



EDITED BY ALEX HUGHES & JAMES S WILLIAMS

# GENDER and FRENCH CINEMA



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## **Gender and French Cinema**

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**Edited by  
Alex Hughes and James S. Williams**



*Oxford • New York*

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**In Memory of Jill Forbes, 1947–2001**  
**A Pioneer in French Film and Cultural Studies**

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## Notes on Contributors

**Elza Adamowicz** is a Senior Lecturer at Queen Mary, University of London. Her book publications include *André Breton: A Bibliography* (1992) and *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (1998). She publishes on Surrealist art and literature, Henri Michaux and Claude Cahun, and is currently researching Surrealist texts on art.

**Guy Austin** is a Senior Lecturer in the department of French at the University of Sheffield. He has published books on contemporary French cinema (1996) and Claude Chabrol (1999). He has a particular interest in genre and fantasy film, and is presently working on a study of modern French film stars.

**Kelley Conway** is Assistant Professor in the department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and is completing a book entitled *The Chanteuse at the City Limits: Paris, Femininity and the Cinema*.

**Julia Dobson** has published widely on contemporary French cinema and the theatre of Hélène Cixous. She is a Research Fellow in French at the University of Wolverhampton, and teaches at the University of Nottingham and the Broadway Media Centre.

**Susan Hayward** is the Established Chair of French at the University of Exeter, and has published extensively on French film. Her books include *French National Cinema* (1993); *Luc Besson* (1998); and *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000). She co-edited *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (1990 and 2000) with Ginette Vincendeau, and her current project is a major study of Simone Signoret, to be published in 2002.

**Alex Hughes** is Professor of Twentieth-Century French Literature at the University of Birmingham, and has published extensively on representations of gender and sexuality. She is the co-editor of the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture* (1998), and her most recent single-authored book is *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (1999).

**Phil Powrie** is Professor of French Cultural Studies and Director of the Centre for Research into Film and Media at the University of Newcastle on Tyne. He has

published considerably on French cinema, notably *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity* (1997), and recently edited *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (1999). He has just completed a book on the films of Jean-Jacques Beineix and is currently co-authoring a student introduction to French cinema.

**Keith Reader** is Professor of Modern French Studies at the University of Glasgow. His publications include *Régis Debray* (1995) and *Robert Bresson* (2000). He is co-editor, with Alex Hughes, of the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture* (1998).

**Geneviève Sellier** teaches cinema studies at the University of Caen. She is the author of *Jean Grémillon: le cinéma est à vous* (1989) and *Les Enfants du paradis* (1992), and co-author, with Noël Burch, of *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français: 1930–1956* (1996). She has edited special numbers of the film studies journals *1895* (on Grémillon) and *Iris* (on film, gender and cultural studies).

**Dina Sherzer** teaches twentieth-century literature at the University of Texas at Austin, and works on post-colonial films and novels and New New Wave film. Recent published pieces have appeared in Phil Powrie (ed.), *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (1999); the *Journal of European Studies*; *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*; and *South Central Review*.

**Ginette Vincendeau** is Professor of Film in the department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. She has published extensively in French and English on French and women's cinema. Among her books are *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (co-edited with Susan Hayward, 1990 and 2000); *The Encyclopedia of European Cinema* (1995); *Pépé le Moko* (1998); and *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000). She recently edited *Film-Literature-Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*.

**Emma Wilson** is a University Lecturer in French at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. Her publications include *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter: Identity and Desire in Proust, Duras, Tournier and Cixous* (1996); *French Cinema Since 1950: Personal Histories* (1999); and *Memory and Survival: The French Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski* (2000). She is currently working on a study of childhood trauma in contemporary cinema.

**James S. Williams** is Senior Lecturer of French and comparative literature at the University of Kent. He is the author of *The Erotics of Passage: Pleasure, Politics, and Form in the Later Work of Marguerite Duras* (1997) and of a critical study of

Albert Camus's *La Peste* (2000). He is editor of *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex* (2000) and co-editor, with Michael Temple, of *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (2000). He is currently writing a monograph on the films of Jean Cocteau.

**Michael Witt** teaches French and film at the University of Roehampton. His doctoral research was on the film and video work of Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard, and he has published articles on Godard's later work. He is currently co-editing *The French Cinema Book* for the British Film Institute.

