the only woman director until the present to have been awarded the Palm d'Or is Jane Campion for *The Piano* in 1993. The second most prestigious award is the Grand Prix and it has been awarded twice to a woman director: Marta Mészáros for *Diary for My Children* (1984) and Naomi Kawase for *The Mourning Forest* (2007). The third most prestigious award, the Jury Prize, has been awarded to Samira Makhmalbaf for *Blackboards* (2000) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), Andrea Arnold for *Red Road* (2006) and *Fish Tank* (2009), Marjane Satrapi for *Persepolis* (2007) and Maïwenn for *Polisse* (2011). There has been only one woman director to ever win the Best Director award: in 1961, the Soviet Yuliya Solntseva with *Chronicle of Flaming Years*. In other categories such as the Un Certain Regard category, which celebrates different styles and visions, Mia Hansen-Løve won in 2009 with her film *Father of My Children*. Yet if so far the comparison does not seem to validate my argument concerning art cinema's more welcoming attitude towards women filmmakers due to the scarcity of women especially in the top category, there is one last category that tips the balance. The Camera d'Or is awarded to the best first feature film in one of the selections and according to the official Cannes' website, the aim is “to reveal and highlight the importance of a first film shown at the Festival de Cannes, whose qualities emphasize the need to encourage the director to undertake a second film”<sup>1</sup>. There has been a steady stream of women directors winning this award since 1985 and, I would argue, this is indicative of the festival's effort to open up and encourage directors who show potential and lack the opportunities due to

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<sup>1</sup> “Caméra d’Or Rules & Regulations 2014,” *Festival de Cannes*, 10 February 2014 <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/festivalServices/cameraDorRules.html>.

gender, geo-political background, and/or financial status.

Having said that, it seems rather obvious from this account that Cannes is still a man's world especially when it comes to the higher echelons of artistic esteem. Yet it should be noted that it is somewhat exceptional in terms of its position within the international festival circuit since it is a rather glamorous event, where several stars flock to walk its red carpet, and rather insular in terms of the exclusion of the public from attendance. This goes to show that when it comes to the high end of budget and glamour, this side of art cinema is not strikingly different from Hollywood yet it still offers a space, even if limited, for women directors. Following this logic, it seems reasonable to assume that in comparison to A-list festivals, such as Cannes, B-list festivals, such as Toronto International Film Festival, will be more open to the inclusion of a wider diversity of artistic voices in their effort to compete with each other and survive in this industrial network<sup>2</sup>. It would be interesting to see whether the figures verify this assumption but it is beyond the scope of the thesis to address this point. Instead, I would like to turn to the thesis' argument which acknowledges that art cinema is still largely a male-dominated cultural sphere while bearing a strong connection to ideas of artistic freedom, innovation, ideological liberalism and iconoclastic attitudes. Thus I argue that it offers the potential for women directors to challenge white, middle class, male supremacist narratives and representations that have for a long time dominated our screens.

In order to substantiate this claim I will proceed by describing the intellectual and ideological context this thesis forms part of. The study of women in film is more often than not connected to a feminist agenda that aims to analyse the way women have been constituted as objects within film history and, particularly within a Western context, to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser in his chapter on Film Festival Networks explains in more detail the intricate forces that exist within this field but due to space limitations I am simplifying the situation for the sake of progressing with my argument. For more on festival networks see: Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2005) 92-104.

argue for alternative representations and practices, and to foreground the role women have played throughout film history both in front of but also behind the camera. The present thesis forms part of this discourse in looking at the operation of women filmmakers and their films within contemporary global art cinema practices. Traditionally, women directors have not been centralised in scholarship on art cinema<sup>3</sup>. Of course this comes as no surprise since women directors to a great extent have been marginalised both within the context of academic study but also that of commercial and industrial discourse as briefly shown earlier. However, during the 1970s the feminist movement had a direct impact on film practice and criticism. In 1971 there was the release of the first feminist documentaries, which was followed in the subsequent year by the publication of the first issue of *Women and Film* magazine and the organisation of the first New York International Festival of Women's Films and the Women's Event at Edinburgh Film Festival (Thornham, *Passionate*, xi). The year 1973 sees the first publications on women and film, namely Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* and the screen pamphlet entitled *Notes on Women's Cinema* edited by Claire Johnston. This pamphlet includes Johnston's influential article "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" which has been crucial in the debates regarding feminist film aesthetics while challenging the masculinist direction of auteurism. Her focus is on two major Hollywood auteurs, Howard Hawks and John Ford, and she briefly compares the female representations in some of their films before concluding that Hawks' representations are highly problematic for feminism while Ford's are more complex and progressive. Still, she argues that cinema is immersed in the dominant patriarchal ideology, which naturalises and presents as objective reality the oppression of women. She therefore insists on the importance of challenging this

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Steve Neale in his article "Art Cinema As Institution" published in *Screen* 22:1 (1981), briefly mentions Germaine Dulac but generally his piece as well as David Bordwell's defining study "The Art Cinema As a Mode of Film Practice" published initially in 1979, focuses on male authored art films.

ideological injustice by “developing the means to interrogate the male, bourgeois cinema” (29). What is important in Johnston's argument is that she denies an image of Hollywood “as a dream factory producing an oppressive cultural product” (24). To support this view she discusses Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino and the way that their films involve an implicit criticism of female stereotyping and oppression that manifests itself in different degrees and on different levels but is nevertheless present.

This is a rather moderate critique of Hollywood cinema compared to Laura Mulvey's condemnation and rejection of narrative fiction film in her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, written in the same year and published in *Screen* in 1975. She argues that “[h]owever self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal *mise en scène* reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema” (16). Throughout she uses psychoanalytic theory to interrogate the way pleasure is structured in terms of gender within mainstream film, woman as object of the gaze – ergo passive – and man as bearer of the look – ergo active – ending with a call 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” adding that “[w]omen, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this [voyeuristic] end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret” (27). Writing 40 years later I am quite doubtful about whether there has been such a decline of the traditional film form but as I will go on to demonstrate in the following chapters, there has been an increase in the number of films that challenge traditional gender representations especially if we look at the work of women filmmakers within global art cinema. In any case, Mulvey's statement and ‘call to arms’ certainly demonstrates the urgency with which feminist film theorists addressed the necessity of reconceptualising dominant cinematic form and content. Mulvey was a proponent of what Ann Kaplan terms the avant-garde

theory film, which rejects traditional narrative conventions and aims to “deconstruct’ the classic melodrama to reveal, first, how it is that the heroine is ‘spoken’ rather than having the voice and controlling her destiny, and second [...], how patriarchy attempts to sacrifice the heroine for patriarchal ends” (*Women* 142). Yet despite the importance of this kind of filmmaking for the development of feminist theory and practice, I agree with Kaplan’s remark that because these films were theory based they did not constitute “easy cinematic experiences” (*Women* 162). In other words, it is safe to assume that these films were destined to be viewed by a very restricted audience rather than articulating feminist content via more mainstream modes that would be accessible to wider audiences. Therefore my argument in focusing on art cinema distances itself from this call to completely reject narrative while at the same time championing the use of unconventional narrative forms which are related to this cinematic field. However, I would argue for the current usefulness of Mulvey’s observations especially in exploring canonical, male-authored art films as will be demonstrated in the second chapter of the thesis.

The contradiction between Johnston and Mulvey in their visualisation of alternative filmmaking practices is indicative of the wider intellectual and ideological upheaval of the time, which Ruby Rich chronicles in her book *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*. In 1975, in an article initially published in *The Village Voice*, Molly Haskell asks “Are Women Directors Different?”. The wider ideological upheaval and confusion not only as to what a feminist film should do but also in relation to whether there is a “woman’s point of view” or a “distinctly ‘feminine’ approach to filmmaking” (430) are also reflected in Haskell’s piece. She observes that women directors within commercial filmmaking are “the rarest of birds” (429) and goes on to briefly compare Lina Wertmüller’s films *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972) and *Love and Anarchy* (1973) with Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1973) in order to assess whether they share any

“distinctly 'feminine' qualities while at the same time cautioning against over-generalisations concerning a “feminine sensibility” (430). Despite the problematic employment of discourse that reinforces bipolar gender distinctions and expectations, which she self-consciously flags towards the end of her piece, she ends with a hopeful statement, which is still relevant almost 40 years on. She writes: “All we can do is hope that women filmmakers become, like their counterparts in the other arts, merely *filmmakers*” (435). I will come back to this statement when commenting on the delicate line a feminist scholar must tread between gender specificity, gender essentialism and the potential traps of enhancing women’s marginalisation in the field and/or making arbitrary assumptions concerning a director's politics just on the basis of her gender. Yet before I proceed with the specific caveats and limitations of the present thesis I would like to spend a bit more time mapping out the field of feminist film scholarship in order not only to clarify the way my work fits in with the existing scholarship but also to demonstrate my particular contribution within the field.

Since these early exploratory and polemic essays I have indicatively referred to so far, the number of studies on women in film has developed and the initial questions have been further elaborated and refined. Mulvey's “Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)” was published in 1981 and was one of the first scholarly works to theorise the gendered spectator. Mulvey has been crucial in the development of feminist film scholarship from its beginnings through the 1980s and onwards and her work draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory. Other major texts that explore the relationship between film and feminism through a psychoanalytic lens are Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988) and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). Both of these works either form part of the intellectual background

of this thesis or are directly invoked in different parts of it<sup>4</sup>. I have therefore projected key ideas found in these writings concerning the stereotypical construction of the female subject onto the analysis of canonical art films from the directors I have chosen as my case studies. To be more precise, in chapter two, I identify four major categories into which the majority of female representations within male-authored classic art films fall. I specifically refer to Mulvey's work regarding the objectification of the female body, its function as a fetish and the way that the end of the film narrative sees female characters either safely integrated within patriarchy or punished for their transgressions ("Visual" 19-25). I also invoke Creed's idea of the 'monstrous-feminine' and her use of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection as constructed in relation to the feminine subject to talk about on-screen female representations (3, 8-10). By projecting these concepts and frameworks onto canonical art films I argue that although much feminist film scholarship has focused on either mainstream Hollywood cinema or avant-garde practices it nonetheless remains relevant for the exploration of art cinema as well.

Furthermore, Annette Kuhn's publication *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982) has added significantly to the growing body of feminist film scholarship and the present thesis is greatly indebted to this as well as Anneke Smelik's *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (1998) for conceptualising the determinants and terminology as well as methodological choice of feminist informed textual analysis<sup>5</sup>. In particular, my authorial focus has been partly influenced by Smelik's statement that "the authorial agency" can be seen as "the subject of a feminist consciousness that establishes a

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<sup>4</sup> In particular my focus on women directors as authors echoes Silverman's view that "the director may in certain situations constitute *one* of the speakers of his or her films, and that there may at times be pressing political reasons for maximizing rather than minimizing what might be said to derive from this authorial voice" (202). Here these reasons are concerned with both the visibility of the female subject as author within global cinematic discourse and the centralization of diverse female experience within film narratives.

<sup>5</sup> My invocation of Kuhn's work lies primarily in conducting a feminist film analysis that aims to "mak[e] visible the invisible" (71) in relation both to women filmmakers' less visible work as well as the experience of women as portrayed in their films.



specific film rhetoric structuring the relation between director, character and spectator” (57). In addition, as I will proceed to point out in my case study chapters, the films I am looking at constitute examples of “the subversive possibilities of giving a female character the point of view” thus “creating a female gaze” and simultaneously undermining the dominance of the male gaze in cinematic discourse (Smelik 84). Therefore my research has been informed by a number of studies on women in film that deal with the representation of women but also with issues of authorship and feminism. Among them, Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (1990) has also been instrumental in considering the difficulties in theorising female authorship but also in emphasising its necessity for feminist film scholarship itself. Mayne looks at Arzner's work and revisits Johnston's earlier article, foregrounding that “the articulation of female authorship threatens to upset the erasure of 'women' which is central to the articulation of 'woman' in the cinema” (97). In this way she reclaims authorship as a useful tool for countering gender essentialism in cinematic representations, emphasising its importance regarding “the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators” (97). By exploring how a number female auteurs can perform this “reinvention” within art cinema and supplying a feminist analysis of indicative case studies my thesis follows the same logic. Working within this context, where auteurs are still powerful and have a prominent position, women can potentially gain recognition and establish their filmmaking careers while offering a diverse range of female representations that effectively shatter essentialist and monolithic concepts of womanhood.

At this point it is worthwhile further clarifying the way I am locating a feminist perspective in relation to my case study films in order to circumvent the assumption that women filmmakers will offer such 'alternative' narratives and gender representations, which risks perpetuating gender essentialism at the level of authorship. I do not wish to

imply that there is necessarily a pre-inscribed feminist intentionality or conscious filmmaking practice that women filmmakers within art cinema abide by. One way of avoiding such generalisation is first of all by consciously making certain choices in terms of female-authored films and performing a feminist reading, which all of my case studies, and indeed many more films I had in mind when starting the research, seem to validate. Christine Gledhill's statement that "meanings are not fixed entities to be deployed at the will of a communicator, but products of textual interactions shaped by a range of economic, aesthetic and ideological factors that often operate unconsciously, are unpredictable and difficult to control" (171) is particularly useful in relation to this point. Consequently I explore the way that meaning is created via the interaction of textual elements, such as narrative and representation, with extra textual elements, such as the figure of the author and the socio-political context in which she works. The resulting analysis allows the thesis to participate in "the polemics of negotiation, exploiting textual contradiction to put into circulation readings that draw the text[s] into a female and/or feminist orbit" (Gledhill 175) even in cases when this is not straightforwardly avowed by the director herself. The concept of a feminist reading of authorship in this context refers not only to the way that a female authorial voice is foregrounded due to art cinema's insistence on the figure of the auteur, but also to the practice regarding "the representation of women in film in ways that counter prior cinematic renditions" (Ramanathan 4). This will be particularly substantiated with the inclusion of chapter 2, which gives a brief overview of women's representation within the work of some of art cinemas most celebrated male auteurs. Having this as a historical background, I argue that gradually an increasing number of women auteurs actively participate in the creation of women's images and the subsequent negotiation of their ideological connotations.

For the purposes of my study, which is informed by my own feminist perspective,

plurality and polyphony provide the way forward for feminist thought and this is achieved within art cinema through the co-existence of a variety of female voices and perspectives from all over the world, hence the global aspect of my study. Due to art cinema's transnational exhibition and distribution network constituted by numerous international film festivals, women filmmakers, who may have been confined to the margins of national film industries that are hostile to women, can transcend these confines and engage with cinematic discourse worldwide. In particular, through their participation in festival competitions female-authored art films gain cultural value, extending and prolonging their dissemination throughout the world. This point is emphasised by De Valck who states that “[b]y travelling the circuit, a film can accumulate value via the snowball effect” (35) since “[f]ilm festivals, in short, are sites of passage that function as the gateways to cultural legitimization” (38). The global spread of the film festival phenomenon, which has its own hierarchical dynamics as a systematic network<sup>6</sup>, creates the possibility for an encounter of a wide array of female representations that may be distinct in terms of their geo-political backgrounds while at the same time it may allow for a realisation of the oppression of women as a persisting global phenomenon. This is reflected in the structure of my study by bringing together films made by directors from diverse socio-political backgrounds that have had successful festival participation. As already mentioned, the films I am looking at might not be all openly feminist in a straightforward, political manner or even to an equal degree but they are all stories by women about women and as I will proceed to demonstrate with each analysis, they all work against the monolithic female stereotypes that are abundant in dominant representations. This in my opinion is a political, for some conscious and for others less so, position for a director to be in.

In relation to this and as a continuation to Mayne's legacy I should mention at this

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<sup>6</sup> For details on the way the festival network has been theorized and the mechanics of its self-preservation see: Marijke De Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. (bibliography).

point Sue Thornham's *What If I Had Been the Hero?: Investigating Women's Cinema*. In this book Thornham gives a comprehensive account of the different strands of feminist film discourse and moves on to look at the way female desire, agency and authorial voice are inscribed within female-authored films from a wide range of filmmaking contexts. Thornham distances herself from views like those expressed by Jan Rosenberg in 1979 who predict an impending demise of the relationship between feminism and film once women directors move into fiction, commercial filmmaking (Thornham 65). In focusing on fiction film she seems to come from a point of convergence with Johnston's thinking that a feminist counter-cinema should draw on fantasy, and her argument to look at film both "as a political tool and film as entertainment" (31). Thornham develops this notion in stating that "[f]iction film is a medium of fantasy, and the fantasies constructed by women filmmakers are constructed both against and through" (6) stories and narratives that have dominated the cultural sphere. It is therefore important to look at how women directors employ their imagination to represent female desire while foregrounding their authorial voice. It is a similar position I adopt for the argument of this thesis, but I propose in particular that global art cinema offers the optimal space for the construction of these alternative narratives. Yet in contrast to all these publications I have refrained from using the terms "women's cinema" or "women's pictures" not because they are not serviceable within the contexts they have been used but because I want to avoid any implication of a sub-sector within art cinema that is occupied by women and/or any assumption that the films made by women directors within art cinema will demonstrate a systematic use of particular aesthetics or betray any feminist intentionality on the part of their makers. In this manner I avoid the further demarcation and subsequent marginalisation women directors seem to suffer from, both in terms of the industry itself and the scholarship surrounding it, while still insisting on the importance of looking at women's cinematic contribution within

global film history.

As I have already briefly mentioned, art cinema has been largely overlooked by feminist film scholars. Johnston in her aforementioned article, talks briefly about how “myth transmits and transforms the ideology of sexism and renders it invisible”, before suggesting that “a strong argument could be made for the art film inviting a greater invasion from myth” (25). Therefore she is rather dismissive of art cinema and briefly adds: “[p]erhaps something should be said about the European art film; undoubtedly, it is more open to the invasion of myth than the Hollywood film” (30). She proceeds to attack Agnès Varda's film *Le Bonheur* (1965) and comments overall that “[t]here is no doubt that Varda's work is reactionary”, adding that “in her rejection of culture and her placement of woman outside history her films mark a retrograde step in women's cinema” (30). I fundamentally disagree with this comment on Varda's films and specifically the one mentioned by Johnston. I would argue that the film does exactly the opposite in the way it represents an idyllic marriage but quickly subverts this image to show that, to use Varda's own words, “inside, there is a worm”<sup>7</sup>. I would go so far as to suggest that the film criticises and to an extent subverts the dominant romance narrative that brings to mind films like *Sunrise* (F. W. Murnau, 1927) while capturing the feel of and commenting on the swinging sixties. Thus Varda's film does not reject culture or place woman outside history and, as I will go on to demonstrate in chapter 2 with the analysis of her new wave film *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), her work performs a crucial part in deconstructing on-screen female stereotypes and reconstructing female subjectivity. Moreover, Johnston's argument that somehow European art film is more open to myth could be justified to the extent of the prevalence of male auteurism in the field but this is equally the case with Hollywood films even if auteurism did not establish itself as early as it did within European filmmaking.

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7 Quote taken from the bonus features of the DVD version of the film released in 1992.

Along these lines Molly Haskell, in one of the first feminist publications on film entitled *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974), observes that “the woman” in European cinema “presents, almost nakedly, the intentions of her cinematic sculptor” (281). Haskell asserts that “[f]or the most part, European women in films have been, for better or worse, the creation of their directors, most of whom have been men” (321). However, one of the minor points she makes is that “[o]ld women, ugly women, and women directors have perhaps fared better in Europe than in America, but the gap between them is not as great as one would assume” (321). This can be seen as an initial point for the research I have undertaken since I argue that art cinema is still a male-dominated field but it is not entirely hostile to women filmmakers. Similarly to Haskell, Joan Mellen in *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (1973) posits that “[w]orld cinema in general persists in offering images of women as diminished creatures, and even independent filmmakers, only partially at the mercy of investors, have not broken rank” (16). However, she does find that there is at least some variation, even if “[o]nly at rare moments, and from directors with a well-developed sense of the relationship between politics and psychology, [...] a sense that what women become is directly related to the structure of the society in which they must struggle for their very existence” (48-9). As examples she mentions Luis Buñuel's *Tristana* (1970) and Eric Rohmer's films belonging to the group 'Six Moral Tales' – *The Girl of Monceau* (1963), *Suzanne's Career* (1963), *La Collectionneuse* (1967), *My Night at Maud's* (1969), *Claire's Knee* (1970) and *Love in the Afternoon* (1972). Her interpretation of Bergman's female representations is much less favourable and she characterises them as “diminished pathetic creatures” portrayed this way in her opinion due to Bergman's view “of the nature of the female sex itself” (51). It seems therefore that Mellen notices more flexibility and diversity in comparing the work of different art cinema auteurs than Johnston's and even Haskell's observations allow for. I

would therefore argue that due to art cinema's auteurist focus, ideological representations are subject more to the individual sensibility of a particular director rather than to the dominant ideology of the American studio system. This discussion will be further expanded in chapter 2 in which I am looking at a number of female representations divided into stereotypical categories presented within certain films by iconic art cinema auteurs – Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard and Luis Buñuel – and juxtaposing them with the female representations in two female-authored films of roughly the same time, namely the aforementioned *Cléo from 5 to 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962) and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975). The aims of the analysis of the films and the subsequent juxtapositions are two-fold: firstly, to demonstrate that the male-authored films, despite the points of contestation and critique of the status quo, rely heavily on the stereotypical representation of women and do not develop that critique to its full potential; and secondly, to indicate that the two women directors employ very different styles and techniques from each other and through using similar cinematic tropes to their male colleagues, they manage not only to subvert stereotypes but also to create points of 'passionate detachment' between film and spectator for the potential reflection on the re-construction of gender within cultural products.

Throughout this brief summary of feminist film scholarship that has been relevant to my study I have highlighted that although some scholars have foregrounded the work of female filmmakers in Hollywood as well as non-Hollywood contexts, the relationship between art cinema and women filmmakers has not been adequately explored. In the few cases that this field has been touched upon, the focus has been on individual directors within specific national cinemas and the issues pertaining to their oeuvre rather than attempts to talk about the wider filmmaking context that they operate within. For instance Laura Mulvey and Colin MacCabe in their article “Images of Women, Images of

Sexuality: Some Films by J.-L. Godard” (Mulvey, *Visual*) provide a fascinating account of the French author's overtly political agenda and how that affects the gendered structure of his films. Yet there are no attempts to look for comparisons and similar attitudes in the work of his contemporaries working in the same field and thus the exploration of art cinema is restricted and fragmented. It was only in Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' book entitled *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (1990) that I found the strongest links with my argument and that might be due to the closeness between art cinema and the French filmmaking tradition/history/context. Flitterman goes to great lengths to explain the essentialist traps lurking in arbitrarily connecting the filmmaker's biological gender to her filmmaking style and politics, stating that “[w]hile a feminist cinema must necessarily posit its enunciative position as feminine, this does not simply mean that there is a feminine 'content' or 'expression' that emanates directly from the woman's place” (19). This is further developed in Angela Martin's article “Refocusing Authorship in Women's Filmmaking” (2003) with particular reference to Kathryn Bigelow's work. I have followed the same directive in avoiding assumptions concerning women directors within art cinema a priori, and instead looking at their films for signs of alternative gender narratives and dynamics. Yet going back to Flitterman's work, she makes the following very illuminating, for the purposes of my research, remark:

[P]ossibilities for opposition can be conceived in terms of the type of subject constructed by a particular (national *or* art) cinema and by the alternative enunciative positions it suggests. It is this reformulation of national cinema and of art cinema along theoretical lines that connects both of them to the project of a feminist counter-cinema, for all three work at the margins of mainstream commercial production in an effort not only to subvert and undermine the structures of dominance, but



also, and perhaps more importantly, to generate new textual forms. (24)

This could be considered as a fundamental aspect of the rationale behind my own argument, which posits that the liminal position of art cinema on the margins of the mainstream, gives a certain amount of freedom from studio/corporate restrictions in terms of artistic and ideological choices. Consequently, it can be fruitfully exploited by women filmmakers to express feminist concerns. I therefore argue that art cinema presents an intriguing filmmaking context for the study of women directors especially due to its high status, exemplified by ‘masters’ of cinema such as Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and Jean-Luc Godard. However, the situation is not as smooth and straightforward for women filmmakers who still have to struggle to get due acknowledgement. This can be attributed to the field's continuing phallogentricity and its connection to the concept of genius, which Christine Battersby in her book *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (1989) explores in detail. She argues that for centuries “Genius was the bedrock of European culture”, highlighting that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and even more into the 19<sup>th</sup> century “[t]his rhetoric praised 'feminine' qualities in male creators ... but claimed females could not – or should not – create” (3). Furthermore Battersby observes that “[a] woman who created was faced with a double bind: either to surrender her sexuality (becoming not *masculine*, but a surrogate *male*), or to be *feminine* and *female*, and hence to fail to count as a genius” (3). This concern seems to be echoed in Tasker's observation that “the emergence and success of women filmmakers is also a question of women who visibly, publicly appropriate titles perceived as male” (“Vision” 214). Therefore in chapter 1, by looking at the different defining characteristics of global art cinema and the intricate interaction between gender and art/authorship, the national and the transnational and other relevant debates, I will initially draw a wider picture of the cinematic field within which women directors can viably negotiate their political and

aesthetic/artistic concerns with feminist overtones.

Thus far, I have already briefly referred to the particular focus of the first two chapters while commenting on the different sources that form the intellectual and ideological background of my project, but at this stage I see fit to recap what has been mentioned fragmentarily and then move on to the description of my methodology and the further structure of the chapters. The first chapter of the thesis studies the particularities of art cinema as a filmmaking context, looking at its defining characteristics since its beginnings with the 1920s film d'art through to its wider establishment in post-war years up until the present, in an attempt to account for women's precarious position within this field and foreground its 'alternativeness' towards mainstream filmmaking. In particular, it focuses on art cinema as a form and a set of structures for the production, distribution and exhibition of films which maintains a balance between two contradictory positions: as another hostile universe given its more elitist and auteurist orientation, not far removed from mainstream practices; but at the same time as a route into filmmaking for women directors allowing for political expressivity, with its emphasis on artistic freedom which creates a space for non-dominant and potentially subversive representations and themes.

In this context, the thesis explores the extent to which art cinema provides a platform for women filmmakers to articulate feminism. This discussion will serve to illuminate my argument that art cinema can offer a more fertile ground for the exploration of feminist issues. On the one hand it seems to offer a less rigidly regulated field of ideological expression than mainstream practices, but on the other it does not move as far away from them as the avant-garde does. Still a narrative cinema, albeit more experimental in its use of narrative and style, it has the potential of greater appeal to larger audiences than avant-garde filmmaking. As such, I argue that it is a space that can be fruitfully exploited by contemporary women directors in presenting feminist concerns in a more

palatable manner thus re-gaining the ground that the backlash to the feminist movement has caused to be lost. In other words, it will be argued that art cinema has the potential of reaching a wider audience and avoid the pitfall of speaking only to the converted while nonetheless reworking feminist avant-garde aesthetics and re-habilitating feminist issues. This strategy seems vital for feminism since the backlash against even the most rudimentary articulation of feminist concerns, as evidenced in many Hollywood films from the 1980s and 1990s, along with its subsequent disguise as post-feminism, has generated a suspicion towards anything labelled 'feminist'. This 'counter-wave' to feminism, along with certain disputes that flared up within feminist theory and criticism, had as an effect the alienation of women filmmakers from feminism. Therefore women directors working beyond the avant-garde had to avoid any ideological and political labels if they were to sustain their career and find means to make films. A case in point is Sally Potter, who in an interview to David Ehrenstein said that the word “[f]eminist' has become a sort of trigger word that closes down thinking rather than opening it up” (6). This gradual movement away from overt feminist associations is indicative of the double bind women directors seem to find themselves in attempting to negotiate political content while pursuing a sustainable filmmaking career. Having discussed these different but pertinent issues as a background of the thesis, I then turn to a more sustained study of art cinema as a privileged site for auteurs. I look at the way issues on female and feminist authorship interrelate in grounding the discussion of contemporary women filmmakers who are active in diverse national and aesthetic contexts while working within the shared forum of art cinema. While avoiding potential accusations of gender essentialism as pointed out by Martin, I argue for the survival of feminist authorship in this potentially subversive filmmaking arena.

In exploring the place of women directors within art cinema, the thesis aspires to re-insert them in the film history of this particular field, which is understood as a film

practice bordering on, but also offering an alternative to mainstream film practices. Although at first sight this might seem contradictory since the focus of my study could be seen as replicating the marginalisation of women directors within film studies, I argue that it is still necessary to draw attention to women filmmakers due to the persistent gender imbalance within the field and that we can productively talk about women filmmakers in this context in a non-essentialist manner. By choosing as my case studies directors according to their filmmaking approach I hope to avoid the essentialist trap. In addition, I am working initially from films rather than directors since one of the basic aims of my study is not to divide directors according to, for instance, the national context they come from, but rather to look for any shared themes and aesthetics present in their films that transcend such boundaries. The thesis then tries to have as wide a geo-political scope as possible, acknowledging the limits that an in-depth discussion of the selected case studies poses but attempting to make up for this by briefly referring to films by other directors that could be meaningfully discussed under the set categories.

Following on from chapter 1, chapter 2, as mentioned earlier, looks at the stereotypical representation of women in art films directed by well-respected male auteurs during the 'golden' period of art cinema's history – between roughly the late 1950s up to the early 1970s – juxtaposing them with the female representations in two films directed by the aforementioned women directors around the designated period. This is more of a historical background for my study, which helps highlight the important contribution, even if at the time sparse, of women directors in terms of the cultural gender representations that are on offer. In order to make this discussion meaningful I have first of all chosen a limited number of male auteurs who I believe to be representative of a range of different socio-political contexts while at the same time holding a dominant position within this filmmaking sphere. The inclusion of the last section of this chapter, mainly the

juxtaposition of the representations within the female-authored films, does not intend to create a polarity between men and women but to highlight that it is not the tropes themselves that are sexist but the way they are being populated and developed by individual auteurs. Having demonstrated this with this historical background, I move on to my study's focal point, namely *contemporary* women directors within global art cinema, which is developed in the four subsequent case study chapters.

As already mentioned, the films analysed are grouped according to categories derived from the principal aesthetic choices they represent. In addition, they are all part of what I have termed 'global art cinema' through their exhibition and circulation within the film festival circuit. The praise and critical attention they have received through these sites, I argue, increases the potential for a wider distribution and gives women directors the opportunity to establish their filmmaking careers. At the same time, by focusing on female characters these films and filmmakers help enrich the cultural representations of women at a global level, showing how issues of gender, race and social class interact in the constitution of the female subject. Therefore they contribute to a destabilising of gender essentialism through challenging familiar stereotypical representations of womanhood. My first category (chapter 3) is that of films within film movements, for which I consider Susanne Bier's *Open Hearts* (2002) and Lucrecia Martel's *The Swamp* (2001) as engaging with the aesthetic preoccupations prevalent in Dogme 95 and New Argentine Cinema respectively. I argue that making films within a particular film movement can be a helpful strategy for women directors to gain credibility and acceptance by their male peers and simultaneously enrich the cinematic output of these movements by offering alternative views and representations. For example, Bier's film won several national as well as international film awards, such as the Golden Seashell at the San Sebastián International Film Festival and the International Critics' Award in Toronto. Similarly, Martel's film had

a successful run in the festival circuit, being nominated for a Golden Bear in Berlin and earning several awards in other events. The chapter is subdivided into two sections, focusing on the exploration of each individual movement and its main aesthetic and thematic concerns; a brief authorial note on the director and her career; a textual analysis of the gender representations presented in each individual film and any relevant observation concerning the film's operation within the film movement. I look at the way that sometimes women can be looked at suspiciously by their male peers or critics and this is also subject to different socio-political contexts and the attitudes towards gender equality that prevail in them. At the end I am looking for potential parallels that can be drawn between the two case studies and whether a feminist tendency can be detected within both texts.

Chapter 4 focuses on meta-cinematic films that work on two levels, both drawing attention to the workings behind filmmaking but also reflecting the director's place at a more personal level. To this end I analyse Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997), which won the Best Film Award in Mar del Plata Film Festival, and Catherine Breillat's *Sex Is Comedy* (2002), which featured as an official selection in Cannes and Toronto. Self-reflexivity is considered both in terms of unveiling cinematic procedures – relevant to feminist film theory – but also in terms of reflecting the self on screen as a way of anchoring the female authorial presence. This interconnection is explored in detail as an insightful way of seeing the particularities involved in being a woman director as showcased by the two main case studies.

Chapter 5 turns to a discussion of social realist cinematic traditions within the British and the Iranian filmmaking context separately, and for this purpose I have chosen Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) and Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998) as the main case studies. Both of these films earned prestigious awards; Arnold's film was nominated

for the Palme d'Or and won the Jury Prize and Makhmalbaf's film was screened in the section Un Certain Regard in Cannes and secured awards and nomination in festivals around the world. The relationship between realism and art cinema is explored in detail, as is the relationship between realism and feminist aesthetics. My final category is that of films that rework generic conventions, in which the use of recognisable generic marks creates a potential cross-over quality between art cinema and mainstream practices. The main case studies I consider are Kelly Reichardt's western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) and Jane Campion's neo-noir *In the Cut* (2003). Despite the fact that these films are closer to mainstream practices, compared to the other case studies, they still had a successful career in the festival circuit, a fact that emphasises the liminal position of global art cinema between mainstream and more experimental filmmaking. Reichardt's film was nominated for a Golden Lion in Venice and Campion, who thus far has been the only woman director to win the Palme d'Or, was nominated for a Golden Spike in Valladolid International Film Festival for *In the Cut*. The inclusion of a case study made within American independent cinema should point to the fact that I am considering this context as part of global art cinema in general. There is no doubt that it forms a distinct, nationally marked type of art cinema but apart from this specificity it shares many characteristics with art cinema in the rest of the world. This can be detected both at the level of filmmaking aesthetics and its alternativeness in relation to the mainstream, but also in terms of the channels of circulation and distribution available to its films. American independent films circulate largely within the international film festival circuit, part of which is the prestigious Sundance Film Festival. The festival is the platform for the circulation and annual celebration of art films from around the world and it is part of the Sundance Institute, which was established in 1981 in order to support production of American independent films. According to the information found at its website the idea was "to create an

environment designed to foster independence, discovery, and new voices in American film”<sup>8</sup>. Such a commitment is very similar to what has been considered as global art cinema's orientation, as I demonstrate in chapter 1, and consequently the inclusion of an American independent film adds to the plurality of my case studies without standing out or posing a conceptual transgression. In particular the main concern of this chapter is to highlight the extent to which generic conventions are both used and abused within art cinema and the way these women directors work within two different but equally “masculine” genres to subvert the gender expectations and power hierarchies that they usually offer.

The delineation of these particular categories relates to an effort to find clusters of films within the broader cinematic field of art cinema that share similar aesthetic concerns. At the same time these four categories seem to me to provide interesting and fruitful frameworks for the discussion of how feminist issues are inscribed in the films in relation to the wider cinematic context they invoke. To be more precise, looking at films made by women that exemplify aesthetics of broader film movements, which is the area I explore in my third chapter, I will be able to historically contextualise them as part of a particular filmmaking tradition but also tease out those elements that are consistent with a different female or feminist perspective. The meta-cinematic category will provide an important insight into the way women inscribe their authorial presence and comment on the filmmaking practice itself. This will be a focal point for my overall argument that looks at women directors' position within art cinema. The social realist film provides a more straightforward reflection on socio-political issues and therefore it offers an appropriate space for the more overt inscription of feminist issues. Finally, the inclusion of the cross-over films that re-work generic conventions will look at the interesting issue of how

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8 Sundance Institute. 20 September 2013 <http://www.sundance.org/about/history/>.



women directors re-write genres that are more traditionally male – like the western and the neo-noir thriller – from their own perspective, offering a diversity of new themes and representations. It should be noted, however, that I am making no claim to cover all the areas of art cinema in which women directors operate. The limitations that an in-depth study of these categories poses, prevents any such claims being made, but I hope to show art cinema's value for feminism as a starting point for further research. In addition, the choice of the particular films for my case studies has been mainly governed by their suitability to the specific categories identified. While other films could be discussed in similar terms – as indicated by the inclusion of brief references to other films that could fit each category – I have tried to select cases that are most pertinent to the argument of each chapter both in terms of each particular film but also in terms of each director's trajectory in filmmaking.

Hopefully, then, a pattern emerges as to the layout of my thesis and the sequence of my chapters, which start with films that are connected more overtly with the distinctiveness of art cinema. Film movements, and in particular the ones I have chosen, usually define themselves by having a precarious relationship to the mainstream, and in some cases they are directly opposed to it. Meta-cinema is primarily associated with modernist and post-modernist aesthetics in terms of breaking the fourth wall, and once more it goes against conventional narrative usage and representational techniques of the mainstream, which usually privilege verisimilitude, suture and maintaining the illusionary aspect of cinema. It then moves on to aesthetics that borrow more elements from mainstream forms of filmmaking, such as documentary-like practices and genre films, thus further blurring the already porous boundaries between art cinema and the mainstream. This gradation will help to make clear the relationship between different filmmaking aesthetics and feminist issues as presented in the case studies. It will also prove useful in

observing the similarities and differences in such feminist pronouncements between films that share certain aesthetic principles across diverse national contexts.

In fulfilling one of the purposes of this study, which is to centralise women directors' position in the contemporary history of global art cinema, I study each film's cinematic context as well as each director's socio-political context and briefly refer to her whole oeuvre. However, by no means does the thesis make any claims to being an exhaustive film history of women directors in art cinema. There is definitely a historical perspective in my study, as seen in the first two chapters, but also in the sense that I am engaging in a brief contextual as well as textual analysis. Such an approach could be labelled as social film history, having as an ultimate goal to consider this particular cinematic field's value for feminism. As a result, ideological and aesthetic textual analysis of the films will be supplemented with any extra-textual information that is deemed relevant. In analysing how female directors voice feminist concerns through a negotiation of political and artistic preoccupations, the thesis aims to reclaim art cinema as a cultural field that brings the marginal closer to the mainstream and thus functions for feminism as the site of fruitful development and expansion to wider audiences of issues that were previously pushed into the margins of the avant-garde. This does not mean that even in this more open field of art cinema the path for women directors is easy. There is a constant need for persistence and determination for a woman in order to manage to make her films on her own terms, and it is tempting to see the last chapter's content as an allegory referring to the participation of women directors within filmmaking and film history in general. In other words, the focus and centralisation of the female characters within generic re-workings of traditionally male-dominated genres that certain female directors are seen to be concerned with is mirrored in the current study's intention to focus on the work of female directors within a predominantly male cultural and professional universe.

## Chapter 1

What Is *Art* Cinema?

Since its establishment as a distinct filmmaking context in the post World War II era, art cinema has proved an elusive term, which is evident by the difficulty in arriving at a clear-cut definition by the many scholars who have tackled the task. Whether it is understood as a genre, a film practice or an institution, or all of the above, seems to be a problem that concerns mostly critics and academics who have been interested in tracing the historical and aesthetic context of this field in an effort to differentiate it from the dominant Hollywood cinema and to account for films that do not seem to abide by its canons. Issues of taste, the status of high-art as opposed to low-art, industrial/commercial aspects – taking into account not only the production but also the distribution and exhibition side of the industry – will be tackled in seeking a set of defining characteristics of art cinema. Moreover, national cinemas and the more recent ideas relating to world cinema need to be addressed since, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith points out, there is a grey area in labelling certain films as art films in order to differentiate them from the mainstream, since many are “mainstream products in their country of origin, enjoying popular success at home before being sold abroad for more restricted 'art-house' release” (“Art” 567). Concomitantly, the implications of the existence of a worldwide network of prestigious film festivals as the site of exhibition and institutionalisation for these cinematic products will be considered as an industry that not only supports but also prescribes the need for this particular mode of cinema. The allocation of awards within these film festivals has already been briefly addressed in the introduction of the thesis in the way it functions to not only acknowledge the artistic merit of films, but also to reinforce certain directors' prestige within the field, which can be seen as a testimony to the celebration of certain 'masters' of cinema. However, as I have briefly touched upon,

more women directors have gained recognition within this area in comparison to the Academy Awards and it would be interesting to look at the rest of the festivals for further information on this. It is not a central concern of this study to concentrate specifically only on this aspect of art cinema but it is still important as one of the contributing factors for the shape of this distinct cinematic context.

The interaction among all these factors seems to me to be a kind of defining force behind any pronouncements towards a definition of art cinema, which is still present in the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite the fact that the actual term seems to be less widely used. As already mentioned in the introduction, the term art cinema seems to suggest a kind of pretentiousness through its association with more bourgeois tastes and the idea that 'higher' cognitive effort on the part of the audience is expected. These elitist connotations that tend to alienate more mainstream audiences, alongside art cinema's post World War II Eurocentric roots, have contributed to the gradual replacement of the term 'art cinema' by the terms 'world cinema' or 'independent cinema' that seem to be free from the negative connotations that art cinema bears. However, these new terms are more complex than they seem and certain issues that arise from their use will be dealt with in more detail later on in this chapter. However, at this point it should be mentioned that more recently there has been an attempt to combine the old and new terms as is evidenced by the title *Global Art Cinema*<sup>9</sup>, a collection of articles dealing with definitions of art cinema and several relevant debates, which could also be understood as a move to reclaim the term 'art cinema' as a meaningful category of cinematic practice while specifying its geographical expansion since the post-war years. It is within this revisionist attitude concerning art cinema that I will be basing my analyses of the case studies that will follow. I have carefully chosen to include films by directors working across a variety of geo-political contexts and looked at

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9 Galt, Rosalind and Karl Schoonover, eds. (see bibliography for full details)

how art cinema practices and aesthetics are a common thread that runs to varied degrees and effects through all the films under discussion.

Nowell-Smith is cautious in applying the term art cinema retrospectively to include pre-1980s films, and also makes a distinction between art cinema and international film<sup>10</sup> in terms of budget levels (567). This is a rather interesting point and the present thesis does take it on board to an extent, at least as far as it acknowledges the existence of art cinema as a distinct filmmaking arena. However, I would argue for the existence of more fluid groupings of films according to their budget that can be considered within art cinema and not impose a clear-cut distinction between art and international film. This is reflected in the consideration of the different categories within my case study chapters. Within this range I am looking at smaller and more 'local' films, such as *Open Hearts* (Bier, 2002), which in some cases and depending on several factors, marketing and director's profile for instance, travel well abroad even if they do not constitute major international films. Furthermore there are films that seem to straddle both worlds, such as Jane Campion's *In the Cut*, which due to a closer proximity to the mainstream Hollywood paradigm can obtain bigger budgets and compete in different ways within the global market. This indicates that in reality there is significant space for variation and fluctuation within this rather ambiguous filmmaking context. In addition, it is always tricky to apply such a constantly changing term retrospectively and especially in chapter 2 this could be considered an issue. However, I believe to have carefully selected a number of auteurs that are highly connected to the boom of what Nowell-Smith calls "the new art cinema" (567), roughly between 1960 and 1970. As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, the selection, instead of covering over the distinctive features each director brings to the floor and implying a greater coherence than the one film history can support, aims to do the exact opposite. I

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<sup>10</sup> Films that transcend their national borders due to high budgets, production make-up (transnational co-productions), etc., and are thus more similar to Hollywood products.

intend to foreground how each of these directors embodies a different relationship to art cinema yet how they all share several aesthetic and thematic concerns at least in their films of this particular period, especially as far as gender representations are concerned. Having clarified this, I would like to give due consideration to a number of definitions that have been given of art cinema in order to better illustrate the discourse surrounding the use of the term in the present study.

According to David Bordwell, the early film d'art in France, German Expressionism and French Impressionism can be considered as art cinema's cinematic predecessors. Bordwell places the birth of art cinema in the Post World War II era and acknowledges Hollywood's declining influence as the main factor for its establishment as a distinct film practice. He argues in favour of the existence of art cinema “as a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures” (“The Art” 94). Among the textual conventions that are commonly detected in art films there is an alternative narrative technique that defies the Aristotelian premise which governs narrative as can be seen in most classical Hollywood films. Narrative linearity, cause-effect relationships, character development and a clear-cut resolution that concludes the narrative and moral order of the plot, are part of the Aristotelian definition of narrative. Art films to a greater or lesser extent break these traditions by fragmenting the narrative through the use of inter-titles, flashbacks and flash-forwards, and by incorporating 'dream' sequences that are not easily perceived as such. A good example of this is *Belle de Jour* (1967) by Luis Buñuel, a director closely connected with French surrealism in the 1920s. Buñuel inserts dream sequences into the narrative sequence of the film without clearly marking them as such, and therefore the narration is destabilised, losing its reliability and opening up alternative narrative possibilities. This is just one example of how art films are seen to break formal

conventions present in mainstream cinema while at the same time using such narrative sequences to reveal the disturbed psychology, fears and obsessions of the characters and to foreground central thematic concerns.

Bordwell identified the recurrence of such characteristics common to many art films as pointing to the existence of a loosely unified film practice. The first characteristic that he detects is the rejection of the cause-effect linkage of events that is prevalent in classical narrative films. For Bordwell art films' narratives are rather motivated by "realism and authorial expressivity" ("The Art" 95). The realism of art film, as he goes on to explain, comes from the frequent use of real locations and the portrayal of real issues that preoccupy its contemporaneous society as well as the depiction of more "realistic – that is, psychologically complex characters" ("The Art" 95-96). On the other hand, Bordwell considers the subjectiveness of authorial expressivity as potentially contradictory to the realism that is established when he states that "a realistic aesthetic and an expressionist aesthetic are hard to merge" ("The Art" 98). The way this apparent contradiction is contained in art cinema is through ambiguity. Elsewhere he develops this argument concerning the relationship between authorship and narrative, stating that "[t]he marked self-consciousness of art-cinema narration creates both a coherent fabula world and an intermittently present but highly noticeable external authority through which we gain access to it" ("Authorship", 43). Bordwell suggests that when something cannot be explained through realism then one needs to seek the explanation in authorial motivation and he says that "the slogan of the art cinema might be, 'When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity'" ("The Art" 99). This could also point towards modernist ideas concerning the subjective and limited perception of reality. Therefore it could be said that art cinema combines issues of realism and subjectivity both in content but also in form – through the use of devices such as deep focus, the moving camera and the long take – while at the

same time it inscribes the authorial mark with the objective of providing an overall meaning and unifying the film text (“The Art” 97). This aspect of art cinema's narrative technique is crucial for my argument since this ambiguity destabilises any dogmatic elements of realism and its naturalising consequences, and inscribes the director's identity, gender being part of it, within the film and the way an audience is expected to interpret it. Of course this happens to varying degrees in different films and in the analyses of my case-study chapters I will attempt to highlight the way this happens along with its feminist reverberations.

Moreover, Bordwell identifies a common thematic in art cinema concerning “la condition humaine” (“The Art” 96), distinguishing it from classical film in terms of an interest in reaction rather than action. He adds that “in the art cinema, social forces become significant insofar as they impinge upon the psychologically sensitive individual” (“The Art” 97). Similarly William Siska underlines this divergence from mainstream practices by claiming that “[i]n the art film more than any other narrative genre, plot becomes subservient to theme, and character development is sacrificed to raising problems 'as problems'” (6). Another common feature among films that have been classified as art cinema, again identified by Bordwell, is the absence of a “clear-cut resolution” which he explains as follows: “the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and this art knows it” (“The Art” 99). This comment points to the significant self-awareness that can be observed in a large number of art films. Siska also detects this overt self-awareness and self-reflexivity of the medium in the way it inscribes the director within the filmic text, as one among certain key concepts of modernist perception like “point-of-view, relativity, subjectivity, [...] and open texture” (30) which are easily discernible in numerous art films. This attribute is quite important for the



purposes of the thesis, as mentioned previously, since it enables women to generate fascinating films which reflect on the image of women within the medium and I will return to a detailed discussion of self-reflexivity as illustrated by my case studies in chapter 4, which focuses precisely on meta-cinematic films. Similarly to the aforementioned studies on art cinema, Steve Neale finds common characteristics in art films that are “marked by a stress on visual style (an engagement of the look in terms of a marked individual point of view rather than in terms of institutionalised spectacle), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorisation of dramatic conflict” (“Art” 103). Thus the characteristics of art cinema, as detected by these scholars, point to its differentiation from the mainstream both in terms of form and subject matter, which opens up a space for a contestation of the dominant ideologies as well.

Considering all these points, it is rather obvious that art cinema was not only indebted to modernism, and later on postmodernism, but also that there is a notable influence from the wider post-War atmosphere in Europe and the popularity of existentialist philosophical thought. All these characteristics of art cinema's transgressions point to art cinema's appropriation of the wider modernist artistic movement, taking place towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Art cinema's self-awareness, which is evidenced not only in the way it foregrounds the cinematic apparatus but also through a manifest intertextuality, is another testimony to its appropriation of modernist and later postmodernist principles. References to other cinematic texts resemble inside jokes and are rather frequent, with directors paying homage to other directors. For instance, Jean-Luc Godard manages to insert in most of his new wave films such allusions not only to Hollywood tropes and icons but also direct references to other new wave films. This connection between modernism and art cinema is one of the bases for its differentiation

from the mainstream, which is indebted to more traditional artistic tendencies such as Hollywood realism and naturalism. Having in mind Johnston's argument against this type of realism, it is evident how such a transgressive and self-aware style would be of use to feminist filmmaking. The incorporation of modernist preoccupations led Siska to conceptualize art film as a distinct genre and he seems to align himself with Gerald Mast in arguing that

the postwar European cinema brought the movies into the mainstream of 'modernism', the key twentieth century movement that produced nonrepresentational paintings, atonal music, absurdist drama, and the stream-of-consciousness novel, and whose two tenets were the self-conscious questioning of all social and moral values and the self-conscious manipulations of the conventions of the art itself. (Siska 2)

Siska equates the modernist narrative to the art film genre but he suggests a potential problem of this association in saying that since the beginning of the modernist movement can be traced back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it thus roughly coincides chronologically with the birth of cinema, then it would be logical to assume that all film is modernist (4). However, I would disagree with this proposition, since modernist aesthetics might be manifest within mainstream cinema as well, but they are not as prevalent as in the case of art cinema.

The assimilation of the modernist aesthetics that Siska detected are clearly there as will be shown in the case studies that follow, but, especially when considering the subsequent post-modernist aesthetics that have been also appropriated by several art cinema directors, it becomes evident that modernism was a distinguishing feature of art films but not a core aspect of art cinema's definition. In addition, his quandary concerning

whether or not all cinema is modernist is understandable when thinking of the multiple factors at play during cinema's early years. However, I believe it is more the case that all cinema is a product of modernity, which according to Ben Singer, is “an extraordinarily expansive topic, encompassing an array of socioeconomic, cognitive, ideological, moral, and experiential issues” (1). Although there are no clear boundaries between this phenomenon and the more art-related modernism, and despite the undoubtable connection between the two, a distinction should be made in the sense that modernism as a set of aesthetic artistic concerns was part of the larger climate during the classical period of modernity and beyond, and cinema especially in its early and more mainstream Hollywood production is related to other sets of concerns from that period of modernity. To be more precise, as Singer points out, cinema was part of a larger industrialisation of entertainment during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was based on technological advancements, sensationalism and “vivid, action-packed, spectacle” (9). This is clearly not a way to describe an Antonioni film for example, and although technological improvements have of course benefited art cinema as well, it can be safely said that they are put to rather different uses than in the big-budget Hollywood industry. Thus, while all cinema was invented in this spirit of modernity, modernism as a set of artistic preoccupations can be traced primarily within art films, and despite the distinction between these two terms it should be noted that they are in constant dialogue with each other. This is also evident in Bordwell's distinction between art cinema and modernist film – an example of the latter being Godard's post-1968 cinematic oeuvre – when he suggests that “the art cinema represents the domestication of modernist filmmaking” (“The Art” 100). He therefore locates art cinema somewhere between Hollywood and modernist cinema, a contention that is accepted for the purposes of this thesis in which I argue for art cinema as the middle ground between mainstream and more experimental film practices.

