GODART, Caroline. The Dimensions of Difference: Space, Time and Bodies in Women’s Cinema and Continental Philosophy.


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Luce Irigaray is a theorist who is quoted time and again in feminist literature on cinema, though oddly enough, very few of those texts approach her theories as a consistent foundation from which to apply cinematographic analysis. Caroline Godart’s book *The Dimensions of Difference: Space, Time and Bodies in Women’s Cinema and Continental Philosophy* (2016), has come along in a timely fashion to fill that gap.

In her book, Godart examines four important movies directed by women — *The Piano* (1993), by Jane Campion, *Beau Travail* (1999) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001) by Claire Denis, and *The Holy Girl* (*La niña santa*, 2004) by Lucrecia Martel. As a philosophical framework, the author makes use of an ingenious combination of Irigaray’s observations on sexual differences, and several points of agreement with other philosophers such as Bergson, Deleuze and Nietzsche.

Godart commences her argument using the two models of heterosexual encounters proposed by Irigaray. In the phallocentric model, the space between a man and a woman is erased, and she ends up being possessed by him through a denial of her own space. In the model that recognizes sexual difference, meanwhile, the woman’s singularity is preserved while desire takes place in the meeting between the two. This constitutes the starting point for one of the concepts that the author employs as a benchmark throughout the entire book: the concept of ‘interval’ as proposed by Irigaray. According to Irigaray, this interval refers to a distance that protects the integrity of both parties in a heterosexual relationship. However, this interval tends to disappear if these parties agree to meet in an intimacy. Using Irigaray’s terms, Godart explains that desire is an opening-up to the other. But at the same time, it is a distance maintained so that the uniqueness of each person is preserved, thereby preventing possession by the other. Thus Irigaray is proposing a new form of heterosexual relationship that consists, essentially, of removing the subjugation to the other. In the temporal space of the interval, different possibilities emerge, and one of these is the autonomous femaleness that exists for itself. As a result of all of the above, the book, by using Irigaray’s notion in cinematographic analysis, introduces a valuable source of knowledge for feminist cinema criticism.

The movies examined in the book constantly refer to this theoretical starting point. Female directors ‘coincidentally’ incline toward a technique for filming female figures that uses close-ups marked by a ‘tactile visuality’ (a closeness that visualizes a texture susceptible to touch) while they are granted a distance that is reserved through their silence and the construction of their own inner spaces. As a consequence of this style of filming, a typology emerges of a desirable, complete woman who resists objectification by the male gaze. The women's cinema exemplified in this book, rather than encouraging identification with its characters, mainly converses with the viewer’s intuition — as understood in Bergsonian terms. Perhaps as a result of the special sensibility of their directors, these movies resort to such senses as hearing and touch — in contrast with those approaches that appeal solely to the sense of vision as the fundamental source of knowledge in the rigid regime of the heterosexual male gaze. This frequent preference by these directors is combined with an ambiguous narrative that encourages the emergence of an openness towards the other, towards the feminine.

Godart confirms the existence of a reverse gaze that is particularly notable in the films of Claire Denis. In her case, the director’s observance of male figures in vigorous movement should not be interpreted as a gaze that imposes power,
but rather as another route, one of many, taken as a sexual difference by the director towards strangeness and otherness — that is, her on-screen male characters. The book perceptively suggests that what lies behind this female approach is wonder. According to Descartes, the wonder that comes from a new discovery and the feeling of surprise it generates is what leads to the first of all passions. Irigaray, meanwhile, takes this Cartesian idea and grants wonder a creative affection based on recognizing that difference is something that is constructive for new relationships. According to Godart, this is the relationship between the director and her characters. There is still a distance between the director or the audience and the mysterious other — the characters on screen. And that singularity of the other refuses to be a mere erotized object of the gaze. This distance becomes specified by the formal techniques that are used: blank stares (discordance between the gaze and its object), the interrupting of cause-effect, abnormal spaces and elliptical editing. Everything leads to the feeling that it is impossible to reach the other. The gaze of the director towards her male characters is a neutral one, sympathetic and without judgement, respecting all their singularities in order to sensitize their interior. She admires them just as they are, in their own everyday worlds, using the interval of sexual difference.

The book insists on the idea of time as a significant element for establishing the integrity of each trajectory, represented by its characters in that ‘image of time.’ The duration of that time indicates alterity and the difference between single entities, open to change in an ever-fluid process. It is thus the prior condition for eliminating possession between lovers. Lovers have their own time in which their singularities and their intimate and sensual encounters can develop. When viewers are exposed to the duration of their movies, the directors mentioned in this book are promoting the idea of the capacity for free relationships without any hierarchization.

The singularity, inner complexity and legitimate existence of each character are all justified in the movies mentioned in the book, even with regard to sexual violence. Godart observes how frequently sexual violence appears in these movies, unlike in Irigaray’s approach. While Irigaray conceives the idea of a relationship that is free from all phallocentric repression, where mutual respect for sexual difference between a man and a woman can lead to equality, directors do not aim to solve the tension between these two encounter tendencies in their cinematographic worlds. Their movies show explicit sexual violence, but they do not condemn its brutality. As the book explains clearly, all the above-mentioned movies invite the viewer to freely interpret the characters: they are not classified within the typical dualities of classic cinema — goodie or baddie, pretty or ugly, hero or villain, etc. Rather, they are immersed in an all-too-human ambiguity and contradictions. Female figures, often silent or sparing with words during the movie, reflect the gaze of the filmmakers: a cold, unjudging observation of the ferocity that is inherent in desire — for desire is indeed inexpressible. It seems as if the only option we have left as viewers is to surrender to the constant changes and irreconcilable forces of a life guided by intuition — in contrast with the cinematographic model of men, ruled by action and knowledge. And here lies the pleasure of this kind of cinema. Together with these acute observations, Caroline Godart’s book opens up revolutionary possibilities for overcoming a rigid view of the world based on fixed categories and meanings.