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## Introduction

*Alex Hughes and James S. Williams*

The focus of this collection of essays, *Gender and French Cinema*, is French film in the twentieth century. Our Introduction to it is divided into several sections. In the first, we invoke particular conceptualizations and treatments of gender, before situating gender-related analysis as central to contemporary critical work on representation. In the second, we survey the space of film studies in order to profile the scope and types of gender-related reading that film, including French film, has elicited. In the third, we detail the project pursued in our volume, and outline its organization. Finally, in the fourth, we introduce the essays that compose it.

### Attending to Gender

In 1949, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously affirmed the following:

One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human being presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature indeterminate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine.<sup>1</sup>

In these remarks, which address the construction of feminine alterity under patriarchy, Beauvoir is doing three things. First, if she does not use the term, she is articulating a crucial, contemporary understanding of gender: one that flags up its distinctness from anatomical sex. Second, she is ‘categorically refus[ing] the idea of a biological or anatomical “destiny” of any kind’, firmly situating gendered subjectivity as non-natural/ontological.<sup>2</sup> Third, she is construing gender, or engenderment, as a productive *social* process: a process of acculturation whereby gender identity is overlaid, palimpsestically, on the sexed being, as ‘an aspect of identity gradually acquired’.<sup>3</sup>

Beauvoir’s essay is the place where modern feminism takes off.<sup>4</sup> And, in its ‘celebrated declaration of gender’,<sup>5</sup> it initiates a corpus of gender-theoretical work that constitutes an essential facet of the twentieth-century epistemological canvas. *The Second Sex*’s analysis of what gender is – a social fabrication; a ‘variable



cultural interpretation of sex',<sup>6</sup> a situation in the world that is humanly created<sup>7</sup> – and where it is evolved (the 'man-made' realm of patriarchy), is radical. It is radical in spite of the fact that it deploys a Sartrean/Hegelian theoretical framework that is 'inextricably connected with a fundamental . . . opposition between masculine and feminine in which the feminine is associated with whatever is devalued'.<sup>8</sup> It is radical in its ground-breaking political, social and conceptual implications: implications that are attracting renewed critical interest today. And it is especially radical, perhaps because, by conceiving of systems of gender regulation as historically-sited and therefore transient, it encourages us to see that gender identities, as lived situations, might in future be lived differently, outside the binary masculine/feminine paradigm that is still normatively and culturally dominant.<sup>9</sup>

Published in the middle of the twentieth century, *The Second Sex*, if momentous, did not initially have an international impact.<sup>10</sup> The same cannot be said of a work of gender theory that appeared some forty years later. The work in question is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Trained in philosophy, as Beauvoir had been, and manifestly in dialogue with Beauvoir, Butler works in *Gender Trouble* from a constructivist position that is indebted to Beauvoir's post-war analyses. However, the account of gender that *Gender Trouble* offers differs from that elaborated by Beauvoir in many ways, not least because it reassociates gender and sex – categories Beauvoir disassociates – and opts to anatomize not the gender constructions produced by the patriarchal order so much as those regulated within the 'obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality'.<sup>11</sup>

Gender, Butler tells us in *Gender Trouble*, is the 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'.<sup>12</sup> It is a 'corporeal style': an 'act' that is 'performative', where performative 'suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning'.<sup>13</sup> In these statements, Butler posits gender as an enactment, imbricated in imitative and compelled bodily signification. She casts gender as a bodily performance controlled by the dominant, compulsory heterosexual regime, and she moots gender performance as a mime that is inscribed on the surface of the body but appears as the effect of an interior core. Gender, in sum, constitutes for Butler a kind of (non-natural) corporeal 'doing', but not one that individuals can choose (how) to 'do'.<sup>14</sup> It is, moreover, a mode of 'doing' that can be done 'wrong'. That this is the case is made evident, says Butler, by the existence of 'incoherent' gender performances where gender identities, anatomical sex and sexual practices fail to mesh normatively: performances where 'gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender – indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another'.<sup>15</sup> Such performances, Butler argues, 'run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts'.<sup>16</sup> They are both prohibited *and* produced by the regulatory

mechanisms of gender:<sup>17</sup> mechanisms that require ambivalent manifestations of gender performance in order to secure as the norm gender enactments that respect the limits of a binarized either/or heteronormative paradigm, determined by the ‘naturally’ binarized material phenomenon of sex.<sup>18</sup>