Existentialism, the other major philosophical/artistic aesthetic that relates to art cinema, first appears in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, for instance in Dostoyevsky, and although it is a rather intricate set of ideas which changed significantly in the post-War era with Jean-Paul Sartre's work, for the purposes of this study I will refer to two of its principal characteristics that can be detected in the films from the directors I discuss in the following chapter. Firstly, the idea of the psychologically vulnerable individual, that I previously mentioned as art cinema's preferred character focus, is nothing else than a state of existential angst that the individual is expressing in relation to a futile existence. This is prevalent in some of Bergman's most iconic characters such as Dr. Isak Borg in *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and most notably in his Faith trilogy – *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1962) and *The Silence* (1963) – which tackles a major issue of existentialism, mainly religion and the existence of God. The preoccupation with God, mixed with a strong sense of irony is also evident in Buñuel's films, for instance in the depiction of Padre Nazario in *Nazarin* (1959) and Viridiana's character development in the 1961 film of the same name. Antonioni also presents us with individuals who experience a strong detachment from their environment and from 'normal' life in general, most notably with the portrayal of Giuliana in *Red Desert* (1961). Godard's appropriation of existentialist thought, as evidenced especially in his film *My Life to Live* (1962), seems to be reminiscent in particular of Sartre's thought, inspired in turn by phenomenology. When Nana in chapter 6 of the film says “we are responsible for whatever we do, we are free” it is a direct evocation of this type of philosophical thought. This philosophy, especially as pronounced by Simone de Beauvoir in relation to feminism<sup>11</sup>, is an important aspect of the esoteric and reflective quality of art cinema, which creates this type of “passionate detachment”, and thus the possibility for intellectual engagement as well. In other words it

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<sup>11</sup> *The Second Sex* (1949) is De Beauvoir's hugely influential book, which explores the link between sexuality and the oppression of women, and it is a central work on feminist existentialism.

is important how this way of thinking brings to the fore issues concerning agency and the philosophical exploration of identity while simultaneously contemplating the wider societal impact on the individual. It should therefore be clear how this philosophical context could relate to a feminist discourse, and in the following chapters I will proceed to point out how this emerges in the films I use as my case studies. Again I do not wish to imply that existentialist thought is exclusive to art cinema, but compared to the mainstream it is a lot more pronounced and it usually becomes central in the narrative progression of the character.

At another level, in considering the idea of a continuum, as mentioned earlier, between mainstream cinematic practices – Hollywood or not – and more experimental forms such as modernist cinema and the avant-garde, it is useful to look at the way a category of art cinema was established with respect to the distribution and exhibition of films in the post World War II era. Barbara Wilinsky looks at specific instances of Art House theatres in New York and Chicago during the post-war era, thus providing an insightful study on this aspect of art cinema that brings together the factors of social status, policies and legislation concerning film production, distribution and exhibition, and the emerging field of film criticism. As a result she reveals the complex interactions that formed the way art cinema was perceived at the time in the United States. She states that “art cinema can be seen as an alternative that allowed art film-goers to distinguish themselves from 'ordinary' filmgoers” mainly due to the more intellectual aspect of the film-going experience and the related “notions of high culture, art, and prestige” (3). In order to question the alternativeness of art cinema she cites Raymond Williams' definition of alternative culture, which is “that of someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it” (3). However, as Wilinsky points out, art cinema also has commercial aspirations and its alternativeness must be carefully regulated in order to

aim for the largest possible audience. To use Wilinsky's words, “[o]perating within the capitalist commercial film industry, art cinema is in constant negotiation with the mainstream cinema, a process that has ultimately shaped both cultures” (4). An example of this cross-fertilization can be found in Claude Chabrol's oeuvre where the influence of Alfred Hitchcock's directorial style is palpable. Art cinema, then, does not wholeheartedly reject Hollywood or mainstream practices but rather it creatively re-works them and therefore it is not that far removed from them. More importantly for this study one of the commonalities between art and mainstream cinema is the treatment of women on and off screen, as mentioned earlier.

Consequently there is a sense that art cinema created a niche for itself emphasising its more serious, intellectual aspect as opposed to light entertainment. Admittedly, notions like intellectuality and artiness can be quite subjective, so it is not an easy task to classify certain films as art cinema, especially when, as Wilinsky points out, terms such as art cinema and art film “are not static, but change over time” (6). Therefore it could be argued that what could be a distinct feature in art cinema is its contemplative nature alongside its entertaining possibilities, an attitude that is encouraged in its audience as well. Likewise Dudley Andrew addresses this ambition of post World War II art cinema to be regarded as art in the sense, not of “emulat[ing] the forms and functions of painting or drama, but [of] adopt[ing] the intensity of their creation and experience” (v). However, alongside its more sophisticated side, as I have already shown, art cinema retains its practical economic ambitions, which prompt Neale to remark that “Art Cinema has rarely disturbed or altered fundamentally the commodity-based structures, relations and practices of what it likes nevertheless to label the 'commercial' film industry” (“Art” 119). In other words, the existence of another industry pertaining specifically to art cinema, with specialist distributors, such as Artificial Eye in the U.K. and Film Movement in Canada, the

international festival circuit as a place both for exhibition and circulation but also for funding, and the journalism surrounding it, e.g. *Sight & Sound* and *Cahiers du Cinema*, attest to this other industry that exists parallel to the mainstream.

In concluding his article, Bordwell returns to the idea that art cinema is not a fixed and stable category of film practice, and through interacting with mainstream practices and more experimental ones, such as modernist filmmaking, it is constantly re-shaped and re-conceptualised. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover in acknowledging the “ability of the category to define an area of cultural, economic, and aesthetic meaning” (5), aim to embrace the notion of art cinema while at the same time updating the scope of its study. They also draw attention to the unreliability of the label 'art cinema' due to its “flexibility as a category” (3). This ambiguity is regarded as the fundamental feature of art cinema and consequently they define art cinema by its “impurity”(6). Their starting point in delineating the many interconnected factors that constitute art cinema is the following definition:

In common usage, “art cinema” describes feature-length narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental films and overtly commercial products. Typical (but not necessary) features include foreign production, overt engagement of the aesthetic, unrestrained formalism, and a mode of narration that is pleasurable but loosened from classical structures and distanced from its representations. (6)

This is the definition I am adopting as well, with one hesitation concerning art cinema's distance from classical representations. As I have already suggested and will proceed to discuss further in the following chapter, art cinema more often than not stays within certain

conventional patterns in terms of the representation of women at least. However, it does bear the potential to offer new models in this area as well, as is done by the female-authored films I am looking at for my study. Yet, what is of great importance in the ongoing dialogue concerning this field of cinematic activity is that more recently the idea of art cinema's European-ness and more generally its Western focus has been challenged. Especially with the relatively recent upsurge of films and directors working in non-European, non-Western contexts, the idea of the international character that has been attributed to art cinema so far has been interrogated. As has already been hinted at, art cinema is a term that has been largely replaced by the term world cinema and it seems that both terms are merged in the title of the book *Global Art Cinema* to talk about a contemporary art cinema that seems to have shifted its centre away from a dominant European centre. This is the cinematic context that all the women filmmakers chosen for this study seem to share, speaking in more or less nationally identifiable voices yet at the same time transcending their national boundaries. Such a geo-political opening up on the part of art cinema makes possible the inclusion and circulation of films by directors who have frequently been marginalised both due to their gender and their national contexts.

Art cinema therefore could be described as a common forum for various heterogeneous film practices that share similar concerns. As a result, it is pertinent in trying to locate art cinema, to address the issue of its relationship to national cinemas, since several national cinemas tend to be wrongly equated with art cinema in general. This is probably an outcome of a given country's reputation in this filmmaking context due to certain film movements, such as the French New Wave and Italian Neo-realism that get particular exposure outside its geographical boundaries. However, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between national cinema and the sub-category of art film production within a given national context. This compelling issue will resurface in the



discussion that follows but first there is another pressing matter that needs to be explored, namely the relationship between art cinema and auteur theory.

#### A Cinema of Auteurs?

The idea of authorship and the role of the director as a unifying presence in the film's subjectivity, on whose identity the aesthetics and marketability of a given film are ultimately concentrated, seem to constitute one of the cornerstones of art cinema. In the preceding discussion on the definition of art cinema, the authorial presence has been frequently mentioned as one of its common features. Most importantly, the self-reflexivity of art films points to the subjectivity of the creator unveiling the cinematic practice, commenting directly or indirectly on the tradition of cinema and rendering the filmic product personal. One such example of self-reflexivity can be discerned in Chabrol's *La Femme Infidèle* (1969), where in a scene there is a panoramic view of a Parisian street in which one of the shops' titles is "Biches", making a clear reference to his previous film *Les Biches* (1968). In foregrounding the commercial aspect of the auteur film-product and the alternative industry that is built around art cinema, Bordwell draws attention to the fact that "[a] small industry is devoted to informing viewers of such authorial marks", which consists of "[i]nternational film festivals, reviews and essays in the press, published scripts, film series, career retrospectives, and film education" ("The Art" 97-98). The theory of authorship originates in France with the publication of François Truffaut's – soon to become one of France's most recognised auteurs of the Nouvelle Vague – "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" in 1954. Barry Keith Grant locates this idea that "the camera would function like a pen for a writer" (2) further back in French cinema history, mentioning Alexandre Astruc's article "The Birth of the Avant Garde: Le Caméra Stylo" (1948). Yet it was in the 1950s that the discussion started taking precedence through the *Cahier* critics and it was further established as a theory in the 1960s, when it crossed the

Atlantic and was further developed by Andrew Sarris.

Truffaut in the aforementioned article introduced auteur theory as a way of criticising a “Tradition of Quality” in French cinema that did not have the artistic value it was presumed to have, arguing in favour of directors with a personal vision and original scripts. He was thus challenging prevailing ideas about art and taste within mainstream French cinema. As a result, Truffaut and his *Cahier* colleagues were instrumental in building the groundwork for auteurism and launching one of the first film movements to be closely connected to art cinema practices, namely the French New Wave. Richard Neupert describes these directors as “Young Turks” for being “bold critics adhering for the most part to a strong belief in auteur criticism, the notion that directors were the creative equivalents of novelists and should be evaluated for how their own morality and mise-en-scène shape their films” (45-46). In a way, therefore, it could be argued that these critics/directors self-promoted themselves, creating a theoretical argument for the role of film directors that they would subsequently proceed to represent. However, this should by no means overshadow the importance of both the French New Wave and auteur theory for the history of world cinema, since it not only created positive opportunities for other more peripheral (to the movement) directors, like Agnès Varda, but also helped legitimise the study of film as an academic field. As Neupert mentions, “[w]hile Varda does not like being considered as a 'precursor' to the New Wave, she admits that it was thanks to the successes of Truffaut, Chabrol, Godard and others that she could interest Georges de Beauregard in helping produce *Cléo from 5 to 7*”(49). In addition, she was acknowledged by André Bazin as “a new, young auteur, which gave her film [*La Pointe Courte* (1956)] – and Resnais' editing work on it – new attention from the other future directors” (Neupert 49). It can therefore be argued that this revisionist attitude of certain film movements like the French New Wave that are encompassed within the category of art cinema creates

alternative spaces which women directors can infiltrate. This issue is further addressed in greater detail in chapter 3 where I am looking at two cases of more contemporary film movements – mainly Dogme 95 and New Argentine Cinema – and the way that women directors and their individual films operate within them. Yet before that and as a transition point between the following chapter and chapter 3, I will proceed to discuss Varda's New Wave contribution in more detail and suggest how her aforementioned film is situated in a creative symbiosis with its cinematic context while rejecting widely employed gender stereotyping.

Truffaut's initial pronouncement of auteurist ideas was greeted with caution by André Bazin who, in his article “De la Politique des Auteurs” (1957), pointed to the lack of valid theoretical criteria that would allow for the categorization of directors as auteurs or otherwise. He also considered the study of a film or body of films in isolation, disregarding the production context, to be a limiting point of view for a film critic to adopt. He astutely remarked that “it is not even true of the most individual artistic disciplines that genius is free and always self-dependent”, while rhetorically asking: “what is genius anyway if not a certain combination of unquestionably personal talents, a gift from the fairies, and a moment in history?” (22). Andrew Sarris, auteur theory's most adamant proclaimer, was to dismiss Bazin's position as “upholding historical determinism” (“Notes” 39) and to argue that “[i]f directors and other artists cannot be wrenched from their historical environments, aesthetics is reduced to a subordinate branch of ethnography” (“Notes” 40). It can therefore be argued that the theory of authorship, especially in its strictest version, is based on arbitrary assumptions, homogenizing the circumstances of artistic creation and raising them to a pedestal of awe and mysticism. Despite Sarris' attempt to construct a theoretical edifice for distinguishing auteurs from metteurs en scène, Pauline Kael with her article “Circles and Squares” (1963) proceeded to

demolish it, saying that “if, in order to judge movies, the auteur critics must wrench the directors from their historical environments (which is, to put it mildly, impossible) so that they can concentrate on the detection of that 'elan', they are reducing aesthetics to a form of idiocy” (51). Despite all of these problems and feuds between film critics as to the importance and the validity of auteur theory, Barry Keith Grant crystallizes its significance by saying that “auteurism's great legacy is that it encouraged a more serious examination of the movies beyond mere 'entertainment' and helped move the nascent field of film studies beyond its literary beginnings to a consideration of film's visual qualities” (5). It is in this aspect of auteur theory's value, in reaching beyond entertainment and legitimising film as a more serious artistic creation, that its strong connection with art cinema can be located. In turn there is a need to highlight the importance of auteur theory's value for women directors. As Janet Staiger astutely remarks, acquiring auteur status is of utmost importance especially for directors occupying marginal positions, for whom “asserting even a partial agency may seem to be important for day-to-day survival or where locating moments of alternative practice takes away the naturalized privileges of normativity” (qtd. in Galt 8). Working within art cinema therefore can potentially prove highly beneficial for women directors who can find a field, in which they can express alternative viewpoints and after the struggle for recognition in this still commercial field, in which they can claim their right as auteurs.

During the 1970s the basic premises of auteur theory were revised in the writings of Peter Wollen and V.F. Perkins. These writers conceded that most of the time “the director does not have full control over his[/her] work” (Wollen 63), that “a film is the result of a multiplicity of factors, the sum total of a number of different contributions” (Wollen 64) and that “[u]nless one has watched the planning and making of a picture, it is impossible to know precisely who contributed each idea or effect to the finished movie” (Perkins 68). In

addition to this criticism, the auteur theory in its earliest formulations can be considered as sexist in not even considering the possibility of having a female director in central control of a film production. Even though the number of active female directors was in no way comparable to that of men, it is quite noticeable that even in the more abstract and theoretical formulations of authorship the gender of the director is always presupposed as male. Taking as an example Sarris' influential publication, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968), auteurist discourse has systematically excluded women directors, an issue detected by editors of *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (1977). In this volume Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary asked Sarris to maybe reconsider his stance regarding this issue, and his contribution was a short article entitled "The Ladies' Auxiliary, 1976". Therein Sarris remains more or less stable in his earlier contempt for the work of women directors, predicting that "[t]here will undoubtedly be more woman directors in the future, partly because of the self-conscious thrust of feminism, and partly because of the ever-increasing glamorization of the role of the director in auteurist criticism" ("The Ladies" 386). However, he expresses his reserve as to "how many women will ever be able to sustain their careers on a regular basis for as much as a decade" (386) and ends with the suggestion to maybe look to television "for the emergence of female talent and a feminist viewpoint" ("The Ladies" 387). This type of hostility is typical of the attitude women directors have had to face within the industry and to an extent, even if less pronounced, it still holds true. As mentioned in the introduction, Claire Johnston challenged the masculinist view of authorship, a path followed by other notable feminist film scholars such as Judith Mayne. More recently, Angela Martin draws attention to the neglect of film studies as a discipline towards films made by women, and even more to the marginal position of women filmmakers as far as issues of authorship are concerned. According to Martin, when authorship is applied to the work by female

directors there seems to be an insistence to their gender and, as she remarks, “female or feminist authorship tends to be sought in what can be identifiably linked to the filmmaker (as woman)” (130). Therefore there seems to be a deeply ingrained prejudice against women acquiring the role of the film director and even when they do they do not get an equal amount of acknowledgment and prestige compared to male directors.

The issue of gender and authorship will be directly addressed in more detail in chapter 4, in terms of the way art cinema's meta-cinematic and self-reflexive character allows the director to comment on the filmmaking process itself and, in the case of the two films, foreground the problems that her gender in particular raises in relation to the power dynamics within this professional space. Taking this gender inequality as presented by attitudes within auteur theory, and the issue of the collaborative aspect of filmmaking, it seems that more recent film criticism of an auteurist perspective diminishes women directors' claim to authorial status. In an interview, Sally Potter points to the fact that all directors collaborate but no one seems to think about this when it comes to male directors, and she claims that “maybe female directors are more willing to give credit to the people that they work with because women know that there is an enormous amount of invisible labour involved in cinema, and women historically have usually done the invisible work in the home and the workplace” (Mayer 140). Thus it seems that women directors have been undermined both by auteurism's initial dismissal of their work but also by its decline, since nowadays auteur criticism is more or less a thing of the past for film studies. This way they have missed that window of opportunity to gain respectability and equality within this field, at least as far as mainstream cinema and more current concerns in film studies are concerned. However, when it comes to art cinema it could still be argued that it remains the territory of auteurs, an indication of which is Cannes' and other film festivals' recognition of the director in awarding him/her the award for Best Film instead of giving it

to the producer, as at the Oscars, and to both producer and director, as at the BAFTAs. In addition, the amount of academic work around figures such as Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman and other directors who have acquired the status of auteur within art cinema, and the availability of such directors' work on dvd on box-sets that try to encompass a given director's whole oeuvre, or at least its most significant part, demonstrates that the director still operates as the unifying figure of film production in this context.

In emphasizing the importance of the authorial signature of the director in art cinema, Bordwell writes that “[l]acking identifiable stars and familiar genres, the art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text” (“The Art” 97). This statement could probably apply to specific movements within art cinema such as films belonging to Italian Neo-realism and New Iranian cinema where most of the actors are non-professionals. However, in the French New Wave there are instances like the actor Jean Paul Belmondo and Jeanne Moreau who easily cross between art and mainstream practices. This way art cinema can use the possible marketability of the particular actor/actress but also the actor/actress acquires the status of 'seriousness', having worked with a recognized auteur of art cinema. This practice has become quite common in more contemporary art cinema as well, with, for example, Nicole Kidman starring in Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), Tom Cruise in *Magnolia* (1999) and Cate Blanchett in *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). Consequently it might not be the case that the casting of stars is as much a prerequisite for art cinema as it is for the mainstream, since the director becomes the primary star persona for the marketability of an art film, but it has been an equally valuable point of convergence in the commercial aspirations of both practices. As I will demonstrate in the last chapter of the thesis, within art cinema stars can be used both in a straightforward manner, similar to the mainstream, but also in a self-conscious way that jars with a given star's prior star persona and opens up a space to reflect on type-casting in

relation to gender stereotypes. Similarly, going back to Bordwell's statement concerning the lack of familiar genres within art cinema, I will proceed to demonstrate in the last chapter how genre is still used to a great extent within art cinema. The self-conscious reworking of certain Hollywood genres in New Wave films, e.g. *Band of Outsiders* (J.-L. Godard, 1964), shows a more intricate relationship between mainstream narrative genre and art cinema practices than Bordwell would allow for. It could therefore be argued that these aspects that are more frequently found in mainstream cinematic practices are still present in the art film in view of its commercial aspirations, without causing films to lose their 'artistic' status and their strong authorial mark.

Neale also acknowledges the importance of the author in art films, emphasising its commercial potential, when he says that “the mark of the author is used as a kind of brand name, to mark and to sell the filmic product” (“Art” 105). This is a similar idea to Bordwell’s view of an industry that exists to inform spectators of authorial marks and promote particular directors. This way Neale reaches the conclusion that art cinema and the discourse that surrounds it “erects a false distinction between commerce and culture” (“Art” 108) and his argument is instrumental in bridging the conceptual divide between art and mainstream practices. My position is rather sympathetic to this while at the same time acknowledging the existence of certain differentiating characteristics that I have developed earlier in this section. It is in this closeness yet by no means equation of the two practices that I find art cinema's value as an effective space for women to develop a sustained critique of dominant modes and motifs while still aiming for the establishment of a commercially viable career. Having discussed this issue of authorship and the commercial aspirations of art cinema I would now like to turn to the discussion of art cinema's transnational nature and its value for my study. In the section that follows I will foreground the way art cinema transcends national boundaries, through the systematic



circulation of art films within the circuit of international film festivals and the exhibition network of art houses, while commenting on some of the most prominent issues arising from this.

### Negotiating the National with the Transnational

Taking note of the emphasis placed on art cinema's differentiation from Hollywood and the cultural value art films are seen to embody, Steve Neale refers to art cinema as "the space in which an indigenous cinema can develop and make its critical and economic mark" ("Art" 104). This is true in most film movements since the immediate post-war years, which have drawn attention to a strand of cinematic production within diverse national filmmaking contexts, such as Italian Neo-realism, the French New Wave and other new waves in Europe and beyond, for instance Iran and Latin America. Neale mentions the case of the French New Wave, which specifically grew out of an urgency, postulated by the *Cahier du Cinema* critics, as mentioned earlier, to re-create their national cinema, creatively incorporating elements of Hollywood style ("Art" 108). As this suggests, the need to define national cinemas and assess the extent to which they can be considered within an art film context must be addressed.

Andrew Higson, in his article "The Concept of National Cinema", considers the different possible aspects of cinematic activity to which the term national cinema can refer. There is the aspect of production, in which case the term refers to "the domestic film industry" (52), the content of the films and the way they evoke national issues, and the aspect of the exhibition and audience consumption of films in a particular nation. However, and quite significantly for the present study, there is also a way in which critics form particular national cinemas by "reduc[ing] national cinema to the terms of a quality art cinema, a culturally worthy cinema steeped in the high-cultural and/or modernist heritage of a particular nation-state, rather than one that appeals to the desires and fantasies

of the popular audiences” (53). An example of this is the British New Wave and the way critics have *a posteriori* privileged its position within national cinematic production at the time. This issue will be addressed in chapter 5 in relation to the tradition of British social realism and its precarious relationship with art cinema. For the moment I would like to stress the idea that art cinema does not necessarily have a pragmatic connection to national cinema in the sense of the representative cinematic production or consumption within a nation, but in certain cases it seems to be consciously privileged due to its cultural prestige. This is also underlined by Alan Williams when he says that art cinema is “usually *self-consciously* national”, arguing that “[t]he ideal film festival success, [...], is a work which goes against the grain of its 'own' national cinema or national state apparatus”, referring to “films banned, denounced, or commercially discouraged in their domestic markets” (18). An example is New Iranian Cinema, which despite being clearly grounded in its national context in terms of the content of the films and the national issues portrayed therein, is not popular within its national boundaries and the authorities have confronted it with hostility.

It is therefore quite obvious from these accounts that the concept and definition of a national cinema, especially its relationship with art cinema, is more complex than it may initially seem. Stephen Crofts detects seven varieties of 'national cinema' according to their relationship with Hollywood. I would argue that art cinema can be located in the first category which includes “cinemas that differ from Hollywood, but do not compete directly, by targeting a distinct specialist market sector” (27) since it seems to be the case, as it has been argued earlier, that at least a part of art cinema has created a niche for itself without fundamentally opposing Hollywood. As Crofts goes on to argue, there is a sense in which art films seem to encourage an “assertion at home and abroad of national cultural identity”, and he points to “the frequent literary sources and tendencies in this European model of national cinema” (28). As will be shown later in the case studies, all the films

considered in the thesis are conjuring up national markers, like these, which could be read as an effort to differentiate themselves within the film market but also tell specific stories about specific geo-political contexts. The European-ness of art cinema is picked up by James Chapman, who states that art cinema “is most commonly associated with European cinemas, where it is manifested in national film movements such as the avant-garde traditions of the 1920s and the 'new wave' cinemas of the 1960s” (42). However, he adds that there are instances of art cinema beyond Europe, mentioning the Australian period film and the Indian art cinema of Satyajit Ray as a couple of examples (42). At this point he makes an interesting remark concerning the unstable categorisation of certain films that in their country of production are regarded as mainstream whereas in foreign countries they cross over to art cinema territory (43). One of the factors that can possibly account for this cross-over is the important role these films might have in enriching cultural representations and providing a new perspective within cinema in the global market. This indicates that not only, as explained in the previous paragraph, can a limited number of art films falsely come to represent a given country's dominant national cinema abroad, but also that films considered rather mainstream within their national contexts may gain in cultural value when traveling beyond their national boundaries.

Chapman points out that national cinemas emerged around the time of the First World War. He mentions Sweden as one of the pioneering countries to create a strong national cinema and pose an 'alternative' to Hollywood's international supremacy at this time (79). Therefore there is a sense in which cinema is used for political reasons, in order to create and promote a national image and culture. However, before World War I there was an atmosphere of cooperation among certain European countries, mainly Germany, France and the UK, that formed the 'Film Europe' movement in an effort to combine forces and better compete with American cinematic domination (Chapman 46). These co-

productions contributed to blurring the boundaries between national cinemas and making film a form of cultural exchange. Whereas certain stylistic movements, like German Expressionism for example, clearly originated in a particular national context, they were quickly dispersed beyond national borders and became shared cultural arenas. With the arrival of sound, however, things became more complicated and as Chapman notes, its main impact was “to accelerate the trend towards the emergence of national cinemas” (93). Audiences in a particular country would naturally privilege the experience of watching a film in their own language and the particular political regimes across Europe at the time could manipulate this preference to their advantage. Neale gives the example of Italy, where “during the fascist period, state intervention overall was clearly linked to a wish to produce a national (indeed nationalist) cinema marked by specific ideological and artistic features” (“Art” 112). The case of Italian neo-realism is interesting since it was both encouraged by the state, and linked to political organisations, and had a great appeal on an international level. However, as Neale notes, in 1949 neo-realism fell into disfavour with the state, both due to its “lack of commercial potential” and for its “political overtones” (“Art” 113). From these examples it is evident that the value of cinema for emphasising national and political concerns had slowly started being acknowledged from an early period. Yet this policy became even more intense after World War II when “state support became firmly linked to the promotion and development of national Art Cinemas under the aegis of liberal-democratic and social democratic governments and under the pressure of the presence of America and Hollywood in Europe” (Neale, “Art” 115). This support consisted mostly of certain laws that limited the import of American films and promoted the development and export of indigenous products, and for this reason the different national cinemas had to ensure their world-wide appeal.

In achieving such a balance between the national and the international or

transnational, Neale explains that the category of art cinema came to function as a kind of melting pot, accommodating films that despite the national specificity of the circumstances of their production retain their marketability across the world (“Art” 117). In other words “art cinema has been a way to organize national cinemas via canons of 'great directors,' so that the very international reception of art cinema becomes proof of its national importance” (Galt 7). Not all national cinemas are recognised as art cinema and there are several instances of regional, mainstream film production, such as Greek cinema especially during the 1950s and 1960s. These might enjoy a wide appeal within their national boundaries, yet they do not travel beyond or they have a limited appeal depending on the strength of the domestic film industry and the possibility of attracting audiences abroad, which in the case of Greek cinema is very limited but in the case of Bollywood, for example, is far more extensive. Yet, in attributing the label of art cinema to a particular trend within a national cinema, especially one outside the Western European kernel, things become more complicated. This is not always related to the artistic value of the films, but it is mostly a matter of politics relating to financial opportunities that indigenous film industries can profit from. In addition, their recognition depends on the gatekeepers of art cinema, namely the numerous international film festivals and film critics. Neale elucidates this point further when he says:

Art Cinema also, in its cultural and aesthetic aspirations, relies heavily upon an appeal to the 'universal' values of culture and art. And this is very much reflected in the existence of international film festivals, where international distribution is sought for these films, and where their status as 'Art' is confirmed and re-stated through the existence of prizes and awards, themselves neatly balancing the criteria of artistic merit and commercial potential. (“Art” 118)

Such a relationship between art cinema and the film festival circuit works both ways in legitimising each other's existence. As Azadeh Farahmand points out, “film festivals have historically distinguished themselves, and thereby self-identified as offering a space for discovery, display, and artistic evaluation of films from around the world” (266). At the same time Farahmand comments on the festivals' political and financial side that remains quite obscure to the public. In addition she argues that “festivals typically pay special attention to films that have escaped local censorship – thereby enhancing the perceived festival image as the forum to display the authentic local reality otherwise filtered by government censorship” (266). In this case it can be observed that a strand of national cinema with art cinema aspirations may not enjoy as much recognition in its home country, as has been noted above, and even be regarded with suspicion for creating and circulating an undesirable image of the nation. On this subject Farahmand notes that “[f]ilmmakers from nations or regions that become festival darlings are often criticized for attempts to adjust the look and narratives of their films to offer selectable and prizeworthy products to festivals” (276). A very interesting example of this precarious relationship between art cinema and national issues is the contemporary Iranian cinema, and it does not come as a surprise that many of its representatives who have been involved in international film festivals have had either to flee the country or face serious problems with the local authorities.

Despite this friction between nation and art cinema in some cases, the recognition of certain films in festivals creates the impetus for the creation of new cinematic production that would be accepted in this artistic circle, thus gaining the potential of a wider commercial success. Indeed the festivals themselves are seeking to discover new areas of potential expansion outside the confines of Europe. David Andrews highlights this by saying that in order to apply the label art cinema it is necessary to “identify a value-

generating institution within which a given movie or group of movies has operated in a sensible way” (71). These institutions can be film festivals, as mentioned above, art houses or other recognisable 'art authorities' like the BFI that can give the art-cinema brand to a filmic product. These criteria appear to be quite loose but they seem to have a pragmatic relevance in the situation of contemporary art cinema. More specifically Farahmand mentions the growing operations of the film festival circuit in the areas of “production, marketing, and distribution of films” and consequently conceptualizes festivals as “loci of artistic exchange and business collaboration in which films (either in a primitive or finished stage) seek and often find distribution deals” (267). It seems therefore that the festival circuit, having established an industry around art cinema and expanded beyond its original cultural centre, namely Western Europe, has contributed to the formation of the cinematic category 'global art cinema' which in turn brings to the fore ideological issues concerning cultural imperialism, globalization and the postcolonial discourse.

In considering the resonance of the term 'global' in the title of their book, Galt and Schoonover claim that it can either “enable the postcolonial revision of canons” or “suggest a cosmopolitanism that looks usefully beyond the scope of the nation, or less usefully, erases material and political boundaries” and they underline that the word 'world' in this instance “does not mean the whole world but those areas outside of Europe and North America” (11). Without intending to weaken this argument, it is noteworthy that in the packaging of certain dvds, French films by Eric Rohmer for example are categorised as world cinema while in on-line dvd stores under the category of world cinema it is possible to find films made in a variety of countries among which the USA is not included. This points to the persistent division of cinematic production between American films, mainstream or independent, and the rest of the world. Yet as Randall Halle points out, there is still a sense in which Western European countries hold supremacy within this

'world cinema' space of cinematic production. The existence of "a market for films that tell the tales of foreign cultures and distant peoples" (Halle 304) encouraged the industry surrounding art cinema to invest in the expansion of its geographic scope. In relation to films from European countries, especially the ones that belong in the European Union, there has been a tendency to conceptualize them according to a common European experience, thus strengthening the cultural bonds inside Europe. Whereas films that are co-produced with countries outside Europe aim to appear as illuminating cultural differences, supplying audiences with the element of novelty. Here, according to Halle, lies the risk of orientalism in that these co-productions are "offering Euro-American audiences tales they want to hear, about people fundamentally different from themselves, keeping as distant strangers people who live around the corner or down the hall" (304). Using Iranian cinema once more as an example, at one level there is the potential of showing films that demonstrate the overt political oppression in Iran, enlarging the gap between eastern 'reality' and the western perception of it. Eurimages and the MEDIA program of the EU are focused on such co-productions serving an ideological purpose in "the promotion of Europeanist transnationalism" (Halle 305). In challenging Hollywood, it would seem therefore that European Cinema, having appropriated the status of art cinema, is trying to dominate the global cinematic space, perhaps being less monolithic than Hollywood but still quite imperialist in its practice. Halle identifies three practices of transnational coproduction; the transnational approach, which transcends national boundaries in terms of production in casting for example actors that belong to various national backgrounds (306); the transnational scenario approach, which "establish[es] a transnational space of cultural contact where [the] characters represent national or cultural types" (307); and the quasi-national approach in which "national tales are told from 'non-national' perspectives" (308). All three approaches involve potential problems in using non-native stars for box-



office appeal and in stereotyping particular ethnic groups. Yet according to Halle the greatest problem is encountered in the third category since “[t]he quasi-national film, [...], establishes a narrative that focuses on a unique and nationally homogeneous setting, thereby masking the complexity of its economic base” (309). In other words this third instance of co-production contains a threat of cultural imperialism passing unnoticed to audiences. Hence, Western European countries would invest in a film that could prove profitable in the primary area of their activity while monitoring the ideological issues that are presented therein. It can therefore be argued that although art cinema has proven more open to representations of marginal subjectivities and has expanded its geographical frontiers from its former Western European core, the national and international aspects are carefully regulated in forming the politics of its ambiguous place between wider mainstream commercial and experimental avant-garde film production.

#### Towards a Conclusion...

As Galt and Schoonover effectively put it: “Art cinema is both an aesthetic category – involved in broadly constituted debates on realism, modernism, the image, and its implications – and a geopolitical category, bound up in modernity and the traumas of twentieth-century history” (20). One of those historical traumas that has a variable pan-national character is the exclusion or marginalisation of women filmmakers. Quite tellingly in most of the texts that I have consulted there is a recurrence of specific names of directors that seem to represent art cinema, with women directors excluded, apart from Neale's brief mention of Germaine Dulac in his discussion of pre-war French cinema. As I have argued, this notable absence can be attributed to art cinema's close association with ideas of authorship and the difficulty with which women directors acquire auteur status. For instance, names like Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut have become synonymous with the French New Wave while Agnès Varda, though one of the first

directors to make films in this style, has not enjoyed the critical and scholarly attention her longstanding filmmaking career would justify. Joan Mellen, as mentioned in my introduction, draws attention to this aspect of art cinema as a male universe, going so far as to suggest that even films made by women have not succeeded in breaking away from the existing values.

However, since the 1970s there has been a significant amount of change both in terms of more female directors becoming active in the filmmaking business and claiming authorial status. At the same time gender representations, both in the mainstream and within the art cinema context, have gradually become more complex, adhering less to the binary of gender stereotyping. This discussion of gender representations within art cinema over the years will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter. What should be highlighted at this point is that art cinema's intrinsic connection to realist aesthetics “continue[s] to grant priority to the downtrodden, the underdog, and the abjected members of human communities”, carrying as “a moral prerogative the representation of the underrepresented” (Galt 15). Based on this it can prove a useful springboard for women directors from all over the world to enter the industry and offer their point of view from the marginal positions they have been compelled to occupy. As has been noted above, “art cinema might refer to an imperialist flattening out of differences as easily as it identifies sites of resistance” (Galt 20) and it will be shown that it is the latter case which the films under discussion in this thesis stand for. The liminal spaces that are created due to art cinema's policed controversiality can provide a fertile ground for new representations, breaking with the still dominant patriarchal paradigms as exemplified by Hollywood production, and Maria San Filippo, in her article “Unthinking Heterocentrism: Bisexual Representability in Art Cinema, celebrates this potential for differential sexual representations within this cinematic field. Similarly, the present thesis recognises art

cinema “as a category of cinema, [that] brings categories into question and holds the potential to open up spaces between and outside of mainstream/avant-garde, local/cosmopolitan, history/theory, and industrial/formal debates in film scholarship” (Galt 9). Stemming from this conviction, the chapters that follow will bring to the fore the diversity of women filmmakers' cinematic production within this field, looking both at the textual and extra-textual elements that contribute to the final product and evaluating the contribution to feminist interests as they can be read within each case.

## Chapter 2

### Cherchez la Femme: Female Representations in Art Cinema

Following on from the previous chapter, which outlined the main characteristics and debates pertaining to art cinema, I now move to a more specific discussion of the representation of women in art film. The thesis is premised on the view that there is a significant difference in how gender identities and issues are constructed and presented in art films as compared to the mainstream. Art cinema, since the postwar years when it started to attract greater cultural visibility and critical attention, became notorious for pushing the boundaries in “exploring the more sophisticated avenues of [woman's] sensual existence” (Haskell, *From Reverence* 284) and being more daring than Hollywood both formally and thematically. This tendency includes a more direct exploration and depiction of sexuality as well as more complex gender identities than the more stereotypical ones showcased until then within classical Hollywood for example. As Molly Haskell contends, “[t]he products of a more feminized culture to begin with, European directors are at ease in what American artists disparagingly dismiss as a 'woman's world'" and are therefore seen “as a running antidote to Hollywood in its more repressive phases” (*From Reverence* 284-5). Her description of European culture as feminised is problematic in that it reinforces a kind of binary gender reasoning. What seems to motivate this statement is an apparent lack in European cinema, compared to Hollywood, of traditionally male, action packed genres and roles. Consequently directors focused on women in less macho settings, which to the eyes of an American film critic might look feminised.

Admittedly art cinema aesthetics and preoccupations provided a breath of fresh air in this respect, yet I would argue that the gender representations and especially the female ones that can be found in canonical art films were not as progressive as they might seem. This chapter will focus on the analysis of some notable examples from films by some of

the most representative art cinema auteurs, including Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard and Luis Buñuel. As mentioned in my introduction, the restriction to these four directors is a necessary, practical choice for the thesis. However, the fact that their work is quite distinct, in that each comes from a different background but all are closely associated with art cinema at its peak, can justify this limited sample as theirs are some of the most representative films within art cinema between roughly the late 1950s and early 1970s. In turn this discussion can shed some light regarding the main argument of this chapter, which is that in terms of their female representations these films do not break with the more conservative traditions of their contemporaries in the mainstream. All four directors focus on female characters to the extent that especially Bergman and Antonioni have been considered as “women's directors”. This chapter will explore the arbitrariness and even absurdity of such characterisations by looking at key texts in their work and showing the problems of the female representations therein. As a litmus test to my argument I will look at the gender representations and issues as presented by two women directors from the same period, analysing Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). The aim is to illustrate the extent to which art cinema has been a male universe for many years, while indicating that with the increase of women directors active in the field at the moment, there are signs of a significant shift. This argument will be further developed in the chapters that follow, which deal with particular case studies of films by contemporary women directors.

#### Women under scrutiny: The centralisation of female characters in key art cinema texts

Judging from the subordinate position of women in history around the world, which is not always manifested to the same extent in different societies but is nevertheless a

characteristic more or less universally shared throughout the history of humankind among a variety of social structures, it is not surprising that there is a notable under-representation, absence or stereotypical representation of women in cinema. Simone de Beauvoir very acutely remarks that the “representation of the world...is the work of men” and is therefore filtered through “their own point of view” while at the same time being equated “with absolute truth” (qtd. in McCabe 4). Cultural representations such as the ones found in cinema are not just portraying the “reality” of the time and space they are produced in, but they construct and recycle certain tropes and themes which reinforce that perceived “reality”. To use McCabe's words, “[i]mages do not simply reflect the social world but are ideological signifiers” (10). Based on this premise the first part of this chapter looks at some key art films that in the past have been applauded for their focus on female characters in an effort to indicate that although their contribution in including women as central characters has been a significant change from the past, they nevertheless constitute an array of highly problematic and stereotypical feminine portrayals.

Up until the emergence of what was to be called 'Italian Neorealism', which is one of the first film movements to be closely associated with the notion of art cinema, it can be argued that women were rarely centralised in films and generally their portrayals were hugely problematic and conservative. Even with the films that belong to Italian Neorealism the situation remains largely the same and although they were pioneering films in terms of portraying sexuality more explicitly and thus creating quite a stir, especially when exhibited in front of foreign (i.e. North American) audiences, women still function as marginalised figures that are merely present to interact with the male characters and they remain significantly undeveloped throughout the film's narrative. Admittedly, as Peter Bondanella states, “Italian neorealism always sought to develop stories that reflected the burning social questions of the immediate postwar period” (34) but it is quickly noticeable

that women's oppression within patriarchy was not one of these “burning” issues. Michelangelo Antonioni was forged as a director and artist within this climate in Italian cinema but he also departs from certain neorealist techniques. According to Pierre Leprohon he “was the first to apply neorealist concepts in a middle-class setting” (27) and he is referred to as “a woman's director” (30) along with Ingmar Bergman. Bergman is quite notorious for being an “actors' director”, in other words for managing to get the most of his actors'/actresses' performances. His numerous memorable characters are female in their majority and it is tempting to consider these representations while at the same time pondering on the director's off screen relationship with the actresses who impersonate them. Jean Luc Godard was an established film critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* and a founding member of the Nouvelle Vague in France. And last but not least, Luis Buñuel has been largely associated with art cinema through his association with French surrealism since the beginning of his career in the late 1920s, and since then he has successfully crossed between the mainstream and art cinema while working within different national filmmaking contexts.

Watching their films one cannot help but notice the significant role female characters play in them and therefore the importance these films bear in breaching new ground for female representations compared to the majority of mainstream Hollywood films at the time. However, it can be argued that the importance of these representations is limited to that: a tiny step in redressing the imbalance in gender representations only superficially, since, as I will proceed to display, they are heavily laden with stereotypical assumptions concerning womanhood and their female characters are utterly objectified. In other words, by making these female protagonists the centre of the narrative little more is achieved than the literal centralisation of female characters within the film and the increase of their on-screen visibility. This is picked up by Mary Ann Doane when she says that

“femininity in modernity has become very much a question of hypervisibility” urging feminist film theorists to pay attention to questions of “iconography, of vision and its relation to forms of knowing” (14). In doing so I have detected four categories of femininity that keep recurring with few variations: woman as an enigma, woman as an empty sign, the virgin/whore dichotomy motif and the motherhood stereotype which I have called the 'eternal feminine'. The chapter is thus structured according to these categories and a number of the characters that appear in the films by the aforementioned directors will be discussed in these terms. Some characters might combine elements that could position them in more than one of these categories but the practical choice of this chapter is to place them according to their most dominant characteristic and function. The desired outcome of this discussion is to highlight that no matter how different their films are, these directors seem to have a more or less similar attitude, both to each other and to the mainstream motifs, when it comes to gender politics and the representation of women.

#### The Woman As an Unsolvable Enigma

Mary Ann Doane evokes this threatening enigmatic aspect of the woman in her discussion of the femme fatale figure explaining that “she never really is what she seems to be” and that “[s]he harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable or manageable” (1). As I will proceed to argue such forms of representation are very much taken up by art cinema as much as they are by the mainstream. In addition Barbara Creed's discussion of the 'monstrous feminine' as presented in horror films seems relevant here and it is helpful to follow her ideas to the extent that they can be reflected in the art films that will be discussed under this category. Creed states that in the cultural imagination of earlier civilizations there can be found numerous female monsters which demonstrate how femininity ever since the dawn of civilization bears an uncanny and horrifying element (1-2). Monsters like the Medusa, the Scylla, the Hydra, the Sphinx and many more, are



distinctly feminine and according to ancient Greek mythology they all had to be slain by the male hero/demi-god in order to eliminate the threat of destruction they wreaked. In a similar way, the femme fatale in “transforming the threat of the woman into a secret” raises the necessity within the narrative to “be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered” (Doane 1). The enigma-woman is equally present in art films but the difference is that due to their alternative narrative structure and aesthetics, her narrative expulsion is not always a necessity. This could be attributed to the fact that art films, as seen in the previous chapter, are more partial to open-ended narratives and the cause-effect links that are found in the mainstream are more tentative and less often adhered to within their narrative universe. In relation to this threatening female presence it is interesting to reflect on the meanings of the Sphinx within the Oedipal narrative and rethink the connotations of this fable, which is pivotal for psychoanalysis. Bearing in mind this narrative and more precisely the earlier part of the story – rather than the relationship with his mother/wife or the patricide which is usually taken up by psychoanalysis – where Oedipus encounters and kills the Sphinx, I will draw some parallels to the conceptualisation of the male hero and the female “monster” as represented in the films I will proceed to discuss. This issue is also addressed within Laura Mulvey's avant-garde, feminist film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1979) in which Mulvey in voiceover ponders on the figure of the Sphinx and the way she represents “the cannibalistic mother, part-bestial and part-angelic” as well as the threatening aspect of the riddle which “confuses logical categories”. This is true of the way women are represented in the films I will proceed to discuss but also there is an element of this in most female representations in general. Creed draws on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic study of abjection in order to explain how female representations in horror films work and there are some interesting points of contact between those ideas and the specific category of the threatening, enigmatic woman within art films. The films I am focusing on for this category are

Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) and Bergman's *Persona* (1966) while there will be a briefer reference to other films that seem to perpetuate this motif, such as *The Rite* (Bergman, 1969), *The Eclipse* (Antonioni, 1962), *The Night* (Antonioni, 1961) and *The Passion of Anna* (Bergman, 1969).

The Sphinx was, according to legend, a terrible monster, half woman and half lion, that plagued the city-state of Thebes in ancient Greece and the only way to exterminate her would be by answering correctly the riddle she posed to passers-by. The threatening aspect of the enigma was that after a failed attempt to solve the riddle, the Sphinx would proceed to devour her victim. By projecting this model onto the narrative construction of certain films, either mainstream or not, we can see that this threat of the mystery woman is embodied in female characters such as the femmes fatales of film noir. Admittedly this position implies a certain amount of power that the phallic woman embodies even if temporarily. However, by the end of the film the threat has been eliminated one way or the other by the actions of the male hero. The equivalent female figure within art films, as I will show, does not always have a similar fate but is nonetheless constructed in a similar way. In both *Red Desert* and *Persona* the female characters seem to be haunted, neurotic individuals and they are both sexually dysfunctional or repressed. Thus their power is even more limited compared to Hollywood's femme fatale figure. They are constructed as abject since “[a]bject things are those that highlight the 'fragility of the law' and that exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction” (Creed 10). This border is also identifiable “between normal and abnormal sexual desire” (Creed 11) which is crossed by the abject woman. In this sense both Giuliana (*Red Desert*) and Alma (*Persona*) embody a threatening aspect of the 'monstrous-feminine' since, as I will proceed to explain, they both seem to manifest 'abnormal' sexualities and they both in a more direct or indirect manner defy the 'patriarchal' law by

refusing to fit very comfortably into their traditional female roles. By the end of the narrative they are both more or less disempowered yet the enigma is not solved.

From the very first shots of *Red Desert* there is a sense that something is amiss in relation to Giuliana which is hinted at by her early encounter with a worker in the industrial estate while walking with her little boy, Valerio. A few minutes later, in a conversation her husband Ugo has with his friend Corrado, we are informed that she had been in a car accident some time ago and she has suffered a terrible shock because of that. As a result she has been hospitalised for a significant period of time but as Ugo says “she still can't ... mesh”. Later in the film Giuliana admits to Corrado that she had tried to commit suicide in the past. There is thus a definite pathological condition that torments her which is also evident in the metallic deafening sounds that are heard every time she has one of her frequent panic attacks. Moreover, throughout the film she is portrayed as very vulnerable with a child-like innocence. When her husband approaches her sexually, she recoils in distress and shouts “No!” and the one time she expresses an appetite for a sexual encounter with her husband is after she has had the quail's egg during their outing with a few friends in the cabin by the port. During the light-hearted conversation it is mentioned that quail's eggs are an aphrodisiac and after she has eaten a couple, she stands in the middle of the red room, closes her eyes and the camera cuts to a close-up of the lower part of her body as she caresses her thighs and exclaims “I want to make love”. It is therefore quite evident that she does not function “normally” in terms of her sexuality; in this scene it is implied that she does not have sexual desires unless she consumes aphrodisiac substances. This dysfunction clearly threatens the harmony of the heterosexual marriage. Her unspecified pathological ailment, which also manifests itself in a form of hypochondria, is thus linked to her sexual dysfunction since each time she is approached sexually she recoils in distress. This theme is brought to a climax towards the end of the

film and foreshadows the rape scene that occurs in Corrado's hotel room. Her behaviour again is erratic and her movements abrupt and hysteric and she admits that she still suffers from the mental illness that she was hospitalised for, saying "I've not been cured, I never shall be". Corrado tries to sleep with her and although she tries to avoid him as she did earlier with her husband, Corrado forces himself on her. However, the way this rape scene is presented in a mystified not openly aggressive way, makes it slightly ambiguous and highly problematic. When she leaves him she expresses her disappointment in Corrado by saying "even you haven't helped me". The film ends where it started, forming a circle, with Giuliana and Valerio once more in the industrial estate and the disturbing metallic sounds attesting the persistence of her ailment.

Similarly in Bergman's *Persona* the two women played by Bibi Andersson (Alma) and Liv Ullmann (Elisabet) portray an equally problematic sexuality and they have difficulty in conforming to their allocated gender roles. Alma is a nurse in the mental health clinic in which Elisabet is hospitalised for refusing to speak after a theatrical performance in which she played Electra. From the beginning of the film these characters occupy opposing places within the narrative. Alma seems to be in the position of control and has a stable life, working as a nurse and engaged to Karl-Henrik, whereas Elisabet is deeply troubled, detached from her family and the world around her. However, there is a hint early on that this positioning of the two women is somewhat precarious when Alma tells the doctor that Elisabet's decision to refrain from talking may be a sign of "great mental strength" and she expresses hesitation as to her capability in helping her. As the plot unfolds and they move to the doctor's house by the seaside, Alma's composed façade gradually decomposes and she appears equally if not more troubled than Elisabet. She expresses her innermost sexual desires and secrets by narrating to Elisabet a story about herself and another girl having illicit group sexual intercourse with two strange boys on the

beach. She tells Elisabet that she derived great pleasure from that encounter and that straight afterwards she returned home and had intercourse with her fiancé declaring that “it's never been as good before or since”. She thus confesses to crossing the border between 'proper' and 'improper' sexuality and she is later humiliated for her transgression, when Elisabet betrays her trust and recounts this incident in a letter addressed to the doctor. Elisabet, apart from her obvious condition of determined silence which renders her a dysfunctional member of society, is later on revealed to have a rather problematic relationship with her family and as Alma states in her monologue, she has been accused “for lacking in motherliness”. This links her to Doane's description of the *femme fatale* who “is represented as the antithesis of the maternal” (2). Alma says that Elisabet was “frightened to the core of having a child” but “she still played the role” while deep down she hated her son and she could not reciprocate the love he felt for her. Once again then it seems that the woman does not perform the role prescribed to her by society, that of a loving mother, and thus constitutes a threatening figure for patriarchal law.

However, apart from the qualities that are disclosed through the character development within the narrative rendering them as threatening figures, there is another sense in which these two characters can be seen to oscillate across borders and these are the borders of each other's subjectivities. This is visually demonstrated towards the end of the film when after one of Alma's aggressive monologues, there is a tight close-up of her face and then the two faces are mixed by combining the one half of Alma's face in close-up and the other half of Elisabet's. This has an uncanny effect since the combination is barely discernible, due to the fact that the two women are not that dissimilar in appearance, and thus deeply disturbing. This editing together of the two distinct faces is repeated a bit later on and although Alma protests against the implied similarity to Elisabet, the message has been conveyed: not only are the two women very similar in the crisis of subjectivity they

face; they seem to be interchangeable and maybe even one and the same person. This is also implied when after a violent episode between the two, Alma is packing her bags and preparing to return to the city and there is a shot of her walking down the road and catching the bus all by herself. Was she alone all the time? Is Elisabet Alma's creation? Does Alma suffer from a split personality disorder or some other mental condition? These are all questions that remain unanswered by the film, emphasising thus Alma's construction as an abject and threatening figure. Moreover, this ambiguity in terms of the two women's identities is manifested earlier in the film when Elisabet's husband comes to visit her and Alma goes to find out what he wants. Mr Vogler talks to Alma as if she is Elisabet and although Alma keeps repeating that she is not Elisabet, he does not seem to take notice of her remarks. A few minutes later and after Alma has presumably given up asserting her identity and has taken on Elisabet's role as Mr Vogler's wife, we see them lying down next to each other in what seems to be a post-coital scene. Mr Vogler asks her whether it was good and after she admits that he is a great lover she has a breakdown and she shouts "Leave me alone! It's shame, it's all shame! It's all just lies and imitation." This again verifies Alma's problematic and contradictory attitude towards her sexuality and reinforces the mystery of her true identity. By the end of the film nothing is resolved and once more there is a spiral-patterned structure. The two women are back in the hospital and Alma makes Elisabet repeat the word "nothing" which is hardly a breakthrough or a solution for the patient's state or the narrative's resolution.