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler brings sex, the body and gender together, through her articulation of gender as corporeal stylization. She problematizes the sex/gender, nature/culture distinction Beauvoir privileges, by suggesting that constrained, reiterated gender performances take place through a (sexed) body that ‘has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’, and by speculating that ‘this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed . . . was always already gender’.<sup>19</sup> In short, she adopts a position on sex/gender that is beauvoirian in its lineage but is more radically materialist than that evident in the *Second Sex*. This evolves in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Here, Butler turns her attention to the materiality of the sexed body. She works to understand how, as she puts it, regulatory norms of sex ‘work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies, and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex’.<sup>20</sup> She shifts her focus, in other words, from gender as a corporeal style to the (materialized) matter of the body through which gender is enacted. Equally, she attends to those bodies in and through which ‘abject’ or non-normative gender performances are played out. In so doing, she posits the ‘heterosexual imperative’ as a manifestation of power that establishes ‘boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as “bodies”’,<sup>21</sup> and produces ‘a domain of abject [gendered] beings, those who are not . . . “subjects”, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject’.<sup>22</sup>

Operating in different theoretical, cultural and historical contexts, and concerned, finally, with different(ly) gendered subjects, Beauvoir and Butler are without doubt the most significant analysts of gender of the twentieth century. Their treatments of gendered subjectivity have not escaped criticism. Beauvoir’s feminist exegesis of the tenor of woman’s becoming has been slated for its pathologization of the biological female ‘body in trouble’:<sup>23</sup> a body Beauvoir recognizes as devalued under patriarchy, but tends herself likewise to devalue. Butler’s neofoucauldian exercises in queer theoretical investigation have been deemed ultimately to elide the category of gender in favour of too exclusive a focus on bodily matters, and to neglect those elements of embodied subjectivity not circumscribed by the regulatory influence of the heterosexual Law.<sup>24</sup> But, taken together, the writings of these women, and the commentaries their writings have elicited, provide us with a map through which to attend productively to gender issues, understood in their broadest sense. Focused not just on what gender is but on its modes and sites of production, its imbrication in matters of anatomy, sexuality and desire, its relation to culture, history, discourse and power, and its normative and non-normative manifestations, texts such as *The Second Sex*, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* open up a

space of gender-oriented reflection constellated with questions and concerns no less manifest in other key accounts of gender and sexual difference published during the last fifty years. These accounts include, for instance, the work on difference pursued in the psychoanalytically grounded writings of French theorists of the feminine, such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray (who, like Butler, dialogues with Simone de Beauvoir);<sup>25</sup> the work on the body elaborated in studies by Anglophone theorists such as Susan Bordo, Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens and Elizabeth Grosz;<sup>26</sup> and the dissections of the politics and discourses of sexuality/desire produced by Diana Fuss, Teresa de Lauretis, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Monique Wittig.<sup>27</sup> The issues such accounts invoke were, in the last decade of the twentieth century, addressed in a growing body of texts devoted to investigations of the masculine. Masculinity, especially heteronormative masculinity, has until recently received scant attention in gender-theoretical analysis. However, as Alan Petersen signals in *Unmasking the Masculine: 'Men' and 'Identity' in a Sceptical Age* (1998),<sup>28</sup> questions relating to the fabrication of the male body, to the construction of masculine gender identities and to the discursification of male sexuality, straight and gay, are currently coming under increasing scrutiny, as conceptions of manhood in the modern West take their place as objects of investigation in the gender-studies environment.

In the context of twentieth-century epistemology, gender in sum became, and remains, a key category of analysis. As a number of the works cited in the preceding paragraphs confirm, a privileged focus of gender-oriented investigational work has been the realm of representation. In the contemporary literary-critical sphere, for instance, gender has been squarely established as a 'crucial determinant of the production, circulation, and consumption of literary discourse',<sup>29</sup> with the result that publishers' lists include today a vast array of studies that 'speak of gender' in respect of the literary endeavour. But some of the most exciting and innovative work on gender and representation has been effected with regard to visual and especially film culture, more specifically in relation to the (gendered) gaze and the situation of the cinematic spectator.<sup>30</sup> In the following section, this work is surveyed in some detail.

## **Gender Matters in the Field of Film**

### *Work on gender and film*

The most sophisticated discussions of desire and sexual politics in cinema have taken place in the field of feminist psychoanalytic film theory. This first emerged as a rethinking of the work of Freud and Lacan, Christian Metz and Stephen Heath, and sought to politicize a set of psychological questions about gender. Theorists such as Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, Laura Mulvey, D.N. Rodowick and

Kaja Silverman have attempted in different ways to develop an analysis of subjectivity that would account for the pleasures of the look and the relationship of those pleasures to gender and sexual identity.<sup>31</sup> Barbara Creed has delineated a brief yet very useful four-stage history of film theory and psychoanalysis, and a summary of its constituent parts can be paraphrased thus:

1. apparatus theory, i.e. the work of Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry.<sup>32</sup> This strove to avoid the totalizing imperative of the structuralist approach by drawing on psychoanalysis as a way of widening the theoretical base of that approach;
2. the work of Mulvey, which introduced gender into apparatus theory and rebutted the naturalization of the filmic protagonist as an Oedipal hero. In her pioneering 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey exposed the position of the feminine in film as the object of the gaze. The masculine subject attempts to appropriate the cinematic gaze for his voyeuristic pleasure, and the masculine look seeks to fetishize images of women; that is, to reinvest them with the illusion of phallic plenitude, in a manner that accounts for the misogynistic violence and objectification in classic cinema;<sup>33</sup>
3. feminist responses to Mulvey's work, including critical studies of the female Oedipal trajectory; masculinity and masochism; fantasy theory and spectatorship (cf. Elizabeth Cowie's notion of a fluid, bisexual gaze<sup>34</sup>); and woman as active sadistic monster (work inspired by Kristeva's treatment of the abject maternal<sup>35</sup>);
4. the use of psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with other critical approaches to cinema, as in post-colonial theory, queer theory and body theory.<sup>36</sup>

There has, however, been sustained criticism of psychoanalytic film theory. It has been deemed to construct a monolithic spectator, and thus itself to become totalizing and repetitive; to be ahistorical, and therefore dismissive of the need to explore the micro-narratives of social change, since history is sacrificed to questions of subjectivity, its formation and its relation to ideology. Above all, psychoanalytic film theory has been critiqued for being more concerned with an ideal spectator than a real viewer, and for failing to engage with questions of class, colour, race, age or sexual preference (the kinds of issue raised, for example, in cultural studies). What underlies these various charges is a sense that, ultimately, whatever its practitioners may think, psychoanalytic theory is not a science and remains unreliable.

It is fair to say that current film theory is more selective and nuanced now in its use of psychoanalysis, for instance, in the way that it can bring together the social and the psychic in a manner derived from post-colonial theory as well as from queer theory which has introduced the concept of gender performativity to studies of filmic representation and spectatorial response. Queer theory suggests that viewers often position themselves 'queerly', that is, position themselves within gendered and sexualized spaces other than those they publicly occupy (hence the

notion that the spectator does not function within any particular fixed gender and sexual category). Much attention has been paid to the body, notably in the work of Steven Shaviro, who argues for an active and affirmative reading of the masochism of cinematic experience,<sup>37</sup> as well as in that of Kobena Mercer, who proposes a hybridized understanding of identity that negotiates between a plurality of different positions. The result, in Mercer's case, is a recognition of 'unity-in-diversity', and the interactions between class, sexuality and ethnicity.<sup>38</sup>

It can never therefore simply be a question of identifying and celebrating positive images of lesbians and gay men and decrying other, more negative representations, a feature of earlier feminist and gay criticism. Indeed, queer theory sees sexual practices – whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, autosexual or transsexual – as fluid, diverse and heterogeneous. As Ellis Hanson has put it in a recent collection of queer film criticism entitled *Out Takes*, queer critics 'enrich political critiques of cinematic pleasure by theorizing the psychic mechanisms of identification and desire, but they also challenge such critiques by deeming impossible any necessary conjunction, any perfect fit between ideology and desire, narrative and pleasure, the image and the subject'.<sup>39</sup> Just as D.N. Rodowick and others revealed Mulvey's inability to allow for the possibility of female desire outside a phallogocentric context, so, Hanson argues, queer theorists have discovered that the heterocentric and exceedingly rigid structure of the look in Mulvey's analysis writes homosexuality out of existence and excites 'a political presumption – we might deem it a paranoid tendency – that views voyeurism, fetishism, sublimation, idealization, masculinity, phallic sexuality, and even identification as not merely suspect but inherently evil'.<sup>40</sup> Critics such as Lee Edelman, Christine Holmlund, D.A. Miller and Patricia White have redeployed the terminology of feminist film theory within queer theory, since it allows expressly for a critique of the sexual politics of representation, as well as a compelling account of desire and identity formation.<sup>41</sup>