In both these cases it is evident that the woman is suffering some kind of psychological trauma that prevents her from functioning according to expected societal norms. Both women, as has been shown, oscillate between sanity and insanity and this allows us to draw a parallel to Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine due to their instability and consequently their resistance to being defined. They also fit into this

category of female stereotype due to “the importance of gender in the construction of [their] monstrosity” (Creed 3) through the narrative's emphasis on their sexuality and gendered roles within the heterosexual couple and the family. Unlike the mysterious and threatening figures of the mainstream, i.e. femmes fatales, the enigma is not solved by the end of the film and the patriarchal order is not comfortably restored. Therefore in this sense the parallel with the femme fatale figure does not hold entirely true for the enigma-woman of the art film. Nonetheless, the male characters within these films attempt through sex to subjugate the 'enigmatic' woman in an effort to 'cure' her from her erratic and pathological state albeit to no avail. Both Giuliana and Alma are subjected to sexual violence, which in some cases is more straightforward but in others more indirect and ambiguous, as are a number of other female characters that could be meaningfully discussed within this category. In Antonioni's *The Night* it is not so much Lydia who embodies this malaise, although she seems deeply unhappy and discontented with her married life, but a minor character in the hospital where the couple goes to visit their dying friend Tomaso. The woman, clearly an inmate of the clinic, tries to entice Giovanni into her room and seems sexually aggressive, manifesting socially deviant behaviour to which the nurses respond by restraining and punishing her. In his next film, *The Eclipse*, Vittoria seems to behave quite strangely in relation to Pierro. When they are in her mother's house and Pierro tries to kiss her she very quickly manages to escape and leaves the room. She seems quite childish and is treated as such by her mother who is abrupt and lacks affection towards her. Anna, from Bergman's *The Passion of Anna* (1969), also seems to be severely troubled and, we come to realise, lies to Andreas about her former life with her family only to find out in the end that she is probably responsible for their deaths when she nearly kills Andreas the same way she did them, by driving off the road and crashing the car. Anna represents a more tangible threat and she is thus both 'monstrous' and abject in her unreliable and mad

behaviour. Although in this film sexual intercourse is not used in the same way, Andreas takes Anna to his house and tries to domesticate her; when he fails, his life is literally threatened. Finally, one of the most overt uses of sex as a form of investigation and punishment is found in Bergman's TV movie *The Rite* (1969). Throughout the conversation between Thea's two companions and the judge, there is evidence that points towards Thea's obscene sexuality. She is susceptible to hysteric fits, her husband says, that result in sexual gestures and "lewd movements". The climax of the investigation comes when the judge interviews Thea by herself during which discussion he realises that she is lying about her identity, once more reminiscent of Creed's notion of abjection (10). The judge grows gradually exasperated by Thea's abnormal behaviour, calls her a "bloody circus whore" and violently rapes her on his desk.

There is a sense therefore that in most cases the male characters try to solve the enigma posed by the women through sexual intercourse in a predatory manner in order to extinguish the presumed threat. This theme is no less present in more recent films, a notable case being the 2001 Dogme film *Kira's Reason: A Love Story*. The ambiguity of art cinema, as mentioned in the previous chapter, embracing both entertainment and political/intellectual thought, coupled with the ambiguous portrayal of sexual violence against women, is picked up by Dominique Russell who states that "[t]he assailing of the bounds of propriety was part of a move to push boundaries, be they social, aesthetic or political" (5). She proceeds to develop the argument that many art films, in making a political point, conflate "consensual and non-consensual force", a practice that tends to seek justification through its claims to a higher ideological status, a determination to break with convention and occupy a controversial position (6). Therefore the perpetuation of female oppression through the circulation of such images that through their association with art cinema have a high cultural value is rarely addressed. This is more evident in the



enigma-woman whose most prominent characteristic is her abject sexuality, but it also appears in most of the others as well since woman is always tied to her biology. It should, however, be foregrounded that the threat she poses is never eliminated due to the open-ended narratives of these art films and it therefore continues looming until and even beyond the end. Consequently there is a sense in which this type of representation, despite its overwhelming negative connotations, presents at least one positive aspect. Women are not ultimately subjugated nor liberated from their ailment, but neither are they reduced to surface. They seem complex and deeper as characters even if that depth seems to consist of a pathological condition that seems to stem from their feminine nature and is not fully resolved by the end of the film. Mulvey, in her discussion of avant-garde aesthetics states that “[r]iddles and enigmas offer the spectator the lures and pleasures of decipherment, while demanding active participation and work in creating the text's meaning” (144). Therefore, it could be argued that by searching for the cause of their pathology we could find places from which to contest and challenge women's subordinate positions and point to their construction as victims of society. And although there are elements within the films that might point to the external causes of these conditions, which are arbitrarily portrayed as distinctly feminine, they are left understated. Under these circumstances, where women more often than not embody a wider social malaise and sexual violence is treated with ambiguity, the philosophical contemplation with which these films end can be seen as ultimately harmful for an articulation of progressive gender politics.

#### The Virgin/Whore Dichotomy Motif

This category concerns the stereotypical representation of female characters as two diametrically opposed versions of female sexuality; that of the pure, saint-like virgin as opposed to the morally loose, promiscuous woman. Similarly to the previous category this pattern in representing female sexuality is not solely encountered within art films but is

widely used in the mainstream as well. For instance, within Westerns and Film Noir it is common to have these two types of women pitted against each other. In addition, it is usually the case that women with an active sexuality are also more active in the social sphere, and their sexuality is usually linked to their professional status. In this respect, I will invoke Yvonne Tasker's work on American mainstream cinema and suggest that the situation regarding this kind of female representation is rather similar within art cinema. Tasker refers to this reciprocal relationship between the two film practices – post-60s American cinema and European art cinema – as far as the topic and representation of female sexuality is concerned (*Working* 10-12). Therefore there are certain points of comparison between the female characters of art films and those of classical Hollywood (e.g. femme fatale) but also those of post-classical Hollywood (e.g. femme fatale of neo-noir). Ultimately, the construction of female characters according to these two opposing stereotypes reinforces patriarchy and reduces female characters to one-dimensional caricatures based on their sexuality. *Susana* (1951) directed by Luis Buñuel is a striking example of a film using this trope of female representation which seems to oscillate between the mainstream and the art film, since it was made by a director who was very much invested in surrealism and has thus inflected his creation with many signs that point to that relationship. At the same time it is one of the director's more mainstream melodramatic works, which fit in comfortably with the mainstream film production flourishing at the time in Mexico. The main character in the film, Susana, is a deceitful, conniving young woman who, having escaped from prison, finds shelter in a respectable family's farm and gradually secures the affection of all the male characters using her feminine charms. The film's longer title *Susana or The Devil & the Flesh* clearly positions right from the start Susana as the evil, promiscuous woman whose sexuality wreaks havoc in the harmonious life of the family. The mother of the family, Carmen, is the exact

opposite; a God-fearing, generous and golden-hearted woman that upholds patriarchal law and occupies a respectable position within her household. Susana manages to seduce several men including the son of the family and in the end she seems to have completely bewitched the patriarch himself, Don Guadalupe, who goes so far as to order his wife out of the house and falls out with his son in competition for Susana's affections. However, right at the end of the narrative, the police discover Susana's whereabouts and they arrive to take her back to prison and consequently the familial harmony is restored. Guadalupe begs for his wife's forgiveness who, in all her Christian kindness, readily gives it and the family sits around the table in peaceful unity. The two diametrically opposed female stereotypes have been pitted against each other and naturally in the end the triumphant one is the respectable and pious matron.

This over-exaggerated form of female stereotyping appears in many other films made during the peak of art cinema and shows the extent to which women in art cinema are reduced to mere stereotypes and flat characters. It is interesting, however, to take a closer look at a couple of instances in order to assess some of the variations of this motif. For this purpose I have chosen Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960) and Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967). At the end, I will briefly refer to a few other films that shed some more light in the use of this trope, namely Bergman's directorial debut *Crisis* (1946), as an early example of the way his female characters are constructed which seems like a tradition he will follow to a great extent throughout the rest of his career; Godard's *My Life to Live* (1962) and Buñuel's swan song *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) which is a fascinating example not only in terms of containing these two opposing stereotypes within one character but also in alternating two different female actresses in the main role. By the end of this discussion, I am hoping to illustrate the extensive use of this particular stereotype within art films and argue that although there are possible hints for their

subversion, much as in the previous category, they are not emphasised within the film text and thus the characters remain undeveloped and end up perpetuating these negative stereotypes.

The first film under discussion is Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*, made at a time in his career when he had already established himself as a master of art cinema and gained worldwide critical acclaim as well as earning an academy award for Best Foreign Film. Interestingly, it was the inspiration for the 1970s exploitation film *The Last House on the Left* (1972) which is an example of the aforementioned cross-fertilization between popular and art film practices. From the very first shot of the film we are introduced to one of the two female characters that are going to be juxtaposed according to the virgin/whore dichotomy. Ingeri is dark-haired, her skin is dark and dirty and she is heavily pregnant. There is a wild, malicious look in her eyes as she is seeking assistance from Odin, who is associated with war, death and magic. Thus she is immediately associated with evil but also with her more bodily, sexual functions due to her pregnancy. As it is shortly after explained, her child is illegitimate and that verifies her transgression of the moral laws of society, and through the words of another female servant she is also likened to a wildcat and generally attributed a base, animalistic behaviour. Karin, the farmer's legitimate daughter, is in appearance the exact opposite of Ingeri. She is a virgin, has long blonde hair, a fair complexion and she wears expensive and beautiful clothes as opposed to Ingeri's rags. Marëta, the matron of the estate, literally spells out this diametrical juxtaposition of these two characters by saying to Ingeri "you're no more like your stepsister than a thorn is like a rose", following these cruel words with a sardonic laughter. Their contrasting positioning is represented even in the horses they are given to ride to church and accordingly Karin rides a white horse whereas Ingeri rides a darker one with a black mane. They are therefore clearly coded in terms of this most fundamental of

stereotypes according to which white-Karin equals goodness and chastity while black-Ingeri equals the evil, fallen woman. In fact Ingeri is almost positioned as the villain of the film, since she is seen to cast a spell on Karin, which precedes her attack, violent rape and murder in the woods. In addition to that, Ingeri does nothing to fend off the attackers but looks on from a safe distance, which she admits to her father towards the end of the film. Even though the father does not punish her but focuses his revenge on the three attackers, she still remains in a dubious moral position regarding her half-sister's demise.

Although Karin is depicted as the angelic figure in this film, something that is reinforced by the spring of holy water that starts flowing at the place of her death, there are some questionable attributes in her character. She seems to be quite capricious when her mother tries to convince her to go to church, and insists on wearing her most precious clothes. She manipulates her doting mother into getting her way and she seems to be quite vain and narcissistic, staring at her reflection in the water after she has prepared to go. Her vanity is also evident in the most critical episode with the three shepherds just before her rape. The shepherds start complimenting her on her delicate hands and her pretty neck and although in the intervals of these compliments she looks quite alarmed, she nevertheless indulges in accepting them, a distraction that proves fatal. Earlier on in the film she is also reported to have been dancing all the previous night and she does seem lazy and reluctant to acquiesce to her parents' demand. In addition, when Ingeri implies that Karin behaved indecently during the night before, Karin loses her temper and slaps Ingeri hard in the face making her cry. It seems therefore that Karin is not as innocent deep down, since she was dancing with several men, and yet she is clearly presented as such. Her virginity is privileged over any other negative attributes in her character, which, as mentioned above, is reinforced by the ending of the film when a spring of holy water is miraculously created at the site of her death.

This is quite a straightforward representation of the virgin/whore dichotomy in which the good and the bad women are pitted against each other and although the virtuous one is destroyed she does win the sympathy due to her brutal demise. I would now like to turn the discussion to a less conventional use of the virgin/whore dichotomy motif as presented in Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, a film made during the late 'French' period in his career – to distinguish it from his early work within French surrealism. Having settled back in Europe and leaving behind his more mainstream, bread-and-butter films made in Mexico and the U.S., it seems that he now strengthens once more his ties with art cinema and brings into his work several modernist and surrealist elements which are rather scarce in his Mexican films. However, the gender representations offered in his films do not change significantly and remain rather problematic. The development that relates to the representation of the virgin/whore stereotype as seen in this film is significant as the central female character, Belle/Séverine seems to incorporate simultaneously both sides of the dichotomy in the double life she leads. Séverine is represented as a sociopath, due to her inability to function healthily within her marriage and within society in general. This internal conflict is a fundamental characteristic in her identity and as I will proceed to illustrate, the lack of character development in addition to the absence of a straightforward, clear resolution do not allow for an in-depth exploration of the issue as a social problem. However entertaining and masterfully made, in this respect the film is superficial, showing a troubled woman and indulging in a voyeuristic observation of her precarious effort to explore her sexuality.

The film begins with Séverine and her husband, Pierre, sitting in a horse-drawn carriage in what seems to be an idyllic, romantic setting which is soon disrupted when Pierre mentions her sexual frigidity towards him and soon after orders the carriage to a standstill and drags Séverine out with the help of the drivers. She is verbally abused and is

then tied to a tree when Pierre tears the upper part of her clothing and starts whipping her. As soon as he is done, he tells the drivers “she's yours now” implying that they will probably rape her. This incident appears to be Séverine's fantasy although it is not clearly marked as such by any usual formal conventions – colour, image blurring or sound. The spectator is led to assume that it is a fantasy only due to the subsequent cut to the couple in their luxurious apartment getting ready to go to bed. The narrative is thus destabilised as there is no clear indication as to whether this event is an actual occurrence within the narrative or an imagined one, except for Pierre's question inquiring what she is thinking of. Through their conversation and actions it is revealed that although they have been married for a year, their marriage has not been consummated and they sleep in separate beds. Séverine tells Pierre that she feels like kissing him and she does so quite briskly without any hint of passion and as soon as he sits by her side on the bed she abruptly gets up and says “no, please!”. We are thus introduced to the situation and we realise that Séverine, much like Giuliana and Vittoria from Antonioni's films discussed in the previous section, is sexually unavailable and troubled. Her blondness connotes innocence and ideal white western beauty but also coldness, while her household and clothing testify to her bourgeois social background. This set-up can be read as a critique of bourgeois values and mores, emphasising the coldness and hypocrisy bourgeois women are seen to represent. In addition, there is a flashback to Séverine's childhood in which she is wearing a short dress and a man approaches her and kisses her on the cheek. This could be hinting at the origins of her troubled sexual awakening, maybe a traumatic experience of being molested as a child. However, this is just conjecture since the very brief sequence remains quite nuanced and is not further explained or elaborated on. Adding to this her subsequent encounter with her husband in which he asks her quite tenderly “won't you ever grow up?”, it can be argued that Séverine is at a state of 'arrested development' in relation to her sexuality.

So far I have established the way in which the virginal stereotype of the dichotomy is reflected in her childlike sexual innocence and apparent moral chastity. However, there does seem to co-exist inside her a sexual being that craves to break free and this only starts manifesting as she becomes Belle de Jour. The critical point in her decision to become a sex worker is when she bumps into Henriette, who is rumoured to be working in a brothel. Husson, her husband's crude friend, calls Henriette mysterious, adding that she is "the woman with two sides to her". The inclusion of this peripheral character in whose position Séverine will be later on, allows for arguing that her problematic relationship with her husband and her own sexuality, this internal conflict she experiences, might be a wider social phenomenon, a certain kind of malaise concerning middle-class women. However, since this is not much elaborated within the film text, for example in terms of the actual cause for this malaise, we are left with a voyeuristic account of a woman that prostitutes herself, vacillating between propriety, tastefulness and sleaziness, and painting a rather unflattering picture of female sexuality. In Mme Anaïs' house Séverine is given the alias Belle de Jour since she is available only during the day while her husband is at work. On her first day she is very hesitant and timid but she gradually gets over her inhibitions. Both Mme Anaïs and Husson mention the monetary reward as the motive for prostitution and yet this does not seem to be true in Séverine's case since she inhabits an affluent household. What drives her to become a prostitute seems rather to be a desire to explore and express her sexuality in an environment that seems 'safe' or expected, which she apparently is not comfortable to do within her marriage. Her husband is very kind, understanding and patient with her and from her encounters with the men in the brothel it seems that she wants to be dominated and humiliated in order to succumb and take pleasure in sex. In her dreams and reveries as well, she is constantly humiliated and maltreated by her husband and other men and this masochistic and deviant sexuality causes



her severe internal conflict. She wants to be both a respectable wife and a contemptible sex-slave, which does not seem possible in her world. However, by becoming a prostitute she threatens the stability of her marriage since there is the constant risk that her secret life will be revealed and thus her domestic harmony destroyed. Therefore she has to renounce her sexually promiscuous side in favour of the socially acceptable norm and in this way the film concludes in a quite conservative manner, eradicating any possible threat to the patriarchal law and leaving Séverine to experience her sexuality only in her reveries. Furthermore not only does the film not explore effectively the points of social critique it raises, but it also proves rather problematic in the way that it encourages the objectification of Séverine through a lack of internal focalisation that would reveal and flesh out her subjectivity. But more importantly it reinforces the sexist psychoanalytic discourse regarding sexual violence as female fantasy. In relation to this Jeffrey Masson argues that “[f]antasy – the notion from Freud that women invent allegations of sexual abuse because they desire sex – continues to play a role in undermining the credibility of victims of sexual abuse” (xxiii). This idea is recycled within the narrative of *Belle de Jour* and it is in this aspect that its problematic female representation lies. Séverine is portrayed as abject through the embodiment of the virgin/whore dichotomy as well as manifesting a deviant sexuality that blurs the boundaries between sexual pleasure and violence.

The two films examined in this section present us with characters constructed according to the virgin/whore dichotomy motif in two different variations. The first film uses it in a more traditional way that is abundantly present in mainstream films, clearly dividing the good from the bad characters and setting them against each other, resulting in the final triumph of virtue. This same trope is encountered in several other art films such as Bergman's *Crisis* in which the main character, Nelly, is caught between two women that represent these two extremes and is made to choose a side. Miss Ingeborg is the woman

that has brought up Nelly, sacrificing her personal life to the responsibilities of mothering another woman's unwanted child. She is poor but morally and socially respectable, regularly attending church and working as a piano instructor in order to make ends meet. Mrs Jenny is Nelly's biological mother who, after having abandoned her daughter for 18 years and moved to the big city to pursue an advancement in life, personal and professional, has become rich and comes back to disturb the harmonious life of Nelly and Ingeborg. She appears heartless and selfish and does not seem to care for Ingeborg's or Nelly's feelings, repeatedly manipulating the people around her. She owns a hairdressing salon, which in contrast to Ingeborg's occupation seems less noble, being more superficial and usually linked to female narcissism. To add a more melodramatic twist, Ingeborg reveals to Jenny that she suffers from a terminal illness but Jenny remains unmoved. In addition, Jenny through her morally dubious relationship with her nephew Jack, is presented as a sexually promiscuous woman whereas Ingeborg, we are left to assume, has never experienced carnal pleasure and in her martyr-like manner suffers in loneliness while her health gradually deteriorates. At the end of the film, Nelly, having been seduced by Jenny's glamorous appearance and lifestyle, and having had a miserable and emotionally devastating experience with Jenny and Jack – who in the end commits suicide – returns to Ingeborg bitterly regretful but having grown as a character. It is therefore evident how Ingeborg's virtuous character is victorious whereas the ignoble Jenny ends up miserable and lonely. The film's generic affiliations to melodrama are quite overt and this straightforward application of the virgin/whore stereotype is, I would argue, more common in films close to the mainstream, as exemplified with *Susana* and *Crisis*.

In *My Life to Live* Godard very resourcefully inscribes these antithetic stereotypes within a single character. This development is a small improvement in terms of the one-dimensionality of the female characters as presented in *Susana* and *Crisis* but it is also

quite stale and problematic since these two qualities are extreme manifestations and cannot be compromised in order for the character to function properly. Nana seems both innocent in her reluctance to go into prostitution but also responsible in her subsequent affirmation of complicity in finally embracing this lifestyle. The innocence comes back towards the end when she falls in love with the young man and they make romantic dreams about being free together, but her fate has already been sealed due to her immersion into this dangerous underworld. In *That Obscure Object of Desire* Buñuel also inscribes this split both in the characterisation of Conchita but also in her visual representation since she is played by two different actresses, Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina. This practical choice, due to difficulties in casting the role, has the subsequent effect of intensifying the internal split of the character, since Bouquet's Conchita is a lot colder and reserved whereas when played by Molina she is a lot more fiery and sexual. This encompasses a racial stereotype as well, according to which Western/Northern European women are cold and asexual in comparison to the over-sexualisation and exoticism inherent in representations of Mediterranean and Latina women. This technique might also allude to a certain degree of interchangeability between the female actresses which is even more emphasised by the fact that it is not at all commented upon within the narrative world and does not impede the progression of the plot, adding thus to its surrealist aesthetic. Having briefly outlined a number of manifestations of this stereotype and before closing this discussion, I would now like to elaborate on an issue that was mentioned earlier, namely the connection between the working woman and the prostitute, and examine how it is presented, particularly in these two films by Godard and Buñuel.

Nana is an aspiring actress who works at a music store but has financial difficulties. Her boyfriend, Paul, accuses her of breaking up with him because he is not rich which she does not deny, saying, "Perhaps it's that". She is in desperate need of money and when she

cannot find any she is evicted from her lodgings and ends up in the street, surviving from her encounters with strangers, as when she goes to the cinema to watch Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). Right after this incident she meets with a man who is going to take some pictures of her to help her get a job in the film industry. The brochure he shows her contains several pictures of women and she tells him she feels embarrassed to undress for the pictures. During this incident a clear connection is made between being an actress and using her sexuality both in a figurative sense – she puts her body on display for money – and in a literal sense – she goes home with him. By the end of the film she actually becomes a prostitute, having Raoul as her pimp who sells her and, when the deal goes wrong, she is caught in the crossfire and killed. Tasker in her discussion of the sexualisation of the working woman refers to the film *Klute* (Pakula, 1971) in which she detects this connection between the aspiring actress and the sex worker (5). This is quite similar to Nana and the two characters also share the same conventional conclusion by the end of the narrative; Nana is killed off whereas Bree is paired up with the male hero and thus domesticated.

Likewise, a connection between the working woman and the sex worker is made in Buñuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire*. Conchita, as argued above, represents simultaneously the two opposing sides of the dichotomy. On the one hand she claims to be a virgin and persistently safeguards her virginity against the predatory advances of Mateo. On the other hand she seems to be manipulating Mateo by promising but never giving herself to him, probably to obtain material privileges. Her promiscuous side comes to the fore towards the end of the film, when she works as a dancer in a flamenco bar in Sevilla. Although it appears to be a decent job in the beginning, Mateo soon discovers that she also dances naked in an upstairs hall for a male audience comprised of tourists. She is not a sex worker in the most literal sense but she does cash in on her sexuality and her body which

might have similar connotations in terms of social respectability. Tasker observes that “[a]cross a variety of popular genres, Hollywood representation is characterised by an insistent equation between working women, women's work and some form of sexual(ised) performance” (*Working* 3) and judging from the examples mentioned above this practice is not restricted to mainstream film production but is widely circulated within art films as well. This idea of work as morally dubious for a woman is also emphasised in this film in Conchita's reluctance to work and her mother's comments about how well-bred women do not acquire working skills. She mentions that she is too proud to get a job as a concierge and she would prefer her daughter not to work either, because of the bad influences that she could encounter. However, they seem to think that being a kept woman is fine and they do not object to Mateo giving them money and other material objects. Her mother even goes as far as to make a deal with Mateo and basically sells Conchita, emphasising the high exchange value virginity has within traditional patriarchal societies. It seems, therefore, that women's labour is associated with their sexuality to a different degree in each case but also their idleness and financial dependence on the male characters seems to bear a similar association with prostitution and immorality. There is a sense in which the films discussed in this section can be seen as pioneering in terms of the bold representation of the taboo topic of female sexuality and its manifestations as phenomena of a widely problematic society. However, the stereotyping of the female characters to the extent of being caricatures, especially when pitted against each other in the form of the virgin/whore dichotomy and the frequent defeat of the latter within the film world, can be seen as quite reactionary from a feminist point of view.

### The Eternal Feminine

In this category I am going to discuss the representation of motherhood and its

essentialist correlation with female representations in art cinema. I am calling this kind of female stereotyping the 'eternal feminine' in order to convey the idea that motherhood is frequently constructed as the quintessence of the female representations within the films that I will proceed to discuss. In the introduction of her book *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*, Lucy Fischer gives an account of the maternal figure as it is depicted predominantly in American films, proceeding to discuss in more detail the place of the mother and questions about motherhood as presented in different film genres. It seems therefore that the mother figure is extremely prevalent in a variety of visual articulations bearing different resonances, and although it is a very interesting area to investigate in depth, the present discussion will be limited to the analysis of the expectant mother or the desire for motherhood as presented by the female characters in Godard's *A Woman Is a Woman* (1961) and Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Molly Haskell dealt with the issue of motherhood as presented in American melodrama, saying that in those films children are presented as “woman's ultimate raison d'être, her only worth-confirming 'career'” (*From Reverence* 169) and I argue that this rings true for both the films I am looking at in this section. After analysing these two cases I will briefly discuss this tendency as it appears in two other films, *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and *Shame* (1968), both directed by Bergman. Considering the generic undertones of the films in question, to follow Fischer's line of thought, it could be argued that the melodramatic elements in Bergman's work could justify these romantic maternal figures whereas in relation to Godard's film, which has elements of the romantic comedy, this obsession of the female character to become a mother can be considered as the driving force of the narrative and is exaggerated to comic effect. Despite the variable effects of this stereotypical portrayal of women, this goes to show that in terms of gender representation art cinema in the past has favoured an equally one-dimensional portrayal of female characters compared to

mainstream genres. However, I argue, it is not the tropes themselves that are problematic but the way they are populated which, due to a lack of alternatives, has the potential of forming perpetual icons of femininity, thus prescribing women's position within society at large.

*A Woman Is a Woman* is Godard's second feature-length film after the widely known *Breathless*, which was made in the early years of the French New Wave. Angela is a strip dancer in a cabaret and through her performance and the song she sings she is associated with beauty, seduction and sexuality, which is reminiscent of the discussion in the previous section concerning the frequent connection between a woman's career and her sexuality. However, in Angela's case the interesting difference is that she expresses a strong desire to become a mother and thus fulfil a woman's "raison d'être" as expressed in the earlier quote by Haskell. Pointing to this tendency there are certain indications quite early on in the film, for example when she is in a news agent's leafing through a magazine about expectant mothers, and also when her colleague gives her advice about how to conceive and provides her with a device for tracing her fertility. As soon as she gets home she uses it and realises that she is ovulating that same day. When her boyfriend, Emile, comes home and while preparing dinner she tells him that she wants a baby. He responds by saying that they will have one as soon as they get married and when Angela quite enthusiastically suggests they get married he says "we'll see". This discussion results in a big fight and at the end Angela says that she will ask someone else to have a baby with her since he is so reluctant. The whole conversation seems quite comic due to the complete disregard of the usual conventions concerning family and marriage. The ideas expressed are quite revolutionary in terms of existing social norms but in the end the film adopts a rather more conventional approach and does not fulfil this iconoclastic vision of female sexual independence in relation to reproduction.

Angela's strong desire to be a mother is manifested visually when, alone in her apartment, she takes a pillow, puts it underneath her blouse and looks at her reflection in the mirror. From this incident and her general nagging to have a child she reveals an almost childish obstinacy that is more comic than a serious, mature desire for motherhood. Towards the end of the film and after another quarrel with Emile, she is in Arthur's room in her underwear, which indicates that they have possibly slept together. When she goes back to her apartment she tells Emile, who seems to be uncomfortable with this, although he was the one coaxing her into sleeping with other men in order to have a baby, and he suggests that they try to have a baby in order to make sure he is the father. It seems therefore that although he was against the idea of having a child, which caused the rift between the couple, at the end it is more important for him to ensure his claim on Angela's child. After they have slept together he starts laughing and when Angela asks him for the reason he tells her that she is *infâme*, which translates as despicable, suggesting that she finally trapped him and managed to have her way. At this Angela replies that she is not *infâme* but *une femme*; she smiles and winks at the camera and the film ends on this note. This final word play reinforces the negative connotations associated with women that are already apparent in the patronising title of the film *A Woman Is a Woman*. Thus it is conveyed that a woman will use any means to achieve her goals and trick the men around her and at the same time, in connection to the more specific theme of becoming a mother, it is implied that it is in woman's nature to want to have a child, which serves as a justification for her devious treatment of her partner and other men.

Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* has a slightly different take on the image of the expectant mother and the desire for motherhood, albeit no less essentialist and problematic. The theme of the desire for motherhood recurs in several Bergman films as does its opposite, the refusal and negation of that role, as for instance in *Persona* discussed earlier



in this chapter. In terms of this theme Fischer remarks that “the film implies that actress Elisabeth Vogler (Liv Ullmann) has gone mad because she is a cold and rejecting parent” while at the same time “Alma (Bibi Andersson) is tortured by the memory of an abortion in her youth” and she therefore concludes that in this film “female derangement is tied to the refusal of motherhood – an 'unnatural position of woman' (*Cinematernity* 20). It has also been noted concerning his earlier film *Crisis*, how Mrs Jenny through her complete failure to take up her maternal responsibilities is represented as a villainous character as opposed to the caring and nurturing Miss Ingeborg. These stereotypical representations of motherhood adhere to the notions of biological determinism that construct women primarily as mothers and condemn those that fail to fulfil their biological 'destiny'. Although *Wild Strawberries* seems to be a film dealing primarily with the existential crisis of the male protagonist, Isak, who in the twilight of his life goes through a process of re-examining his past choices and values, Marianne, his daughter-in-law, plays a vital role in this process and is primarily defined by her condition as an expectant-mother. As Isak and Marianne begin their road trip to the city, it is quite evident that there is a certain amount of coldness in their relationship and as soon as Marianne lights a cigarette Isak asks her to put it out saying that “there should be a law against women smoking”. He adds that smoking cigars is more to his liking but he describes this activity as a “manly vice”. Marianne, in an ironic tone, asks him “what vices are women allowed?” to which he replies “crying, having babies and speaking ill of their neighbours”. Immediately therefore Isak is presented as a very old-fashioned man who expresses with ease sexist ideas. Marianne stands up to him, remarking on his advanced age and telling him that Evald, his son, hates him and she does not like him either because he's an “inveterate egotist”, accusing him also of being dogmatic in his opinions. From this early stage, then, Isak expresses the opinion that having babies is seen as a negative thing and as it will be

revealed later on Evald seems to share this opinion.

The rift between Marianne and her husband is revealed later on in the film when she confides to Isak that she is pregnant. There is a flashback narration sequence in which Marianne and Evald are in the car when she announces to him that she is expecting a child and she is determined to keep it. Evald responds in a cold and sombre manner, telling her that she has to choose between him and the child. Marianne expresses her pity towards him while he explains his existential anxiety by saying that “life's absurd, without producing new wretches and imagining they'll be happy”, adding his personal situation of being a product of a miserable marriage as a further argument supporting his position on the matter. Marianne is upset and calls him a coward, to which Evald responds in the following manner: “You feel the need to be alive. You want to live and produce life. I feel the need to be dead, absolutely dead.” With these words Evald very straightforwardly describes this polar opposition between the male Bergman hero that finds himself in an intense existential crisis, in this case both Isak and Evald, and the female heroine, Marianne, who in her ability and desire to produce life is hopeful and positive. She says to Isak that “there's nothing but coldness, death and loneliness” but that “has to end somewhere”. She is going back to Evald to tell him she will not accept his conditions. She says “I want my child. No one can take it from me; not even the man I love.” Marianne is admirable in her determination to assert her decision especially in front of the difficult prospect of becoming a single mother, but as I have suggested earlier, no matter how positive a stance this is within one of Bergman's most despairing fictional universes, the fact that she is entirely identified as a mother figure is limiting and problematic. She becomes the quintessential eternal feminine that predicates the figure of the mother as the vessel through which to reproduce life and perpetuate the human race. In this sense the mother is not identified in a self-assertive manner but in terms of her contribution to

'humanity'; in other words she is not defined in relation to herself but in relation to another.

A similar characterisation of the main female protagonists can be detected in other Bergman films such as *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and *Shame* (1968). In the former, Alma, the wife of a painter who has vanished, is in an advanced stage of pregnancy and narrates the story of her life with her husband Johan. In the opening sequence she looks directly at the camera explaining Johan's state of psychological turmoil, and once more there is this idea of the man being caught up in a philosophical existential crisis whereas the woman is more practical and bound to a life-affirming biological function. The ultimate representation of this is the scene when she is sitting by a tree and he playfully calls her "fatty" because of her pregnancy while sitting down to paint her. Alma is immediately linked to nature and is positioned within the 'lived' world whereas Johan is perceiving her from a distance, not participating but replicating the image in front of him. In several scenes she is seen engaging in household activities like sewing or other housework, and she also takes care of him almost like a child, e.g. putting him to bed and taking off his slippers. At some point she does express a concern about how people that grow old together think alike and start resembling each other. This can be seen as a fear she has that her harmonious, life-affirming and practical existence might be contaminated by the demons that keep haunting Johan, but it could also be an indication that she thinks she can save him from them by dragging him back to their every-day reality. Later on, for instance, while they are sitting at the table, she starts talking to him about everyday household matters like money and expenses and asks him not to simply hand over the money to her but to take a look and interest himself in her accounts. However, she gradually seems to be sinking much more into his world rather than being able to wrench him out of it and to the end she wonders whether she could have helped him. There is a sense of extreme uncertainty and guilt in her final monologue when she says, "if I had loved him much less,

and not bothered so about everything around him, could I have protected him better? Or was it that I didn't love him enough that made me jealous?". Yet no matter how affected she has been by his horrific state she remains there, in the house in which they once shared a few happy moments, hoping for him to return and expecting their child to be born. This seems to be her strong grasp on life, which on the one hand seems rather positive yet on the other rather problematic. The woman is bound to her biological function of child-bearing, and generally her nurturing role within society, as the only solution to avoid madness and depression. As a result, this function renders her responsible for the salvation of her male partner and humankind in general.

*Shame* deals with similar issues but in a more overtly political manner, since it directly addresses these themes of depression and existential anxiety from the perspective of an ordinary couple that have left their urban life to avoid the civil war ravaging their country. From the beginning of the film Jan is portrayed as a weak man, both physically and emotionally, who is constantly afraid and cries because of his lack of courage. Eva on the other hand is portrayed as a woman who is a lot stronger and practical and she tells him "don't be so sensitive, I can't stand it". What is interesting is how at least to an extent the gender stereotypes that require characteristics like bravery and strength to be male attributes and hyper-sensitivity and cowardice to be linked to femininity are inverted. However, the power relation between the couple gradually changes and by the end of the film, although they have become severely estranged, Eva seems to be quite dependent on Jan for her survival. In terms of Eva's association with motherhood, once more Bergman instills his female protagonist with this primal instinct for reproduction. At an early point in the film the couple is having a meal outside their house during which Eva tells Jan that she wants to have babies and when Jan asks her to wait until the political situation calms down she says "no. It's important now" going on to suggest that "many of the things that

might be bad between [them] depend on the fact that [they] have no children, that [she], as a woman, [doesn't] have a child". This shows that Eva believes that simply having a child will magically improve their situation, appearing rather naïve since she seems to underestimate the impact all the horrific things that happen around them, which are far beyond their control, have on them. In a way then the film does not support women's ability to produce life as a panacea to the problems of the world, since Eva herself admits that after the first violent encounter with the soldiers she felt relieved they had no children. Despairingly she faces the fact that they will never have any, even though Jan seems to be more optimistic saying that they will have when peace is re-instated. This moment could be seen as the tipping point in the narrative where the power relation between the characters starts changing. Jan gradually becomes more and more brutal and unfeeling in his struggle for survival whereas Eva is gradually shattered psychologically in the face of the horrors of war and human brutality. Therefore it could be argued that once death prevails and her desire to generate life vanishes, she is reduced to a shadow, since the core of her existence, as she earlier proclaimed, has been drained from her.

#### The Woman As an Empty Sign

This last category of female stereotyping is one that to an extent pervades most female representations in visual media and has been addressed in Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In this highly engaging and fiercely contested article Mulvey articulates the idea that due to the hegemony of patriarchy there is a gender dichotomy in the pleasure of looking that positions the man as the "bearer of the look" and the woman as the object on display that fulfils this pleasure due to her quality of passive "to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). Similarly, I would like to argue that due to gender discrimination and the allocation of different roles for men and women within patriarchy, it is fairly obvious that beauty and its exhibition has been closely tied to the feminine rather

than the masculine socially acceptable norm. Of course, since society and its norms are in constant flux it is noticeable that this clear division between gaze and exhibition is not as absolute and clear-cut as Mulvey suggested in the mid 1970s. Yet for the time-frame that this chapter is concerned with, late 1950s up to early 1970s, and as I will proceed to explain with my case studies, this idea of the woman's role as merely the adornment of the screen does seem relevant both for the mainstream, which is Mulvey's focus, and for art cinema. While watching a significant number of the chosen directors' films it is interesting to notice the importance of the female body as spectacle and the way the camera movement emphasises its precedence. For example, in most of Antonioni's films there are close-up shots of different parts of the female body and the movement is slow and lingering, resembling a caressing gesture all over the woman's body. There is a particular recurrence of shots of legs which accords with Mulvey's observation of the fragmentation and fetishization of the female body. This tendency seems to take a slightly different turn in Godard's films where usually the male protagonist recounts the beauties of the female body verbally, while the camera focuses on the different parts, thus drawing attention to this fragmentation. In addition, there is a huge imbalance in most films between male and female nudity and most notably in Bunuel's work, where there is a significant amount of female nudity in films such as *Belle de Jour* and *That Obscure Object of Desire* but there is hardly any male nudity. Therefore I argue that Mulvey's argument concerning female to-be-looked-at-ness holds true for the films I am looking at. As I will proceed to demonstrate in the following analyses of Godard's *Breathless* (1960) and Bergman's *All These Women* (1964) the women are mostly present for their superficial qualities of beauty and the characters are severely under-developed and therefore appear as empty signs of femininity. Having discussed these films in detail I will then proceed to comment on the recurrence of this trope in a few other Godard films.

As Richard Neupert mentions, the French New Wave “owes more to the study of film history than does any other film movement” (41) and is driven by a “passionate cinephilia” (42) that is evident in the numerous references to Hollywood and other films and directors. Hence it is to be expected that despite its original style and technique it still bears a close connection to the mainstream. Therefore the gender stereotyping that is found in the mainstream is equally present in these films and *Breathless* is a case in point for the representation of woman as spectacle. There are several elements in the film that allude to the film-noir genre, such as the reference to Bogarde's persona and the shady male protagonist who is hunted by the police. In this sense Patricia could be considered as the femme fatale of the film. This reading is verified by her independence and aloofness in relation to Michel and also by the role she plays in his final demise. This is achieved first and foremost through her beauty since she captivates Michel so completely that he does not see the imminent danger. However, instead of being a calculating and conniving temptress who uses men to achieve her own goals, Patricia is presented as rather naïve and one dimensional, merely a tool for the progression of Michel's fate and as such devoid of any depth. This is mostly apparent in the scene that takes place in her apartment when she says to Michel that she is thinking but she does not know what she is thinking about. Michel tells her that he knows but she says “No, I'm thinking of nothing. I'd like to think about something, but I can't seem to”. This and other similar incidents add to her portrayal as a superficial empty-headed doll. She is presented as quite narcissistic and obsessed with her appearance since she has photos of herself on the walls of her flat and there are several shots of her checking herself in mirrors. She also asks Michel which part of her body he likes the most, her eyes, her mouth or her shoulders, accentuating the fragmentation of her body which Michel has performed earlier when he said, “I love a girl who has a nice neck, nice breasts, a nice voice, nice wrists, a nice forehead, nice knees...”. It is evident that

Michel, although he says he is in love with her, objectifies her and is obsessed with her because of her beauty, which he keeps admiring, and he tells her at some point “I’ve thought of something nice to tell you Patricia. I would like to sleep with you again because you’re beautiful”. Her reaction is to laugh, showing that she is clearly flattered, though this could also be interpreted as a dismissal of a rather forward and vulgar comment.

Yet the climactic point regarding this sexist discourse is when Patricia attends a press conference given by Mr Parvulesco during which he compares French and American women in a simplistic and ludicrous manner. When Patricia asks him whether he thinks that women have a role to play in modern society, he replies in the affirmative, adding “if she’s charming and wears a striped dress and dark glasses”, basically describing what Patricia is wearing. This could serve as a double comment, both in a meta-cinematic sense and also in a literal sense concerning women within society. On the one hand Jean Seberg as Patricia is actually playing an important part in the film by dressing the way she is, and on the other it is considered woman’s “role” to look pretty and attractive within society in general. Whichever way this comment is read, it is still diminishing as far as women’s value and subjectivity are concerned. Mulvey, in her article “Images of Women, Images of Sexuality: Some Films by J.-L. Godard”, comments precisely on this scene with Mr Parvulesco, pointing out the complicity in Patricia’s smile (52) and adds that Godard “understands the forces that mould women into a stereotype and reduce them to impotence” (53). There is a sense therefore that the over-emphasis of this commodification, especially in Godard’s films, to an extent could be read against the grain, but as Mulvey suggests “his own relation to that image raises further problems” and this scene “demonstrates but is also complicit with an equation of woman and sexuality” (53). Despite its self-awareness, by replicating these motifs the film participates in this problematic discourse as much as it might serve to criticise it and although there is a sense



that Godard's resentment focuses on the malaise of the capitalist society, his constant use of women to attack it generates the risk of “producing another equation in which women represent *the problem of sexuality in capitalist society*” (53). This, I would argue, holds true for most of his films, such as *My Life to Live* analysed earlier, and reinforces the connection between female sexuality and prostitution which reappears in several of his later films such as *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her* (1967). Before referring more generally to other instances of this stereotype within Godard's output in the 1960s which manifest this kind of guilty criticism of society in which women are sacrificed at the altar of Marxist discourse, I would now like to turn the discussion to Bergman's somewhat different yet equally problematic use of this stereotype.

*All These Women* focuses on the story of a music critic, Cornelius, who visits the mansion of a virtuoso musician in order to write his biography. The presence of Felix, the musician, is rather mystical since he is never seen in the flesh, apart from a few glimpses of his hands or legs and the bust that dominates the reception room, but he is heard playing his instrument in which instances the rest of the characters react in awe and extreme respect for his talent. The prominent characters in terms of screen presence in the film are the seven women that live with him and are all romantically involved with Felix. In this way the film presents us with an array of stereotypical female characters that are all competing against each other for his attentions. Once more the man is the creative artistic figure that reigns over these women, whereas they are there only to provide inspiration, material and physical service, and increase his fame both as an artist and as a model of virility. Therefore these women have a role only in relation to Felix and are otherwise quite insignificant and without agency. Adelaide is Felix's wife and she seems to be in charge of the 'harem', demonstrating power and a certain kind of detachment in tolerating this situation. She also seems to be something like a guardian to Felix's artistic integrity since

in a letter Felix writes to her: "I deceive you and betray you. This is inevitable. But remember this: if I ever fail or demean my art you must surely kill me". This explains why later on in the film Adelaide is seen practising her shooting skills on Felix's busts. Adelaide is also responsible for sorting out the quarrels between the mistresses and she is in charge of the schedule which dictates who will keep Felix company each night. In one scene, Adelaide goes through the timetable with Humlan and they discuss to great comic effect the different problems that arise, for example when one of the women, Traviata, gets overly jealous and Humlan says "We can't be that selfish!". The hilarity of this comment and other similar instances in the film comes from the extreme self-subjugation of these women to Felix. The comic incidents arising from the jealousy and competition between the women add to the intensification of the stereotype of woman as empty of her own subjectivity and acquiring a meaning only in terms of her relation to a man.

Cornelius is jealous of Felix's situation, being surrounded by all these beautiful women who adore him, and is chasing after Humlan in order to share in the glory and success. It seems therefore that the women act as a verification of success and a nurturing force for the men's masculinity, which is epitomized in Felix's phrase addressing Isolde, that everything nice would be pointless without her admiration. It is this kind of male narcissism that is foregrounded when similarly Cecilia says that Felix is attracted to her because "he wants to prove that he's not old and useless". Therefore there are some elements that show that these women are somehow empowered, such as the discussion they have out on the terrace while having breakfast, in which Traviatta tells Cecilia "we girls have learnt to live side by side" and that they have created their own moral order. However, after this phrase they start fighting and they all turn against Felix, but the moment they go to confront him, they are all appeased and tamed once more by the sound of his music. This and the general irony that comes out of the exaggerated portrayal of the

whole situation and pervades the film, complicate the discourse which could be read as a satire aimed at the critic's effort to appropriate the artist's 'glamorous' lifestyle. In the end, right after Felix's death, another young aspiring musician arrives in the house and Madame Tussaud, the owner of the mansion, asks him whether he wants to stay with them and let them take care of him. Having played on the interchangeability of the women and the contemptuous behaviour they have been subjected to, it seems in the end that the artists are equally interchangeable and the women easily replace Felix. Admittedly the discourse in this film is not monolithic, but similarly to the film discussed previously, it does recycle and reinforce the problematic stereotype I have pointed out through its extensive use. This idea of the artist as the figure around which the women revolve is also prevalent in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963) but in that case and in the absence of Bergman's intense sarcasm, it becomes a lot more problematic and self-indulgent for the male artist.

In order to round up the discussion on this last category of stereotypical representations, I will now refer to a few more instances that appear in Godard's oeuvre. As I have mentioned earlier, this predominantly decorative function of the female character is found in most films to variable degrees, but what makes the films discussed in this section stand out is that this seems to be the only function of the female characters and there is hardly any depth in them. An interesting and conflicting instance of this appears in Godard's *Contempt* (1963) in which Brigitte Bardot's character, Camille, does seem to have something more to offer, but the film does not explore it enough to counter the stereotypical use of Bardot's voluptuous figure. After the two-minute meta-cinematic introductory segment, the film cuts to the two protagonists, Bardot and Michel Piccoli, lying in bed. Bardot is completely naked, lying face down on the bed and Piccoli is lying dressed next to her. This is another occasion of the imbalance in the depiction of male and female nudity. It is repeated later on in the film when Camille is on the rooftop of the

producer's villa sunbathing naked, having a book on her backside, and in the end when she takes off her yellow robe and swims naked in the sea. As Mulvey suggests, “the use of the naked female body immediately casts doubt on Godard's project” (54). During the introductory segment there is a long dialogue between the two characters in which Camille keeps asking Paul whether he likes different parts of her body, thus initiating the fragmentation of her body for the pleasure of the man, and likewise the camera follows the dialogue and focuses on different parts of her body in close-up, slowly moving up and down her body at an almost caressing pace. In asking for Paul's approval she shows her obsession with her appearance and her narcissism, being constantly in need of confirmation from men. As the film progresses, the relationship between the couple deteriorates and Camille starts showing signs of discontent that can be traced back to the moment when Paul passes her on to the producer of the film, Jeremy, in an effort to gain his favour. Camille's discontent culminates when the couple fights and she tells Paul that she feels contempt towards him. Therefore Camille does not seem to be completely empty inside but on the contrary she shows signs of intense perceptive and thinking capacity. In the end she leaves Paul and when in the car with Jeremy she tells him that she is heading to Rome and intends to go back to working as a typist. She therefore chooses her dignity and independence instead of the economic affluence and stability Paul or Jeremy could offer. However, as with many other female characters in New Wave films – e.g. Nana in *My Life to Live*, Catherine in *Jules and Jim* – Camille meets a tragic death in a car accident.

From this brief discussion it is evident that although certain fault lines within the patriarchal capitalist system are presented and Camille seems to be more than she initially appears to be, the undertaking remains problematic due to its own implication in the discourse it criticises through the use of Brigitte Bardot's sex symbol status. Mulvey comments on how the length of the shots of her naked body allows time for a self-

realisation of the spectator's gaze that could create a questioning of this process (54). Yet as she goes on to argue, “[o]n the one hand its length and form are an attempt to demystify the very source of our images of women and yet, at the same time, the potency of that image is such that it is doubtful that any simple demystification is possible” (54-55). This pattern of stereotypical representation of femininity that reduces woman to an image that is valuable only in its aesthetic and sexual appeal, as mentioned earlier, is prevalent in numerous films that for practical reasons of space cannot be included in this study. In films such as Godard's *Band of Outsiders* (1964) and even *Pierrot le Fou* (1964) the female characters are, to a variable degree but quite consistently, presented as amusingly naïve and lacking a meditative, philosophical depth while being visually stunning and concerned mostly about their appearance. This could be attributed to the male gaze that controls the aesthetic of the films, which is that of the male director. As Mulvey claims in relation to Godard, “[i]t is not that [his] investigation lacks interest but it is finally a masculine investigation, ignoring the complex social determination of women's position in favour of an image of woman outside any social or economic context” (54). This comment I would argue is equally valid for all four directors studied in this chapter. Despite the differences in their styles and thematic preoccupations, they all seem to be concerned with a social malaise that plagues their contemporary world but in their exploration of this malaise each one seems to ignore its intrinsic sexism and its implications for the social structure they are looking at. Without any intention to diminish the value of their work, I would, however, claim that the characterisation “women's directors”, as attributed to two of them, is far from well-founded as soon as their female representations are put under scrutiny. In order to justify and support this position at this point I am going to turn the discussion to two examples of filmmaking around the same time-period coming from two prominent women directors of art cinema: Agnès Varda and Chantal Akerman.

### The Woman with a Movie Camera: A Different Approach to Female Representation

As the title of my thesis suggests, the main premise of my argument is that women directors can exploit art cinema's iconoclastic potential in order to directly address issues of gender identity and its implications as well as offering alternative ways of representing women and questioning the already existing representations. The artistic fluidity and freedom of expression that pervades art cinema is the most important quality that renders it a fertile ground for such explorations. Agnès Varda is a prolific director who has infused her work with such explorations. She has managed to establish a career in a male-dominated environment by putting her personal stamp and experimenting with different themes and formats. Most of her films openly tackle feminist issues yet manage to successfully tread the thin balance between entertainment and political commitment thus avoiding being marginalised. For this section I will focus on her film *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), made at the height of the French New Wave, and look at the entirely different take on female subjectivity in comparison to the rest of the New Wave films, some examples of which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. I will then move on to a discussion of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) by Chantal Akerman, a director that was more closely linked to experimental feminist film. However, I would argue that with this film she crosses over to the art cinema territory, making her feminist concerns more approachable to a wider audience while still raising important issues about female representation. This brief discussion aims at validating the importance of female authorship if gender equality both in fiction and in reality is to be achieved. Simultaneously it paves the way towards a consideration of the contemporary situation, which will be undertaken in the case study chapters that follow.