### *Work on gender and French film*

Critical works in English or French on French film directly informed by feminist or queer psychoanalytic theory are still relatively few, but include Françoise Audé's early study of French feminist filmmaking, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles: Situation des femmes dans le cinéma français 1956–1979* (1981); Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau's ground-breaking collection, *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (1990); Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (1990); Jill Forbes's *The Cinema in France After The New Wave* (1992); and Phil Powrie's *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity* (1997). There has not yet been, however, a volume tracing the evolution of French cinema specifically in terms of gender and sexual representation, and that

takes fully on board new theoretical insights in these areas. A study, for example, that would engage with the whole course of French cinema, from silent film, surrealist film, Occupation and post-war cinema, feminist avant-garde cinema of the 1970s (the cinema of Diane Kurys, Coline Serreau, Agnès Varda and especially Marguerite Duras, who experimented with the apparatus of cinema even to the point of its negation) to the 1960s–1970s work of Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville (which involved extensive semiotic analysis of film and video representation, the female body and the male gaze), and more recent trends such as the *cinéma du look* of the 1980s and the New New Wave. The latter is a loose term covering an eclectic range of directors based in Paris, or the North or South, and Maghrebi-French directors, including Olivier Assayas; Jacques Audiard; Xavier Beauvois; Catherine Breillat; Mehdi Charef; Malik Chibane; Arnaud Desplechin; Bruno Dumont; Karim Dridi; Laurence Ferreira Barbosa; Robert Guédiguian; Cédric Kahn; Mathieu Kassovitz; Cédric Klapisch; Noémie Lvovksky; Tonie Marshall; Eric Rochant; Marion Vernoux; and many others.<sup>42</sup> The particular problems inherent in the notion of gay film-making in France have been discussed elsewhere,<sup>43</sup> yet one key aspect of the vitality of new French cinema is the very proliferation of out-gay directors, notably François Ozon, Philippe Barassat and François Roux. These film-makers can be seen to consolidate and develop in different ways a male gay tradition established by figures such as Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet (in films such as *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) and the 'outlawed' *Un chant d'amour* (1950)); a tradition continued by directors as diverse as Patrice Chéreau, Jacques Demy, André Téchiné and Paul Vecchiali, and marked spectacularly by Cyril Collard's highly acclaimed and controversial *Les Nuits fauves* (1993).

### **The Project of *Gender and French Cinema***

*Gender and French Cinema* brings together critical essays by British, French and American scholars working in film or gender studies. Its task is not simply to trace and celebrate forms of gender expression in French cinema, but rather to reconceptualize and reframe the view of French cinema *tout court*. In this sense, the collection's project is very different from that of French (male) critics who recently, on the fortieth anniversary of the New Wave in France, honoured the *Nouvelle Vague* as a clear formalist break effected by male directors bent on sacralizing the status of the *auteur*. The work of such critics deliberately downplays more mundane yet equally important focuses of attention such as society, politics and gender.<sup>44</sup> Instead, the present volume shares goals more akin to those of the ambitious new Manchester University Press series on French Film Directors: a series that attempts to assess and re-evaluate both canonic and non-canonic French *auteurs* in the light of critical factors such as sexual difference, nation and ethnicity, and in full awareness of psychoanalysis and film theory, including feminist theories

of women's film authorship. To take just one instance, Martin O'Shaughnessy's *Jean Renoir* (2000) reveals how these factors often work in contradictory ways in central films such as *La Marseillaise* (1937), and thus demand, for example, a rethinking of our common understanding of Renoir's political commitment.<sup>45</sup>

The studies of the MUP series may be set alongside Powrie's edited collection *French Cinema in the 1990s* (1999), which, in its second part entitled 'Inscribing Differences', illustrates how gender as a path of enquiry only makes proper critical sense when associated with questions of race, ethnicity and history. Further examples of this multi-levelled type of investigation include the work of Graeme Hayes and Carrie Tarr on sexuality and masculinity in Carax's *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991) and *Les Nuits fauves*,<sup>46</sup> and of Lucille Cairns on Josiane Balasko's *Gazon Maudit* (1995), which places the portrayal of lesbian desire in the larger context of French – that is to say, universalist and Republican – national identity.<sup>47</sup> Gender is always imbricated within history, a fact made brilliantly clear in Tarr's examination of Jean Delannoy's enormously popular 1943 film (scripted by Cocteau), *L'Eternel retour*. Tarr deftly connects the issues of masculinity and aesthetics – in particular, the 'weak' body (*douceur virile*) and ambivalent performance of Jean Marais – to the specific period of the Collaboration and the collapse of confidence in the Vichy regime in 1943.<sup>48</sup>