By the time Agnès Varda launched her second feature film *Cléo from 5 to 7* in

1962 she had already attracted the attention of new wave producer Georges de Beauregard. I have already referred to the importance of the way Varda's first steps in filmmaking coincided with the French New Wave (chapter 1). The increased interest of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics/directors and the technological developments at the time contributed to the cinematic growth in France and Varda was able to reap the benefits from this attention in order to establish her career as a filmmaker. Varda's reluctance to be lumped in with the new wave auteurs, as noted by Neupert (49), must have been compromised by the realisation that 'catching the wave' at that particular time would give her the financial opportunities to make films. *Cléo* was very successful at the time and can be considered as her 'break' into the industry, which already showcases her distinct artistic vision. As Alison Smith argues, "Agnès Varda is one of the very few French women film-makers who have identified themselves as feminist" (8) and although some of her later films are more overtly political, I would argue that in *Cléo* the representation of the main character is profoundly distinct from the female representations of her male counterparts and this can be considered as evidence of its feminist value.

*Cléo from 5 to 7* is a film that deals with the exploration of its female protagonist's identity, a process that is set in motion by the horrifying news of her impending death. She has been diagnosed with cancer and the film follows her life during the two hours before she gets the results of her biopsy. From the beginning of the film she is presented as quite frivolous and childish. After she has heard the terrible news predicting her death she seems intensely upset, but as soon as she looks at a mirror, she smiles. When she walks out into the street there is a voice-over saying, "hold on, pretty butterfly, ugliness is a kind of death" a phrase that seems to epitomize her existence at this point. Straight away she adds that as long as she is beautiful she is more alive than others. This and other similar incidents indicate that she is very much preoccupied by her looks and she seems to be more

concerned about her illness affecting her appearance rather than death itself. During the scene that takes place in the hat-shop, she behaves quite capriciously, trying on several hats and posing in front of the mirrors in a narcissistic and coquettish manner. Soon after, there is a gradual build-up of her internal crisis, which is intensified by the fact that no one seems to take her seriously: her boyfriend, Angèle or her musician colleagues, they all seem to imply that she is feigning her illness as a form of attention seeking. Until this point Cléo's representation seems to be conforming to the dominant stereotype that portrays female characters as vain, narcissistic and embodying Mulvey's notion of to-be-looked-at-ness. Yet, unlike any other female representations in the New Wave, this film offers a refreshing departure from this common stereotype, since the character half-way through the film undergoes a crisis of identity and gradually changes the way she views herself and the world around her.

As the fortune-teller at the beginning of the film had predicted, the final tarot card does not necessarily mean death but a profound transformation of her whole existence. Varda herself comments on the trajectory of her character's development, saying that “in the first half of the film, Cléo is described and defined by those who see her”<sup>12</sup>. Yet, she explains: “in the middle of the film, I wanted a clean cut, a sharp change. Forty five minutes into the film the beauty feels herself cracking. [...]At this point, she begins to look at others. I consider this a feminist approach”<sup>13</sup>. The climactic sequence unfolds during the rehearsal of her songs with two colleagues in her home. She starts by performing songs whose lyrics are very coquettish and conform to the idea of the woman performer as a sexual figure, but when she sings a sad song which includes the lyric “beauty wasted”, she gets more and more emotional, breaks down crying, and says “it's too much”. Bob, the pianist, exclaims “another caprice!” and at that Cléo starts shouting at him things such as

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12 Quotes by Varda are taken from the special features of the dvd release of the film. Artificial Eye: 2009.

13 *Ibid.*



“either I'm an idiot or a china doll” and “you unnerve me to exploit me”. From these words it is evident that she was conscious of her performative role and the way she allowed her own exploitation but now she rebels against that. She tears off her fancy hairpiece and changes into a simple black dress, adding her new hat and standing up to Angèle saying “I'll do what I want” before dashing out. From that moment onwards, as Varda's own comments suggest, she gradually transforms from object to bearer of the gaze, which is the first step to regaining her subjectivity and developing as a character. This is also marked formally by an increase of POV shots and through continuity editing in which there are shots of Cléo observing the world around her and reverse shots of what she sees. A notable example of this appears in chapter 8 when she is sitting at a café, wearing sunglasses, and there are several shots of passers-by intercut with shots of incidents that have occurred earlier in the film. This shows her now meditative attitude towards what occurs around her but also a re-thinking of past events. Her subsequent encounter with her friend Dorothée is crucial to this transition since their talk touches upon issues of the body as spectacle. Dorothée, who is posing naked as a model for sculptors, suggests that the body can be a source of pleasure for the woman herself when she says “my body makes me happy, not proud” and she also hints at the possibility of disconnecting the female body from sexual performance in the context of art by saying “they're looking at more than just me...a shape, an idea...”. This conversation, as well as the one she has later with Antoine, are fundamental for Cléo's internal metamorphosis and through them she is seen to become “a multi-layered persona, going from vanity to anxiety, fear to curiosity”<sup>14</sup>. It is this curiosity that drives her henceforth, managing to open her mind and challenge her prior world-view. The effects of this positive change in her are evident in the film's optimistic ending. Although it is confirmed by her biopsy that she does have cancer, there is hope that she

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14 Varda, *ibid.*

will recover. She tells Antoine that she is not afraid any more and in the last shot they stop, look at each other and smile.

This portrayal, as Varda herself states, represents a feminist approach in that the film directly addresses feminine stereotypes and surpasses them by presenting the complexity of the female character. In addition to this, Varda adds another interesting incident in terms of gender preconceptions, namely the sequence with the female taxi driver. This comes quite early in the film and it can be considered as the first feminist intervention in a fictional universe so far governed by a conservative ideology. Although it is a traditionally male-dominated profession, she tells Cléo and Angèle that she loves it despite the inherent risks. The discussion between the taxi driver and the two passengers brings to the fore the existing prejudices concerning gender and certain professions. It reveals how arbitrary these beliefs are and although Cléo's reaction is quite conservative, saying that the taxi driver shocked her, Angèle expresses her admiration, calling her courageous and charming. This episode can also be read as a self-referential intervention on the part of the director in addressing an issue that must have been a personal concern as well, since her profession is similarly dominated by men. This self-reflexivity appears more strongly in relation to the film's position within the new wave in the film-within-a-film sequence in chapter 10. The short film entitled, *Les Fiancés du Pont Mac Donald* (1961), stars Jean-Luc Godard and his then partner and leading lady, Anna Karina, alongside other key figures of the movement. It is a parody of Godard's obsessive use of his dark sunglasses, and Varda says playfully that “the truth behind [her] motivation for this was that [she]’d had enough of Jean-Luc’s dark, black sunglasses that always hid his eyes”<sup>15</sup>. This is a delightful reference, almost like an inside joke, for cinephiles, but it can also be read in a more serious manner with regard to the ways of seeing. It could therefore

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15 *Ibid.*

be read as a playful comment on the distorting effects of the dark glasses on the famous director's vision, since instead of seeing what is actually taking place, he sees grim and depressing visions, such as Karina dying. Taking this point further, it could be read as a comment on Godard's point of view and how his persona, represented by the dark sunglasses, is responsible for or prone to victimising the female character. It thus accentuates the very disparate points of view of the two contemporaneous directors in terms of on-screen gender representations.

Chantal Akerman, as mentioned earlier, comes from a more experimental, avant-garde film background if one thinks of her short film *Blow up My Town* (1968) or even her feature *I...You...He...She...* (1974). Judith Mayne mentions that in French cinema the “search for alternative cinematic forms has not entailed the dismissal of narrative, but rather its reconceptualisation” (“Women” 87). I would therefore argue that this quality makes it more accessible to a wider audience compared to other avant-garde practices, and as a result it can be considered within an art cinema context. Akerman's best known and most widely discussed film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), was made at a time when issues of gender representation and their aesthetics were gaining precedence in film scholarship. It is an interesting exploration of the everyday life of a woman who is an ordinary housewife but also a prostitute. To a certain extent, then, this film is reminiscent of Buñuel's *Belle de Jour*, discussed earlier in this chapter, in that the two protagonists lead double lives and try to balance their ordinary family lives with prostitution. In other words, *Jeanne Dielman* could be considered as a reworking of the idea behind *Belle de Jour*, so it is quite evident that it is not the tropes themselves that are problematic but the ways they are approached and represented on screen.

What is particularly striking about this film is its lengthy scenes and slow paced action, which would be considered 'dead time' in a conventional film narrative since they

depict mundane household activities, but are in this case studiously observed and recorded. According to Mary Ann Doane “[t]he specificity of the film lies in the painful duration of that time 'in-between' events, that time which is exactly proper to the woman (in particular, the housewife) within a patriarchal society” (176). In this way it renders visible a housewife's 'invisible' labour and, as Janet Bergstrom has noticed, there are two feminine positions inscribed into the film “the feminine *manquée*, acculturated under patriarchy, and the feminist who is actively looking at the objective conditions of her oppression – her place in the family” (qtd in Mayne, “Women” 95). In contrast to the glamorous middle class character in *Belle de Jour*, in this instance the housewife/prostitute is de-glamorized, and due to the lack of titillating sex scenes it avoids any objectification of its protagonist. The camera is very static and maintains a relative distance, allowing the characters to move in and out of frame rather than following them around. The only scene when Jeanne is naked is quite early in the film when after her first client she is having a bath. Yet even in this instance the female body is not presented in a sensual, voyeuristic manner because of the distance and the lack of performative sensual movements on the part of the character; she is just having a bath in a very ordinary and de-aestheticized manner. The use of the camera distance in this way, as Mayne argues, “engages a rethinking of the opposition between distance and identification” (“Women” 97) and realises Mulvey's formulation which 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” (27). Moreover, the film brings up certain issues concerning gender and more precisely women within its narrative as well, and it will be interesting to trace these in order to complete the discussion concerning the portrayal of Jeanne.

Jeanne has been a widow for 6 years, has a teenage son, Sylvain, and a sister who lives with her family in Canada. From her daily routine one can conjecture that Jeanne is

obsessive to an extent about her household activities and is in control of everything. This routine seems to be quite strict and disciplined, which renders the slight glitches that start taking place both significant and ominous. It is not easy to detect the cause that instigates the disintegration of Jeanne's perfectly organised daily life but one of the things that Mayne also notices as a possible cause is the letter her sister sends her ("Women" 95). Among other things, her sister suggests that Jeanne should think of remarrying because she is "too pretty to be alone". Moreover during the conversation she has with her son later that night, when she tells him about how she met his father, she says "I didn't know if I wanted to marry, but that's what people did". These events combined show that Jeanne's attitude towards marriage is not particularly positive and she did it only because of the social pressure. Jeanne is a very devoted mother and Sylvain seems to be extremely fond of her, sharing with her his innermost thoughts and preoccupations. During a conversation Sylvain says, "If I were a woman...I wouldn't be able to sleep with someone I didn't love", to which Jeanne rather abruptly replies "You don't know, you're not a woman". This comment then seems to hit a vein in Jeanne who responds quite sharply to a criticism coming from an 'outsider', someone who is not in the position she finds herself in. Mayne argues that "[t]here may not be an exact and identifiable cause for the murder of Jeanne's client, but the threat of randomness, of an interruption which is not immediately regulated and defined within cycles of repetition and rituals, looms over the film from the outset" ("Women" 95-6). In other words, a number of different things start disrupting Jeanne's automated routine, such as the letter, Sylvain's comments about sex, or any other slight deviation from the standard plan, which have as their ultimate result the murder of her last client. By the time of the third client's visit the pace has picked up and there is a sense of impending crisis which is also heightened by the fact that this is the only time in the film that the camera is inside the bedroom while Jeanne is with a client. The scene is not

presented in a sensual manner but in a matter-of-fact clinical way, and instead of being pleasurable to the viewer one could argue that it creates discomfort and awkwardness, especially during the shots when Jeanne is underneath the man trying to shake him off her. Yet in the final shot of the film, after she has stabbed him, she is sitting at the dining room table with blood on her hands and shirt but with a look of what seems like a returned serenity or as if she is deep in some sort of trance. This inability to pinpoint the character's motives, feelings and thoughts is one of the biggest strengths of Jeanne's representation. One could argue that she is an enigmatic woman and therefore a stereotype of femininity, but in contrast to this stereotypical representation the woman is not violated in order to be cured and her final action points to her sociopathy as caused by her oppressive and monotonous life rather than something inherent in her nature.

### Conclusion

This chapter has focused on female representations that can be found in 'classical' art cinema, roughly from the late 1950s until the early 1970s. This is a cinema of great auteurs, a characteristic that testifies to the distinctness of each one of the chosen directors but also positions them in a common arena of cultural production. It has therefore been argued that one of the shared characteristics among these directors is the more or less stereotypical representation of their female characters. Similarly to the mainstream, especially to classical Hollywood practices, and despite art cinema's 'alternativeness', it seems that in terms of gender representation there is little difference between the two cinematic fields at least at that time period. In order to give some validity to my argument, mainly that art cinema can be a valuable platform to present feminist ideals and interrogate gender issues, even though male directors have not taken advantage of art cinema's potential to break convention in gender representation, I have included the analyses of two

films directed by women who have a significantly different take on gender representation from their male contemporaries. Yet since then a notable shift has occurred in terms of the boundaries of art cinema, transforming it from a Eurocentric arena to a global one, and although some would argue that art cinema's focus still remains in Europe<sup>16</sup>, there are very obvious effects this opening up has had for the female representations that are offered therein. One of my main feminist concerns in relation to this is to demonstrate through the study of films how patriarchal oppression transcends national boundaries, manifesting itself in different forms and degrees from place to place. My study also shows how feminism has had a better fate in the western 'first' world, whereas in certain other countries women are still deprived of basic human rights. In addition, as gender debates have become more and more vocal from the 1970s onwards, several directors have become more and more aware of the politics of gender representation on film and have challenged to a significant degree the existing conventions. For example, Pedro Almodóvar, the most prominent Spanish contemporary auteur, provokes and challenges in varying degrees the social status quo in terms of gender and sexuality in films such as *What have I done to deserve this?* (1984), *Kika* (1993) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011). Abbas Kiarostami, whose name is synonymous to New Iranian Cinema, has produced a significant number of films to worldwide acclaim and in some of them – e.g. *Ten* (2002) – he presents strong female characters or shows their oppression due to the strongly patriarchal religion and culture. Similarly François Ozon and Lars Von Trier, both prominent auteur figures within global art cinema, have shaken conventions, making socially provocative films like *Swimming Pool* (Ozon, 2003), *Potiche* (Ozon, 2010), *Breaking the Waves* (von Trier, 1996) and *Antichrist* (von Trier, 2009). All of the films just mentioned show the positive progress concerning female representations through time, since it is quite obvious that there has

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16 For further information see Randall Halle's article "Offering Tales They Want to Hear: Transnational European Film Funding as Neo-Orientalism". See bibliography.

been some sort of change, at least in pushing the boundaries as to what can be shown on screen, yet in most cases the female stereotypes are still used even if to an ambiguous effect. This ambiguity and point of contestation is important and should not be underestimated since it is inscribed in the text and offered to the spectator for further reflection. However, the main argument of this thesis is that female-authored art films are more decisive in breaking these old stereotypes, furthering issues related to gender and its representation, and therefore art cinema is a hospitable environment for feminist ideals. This will be demonstrated in the subsequent case studies, which are divided according to aesthetic practices (film movements, social realism, meta-cinema, genre films) in order to show the diversity of women's cinematic production and also the applicability of feminist ideas in contemporary film culture. Having shown the proximity between art and mainstream cinema in terms of inscribing gender ideology, this study is looking forward to the increasing inclusion of films, through the participation of women within filmmaking, that are feminist-friendly and to the eventual obliteration of stereotyping in popular as well as art cinema.



## Chapter 3

Female-Authored Films within Film Movements: Adopting Aesthetic Trends to  
Revolutionise Gendered Perspectives

This chapter looks at the specific case of female-authored films made within particular film movements related to art cinema. Through this discussion I will highlight the importance of such movements for this particular cinematic context and also the significance of women directors' participation in them as a way to share this common platform of artistic innovation within their contemporary film culture. Hence, women directors through art cinema's various movements can not only earn due acknowledgement for their cinematic production and everything that this entails – popularity, financial profit and increased career prospects – but also promote a different viewpoint in terms of gender representations, while simultaneously avoiding being marginalised as simply making women's films. Film movements are directly influenced by the wider cultural trends and concerns within a certain socio-political context as well as cinematic traditions worldwide. Due to their visibility, film movements form an important part of cultural production and are frequently important in shaping and reinforcing the ideological viewpoints they are usually rather keen to publicise. It is in this aspect that feminist and other political issues can be successfully integrated and new models for gender representations or critiques of the existing status quo can be inscribed within the filmic text. In addition, film movements may start as specific products of a place and time but quickly influence film production in general and expand beyond the national borders they might have sprung from. This resembles a cultural butterfly effect that is facilitated by art cinema's transnational character. Linda Badley and Barton Palmer acknowledge this in the following statement:

Most often, cinematic traditions are 'national' in the sense that they include only texts that constitute a form of difference within a larger, more diffuse and varied body of national films, and yet there are often

indispensable transnational connections that foreclose any understanding of the tradition solely within the terms of its 'native' culture. (2)

In this sense both the film movements that will be discussed in this chapter – Dogme 95 and New Argentine Cinema – are immediately related to the cultural production of Denmark and Argentina respectively, but at the same time they participate in a more global cinematic dialogue, responding to other film practices and changing the creative landscape in their native country and beyond. For instance, in the case of Dogme there has been an overt opening up to the rest of the world and it could be argued that the international festival circuit was the platform that facilitated this cultural diffusion. In the case of New Argentine cinema as well, there is a sense of a greater Latin American terrain of cinematic reform that bears a lot of resemblances to the European New Waves of the 60s, sharing as a common anxiety the necessity to interact with and counteract the cinematic dominance of Hollywood. Therefore these quite diverse film movements I am focusing on have a point of convergence but they also have certain differences, which makes them interesting case studies for the present chapter. Following the analyses, I will demonstrate the possibility of a meaningful comparison accompanied by some concluding remarks concerning the importance of women's work within film movements worldwide.

The connection between film movements and art cinema should not suggest that this sense of a renewal of cinematic production, which they are usually invested with is exclusive to art cinema. Mainstream practices do evolve over time as well, but it is definitely the case that such movements are usually hailed and defined more readily and enthusiastically within 'alternative' spaces such as art cinema. The defining characteristic of art cinema's movements is the force they obtain and the usually radical spirit they invest themselves with in breaking away from past or contemporaneous Hollywood and domestic

film practices. It is probably art cinema's pronounced flexibility and imperative for differentiation that almost demands film movements as a way of re-inventing itself and evolving through distinguishing itself from the rather more 'stagnant' and 'lethargic' mainstream practices. In this way they could also be considered as practical ways of conceptualising and making sense of different patterns of artistic creation that emerge within the rather fluid context of global art cinema that concomitantly offer the possibility for ground-breaking artistic innovations within the medium. Consequently, it could be said that there is a tension between the flexibility or openness of art cinema and the constraints of an artistic movement as well as the restricting and regulatory characteristic of demarcating a film movement post facto. This tension can be attributed to the ambiguity of art cinema's position between highly regulated film industries and more liberal filmmaking spaces. The differences between individual film movements are therefore symptomatic of this tricky balance, which is also affected by their particular historical and national contexts. In some cases they are clearly defined and preceded by manifestos, such as surrealism and Dogme. In others there is a more relaxed, less organised and more organic evolution that many times is defined a posteriori by critics and institutions who signpost this break away from previous film practices and aesthetic concerns. This seems to have been the case with, for example, Italian neo-realism, New Iranian cinema and New Argentine cinema.

In this respect, the two movements I have chosen for my analysis are distinct in terms of the amount of self-consciousness and self-promotion they include. To be more precise, in making a Dogme film a director has to apply for the certificate and very consciously stick to the rules that are specified by its founders. This is not the case for New Argentine Cinema since the directors do not consciously choose to stick to certain rules but the rules and aesthetics, as I will proceed to demonstrate, come out of the politics and

ideological stance the directors adopt. Yet both movements have gained global dimensions, which to an extent is attributable to their art cinema affiliation. Dogme cannot only be considered as having been influenced by the spirit of the Nouvelle Vague but it has also spread outside its national boundaries with directors from America, Argentina, France, Korea and Italy applying for the certificate. However, as I will proceed to demonstrate, this 'globalisation' is not that simple and there seems to be a clear distinction between Danish Dogme films and foreign production. The global nature of New Argentine Cinema has more to do with the relationship it bears to the rest of Argentina's national cinema as well as the New Waves and New Cinemas around the world. As I will explain in the second section of the chapter, Argentine Cinema holds an important place in Latin American Cinemas and it has been influenced both by European film movements such as Italian Neo-realism and by its more local cinematic past like Third Cinema and Cinema Novo during the 1960s.

Furthermore, the choice of these geographically and politically/historically disparate contexts aims to instigate a comparison in terms of women directors' position within the industry. Danish cinema compared to Argentine or Latin American cinema in general would be expected to offer more opportunities to women directors. Yet reading about particular film movements or more general articles, like Nick James' "Revolt Into Style", that give a brief overview of these cinematic phenomena, one cannot fail to notice that film movements, especially the more self-consciously radical ones, with the exception of the feminist film movements during the 1970s, are usually launched by groups of "angry young men" (33). These cultural arenas, then, seem to be still rather male dominated. However, as I will proceed to show, women directors are increasingly beginning to participate in greater numbers, which I argue is potentially rather helpful for feminist politics. It is the revolutionary attitude of these movements that can create the possibility

for women to join in and challenge patriarchy and traditional ways of cinematic expression. In fact there are a few notable cases of women contributing significantly within certain film movements in the past, such as Germaine Dulac who made the first surrealist film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927). She therefore rightfully deserves the title of the “Mother of Surrealist Film” and more generally due to the significance of her whole cinematic oeuvre “[s]he has an important place in early film history as 'an intrepid improviser and experimenter in film form’” (Quart 21). Similarly, Agnès Varda, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been considered as one of the pioneering figures of the French New Wave – an evaluation based on her film *La Pointe Courte* (1955) – and although she has expressed a certain reluctance to embrace that role, she has admitted to the value of this recognition for her subsequent career. In thus 'catching the wave' she managed to create a film that challenged female representations while making a strategic move that earned her the necessary attention that would facilitate the progression of her career. Due to the frequent comparison between the French New Wave and Dogme 95, it seems fitting to proceed first with the more detailed discussion of Dogma and Susanne Bier's involvement in it with *Open Hearts*. I will then 'cross the pond' and look at Lucrecia Martel's *The Swamp* and her involvement in New Argentine Cinema. My aim is to show how these two directors have embraced this reinvigorating trend within their individual cinematic contexts while injecting their films with alternative gender representations.

#### Manifesting Allegiance to the Dogme: Susanne Bier's *Open Hearts*

Denmark has a rich cinematic history dating from the dawn of cinema in 1896. Since then Danish cinema has had an important position within cultural history both at a national and at an international level, albeit with considerable fluctuations. Danish cinema's golden age, according to Paolo Cherchi Usai, took place during the early 1910s

and generally Scandinavian cinema held a prominent place internationally during the silent era (151). As with many national cinemas it was the introduction of sound that restricted its international appeal and with the German Occupation during World War II a further cultural isolation, due to the ban on American and European films, was unavoidable. Ib Bondebjerg, in his article “Film Comedy, Modernization and Gender Roles”, describes in detail this unstable yet constant relationship that Danish cinema has had with the wider world, specifically in relation to how a popular genre like romantic comedy has evolved, taking on board local cultural traits as well as adopting and creatively incorporating Hollywood and other styles, themes and aesthetics. Yet alongside genre filmmaking there have flourished other forms more avant-garde and more readily related to art cinema, such as realist filmmaking influenced by Italian neo-realism and subsequently the French New Wave which had a huge impact in Danish cinema during the 1960s (Bondebjerg, “Film Realism” 191). However, it is more recently that Danish cinema has been most consistently in the international limelight, and as Bondebjerg remarks, “[i]n the 1990s, we see a clear increase in the internationalization of Danish film culture, both through a growth in Scandinavian and European co-productions and through a stronger aesthetic and stylistic influence on Danish film from international film culture” (“Film Realism” 209). He therefore argues that this new tendency within Danish cinema, starting in the late 1980s with Gabriel Axel's and Bille August's international successes, was further sustained by the international appeal and later spread of Dogme 95. Yet before proceeding to talk about the specificities of Dogme, it is important to point out the way women directors have held an important place within Danish cinema. My contention is that despite their lesser numbers, they have been equally integrated within the industry and its history. A few notable examples are Alice O'Fredericks who established a long career from the mid-1930s to the late 1960s; Bodil Ipsen, an actress/director who made several films during the 1940s and

whose name was given to the Danish film awards which are equivalent to the Oscars; Annelise Reenberg who between 1950 and 1970 made a significant mark in terms of female representations; and more recently Susanne Bier, Lone Scherfig, Paprika Steen and Lotte Svendsen. Therefore this environment seems rather progressive in terms of gender and professional roles, especially compared to other countries. Yet, as I will proceed to argue, despite Danish cinema's openness to women filmmakers, Dogme presents a slightly different picture. Stemming from this observation it could possibly be the case that the particular example of Danish cinema presents an exception to my initial assumption that the mainstream is a more hostile environment to women directors compared to art cinema. In other words, it seems that in the Danish context women are more easily incorporated into the national cinema but not so well represented within art cinema. This shows that in this particular case gender discrimination has more to do with the presumed cultural value of art cinema and I will return to this issue when talking about the critical reception of female-authored Dogme films.

Dogme 95 was launched internationally during a film conference in Paris on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1995 that was dedicated to the celebration of the completion of a century of cinema. In a controversial way Lars von Trier chose that stage to declare his manifesto and the accompanying 'Vow of Chastity' that he and his three colleagues and co-founding members had signed in proposing a cinematic revolution<sup>17</sup>. As Linda Badley states, the movement “required abstinence from Hollywood-style indulgences and high-tech 'cosmetics’” (80). Hand-held camerawork, diegetic sound and a total lack of special visual effects are some of the most noticeable characteristics of their approach<sup>18</sup>, which was directed to a search for originality and 'truth' in cinematic expression. This approach has been repeatedly

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17 For further information on the origins of Dogme 95 look *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*. Introduction. By Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie.

18 For a full list of the 10 rules that constitute the 'Vow of Chastity' look *ibid*. Appendix I. p. 199-200.

compared to the French New Wave in terms of the low production values and the use of new technologies to revolutionise cinematic production. Thus Bondebjerg observes that “in many ways the Dogma concept both in its ritual birth in Paris and in its actual rules, continues the tradition from the New Wave cinema” (“Film Realism” 191). However, he also adds that “the new generation of the 1990s definitely took realism in new directions, mostly through a much broader thematic universe and a more dense and experimental visual style” (191). This goes to show that Dogme was not as decisive a break with cinematic traditions as it claimed to be, at least on this level. It was definitely a development but it still made use of both national cultural traditions and globally dominant artistic tendencies.

Yet a major point of differentiation between the two movements is Dogma's apparent rejection of the figure of the director as the author of the film, since directors are not to be credited for their directing role according to the tenth rule in the 'Vow of Chastity'. This was a significant point of contestation between Dogme 95 and the French New Wave, and in their manifesto the Dogma brothers accused the French directors of the New Wave of betraying their anti-bourgeois ethos. According to Dogme 95, “the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art” adding that “[t]he auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby ... false!”<sup>19</sup>. Yet it could be argued that Dogma, due to its intrinsic association with Lars von Trier, one of the most prominent and controversial auteur figures of contemporary Danish cinema and global art cinema, fails to distance itself from the spectre of the auteur and even if the director is not included in the credits, there are other channels, such as participation in festivals or press material, through which the individual films are being known as a specific director's work. Therefore this principle of Dogma seems highly

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19 *Ibid.* p. 199



ambiguous and its effectiveness remains questionable. In a similar vein Bondebjerg argues that “the manifesto in and of itself, with its very militant rhetoric aimed at the dominant cinema and the *auteur*, is not always lived up to by the Dogma directors, since most of them also work on big-budget movies and because they themselves are certainly very different *auteurs* and not a uniform group” (“Dogma” 76). Therefore there seems to be a certain amount of controversy around this idea, and the movement, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, could be seen as restrictive rather than liberating at least to some of its participants. Jean-Marc Barr for example, the first non-Danish director to make a Dogma film, in an interview to Richard Kelly commented that he and his collaborator, Pascal Arnold, consider this rule of not giving credit to the director as “a little bit bourgeois”, adding that von Trier's insistence on it made them think that “it was a process that [they] found a little bit fascistic” (42). Yet most of the directors that have been involved in the movement seem to stress the opposite point, that of the freeing potential of all these rules, and Lone Scherfig, “the first practising Dogme Sister” (125), as Kelly calls her, stated that this freedom is also apparent in the decision to not credit the director, but admits that in the end “it's no secret who has made these films” and points to the “symbolic value” (126) of this gesture which she seems to condone.

As emphasised in the introduction, the figure of the *auteur*, especially the female *auteur*, is very important for this study, since it is through this personal artistic signature that directors mainly establish themselves within the art cinema context. In terms of the Dogma movement it is quite notable how little visibility women directors and their Dogme films have gained in comparison to the 'brethren', even though at least the first two female-authored Dogma films, *Italian For Beginners* (Scherfig, 2000) and *Open Hearts* (Bier, 2002), seem to have been massive financial successes domestically. This brings forward the issue that even though the director's identity is meant to be insignificant within this film

movement, it is definitely the case that at least in the critical reception of the films it is taken into consideration and there does seem to be a segregation both in terms of gender and also in terms of national context. In other words, not only has there been a distinction between the Danish Dogma films and the non-Danish ones but also between the Danish Dogmas that have been directed by women and the ones directed by the original 'brethren'. This is articulated quite strongly by Jack Stevenson who states that “it was the gals – Scherfig and Bier – who had made the two love stories that had turned out to be massive hits, while the guys were making the 'daring works of art' that relatively speaking didn't draw flies” (149-150). This rather patronising statement, which testifies to the source's journalistic tone, is an indication of a certain amount of sexism that sees women as making 'inferior' commercial films rather than noteworthy works of art. Stevenson elaborates further on this view in the following way:

They were all domestic melodramas with a twist, but the lines seemed clearly drawn: the fellows made the raw, hard-edged films that were transgressive, ground-breaking, and experimental, while the women made, well ... 'women's pictures', that promulgated a more sentimental set of values and which tapped into a potentially much larger audience. And with three of the next four Dogme films to be made by women (Natasha Arthy, Annette K. Olesen, and Charlotte Sachs Bostrup), one had to wonder how that would effect the perception of Dogme as a totality, as an artistic concept. (150)

The discourse used in this passage is quite problematic since it seems to adhere to a discriminatory binary according to which women make “women's pictures” and the men make challenging works of art. Therefore one can trace in this statement the high/low culture divide that links generic and more mainstream qualities, such as popularity, with

low-quality films which are disdainfully dismissed as women's pictures. Although Stevenson defines all of the Dogma films as domestic melodramas, he still differentiates between them by inferring that the films directed by women are more sentimental which according to him explains their box-office success. Stevenson ends this statement by attempting a bleak prediction concerning the future of Dogma and the threat that women directors seem to be posing for its 'artistic value'. As a whole, Stevenson's argument echoes the ideas on gender and genius which Battersby, already mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, detects in European culture since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Of course this attitude is not necessarily representative of the whole industry, but it is indicative of the persisting gender divide within art cinema at least in some cases. For example, Scherfig, in her interview to Kelly, stated that she did not perceive Dogma to be "a man's club" or at least any "worse than anywhere else in the film industry", adding that at least in her national context it is quite common to have a woman in the director's position (128). This statement underscores an important issue for the present study, mainly the challenging position of women directors within the film industry, which may vary from one socio-political context to the next, as well as from one individual to the next. Therefore the discussion that follows does not intend to represent 'Women's' take on Dogme but only the specific director's. Accordingly, I will proceed to delineate the film's position within Dogme and also offer a brief textual analysis of the major themes that are presented therein, commenting on their potential value for feminism.

*Open Hearts* is Susanne Bier's take on the Dogme 95 movement, coming at a time in her career when she had already established her name as a noteworthy director within Danish cinema. From its conception, according to Lars von Trier and his mentor, Mogens Rukov, Dogma seems to have been an exercise in cinematic minimalism aimed at experienced directors "who have been tried and tested in various ways and who have

clearly demonstrated talent and expertise” (Hjort and Mackenzie 8). Due to her successful career in filmmaking within Denmark, Hjort and Mackenzie remark that “Bier [...] is precisely the kind of film-maker who should be making a Dogma film, for in her case the notion of an ascetic shedding of ingrained habits, procedures and frameworks makes considerable sense” (9). Her romantic comedy *The One and Only* (1999) was hugely successful, and although her filmography until then did not consist of big-budget films, at least in comparison to other directors like von Trier, her experience within a more mainstream context made her involvement with Dogma particularly meaningful. *Open Hearts* was hugely successful and according to Stevenson it “set the record for opening weekend grosses for a Dogme film, exceeding the phenomenal numbers *Italian for Beginners* had posted almost a year and a half earlier” (142). This financial success was accompanied by an overall positive critical reception, yet despite this, or maybe because of this, the film seems to have initiated a crisis within Dogme in terms of the presumed standardization of film production at least within Denmark. Before going into a more detailed discussion concerning the position of this film within Dogme, I will firstly look at the film itself and its basic themes in order to substantiate the claims concerning the important contribution of Bier within the movement. In addition, I will highlight the film's strategies – narrative point of view, gender representation and character construction – in order to support claims of its feminist undertones.

*Open Hearts* deals with a young woman's effort to come to terms with her fiancé's quadriplegia and the relationship that develops between her and a doctor whose wife is coincidentally the one responsible for the tragic accident, which caused it. In this theme the film is reminiscent of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) in which the main character, Bess McNeill, finds herself in a similar situation, struggling to come to terms with her husband's paralysis. Even stylistically von Trier's pre-Dogme film anticipates and

to an extent puts into practice the Dogme aesthetic, with its grainy shots, the haphazard camera movement, that seems to be at least in part hand-held, and the extreme close-ups of the protagonist's face. The film retains a very heavily melodramatic and sentimental tone, presenting the viewer with a central heroine who seems to be almost a caricature, due to her extreme piety and her disturbed and rather simple mentality. Peter Schepelern points out that with this film von Trier paid tribute to the grand master of Danish cinema, Carl Theodor Dreyer, in “rework[ing] the Dreyeresque themes of the suffering woman and the miracle of faith” (146). These themes are absent from *Open Hearts*, which nods instead to the tradition of realist melodramas between 1945 and 1960, and in particular to the dramas of everyday life and Ole Palsbo's dark realism. The effect of realism is a result of both the style and aesthetics, which comply with the Dogme rules, the everyday nature of the story itself, and its characters. Even in comparison to the rest of the Dogme films, Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998), von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) or Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive* (2000), it seems highly unjustifiable to argue, as Stevenson does, that *Open Hearts* is more melodramatic or sentimental than the rest of the Danish films of the time. If anything, as I will proceed to point out, the melodramatic elements are counter-balanced by a detached psychological realism, and thus the film avoids emotional excess and flourish.

The film, as with all Dogma films, opens with a still of its Dogme Manifesto Certificate. It thus immediately communicates to the audience members that are familiar with the movement, certain expectations in terms of style and subject matter. The opening sequence is of a city street location, presumably Copenhagen, shot at night with an infrared camera, an aesthetic choice that according to the director depicts people's body temperature – having a warm interior and a cold exterior<sup>20</sup>. This aesthetic seems to be adopted in the

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20 Information taken from the director's commentary accompanying the dvd version of the film.

character development as well, and thus Bier not only depicts their actions but delves deeper into their inner core in order to find this 'warmth' that motivates them. Immediately after this external sequence, the characters are introduced sitting at a restaurant having a nice romantic dinner at the end of which Joachim proposes to Cecilie. These first scenes depict an idyllic romance between an ordinary couple, and we get an insight into their cheerful and affectionate relationship. However, the situation is quickly and violently disrupted when one morning Joachim, stepping out of his car and leaning in to kiss Cecilie, is run over by a speeding car. The contrast between the earlier blissful scenes and this tragic accident is shocking and it immediately changes the tone of the film. From that point onwards it becomes dark and oppressive yet with several light-hearted sequences scattered within the narrative, a typical characteristic of Danish realist melodramas in which tragedy and comedy are inextricably combined. After this incident the narrative follows an episodic structure, moving back and forth between the couple and the doctor's family, strands which are initially separate but whose stories gradually get more and more entangled.

Throughout the film the focus remains on Cecilie and her effort to support an aggressive Joachim who tries to push her away in a cruel manner. Nonetheless there is no internal focalisation and I would argue that the film keeps a distance from the main character's subjective position within the narrative while at the same time closely following her development. In other words, although the focus of the narrative stays on her in that we follow mostly her side of the story and not, for instance, Joachim's, the narrative "I" is not conflated with Cecilie's subjective point of view through for example point-of-view shots. The camera keeps a safe distance from the unfolding events and it thus allows for a more critical appraisal of the situation, even though there is the encouragement through the focalisation to sympathise with Cecilie. The audience therefore bears witness to Cecilie's

trauma and the abrupt derailment of her life but also the painful and gradual process of coming to terms with it. Unlike von Trier's film in which Bess ends up being exploited and sacrificed on the altar of love and marital devotion, Bier constructs a less sensational narrative grounded in everyday-drama realism, presenting ordinary characters in tragic but still ordinary situations. In addition, despite the different stages of emotional turmoil the characters go through and the bleakness of their situation – quadriplegia, loneliness, marriage breakdown, etc. – Bier avoids the dark realism found in earlier Danish realist traditions. By the end, all the characters reach a relatively positive and life-affirming conclusion. Cecilie, having interrupted her affair with Neils to run to Joachim's side, finally manages to get closure when Joachim releases her from any obligation towards him, explaining again to her the impossibility of their situation but this time in a peaceful and tender manner, saying: “We were unlucky. That's no reason for you to suffer. Sweet, wide-fingered Cecilie...”. Niels and Marie, who have been through a painful break-up that tore their family apart, manage to overcome their problems; Marie accepts her new state as a divorced mother of three and achieves emotional independence, which is shown in her gesture to pack the last of Niels' belongings; Niels, although he has been left by Cecilie, does not go back to Marie, showing that his affair was not the genuine reason for the break-up but the result of an already failed marriage. At the very end of the film, Cecilie goes to Niels to tell him about her final separation from Joachim, telling him that she has to figure things out and asking him whether she can call him sometime. Although this is not a stereotypical happy-ending, in the way the relationships between the different characters are resolved, there is an overall sense of tranquillity and optimism in the film's conclusion, as it finishes in a cyclical pattern, repeating the infrared camera sequence. I have therefore argued that the realist perspective in the film is upheld stylistically through the Dogme rules and thematically through the everyday nature of the story. Adding to this I should

reiterate the importance for the realist effect of both the gradual development of all the four main characters and the narrative progression combining episodic narration with other modernist techniques such as the open ending.

In terms of the female representations as well, this film offers a refreshing point of view in comparison to the majority of Dogme films, which might be the reason that prompted Stevenson to rather simplistically define the film as a 'woman's film'. Cecilie, as mentioned earlier, is not a threatening figure of a home-wrecker, but a woman in desperate need of psychological support in the face of the tragedy that violently overturns her previously harmonious life. The treatment of the affair between Niels and Cecilie focuses on the psychological aspect of the relationship and the physical aspect complements the need for contact and consolation they both feel. Even the *mise-en-scène* and camera positions betray a kind of shyness in witnessing those very personal moments, through dim lighting and a reluctance to frame the amorous couple in the centre or more explicitly, as opposed to other more voyeuristic cinematic approaches to sex scenes. Instead, images of the couple's more tender moments take precedence, such as the post-coital scene of them lying in bed with Niels holding Cecilie, an image that has been used as one of the film's official posters. It could therefore be argued that the emotional side of the affair is emphasised more and provides the motive instead of a carnal desire. In this way the portrayal complicates the issues of adultery and fidelity, not allowing for a simplistic polarisation between ethical/unethical and good/bad. Moreover, in terms of female representations, it avoids reproducing stereotypes and placing the blame on the young unmarried woman as a threat to the heterosexual couple. The film does not pit the two female characters against each other in a competition for Niels' romantic interest, which is evident when Marie goes to Cecilie's house to pick up her daughter. Marie asks her not to break up her family, yet she does not confront her in a violent manner and expresses her



gratitude for keeping her daughter safe and informing her of her whereabouts. As noted above, Marie undergoes a transformation from a woman significantly dependent on her husband for her emotional welfare to one facing betrayal and having a breakdown, literally begging him not to leave her and their children, and finally adapting to the new situation and becoming calmer and self-reliant. The film, therefore, despite its focus on Cecilie, which encourages audiences to an extent to take her side, gives a fair treatment to all the characters, gradually letting their warm interior and internal motives come to the surface. This non-biased stance is effected by a narrative that does not stick to easy conclusions and assumptions based on cold facts. In this way it fulfils a feminist potential, even if in an understated way, by avoiding stereotypes and moralistic explanations and judgments, which imply conservative ideologies.

In terms of the film's contribution to the Dogme 95 movement, Hjort and Mackenzie highlight its importance in the following passage:

*Open Hearts* was described by Steve Gravestock in the Toronto Film Festival programme as correcting certain false impressions created by Dogma 95 even as it breathed new life into the brethren's original project. The visibility of Dogma 95, he argued, allowed a standard account to emerge that construed contemporary Danish film as moribund prior to the brethren's salvage operation. Yet *Open Hearts* draws attention to the vibrancy of pre-existing national or indigenous tendencies, and thus to the fact that there was cinematic life in Denmark before the advent of Dogma. *Open Hearts*, the view is, takes Dogma in new directions that may well have the effect of deepening the movement's legitimacy and of prolonging its existence. (5-6)

This account of the film's value in terms of the movement in general shows how sometimes a film can polarise opinions, if one compares it to Stevenson's condescending dismissal of it as not of particular artistic value, at least in comparison to the films made by the founding directors of Dogma. Although Stevenson alludes to the favourable reviews the film gathered (143-144), he goes on to discuss the issue of what the critic Ebbe Iversen calls the apparent “standardization of film art in the form of movies which are all low-budget, take place in present day Copenhagen and deal with similar subject matter” (qtd in Stevenson 144). In relation to this one can compare Dogma to the fate of some of the other film movements such as the European New Waves of the 1960s, which quite quickly after their conceptualisation lost their original *éclat* and freshness. It should therefore come as no surprise that Dogma having had a 4-year run by the time *Open Hearts* was released, had become formulaic at least within its original national context. Yet as Hjort and Mackenzie argue, it is Bier's Dogma film that takes the movement to another level in which “Dogma 95 begins to fulfil its original potential as a vehicle for a fully blown politics of recognition”, since “in this case the Dogma effect functions as a leveraging device that allows Bier to lift certain popular traditions into the light of international visibility, and out of the obscurity that a purely national mode of reception ultimately constitutes” (6). These traditions, as I mentioned earlier, are the relationship of Danish cinema to different realist aesthetics throughout its long history, and more specifically in this case psychological realism and everyday melodramatic social realism. In a way, therefore, *Open Hearts* brings certain realist traditions previously related to the mainstream within the art cinema context. Thus Bier does not embrace the 'brethren's' negative attitude towards their cinematic past and through her work she integrates elements from the past and the present, putting more emphasis on the actual process of filmmaking rather than on the confrontational discourse surrounding it. This is evident in the brethren's disapproval of the film following its

release, which was apparently fuelled by what they perceived as the director's disregard for a rigorous compliance with the rules, especially the one concerning the inclusion of non-diegetic sound. Bier dismissed this accusation by saying that she deems this issue rather “uninteresting”, adding that for her this constant insistence on the letter of the rules is “navel contemplation and distracts from what the film really deals with”, with the only possible advantage being that of “generat[ing] publicity” (qtd. in Stevenson 143). In this way Bier seems to be standing up against the brethren's authority to sanction Dogma films, and she transcends their stifling control by pointing to the bigger picture, which is ultimately making films that engage with the public and becoming part of a wider cultural discourse. Since then Bier has seen her career flourish beyond the national context with films like *After the Wedding* (2006) earning her several awards and nominations in the international festival circuit, a trajectory that culminated in winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film with her most recent *In A Better World* (2010). It could therefore be argued that, much like Varda in the 1960s, Dogma's visibility as a film movement has helped the director promote her filmmaking career into a transnational cultural arena. This is also the case for Lone Scherfig who after her Dogma film went on to direct bigger European co-productions such as *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* (2002) and more recently *An Education* (2009) and *One Day* (2011). However, as I have already mentioned, these two directors had rather different experiences working within the Dogme 95 film movement. On the one hand, Scherfig had a rather positive and unproblematic relationship with the 'brethren' and their rules, while Bier seemed to clash with them on the level of artistic principle, considering the overall film aesthetic more important than a blind conformity to a set of prescribed rules. I should therefore stress that this study does not aim to argue for a homogeneous female experience or positionality in filmmaking within film movements, but instead to highlight the significance of the inclusion of diverse creative

voices in an effort to 'infiltrate' the masculine hegemony that is encountered within this and other cinematic contexts. What is more, in this case it is of vital importance to draw attention to the gender discrimination women filmmakers are still being subjected to on the level of critical reception, with Stevenson publishing a rather diminishing account of the women's films' success, thus casting severe doubt on their artistic merit. As long as divisive statements based on gender are being made, it becomes obvious that there is still a deeply ingrained gender imbalance within the industry despite the differential degrees of its manifestation in different national contexts.

New Argentine Cinema: Art and Politics in Lucrecia Martel's *The Swamp*.

As with most film movements it is a complicated task to define New Argentine cinema, since from the late 1950s and early 1960s and continuing until the present, Argentinian Cinema has seen several trends or movements with no clear beginning or end. While it is more straightforward to signpost the beginning of Dogme 95 and its subsequent decline, this is not the case for Argentinian or other Latin American cinemas. Part of the reason is the political and financial instability these countries experienced in their recent history, which had a direct impact on cinematic production especially from the 1950s onwards. The 'nueva onda' in Argentina came at a time in the country's history when, following Perón's exile, “[t]here was a brief period of optimism between 1956 and 1965 when Buenos Aires seemed to reflect a number of characteristics that we loosely associate with the sixties: an increase in consumerism, not just of goods, but of many different aspects of culture” (J. King 79-80). The increasing visibility of European art cinema, as John King observes, had a refreshing influence on Argentinian literature and consecutively its budding cinematic production. Therefore at this time there is a move towards an auteur cinema much as in the European New Waves. Ana López describes the Nueva Onda as “an

intellectualised cinema designed for a small, elite, Buenos Aires audience”, whose “major achievement was to bring to the screen, with the technical fluidity of the European cinema, the world view and individualistic experiences of the Buenos Aires middle class” (qtd. in King 82). Simultaneously, Fernando Birri, a filmmaker who would have a prominent role in Latin American cinema, was very much influenced by Italian neo-realism, having studied film in the Centro Sperimentale in Italy, and sought to apply these techniques to Argentinian film. His overt political orientation led to his exile in the early 1960s, but the legacy of this cultural convergence between Italian neo-realism and Latin American actuality that he initiated would remain and flourish in the years to come.

By the end of the 1960s there is a move away from the Nueva Onda and its European influence marked by the launch of the 'Third Cinema', with the completion of the film *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) by directors Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas. This film was accompanied by a radical manifesto titled “Towards a Third Cinema” demanding political engagement from cinematic production at all levels in order to stand up against the cultural imperialism of the first (Hollywood) and second (European art) cinemas that dominated the continent. This type of engaged art that was at the core of this militant film movement rejected the models of the past, i.e. auteur cinema of the nueva onda, and although it acknowledged art cinema's superiority in terms of freedom of expression – compared to the Hollywood studio system – it still severely criticised its bourgeois orientation. In a sense this seems more akin to the tone that was later adopted by Dogma. Yet this movement was short-lived due to political unrest in the mid to late 1970s when there was yet another military coup, and censorship tightened its grip on cultural production. As a result, several of the cineastes of Third Cinema would either have to flee the country or face severe life threats during the Dirty War that was waged between 1976 and 1983, when the dictatorship was finally ousted. In the following years of democratic

restoration there was a boom in cinematic production and a move away from the militant aesthetics of Third Cinema in an effort on the part of Argentinian filmmakers to “capture the market-place” (J. King 93). King remarks on the diversity of the film production of this period by stating that “after so many years of persecution, direct and indirect censorship, deaths, blacklists and exile, the film-makers showed a great energy and inventiveness in exploring their new freedom” (93). These films bring a new and refreshing quality to Argentine cinema by embracing the entertainment value of filmmaking in contrast to the previous didacticism that was a dominant characteristic.

It is during this era that the first female Argentinian director, María Luisa Bemberg, makes her debut with her feature *Momentos* (1981), and throughout the rest of her career she overtly tackles issues of gender equality and feminism. Thus she became one of the few women directors in the whole continent to gain such visibility and openly align herself with feminist politics. As Stephen Hart records in his entry on *Camila* (1984), Bemberg's hugely successful third feature, included in the book *A Companion to Latin American Film* (2004), and according to the director's own statements, “she became a film director because she wanted to give women the chance to speak rather than be spoken for” (112). Interestingly enough in Hart's book there are only two entries, among a total of twenty five, on female-authored films and they are both from Bemberg's filmography. That is indicative not only of the important place she holds within Latin American Cinema but also of the marginal position of women directors in this context. Yet despite the neglect that women directors suffer in this larger context, there are two important women filmmakers from the past that have received a certain amount of critical attention, namely the Mexican Matilde Landeta and the Cuban Sara Gómez. Rich foregrounds the importance of these early instances of women's filmmaking, arguing that Landeta “laid the groundwork for the Latin American women's films of the 1980s, which began to

incorporate women's struggles for identity and autonomy” (279) while Gómez, being “[v]irtually the only woman ever to direct a feature film in Cuba, [...] offers clear critiques of machismo and the consequences of male pride” (280).

Rich goes on to demonstrate the important development that took place in the 1980s concerning the exploration of gender issues, which was facilitated by “a shift from 'exteriority' to 'interiority’” which in turn “opened up the field to women” (281). Yet, despite their significance, they constitute exceptions to the male dominance within these flourishing filmmaking contexts. The case with Argentina was very similar yet, as Myrto Konstantarakos observes, one of the characteristics of the New Argentine cinema is “the expansion of feminine voices in its ranks” (134) which, as I will proceed to argue with the case of Lucrecia Martel, brings a significant aesthetic and ideological development within this new and refreshing cinematic movement. As these constant shifts in the political and cultural arenas of the country show, it is not easy to reach a precise definition of New Argentine cinema. One of the tendencies that seems to be quite common is to talk about New South American or New Latin American cinema, thus acknowledging the influence and interconnectedness of cinematic production in the continent. However, this broader term contains the risk of glossing over the particularities within the different national contexts that a more limited geographical focus would pick up on. In addition, the continental approach would probably imply a more organised and structured cultural exchange, which was not the case. By limiting this study to Argentina the intention is not to overlook the rest of the cinematic production of the continent, but to limit the scope to a more manageable amount of material, especially since a director's work is inevitably tinted to a varying degree by their national background, identity, and specific locus of activity. Lucrecia Martel is one of the most prominent figures of New Argentine cinema, which Demetrios Matheou describes as a rather “amorphous concept” (233) that was once more

fuelled by “the desire to pull away from what preceded it, to eschew film as political soapbox (the sixties/seventies) or psychiatrist's couch (the eighties), for something more personal, and more rigorously cinematic” (235). This statement implies a turn towards art cinema concepts, a cinema of auteurs. Furthermore, New Argentine cinema as a movement does not resemble the previously discussed Dogme 95 or the Third Cinema that were accompanied by clear promulgations of their intentions and aesthetics. Instead it represents a looser development of this national cinema or as Matheou calls it “a generational shift” (235) that still focuses on the personal and the everyday, but is offering an image without analysing or giving answers to the problems that are presented therein. As such it is more easily compared to Italian neo-realism and yet it does have some similarities with more clear-cut movements in its rejection of the past, the sense of renewal in cultural production, and also in its re-connection to auteur cinema evident in the personal nature of the new films. Manuel Antín, another prominent figure of Argentinian cinema, characterises New Argentine Cinema and the new generation of filmmakers as rather pessimistic in comparison to the tone of the 1980s, saying that “[t]hese films show a bleak picture of reality” (qtd. in Matheou 243). Martel's *The Swamp*, one of the most representative films of this new trend, delves unflinchingly into the decadent and stagnant existence of suburban middle class life, opening up several frontiers for ideological discussion in terms of class, race and gender, and ending rather gloomily without a resolution. Therefore, despite the personal character of these films and their restricted scope in looking at small units such as families or individuals, New Argentine Cinema retains a strong political aura that becomes even more potent through avoiding political didacticism and polarisation.

As Matheou mentions, “[w]ith *La ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, 2001) and *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, 2004), Lucrecia Martel established herself as the most distinctive director of the New Argentine Cinema of the late nineties and early 2000s” (302). Although within



her films there is no clearly stated feminist agenda, I would argue that her achievement as a prominent filmmaker within a male-dominated filmmaking context, alongside her focus on women within contemporary Argentinian society, make her the most obvious case study for this chapter. Matheou calls her “an iconoclast, whose observations on family, sexuality, religion and, particularly, Argentina's provincial bourgeoisie are both subversive and savage” (302). It is in this subversive quality that I find the feminist value in her films, in the way that she stands against injustice and openly criticises the current status quo. Her attitude against racial and social injustices is also evident in her interview to Matheou clearly stating the views that can be found in her films as well (308-9). In this interview she comments on the common theme of her three feature films by saying that “the emotional link between them is this idea that the 'reality' we live in is not natural – the meaning of relationships, the emotions, the desire, the economics, everything” (313). This attack on the dominant representation of reality resembles a major feminist concern regarding the naturalisation of women's oppression worldwide. Therefore, I argue, her films manifest this feminist cultural battle to expose these naturalising processes and criticise the status quo. As her producer Lita Stantic avows, the New Argentine films are “unwittingly political” in general, yet in Martel's case “her intention has grown political” (qtd. in Matheou 245). As she explains “[s]he felt cheated by her parents, and by her social class, because she never really knew what was going on” (qtd. in Matheou 303), and she proceeds to attack this system of injustice that she was brought up in. Stantic suggests that “[t]hat may be the engine that makes her create those characters, who are all quite sinister, especially in *La ciénaga*, which has more to do with her personal story, with the images of her adolescence” (qtd. in Matheou 303). Stantic, who produced Martel's first two features, was also the producer of most of Bemberg's films – the only exception being her last feature *We Don't Want to Talk About it* (1993) – a connection that might add another

feminist undertone in reading her work. This and other features of her work will be discussed in the following analysis of her first feature film, in order to show its importance as part of the contemporary New Argentine Cinema in the way it tackles burning social issues.

*The Swamp* (2001) is set in Salta, the director's hometown, which is located towards the north-west of the country, quite far away from Buenos Aires and its cosmopolitan atmosphere. This is the place where Martel focuses her creative energy since her two subsequent features are also set in the same town. She describes it as “an extremely conservative city”, explaining that because there is “less European immigration from the nineteenth century, [...] the culture is very strongly linked with Spanish colonialism and this idea of society” (qtd. in Matheou 312). This socio-political make-up makes Salta a prime location for the exploration of the gender and racial injustices that Martel focuses on and the film had a very strong impact when it was shown there. According to Ana Martín Morán, the director was accused by some of her fellow citizens of showing a negative side of people in Salta due to the overt denunciation of their racist attitudes, but what is more important is that “shortly after [the film's premiere], in the region of Salta, Indians and peasants revolted and took over a refinery, which resulted in a violent confrontation with the army” (234). For Morán, this shows that the political message was successfully transmitted in terms of raising awareness concerning the potential for change, even if that is a difficult and slow process. In her interview with Matheou, Martel specified that she is “not trying to attack [the people from the middle classes]” but to “[j]ust wake them up” adding that she thinks that the bleak endings of her films might have a positive effect on the audience and possibly instigate change (313), which seems to have been the case with her first feature at least. Having this in mind, the cyclical presentation of the plot seems to be of crucial importance in creating an effect of discontent that the audience will

potentially share, and appreciate the need for a change in order to break this vicious circle.

The film starts with a shot of the older generation of characters – Mecha, Gregorio and their friends and relatives – sitting by the pool, drinking wine and dragging around their metal chairs in zombie-like, lethargic movements. This shot is repeated at the end although this time it is Vero and Momi – Mecha's daughters – sitting by the pool. This cyclical pattern suggests that the younger generation is following in the steps of their decadent predecessors. Momi's final statement, which is drowned among her sobs, is a desperate “I didn't see anything” – in relation to a religious miracle that has been reported in the area. This is a rather downbeat open ending, yet at the same time it could have a positive interpretation in suggesting that religion is not the answer and the realisation of its emptiness could be a step towards empowerment and positive action. Martel does not give answers in her film but as I will go on to demonstrate, through the representation of Isabel, Mecha and Tali, but also that of the younger generation, she shows how misery is recycled in this hermetic and backward environment. By showing the different conflicts among the characters, the film demonstrates that the situation is complicated, instead of simplistically resorting to bipolar representations and stereotypes. Thus, Martel avoids the pitfall of representing all the native characters as inherently good, since, as she says, “there is a danger of romanticising: poor-good, rich-bad” (qtd. in Matheou 312). Although her film heavily criticises white, middle-class Argentinians by representing everyone as racist to a greater or lesser extent, there is a certain amount of tenderness for these people who are definitely not presented as inherently bad. Even if this does not justify their actions, there seems to be a tendency towards trying to understand them while at the same time inciting a sense of pity towards them. For example, Mecha's fear of ending up like her mother shows at least a noble intention to break away from the backwardness of the past. Despite the bleakness of the narrative, I will point out through the following analyses of the

representation of the main characters that there are moments of momentary subversion and hope within this stifling atmosphere. Even if the film remains realistic in its expectations and recognises that there are no miracles, it is this sadness and discontent that might motivate a future change, which is in accordance with the avant-garde distrust of happy endings.

One of the common characteristics of New Argentine films is the representation of the native communities outside the big city centres and the portrayal of their disenfranchised position within society. Morán emphasises the importance of this issue “which has been ignored in the national identity-building discourses and generally excluded from cinematic representation” (234), a theme that would be treated in a more direct manner and with greater political resonance in Martel's latest film *The Headless Woman* (2008). Yet even in her debut, Martel sets the tone and portrays the injustice with which all of the native characters are treated. The main focus is on Isabel, who is a servant in Mecha's house. As I will go on to suggest, she represents a subaltern class as described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>21</sup>. Momi is very much attached to Isabel and she is distressed because at the beginning of the film her mother threatens to fire her. Mecha throughout the film is suspicious of Isabel, constantly accuses her of stealing and generally treats her cruelly. Ironically, Isabel is the only one who cares for Mecha when due to her alcoholic intoxication she falls face down on broken glass and injures herself. Yet when Isabel tries to help Mecha she keeps insulting her and calls her a savage. Isabel suffers a great amount of psychological abuse and although she tries to put up with the situation with a Job-like patience, it is quite evident, as the film progresses that she gets more and more frustrated. This is noticeable in the scene where

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<sup>21</sup> I take Isabel as an example of subaltern subjectivity, since she is positioned at the bottom of power hierarchy, due to her social, racial, and gender oppression. For a more detailed discussion of the constitution of the subaltern subjectivity and the epistemic violence of its silencing, see: Spivak, bibliography.

she is accompanying the children back home from a day out fishing by the dam and she hears Joaquin saying that he will not eat the fish they caught because “it's all mud”, adding that “Indians eat any shit” and chucking the fish aside. Isabel, who is walking behind, looks rather hurt by this comment, stops and picks up the fish that he threw by the side of the road. Not long after this incident she goes to Mecha to announce her resignation, to which Mecha reacts by insulting her and calling her “ungrateful”. Isabel, hurt by this final cruelty, goes to her room to pack while crying, and although Momi tries to console her, she pushes her away and leaves the house. This way she stands up to the injustice she has been suffering and it is her final act of rebellion, an attitude that is also evident in the servants' silent refusal to answer the phone throughout the film despite Mecha's orders.

Furthermore, Isabel is shown to be doubly oppressed, not only by Mecha and her family but also by her boyfriend, Perro. This is evident in the carnival party scene in which Perro asks her to bring him another beer in a rather demanding manner, indicative of the way he treats her like his servant as well. On her way to the bar, José, Mecha's son, and his friends harass Isabel who manages to get rid of them, and yet Perro attacks him to defend his honour. In this way he defends his masculinity that has been threatened and bruised earlier in the film as well, and establishes his right of possession over Isabel. Consequently one can detect a vicious circle of violence since Vero earlier humiliated Perro in the scene at the clothes store, when she asked him to come in the shop and try on a T-shirt she wanted to buy for her brother. From the fact that, as Perro mentions, they are not the same size, and from Vero's sly glances, it is quite evident that she just wants to humiliate him and make Isabel uncomfortable. As soon as Perro takes off the shirt, Vero smells it and throws it aside which is an indication of taking pleasure in her authority over Perro as well as of her pleasure in looking at his half-naked body, an expression of 'illicit' eroticism, which she disperses by referring pejoratively to his racial identity. Thus his body is

exoticised and feminised, since he is put on display and ridiculed for the amusement of the white, middle class girls. Therefore, at the carnival party he gets the chance to re-instate the balance and to prove his masculinity in a manner that is primitive and offensive to Isabel. The power hierarchies that are inscribed in this film involve both gender and race, with Perro being superior to Isabel yet subordinate to the white middle-class girls, a position that leads him to rebel by physically attacking a male member of the family in order to prove his superiority. Isabel is thus presented as doubly oppressed and although she is the nicest character and the best role model for Momi, she is subjugated on the one hand because of her race and class and on the other because of her gender.

While it is definitely true that the two central female characters are not presented particularly positively, they are also seen to be victims as well as perpetrators of injustices, which renders them more sympathetic. They are both restricted in their households: Mecha is always seen in her home apart from her visit to the clinic early in the film, while Tali is seen only at Mecha's when she is outside her own house. As a result, they start talking about and planning to take a trip to Bolivia with the excuse of buying cheap stationery for the children's new school year. This trip functions as a fantasy of breaking free from their restricted and mundane lives with the possibility of an adventure, which Tali's husband, Rafael, manages to destroy. From the moment Rafael hears about their plans he is reluctant to help Tali prepare and at one point he tells her that "it's too dangerous for two women". Generally he is portrayed quite favourably, especially in comparison to the drunkard Gregorio, as being an affectionate husband and father and not at all domineering. However, his final gesture of completely overriding Tali's plans and getting the stationery behind her back undermines her independence and asserts his dominance even if in a less authoritative fashion. Mecha is more obviously trapped in an unhappy marriage to Gregorio, who is an alcoholic and apparently has had an affair with Mercedes, her old

friend who now lives with José. Tali and Rafael seem to think that it is because of her husband that Mecha has been ruined and she says that Mecha knew about Gregorio's affair with Mercedes but turned a blind eye. She is very passive, lying in bed all day wearing her sunglasses, and she has a very short temper, screaming and calling Momi a “dirty savage” because she spends time with Isabel. She is constantly shouting at the servants to answer the phone in order to appear more aristocratic and not attached to menial tasks. Momi, as well, in one scene when the phone rings tells Isabel, “my Mum says you should answer” yet she picks up the phone herself. This is an indication that even Momi who is very friendly to Isabel and seems to be very much emotionally dependent on her – spending most of her time hovering around Isabel and thanking God for her – has to a degree internalised the racist discourse that surrounds her and repeats it even if in a less abusive manner. Mecha is not an affectionate, caring mother like Tali, neglecting Joaquin's medical needs, and generally neglecting the children, which results in Momi's attachment to Isabel in the absence of a tender maternal figure. However, it could be argued that at least as far as her relationship with Gregorio is concerned, she does realise that it is harmful for her and takes action to amend the situation. In one scene she tells him, “What a pig you turned out” and a bit later she asks him to move to the back room and ridicules him about the fact that he dyes his hair. Thus, as Morán comments, the narrative space of the film is dominated by the female characters while the men “are always placed far from the core of the story, seen from the perspective of women who rule the realm of home life where the film rests” (233). On the surface it seems that the women are stronger and more important characters in comparison to the peripheral positioning of the men, yet I would argue their strength is undermined by the internalisation of traditional patriarchal ideologies and their inability to transcend them.

Before concluding this discussion I would like to make some more general

comments about the portrayal of the setting and its connotations. Most of the action takes place in Mecha's estate, which is a run-down property with a dirty swimming pool outside, located on the outskirts of Salta, in the countryside, close to a forest. Morán comments on the title of the film – *Ciénaga* – which refers to this type of muddy ground “in which animals are trapped and die” (231), an image that is presented very early in the film when the boys accompanied by their dogs are running around in the forest and they come across a swamp in which a cow is fatally trapped. Yet Morán very acutely reads the metaphor embedded in the choice of this title, stating that “[i]t also refers to an apt description of how life is paralysed there, of the people resigned to eking out an existence in a foul and putrid atmosphere” (231). The dirty unattended swimming pool, around which the family gathers and spends a significant amount of their time, conjures up more the image of a swamp rather than symbolising luxury and wealth. Therefore from the beginning of the film there are certain elements like this that create the atmosphere and predispose the spectator for what there is to come, the thunder at the distance in the opening being among these bad omens. Morán highlights that “[t]he sense of 'fatality' that runs through the film, rather than reflecting the imminence of a tragedy, is founded upon the impossibility of introducing changes, of provoking a crisis that might free the characters from their stagnation” (232). This is a sharp criticism of a place and its mentality that due to its backwardness and decadent values constitutes a mental and moral 'swamp' for its inhabitants, a theme which is further developed throughout the narrative and the representation of the main characters as has already been shown.

Going back to Matheou's characterisation of Martel as an “iconoclast”, one last thing that needs to be addressed is the controversial theme of incest, as it is presented throughout the film. In most of the scenes the conversations between the family members take place in the bedroom and at first glance this might seem like an indication of intimacy



within a close-knit family. Yet there are moments when this intimacy is taken a step further, an example being the ambiguous relationship between Vero and José. Vero seems to be extremely jealous of Mercedes, José's mistress, and she expresses her dislike quite passionately upon the announcement of her imminent arrival, saying that she will sleep for the whole time Mercedes will be visiting. In addition, they seem to be constantly teasing each other, blurring the distinction between siblings and lovers, for instance when they are running around the house chasing each other because José has stolen her underwear. A notable scene in terms of the depiction of Vero's attraction towards her brother occurs the day after he gets beaten up by Perro. While he is sleeping in his room, Vero and Agustina, Tali's daughter, go inside and take off his dirty clothes. The intensity with which she looks at his half-naked body is unusual for a brother-sister relationship, and while she tells Agustina to undress him she sits back and stares at him. Moreover, towards the end of the film when Vero is taking a shower, José goes in the bathroom and he puts his legs inside the shower in order to wash them while Vero is covering herself with the shower curtain. There is a sense therefore that certain boundaries pertaining to familial relationships are being transgressed, which is also evident in the case of Mercedes having had an alleged affair with Gregorio in the past and now living with his son. Martel comments on this incestuous atmosphere by saying that although she “do[es] not encourage incest” she thinks that “human sexuality goes beyond all taboos”, adding that she considers it to be “an absurd prejudice, a proscription and a sort of intimidation, to deny sexual desire inside the family, which has always been there” (qtd. in Matheou 233). Therefore according to her comments, the inclusion of incest is not a disparaging attribute of their moral decay but something instinctive that is not necessarily objectionable. However, I would argue that it is another indication and consequence of their extreme insularity and reluctance to open up to the rest of the society.

As I mentioned earlier, Lucrecia Martel holds a very prominent position within New Argentine cinema. This prompts Matheou to call her “the director's director of the continent as a whole” because “she produces work quite unlike any of them” (302). She explains her vocation by saying that for her “to do cinema is a way to be a citizen” (Matheou 322), referring to the political intention behind her films that has as its eventual objective to help towards a gradual change concerning the social maladies of her contemporary society. Her films are not didactic like the political films of Argentina's earlier decades, and thus she refrains from offering concrete solutions, yet she admits that one might detect a proposed alternative in the relationship between the two girls, Isabel and Momi. Therefore she claims that “the softness, the ambiguity of these relationships<sup>22</sup> could represent a little hope that things could be whatever we want them to be” (qtd. in Matheou 314). Thus for Martel the future lies in transcending the old-fashioned rules of society in order to avoid its unjust and stifling grip. This same attitude is encountered in Lucia Puenzo's films, *XXY* (2007) and even more so in her latest *The Fish Child* (2009), in which the narrative follows the relationship of an upper middle-class girl with a female servant and their plans to leave together. Along with these two Argentinian directors, the Peruvian Claudia Llosa has recently attracted a significant amount of attention with her 2006 debut *Madeinusa*, which garnered several awards from international film festivals and was successfully followed by her equally acclaimed second feature *The Milk of Sorrow* (2009). All these directors are unique and have distinctive styles but one can detect common themes running through them, including the exploration of gender and sexuality, the representation of incest, and more importantly the focus on the representation of native South American women. I would therefore argue that the feminist aspect of these films, even if it is not vociferously acknowledged as such, lies in criticising traditional ideologies

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22 The plural refers to another relationship as well, between the siblings in *La Niña Santa*.

and offering alternatives while giving voice to a minority of women that have long been deprived of the opportunity to have their story told on such a scale.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion I would like to reiterate my argument on the importance of women directors' participation within film movements due to their privileged position within art cinema. Throughout the chapter I have shown not only the significance of film movements for art cinema but also the historical continuity and inter-connectedness between film movements originating in different national contexts at different times. A common characteristic between most movements in post-war art cinema is the way they have been influenced by Italian neo-realism, and even though there is a difference in the intensity of that influence from case to case, this creates a loose base for their transnational cultural background. Furthermore, I have claimed that art cinema has been a male-dominated filmmaking context and this is also evident in the case studies I have chosen for this chapter. Dogme 95 is clearly associated with Lars Von Trier and his three 'brothers'-in-art since they are not just the founding members but also the aesthetic guardians of the movement's formal concerns as promulgated in their manifesto. Argentinian cinema, as I have shown in the brief account of its recent history, has always been a space where women directors have been few and far between. This is also the case for New Argentine Cinema even though there has been a considerable increase in the numbers of women filmmakers within its ranks compared to the past. Konstantarakos draws another parallel between the two movements, observing that in Argentina “[a] new generation had been born that along with Dogma, extolled the virtues of a more natural style of filmmaking, although in Argentina this is determined more by scarcity of means rather than by the Danish movement's rigid rejection of Hollywood commercial cinema” (137).

This is a crucial difference between the two movements, since it shows how even

though the aesthetics are similar, the underlying motivations are not. Within the European context and especially in the countries of western Europe that benefit from a substantial amount of state support, as in the case of Dogme 95, low-budget ascetic production is an aesthetic choice rather than a necessity as in the case of New Argentine Cinema. For instance, Martel had to fund most of her projects herself and generally these films rely hugely on Europe's funding, typically developing as co-productions between Latin American countries and Spain. This demonstrates the point made in the thesis' introduction concerning the Euro-centricity of art cinema's industrial base but also its effort to open up and support art film production in less privileged contexts. Of course this is not merely a philanthropic enterprise since it involves taking advantage of the opening up of additional markets especially in situations where language, as in the Latin American/Spanish interaction, does not constitute a barrier. This is part of the post-colonial critique that global art cinema as an institution can be subjected to, as mentioned in chapter 1, but along with the more dubious side of this interaction, it is definitely the case that there are certain benefits non-European countries derive from this financial and cultural exchange. These relate not only to their active role in shaping global cultural narratives and representations, but also to the financial opportunities they gain, helping them sustain a strand of national cinema in the face of Hollywood's global domination.

Within this uneven and challenging climate, both in terms of funding and gender politics within the industry, it is important that women directors have started getting more attention through their participation within art cinema's various film movements. With a closer study of Dogme 95 and New Argentine Cinema I have foregrounded the way women can gain wide professional recognition by participating within film movements, which in turn can be vital in sustaining and promoting their filmmaking careers. Although Bier and Martel were at very different points in their career when they engaged with these

film movements – the former already an established filmmaker within domestic cinema, the latter making her debut in feature-length filmmaking – an observation that applies to both is that their subsequent respective careers have transcended national boundaries. Also despite the inherent differences in depicting such disparate socio-cultural contexts, not only are the uses of realist techniques rather similar, as mentioned above, but also in both cases there is a tendency to avoid didacticism and simplistic resolutions. They also both avoid gender stereotyping, although in the case of Martel it could be said that her political intention to criticise the white middle class of provincial Argentina propels her to use certain stereotypes related to both gender and social class. However, as I have already suggested, the development of the characters and the insight we get into their psychological state and mentality allows us to consider them as more complex and problematized individuals than merely as one-dimensional types. This is also the case with the characterisation in Bier's film and it is in this way that both films are seen to break conventions and challenge traditional modes of gender representations. This I believe is a feminist aesthetic, which due to the usually rebellious character of film movements towards their cinematic past, can easily be injected within films, as it is done by the female directors mentioned in this chapter. In other words, it is easier for women filmmakers within film movements to bring forward diverse points of view concerning the still pressing matter of gender and racial discrimination and thus potentially influence the ideological apparatuses that have marginalised and objectified women. Next, I will look at how this can be done through emphasising the process of filmmaking itself within meta-cinematic films that foreground the figure of the female auteur.

## Chapter 4

The Meta-cinematic Film: The Auteure, Feminism and Self-reflexivity

As discussed in chapter one, self-reflexivity is one of art cinema's prominent characteristics, one that relates specifically to modernist aesthetics. This chapter looks at how meta-cinematic techniques and self-reflexivity in women's films, whether of a personal or formal nature, or both, foreground gender issues within filmmaking and problematize the idea of the romanticised auteur as has been conceived in relation to some of art cinema's most prominent directors (some examples being those discussed in chapter 2). Before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of the two case studies, I would like to consider the connections between meta-cinematic techniques, the avant-garde and feminist counter-cinema in order to illuminate the importance of this category of film practice for the present study. Meta-cinema is affiliated with avant-garde film practices due to the attention to the formal aspect of filmmaking, much like Bertold Brecht's meta-theatre is akin to more experimental and avant-garde practices in theatre. Alison Butler explains that the term avant-garde was extensively used to refer to art “that challenged institutionalised cultural forms” (p.89). By definition then, avant-garde cinema depends on the mainstream cultural art forms as a reference point for its constitution as something different, much like art cinema as has already been discussed in the first chapter of the thesis.

Butler detects the first emergence of avant-garde cinema in the early years of cinematic production, mainly around 1914-1930, and consisting of different groups of artists experimenting with the potentials of this new art form. Avant-garde practices resurfaced after WWII in the US when, as Butler notes, “an increasing availability of 16mm equipment made film production and exhibition more accessible to those outside the industry, thus encouraging the spread of film societies, film-education and amateur filmmaking” (91). There are two separate eras in North American avant-garde; the 'personal

film', which was prominent between the 1940s until the mid-1960s and was mainly focused on the "personal as subject matter" using forms that were related to "first-person discourse"; and the 'structural film' appearing in the second half of the 1960s which "foregrounds the materials and processes of film itself by substituting very explicit organising structures for the self-effacing structures of tradition" (91). Although this kind of filmmaking was aspiring to a kind of purity in film, divesting it of mainstream ideological constraints, many doubts have been raised as to the possibility of any such purity, since film, and any other form of cultural production, cannot be emptied out of the historical and ideological context of its production. In Britain, structural films took a more Marxist approach employing "reflexive, anti-illusionist strategies" in order to break "with ideology and demonstrat[e] the materiality of filmic practice" (92). This approach is highly reminiscent of Brechtian techniques in theatre where the rules of distanciation and disillusionment were firstly introduced in order to awaken audiences from their presumed ideological slumber.

One of the few women directors within the American avant-garde was Yvonne Rainer who started her career in the early 1970s. Her work precedes any kind of conscious feminist filmmaking practice and due to the later feminist attention her films received "she had come to identify, rather reluctantly, with feminism" (Kaplan, *Women* 113). What is noteworthy for filmmaking at the time, and apparently constituted the reason for the feminist appropriation of her work, was the centrality of an alternative female experience within her films and, as Ann Kaplan explains, "in having the questions posed through women's experiences specifically, Rainer's work makes an important contribution to feminism" (*Women* 124). Examples like Rainer's were quite rare in the avant-garde since it too was mainly a male cultural arena and, according to Rich, dominant/Hollywood cinema can be called "the Cinema of the Fathers" whereas she sees the avant-garde as "the Cinema

of the Sons” (*Chick* 63). On these grounds she criticized severely the 1970s avant-garde, describing it as “a chosen circle of guys elevated as gods for their cutting edge work, the deification of structuralism as the only genuine way to make films, a total absence of women filmmakers in any pantheon, and a determinedly uncritical attitude toward representations of women on celluloid” (*Chick* 104). Nevertheless, the avant-garde techniques and ideas developed at the time would prove extremely useful in the creation of a feminist film practice. In addition, it can be argued that the grey area of art cinema, although again highly dominated by male figures, in being less formalist than both the avant-garde and mainstream practices, can provide women directors with a creative space where the formal experimentation and the personal vision can be freer to interact in the construction of the final product. As already mentioned in the introduction of my thesis, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis draws attention to the alternativeness of art cinema “by European and women filmmakers alike” (4) in terms of disclosing the enunciative process of cinema as opposed to more mainstream practices. More specifically she argues that “[t]he question of an oppositional filmmaking practice intersects with notions of both art cinema and national cinema”, adding the following:

It is art cinema – in which there is a theoretical reflection on the specific properties of cinema as a signifying system and, as a consequence, experimentation on what can be understood as its language, its mode of organising meanings – that has traditionally provided a context for the development of alternatives to the normal commercial mode. (23-4)

This position is very much in accordance with the main premise of this thesis as it has been presented earlier, and it is through a more specific discussion of films about filmmaking that this chapter attempts to showcase the importance of women directors' contribution in



voicing their personal and professional experiences within this field.

In conjunction to this, I would now like to turn the discussion to the consideration of counter-cinema and its implication within this framework from a feminist but also 'alternative' point of view. The term was first introduced by Peter Wollen to refer to Godard's cinematic approach, a term that alludes to the “negation of the values of mainstream cinema” in order to differentiate it from the avant-garde “which implies being in advance of mainstream cinema in an indeterminate way” (Butler 92). Again counter-cinema signifies an 'otherness' to the mainstream, just as the avant-garde does but with a more polemical attitude, and is therefore dependent on the latter's existence for its definition. It is greatly opposed to mainstream cinema on the grounds that the illusionism imbued in it covers up the conditions of its production and the ideologies that inform it, and asks for an active engagement on the part of the audience. This stance could be aligned to the structural film of the avant garde in its political and meta-cinematic focus. Counter cinema thus favours tactics such as “disrupting linear causal relations, denying narrative closure, fracturing spatial and temporal verisimilitude, undermining identification and putting pleasure into question” (Butler 92). The difference between the avant-garde and counter-cinema is that in the latter, film is exposed not just for film's sake as a distinct art form but for the further realisation of its function as an artefact and the understanding of the diverse parameters implicated in its production. This political engagement of counter-cinema is interpreted by Wollen as a further comment on the intricate relationship between politics and cinema. He acutely states that “[t]he cinema cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed”, and as a result what the cinema does is “produce meanings and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings” (*Readings* 91). For this reason counter-cinema insists on the negation of pleasure as a

hypnotising quality that is seen as inimical to any kind of political action.

Feminist counter-cinema, which I have already referred to in the introduction of the thesis, started developing under the influence of these ideas and in relation to feminist theory in the 1970s. Women writers/directors perceived as necessary the re-constitution of the female subject in their own terms and the voicing of women's experience was regarded as an essential part of a process, which would counter the subordinate position of women within male discourse. Film theorists like Johnston highlighted the necessity of a counter-cinema that would reject the existing depictions of reality, by emphasising the ideological implications embedded in the cinematic apparatus itself ("Women's"). This train of thought led to the creation of the first feminist avant-garde theory films:

In the mid-1970s Johnston, Cook, Mulvey and Wollen in Britain began to develop a new feminist avant-garde which, while it drew on earlier avant-gardes (Russian formalism, Brecht, surrealism (Dulac), and the recent counter-cinema directors like Godard, Akerman and Duras), was new in its particular combination of semiology, structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. (Kaplan, *Women* 137-8)

These films have an inextricable connection to the theories proposed by their makers and can be more easily interpreted by audiences that are already familiar with them. Consequently they have a restricted target audience, which is something that they themselves recognised. Thus, despite being valuable in the deconstruction of patriarchal narratives and forms, it can be argued that their ultimate effect is questionable since they seem to be preaching to the converted. At the end of her discussion on feminist film Kaplan suggests that women directors need to move further from negation to affirmation, saying that "[a]t this point, then, we must use what we have learned in the past ten years to move theoretically beyond deconstruction to reconstruction" (*Women* 140), expanding this

theoretical stance to the actual practice of filmmaking.

Mulvey also argued in favour of the creation of a counter-cinema that will “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment” (27). Feminist film theory thus embraces counter-cinema's characteristic negation of dominant cinema and having recognised that “[i]n cinematic terms traditional illusionist aesthetics have privileged the signified, organising a text so that its mechanics would attract minimal notice”, she goes on to argue that “women cannot be satisfied with an aesthetics that restricts counter-cinema to work on form alone” (Mulvey 128). Similarly, Johnston deemed as necessary the creation of new meanings “by disrupting the fabric of male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film” (29). Mulvey's position, as already mentioned earlier, was far more radical since Johnston emphasised the need for pleasure and entertainment in women's cinema. The problem of cinematic pleasure was one of the issues that from the 1970s onwards has greatly preoccupied feminist directors and theorists who gradually came to realise that pleasure can be derived in ways that are not necessarily offensive to women. Sally Potter, for example, expressed the desire “to make pleasure that isn't causing somebody else pain” (qtd. in Harper 205), and the main proposition of this thesis is that art cinema provides the space for the creation of such a pleasurable text.

Having outlined some of the basic premises of avant-garde, counter-cinema and feminist film practices, which relate specifically to this idea of meta-cinema and self-reflexivity, the basic goal at the moment is to point to the significant overlap between them in terms of this technique. Interestingly enough, Verina Glaessner writes that Sally Potter, “[a]ware of these categories of 'avant-garde' or 'independent,' 'feminist' or 'experimental,' has in quite serious ways never accepted them”, adding that “[q]uite early on she spoke of herself as working within “avant-garde show business” (341). This statement is indicative

of Potter's awareness and commitment in treading her own path within filmmaking. At the same time, it can be interpreted as an allusion towards an art cinema context within which her work could be more meaningfully discussed, borrowing aesthetic concerns from all these other practices yet operating in a more fluid cinematic domain. What I will proceed to argue concerning meta-cinematic techniques within art cinema, evident within the chosen case studies, is that these films share a concern to expose the cinematic apparatus and the mystical process of filmmaking by using the avant-garde and counter-cinema practices, yet they also depart from them by embracing the principle of cinematic pleasure and blending harmoniously the personal with the formal, and the political with the pleasurable in a constructive symbiosis. Consequently, with the further analysis of Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* and Catherine Breillat's *Sex Is Comedy*, I will draw attention to this connection between the personal and the political which can be very productive in illuminating feminist concerns within films directed by women. Self-reflexivity will be considered as it both reflects cinematic processes and also relates to reflecting the self on screen in a more personal sense. This interconnection will be explored in detail as an insightful way of identifying some of the particularities involved in being a woman director, as showcased by the two main case studies. It will be argued that in this way art cinema, often seen as the creation of talented geniuses, is demystified and presented in its true colours, having as many challenges as other filmmaking practices, especially where women directors are concerned.

#### From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: The Auteure in Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson*

*The Tango Lesson* is Sally Potter's third feature film, following the worldwide success of *Orlando* (1992), an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel of the same title. It is the epitome of a self-reflexive film in that it features Potter herself as the main character,

Sally, a director starting to work on a new project “explicitly rais[ing] the question of what constitutes filmmaking” (Mayer 139). Throughout the film Sally is trying to make her next film, facing several difficulties and disappointments in the process. The final film is an intricate mixture of auto-biographical and fictional elements that, as I will proceed to discuss, presents not only the process of filmmaking as a rather challenging experience but also emphasises the specific gender struggle within this field. It is a very distinct female experience within this profession and it is this specificity that renders it an interesting example for the present study since it avoids any over-generalisations about 'The Female Experience' within filmmaking. The focus on the struggle between the two protagonists to come to terms with their gender positions gives a feminist inflection to the film, and also the autobiographical and the self-conscious aspect of this film emphasizes the auteur status of the director.

The film opens with a white surface, which turns out to be a kitchen table that Sally is cleaning in order to sit down and start filling the blank pages in front of her with ideas concerning her next film. Yet there seems to be a problem each time she sits down to write which Fischer interprets as writer's block. It seems that Sally cannot concentrate and she scribbles a few things with her pencil, an act followed by crumpling the paper and throwing it in the bin (“Passion” 132). Fischer thus remarks that this is a testimony of “the female author's conventional difficulty with creation”, adding that the choice of the pencil as writing material signifies tentativeness (“Passion” 133). I would be rather hesitant to claim that this creative crisis is necessarily restricted to the female author since there are a number of films dealing with this idea of the writer's block and in most cases the artist is male. A notable example that comes to mind is one of the iconic texts of art cinema, namely Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*. In this film the filmmaker is experiencing a serious crisis of creativity yet it is dealt with in a rather different tone, emphasising the director's macho

confidence and successful career. In contrast, Sally's creative frustration is depicted in a less pompous manner and she tries to get away by going to the theatre to attend a tango performance. Immediately she crosses the boundary from enunciator to receptor as she attends the show and becomes fascinated by it. She ends up introducing herself to Pablo, the tango dancer, and they make a deal for him to teach her how to dance tango and for her to put him in her film. One of the most obvious meta-cinematic techniques employed in the film's structure is the fragmented narrative that is signposted by inter-titles that effectively divide the film into twelve chapters or "lessons", as they are called within the film, to invoke its main title. This is evocative of the counter-cinematic aesthetics used by Godard in most of his films to point to the materiality of film. Instead of creating a seamless narrative space that fosters the illusionism aimed at by mainstream practices, Potter very clearly breaks away from this tradition and, as will be discussed later in more detail, this is an anti-realist technique that emphasises the distinction between reality and fiction.

In the second lesson Sally returns to the writing table and when she notices a mark on the floor she tries to clean that too. This compulsion to clean the table and generally the room she works in can be read as an effort on her part to clean up all the connections with the past and to start afresh. Like Orlando, from Potter's previous film, Sally needs to break free from the house to free her artistic spirit, which she does by travelling to Paris and Buenos Aires while her house is being refurbished. In other words, Sally needs to perform a certain deconstruction, tearing down the old and rotten floorboards in her home in order to replace them with new ones. This is indicative of a more subtle and figurative deconstruction of the old conception of the auteur figure and of gender binaries that will make way for a reconstruction of the auteure and of gender representations, which is achieved by the end of the film. Not only does Potter manage to make a film on her own terms, meaning that the deconstruction has helped to reach a point where the creative force,

instead of being demolished, can flourish in a different direction, but she also performs the pivotal step towards the conceptualisation of the female auteur and the artistic exploration of gender imbalances within this field. From its inception then, this film is deeply self-reflexive and, as Mayer puts it, “[w]ith *The Tango Lesson*, Sally is not writing an autobiographical film, but rather a meditation on what it means to make a film about filmmaking as a female, collaborative filmmaker” (146). Taking this into account, I argue that there is a distinctive use of avant-garde techniques within art cinema, as opposed to their more formalist usage in more experimental contexts mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. Due to art cinema's closer link to the figure of the author as the focal point around which meaning is structured, the formal and the personal are inextricably combined and consequently it is in this combination that the feminist message gains its momentum.

Potter chose to cast herself in the lead role and she explains her decision in the following passage from the introduction to the published screenplay of the film:

The highwire was held taut by the uneasy relationship between reality and fiction. I knew that this story could only be told from the inside out. I knew I had to live it. And despite never having consciously desired to perform on film – being, like many directors, quite camera-shy – I now knew that I *had* to perform in this one because the impetus for the film came out of my own desire to dance. (ix)

In this extract Potter justifies the significance of her playing the lead role in the film and also touches upon the issue of reality versus fiction that is one of the most important aspects of the film. Claire Monk states that “[b]y allowing a version of her affair to be restaged within the film, [Potter] squarely enters the autobiographical realm” (qtd. in Fischer, “Passion” 135). This is a valid point and the words “version” and “restaged” are key in understanding the precarious balance between fiction and reality throughout the

film. Although it holds a strong connection with reality, as Potter herself admits, even using the real names of the two main protagonists, the film remains within the fictional plane. Some evidence of this is that it follows a constructed script, it is edited in a way that emphasises its constructed-ness – by the inclusion of inter-titles as mentioned in the previous paragraph – and it is shot mostly in black and white, which is another aesthetic choice that brings forward the discrepancy between reality as we perceive it in the world around us and the ‘reality’ the film world. Overall, the story is re-enacted in the more artistic and controlled environment of the filmmaking context and there is an awareness both of its affinity to the fictional world through the overt use of meta-cinematic elements and of its affinity to the ‘real’ and the personal world of the filmmaker, who crosses the line between reality and fiction to share her own story. Regarding the impact that Potter's choice to star in her own film had, Corinn Columpar points out the gender imbalance that pervades the critical reception of films. She does so by briefly comparing the critical reaction to Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) with that to *The Tango Lesson*, saying that “[c]ritics took Potter to task for her film *The Tango Lesson*, designating the work as ‘an act of wild hubris’ employing a ‘self-admiring gaze’ and featuring ‘a woman smothering herself with her own affection’” (108-109). This condemnation seems rather extreme yet it can be better understood if one considers the authorial status that critics invest certain directors with, and therefore the ‘poetic license’ that they are prepared to make allowances for in some cases but denounce in others. Columpar expresses this imbalance when she says that “[w]hile Allen's self-indulgence is greeted with a chorus of kudos and the occasional bemused ‘tsk, tsk,’ Potter's is considered unfeminine and, thus, gravely inappropriate and egotistical”, adding rather poetically that “[i]n short, if Harry were to meet Sally it would be on a textual terrain reserved for male subjectivity” (109). This further illuminates the gender imbalance that exists at the level of critical reception,



which – as has been shown earlier (chapter 3) in connection with the Dogme directors and the qualitative differentiation asserted between the films made by men and women – is not an isolated case and may well constitute part of the reason why women directors struggle more to build their career, having to face constant doubt and even hostility from critics and producers alike.

This last issue is also addressed within the film in Sally's attempt to make *Rage* (1996) and the eventual abandonment of this project altogether. This is the result of her attempt to get some financial support from an unspecified American film company, which proves to be futile. During the 'Sixth Lesson' Sally goes to Hollywood to discuss her film with two movie executives. She does not seem to be very confident sitting with them explaining the idea for her film, which is emphasised by the fact that she does not speak loudly enough, so one of them tells her “can you speak up a bit?” in a rather intimidating and condescending tone. They also criticise the ending for being rather vague and generally they take apart her whole idea, objecting to every little detail, such as the fact that the main character has no legs and that they speak in French. They find that things like that limit the market and although at the beginning they said they liked it, it seems that they want to change so many things that the end product would not be Sally's film but something completely different. Her decision to abandon the making of *Rage* (1996) indicates her resolution to retain a more independent filmmaking stance so as to be able to make her own projects as she believes they should be. Towards the end of the film Sally is talking on the phone with a movie executive concerning her new project about tango. Again the movie executive seems interested but once he hears there will be no known stars on board he tells Sally that this is quite limiting in terms of marketing. At that point Sally, rather disappointed, says to him, “I thought after the last film you might trust my decisions” and hangs up the phone. Yet she does not abandon this project and, when

talking to Pablo in the 'Twelfth lesson', she tells him that there is no money to do the film but they are doing it anyway. This can be interpreted in relation to Potter's career as a statement that despite *Orlando's* unprecedented success, there has been no change towards securing better prospects within filmmaking and she is still not 'reliable' enough to be allowed to make the decisions she pleases concerning her film. She therefore finds herself at a crossroads where she has to choose to either relinquish authorial control over her films or forsake any ideas of external financial assistance and tread a solitary path of creative independence. In her choice to abandon the first project and go for something more personal, as Sally says to Pablo in the film, Mayer claims that Sally "moves from auteur to auteure, taking off the glamorous robe of the Director in which she has become entangled" (*Cinema* 146). Admittedly at that point Potter chooses her independence over selling-out in order to establish herself faster within the industry and earn the opportunity to materialise more projects because of the financial support this entails, yet I would argue that she was never vested with "the glamorous robe of the Director". If anything, by not compromising her artistic choices she keeps hold of her "robe of the Director" and she succeeds in becoming an auteure, as in a female auteur, by showing that in the case of the female director "the robe" is rarely "glamorous" because of the gender imbalance within the industry.

Consequently, the significance of this meta-cinematic approach with the strong autobiographical element lies in its value for feminist film criticism in the consideration of the gendered position of the concept of the film director and more importantly, for this study, of the art cinema auteur. As Mayer comments, "[t]he auteur is a particularly masculine figure of power, so Sally's internal battle is the more obvious and political, reflecting women's struggles for all kinds of equal access" (127). Sally Potter herself, in the introduction to the published screenplay, describes the "schisms in [her] life – between

the world of ideas and the world of the body – between 'serious' work and pure pleasure – between the world of the writer/director and the performer – between doing and being” which “gradually became the subject matter for a new film” (viii-ix). Throughout the tango lessons Sally undertakes, there is a gradual tension that builds because as a film director she is used to having control and leading instead of following instructions. During the 'eleventh lesson', in one of their arguments Sally angrily turns to Pablo and says: “I've done almost nothing. Except follow. Badly. Because it doesn't suit me to follow, you see. It suits me to lead. And you can't deal with that.” Yet in order to be a good dancing partner she has to relinquish her leading position to her male partner and learn how to follow. As Pablo prompts her throughout their dancing lessons and rehearsals she has to “let go”. This tension comes to a climax after their on-stage performance in the 'ninth lesson', when as soon as they finish dancing Pablo looks coldly at Sally and gestures at her to leave the stage. In the dressing room Pablo angrily shouts at her: “You have to give up all the ideas you ever had about what it means to be strong on stage. You are confusing strength with tension. You have to be calm to be strong. You have to be slow to be quick. Everything else is from the past, and you have to throw it all away.” To this he adds: “You should do nothing when you dance. Just follow. Follow. Otherwise you block my freedom to move. You destroy my liberty. And then I cannot dance.” In this way the internal battle that Sally is experiencing in trying to occupy a new position, a more passive one in contrast to her active role as a film director, manifests itself in her interaction with Pablo and is perfectly depicted in the film's symbolic use of Delacroix's painting of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. In the 'tenth lesson' Pablo joins Sally outside the church of Saint Sulpice in response to her peace offering and they re-create the tango-like posture of the painting. At that moment Sally looks up to his face and says: “I've been following you in the tango, Pablo. But to make a film you have to follow me.” The next scene after their reconciliation

is in Buenos Aires, where they are dancing in the rain carefree and happy, an indication that their conflict has been resolved at least for the time being. What these intense conflicts bring to the foreground is the detrimental effect of gender preconceptions both at a professional and a personal level. As I will proceed to show, Potter in the portrayal of the characters throughout the film manages to question these preconceptions and expose their randomness.

Concerning the stereotypes and binaries that usually pervade gender representations, the two main characters inhabit positions that seem to go against conventional gender expectations. Sally is in a stereotypically masculine position of film director and Pablo is in the stereotypically feminine position of the performer on display. In this way the film deals predominantly with the issue of gender in showing the arbitrariness of the characteristics that gender categorisations assume. In other words, by transgressing the gender expectations related with these two professional roles Potter challenges their omnipresence. Not only is Sally in a traditionally male profession but it could be said that through the use of costume she is seen to perform and alternate between stereotypical gender roles. For example, when she dances in public she wears more feminine clothes, such as dresses and high heels, whereas on most other occasions she is seen wearing more unisex and casual outfits and in the screenplay, for instance, her boots are described as “rather mannish” and “sensible” (17). This seems to be exemplifying Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance containing a subversive potential since, as she argues, “[t]hat the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (185).<sup>23</sup> Apart from her external appearance, Sally is most of the time in the male, according to Mulvey, position, that of the bearer of the look, while Pablo is more often than not the object of her gaze.

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<sup>23</sup> For more details of gender performativity and subversion, see, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) in bibliography.

Therefore according to this schema Pablo inhabits a position, which is stereotypically feminine. In turn he seems to be rather narcissistic and obsessed with performing, which he does every time he gets the opportunity. Traditionally this is a trait that is associated with femininity, especially in connection to female performers and Mulvey's idea of to-be-looked-at-ness. Hence Potter, in positioning her characters in this way, manages to completely subvert these stereotypes and question their wider validity. Pablo seems to be very comfortable in this position of the performer and he strives to be the centre of attention, which in his profession is associated with a successful career. Appearing in Sally's film will be another way to achieve this much-desired visibility. For instance, towards the end of the 'fourth lesson' he asks her whether she has finished her script and as they are walking along the Seine he performs a brief dancing number and tells her he always wanted to be in films. This motif is repeated several times throughout the film. In 'lesson six', he once more performs for her while preparing dinner in his home in Paris. This is a flashy impromptu performance which is motivated by Sally's admiring and loving gaze that is focused on him.

In this way Pablo seems to be rather self-centred but at the same time quite vulnerable in his constant dependence on other peoples' gaze to gain recognition and sustain his career. Sally uncovers this narcissism and vulnerability when after their big fight in 'lesson nine' she asks him while crying, "why are you afraid of me?" He replies that he is afraid of her emotional weakness, to which Sally responds by saying "I'm not weak. I'm expressive. You think I could direct films and be weak?" and she adds "you are only interested in being looked at. Not at looking. That's why you don't see. And that is why you know nothing about cinema." With these words Potter addresses one of the most common stereotypes of femininity, mainly that women are emotional which is interpreted as a sign of weakness. Pablo therefore seems to be quite short-tempered and antagonistic

and possibly due to his international career he seems to have the attitude of a diva, especially when compared to his friends from Buenos Aires, Gustavo and Fabian, who are simpler in their ways, more friendly and encouraging in their encounters with Sally. Towards the end of the film Pablo's vulnerability, that manifests itself as aggressiveness, is explained when he tells Sally that he is afraid he will disappear without leaving a trace, to which she responds by saying that "perhaps that's why [they] met". This portrayal of Pablo manages to question gender stereotypes that require the man to be aggressive, strong and always in control, and shows that only by shedding the past – as he demands of Sally in relation to the tango – can they be free to come together in an artistic unison beneficial for both. Different pursuits require different degrees of activity or passivity and it is thus suggested that in order to be able to succeed, people, regardless of gender, have to be able to move between and beyond stereotypical gender positions. Similarly Fischer summarises the film's crux in the following passage:

In the course of its narrative, it provides a treatise on the female author – portraying both the perils and glories of writing. At the same time, it questions rigid binaries that have haunted feminist thinking – those between sexual pleasure and oppression, those between male and female roles. ("Passion" 146)

It is in this manner, I argue, that the film showcases its feminist values, and having shown how the deconstruction of the characters, through their conflicts and their identity crises, develops to a re-construction of gender representations that move beyond the limiting binaries of the past, I would now like to turn the discussion full circle to the issue of the female auteur and the new figure that emerges from the ashes of the deconstruction.

During Sally's meeting with the Hollywood executives, one of them expresses the opinion that "the writer should know everything, the writer is God". This idea returns a bit

later when Sally and Pablo are sitting in a café having a conversation about religion. Sally says, “I don't believe our lives are already written, I don't believe there's a superior power controlling what we do”. Considering this is expressed by a character within a film it has a dual function: it points not only to the unorthodox conditions of making this particular film which is inspired by the unpredictability of real-life events, but also to the notion of the 'death of the author' as formulated originally by Roland Barthes<sup>24</sup> and appropriated subsequently within discussions concerning film authorship. Therefore both the position of the auteur in its purist formulations and, consequently, the fixity of the text's form and meaning, are destabilised. Potter, in an interview to Mayer, explains this matter further in the following passage:

The director's work is, I totally agree with auteur theorists, another form of writing, and editing is another. You reorganise and reshape and therefore rewrite what you wrote in the first place. It's not finished when the film is over. You start writing director's statements and giving interviews in which you try and rewrite what you were doing.

So that rewriting goes on and on. (144)

With this statement Potter expresses her belief in the never-ending process of writing, at the different levels of the film's production, and the infinite possibilities such a process opens up. The audience is seen to play an important part in this process through its participation in the creation of meaning during the viewing of the film. This is addressed within the film when towards the end the three men are dancing around trying out different numbers and Sally is watching them perform. Yet after a moment she gets distracted and, according to the screenplay, “without her gaze something is missing. The men start to lose control without her appreciative attention” (61). It seems therefore that the spectacle is

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion of Barthes' argument see his article “The Death of the Author” originally published in 1968. See bibliography for details of reprint.

dependent on the audience and Potter does not hesitate to acknowledge the audience's important position in the process of rewriting the text and therefore giving it substance and meaning through their participation. This conscious choice in her directorial stance to create an alternative kind of cinema in collaboration with the audience is also detected by Mayer, who interprets Sally's voicemail addressed to Pablo as a suggestion that Pablo is like the viewer, who is like God “perhaps not' there, but the film addresses them anyway, inviting them to meet down to earth” (137).

This unusual collaborative approach that Potter applies to her work is also evident in her other films: from directly addressing the audience through her films – e.g. *Orlando*, *Yes* – to actively engaging with them, in relation to her latest film *Rage* (2009). According to Mayer, Potter “discovered the film's [*Rage* 2009] form, after more than a decade reworking the story that appears, fragmentarily, as the film-within-a-film in *The Tango Lesson*, while blogging and interacting with forum posters during the festival tour for *Yes*” (217). This attitude shows Potter's distinctive authorial stance in championing a collaborative and open interaction between the participators in the production of a film, one of which is the audience. Regarding the issue of collaboration and how she thinks it affects claims to authorship, Potter has stated the obvious by saying that “everybody that we think of traditionally as an auteur also collaborated” and therefore she does not consider collaboration and authorship as “contradictory ideas” (qtd. in Mayer 140). Interestingly, as has been noted in chapter 1 (46), she comments on the reason behind women directors' willingness to acknowledge this collaboration due to their experience of doing work that is not properly acknowledged throughout history (Mayer 140). This is an issue I return to in relation to my second case study, which looks at the tensions at work in the making of the film-within-the-film.



Negotiating Authority: The Auteure in Catherine Breillat's *Sex Is Comedy*

In his book on French Cinema, Charles Drazin talks about the beginnings of the French New Wave and the strong autobiographical ties the new films had with their directors' personal life, using specifically the example of Claude Chabrol and his film *The Handsome Serge* (1959), which is considered to be the first of this movement (306). Of course this connection, as mentioned earlier, is largely attributable to the preceding call to arms by another of these young directors, François Truffaut, in his 1954 article “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema”, which was the spark that ignited the birth of the theory of authorship. Therefore art cinema, with its high regard for the figure of the auteur, is closely linked to French cinematic discourse and although this discourse has greatly developed and overflowed the limits of its national origins, it still seems appropriate in this chapter that a French film be considered. Breillat is very much aware of this tradition she is part of as a French director and, as she said in an interview, “To begin with, I thought I would be making a film like *La nuit américaine*. I didn't imagine the dimension of self-portraiture” (qtd. in Ince 159). Although her film is less personal than Potter's, in that it keeps some distance from the director's private life, it is equally self-reflexive in depicting the process of filmmaking and maintains a close affinity to the particulars of her own work, since it contains explicit references to her previous films and it thus gives an account of her specific directorial experience and style. For this reason, Katherine Ince describes it as an “autofiction, in which the central character is Breillat's fictional incarnation Jeanne” (159). In the analysis that follows I will proceed to highlight the way in which *Sex Is Comedy* follows very closely the intricacies of managing a film set and provides an account of the negotiations of power between the director and the rest of the people involved in the making of an intimate scene. At the end of this discussion certain parallels will be drawn between the two case studies that will support the overarching claim of this thesis that art

cinema is a terrain that allows feminist issues to surface, in particular through the convergence of the personal and the political, as is most straightforwardly seen in the meta-cinematic films under discussion.