Such studies may be said to constitute a new general theoretical project in French film studies that tracks stories and histories of French cinema not covered by more traditional film history (the now classic work of André Bazin, Marc Ferro, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, René Prédal and Georges Sadoul, for instance). As such, they can be linked to Geneviève Sellier and Noël Burch's key study of gender and cultural representation in wartime and post-war cinema, *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français: 1930–1956* (1996), a volume all the more remarkable for being produced within the French academic context, which still remains highly suspicious of the Anglo-Saxon 'invention' of cultural studies.<sup>49</sup> Equally, they can be allied with the selective and subjectively rooted readings of French cinema since 1950 by Emma Wilson: readings that are possible only because they are beyond the usual norms of film history and *auteur* criticism, or the constraining categorizations of a genre-directed approach.<sup>50</sup>

To reiterate, the primary purpose of *Gender and French Cinema* is to explore different aspects of gender representation in French film, with gender taken in the widest, most comprehensive (Butlerian) sense: that is to say, as enmeshed with sexuality, the body and desire. In pursuing that purpose, unsurprisingly, *Gender and French Cinema* privileges questions of gender production and performance, central to the work of the gender theorists discussed earlier in this Introduction. But the collection does not restrict itself solely to investigating issues of gender (and) representation, since what is involved in any inventive rethinking of gender and French cinema is necessarily a rethinking of form and the politics of form, as

inflected by other important factors and vectors of subjective location such as history, nationality, ethnicity, class, colonialism and post-colonialism. All the various well-documented aspects of the French tradition are covered in our volume: realism, stars, indigenous comedy, *auteurs*,<sup>51</sup> as well as movements and periods that are uniquely French. At the same time, however, new genres such as AIDS film-making and fantasy cinema, and themes often viewed as marginal such as female friendship and female gender identity in urban space, are actively promoted. For this reason *Gender and French Cinema* responds to the kind of challenge to the critic posed by a powerful new film like Claire Denis's poetic, homoerotic *Beau Travail* (1998) (an adaptation of Melville's *Billy Budd* that celebrates the male body and male camaraderie in a Foreign Legion outpost on the shores of Djibouti): a challenge that invites us to engage with French cinema and to define it in the full light of its gendered, national, historical and post-colonial contexts.

In his introduction to *French Cinema in the 1990s*, 'Heritage, History, and "New Realism"',<sup>52</sup> Phil Powrie talks of 'new generations': that is to say, of a new return of the political as well as realism. (Exceptions to this resurgence of political realism would be films such as Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), a combination of French postmodern style and Hollywood action style, or what Powrie wryly calls 'a kind of hyper-postmodern transnational commodity fetish'.<sup>53</sup>) Powrie considers the importance and influence of the *sans-papiers* affair of 1996, and invokes the pertinence of phrases such as Guédiguian's *militantisme de proximité* (community politics) and Jeancolas's *réel de proximité*: an expression used to refer to a closeness to the sense of social change in a fragmented society, as evidenced in *beur* and *banlieue* films (French genres, although clearly influenced by contemporary black American film-makers such as Spike Lee). *Gender and French Cinema* follows in the same vein as Powrie by addressing directly the question of the national and the historical. It does so by interrogating the links between the open term 'gender' and the historical and national determinants of a cinema produced principally in France (as opposed to one that is more generally *francophone*). Moreover, it aims to convey a sense of the evolution of French film, via a historically oriented organization of chapters, and a range of critical approaches and methods. First – and in no order of priority – it contains essays concerned with key moments, movements and periods, notably dada and surrealism; the arrival of sound; cinema of the Occupation; post-1968 cinema; the New Wave; the *cinéma du look*; and the New New Wave. Second are those chapters dealing specifically with different (predominantly male) manifestations of the *auteur*, such as Cocteau, Godard, Miéville, Jean-Pierre Melville and Jean-Jacques Beineix. Third are discussions that address predominantly female stars such as Arletty and Simone Signoret and their performances within the system. Fourth, and finally, are chapters directly focused on genre, including the fantasy film, AIDS film-making and the so-called 'female film'. Here now follows a brief summary of the individual chapters.



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