*Sex Is Comedy* was released in 2002, a year after Breillat's film *To My Sister*, which concerns the sexual awakening and coming of age of two sisters, Elena and Anaïs. It is a fictionalisation of the process of filming the sexual scenes of *To My Sister*, which is even more emphasised by the recurrence of the actress, Roxanne Mesquida, who plays Elena in the former and the lead female role in the subsequent film. This is one of the most obvious points that create the link between the two films from the very beginning, a link which is established further by the re-presentation of the main sex scene of the first film and the disclosure of the details of its shooting. Therefore viewers that are familiar with Breillat's previous film will immediately recognise the self-referential character of *Sex Is Comedy*. The narrative of the film starts in medias res during the shooting of one of the scenes of the film-within-the-film which is set on a beach. This is a very direct introduction to the film's content as it does not follow a more traditional narrative format of gradually introducing the characters and having a clear-cut beginning middle and end following the whole process of making the film. Rather, it focuses on the two scenes of physical intimacy between the leading characters and, as Ince has remarked, "*Sex Is Comedy* is, first and foremost, a self-reflexive meditation on Breillat's working methods as a director, and particularly as a director of explicit sex scenes" (159). Breillat's focus on the representation of explicit sex scenes throughout her oeuvre is one of the distinguishing characteristics of her authorial signature, and by directly addressing this issue, the film remains rather personal and expresses an urge to share this personal view with the audience much as in Potter's previously discussed film.

Emma Wilson points to the director's career originating in writing erotic novels

from the age of seventeen, starting with *Easy Man*, and then getting into filmmaking during the 1970s (146). Her debut at directing was *A Real Young Girl* (1976), which is based on her own novel titled *Le Soupirail*. Due to its sexual explicitness the film did not secure a theatrical release until 1999. This bold start was to be followed by a number of films that very openly explore female sexuality and more specifically its representation on screen. Despite a certain amount of hostility in the reception of her films, an example of which is Jason Caro's review of *Romance* in which he characterises the film “French porn masquerading as art” (qtd. in Wilson), Breillat continued exploring this sensitive and controversial subject with unabated rigour as is demonstrated by her films, *Romance* (1999), *To My Sister* (2001), *Brief Crossing* (2001), *Anatomy of Hell* (2004) and *The Last Mistress* (2007). Her innovative way of looking at and portraying female sexuality has been noted by film scholars such as Susan Hayward<sup>25</sup>, who stresses the importance of Breillat's work in demystifying and de-aestheticising this most taboo subject of female experience. This different aesthetic that Breillat brings into her films can be easily discerned if one compares the portrayal of sex and sexuality in other art films such as Luis Buñuel's previously discussed *Belle de Jour*, or Antonioni's more recent *Identification of a Woman* (1982), or even his latest *Beyond the Clouds* (1995), which he co-directed with another prestigious auteur, Wim Wenders. The importance lies not so much on *what* is shown but *how* it is shown, in terms of fetishising the female body and providing images based on their sensual effect. This is expressed by Jeanne in the film when on the way to shoot the sex scene she complains that in others' films the actors undress without any hesitation and “they do shower scenes that are sheer titillation”. Accordingly Breillat, in her interview to Robert Sklar, says that “[f]or French spectators, women are taking power to talk about sex in a way that men don't” (qtd. in Wilson 148), which underlines her

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25 Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

cinematic contribution to the portrayal of sex and sexuality.

Breillat's attitude in filming explicit sex scenes is presented towards the end of the film when Jeanne is explaining to the actress how she wants the film to look and she says: "Dazzle me on the monitor, so I feel like an intruder! I have no right to watch this scene! It's very intimate! I must be breathless, watching you is indecent!" The actress starts crying and Jeanne asks her to scream louder and louder. At the end Jeanne, who is watching from the monitor, is moved by the girl's performance while the rest of the crew, mostly men, seem to be uncomfortable, fidgeting in their seats and looking awkward. This episode more or less summarises Breillat's intention in making this type of scenes. She does not want to convey sensual pleasure but to explore this traumatising experience of sexual awakening in a genuine and shocking manner. She is committed to "making a *moral cinema*" and, as Wilson explains, "in her terms this ethical cinema would be a cinema which would be uncompromising in its exploration of sexuality, and not hide-bound by questions of right and wrong, moral and immoral" (148). Her work also directly raises issues concerning the distinction of art versus pornography within art cinema in casting porn star Rocco Siffredi in two of her most controversial films, *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*. According to Wilson, with this choice "Breillat attempts to break through the tasteful veils that have dissimulated the erotic in art-house cinema" (152). It is thus made clear through this very brief overview of Breillat's career and position within filmmaking that her authorial voice brings something new within art cinema in terms of the representation of gender and sexuality. I will now proceed with the closer analysis of her film *Sex Is Comedy* in order to show how this position within filmmaking is fictionalised and presented more explicitly to the viewer.

The focus of the film from the very start until the end is on the figure of the fictional director, Jeanne, which is made even more apparent by the fact that she is given a

proper name whereas the two actors are not. This is indicative of the subordinate position they hold in the wider scheme of the film's argument or in the hierarchy of the set and in a way it is suggested that it probably does not change anything; it could be any actors in their place. In other words there seems to be a generalising tendency in order to free the film from a restrictive specificity and give it a more universal and abstract scope. Yet the references to Breillat's previous film are clear and the focalisation of Jeanne and her experience of the events puts her in a privileged position in relation to that of the actors who might be replaceable. This is also evident when at certain points during conversations with her assistant, Leo, or the actor, she makes general statements about her experiences in working with actors and her opinions about them. Therefore by keeping a closer focus on the director and investing her with a distinctive subjectivity she becomes a mouthpiece for Breillat to express her own personal views on her experiences in the business, and hence the film avoids over-generalisations concerning "The Director" or "the Woman director". At the same time the decision not to take up the role herself points to Breillat's hesitation to suggest the complete conflation of the identities of the fictional and the actual director. With this in mind it is safe to say that the film, much like Potter's previously discussed film, keeps a rather fragile balance between fiction and reality and also between specificity and abstraction.

From the very beginning of the film, Jeanne is presented with the problem of the actor's insubordination, which is initially indicated by the fact that he objects to wearing make-up. This is the first moment of friction between the two, setting the tone of their relationship and the numerous arguments that will follow. The director goes to his dressing room and stands behind him, rubbing his shoulders and trying to softly persuade him to comply with the rules and allow the make-up artist to do her job. Of course the main reason behind his refusal is the desire to assert his masculinity, suggesting that make-up is

for women, which in turn shows his stubbornness and unprofessionalism. In this instance Jeanne cajoles the actor, using diplomacy, and her stance is reminiscent of the way a mother reasons with an unruly child, which she notes herself when she says that she is fed up with mothering the actors. At other moments she deals with the actor's whims and caprices in a more abrupt manner, shouting and ordering him to do as told. This shows that not only is Jeanne in the position of authority and in possession of a clear artistic vision but she is also very vocal about how she wants things to be done and demands from her colleagues that they abide by her guidelines. Yet despite this strong aspect of her character, she does have her moments of weakness and internal conflict. Rather notably, after the first day of shooting on the beach she says to Leo: "I'm always in control. They're MY actors! When I seem furious, I'm not really angry. Maybe I am, but it's good for the role. That's how the movie has to be shot". This statement on the one hand shows her determination and firm hand in managing the film set, but also implies that in occupying the position of the director she is playing a role herself. She is very much aware of the power play and the part she has to perform to achieve her ultimate goal in bringing to life her creative vision. Immediately after this she tells Leo: "I never know what I'll do, it's terrifying. I don't know how I manage. It's always a last minute thing." In a similar vein, towards the end of the film and during the filming of the sex scene, Jeanne once more temporarily crumbles under the pressure of filming and she starts crying. As with Sally in the previously discussed film, this is not a sign of weakness and incapacity to fulfil her role but a portrayal of the emotional turmoil that the constant pressure being in charge of a film-set places on the director within the filmmaking context of art cinema. In this way the film demystifies the romantic figure of the auteur and shows the less glamorous and more pragmatic side of the profession.

In relation to this, one of the film's most potent symbols of the director's struggle

and vulnerability but also determination, is her broken leg, which she gets soon after the beginning of shooting and her statements quoted above. When asked how it happened, she says “it broke on its own” and elaborates by saying very ambiguously, “I put my foot down! It broke itself”. And to the actor she says, “My foot broke to save this film”. In this way it is emphasised that being in control and having her way is not as easy as it may seem, since she has to face a certain amount of antagonism, and she is not indestructible, hence the broken foot, but she seems to be suggesting that it is a small price to pay if it means the successful completion of her film. Jeanne explains her emotional state at one point in the film and the vulnerability of her position, when the actor calls her a tyrant, expressing his dislike about the way she speaks to people, by saying that she does not shout out of malice but out of anxiety. To Leo she explains it in more detail by saying that once the actors are chosen, “the film becomes their hostage” and she stresses the importance of keeping control. Yet most notably at one point she says to the actor: “You refuse to understand. I needed to be alone. The film's hard for me too. It's no trifle. I'm at stake here. If you're bad, you'll say I'm to blame. That the film's hopeless. You'll say it's not your film”. This underlines the centrality of the director within art cinema and the fact that this auteur-centred filmmaking context functions as a double edged sword since the pressure on her to deliver the best outcome possible is far bigger, and consequently the acknowledgement of her success will be proportionate to this. In other words the personal nature of filmmaking within art cinema means that she is exposing herself and if the film is not a success she will be considered responsible. Eleanor Roosevelt's quote, “with great freedom comes great responsibility” seems to be an apt description of the position of the art cinema director who is free to pursue their individual artistic vision and, notwithstanding the collaboration that is naturally involved in making a film, eventually the greatest responsibility lies with the director.

During one of her conversations with the actor he tells her, “you must trust me, respect my freedom”, a phrase, which is reminiscent of the power struggle between Sally and Pablo in the previously discussed film. Jeanne goes on to address this issue in more detail and says that her problems are only with actors not actresses, adding: “with them I get along, even when we don't like each other. The violence, the power trip, is masculine”. This brings to the foreground, as *The Tango Lesson* does, the problem of the binary gender stereotyping especially as it is perceived within the filmmaking profession. Jeanne is seen to occupy a male position and the actor a female position and that is probably the reason why there is no problem with the actresses. She says, “an actor is female. He has to be, to be an actor” adding that “a director is a predator”. Catherine Wheatley very acutely comments on this when she says that “[t]he suggestion is, therefore, that in the filmmaking scenario, the director must be an aggressively seductive (“masculine”) force, while the actor is a vain and coquettish (or “feminine”) presence, flitting between desire to be controlled and fear of submission, ridicule and, worse still, ambivalence” (34). On the one hand this discourse used by Jeanne within the film, and by Wheatley in the above remark, can be seen as perpetuating this gender divide which defines certain behaviours as feminine while others as masculine. However, I would argue that it is more the case of employing the dominant discourse which despite bearing this potential risk also allows for a direct challenge since, as with my previous case study, it shows that in reality these roles and characteristics are not exclusive to the gender categories they have been applied to. The look is assumed to be a male privilege and Jeanne's cameraman tells her that she looks at boys “the way men look at girls: for consumption, not human qualities”, to which comment she smiles and says that she likes filming “machos”. Jeanne insists on her prerogative as the director to look, and says to her assistant: “I'll go up to him, I'll stand in front of him and stare at him, so he understands it's my right. So he sees he can't dodge me,



or the role". It seems therefore that Jeanne takes some kind of pleasure in exposing the clash between gender and the expectations that traditional discourses have assigned to professional roles on that basis.

On the other hand, the actor seems to be equally comfortable in the position of the object of her gaze since he is constantly striving for her attention. He keeps trying to have an exclusive relationship with the director and he wants to sit alone with her for lunch, during which time he complains about his co-protagonist and tries to influence Jeanne against her. In addition, he seems to be jealous of other people on the set for stealing Jeanne's attention from him and he considers her need for isolation on the set to go over the scene with Leo "an act of violence". He says to her "I'm interested in myself: I'm unique. If I'm ill at ease, screw your film." This shows his narcissism and egomania and it is when he is neglected or when his masculinity is at stake, by being ordered around and questioned, that he becomes difficult and rebellious. Through this depiction Breillat sustains this overarching theme within the narrative, mainly that the gender labels attributed to different professional roles are rather arbitrary, by showing that a "traditionally male position" can easily be occupied by a woman and vice versa. This is also evident when Jeanne is going over the intimate scene with Leo and during this rehearsal he plays the girl's part while she plays the male lead. Eventually it appears that the tension that arises is not due to the "transgression" of this convention but due to the actor's inability to accept this and move past the conservative stereotypes of contemporary society. Leo refers to this tension when he tells her: "You have a weird relationship with your actor, so passionate, like two wildcats. No one dares interfere, as you go at each other". This special relationship is made even more apparent by the comparison between the actor's and the actress's attitude towards Jeanne. Of course this does not imply that the actress is perfect in her job and she does need guidance and criticism but Jeanne is always more tactful and speaks to her in a

more tender manner. This is encouraged by the fact that the girl is very compliant with everything she is told and she does not create problems as the actor does. It is probably safe to say that Jeanne even admires the actress for her professionalism, which is made clear when she tells the actor that the actress has guts: “she takes risks, she's not a pain”. In this sense a gender polarisation is created on the set, which demonstrates that the masculinity crisis experienced by the actor is at the centre of the working disharmony.

This disharmony becomes even more apparent due to the nature of the scenes, which are of an intimate nature and are directly connected to issues concerning sexuality. One of the most significant aspects in relation to the filming of the sex scene and its difficulty is the factor of nudity, and for this reason they decide to use a prosthetic penis so that both actors can feel more comfortable. This is mentioned in a brief discussion between Jeanne and Leo when he says that it is more reassuring having a prosthetic penis, to which Jeanne replies rather sardonically: “really? You think it's more politically correct?”. The tone that Jeanne adopts could be interpreted as mocking the convention of political correctness, indicating that the director has a different agenda. As Ince very eloquently puts it, the use of the prosthetic penis is an indication “that the phallic mastery that would deflower the Actress is a masquerade” (159). Having witnessed the perseverance with which Jeanne is pursuing the appearance of verisimilitude in terms of the portrayal of passion and emotion during the intimate scenes, it is only fair to assume that the reason why she decided to have a prosthetic penis for the male lead is in order to make a point. This tendency towards realism in portraying sex on screen is underlined by Wilson, who notes in relation to the director's technique that “[i]n surprisingly long takes, by pushing her actress to the limit, or by extraordinary artistry, Breillat manages to convince her audience that [...] we are witnessing 'real', unstaged physical responses and reactions” (154). Moreover, the whole incident about choosing the prosthetic penis and the effect it

has on the actor's psychology seems to be in support of Ince's argument. While Jeanne and the man in charge of the props are discussing the particulars of making the prosthetic part, the actor is quiet and staring at the floor, which betrays his discomfort. He acts as if his masculinity is threatened, which is particularly evident when he tells Jeanne that he feels sick because a man has touched his penis. Not long after this he tells Jeanne about a nightmare he had in which he had a penis that reached to the sky and he had become tiny. It seems therefore that he is experiencing some form of anxiety relating to penis size and its correspondence to his masculinity. He then chooses the biggest prosthetic penis, which looks rather comic and exaggerated, clearly an evocation of the idea of the phallus and its artificiality. This effectively emphasises the underlying crisis of masculinity the actor is experiencing as due cause for the power struggle between Jeanne and him, which, elevated to a more general level, can be read as a comment on the way women directors are perceived and the reasons behind it.

### Conclusion

Both films discussed in this chapter, with their strong meta-cinematic and autobiographical elements, provide interesting insights to the way that tensions arising from the gender role reversal implied in the role of the female director threaten the much desired creative harmony within the filmmaking context. The two different accounts have a striking similarity in foregrounding the weight that falls on the director within an auteur-driven industry, while also emphasising the more specific difficulties that a woman faces in dealing with the power hierarchies in this professional environment. Interestingly enough, both films belong to a western socio-political context in which there has been a significant development of feminist thought and progression of equal rights policies. Nevertheless, both accounts point to the more deep-rooted inequalities and the gender-based

discrimination that exist on the level of discourse and are still strongly manifested within professional environments such as filmmaking. Overlaying this common concern of these films, there are also some notable differences that attest to the differential experience of women directors mentioned in the previous chapter as well. In other words, the treatment of this issue is filtered through the personal subjectivity and experience of each director and thus self-reflexivity works both at the level of the content and form, in that it reveals the process of filmmaking as well as that of the personal authorial inflection encouraged within art cinema. Potter crosses the divide between being behind and in front of the camera and causes an uproar among the majority of film critics; while Breillat who, according to Wilson, “wants to make an impression” by “mak[ing] people accept what they deem unacceptable” (157) steps back and reveals the inner workings of her filmmaking stance. The autobiographical elements in both cases are even more apparent to those members of the audience that are familiar with the directors' cinematic oeuvre yet such knowledge is not indispensable for joining in the pleasures that these texts offer.

More importantly, this side-by-side analysis of two very distinct films shows that despite their differences there is one crucial common problematic: the deconstruction of the mythic figure of the auteur in art cinema and the representation of the gender imbalance within the filmmaking profession, in particular the struggle that being an independent woman director entails. As has been shown in the second chapter of the thesis, in connection to Bergman's *All These Women* and Fellini's *8 1/2*, the figure of the male artist, surrounded by his female muses that are there to inspire him into creation with their external beauty and service, has dominated the public imaginary. By showing the intricacies and less romantic aspects of filmmaking – i.e. anxiety and stress over the prompt completion of shooting, failure to secure funds for the production, and dissidence on the film set – both Potter and Breillat manage to create a new image of the auteur: one

not so much God-like as human-like. By blurring the dividing line between reality and fiction they both manage to create a picture of their own experience of being a woman filmmaker while at the same time avoiding any universal claims that might be arbitrary and inaccurate. Another film that functions in a similar way is Agnès Varda's 2008 documentary *The Beaches of Agnès*. Although Varda does not focus on the specificities of being a woman director within a male-dominated profession, in performing a retrospective of her own career she tells her story in a visually captivating manner, thus narrating her authorial subjectivity. As would be expected, within this story there are snippets of information concerning her gendered position within the field. For example she says about the beginning of her career: "I had a problem to solve: how to enter the world of men, who frightened me, intimidated me." She also talks about how motherhood influenced her professional life in terms of having to work close to the home in order to be there for her new-born son. Among other memories she talks about the challenge of making a film in Hollywood and how she declined the project because they did not give her the final cut. Therefore some of the themes that are dealt with in more detail in the main case studies do make an appearance, as well as others that are specific to Varda's experience as a woman and a filmmaker. The film is again a play on reality and fiction, this time a fiction that has to do with the process of narrativizing and shaping past events. It is very different from the other two cases I have looked at for this chapter, yet it also offers a valuable insight as to some overarching concerns a woman filmmaker faces. In this way these personal testimonies and experiences become political manifestations of the necessity of gender equality within this professional field. The relationship between reality and fiction along with its feminist reverberations within female-authored films will be further pursued in the chapter that follows through the consideration of social realist films within the art cinema context.

## Chapter 5

Social Realist Films: Negotiating Feminism Between Reality and Fiction

Moving on from the discussion of the previous chapter that touched upon the ambiguous relationship of self-reflexive films with reality as filtered through the filmmaker's perspective in the particular portrayal of feminist issues, this chapter addresses more directly the portrayal of social reality within art cinema through the cinematic practice of social realism. More specifically a case will be made for the usefulness of this style of filmmaking in the representation of women and more generally gender issues within society. Realism has been closely linked to the seventh art even more so than its artistic ancestors of visual representation, namely painting and photography. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith observes, film scholars, theorists and critics have drawn attention to the “presumed privileged relationship of the film camera to the movement of the outside world that comes into its field of view” (“From Realism” 147). Béla Balázs, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer are some of the most prominent names that come to mind when thinking of discourses relating to cinema's ability to record reality. However, as Nowell-Smith goes on to explain, the representation of reality is not always at the forefront of cinematic production, a tendency that is evident in the numerous surrealist and experimental films (“From Realism” 148-9). In addition, there are different forms of realism, as manifested in the different approaches to the portrayal of reality within classical Hollywood, Italian Neo-Realism or, for instance, British social realism, which will be discussed in relation to the first case study in this chapter. Raymond Williams in his article “A Lecture on Realism” detects four criteria that can be traced to all forms of realism: first, secularity; second, contemporaneity; third, a tendency to social extension; and fourth, a close connection to artistic intention (61-74). As I will show with the choice of the following case studies these parameters are all present in both films and I would argue they

contribute to the urgency of the feminist message. Situated within fictional filmmaking yet alluding to the non-fictional world they are examples of the way social realist films can be both aesthetically pleasing and effective tools for raising the public's awareness in relation to important social issues.

Therefore this is an important field for women filmmakers to explore and give their perspective, showing society and its ailments from a female point of view and thus demonstrating the necessity for feminism. Social realist films are tentatively and to varying degrees related to documentary practices, which have been crucial in the development of feminist filmmaking since the 1970s. The first feminist films to emerge from second wave feminism were in documentary style, influenced by documentary practices which flourished especially during World War II and which were particularly adept in capturing the experience of ordinary people. Some indicative titles of feminist documentaries employing cinéma vérité techniques are, among others: *Betty Tells Her Story* (1972), *Joyce at 34* (1972) and *Union Maids* (1976). Ann Kaplan detects the influence the French New Wave had on this form of filmmaking, using “fast film stock [...], hand-held camera, interviews, voice-over track” and “editing both for shock effect and to develop a specific interpretation of political events” (*Women* 126). As a result these films have as their “overriding aim not to produce aesthetic objects but to create powerful organizing tools” (*Women* 126), serving in other words as auxiliaries to feminist activism. This form of realist cinema, however, should be approached with some scepticism as to its objective depiction of reality since the relationship between the camera and its subject is never as innocent and ideologically free as it is sometimes made to appear. As I have already mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, film theorists like Johnston realised this shortcoming of cinéma vérité practices and highlighted the necessity of a counter-cinema that would reject the existing depictions of reality while emphasising the ideological

implications embedded in the cinematic apparatus itself (27-31). This is achieved, as I will proceed to argue, in this case by the addition of the female voice in social realist filmmaking. It destabilises what is considered to be “the reality”, for instance by tying the cinematic gaze to a character's specific point of view and giving a version of reality that so far has been neglected.

Consequently the subjectiveness of art cinema, allowing for personal vision, coupled with the employment of documentary-like realist practices and psychological realism, provide a distinct type of social realism. As Raymond Williams has observed in the aforementioned article, it is important “to show how the methods and intentions [within realism] are highly variable and have always to be taken to specific historical and social analyses” (73). Following this premise I will look at the formal tendencies that exist within this transnational cinematic field, which will be grounded in specificity by my two case studies. The close connection between social realism and art cinema has already been referred to when talking about Italian neo-realism, art cinema's first film movement in the post-war era (chapter 2). The aesthetics that started developing then, and influenced the majority of the film practices that followed worldwide, are I believe the common ground for all social realist practices within this filmmaking context. Of course, they have developed in different ways depending on each individual socio-political context since, as I have argued earlier, the development of art cinema practices within a particular national cinema is a two-way interaction between transnational art-cinema tendencies and developments within national cinematic traditions. This has also been pointed out in the relationship between realism and the two film movements analysed in chapter 3, thus showing even further the influence from Italian neo-realism on subsequent art film practices around the world. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus more specifically on social realist practices and proceed to highlight these developments within the



individual case studies I have chosen: British social realism as the cinematic background for Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) and New Iranian cinema for Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). With the following analyses the intention is to look at how these two films employ realist aesthetics to deal very openly with particular social issues within their original national context while offering fertile ground for raising feminist concerns. As a result, I argue, they both make a strong case about the existing gender inequalities in these two distinct socio-political environments. Even though I could not speak of authorial intention, as Raymond Williams does, this political reading is definitely a privileged one within the filmic text, through the narrative focus on the female characters and the unflinching gaze at their challenging existence.

#### This Is a Woman's World: British Social Realism in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009)

Andrea Arnold started her filmmaking career after studying at the AFI in Los Angeles and her first directorial undertakings were the short films *Milk* (1998), *Dog* (2001) and *Wasp* (2005) which earned her an Oscar. Her debut in feature-length filmmaking came a year later with the much-acclaimed *Red Road* (2006), which earned her the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. She followed this successful beginning with the equally praised *Fish Tank* three years later, which will be discussed in more detail below. The latest addition to her oeuvre is an adaptation of Emily Brontë's classic 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *Wuthering Heights* released in 2011, which won the award for Best Cinematography at the prestigious Venice Film Festival. By briefly mentioning the various accolades her films have garnered so far, the intention is to underline the wider acknowledgment her work has received within the art cinema festival circuit designated by two of its most prominent members. This success in turn is very important for the wider dissemination and promotion of gender issues and feminist concerns that can be detected in Arnold's work. Within her

films she employs social realist practices, presenting us with the specific viewpoint of the marginalised working-class woman, a social demographic she is particularly familiar with since, as she has said in several interviews, she was brought up in a situation that was similar to the one presented in *Wasp* and *Fish Tank*. Her films therefore belong to a larger social realist tradition that has developed throughout the history of British cinema and is closely linked to documentary aesthetics.

Social problem films from the 1950s – *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) and *Sapphire* (1959) – Free Cinema and British New Wave films from the late 1950s to early 1960s – *Room at the Top* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Kind of Loving* (1962) – and later art house films with a social investment – *Poor Cow* (1967), *High Hopes* (1988), *Raining Stones* (1993), *All or Nothing* (2002) – form different stages to this ongoing engagement of British film with contemporary social reality and burning social issues. More recently Shane Meadows can be seen as one of the newest additions to this category of socially sensitive auteurs. Meadows much like Arnold, comes from the working class environment he depicts in his films. Yet, as I will proceed to show, this area in terms of its cinematic representations has more or less remained a male territory and more often than not the female characters either remain marginal to the narrative or are stereotyped to varied degrees. Even though there are some films that address issues which affect women, such as domestic abuse in Paddy Considine's *Tyrannosaur* (2011), overall there seems to be a divide and a polarisation between the sexes as they are depicted in these films, and women tend to bear the brunt of this uneasy relationship. As I will proceed to show with the following discussion on *Fish Tank*, Arnold's contribution to contemporary social realism within the wider arena of art cinema is significant in terms of a feminist aesthetic, which is inextricably combined with the aesthetics of this long British cinematic tradition. Within her films she appropriates this

traditionally male-dominated cinematic practice and presents us with a female version of social realism. To be more precise, she foregrounds these female characters who live at the fringes of society in a way that only a few other female-authored social realist films have done. Even though her latest film is not social realist, since it is an adaptation of a literary novel set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cinematography and production values are closely linked to the gritty social realism much more prominent in her previous films. It can therefore be argued that social realist aesthetics seem to form part of her authorial signature so far, and on this basis she constitutes a rather obvious case study for this chapter. Before proceeding to discuss the particular way in which *Fish Tank* functions as a social realist text and its specific focus on a female working-class slice-of-life narrative, I would like to briefly outline the British social realist tradition. This will be useful in presenting the film's cinematic precedents and its larger context, thus situating it within film history as a contemporary evolution of social realism. At the same time it will be helpful in drawing attention to the significant gender imbalance I mentioned above and this film's function as a positive step towards redressing it.

As Higson comments, the British New Wave films “inherit[ed] certain of their realist attributes” from the British documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s (“Space” 134). John Grierson is the presiding figure of the documentary movement and it is he who is credited with coining the word documentary and applying it to film practice. According to Leo Enticknap, Grierson considered the financial viability of films and their artistic and cultural merit to be two aspects that were more often than not in conflict (209). Therefore Grierson set about to try and 'educate' the public about various topics and current social issues<sup>26</sup>. The prominent position of the working class in the films of this movement is one of the main characteristics that connects it with the film practices that follow, such

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26 For a further discussion of the British Documentary movement see Higson *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*. p.176-271.

as the British New Wave and the social realist films from the late 1960s onwards. On this subject Paul Rotha, one of Grierson's close collaborators, has said that the documentary films of the early 1930s “represented the first attempt to portray the working class of Britain as a human, vital factor in present day existence” (qtd. in Higson, *Waving*, 197). Yet as several film scholars have noted, Peter Hutchings being one of them, there is a definite exoticisation of the working class and “the middle-class perspective has become so obvious over the years that they [the documentaries] have lost their power to win us over to their viewpoint” (146). Humphrey Jennings, another prominent documentarist of the time, seems to have been more aware of this patronising stance of documentary filmmaking. As Samantha Lay explains, Jennings advocated that “part of documentary film's realism implied a moral responsibility for the film-makers towards those represented” (46). This tension concerning the politics of representation in terms of social class is also detected within the fictional films that follow, especially within the British New Wave films.

Yet before concluding this brief reference to one of British cinema's most prominent movements I would like to draw attention to one last point. As Lay mentions, Grierson's idea about documentary was that it constituted a “creative interpretation of actuality” (42). This statement foregrounds the constructedness of documentaries through the filmmakers' creativity in their role as mediators between contemporary reality and its on-screen representation. Bearing this in mind, the realist approach of these films becomes more complicated and it showcases Raymond Williams' aforementioned point concerning “the consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint” (68), which is embedded within a given text through a combination of “the methods and intentions” (73) of its makers. It therefore points to the value in considering the enunciator and their ideological investment as a means to understanding the partial view of 'actuality' that this process entails. Higson talks about the combination of the social and the artistic aesthetic

within the documentaries which he terms “poetic realism”, and he goes on to explain its function:

In a sense, poetic realism constitutes the happy balance between the various conflicting and competing ideas and impulses which make up the documentary idea as a whole. It holds all excesses in check: the responsibility of realism blocks off the path to self-indulgent aestheticism or cloying sentimentality, while the poetic sensibility tempers both the objective coldness of the document, and the tendency towards establishing action as the ultimate logic of narrative movement and energy. It attempts, above all, to hold together the irreconcilable discourses of artistic endeavour and public service. (*Waving*, 191)

As I will proceed to show with the discussion about social realist films and more specifically with the analysis of *Fish Tank*, the use of poetic realism has been passed on from this early documentary practice through to contemporary social realism within art cinema. In this way it would seem that at least in principle this early practice of non-fiction filmmaking is not that far removed from art cinema's more contemporary social realist films. The latter, too, are largely dependent on the auteur figure who presents a view of reality as it is filtered through their creative sensibility. And they also more or less adhere to the balance Higson detects in 1930s documentaries between “the objective coldness” of reality and a “self-indulgent aestheticism”, which will be further shown in the analysis. Having briefly outlined some of the more important aspects for this study of social realism's notable ancestor – British Documentary of the 1930s – I will now turn to briefly look at another distinguished film practice of the British cinematic past, mainly the New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Being a fictional film practice this can be

considered a much closer relative of contemporary social realist film and I will discuss the way these films impacted the scene and the legacy they left, putting substantial emphasis on the gender politics these films negotiate.

The British New Wave, or as it is otherwise known, the 'kitchen sink' cycle of films, is a relatively short-lived movement in itself – as with most New Waves around the world – but it holds a highly significant position within British film history. It shows the continuing fascination with realism and even though these realist films are by no means the only output of British cinema at the time, their prominent position in film criticism can be considered as an indication of their perceived quality. That quality depends on the films' direct engagement with discourses concerning reality and its representation on film. In other words “quality is associated with realism, which in British cinema is associated with educational, socially purposive films, rather than with vehicles designed for pure pleasure and entertainment, or 'tinsel'” (Lay 55). In contrast to the documentary films discussed earlier, these films consist largely of screen adaptations of contemporary novels and plays. Yet, similarly to the documentaries, the directors that came to be identified with the New Wave were intent on representing the working class. Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson, two of the New Wave's most prolific filmmakers came to prominence through the Free Cinema documentary movement which only just predates the New Wave. As Lay explains, this idea of the Free cinema screenings that took place between 1956-59 was more or less a route for the directors involved to make an impact and launch their respective filmmaking careers (58). John Hill draws attention to the differences between the 1930s Documentary movement and Free Cinema since the latter emphasised even more the use of poetic realism, allying it more with Jennings' approach to documentary in its privileging of the 'aesthetic' (128). Lay sees the British New Wave “as a continuation or repackaging of Free Cinema”, having similar concerns such as the realistic representation

of contemporary society, but also notable differences (59). The main difference is in the degree of self-consciousness of the two movements: Free cinema was conceived, conceptualised and promoted as a political and aesthetic movement by its makers, whereas the British New Wave was a label attributed to certain films by the critics post facto and is therefore less coherent and unified.

Yet what is more important for the present study is the connection with Italian Neo-realism which Lay makes (60), a movement which seems to have influenced greatly all cinematic practices that followed it and also helps position these films within the larger art cinema context. More specifically, Italian neo-realism's aesthetic and stylistic concerns, such as location shooting and depicting everyday working people's lives up close, seem to have been adopted by several other cinematic practices since then, the British New Wave being one of them. The directors of the New Wave used regional, little known actors and since most of these films are set in Northern England, there is a strong regional accent that emphasises the 'authenticity' of the representation of this under-represented strand of British society. The shots that are used to foreground the actual setting of these films, however, tend to draw attention to the director rather than the characters since, as Hill notes, "it is precisely through the production of a 'realistic surplus' that the film marks the authorial voice" (132). Yet what seems to be the most prominent characteristic and the unifying theme that runs through all of these films is their daring subject matter, including taboo issues of sexuality, abortion and homosexuality, issues that at the time were considered scandalous and were not directly addressed within mainstream films. As Hutchings observes, the new films were hailed at the time as "a move towards a mature, intelligent engagement with contemporary British social life and a welcome breath of fresh air after the conformist entertainment provided by studio-bound British filmmakers in the first part of the 1950s" (147). This issue echoes art cinema's pioneering role in breaking the

boundaries of on-screen conventions of propriety, especially in the depiction of nudity and sexually explicit subject matter, which touches upon the sometimes grey area between this more serious art form and the more salacious, exploitation filmmaking practices. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to address this overlap in more detail, it should be noted that such an overlap does exist, especially in terms of marketing and reception. This has been also pointed out in the previous chapter in connection to Breillat's use of explicit sex scenes and the critical response that dismisses it as pornography disguising itself as art. Admittedly it is not always straightforward to distinguish between the two and even if the intentions of the author might be rather clear in the use of explicit scenes in a non-exploitative way, the potential that such depictions might have at the moment of consumption cannot be completely erased. Yet I would still argue for the importance of such material within a politically invested art cinema, which addresses taboo social problems, thus transcending their sensationalist aspect. It is therefore important to keep a distinction between exploitation and art cinema while acknowledging the potential overlap.

However, despite the audacity British New Wave films manifest in terms of the social issues they address, Hill is rather cautious in celebrating their transgressiveness, pointing to the “outsider's view” (132) embedded in these films through shot composition, adding that “it is only from the 'outside' that such 'squalor' can assume its fascination (136). He therefore acutely remarks that “[r]iding on the back of the 'social commitment' to observe 'ordinary people', then, emerges a kind of sexual fascination with 'otherness’” and as a result “the pleasures delivered may well rely less on recognition than the very sensation of class difference” (136). In addition to this criticism, it has been widely noted that there is also a strong gender bias since the majority of these films follow the point of view of the working class young man and the female characters are rather peripheral and stereotypically portrayed. Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) is an exception to this,



featuring the only female protagonist of the British New Wave – the *L-Shaped Room* also has a female protagonist but it does not rest comfortably with the most canonical New Wave films – yet it still remains rather conventional in terms of its gender politics. Terry Lovell discusses the sexist tendency of these films and contends that “[b]ecause work was seen as the defining feature of working-men's lives, characterisations of the traditional working-class community and its culture were masculine” (160). Accordingly, the role of the woman has been limited to that of wife, mother and lover, in other words only as she relates to the male hero, and consequently she occupies the domestic space. Female characters such as Ingrid in *A Kind of Loving* (1962) or Doreen in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) constitute a threat to the hero due to their potential to restrict and extinguish his rebelliousness and freedom. They are mostly presented as bad home-makers and nagging wives and are associated negatively with capitalist values due to their consumerist aspirations. This rather stereotypical and restricted view of female characters is also true of Jo in *A Taste of Honey* and, as Lovell argues, the fact that she is crossing between public and private spaces does not necessarily empower her, since “her moves outside may be related to her reluctance to abandon childhood rather than the masculine search for sex, while the interior of her flat is associated with her search for nurture rather than sex” (175). Therefore, despite their refreshing qualities in terms of what is shown on screen and the issues that are tackled, these films remain quite suspect in the treatment of their subject matter and they are ultimately rather conservative in their negotiation of gender politics, governed by a phallogentric disposition.

This tendency of exclusion of a more rounded female point of view seems to continue in the social realist films of the auteurist art cinema tradition in the years that follow. The aforementioned *Poor Cow* is Loach's first feature film, coming two years after John Schlesinger's *Darling* (1965), and it was probably the temporal proximity of their

release along with the shared focus on a blonde female character that prompted Hirschhorn to characterise Loach's film as “a sort of *Darling* of the working-class” (qtd. in Leigh 48). The comparison is very interesting and despite this important centralisation of the female, working-class character and her struggle to survive, her portrayal remains very dubious. Throughout the film Joy is very much dependent on the male characters, and although there are some moments in which one can detect some sort of a critique of the objectification of the female body – during the sequence of the pornographic photo shoot – her character is left relatively undeveloped and stagnant. On the other hand, Schlesinger's Diana does not seem to have any problem surviving and the narrative follows her Utopian quest for personal fulfilment. What is interesting, though, is that despite the great disparity in terms of the social and financial status between these two characters, their narrative progression seems to be more or less identical in that they are sexually promiscuous and seem to be lacking in moral values. They change romantic partners frequently and although in Joy's case it is a matter of survival for her and her son more than anything else, she is presented as frivolous, since one of the inter-titles reads: “I need different men to satisfy my different moods”. Jacob Leigh also points to Joy's dubious morality through her complicity with her criminal partners. She is not innocent since when Dave gives her the stolen jewellery she accepts it rather enthusiastically and thus she “implicitly condones his actions” (56). Although an important alternative to the male-dominated narratives of social realism, alongside Loach's teleplays *Up the Junction* (1965) and *Family Life* (1971), *Poor Cow* remains problematic in its ambiguous portrayal of a female working-class character. The majority of Loach's subsequent films shift their focus towards the male hero, such as the young Billy Casper in *Kes* (1969) or Bob in *Raining Stones* (1993). This intense focus on the male working-class community is also found in the films directed by Shane Meadows who, like Andrea Arnold, brings an autobiographical element in his work. Once

again the female characters in films like *This Is England* (2006) are peripheral and only significant in terms of their relationship to the male characters. Mike Leigh, another prominent auteur of art cinema, who is known for his left-wing politics and an insistence in representing sympathetically working-class people while often ridiculing the middle classes, seems to have more of a balance in the inclusion of memorable female characters. Some of his films are exclusively centred around female characters – *Career Girls* (1997) or *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) – while frequently his films depict an ensemble of male and female characters, such as in *High Hopes* (1988) or *Another Year* (2010).

It seems therefore that in the post New Wave era spanning four decades to the present, social realism continued its trajectory as an aesthetic practice adopted by British filmmakers. However, this does not mean that it is a uniform or necessarily dominant tradition within British cinema, which has remained unchanged throughout the decades. Especially due to its later connection with art cinema, its use has become very variable and symptomatic of individual auteurs and their creative and political idiosyncrasies. During the 1980s the political aspect of social realism seemed to gather momentum in spite of, or maybe because of, the conservative values promoted by Thatcher's rule. Consequently, there is an increase in the representation of a previously under-represented social demographic, an example of which is Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), bringing forward issues concerning race and homosexuality. Moving on to the 1990s, Charlotte Brunsdon observes that “[i]f the 1950s in British culture had given us 'Angry Young Men', the 1990s, at the tail end of what had started in 1979 as the Thatcher government, had brought forth desperate girls” (“It's a Film” 462). She points to the “inconsolable femininity in the heroines of female-directed films” (“It's a Film” 474) such as *Stella Does Tricks* (Coky Giedroyc, 1996) and *Under the Skin* (Carine Adler, 1997), a

theme that expands well into the next decade<sup>27</sup>. What is important to keep in mind at the end of this brief discussion is that the years following the demise of the British New Wave have not necessarily seen a decrease in social realist films. There has been a continuous output of British social realist films that seem to be reflecting the political and ideological sensibilities of their makers in choosing to portray a certain aspect of contemporary British society. *Fish Tank* belongs to this tradition and I will now proceed with the analysis of its social realist aesthetics, showing in the meantime its refreshing quality in terms of gender representations, which contributes to broadening the representational palette of contemporary British social realism.

*Fish Tank*, as mentioned in the beginning of this section, is Arnold's second feature-length film. It is set in North East London and was shot on location in the areas of Barking, Havering, Dagenham and Essex. The main character, Mia, is played by newcomer Katie Jarvis and according to an online article the actress was discovered by one of Arnold's assistants on a train platform while fighting with her boyfriend.<sup>28</sup> According to the same article it seems that what was important for Arnold in casting the lead role was the need for the actress to be as close to the character as possible. The decision to have a non-professional actress coming from the place where the film is set immediately recalls the tendencies of Neo-realism and New Wave traditions<sup>29</sup>. However, the other two main roles are played by professional and established actors. Kierston Wareing, who two years earlier had starred in Loach's *It's a Free World...* (2007), plays Mia's mother, Joanna. Connor, Joanna's lover, is played by Michael Fassbender who had by that time established his career, appearing in big productions like *300* (Snyder, 2006), François Ozon's *Angel* (2007), and earning the British Independent Film Award for his role in Steve McQueen's

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27 For more information on Brunson's work on female representations in the 1990s see "Not Having it All" (bibliography).

28 <http://www.scotsman.com/news/film-andrea-arnold-interview-1-1355790>

29 Very similar to Rita Tushingham's casting in *A Taste of Honey*.

*Hunger* (2008). Therefore, even though two important but secondary characters are played by professional actors, having a non-professional actress for the main character whose point of view is centralised in the film, is a rather significant social realist technique, adding to the film's rawness and realism.

Another characteristic that is in keeping with social realist aesthetics is the establishing shots of the council estate where most of the action takes place. This is what Higson calls “That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill” (138), and it is one of the elements that contribute, along with the regional protagonist and the regional accent that marks the whole film, to its “*surface realism*” (“Space” 136). These shots do not just function to halt the narrative and provide a spectacle, but also to contextualise it and more often than not they are associated with Mia's point of view looking out from the window of the abandoned council flat where she goes to practice her dancing. For instance, the first shot of the film is of the girl bending forward, and panting due to exercise strain, and the position of the camera is at a high angle looking down at her. This is reminiscent of Hill's observation that “the look of the camera” is inscribed as “a look from the 'outside” (134). Yet immediately after, there is a reverse shot from behind the girl and gradually the camera assumes her point of view looking out of the council flat and providing the first establishing shot of the outside scenery. This shot composition is significant since it seems to reverse the usual aesthetic of the New Wave establishing shot that moves from a panoramic view of the city to the view of a house, going inwards to focus on the protagonist<sup>30</sup>. It could therefore be read as an indication that this film, unlike several other social realist texts, offers an inside point of view of the typical working-class setting rather than an outsider's gaze. The editing technique is thus woven into the narrative to show that this film is an exploration and a journey from within the community and is directed

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30 For a further discussion of this issue see John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*. 133-136.

outwards as Mia's breaking free in the end illustrates. This technique directly engages with discourses concerning point of view in representing social reality, which is discussed extensively in Lovell's article. The director, due to her familiarity with the space she depicts and the way it is aesthetically inscribed through this representational technique, manages to tell her story from within and thus give more depth to her realist commitment.

This narrative and visual trajectory from inside to outside are also highlighted through the use of poetic realism, another aesthetic that social realist texts traditionally employ. The title of the film alludes to the restrictive and stifling space Mia occupies, yet simultaneously it could be read as a comment on the transparency of this particular cinematic technique in depicting social reality. Therefore it could be considered as an allusion to the spectator's positioning outside the *Fish Tank* looking in. Mia seems to be trapped in a society that, as is also suggested in earlier films such as *A Taste of Honey*, is doomed to function in a vicious circle in terms of the limited opportunities that it offers and the consequent aggression that arises from this social injustice, which, as is shown in Joanna's case, seems to be self-destructive. In a sense, then, the hatred between the female members – in a complete absence of the father – and the portrayal of their dysfunctional relationship could possibly point to a potential perpetuation of this cycle as Mia is following in the footsteps of her mother, in terms of drinking, smoking and using foul language, and similarly, Tyler, the younger daughter, is following in Mia's. It is in this way that the symbol of the 'fish tank' could be interpreted as a sterile and doomed environment that provides no opportunity for escape. This theme of impending doom is reiterated in the episode where Mia is helping Connor to catch a fish in a murky river. Connor, with his characteristic vitality, goes in the river to catch a fish and asks for help to which Mia responds. She takes off her shoes and socks and rolls up her track suit, while Connor instructs her to walk towards him slowly and stealthily in order to catch the fish who are,

as he says, rather dumb in that area. Their attempt is crowned with success but on the way out Mia hurts her ankle, which starts bleeding. Once they are out Connor throws the fish on the ground, takes a long stick and pierces it through. This whole episode could be read as a symbolic foretelling of things to come, especially between Mia and Connor, having in mind their later sexual encounter. What is important to point out at this stage, though, is that Mia, in volunteering to help Connor, is complicit with his action and she thus gains agency rather than being a passive receptor of his predatory instincts.

Yet the film's most potent poetic symbol is the horse that Mia finds in a yard where a family of travellers has set up camp. Quite early on in the film Mia spots the horse, which is tied with a chain to a rock, and she approaches and tries to release it. Yet before she can manage, the owner comes and chases her off. During her next attempt to free the horse she is caught and the scene that follows is one of heightened tension and impending danger as the young men begin harassing her and manage to capture her. The violence during this scene is accentuated by the rapid shaking of the hand-held camera that follows the jolting movements Mia makes while trying to free herself. The spectator is thus drawn inside this tumultuous moment and is put in a position to empathise with Mia. Yet this sequence also echoes the fish-catching sequence due to similarities in Mia's movement with that of the dying fish, and also in terms of the stance of the captors, since both Connor and the two young men seem to take pleasure in this moment. For them this type of violent behaviour is nothing more than an opportunity to assert their masculinity by capturing their prey without caring about any other consequences. Mia is also found in the role of the captor when she kidnaps Connor's daughter and again the constant movement of the hand-held camera emphasises the tension of the impending violence. Yet Mia breaks the cycle of violence by regretting her action, saving the girl from drowning and restoring her to her family.

Coming back to the symbol of the horse, towards the end of the film and after Mia has been through a lot of disappointment and grief, she goes to see Billy, the brother of her two captors, who tells her he had to shoot the horse because she was sick. At that point Mia experiences a total breakdown; she sits on the ground and starts sobbing, the first emotional outburst other than anger and aggression she has manifested until then. Billy, not knowing what Mia has been through, tries to justify his action by adding “she was sixteen. It's her time”. This could be seen as further illuminating the parallelism of Mia and the horse. Mia seems to have a strong empathy for the horse from the beginning, judging from her obsession to free it despite the danger of getting caught. The horse is trapped just as Mia is, and it is at the news of her death that she starts crying, mourning for the horse's tragic fate but also for her own apparent misery and equally ominous future. It is therefore at that moment of realisation of having reached rock-bottom that this incident motivates her to accept Billy's offer to go with him to Wales in an effort to escape her stagnant environment. Thus the use of this potent symbol has an important narrative function in providing motive for the heroine to transcend the boundaries that keep her imprisoned. Even though it could possibly be argued that there is a stereotypical equation of the woman and nature via the horse, it is also true that the identification that Mia feels with the horse is based on their shared 'captivity' and she manages to surpass this point of comparison. Her departure in conjunction with the last reconciliatory encounter with her mother and sister constitute an open ending that exudes a hopeful note of freedom and open possibilities. This is accentuated visually by the last shot of the balloon flying above the rooftops of the council estates that have provided the setting for the narrative. This ending constitutes another break with social realist tradition since the majority of the films end in rather dreary and depressing ways.

Having described and commented on the main elements that point to the film's



social realist aesthetic and looked at how these adhere to a long tradition within British cinema but also how, subtly but significantly, they break with it, I conclude this analysis of *Fish Tank* by looking at gender representation and most importantly the representation of Mia. Throughout the film Mia is dressed in track suits, casual t-shirts and hoodies that, apart from signifying her financial situation and social status as working-class, also contribute to her portrayal as not stereotypically 'feminine'. This can be supported by the comparison of Mia and the girls in the park who are wearing more revealing clothing and are dancing in a rather sensual way while a group of young men are looking on. In contrast, Mia only dances alone in the abandoned council flat and her dance-moves resemble "breaking", most widely known as breakdancing, which is not sexually suggestive and is a form of street dance to hip hop music. This comparison shows the difference in the two forms of dancing, one for the pleasure of the onlookers and the other purely for self-expression and creatively externalising her numerous frustrations. Consequently when Mia goes to audition for a dancing job in a club, she looks around hesitantly at the scantily dressed women waiting to audition while a young woman is already dancing in a rather sensual way. Mia looks extremely out of place auditioning for an exotic dancer position, and as soon as her turn comes, the woman in the auditioning panel asks her to let her hair down, remarking that it looks more feminine that way. She also asks her whether she has any hot pants or shorts to which Mia replies in the negative. When they tell her to go ahead, her song starts but she seems frozen, looking down at the other girls, and after a couple of minutes she abruptly leaves the stage and walks out. Thus Mia refuses to become an object for the leering gaze of the fictional spectators, something that the film clearly avoids as well through the way she is framed throughout the dancing sequences. The camera is most of the time positioned at a distance or is shaky, framing her from unconventional angles, thus avoiding to creating a spectacle for our pleasure. Only

once does she perform her routine for Connor, which leads to their sexual encounter. Yet that scene is also filmed in a way that avoids aestheticising the spectacle, since there is no nudity and the whole sequence is shot in close-up of their upper bodies, ending in an extreme close-up of their faces one against the other. Thus the choices made in terms of *mise-en-scène* and the camera position and movement contribute to the empowering of the heroine in the sense that her subjectivity is foregrounded instead of functioning as the object of the gaze. In addition, her portrayal does not conform with conventional stereotypes and even if there are signs pointing to the woman-nature equation they are quickly transcended.

Finally I would like to comment briefly on the relationships Mia develops with those around her in order to show the gradual maturation that she achieves by the end of the film, which is indicative of the character development. As mentioned previously, she is quite aggressive and introverted, which could be a result of her dysfunctional relationship with her mother. Joanne is rather neglectful of her children, not really having much to do with them, and she asks them to stay out of her way when she hosts a party at their flat. She drinks rather heavily and one is led to assume that they live off benefits since there is no sign of her being in any way employed. After Connor enters their lives, she gradually mellows and although she still tries to exclude her daughters from her life, for instance when they plan to go for a drive, it seems that Connor's presence brings some stability and harmony within the household. He shows genuine interest in the girls and takes care of Mia's ankle when she is hurt. In this way he is the only nurturing figure that exists within the narrative and Mia gets attached to him both due to her need for tenderness and her concurrent sexual awakening. Although this one sexual encounter threatens to offset her growth and independence, she manages to overcome the trauma of that potentially dysfunctional relationship and the expectations it raised. By the end she shows signs of

emotional growth, and before leaving for Wales she goes to say goodbye to her mother who is listening to her cd. It is in that final scene that they finally acknowledge each other: Mia, having experienced betrayal and disappointment, seems to be in a more sympathetic position towards her mother, and Joanne says that she likes her music, which is the first time she gives her a positive comment. In a scene of a rather understated but no less potent tenderness, the two women start dancing together, smiling at each other and Tyler takes hold of Mia and follows the steps. This coming together seems to be a hopeful indication that despite the difficulties that they have been through they will survive, realising that they both have to stand on their own two feet. There is no knight in shining armour to help them out and the open ending functions as a further realist technique, since real life is rarely tied together neatly.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that Arnold's second feature length film is not only a contemporary example within a rich tradition of social realist filmmaking, but it offers a great amount of originality in the way gender is dealt with and inscribed within the text. Watching a number of earlier social realist films, one could easily imagine this film being told from Connor's point of view, since he seems to be the more traditional type of hero usually associated with the British New Wave. He easily crosses between spaces and uses women in a rather selfish way possibly to express his own social frustrations. Yet Arnold follows Mia's point of view and constructs a representation of a teenage working class girl that is steeped in the reality she herself has known when she was younger. It is in this way that a feminist voice is manifested through this film since, unlike earlier examples such as *A Taste of Honey*, this film manages to move past stereotypical representations, give voice to the under-represented (young women, travellers) and look to the future with hope. Finally I should mention that despite the inevitable effect this discussion has had in implying a stronger linearity between the different social realist approaches throughout the

decades of British cinematic production, the actual picture is much more variable and convoluted. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to dwell on the more intimate details concerning the trajectory of social realism over the years. What was important, however, in sketching this rough background of social realist practices was to foreground the gender bias present in the majority of these films. As mentioned earlier, Brunson detects an increase of films about “desperate girls” from the 1990s onwards within specifically female-authored films (“It's a Film” 462). This, I argue, is how female directors, such as Andrea Arnold and Lynne Ramsay, by engaging with this tradition and bringing into the foreground a female perspective, add something new to the social realist canvas. In turn this helps raise awareness of women's less privileged position within society, especially “[a]s the 'purchasing power' of post-feminism diminishes in the cash-strapped West, and as more and more studies show that it is women with caring responsibilities who are most hard hit by the cuts” (Brunson, “It's a Film” 474). The case study that follows is a further indication of how important social realism can be for a feminist cause and hopefully a meaningful comparison will arise between the two very different socio-political contexts.

#### Re-staging Reality: Feminism and Iranian Neorealism in Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple*

Samira Makhmalbaf is an Iranian director of contemporary New Iranian Cinema who has gained international critical acclaim, becoming the youngest filmmaker to participate at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998 with her first feature film *The Apple* (1998). Her successful career was further established with her subsequent feature *Blackboards* (2000) winning the Jury Prize at Cannes. Since then she has directed two more feature films, *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003) winning for the second time the Prix du Jury at Cannes and her most recent film *Two Legged Horse* (2009) which was screened at numerous international film festivals all over the world. She also made a short film *God*,

*Construction and Destruction* as part of *11'09''01 – September 11* (2002) for which she won the UNESCO Award at Venice Film Festival. As in the case of Arnold, a realist aesthetic is a common characteristic throughout her films, using non-professional actors, location filming and other cinema vérité techniques, as I will point out with the analysis of her first feature. Although her films are not overtly political in the sense of expressing a particular political agenda, as in the case of Ken Loach or Mike Leigh, they are still engaging with politics through the depiction of different social problems using social realist aesthetics. Similarly to the previous case study, these aesthetics have been influenced by Italian Neo-realism and started developing in Iranian cinema since the 1960s.

As I will proceed to argue, Makhmalbaf's contribution to social realism within art cinema brings visibility to important issues within her national context as well as internationally. This is largely due to art cinema's network of support through international festivals and funding bodies. According to Shohini Chaudhuri, “festivals perform an indispensable role in enabling a diverse range of films to be seen by audiences around the world”, giving the opportunity to filmmakers and national cinemas to transcend the borders of their own countries; thus, apart from establishing their position, this also helps them in “attracting distributors, although 85 per cent of films shown at festivals never reach commercial screens beyond the festival circuit” (5-6). This statement applies to Makhmalbaf's case as well, since from the moment she won her first award, “[s]tyle magazines fell over themselves to cover this precocious woman in the black chador” and “veteran auteurs such as Jean-Luc Godard paid homage to her” (S.F. Said 164). As already mentioned in chapter one, festivals create opportunities for filmmakers who lack support within their own national context, but also act to an extent as regulatory bodies in terms of what is deemed worthy and culturally valuable. Therefore there has been a certain amount

of scepticism on the part of critics when it comes to non-Western films and the way they engage with this new context (Farahmand 276). Often there is a tension between national and transnational cinema, of which Iranian cinema is emblematic since, as was the case with Argentine cinema, political instability and state intervention have paralysed cinematic production for long periods. Makhmalbaf's films in particular exemplify this tendency and it could be argued that due to her insistence on portraying certain controversial issues of the Iranian society, she has faced a great amount of difficulty and even outright hostility during the making of her films. In order to highlight this challenging context, I will briefly outline the cinematic tradition she comes out of while focusing more specifically on the place of social realism within Iranian cinema.

The first cinema in Tehran was opened in 1905 but it was not until the 1930s that the first Iranian silent films were made by the Armenian director Avanes Oganians. Cinema was considered incompatible with Muslim tradition since the representation of the human form on screen was something inconceivable and heretic. *The Tempest of Life* by Esma'il Kushan was the first Persian language film produced inside Iran in 1948. As Chapman points out, at that time and almost until the revolution in 1979 “[f]ilmmakers in Iran often had to work under the patronage of the Shah” (389) and their films were highly propagandistic of the monarchical status quo. In other words, cinematic production at the time is marked by a high degree of censorship that in pre-revolutionary Iran concerned the appearance of social and political subject matter that could be threatening to the oppressive monarchy. There was a great insistence on modernisation and the regime used film and television to promote an image of Iran as a modernised and prosperous country. Consequently cinemas and television “were inundated with Hollywood films and locally produced programmes which conformed to the state's modernizing ideology” (Zeydabadi-Nejad 32). The most common cinematic genre of that period was film farsi, a

melodramatic commercial genre that was greatly influenced by Indian commercial cinema, containing sexually explicit scenes in addition to song and dance sequences. Following WWII and due to the oppressive presence of the Allied Forces in the area, cinematic creation was invested with a strong nationalistic aspect. In the 1960s the phenomenon of film jaheli became dominant in Iranian cinema – a highly chauvinistic genre “in which masculine 'honor' was vested in the chastity of men's female relatives” (Dabashi 26). It can therefore be said that so far cinema seems to be tightly controlled by the regime, which is dominated by a phallogocentric ideology, and therefore women are completely objectified both within and outside cinematic representations.

According to Hamid Dabashi, “although the origin of cinema in Iran goes back to the earliest years of the twentieth century, it was not until the early 1960s that it emerged as a serious art form” (4), culminating with Dariush Merjui's film *The Cow* (1969) that was to change completely the nature of Iranian cinema. The New Iranian Cinema, which began under the absolutist monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and was further developed during the 1970s, was “created by a fairly heterogeneous group of young intellectuals, many of them foreign-educated and receiving some support from the Ministry of Culture and the state television service” (Chapman 396). This type of cinema, some of its earliest examples being films such as *South of the City* (Ghafari, 1958) and *The House Is Black* (Farrokhzad, 1964), focused on “social and economic problems that the regime attempted to gloss over with a veneer of modernization” (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 33). Although these films received some financial support from the state, paradoxically they were also often banned or censored. This can be accounted for by the nature of the censorship which was “meant to prevent attempts at undermining state values and aspiration” (33), and in one of the articles of the 1959 censorship code it is stated that the 'presentation of ruins, poverty, backwardness and scenes that damage the state's national prestige' is prohibited

(Zeydabadi-Nejad 33). Therefore state support for the production of these films was discontinued and the New Wave was barely alive when the revolution arrived to complicate matters even more in the late 1970s. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the revolutionaries at first were fiercely against cinema, condemning it as a corrupting medium. This had as a result several attacks on theatres, which culminated in 1979 with the burning down of the Cinema Rex in the city of Abadan and the killing of hundreds of people that were inside. As Dabashi chronicles: “[t]he development of Iranian cinema came to a standstill immediately after the revolution” and “[t]he organs of the Islamic Republic actively used the medium for their own propaganda purposes” (32).

One of the most significant changes in the cultural laws that affected cinematic representations in the post-revolutionary era was the introduction of 'the rule of modesty'. According to Negar Mottahedeh, this set of rules impacted significantly the representation of women and of heterosexual relations, since it imposed the veiling of the female body and the restriction of activities performed by women on screen, as well as imposing a ban on physical contact between characters from opposite sexes (177). One could argue that despite its oppressive nature this rule had the effect of realism since it transferred into the cinematic realm the real restrictions women faced in their everyday lives. However, when it comes to filming domestic, familial scenes the modesty rule still applied which, as Mottahedeh observes, “seemed unrealistic to Iranian audiences” (178) since women were obliged only to veil themselves in public or in the presence of unrelated men. The restrictions prescribed by the modesty law applied further to cinematic language and consequently close-ups of women and other suturing mechanisms of classical cinema that were considered to “sexualis[e] the visual relationship between a man and a woman” (179) were banned. Within this atmosphere of artistic limitation and state interference filmmakers were obliged to either abide by the strict guidelines of the regime or avoid the



representation of women altogether. Abbas Kiarostami's hugely acclaimed *Taste of Cherry* (1997) is an example of this on-screen female absence which can be detected in several of his previous films that focus on either male characters or children, e.g. *Close-up* (1990), *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987).

Cinema has therefore always been in the tight grip of the state ideology and consequently a cinematic form of expression that would openly address social and political issues and criticise the existing status quo – as British social realism does to varying degrees – was virtually impossible. Ali Reza Haghighi laments what he sees as a complete absence of political filmmaking in his country both before and after the revolution. Although he acknowledges the fact that due to the circumstances of extreme state intervention in this cultural sphere, “an explicitly political cinema was not possible”, he adds that “filmmakers who wanted to articulate a critical view resorted to such complex metaphor and symbolism that, in practice, they could not communicate fully with their audience, and they never succeeded in having a political impact on public opinion” (111). I would argue that this is rather self-contradictory and Haghighi seems to neglect the value of a number of films that, given the situation, embark on a veiled criticism – and in some cases, as in Tahmineh Milani's films, this criticism is rather overt and straightforward – of different aspects of society, which is ultimately a political stance on the part of the filmmakers. To be more precise, Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001) depicts the problems of illegal immigration, extreme poverty of the working classes, corruption and gender inequality, and although it is not a militant film that overtly urges people into action, its value as a form of social critique should not be underestimated. Yet the most acute social critiques seem to be generated by women directors, and Gönül Dönmez-Colin points to a possible connection between the post-revolutionary restrictions on female representations and “a movement among women to go behind the camera to have their voices heard” (7).

Gradually, and especially due to the election of the more progressive President Khatami during the 1980s, three female directors emerged as leading figures for the representation of women on the big screen: Rakhsan Bani-Etemad, Pooran Darakhshandeh and Tahmineh Milani. Among them Milani can be considered as more openly committed to a feminist agenda and most of her films were rejected by the Islamic Ministry of Guidance. Throughout her films she tackles controversial issues about the social injustice against women that is present in the Iranian society. For this reason she was even imprisoned in 2001 because of her film *The Hidden Half* (2001) that was considered to be hostile to the regime<sup>31</sup>. In an interview that accompanies the DVD version of her later film *Unwanted Woman* (2005), Milani talks about her political stance and her commitment to portraying issues concerning the gender imbalance and other problems that afflict her contemporary society, and she describes the amount of hostility from the authorities she had to face in making her films. This is apparent in the production values of her films that betray a very minimal budget and a lack of sophisticated film equipment. Her films remain generally in the field of mainstream cinema and they are melodramas apart from *Cease Fire* (2006), which is a comedy. In this way Milani hopes to be accessible to the public and create the opportunity to effect changes in the dominant discourses. Rakhsan Bani-Etemad has had a less tumultuous career, which could be attributed to the fact that she has not openly adopted the feminist label, and she has moved from documentary filmmaking to fiction with a strong melodramatic and social realist character. Her work, apart from a shaky start, has enjoyed critical and popular acclaim and she has been instrumental in representing women on screen through social realism. Dabashi observes the difference in the realist approach of Bani-Etemad compared to the poetic realism of Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf and argues that “[b]y putting her documentary social realism

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31 [http://www.iranchamber.com/cinema/tmilani/tahmineh\\_milani.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/cinema/tmilani/tahmineh_milani.php)

squarely at the service of a morally destabilizing confrontation with sexuality she attacks from an angle that is [...] completely absent in those two great filmmakers” (223). Consequently, he suggests that the potency of her work is the result of a focus in the portrayal of Iranian working class femininity (224) which, along with a focus on children and non-professional actors that is encountered in other films (eg. Kiarostami's earlier work), forms part of the more recent development within New Iranian Cinema.

Samira Makhmalbaf's first film embodies all the characteristics prevalent in New Iranian Cinema: representation of everyday life with non-professional child actors, a certain degree of alienation between the characters and their environment, and finally a “frozen view of life, which does not resolve the preceding disparity but transcends it” (Chaudhuri and Finn 165). In addition, “Iranian neorealism”, as Dabashi calls it, manifests the “uncanny ability to concentrate on the real in such a way that reveals its irreducible 'round-about-us' nature, its ready-at-hand quality, its refusal to heed the call to arms of any ideology, religion, or culture” (279). For this reason Dabashi describes her as being part of a new, post-ideological generation of filmmakers while incorporating in her work several elements from the cinematic aesthetic of her predecessors – i.e. focus on women and children, documentary-like aesthetic, use of metaphor and symbolism. Therefore, the distinguishing trait of this new generation is a lack of didacticism since there are no claims to holding 'the truth' about society or politics, and the authorial voice becomes subtler, giving way to the voice of the individuals that are represented. However, by this I do not intend to suggest that her films are devoid of any political messages since the different choices involved in the making of a film contribute in the creation of a message that can be interpreted in a political manner. As I will proceed to argue in relation to *The Apple*, the choice of the subject matter has clear political reverberations relating to the feminist issue of gender inequality, yet it is dealt with in a delicate manner, avoiding overarching

statements and didacticism. Even the fact that Makhmalbaf is able in the first place to make a film about two young girls who are imprisoned inside their own house, can be read as a political statement which testifies to the layered oppression that exists in Iranian society in terms of social class as well as gender. Unlike Arnold who comes from the under-privileged background she portrays in her films, Makhmalbaf comes from a rather elite position within Iranian society. Yet in view of the extreme economic inequalities among the different social classes – the affluence of middle and upper classes and the penury of the lower classes – and the oppressive Islamist regime with its inherent misogyny, it is understandable that filmmaking is sadly the privilege of the few. Therefore, much as in the case of Martel, a social realist text in this socio-political context lacks the insider's point of view, which, as I will proceed to argue, is compensated by the immediacy of the subject-matter and the documentary-like aesthetic employed within the film.

*The Apple* was inspired by an actual report that appeared in the news about a poor couple living in the slums of Southern Tehran who for eleven years had kept their twin daughters locked in their home. The film is invested with a documentary aesthetic both in terms of its mise-en-scene and the subject matter, which is taken from Iranian actuality. At the same time, this is not a factual film but hovers between fact and fiction since, despite its close connection to the real events, it performs a re-staging of those events with the addition of certain symbolic shots and the construction of a narrative, however loose and unconventional this narrative might be. According to Dabashi, Makhmalbaf's film performs "a direct reading of the real" (263), which is achieved primarily through the use of a number of cinéma vérité techniques. Makhmalbaf opts for location shooting, going to the neighbourhood and the house where her 'characters' actually live and using the natural light that is available at the time of shooting. The actors in the film are all non-professional, playing themselves, and they are mainly the members of the Naderi family,

the social worker and some neighbours. The film also contains some of the footage that was broadcast on TV, such as the sequences with the news reporters asking questions outside the welfare centre, which adds to the film's documentary feel. In addition to these elements which add to the film's realist claim and are similar to the social realist techniques elsewhere, what points to the film's function as a "reading" of the real, and therefore to its constructed-ness, is the use of poetic realism. As I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter, this foregrounds the creative symbiosis between social realism and poetic realism within art cinema. Through the insertion of certain symbols to connote some important ideas that the film addresses, Makhmalbaf performs a creative presentation of her contemporary social reality.

Firstly and more importantly, the apple, being also the title of the film, becomes a potent symbol, which signifies knowledge and consequently empowerment and freedom. It also mobilises its biblical connotations as the 'forbidden fruit' in the story of Adam and Eve which alludes to the human right of free will. Such a reading of this symbol reveals a certain tone of religious scepticism, since Adam and Eve in accepting the apple were expelled from paradise, committing thus the ultimate sin. Similarly, the two girls were freed from their house-prison, which could be considered dangerous by their father and the people who think like him. So in a way heaven is equated to prison and by extension religion is portrayed as a stifling institution. Initially, the image of the young boy from across the street, teasing the two girls by dangling an apple from what looks like a fishing pole and making them jump for it while laughing at their unsuccessful efforts to catch it, might seem ambiguous and cruel. Yet he later on comes down and offers to help them get more apples by taking them to the greengrocer's, and it is through this encounter and the transaction that ensues that the girls start to learn about the outside world. Therefore the apple is not only a poetic symbol but also an actual source of knowledge for them. This

motif is repeated at the very end of the film when the blind chadored mother comes out of the house, alone and confused, looking for her family. The little boy is once more sitting at the window and he starts dangling an apple in front of her, which is again rather uncomfortable to watch as she is mumbling to herself and calling for her daughters. Yet in the final freeze-frame she grabs the apple, a shot which exudes optimism for the eventual emancipation of those who are underprivileged and oppressed. Chaudhuri and Finn read the film as “a feminist allegory”(178) of women being oppressed in Iran and I would argue that it is this allegorical rhetoric that makes the political criticism constructive. Especially, the ending gives a hopeful inflection to an otherwise rather grim account of social reality in contemporary Iran.

Yet apart from the use of the apple as a central symbol, there are a number of other symbols that enrich the film's semantic universe, such as the half-dried potted flower, which is left in the yard under the blazing sun. This is introduced in the very first shot of the film, in which a hand is reaching out of the iron bars to water a small flower pot. Not long into the film it is made clear that the flower pot works as a symbol for the two girls. This is evident when their father reads out to the social worker a passage from the Islamic book *Father's Advice* that parallels young girls to flowers that, if seen by male eyes other than their father's, will wither like flowers under the sun. His actions are therefore shown to be direct applications of the religious doctrine, which oppresses women in particular, and makes men the vessels of a deep-rooted misogyny. On another level this shot, that will be repeated when the social worker locks the father in the house, represents this situation of imprisonment and the threat of the mental desiccation it can lead to in view of the girls' inability to speak properly and perform any activities their peers seem to have mastered through a normal interaction with society. As soon as the girls begin to interact with society, which works like the life-giving water that they manage to provide for their

unfortunate flower, they begin to gradually acquire knowledge about the world and how it works. The first step towards this direction is underlined by another symbol, that of the pair of mirrors which the social worker brings to the girls. As soon as they acquire the mirrors the girls are freed from their domestic prison and they are urged by the social worker to go out and mix with other children, which is how they start learning some important rules about living in society, such as paying for the products they want and making friends.

However, the most striking aspect of the film, which allows Dabashi to characterise it as a “counter-ideological statement that may serve as the manifesto of the generation that Samira represents” (269), is her reluctance to make any judgements. Instead, she presents the story from an objective point of view, showing that “[a]ll characters have reasons for their actions, and we are encouraged to understand them on their own terms” (S.F. Said 163). In other words, all the parties are given an even-handed representation, and despite some of the comments made by the neighbours or the social worker that are quite sharp in their criticism of the father, the director seems to make an effort to present 'his truth' as well and expose the reasons behind his behaviour. For instance, quite early on in the film when the girls are taken to the welfare centre and the father goes to see them, he admits that it was wrong that he deprived them of their freedom and of the opportunity to be educated, saying “it's my fault, I'm not saying it isn't”, while later he tries to justify his actions by saying that it is for their safety that he locks them up and not out of cruelty. At one point he talks to a neighbour about his problems caused by their extreme poverty and how everything is worse due to the disgrace brought upon him by the added public scandal he is involved in. This speech points to two factors that lie at the root of his predicament and by extension his actions: one is the social injustice that leaves these people completely destitute to live in appalling conditions; the other is the extreme religious zeal that entails a

gender injustice since women are seen as commodities and their safekeeping is closely related to the man's honour. In relation to this he tells the social worker that he cannot let the girls out in the yard if he is not present because boys climb over the wall to get their ball and if they touch the girls he would be dishonoured. It is in this way that Makhmalbaf does not seem to blame the father, but by giving him the opportunity to express his point of view she exposes the detrimental role of an oppressively sexist religion along with the wider social malaise of the working classes. This alternative way of representing such a complicated situation has been celebrated by Mulvey, who remarks that “[n]ow that women are emerging as filmmakers in sufficient numbers, Iranian cinema may explore new ways of seeing and of telling stories” (259). Makhmalbaf's work is representative of this tendency that can also be detected in her later film *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), which again focuses on the oppression of women in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Yet it does so while registering the effect of the US bombings in people's everyday lives and seeing the larger picture without resorting to any simplistic critique. This method of representation could be read as a feminist approach through which the use of social realism points to the gender and social injustices that exist in the world and as Dabashi puts it, “*The Apple* thus becomes a devastating condemnation of the mind-numbing oppression of women, not just in Iran, but anywhere” (271).

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that social realism is used by Makhmalbaf in order to represent the reality as it is experienced by a strand of the Iranian society that remains largely under-represented. *The Apple's* focus on female experience within the specific societal structure which is dominated by the theocratic status quo is an important addition to global feminist discourses. On the one hand it shows the specificity of women's experience within an Iranian and Afghan context while at the same time it connects with the overarching issue of female oppression that exists in differing degrees and



manifestations throughout the world. Although Iranian cinema does not have the rich social realist tradition that was presented in reference to British cinema, spanning most of the country's cinematic past, there is still a certain number of films that address the contemporary social reality and it seems to be the most preferred path for Iranian women directors to bring to the foreground issues concerning female oppression in their society. The aforementioned directors, Tahmineh Milani and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad have chosen a more mainstream cinematic approach, hoping to gain access to local audiences and thus to potentially impact on ideological changes. Samira Makhmalbaf, on the other hand, works within the transnational arena of art cinema and therefore not only does she draw attention to women's plight within the socio-political context she portrays, but she also manages to transcend the artistically stultifying rules of cinematic production present in her native country.

### Conclusion

This chapter has foregrounded the significance of social realism within art cinema and its potential for a feminist appropriation. Arnold is one of the few women working within the British social realist filmmaking tradition, which historically has been rather hostile and dismissive of women. Through her work, and as has been shown in particular with the analysis of *Fish Tank*, she presents the young, working-class woman's point of view. She breaks with the British social realist tradition only in terms of foregrounding this under-represented social demographic in terms of both form and content. She provides a rough and gritty representation of working-class life yet her open-ended narrative, unlike the majority of social realist films, gives it a positive and hopeful twist, which relates to feminist empowerment. This has also been detected in the second case study as well, and similarly Makhmalbaf re-presents a lower-class, female point of view. Although the two films are very distinct looking, the common argument is that social realism is a suitable

cinematic practice for the portrayal of female oppression and gender injustice worldwide. As has been mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, social realism in itself is hard to pinpoint since, as Lay explains, “it is both politically and historically contingent” (8). Other films that represent this hard-edged realism in the service of promoting women's issues and also exemplify this socio-political specificity, apart from the ones mentioned earlier in this chapter, are Icíar Bollain's *Take My Eyes* (2003) and Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). Lay also points to the usual affinity between social realist texts and independent art cinema which I have emphasised throughout this chapter. Yet I would argue that their distance from mainstream modes of filmmaking is not that vast due to a proximity to documentary filmmaking and also to the genre of melodrama. This proximity between art cinema and mainstream practices, and its potential benefits for feminism, will be further explored in the next and last chapter that looks at films that have a strong cross-over value between these two contexts and portray several generic characteristics in common with the mainstream.

## Chapter 6

The Cross-over Film: Investigating Feminist Concerns through Generic Ambiguity

Following on from the previous chapter, which looked at the way social realism within art cinema is employed by women directors to foreground women's experiences in everyday social reality, I will now move to a discussion of female-authored genre films within art cinema. As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, I am looking at different practices and aesthetics within art cinema moving from more avant-garde films, which are readily identifiable as belonging to this alternative space (film movements, films with strong metacinematic elements) to more mainstream-like ones (social realist films, genre films). This trajectory helps showcase not only the diversity of art cinema as a filmmaking context, but also the way that these different practices can and have been used by certain women directors to break with gender stereotypes and promote a usually neglected female point of view. Therefore the discussion on genre art-films will be instrumental in rounding up the whole argument of the thesis before moving on to draw certain conclusions from this exploration of women directors' variable participation within art cinema. What I will proceed to argue in the following pages is the multiple usefulness of genre conventions within art cinema. Such integration testifies to a rapprochement between two filmmaking contexts that have been seen in the past as mutually exclusive, which results in a beneficial cultural dialogue between them and also in potentially widening art cinema's audience due to this use of popular genres. Consequently, women directors who work within this context have the opportunity to reach wider audiences while at the same time re-constructing these generic conventions and inserting new tropes that challenge gender stereotyping. In order to demonstrate this functionality of genre art-films for feminism I will look at Kelly Reichardt's indie western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) and Jane Campion's neo-noir *In the Cut* (2003). Yet before proceeding with the analyses I would like to address the issue of genre,

its meanings and definitions and its particular manifestations within art cinema in order to clarify the way it is used in this study.

The label 'genre' offers a simple and useful term when discussing films, helping critics and audiences alike to conjure up a set of ideas and qualities that pertain to a certain semantic universe, thus conveying a set of meanings and messages. In reality it is a lot more complicated to define genre and to identify what constitutes a particular genre, as the debates within genre theory show. Steve Neale, in his book *Genre and Hollywood*, traces the main outline of this debate and goes on to discuss the different definitions and uses of genre as a term. Most of the scholars that have tackled the issue, such as Andrew Tudor, agree, to a greater or lesser degree, that genre manifests “the interplay between culture, audience, films and filmmakers” (qtd. in Neale 19). In other words, amid the various disagreements between genre theorists Neale observes that they “[a]ll agree that genre is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and that its dimensions centrally include systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all” (*Genre* 25-6). Yet neither is genre theory as simple as this extremely brief introduction shows nor is it my intention to suggest any such simplicity. It is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter to delve further into the specifics of genre theory itself and attempt to answer in this limited space questions that have preoccupied film theorists for several decades now. Having said that, since this chapter engages with the concept of the genre film it is only appropriate to explain what this means and how the term is used in the present discussion as well as what it entails for art cinema.

Coming full circle to the very beginning of the thesis, it seems fitting in this final chapter to refer back to certain definitions and characteristics of art cinema as discussed by film scholars. William Siska, in his study of art cinema, considers it primarily as a genre,

basing his formulation on Andrew Tudor's understanding of genre "as a sociological term" that is primarily concerned with the way audiences interact with film (1). In this rather broad and relatively arbitrary sense, art cinema must be a genre since the term does conjure up a certain type of film with particular characteristics, whether formal or thematic. Therefore, according to Neale's paradigm, all films belong to multiple genres simultaneously, such as 'narrative film', 'Hollywood film', 'documentary' and so on (*Genre* 25). In this sense art cinema is a genre that, just like 'Hollywood', contains other genres. Or rather art cinema is one of the many genres that a given film may operate within. Yet as has already been noted, Bordwell has argued against the idea that art cinema might bear a connection to genre (meaning in this context narrative genres such as the western), writing that art cinema is "[l]acking identifiable stars and familiar genres" (97). As I have suggested earlier, this formulation is not entirely valid on either of the two counts since not only are stars used within art cinema but also most art films can be related to a varying degree to one or more "familiar genres". It might be the case that narrative genres do not remain unchanged within this filmmaking context, but this argument also holds true within Hollywood production itself. Certain films, such as the Hollywood B-western of the 1930s for instance, were produced just like an industrial production line, according to Edward Buscombe, having identical narrative structures and motifs, whereas others, such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (Wellman, 1943), deviate significantly from the conventions of the western narrative. Similarly, the *Cahiers* directors in the 1960s were making films that were very much related to certain major Hollywood genres, such as Godard's *Band of Outsiders* (1964) or Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist* (1960), both engaging with the gangster film genre. Even if they engaged with the specific genres in a more playful and self-conscious way rather than in their purest industrial manifestations, they still operate within that generic universe as well as within art cinema as a genre. Consequently I argue that

conventional narrative genres are very much present within art cinema since this is still largely a narrative cinema. As it has been noted earlier, there is a certain degree of distinctiveness in the narrative form of art films, particularly in terms of structure and self-consciousness. The use of narrative genres within art cinema mobilises distinct, more or less universal semantic spheres while being similarly governed by this self-consciousness and experimental attitude that defines this filmmaking context overall.

Moving on to the specific focus of this chapter I would now like to draw attention to another complicated term: that of the 'genre film'. The title of this chapter refers to the cross-over film, meaning in this context the 'genre art film'. In other words, genre films within an art cinema context, I argue, present a greater potential cross-over – towards the mainstream – and in turn the potential of a larger market that is not necessarily restricted to art house audiences. According to Rick Altman, the term 'genre film' is applicable to instances when “the notion of genre takes on a more active role in the production and consumption process” (277). Neale suggests the terms “generically marked” and “generically modelled”, going on to explain that “the former refers more to the moment of reception, and may include instances of generic reworking and generic rejection as well as instances of generic conformity”, whereas “[t]he latter refers to the moment of production, and by definition excludes generic rejection” (*Genre*, 28). For the purposes of this chapter I am going to favour the terms 'genre film' and 'generically marked film' since, as I have argued earlier, art cinema engages with narrative genre in different ways that include “generic reworking” as well as “generic conformity”. Hence, the term “generically modelled” as defined by Neale seems inadequate for the art cinema context even if to an extent both case studies could be considered as 'generically modelled' to varying degrees. The application of this term in the art cinema context, however, requires a looser definition that takes into account the choices made at the moment of production in terms of

iconography, characterisation and narrative according to a specific genre, even if the films eventually deviate from any given archetypal model. This underlines the extent of theoretical complexity that pervades all discussions concerning genre in film, and the ephemeral nature of the terminology that needs to be explained individually for the specific purposes of each study because, as has been hinted at, it cannot be taken for granted.

My first case study for this chapter, as mentioned above, is Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), which is part of a distinct subsection within art cinema, that of American Independent cinema. As I have explained in the introduction, this choice is particularly useful in the present discussion on genre. This is because narrative genres are closely related to Hollywood film production and it is interesting to see how they are employed within a different filmmaking practice from the same national context. In this respect Geoff King has observed that within American independent cinema genre is occasionally problematised but it still “forms an important point of orientation in many cases”, and “[i]t can provide a stable base [...] within which to offer something different” (166). King elaborates on the intricate relationship between genre and independent cinema and the existing tension “between the use and undermining of approaches associated with the commercial mainstream” (166). It is in this spirit that the following analysis of both case studies will be undertaken. I argue for the usefulness of generic markedness in art cinema while showing how these films break expectations associated with genre and thus renew and refresh each genre due to a productive dialogue that develops between mainstream and art practices. Furthermore, I will proceed to foreground the usefulness of this practice for inserting gender and even feminist concerns in spaces that were predominantly male-centred.

Jane Gaines has talked about the development of genre theory as a way to counter the elitist discourse pervading auteurism, according to which “the auteur was expected to

'transcend' the formal dictates of the industrial genre" (19). Her position is clearly presented in the following quote:

The genius of genre lies in the enormity of its repertoire, its vast cultural storage, its knowledge of both itself and the socioemotional raw material of the cultures that sustain it. What do we gain by attributing the genius to genre and not to the auteur? While the former contains the latter, the latter only contains the former insofar as the auteur coincides with a genre. (26-27)

This statement is rather useful for the present study since, firstly, it validates the assumption that art cinema, with its auteur focus, and narrative genre are not mutually exclusive. In addition, it suggests that the use of genre could in itself be a technique on the part of the auteur to not only participate within a wider film culture but also to deviate from it. In other words, genre films can help auteurs get recognition through their association with that particular genre. At the same time, the idea that auteurs do not contain genre but they only "coincide" with it, may allow for a greater detachment from its conventions and therefore the potential on the part of the auteur to critically reflect on its usage. This, according to Ann Kaplan, is achieved specifically in relation to gender in the way "female directors have drawn on traditional Hollywood genres for feminist ends" ("Troubling" 72). Thus she claims that genre categories "inspired feminist directors to imagine aspects of their social and political worlds through a genre lens, combining aspects of Hollywood genres with the genre feminist critics 'invented', namely the woman's film" ("Troubling" 72). Once more the definition of this genre is a rather complex undertaking which is indicated by the very broadness of the definition given by Annette Kuhn in her article "Woman's Pictures", in which she says that the woman's picture is "about, or made by, or consumed by, women" (367). Kaplan adds to this critical discussion of the woman's



film, noting that this “genre is not only defined by certain thematic concerns and its address to a female audience but also by resistance to normative female roles, a refusal to be reconciled to patriarchal requirements” (“Troubling” 73). Although I would hesitate to put the films discussed in this thesis under the category of the woman's film, for reasons that have mainly to do with the potential danger of marginalisation such a label might bear, it might be useful to briefly mention Kaplan's argument since the films I will proceed to discuss in this chapter contain at least some of the qualities she attributes to the woman's film. In this way and through this discussion of the cross-over art film, I will highlight the overall intention of the thesis, which is to show how films directed by women within art cinema not only participate significantly within this cultural terrain but also serve a wider social purpose; that is, these films point to the current gender imbalance while imagining an alternative.

According to Kaplan, the use of genre by independent female directors is crucial, since it is through the re-working of genre conventions that gender and its on-screen representation is shown to be a construct (“Troubling” 75). She argues that “[f]eminist directors feminize genre” by “mak[ing] female subjects central and active instead of peripheral, exotic, or mere victims, while rendering male figures as either absent or peripheral to the main focus of the narrative” (“Troubling” 82). While avoiding reading feminist intentionality on the part of the directors unless it is clearly stated in extra-textual information, this statement will be embraced in the analysis of the two main case studies. Therefore this chapter explores how, through the use of recognisable generic markers, women directors aim for a larger audience while at the same time injecting their films with alternative themes and representations that raise feminist concerns. Reichardt's film will be discussed primarily in the way it focuses on the female characters who seem to be increasingly empowered as the narrative progresses. This is even more significant since the

film's generic marking as a Western aligns it with a genre which has historically been centred around a predominantly male narrative. Pam Cook contests the idea that classical genres have a "gender-specific address" ("No" 31). Therefore it should be clarified that both the western and the neo-noir crime thriller, which have been assumed to aim for a predominantly male audience, are hereby discussed not in terms of their address but in terms of the gender composition that they usually contain within the fictional universe. For instance, as I will proceed to highlight with the ensuing analysis of *Meek's Cutoff*, not only does the film defy gender stereotyping by exposing and ridiculing the image of the tough, ultra-violent, lone cowboy but it also de-glamorises the myth of the 'West' and the violence that dominates westerns historically. Thus Reichardt offers a critique of the western and a re-working that, although conjuring up the same historical and cultural context as traditional westerns, deviates significantly in terms of the story told and the accompanying messages. Similarly, the analysis of *In the Cut* will emphasise the equally potent gender critique that is achieved through the self-conscious use of gender conventions within film-noir and their reversal. Meg Ryan's character, Frannie Avery, will be discussed as a rather complicated instance of characterisation that avoids stereotyping and usual narrative motifs, such as that of the woman with active sexuality, usually a *femme fatale* figure, as a threat that needs to be annihilated. To the contrary, it will be foregrounded that in Campion's take on film-noir it is the law, both in terms of the actual law and also the patriarchal law represented by the policemen, which poses the real threat. Both films hover in varying degrees between art cinema practice and the mainstream, and I argue that this ambiguous position is a useful standpoint for an effective feminist critique.

#### Women in Focus: Re-imagining the Western in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff*

The first section of this chapter, as mentioned above, looks at the reformulation of

the western in Kelly Reichardt's fourth feature length film, *Meek's Cutoff*. I will briefly discuss the director's oeuvre which is situated within American independent film practices and manifests a continuing concern with genre and its reformulation while addressing contemporary social and gender issues. Thereafter I will narrow down the discussion on the particular case study by firstly referring to the western and its conventional mainstream manifestations in order to then proceed to the analysis and point out how the present film breaks with the dominant conventions both in form and content and in its ideological repercussions. In this way the analysis supports the argument of the thesis overall by drawing attention to the proximity and cross-fertilisation of mainstream and art cinema practices as is evident in the way Reichardt, working within an art cinema context, is able to engage with a traditional mainstream genre in a rather unconventional way. It is this degree of unconventionality, compared to the mainstream, inherent within and promoted by this filmmaking milieu, that bears the potential for women filmmakers to use and question the gendered structures present in the mainstream and thus imbue their films with feminist reverberations.

Kelly Reichardt made her first feature film *River of Grass* in 1994. Reichardt herself describes her first film as “[a] road movie without the road, a love story without the love, and a crime story without the crime”<sup>32</sup>. It seems therefore that from the very start of her career she was engaging with genre in a rather complex manner. She plays with many of the conventions of the three genres mentioned in her quote and the result is a film that borrows elements from all three genres and at the very end refuses generic ties. It could be argued that in this way it functions as a filmic meditation on genre while also containing an array of political messages related to social and gender issues. The film had a successful festival career, being nominated for awards in the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, but

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32 <http://www.walkerart.org/calendar/2010/river-of-grass>

almost ten years later it is rather difficult to access since it is not widely distributed. After her first feature there was a considerable hiatus in Reichardt's feature filmmaking career. In the meantime she released two short films; *Ode* (1999) and *Then a Year* (2001). She did not return to feature filmmaking until twelve years after her debut feature, releasing *Old Joy* (2006), and once more drawing critical attention, winning awards from the Los Angeles Critics Association and succeeding at festivals such as Rotterdam International Film Festival. Her next feature, *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), also did very well at the international festival circuit, winning over critics in America and beyond. Just like her debut feature, all of her films play with genre and its limits whilst raising very subtly and organically contemporary socio-political issues. The road movie, a genre associated primarily with the New American cinema of the 1960s and onwards, is clearly referenced in all of her films so far, and it is through this genre that issues of identity and politics become more prominent. It is therefore important at this stage to stress the consistency that is apparent in Reichardt's work in terms of formal aesthetics, largely associated with American Independent cinema, and of thematic concerns that are politically charged. Her use of genre seems to be in accordance with King's statement that “[t]o complicate or to undermine genre conventions is still to mobilize them to some extent, even in the more radical departures”, and therefore, as I will proceed to show with the analysis that follows, “[t]he line between use and abuse is not clear-cut but a question of balance” (G. King 191).

*Meek's Cutoff* manifests a common blending of genre, combining elements of the road movie with Western iconography. Shari Roberts picks up on the connection between these two genres, suggesting that “the Western has condensed [...] into what we now refer to as the genre of the road film” (45). This point is reiterated by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark who see the road movie's thematic origins in “popular mythology and social history, go[ing] back to the nation's frontier ethos”, which “was transformed by the technological

intersection of motion pictures and the automobile in the twentieth century” (1). Of course this road narrative was present in classical Westerns already, as it can be seen for instance in John Ford's renowned western, *The Searchers* (1956). The mixture of these two genres within Reichardt's film is not something new, but it is a direct reflection on the ideological link between them which, according to Roberts, is “this ideal of masculinity inherent in certain underlying conceptualizations of American national identity that have persisted, if only through continual ideological struggle” (45). In light of this ideological relationship I am focusing the analysis of Reichardt's film primarily on its association to the Western, in order to highlight the significant diversion she takes from its dominant conventions. Consequently, before engaging with the analysis itself, it is necessary to briefly refer to the Western as a mainstream genre and those elements that are mobilised within the present case study.

The Western is a genre with a very specific and unique iconography in terms of landscape, costumes and other objects that are used to point to a specific geographical and historical moment in American history. Edward Buscombe, in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, gives a comprehensive, if brief, history of the Western starting with its main constituents in terms of iconography, such as costume and setting, and proceeding to give an overview of the genre's development throughout the decades. For instance, he observes that “[t]he Western is remarkable for the consistency and rigour with which costumes are assigned to particular roles” (16). Therefore the image of the cowboy, despite different fashion variations, seems to have a generally recognisable outfit that recurs in most Westerns and which basically consists of a “wide-brimmed hat, jeans and boots” (16), and more often than not the typical leather chaps and pair of pistols or other type of weapon. He is also most often depicted on horseback, and many Westerns begin with the image of the lone cowboy riding into town and end with him 'riding off into the sunset'. A good

example of this is found in the Franco-Belgian comic series *Lucky Luke* which despite its foreignness as a cultural product, taps into and reproduces the major stereotypes of the genre. Women's costume is equally “codified”, as Buscombe notes, and the socially respectable woman is seen to wear “a dress of some sturdy material [...] buttoned up to the neck” (16), and any variations from this typical costume signify a lack of respectability and a contempt for social norms. This is evident in Mae West's costume and characterisation in *My Little Chickadee* (Cline, 1940), especially as she is juxtaposed with Mrs Gideon who seems to be representing society's dictate as to female respectability.

The setting of the Western is one of its most important generic marks and, according to Buscombe, “a large part of the Western's appeal, especially to easterners and non-Americans, derives from the exotic beauty of the wide open spaces of the plains, mountains and deserts of the trans-Mississippi West” (17). Yet as he goes on to explain, geographically the setting is rather ambiguous, since there are Westerns that are set in Mexico, the Monument Valley or even further away from the American West (17). In some cases there are actual geographical markers that help to roughly locate a specific Western, such as the Colorado river and the Monument Valley, which appear in, among others, the 1950 John Ford Western *Rio Grande*. This disparity in terms of location, however, does not impede a film's identification as a Western, since there are always recurring types of landscape in the form of non-specific, iconic settings such as the desert, the pioneer town, the rocky mountains, etc. This is one of the parameters that contribute to the iconography of the Western, yet it is not the most fundamental one, since as Buscombe puts it, “[t]he West of the imagination is grounded in real geography, but not confined by it” (17). For instance, it is possible to have a Western set in the 'traditional' West such as *The Horse Whisperer* (Redford, 1998), set in Montana, and *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), set in Wyoming, and it is equally possible to have a Western set in Australia, such

as *Ned Kelly* (Jordan, 2003). In a similar vein, chronological markers are rather diverse and may range from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Some Westerns state precisely their chronological setting whereas others are left vague and the spectator can roughly position them in time through their mise-en-scène. For instance *Meek's Cutoff* is set in 1845, *Appaloosa* (Harris, 2008) in 1882, *All the Pretty Horses* (Thornton, 2000) in 1949, while other films, such as *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor, 1946), *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973) and *The Quick and the Dead* (Raimi, 1995), are more ambiguous as to their chronology. This temporal vagueness, however, does not impede one's recognition of a film as a Western and it is rather the combination of several different parameters that mark a film as a Western.

Having outlined the fluidity yet consistency of some of the characteristics of the genre's iconography, I would now like to briefly turn to the Western's recurring thematic concerns and gender representations. Of course, such a discussion might seem to create an image of greater uniformity than there is in reality and it should be noted that even if there are similarities in many Western narratives there are also notable differences and exceptions to the major common formulas. Once more I turn to Buscombe's account, which identifies the "captivity narrative" to be a recurring theme at the heart of many Westerns, among them Ford's *The Searchers* (18). Historical references such as the American civil war and the migration to the West, with the accompanying expansion of the American border are present in a significant number of Westerns, and more often than not they constitute the narrative's background. But, as Buscombe observes, "[a]t the centre of the Western as it evolved in the cinema [...] was physical action: the violent confrontation between men and nature or, even more crucially, between savage or outlaw and the representative of advancing civilization" (18). Adding to this mixture of reality and fiction are stories about popular Western characters that have gained mythic dimensions, such as

Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Calamity Jane. Consequently, historical specificity and realism are not necessary components of the Western and not even always desirable, since it seems that the main concern is to create a larger-than-life spectacle and construct an imaginary world that is more idealised than realistic. It is therefore no surprise that in a significant number of classical Westerns, bearing in mind that there are notable exceptions, there is an overt manifestation of racist ideologies. In particular, ethnic minorities – Indians, Mexicans, and Chinese people – as well as women in general are seen to bear the brunt of the phallographic white supremacist propaganda that is repeated from one film to the other.

However, this does not preclude the possibility for readings against the grain or for subtle subversive commentary within the filmic text; yet the possibility for subversion gaining full force and overturning the status quo remains rather limited if not entirely 'forbidden'. For example *Broken Arrow* (Daves 1950), which at the time of its release was considered liberal, even winning the Golden Globe for Best Film Promoting International Understanding, by the end loses its momentum and, by killing off the hero's Indian wife, the risk of miscegenation is avoided (Buscombe 46). Another example is the 1957 film *The Guns of Fort Petticoat* (Marshall), which is remarkable for its predominantly female cast. However, the women are led by a man and are ridiculed for the purposes of comedy in their effort to learn how to defend themselves. Eventually one of the main characters, who from the beginning has been portrayed as quite strong and independent, especially as compared to the rest, marries the hero and is safely domesticated. Meanwhile the company's 'loose' woman undertakes the responsibility of raising a child whose mother died in battle, and thus the threat she might have posed to the moral order is ultimately obliterated. Pam Cook comments on the "impoverished range of female stereotypes on offer" (240) in the genre, adding that "[t]he search for realism is perhaps rather self-



defeating in a genre which is more concerned with myth than historical accuracy” (“Women” 241). In other words, one could not justify women's subordinate position in the Western narrative through an allusion to historical reality. As this thesis argues, it seems more accurate to suggest that the subordinate position of women filmmakers within the history of film provides an explanation for the marginalisation of female-centred narratives in general.

Yet this is something that has started being rectified in more recent years, and Yvonne Tasker, in looking at a number of revisionist Westerns that came out in the 1990s, finds an interesting array of complex female representations. Reflecting on Cook's observations on women in the Western, she picks up on the performativity of gender roles within the genre which “links the showgirl and the cowboy” and also the emphasis on freedom in terms of the social structure (*Working* 53). It is mainly these qualities of the genre that open up a space for a potential subversion of stereotypical representation and as Tasker states “[t]he white woman in the Western has, at least some of the time, a strength and an independence to match the struggles that she faces” (*Working* 53). A perfect example of this is the 1997 television movie *True Women* (Arthur) in which the female protagonists manage to fend Indian attacks, successfully run a plantation and generally succeed in surviving against all the hardships they are faced with. At the same time that they accomplish all this, they do not constitute a threat to the gender hierarchy of the society since they are, or learn to be, excellent home-makers, mothers and wives. Therefore, despite the considerable empowerment of women within a narrative like this, and despite the insertion of feminist-related issues such as the campaign for the women's vote, the narrative fails to overturn the patriarchal social structure and women are once more place within their stereotypical roles. This ideological stance is reinforced by the use of the title *True Women*, which very openly promotes the female representations within the

film as positive and ideal role models. However, this account is by no means true of all the films that portray powerful women, and Tasker's analysis shows the different degrees of complexity offered by different films (*Working* 51-64). Yet I argue that this is indicative of the fact that within the mainstream the potential for subversion is always contained to a greater or lesser degree. It is therefore rather telling that among the films included in Tasker's discussion, those that offer the greatest degree of resistance to the dominant patriarchal narrative are Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) and Gus Van Sant's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993). Quite significantly they are both operating within an independent filmmaking context, having been distributed by Fine Line Features which in the early 1990s specialised in the marketing of independent features. This is a context which, as I will proceed to demonstrate with the analysis of Reichardt's Western, seems to be more receptive to alternative narratives.

As mentioned earlier, *Meek's Cutoff* is set in 1845 on the Oregon Trail where three couples of immigrants moving West are led by Stephen Meek, who promises to take them to Oregon through a shortcut, hence the title of the film. However, they quickly find themselves lost in the desert and, with their water and food supplies diminishing, in a desperate struggle for survival. Their desperate state is conveyed early on in the film when the young man, Thomas Gately, is seen etching on the surface of a rock the word 'LOST'. The iconography of the film, which is one of the Western's most distinctive characteristics, immediately points to its generic affiliation, and it is the film's strongest connection to the genre since, as I will proceed to demonstrate, it does not contain spectacular conflicts in the manner of shooting duels or warfare as more traditional Westerns do. The setting is very much conventional in its use of desert landscapes, and it is filmed on location in the state of Oregon. The characters consist of recognisable types that frequently appear in the genre: three pioneer couples (Emily and Solomon Tetherow, Millie and Thomas Gately

and, Glory and William White), a lone cowboy on horseback who is their leader, and an Indian hostage. In addition, the props that are used, such as covered wagons, rifles and furniture, as well as the costumes worn by the characters, are within usual conventions, adhering to the film's chronological setting. On the surface, then, the film seems to conform to the iconographic prerequisites of the Western. It is on the level of characterisation and narrative development that the film breaks with tradition, and I argue that this break allows for a criticism of the Western's ideological position as a patriarchal white supremacist narrative.

One of the first striking elements that seem unusual, but not unprecedented, for a Western is the sparsity of dialogue, which is a recurring theme in Reichardt's oeuvre. This laconicism has an introspective effect and potentially leaves space for the audience to reflect on the on-screen occurrences. It also intensifies the slow pace of the narrative, which contrasts with the majority of mainstream Westerns that rely on fast-moving action scenes and quick verbal exchange between characters. In an interview Reichardt directly addresses this issue by saying that “[i]n Westerns, everything is quick and highlighted” and there is a conscious desire to play with that aspect<sup>33</sup>. In the same interview she says that she is surprised when hearing comments concerning the slowness of the film since, as she says, at the time when the story is set everything was happening in a different pace, a lot slower than people are used to nowadays<sup>34</sup>. This demonstrates her intention to achieve historical accuracy and a type of verisimilitude, which, as has been discussed earlier, is not a central concern of the genre. Yet, as Geoff King observes, “[m]aterial suggesting a greater degree of 'reality' within generic territory can also be inserted into films that are not remotely committed formally to the creation of impressions of authenticity” (182). In this way Reichardt takes a step back from the Western's generic conventions, bringing generic

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33 <http://www.avclub.com/articles/kelly-reichardt-and-jon-raymond,55095/>

34 Ibid.

affiliations of the period drama into the mix. Similarly, the narrative development, apart from its slow pace, is rather peculiar for a Western since it does not seem to openly centre around a spectacular conflict involving physical action in the same manner as a more classical Western, such as *Rio Grande*, does. The theme of conflict, or rather of several conflicts, is still there but in a subtler, understated way. The whole narrative is based on the struggle for survival, which is, in effect, the conflict of human beings against nature. In addition, there are a number of minor conflicts between the characters, such as the violent encounter between the pioneers and the Indian, which results in the latter's capture. Significantly, this conflict remains a small-scale incident involving only one Indian whose capture is effected off-screen. However, Meek keeps treating him violently and repeatedly tries to persuade the group to kill him because, according to him, the Indian is a threat even as a prisoner. This can be read as a critique of the violent treatment and near extinction of the American Indian people, since Meek's violence is incited by an imaginary threat.

Interestingly enough, this conflict brings to a climax the conflict between the pioneer families and Meek who, from the beginning of the film, are suspicious of him. The climactic scene comes towards the end of the film, after one of the wagons is overturned in the attempt to get it down a steep hill. While everyone is trying to rearrange the contents of the wagons and salvage what is left, Meek points a gun at the Indian because he gets angry with him for rummaging through the scattered objects. Immediately, Emily points a rifle at Meek and thus saves the Indian. In this way the conflict between Emily and Meek, that has been simmering for a while, comes to a climax and Meek is overpowered. In connection to this power-play between Emily and Meek, it should be mentioned that another point of departure from the traditional generic mode is the characterisation and the rapid transformation of the power structure within the group. To begin with, Meek is the leader of the group, the authority on everything relating to the West, and he is positioned in front

of the group, riding ahead, whereas the rest of the convoy follow on foot. This dynamic is fostered by the fact that Meek narrates stories about dangerous, heroic situations he and people he knows have been involved in. However, his authority starts to erode gradually from the beginning of the film since his knowledge about where they are or which way they should go is as good as anyone else's. The men of the group are seen early on having a private discussion and, as Emily tells the other women, they are talking about whether to hang Meek. In this sequence it is notable that the men are talking apart and do not include the women in the decision-making process. The women seem to be confined to chores such as gathering twigs for the fire and preparing the meals, while in several shots they are seen to walk some distance behind the wagons. In this way the characters are often segregated into two gendered, spatial groups which results in an initial schematic depiction of the power structure within the group, as follows: Meek→men→women. However, it should be noted that this power structure is rapidly changing.

For one thing, Emily seems to be in a more empowered position since her husband – albeit at night in their tent – discusses important matters with her and asks her opinion. So among the pioneer couples, Solomon and by extension Emily, are seen to be in a higher position in the decision-making process. Throughout the first half of the film, Emily seems to have adopted a rather stoic stance, not saying much and being generous towards the others as, for instance, when she offers to share her food and water with the Whites. It is Emily who encounters the Indian first and although she is visibly terrified, her frustration is directed towards Meek for his ignorance and incompetence rather than towards the Indian. When she is alone with her husband she says: “I don't blame him for not knowing. I blame him for saying he did”. In this way Emily breaks her silence and it is mostly through her that the image of the powerful cowboy, which Meek is seen to embody, starts to get demystified. This is accomplished even further during her exchange with Meek, when she

directly questions his authority by blaming him for getting them lost and when he tries to comfort her by saying “we gonna make all right”, she retorts “Oh, you don't have to patronize me, Mr Meek”. She continues by doubting his knowledge about women and replying to his remarks sarcastically. The conversation leads Meek to give a short speech saying that “women are created on the principle of chaos”, whereas “men are created on the principle of destruction”, thus becoming the mouthpiece of the most conservative binary gender stereotyping. This could be read in terms of the gender representations apparent in most classical Westerns, where men are portrayed as ultra-violent and women are either a threat of disorder – in the case of loose women – or the source of creation – in the case of the respectable, nurturing, home-maker. The conflict between Meek and Emily is put to rest at the very end of the film when the group, under the leadership of the Indian now, who is being used to lead them to a source of water due to his knowledge of the land, arrives before a tree in the middle of the desert. At that point they regroup and each party expresses their decision as to how to proceed. This time it is the women that speak and Meek finally says: “I'm taking my orders from you now, Mr Tetherow, Mrs Tetherow. And we're all taking our orders from him [Indian], I'd say”. Therefore the power structure seems to have been overturned, and now it is the Indian who leads the group, the last shot of the film being of him walking away in the distance. Schematically, the new power structure can be depicted thus: Indian→Emily (and by extension her husband)→the rest of the pioneers (this time with the inclusion of the women)→the disenfranchised cowboy. Deriving from this, it is evident how Reichardt deviates from the typical narrative closure, a technique that is associated with art cinema practices. The narrative remains open ended and their quest for a water source is not seen to come to fruition. The appearance of the tree is a hopeful sign that somewhere nearby must be a water source, yet the film ends rather abruptly with this vague indication as to their possible survival. Moreover, instead of

the cowboy riding off into the sunset, it is the Indian who is framed in the last shot, walking away under the blazing sun presumably towards the direction of the water source. The original status quo is not re-instated and it is in this anticlimactic manner that the film functions as a meditation on the Western's conservative form and content. Simultaneously, through the centralisation of the female characters the film offers a point of view, which is more often than not marginalised in the Western narrative.

Using *Meek's Cutoff* as a case study indicative of the way women directors engage with mainstream genre within the alternative context of art cinema, I have argued that this practice is crucial to the revisionist role cross-over films are seen to perform. In particular, by focusing on female characters, women directors foreground a female point of view in an otherwise male-dominated cinematic universe such as the Western narrative genre. As I mentioned in the brief overview of Western conventions, this is also evident in the TV movie *True Women* directed by Karen Arthur. Yet in comparison to art films, such as the present case study, the aforementioned Maggie Greenwald Western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* or even Debra Granik's modern-day Western, *Winter's Bone* (2010), it seems that the mainstream poses certain limitations to the gender critique that becomes part of this revisionist attitude. It is true that there is a very small percentage of female-authored Westerns but this only makes the few instances that do exist even more pronounced in terms of their iconoclastic position within and outside this traditional Hollywood genre. This is also evident in other equally 'masculine' genres and their treatment within female-authored art films, such as film noir and neo-noir crime thrillers, which will be discussed in the subsequent analysis of Jane Campion's *In the Cut*. Sue Thornham has noted the obvious link between Campion's film and Alan J. Pakula's crime thriller, *Klute* (1971), and therefore its relation to a wider tradition of mainstream, American films that revisit certain conventions of the older cycle of film noir ("Starting" 34). As I will proceed to explain,

the strength of its revisionist attitude lies in the role reversal of certain classic gendered types frequently employed in this genre. It thus performs a similar function to Reichardt's Western indicating that genre filmmaking within art cinema is a useful practice for women directors to comment on the way certain fundamental ideological issues, such as gender inequality, are presented within popular culture.

Neo-noir and the Homme Fatale: Exploring Violence and Sexuality in Jane Campion's *In*

*the Cut*

As mentioned above, in this section of the discussion concerning cross-over films I turn to the consideration of film noir, or more appropriately its contemporary manifestation in neo-noir crime thrillers. In particular I look at Jane Campion's 2003 film *In the Cut* and consider the gender representations it offers in the process of reversing the conventional character types that appear in this kind of narrative, mainly that of the male detective and the duplicitous *femme fatale*. I will proceed to argue that the film, in the process of explicitly addressing the interrelation between violence and sexuality in a bold and unflinching way, works in a liberating way for female representations and the portrayal of female sexuality. Its more mainstream characteristics, such as the narrative conventions of the crime thriller and the casting of well-known stars, that are more related to mainstream genre films, apart from giving it at first glance a mainstream, conventional feel, also work to subvert the norms since they are used in new and unexpected ways. More importantly for the argument of this thesis, it is through this 'abuse' of mainstream conventions that a fault line is created within the text and a feminist reading of female empowerment is made possible. Before focusing on the analysis of the actual film, though, I will briefly look at Campion's oeuvre to suggest possible thematic and formal concerns that are shared by several of her films, arguing that the director's place within this ambiguous sphere of the genre art film is significant in its potential to engage with feminist issues for mass-



consumption. I will then move on to the analysis of the specific case study in order to highlight the minutiae of the representations that are offered and the ways they clash with dominant generic tendencies.

Jane Campion began her filmmaking career with the short film *Peel* (1982), which won the Short Film Palme d'Or in Cannes in 1986. Her successful beginning was to be continued within short-filmmaking and, before venturing on feature filmmaking, she worked in television, directing an episode of the Australian TV series *Dancing Daze* (1986) and her first TV movie *Two Friends* (1987). Her first cinematic feature, *Sweetie* (1989), tells the story of a dysfunctional family, blending comic and tragic elements and earning her several awards such as Best Original Screenplay (Australian Film Institute) and the third place as Best Director in the American Film Critics Awards. Her next feature, *An Angel at My Table* (1990), is a biopic portraying the life of the New Zealand poet Janet Frame, and it was even more successful than her debut feature, earning her several awards both in her home-country and in prestigious international film festivals such as Toronto and Venice. This recognition gave her the opportunity to establish herself as a filmmaker and manage to produce her next project, arguably the most acclaimed film of her oeuvre, *The Piano* (1993), which boasts a cast of widely recognised film stars such as Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel and Sam Neill. With this film Campion won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, thus becoming the only woman director so far to be so highly honoured within the international film festival circuit. At the same time she was also nominated for the Best Director Academy Award and I would argue that this is an indication of the film's place within the cross-over realm between art and mainstream cinema. Since then her subsequent features – *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), *Holy Smoke!* (1999), *In the Cut* (2003) and her most recent *Bright Star* (2009) – have hovered around this arena of art cinema with cross-over potential, by utilising mainstream genre conventions and recognisable stars, among them

Nicole Kidman, Kate Winslet, Abbie Cornish and Meg Ryan. This cross-over quality combined with an overarching concern with women's issues, as portrayed in her films through the focus on the female characters, is crucial in the potential of her films to not only enrich dominant cinematic representations but also to bring feminist issues to the foreground. Most of her films, especially her post-*Piano* projects, directly engage with recognisable mainstream genres such as the biopic, literary adaptation, period drama, romantic drama and, as already mentioned in relation to the present case study, neo-noir crime thriller. This engagement with the mainstream, as argued earlier in relation to Reichardt's work but also more generally in relation to cross-over art films, provides an opportunity to refresh and develop current genres but also to criticise their ideological affiliations, particularly for the interests of this study in relation to feminism, through subverting common generic tropes.

Having briefly introduced the way Campion's work fits within the premise of this chapter, I will now move on to the specific address of the genre invoked and re-worked in *In the Cut*. By giving a brief summary of some of noir's and neo-noir's conventions, as I did with the Western above, I intend to pave the way for the discussion of this particular case study and point out the ways that it deviates from the conventional manifestations of this genre, thus privileging a feminist reading. First and foremost it should be said that if any film genre provides a challenge for critics and scholars alike to define and delineate it is that of 'film noir'. Steve Neale dedicates a whole chapter in *Genre and Hollywood* to presenting the discourses surrounding film noir, which is indicative not only of the complexities in writing about this genre but also of its significance as a cinematic and critical phenomenon. Neale observes that "critics have been unable to define *film noir*, even though there is considerable agreement as to the films that constitute *noir*'s basic canon" (*Genre* 153). What is important to note in contrast to other major genres such as the

Western, discussed above, is that the term *film noir* was not used at the time within the context of the films' production, marketing or reception, neither among critics nor audiences. So, at least originally, it does not seem to fulfil any of the usual functions of genre, i.e. constituting a label that producers use in order to target a specific audience and convey a certain set of meanings or the promise to fulfil certain audience expectations, and the term seems impossible to reconcile with this lack of discourse pointing to its meaningfulness. However, since Nino Frank coined the term in 1946 it has been taken up by film scholars, and Neale presents an array of academic and critical writing engaging with it and trying to substantiate it by giving definitions and cataloguing major characteristics shared by films that are considered under this label. This *a posteriori* discourse mobilisation is very rich, sometimes contradictory, but very productive and significant in as far as it points to the importance those films have been vested with. As Neale explains, it was due to the sudden upsurge of American films in France, which had been lacking during WWII, that Frank and other critics were suddenly exposed to this cinematic phenomenon (*Genre* 154). Therefore it might be the case that this 'unnatural' number of films and the circumstances of their foreign exhibition, alongside the context of reception rather than of production, are the reasons for the birth of this idiosyncratic genre. It would be interesting to study these origins in more detail, in terms of how many American films were released at that time in France and the way they were promoted in this context, in order to make a stronger case in relation to the constitution of this genre, since, as Neale explains in his chapter on film noir, the subject matter and other characteristics in addition to stylistic and formal properties that are seen as defining elements of film noir are very much present in American film production in general at the time.

With the present analysis of *In the Cut* as a reworking of neo-noir, I am referring to

the conventions and characteristics that have been detected by critics and scholars as part of the noir make-up. Notwithstanding the uncertainty of the genre's dimensions through its surrounding discourse, it has been fleshed out with a number of elements that are seen to pertain to this generic mode. More importantly, the figure of the *femme fatale*, the focus on sexuality, desire and death, moral ambiguity, psychological tension and a complex crime narrative are some of the characteristics that are combined within the fabric of the films that have been labelled as *noir*, and by extension will be addressed in the way they are manifested in relation to the specific case study. The figure of the *femme fatale* has been the particular focus of interest for feminist scholars, such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane and Janey Place, who have looked extensively at the way this character type functions within the noir narrative, noting the importance of her controversial nature. Although in a way she constitutes a transgressive and potentially subversive presence within the noir narratives, it has been observed that there are certain limits to this function. For instance, Kaplan highlights this limitation by observing that “often the work of the film is the attempted restoration of order through the exposure and then destruction of the sexual manipulating woman” (qtd. in Neale, *Genre* 160). It is interesting to note that this figure of the sexually transgressive woman is not exclusive to film noir and, for example, in the Western a similar stereotype exists in the figure of the morally loose woman. However, within *noir*, sexual desire and the dangers that arise from it take centre stage and are crucial to the unfolding of the narrative, as can be seen in classic noirs like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1946) and *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944).

The duplicitousness of this figure is her most defining characteristic, since she uses her sexuality to ensnare the male hero into helping her achieve her morally ambiguous and more often than not illegal schemes. This exceptional quality that the *femme fatale* embodies is described very acutely by Yvonne Tasker:

The appeal of the *femme fatale* for feminism may lie in this particular confluence of elements. Drawing on a tradition of representation in which women are mysteriously seductive but evil, in which 'woman' is not only defined by her sexuality but also by the power that this generates. She is a transgressive figure who misleads the hero and who is punished for her pains. (*Working* 120)

This figure has been transferred into *neo-noir*, which Neale acknowledges in comparison to *noir* as “much more real, not only as a phenomenon but also as a genre” (*Genre* 174). *Neo-noir* seems to span several decades, with films like *Harper* (Smight, 1966), *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), *Body Heat* (Kasdan, 1981), *Disclosure* (Levinson, 1994), and several others, which reiterate either in contemporary or anachronistic, nostalgic settings similar themes and concerns with *noir*. The male hero is depicted as vulnerable and at the mercy of the modern *femme fatale* who, according to Tasker, is depicted as “the 'independent woman', figured in terms of a bright, advertising culture confidence and a narrative refusal to accept a submissive role within relationships or professionally” (*Working* 121). This cultural depiction is concurrent with the emergence of the new woman through the struggles of the feminist movement, and subsequent male anxiety in the face of a gender-role transformation within the fabric of society. The narratives of these new films are addressing this male anxiety and, as Tasker observes, “[n]ew *film noir* explores and exploits evolving discourses around both masculinities and femininities through the conflation of sex and work in the figures of a feminised/persecuted hero, an aggressive *femme fatale* and the independent career woman” (*Working* 134). However, as I will now proceed to argue with the subsequent discussion of *In the Cut*, Campion offers a new version of the noir narrative which liberates the female characterisation from this vicious stereotyping and offers an exploration of explicit female sexuality that is not threatening or

deadly.

As my argument goes, the ability to visibly re-consider generic conventions and re-imagine the gender representations offered therein forms the crux of female-authored, cross-over films. As shown earlier, in the case of the Western it is the genre's strong connection and role in shaping ideas concerning American national identity and the dominant ideology that makes it a rich source for American independent film and its revisionist operation. In a similar way, *neo-noir* in particular, having in mind films like *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987), becomes an important vessel for the promotion of traditional ideologies relating to male supremacy, old-fashioned family values and heteronormativity. Yet it also provides a space, even if limited, for the insertion of dissident voices and temporary displacements of this traditional status quo, which is usually occupied by the femme fatale, as mentioned earlier. This opens up the possibility for art films to further explore such avenues and also to uncover the gender injustice these generic conventions are pointing at. Moreover, certain characteristics that can be detected in a number of classic *noirs* seem to be closer to art cinema conventions as discussed in chapter one. The subjectiveness of the narrative due to the narrator/hero's corruption and vulnerability, the non-linearity of the narrative, the theme of sexual explicitness (especially in the case of *neo-noir* but also present even if less emphatic in classic *noir*) and moral ambiguity, and occasionally an adherence to dark endings, are some of the elements that seem to bring art films closer to *film noir* than to any other genre. It is therefore to be expected that this affinity will be exploited in the cross-over films and it will be further highlighted in the subsequent analysis.

*In the Cut* is set in New York City in keeping with the urban settings that are frequently used as the background for the exploration of contemporary crime narratives. The apartment block where Frannie lives becomes the site of the investigation since the

head of the victim is discovered in the garden right next to it. It is a somewhat run-down building that reflects the protagonist's humble social status in financial terms. She is a teacher of English in secondary education and also, as she tells detective Malloy (Mark Ruffalo), a writer. The low-key lighting in the building – stairwell and apartment – another common stylistic trait of noir, adds to the sense of mystery and danger. Especially the contrast between the bright sunlight in the outdoor sequences when Frannie is walking around town, as for instance when she is going to the Red Turtle Bar with her student quite early on, and the darkness inside the bar emphasises this sense of danger, gloom and moral ambiguity. The heroine, especially since the bar is at a lower level than the street, is seen to be literally descending into a kind of underworld in which the low-key lighting serves to conceal deviant actions, such as the scene of oral sex she witnesses. I will come back to the minutiae of this particular scene in relation particularly to the gaze and how it is structured to deviate from noir conventions. However, for the moment I want to stress the stylistic characteristics such as low-key lighting in contrast with the colourful setting of Frannie's flat and the harsh sunlight outdoors that are clear references to noir and neo-noir in the tradition of expressionism. One last observation concerning the setting of the film is to do with Pauline's (Jennifer Jason Leigh), Frannie's sister's, residence above a strip club. Frannie is seen several times in the metro, a space of transition but also of imminent danger due to its underground location, signifying a sense of entrapment. She goes to visit her sister several times and again one of the dominant elements of *mise-en-scène* is the darkness, loud music coming from the bar, and also the unbearable heat. These elements combined create a feeling of suffocation and portray an existence at the margins of society.

Like most *neo-noir* films, *In the Cut* has a contemporary setting, which is made apparent by the “signifiers of modernity” (Grist 267) such as the metro, the costumes and cars. The narrative is intercut by brief flashback sequences, which are shot in sepia, a

device that points to their imaginary nature and their temporal antecedence. The use of the flashback, a recurrent motif in film noir, is explained by Neale as a device that aims “to focus attention to one or more of the characters, and to produce an intense awareness of – and intense curiosity about – their mental and emotional states” (*Genre* 168). Therefore Frannie's point of view and internal state of mind is focalised and privileged through this device, and she becomes the centralised subjectivity through which we are encouraged to follow the unravelling narrative. The repetition of the narrative of her parents' romantic meeting while they are ice-skating indicates a certain longing for such a romantic narrative but also her distrust of men and romance in general. As she tells her sister halfway through the film, “He [their father] killed her [her mother]. When he left she went crazy with grief, she didn't understand, couldn't believe it”. Apparently their father has had several women in his life, he has been married four times, and Pauline says that he never married her mother. This topic of marriage is quite prominent during the conversations between the two sisters and Pauline expresses the desire to get married for her mother's sake. Frannie does not express any such desire and she even suggests to her sister when she sees her in a desperate situation crying over a doomed romance with a married doctor, “Do you ever think about just imagining sex?” and then she turns on the radio and the song goes: “I don't want to wait in vain for your love”. These are all signs of her independence, both emotional and physical, which contrasts entirely with her sister's longing to find a partner. Quite significantly, Pauline gives Frannie a charm bracelet which she says is “a courtship fantasy” since the charms are all signifiers of marriage and family life – a wedding bell, a little house, a baby carriage with a baby inside and so on. She tells Frannie that she should have a baby and Frannie replies: “this is the closest I'll get”. This shows how disillusioned Frannie is concerning relationships and that she does not aspire to fulfil certain prescribed roles that are considered social imperatives. I will return to this idea of her emotional and



sexual independence further below in the discussion of her portrayal as a *femme fatale* that deviates from dominant representations. First I will address the issue of the narrative progression and how it resonates with *noir* conventions.

To begin with it should be mentioned that the film is an adaptation of a novel by the same name written by Susanna Moore. Neale and other noir scholars draw attention to the close relationship between noir and hard-boiled fiction (Neale, *Genre* 164-65) and the tough and cynical quality that pervades the genre. This could also be observed in the present case study since Frannie's character is both tough and cynical as I will proceed to show, and although she embodies the victim/hero at least on one narrative level, by the end she manages to overpower her assailant and eliminate the threat by killing the serial-killer. Her cynicism is underlined by her aforementioned reluctance to subscribe to the idea of the romantic fantasy and by her suspicion of Malloy when they first meet. She does not believe immediately that he is a real detective and she makes him wait outside her apartment with her door ajar and the safety chain fastened until she calls the police station to check his credentials. Therefore she embodies characteristics that are stereotypical, but not exclusive, of *noir* heroes, manifesting a certain amount of paranoia, cynicism and distrust of people around her, apart from her sister who seems to be the only person she trusts. In addition to these elements, the narrative of the film is multi-layered and the detective plot is only one level of its structure, the other being the plot concerning the sisters' romantic preoccupations and their outcomes. Of course these two different plots are intertwined and the one ends up feeding into the other, since Pauline, unbeknownst to her and due to her emotional fragility, gets involved with the serial-killer and ends up being the third victim in the investigation. Moreover Frannie gets involved with detective Malloy who she starts suspecting of being the serial killer, due to a tattoo on his forearm, and the added plot of her attack on her way home complicates matters even more. From quite early on there is

indication that someone is watching her, for instance in the shot through a car when she walks out of the bar. This shot is repeated later on and eventually the night after her date with Malloy, when she is walking back home, she gets attacked. Initially she believes the original crime and her attack to be connected but Malloy tells her that it is not likely. These convolutions of the plot create an effect of uncertainty and unreliability producing a “vulnerable interiority” similar to 1940s *noir* narratives (Neale, *Genre* 169) and heighten the suspense of the overall narrative.

Having addressed the *noir*-related aspects of setting, narrative and the use of flashbacks, I would like to focus upon the portrayal of desire and violence, the explicit depiction of sexuality, and the figure of the *femme fatale* and, since these are rather intricately interconnected, I will address them simultaneously. Frannie, as I already mentioned, is the centralised character around whom the narrative is structured. Therefore although typically the detective might have a privileged narrative position, even if problematised by the unreliability that usually pervades the *noir* narratives, it is not the case in this particular film. Therefore Frannie is seen to motivate narrative action rather than constitute a passive figure whose function is limited in performing her sexuality and thus becoming the object of the gaze. However, to an extent she could be seen to possess the qualities of the *femme fatale*, in the sense that she displays an active sexuality that at times seems to transgress acceptable social conventions. For instance, when towards the end of the film she wears a red dress and make-up, confines Malloy onto a chair by handcuffing his arm to a pipe and has sex with him, the film draws upon the convention that appears in several *neo-noirs*, as observed by Kate Stables, such as *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) and *Body of Evidence* (Edel, 1993), in which “the hero is *acted upon* by the *femme fatale*” (173). The connection between violence and sexuality, however, goes beyond this manifestation of aggressive sexuality and is inscribed from the start in her

interest in slang. A few minutes into the film she tells her sister, as they are walking out of her apartment, that “slang's either sexual or violent” and Pauline says “or both”, immediately drawing the connection that the rest of the film will proceed to explore. This is even more emphasised in the sequence after Frannie gets assaulted in the street. She is visibly shaken and Malloy tries to calm her down by reassuring her that the incident is not connected to the murder of the young woman he is investigating. He asks her to show him how the attack happened and in the process of re-enacting it Malloy grabs Frannie from behind and holds her in a lock. At that point of proximity they start touching each other in a sensual way and they end up having sex. The portrayal of the sexual act is explicit, as expected from a contemporary neo-*noir* thriller, but unlike most examples within the canon I would argue that it is not pornographic, aiming merely at the titillation of the audience, but performs a crucial role in representing the taboo subject of female sexuality. As has already been mentioned, sexuality and desire in *noir* and neo-*noir* is something dangerous and the *femme fatale* is seen to use it as a weapon. However, in this film Frannie's sexuality does not constitute a threat to society since she does not use it in this way, and therefore she is not a *femme fatale* since there is nothing fatal about her sexuality. She lacks the deceptive, duplicitous side that is a major characteristic of the traditional *femme fatale* and therefore in this disassociation between active female sexuality and death the film rejects this sexist stereotype and opens itself up to a feminist interpretation. This is also evident in the slogan appearing under the title in an official poster for the film saying: “Everything you know about desire is dead wrong”. Initially this slogan seems similar to other ones accompanying neo-*noir* erotic thrillers that aim to emphasise the film's dangerous eroticism and thus attract audiences. And it does work on this level as a film that invokes this particular genre and to an extent works within it. Yet it works on a more literal level as well, in terms of destroying this uncanny relationship between female sexuality and death

and promising a treatment of desire that goes against audience expectations through its deviation from the typical generic tropes.

Before ending this analysis, I would like to talk about the idea of voyeurism and the gaze, drawing upon the work of Mulvey and other feminist film scholars. In this way I am hoping to bring my argument to its climax by showing the radical transformation the genre undergoes in this instance, simply by foregrounding the female character and reversing gender roles and expectations. One of the most important sequences in the film in terms of the unravelling of the plot is quite early on when Frannie goes to the Red Turtle Bar with her student, and, excusing herself to go to the toilet, she witnesses a woman giving oral sex to a man. Quite symbolically she goes down a staircase, descending further into an underground space where it is dark and she is drawn by noises towards a half-open door. Using a sequence of shot-reverse-shots between the people involved in the sex act and Frannie's face, her reaction is first registered as one of astonishment at the unexpected spectacle and then of pleasure since she lingers in the concealed but visually privileged position. This is therefore a clear depiction of the female character deriving voyeuristic pleasure and consequently being the bearer of the gaze rather than its object. Neither of the people involved is clearly visible, since the woman has her back towards Frannie and the man's face is concealed by the shadow in this dimly-lit space, but there are two outstanding traits that she notices and which play a key role in their identification: the woman's long blue fingernails and the man's tattoo above his wrist depicting the three of clubs. The voyeuristic scene is cut rather abruptly by the ring of Frannie's mobile phone and she runs back up the stairs and into the bar to find that her student has gone, possibly suggesting that there has been a significant passage of time from the moment she went downstairs. The observation, which is underlined by close-ups on these two significant traits – tattoo and blue nails – is conjured up again throughout the investigative narrative. It is through

this function that one can argue that, despite the scene's scopophilic quality and apparent function as spectacle, which in an adaptation of Mulvey's argument can be argued to “freeze the flow of the action in moments of erotic contemplation” (19-20), it performs a crucial role for the development of the narrative. As soon as Frannie returns home there is a close-up of Malloy's forearm with the same tattoo and she thus believes him to have been the man involved in the act she witnessed earlier. It seems that this is what makes him alluring in her eyes, this mysterious and illicit performance of sexuality, and this is made evident when soon after their first encounter she lies in bed fantasising about him and pleasuring herself. In that way he takes the position usually reserved for the *femme fatale* and he becomes a threatening but at the same time alluring figure even if it is through false representation and misunderstanding. In bearing the gaze Frannie is empowered in holding the key to the investigation, but due to the illicit nature of her voyeurism – in terms of social decency especially relating to women – she does not immediately admit to what she witnessed, which causes the subsequent misunderstandings and puts her in mortal danger. In the end, however, she does confront the murderer and manages to overpower him, conjuring up the image of “the final girl” as detected in horror films by Carol Clover.

The film thus provides us with an *homme fatale* figure which is embodied partly by Malloy but also by the other male characters, John Graham (Kevin Bacon), Ritchie Rodriguez (Nick Damici) and even Cornelius Webb (Sharrieff Pugh). John Graham is a man that we are led to assume Frannie has been sexually involved with, judging from the voicemail he leaves on her answering machine early in the film, and she seems to have lost interest in. He is constantly calling her and lurking around her apartment block and the café where she goes to meet her sister. It is insinuated through this stalking behaviour that he is possibly her attacker, although this is never clearly resolved. But judging from his obsessive behaviour that culminates in his breaking and entering in her apartment, he

shows signs of an unstable and potentially dangerous personality reminiscent of Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) from *Fatal Attraction*. Cornelius, Frannie's student who is helping her with her research on slang, seems to be less of a threatening figure but again manifests an aggressive and potentially threatening stance towards her. Towards the end of the film he goes to see her and finds her in an extremely vulnerable state due to her immense grief over her sister's murder, accompanied by alcohol abuse. He proceeds to come on to her and when she tries to put an end to his advances he gets angry, pushes her on the bed and screams at her "What do you want?". However, further consequences are prevented by Ritchie, Malloy's partner, who comes to check on her. Ritchie is presented early on in the film as Malloy's partner, asking her several questions concerning the murder investigation. He appears again in the bar where Frannie and Malloy meet for a date, during which Malloy informs Frannie that Ritchie is not allowed to carry a gun because he tried to kill his wife after she made a scene because he cheated on her. To be more precise, as he goes on to explain, Ritchie's wife threw his San Juan "Man of the Year" prize out of the window and that caused his violent reaction because, as he goes on to add, "Ritchie takes this stuff seriously". Malloy seems to condone his partner's violent behaviour by saying that he did not mean to kill his wife but only to scare her, commenting on the harshness of his punishment. As soon as Ritchie arrives at the bar, Malloy turns and starts chatting with him in an excessively macho discourse and when Frannie asks them whether all cops are homophobic, Ritchie looks at her and rather derogatorily asks "What are you, one of them feminists?". They continue talking about women in a disparaging way and it is at that point that Frannie leaves them. This behaviour, coupled with the revelation in the end that he was the serial-killer who approached women, proposed to them and then killed and dismembered them, fulfils the portrait of the *homme fatale* who uses his sexuality with deadly effects.

Consequently, I have argued, this analysis shows the way the film hovers between art cinema and the mainstream Hollywood genre of *noir* and *neo-noir*. Instead of centring on the male detective hero, who is often the focal point of a mainstream film of this genre, it focuses on the female protagonist, who is seen to portray simultaneously elements of the *femme fatale* and the *noir* hero, displacing thus the power hierarchy that usually pervades this type of narrative. As mentioned earlier, there is some similarity between certain qualities of art cinema and film noir, for instance a pervasive moral ambiguity, non-linearity of narrative progression and the portrayal of daring, sexually explicit subject matter. This makes these two distinct filmmaking practices seem relatively connected, especially when thinking of film *noir's* investment in Expressionism, a modernist movement that originated in Germany and greatly affected its early art cinema production. Yet apart from that 'genetic' link, it is quickly noticeable that the similarities mentioned above appear in different ways and have rather different uses. For example, in terms of the moral ambiguity that is accentuated by the non-omniscient narrative, it can be argued that art films, within their fictional universe, more often than not avoid having a moral centre, or that centre clearly clashes with dominant ideologies and thus morality and choices based upon it become an issue of personal opinion. In other words, the moral universe of the art film is governed by the author's subjectivity, whereas this is not obviously the case with the majority of *noir* and *neo-noir*. In those scenarios the hero might choose the morally ambiguous route, instead of following the noble, lawful path, usually as a result of the *femme fatale's* seductive and morally corrosive influence. However, within the overall structure of the narrative it is clearly evident that there is still an overarching moral order that clearly designates good from evil and polarises character types accordingly. Also, in terms of narrative ending, whereas in the art film the open ending is preferred, in this Hollywood genre it is a definite, albeit dark, ending that ties the fragmentary narrative

together and leaves no doubt as to the outcome which usually reinforces the overarching traditional moral universe.

Therefore this mingling of art cinema and *noir* becomes instrumental in transgressing the latter's ideological limitations. This is aptly described by Shelley Cobb:

In contemporary postfeminist film culture, where any explicit expression of feminist subversion of patriarchal ideologies is immediately expelled or contained, Campion, as a postfeminist (in the chronological sense) female art cinema auteur, utilizes a perverse feminist aesthetic in her women's films by mixing the conventions of art cinema and mainstream genres, resulting in the subversion and perversion of the lessons of the postfeminist rape narrative. (111)

Her reference to the rape narrative that is encountered in several Campion films can be extended to include more generally the violence in terms of gender inequality that is effected on the female characters in certain predominantly mainstream but also art films. Cobb calls this practice of mixing these different conventions “a perverse feminist aesthetic” and in a similar vein Sue Thornham, having compared the postfeminist romance narrative as it appears in *Sex and the City* and *In the Cut*, concludes that the latter, “[y]oking together its multiple and often shockingly disparate references and registers, [...] performs, disturbingly but triumphantly, the strategy that Rich calls 're-vision'” (44). It thus evokes a feminist tradition of cultural deconstruction and reconstruction, and it is art cinema's ambiguous relationship between mainstream and avant-garde cinematic practices that creates this opportunity.

### Conclusion

Throughout this chapter the overarching goal has been to assess the way art films with a cross-over potential via generic kinship to the mainstream can re-examine and re-



formulate established tropes to highlight gender issues associated with feminism. I have sought to briefly delineate the core characteristics and dominant debates surrounding two major Hollywood genres, the Western and neo-*noir*, as a basis for highlighting the ways the two case studies comply with but also deviate from the norms. On the one hand they seem to share some characteristics, which allow for an initial generic identification and possible marketing to wider – than the art-house – audiences. Yet, having established this potentially privileged position, they also work against certain dominant generic conventions in an attempt to renew and develop the genre by injecting it with an alternative gendered point of view and overall structure. In the first instance Kelly Reichardt creates a Western that deliberately conjures up its generic affiliations through the tag-lines appearing in official posters for the film such as “A Film with True Grit”. Yet at the same time, as it has been argued in the above analysis of the film, it constitutes an acute critique of the genre's biased myth-making and backward gender politics. Through the use of realism and historical accuracy, which as it has already been mentioned, was never one of the genre's primary intentions, the director manages to portray a gritty and de-glamorised image of the expansion to the West. Her schematic representation of the power hierarchy is emblematic of the destabilisation of patriarchy as the narrative progresses. Women are not confined to stereotypes but are presented as distinct individuals and, in the case of Emily Tetherow, able to lead the group in times of strife and uncertainty. Thus, and despite the expansive landscapes presented on screen, the film becomes an esoteric treaty of identity-seeking and inner exploration as well as constituting a more overt depiction of the struggle for survival against harsh conditions. It thus moves away from generic antecedents that were centred around spectacle, violent conflicts and repetition of a limited set of character types.

In the second instance Jane Campion provides us with a neo-noir that manages to

completely overturn the gender roles that appear typically in films of this canon. The cross-over potential of her film does not only lie in its generic affiliation with neo-noir but also in the use of recognisable stars from mainstream filmmaking. In particular Meg Ryan as the lead actress, who has frequently been typecast to portray stereotypically 'feminine' roles as a sweet and innocent girl through her appearance in romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You've Got Mail* (1998) and *Kate & Leopold* (2001), is here cast against type showing a 'darker' side of femininity and manifesting a not so innocent explicit sexual appetite. In this way her role in this film has intertextual reverberations throughout an array of different films, emphasising the performativity of femininity and effecting a cynical comment on the idea of the traditional romantic fantasy. Her character, Frannie, is independent and sexually active and she is suspicious of the men around her who are seen to be unreliable and duplicitous. The traditional noir roles of the male as the vulnerable detective/hero and the *femme fatale* as the dangerous seductress are reversed and the male characters in the film embody a dangerous and violent sexuality which attracts and simultaneously poses a mortal threat to the female characters, predominantly Frannie but also her sister and mother and the other two female victims of the serial-killer. In this re-appropriation and 'refurbishment' of generic convention it is made clear that it is not the forms themselves that are sexist and problematic for feminism, but the way they are populated and structured in terms of gender hierarchies. Other examples of female-authored cross-over films are Sally Potter's *The Man Who Cried* (2000), Mira Nair's *Amelia* (2009) or Lone Scherfig's *An Education* (2009). They all exhibit an ambiguous relationship to the mainstream in the sense that they employ well-established stars and dominant generic tropes but, within their independent sphere, creatively re-work their material and are injected in differing degrees with a feminist consciousness.

### Conclusion

Throughout this study I have maintained the position that art cinema operates as a useful and potentially beneficial space for female authorship and, by extension, for feminist ideals. As explained in the introduction, I do not intend to suggest that there is a conscious, methodical, organised feminist film practice as a subsector within global art cinema. Instead, as I have shown, the feminist strand of the female-authored art films I have looked at, lies both in foregrounding a female artistic voice within a male-dominated industry, and in the wealth of non-stereotypical female representations that can be found therein. I have therefore avoided reading feminist intentionality on the part of the directors unless there is sufficient evidence in a director's statements as to her overt affiliation with a feminist agenda, as for example with Agnès Varda's comments on her film *Cléo from 5 to 7* (Chapter 2). What I have argued, in terms of the feminist potential of the films explored here, is that by foregrounding and substantiating the female subject both in terms of the content, i.e. the plot of the films' narratives, and in terms of its form, i.e. the way the film is composed, the structure of the shots, the unconventional narrative pattern, etc., the films result in opening up spaces for contestation of the existing status quo allowing them to be considered in a feminist light.

The specific focus on art cinema and its potential for alternative to the mainstream representations has been noted by other scholars such as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, who observes that “even at the very inception of the Hollywood machine – and the mode of narrative fiction film that it implies – alternative models were being conceived by European and women filmmakers alike” (4). However, she remains cautious in suggesting that “resistance to patriarchal representations is not exactly synonymous with alternative readings” (11). Indeed the present study carries no implication that as a film practice art cinema has inherently or historically any privileged relationship with feminism. In fact it

would seem that despite the several differentiating aspects between art cinema and dominant mainstream practices (exemplified mostly by Hollywood), in terms of the female representations and gender politics offered on screen, the two practices are rather analogous. As I have showcased with the extensive, yet by no means exhaustive, account in chapter two, the female representations and ideologies that are presented within canonical art films are rather conservative and stereotypical, symptomatic of the patriarchal context they were produced in, yet varying in intensity and ambivalence depending on the individual consciousness of the auteur behind them. In this way, they are no more innocent of perpetuating gender inequality than their mainstream counterparts which have monopolised the criticism of feminist film scholars from the 1970s onwards. This study therefore complements feminist film scholarship and works in a two-fold manner to foreground the importance of female authorship within the shared cultural arena of art cinema, and to draw attention to the gender representations offered in films that move beyond stereotypes in enriching the on-screen presence of women.

As I have shown with the opening discussion (chapter 1) concerning some of the most important defining aspects of art cinema, it is rather challenging if not impossible to arrive at a clear-cut definition of this cinematic practice. As Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover maintain, “the lack of strict parameters for art cinema is not just an ambiguity of its critical history, but a central part of its specificity, a positive way of delineating its discursive space” (6). It is on this ambiguity that I have built the central argument of the thesis, looking at how the privileged position of authorship, artistic innovation and transnationalism create an intricate interplay that can prove invigorating for a different kind of feminist filmmaking. One of art cinema's fundamental characteristics, that of promoting innovation both in terms of content – what is shown – and form – how it is shown – differentiates it from the mainstream. Yet as I have shown via the sequence of the

chapters, moving from a more art cinema exclusivity towards a blurred area where the two practices operate in a creative symbiosis, it always holds a strong connection to the mainstream, either using it as an adversarial model – e.g. film movements such as Dogme 95 and New Latin American Cinemas (chapter 3) – or as a cultural neighbour borrowing from and also transforming some of its dominant tropes – e.g. cross-over films (chapter 6). This relationship to dominant cinematic practices is what gives women directors the opportunity to re-shape cultural tropes that are already in circulation, since they are “expected” to do so within this field. They can therefore redefine new spaces for enunciation for the female subject and contribute to global artistic production whence they have been excluded in the past. Therefore it is this fluidity, hovering between strongly commercial mainstream filmmaking and avant-garde experimental practices, that I argue invests this cinematic field with a subversive potential – in relation to dominant ideological apparatuses as presented elsewhere – and due to its still commercial orientation creates the possibility for reaching a wider audience than most experimental and avant-garde practices can aim for. In arguing that art cinema has the potential to reach wider audiences while nonetheless reworking feminist avant-garde aesthetics and themes, the thesis traces the contours of a liminal cinematic space, both in terms of form and ideological expression. It thus seeks to open up the field for further research into the way the combination between commercial genres and art cinema conventions can prove beneficial for feminism.

I have therefore argued that art cinema presents an intriguing filmmaking context for the study of women directors, especially due to its high status exemplified by ‘masters’ of cinema such as Luis Buñuel, Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Renoir. Filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac, Agnès Varda and Sally Potter have produced significant cinematic oeuvres within the broad space of art cinema yet they have not enjoyed the critical acclaim or scholarly attention of their

male peers. This has been connected to Battersby's notion of the essentialist gendering of genius as male throughout history, which is apparent within art cinema discourses in the promotion of auteurs. In this light, art cinema has been viewed as another hostile universe for women filmmakers and to this extent not far removed from mainstream practices. To be more precise, auteur theory, through its original proclaimers, as seen in chapter 2, has repeatedly assumed that the gender of not only the auteur is male but also that of the film critic. For instance Andrew Sarris' work on auteur theory has been seen to represent this masculinist bias. Having this in mind and taking also into account the gender biased critical responses to films such as *Open Hearts* (chapter three), *The Tango Lesson* and several of Breillat's films (chapter four), it seems intriguing to explore the extent to which such a gender imbalance remains and its effects on the success of specific films and on the careers of their directors overall.

Therefore, by simultaneously arguing that on the one hand art cinema has been and still is to some extent a “gentlemen's club” yet, due to its emphasis on artistic freedom and innovation, which creates a space for non-dominant and potentially subversive representations and themes, it opens up a route for women directors, this thesis opens up the field for further investigation as to its paradoxical positioning. As I have demonstrated in chapter two with the analysis of Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* and Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, the stereotypical categories that I have detected in canonical art films are still present but they are overcome by a gradual development of the female characters and a concomitant interrogation of the reasons that led to their constitution as such. By insisting on the inclusion of women directors within art cinema and by acknowledging their auteur status, we can start to aim for equality within this professional sphere. In so doing and due to auteurism's insistence on personal artistic expressivity and originality, women directors can participate in the creation of their own stories, focusing on the individual inner

psychology of their characters, and thus uncovering the subjectiveness and complexity in the construction of gendered subjectivities on screen. This is further elaborated and analysed in the subsequent chapters with each of the eight distinct case studies.

I have divided my case studies into four categories, which provide useful frameworks for the discussion of how feminist issues are inscribed in the films in relation to the wider cinematic context they invoke. To be more precise, looking at films made by women that exemplify aesthetics of broader film movements (chapter 3), I have been able to historically contextualise them as part of a particular filmmaking tradition but also I have teased out those elements that are consistent with a different female or feminist perspective. Consequently I have demonstrated the possibility of successfully negotiating and integrating such a perspective with wider cultural trends within filmmaking in two distinct politico-cultural environments. This section anticipates further investigation into the contribution of women filmmakers within contemporary film movements, as for instance the relatively recent, post-millennial emergence of a number of young female filmmakers in New Latin American Cinema, e.g. Claudia Llosa and Lucía Puenzo. The meta-cinematic category allows for an important understanding of the way women inscribe their authorial presence and comment on the filmmaking practice itself. This has given a further insight towards my overall argument that looks at women directors' position within art cinema and the gender struggle they face in the workplace. I have argued that the author, as far as art cinema is concerned, is indeed not dead and women's establishment as such is a particularly difficult but crucial step in furthering their independent careers. Again, this area has proven to be pivotal for the study of women's filmmaking, and it seems rather promising for further research focusing on self-reflexivity and authorship, given the wide range of relevant films such as Agnès Varda's fascinating career retrospective/artistic documentary *The Beaches of Agnès* and self-reflexive personal films

like Lena Dunham's *Tiny Furniture* (2010) or Sally Potter's latest *Ginger & Rosa* (2012).

The social realist film provides a more straightforward reflection on socio-political issues and is therefore a space for the more overt inscription of feminist issues. As I have pointed out, social realism has a long tradition within art cinema and it is only recently that women filmmakers have managed to contribute with their “own” versions, opening up uncharted territories in relation to women's realities worldwide. It is interesting to explore further the interconnection between realist, documentary aesthetics and poetic elements, reality and fiction, in the way it works both as entertainment and an awareness-raising mechanism. It has been the thesis' contention that social realism facilitates the presentation of an array of burning issues regarding women's place in society. Looking at these through the prism of global art cinema, which concentrates a wide range of national, political and personal/artistic elements, can assist female directors to deconstruct an imposed monolithic representation, and consequently conceptualisation within society, of women. This exploration of the interplay between realist traditions and fictional narratives that has been detected within a number of art films culminated in the last category, focusing on cross-over films that re-work generic conventions. Therein I looked at the interesting issue of how women directors re-write genres that are more traditionally understood as male, such as westerns and neo-noirs, from a different perspective, offering new ways of seeing old motifs and narrative patterns. I have therefore shown how certain patriarchal myths are deconstructed by the women directors discussed in this thesis from this liminal space not inside the mainstream industry but bordering on and through a dialectic with its major cinematic tropes. It would therefore be interesting to research further the way commercial genres combine with art cinema conventions and the possibilities this opens up for feminism. The importance of this particular instance of art film, I have argued, lies in its close proximity to the mainstream industry, which focuses more on entertainment, and its



subsequent potential to attract larger audiences disseminating alternative gender representations and themes.

Having provided a brief concluding overview of the thesis' structure, I would like to return to the issue of realism, which emerges as an overarching concern of this study. As mentioned earlier, one of the aspects that has been discussed as a defining characteristic of art cinema is its relation to realism. As Galt and Schoonover state, art cinema “has often been coterminous with specific realist movements” (15). This topic was central to chapter five, where I looked at the way in which a particular realist aesthetic, that of social realism, is employed in my two case studies. At this point of the thesis I would like to ponder on this relationship of art cinema with realism and its implication for a feminist aesthetic in general. Despite the specific focus on a particular type of realism in the aforementioned chapter, which at the inception of the thesis seemed useful for showcasing feminist issues in a straightforward manner, I have come to realise that there is a continuous thread running through the thesis that binds all the categories and consequently the case studies together. To be more precise, in a rather unexpected way it seems that all the films discussed from chapter three to chapter six have been seen to hold a strong connection to realist aesthetics: Dogme is obsessive in its insistence on realist techniques, such as natural light, the banning of non-diegetic music and special effects, etc.; New Argentine cinema was heavily influenced by Italian Neo-realism in addition to not having the funds to support lavish and contrived productions. The meta-cinematic films of chapter four are built precisely on this precarious ability of cinema to represent reality, since through their self-reflexivity they break the illusion of realism that the cinematic apparatus creates. Thus they comment on and disclose the filmmaking process while remaining very personal confessions of their makers, operating on the border between autobiography and fiction. Chapter five is a closer study of social realism within art cinema via two different socio-

political and cultural contexts. Initially with chapter six, it seemed that this realist thread would break since I moved into genre territory, which is more often than not based on myth and fantasy. However, the thread seems to be equally present, at least as far as the first case study is concerned, since one of the director's primary ways of subverting generic conventions was an insistence on verisimilitude and the kind of realism such a practice invokes. The second case study has a more tentative connection to realist aesthetics due to its evocation of *noir* expressionism, but I would argue that it could be considered in the light of psychological realism through the depiction of threatening and dark surroundings and the way we see the heroine's psychology and life impacted upon by her social environment. It also centres on a thematic concern regarding the elusiveness and distrust of what appears to be real, since the heroine's life is put in danger by misreading a number of signs and to an extent identifying, even if tentatively, with the romantic myth. In addition, as it has already been mentioned, it plays on the extra-textual knowledge of the *noir* genre and the star persona of Meg Ryan that audiences will be attuned to, and it works to destabilise this familiar space.

The dialogue these texts hold with realism and 'reality' is very crucial for the argument of the present study, and I will now proceed to point to the connection between realism and feminist film aesthetics in order to further highlight the potentially productive symbiosis of art cinema and feminist filmmaking. One of the first film forms appropriated by feminists, as mentioned earlier, was documentary filmmaking aimed at creating powerful organising tools for the purposes of the political movement during the 1970s. Therefore the documentary style, with its ability to 'directly' portray the social struggle of women, has been effectively employed to raise awareness about this specific issue. Of course documentary aesthetics are not 'innocent' or objective and, as feminist film scholars pointed out, there are problems embedded in the veiling of the cinematic process and its

subjectiveness or ideological bias. It was then that feminist filmmaking turned to avant-garde practices embodying a distrust of narrative as well as of the seamlessness of mainstream film form. Yet in that case the films lost their public appeal since they withheld narrative pleasures in favour of cognitive ones. What is achieved within art cinema is to overcome these problems by negotiating the political vehemence through a more personal and artistic prism that subverts certain rules pertaining to mainstream cinema, such as narrative structure, but still keeps hold of widely shared notions of storytelling, thus avoiding completely alienating prospective audiences. From the start art cinema flaunts its subjectiveness by privileging the figure of the auteur and their distinctive artistic vision. Essentially what has been celebrated in many instances of art film auteurs (e.g. Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, etc.) was their ability to re-work reality through their films, and manage to produce fiction films that were anchored in their contemporaneous historical reality yet presenting it in their individual, idiosyncratic way through a mixture of realism and modernism. This subjectiveness and individuality of artistic production is nevertheless part of a wider filmmaking context that, despite its relatively dispersed nature – in the sense that it is not centred around Hollywood or an equivalent environment – still provides a platform where different trends, aesthetics and themes are shared and interact. Realist tendencies are therefore seen in different ways and different degrees to exist in several film movements, in the self-reflexivity of avant-garde practices, in the more straightforward social realist tradition within global art cinema and also in the re-working of genre from the mainstream.

It is this ability of art cinema to combine seemingly contradictory perspectives, allowing for individuality within a tentative commonality, and negotiating realism with modernism and post-modernism, that can prove vital for women directors to develop and express their own voices and at the same time share a common artistic space without being

marginalised as making ‘women's films’, or engaging with an exclusively feminist form of filmmaking. Galt and Schoonover make a similar point when they observe that art cinema “has often yoked these otherwise incommensurate traditions together [realism and modernism], and in doing so it often negotiated, merged, and complicated these competing impulses for audiences” (15). Although the situation is complicated and, as I have argued, breaking into the industry is especially challenging for women, it is through this field that they can provide their own stories and negotiate politics and aesthetics in order to establish their auteur status. It is my belief that the more women engage with art cinema, still a commercial cinema but not as heavily regulated as the mainstream, and the more they offer their own versions of realist narratives, the more they will chip away at the normative patriarchal narratives and consequently they will gradually be considered equal members in the creation of their socio-politico-cultural context.

Consequently the present research should be seen as building on the long tradition of feminist film scholarship, arguing for the importance of female authorship and simultaneously art cinema's potential value for feminism, as a starting point for further research. For instance, as I mentioned in the introduction, although the choice of the particular films for my case studies has been mainly governed by their optimal suitability to the specific categories, it is definitely the case that several other films could be discussed in similar terms. Thus film scholarship can draw due attention to the contemporary canon of women directors working within this field and explore the themes and aesthetics that appear within their films. The social history approach that I have maintained through the inclusion of a brief contextual analysis, not only of each particular film, but also of each director's trajectory in filmmaking, seems to be a productive way of still championing auteurism and thus compromising modernism with postmodernism within art cinema. Such an approach could be seen as engaging with social film history in

the sense of having as an ultimate goal to consider this particular cinematic field's value for feminism. In analysing how female directors voice feminist concerns through a negotiation of political and artistic preoccupations, the thesis aims to celebrate global art cinema as a cultural field that brings the marginal closer to the mainstream and thus potentially functions for feminism as the site of fruitful development and expansion to wider audiences of issues that were previously pushed into the margins of the avant-garde. Having drawn due attention to the significant and diverse work produced by women within this filmmaking context, the thesis insists on the importance of the continuation of this attempt to inscribe women directors within global film history, celebrating difference but at the same time detecting common elements symptomatic of women's differential oppression worldwide.

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