



The Wild Party (dir. Dorothy Arzner, US, 1929)

The Future of Feminism and Film History

Lauren Rabinovitz

It is now the fashion to pronounce film *history*, rather than film *theory*, as that which counts most. Although such proclamations are more ritual than reflection, feminist film history is producing not one unified position, but a number of ongoing critiques. Feminist film history creates incipient challenges: What are the proper sources for knowledge? Who should be the subjects of history? What are the myriad, complex ways in which identity is formed with the consequences of historical power inequities? What are the examples by which conditions of social production and relations may be changed? Such questions target goals of political transformation and of change in power inequities that have always formed the basis for feminist inquiry.

The fact that many call feminist film history “new” is surprising, since scholarship that carried out feminist film history or that synthesized feminist film theory and history has existed since the onset of second-wave feminism. The recent backlash to the excesses of psychoanalytic feminist theory, however, has unfairly cast all feminist film theory as universalizing, essentializing, and ahistorical. We must resist any binarism that opposes theory to

Camera Obscura 61, Volume 21, Number 1

DOI 10.1215/02705346-2005-004 © 2006 by *Camera Obscura*

Published by Duke University Press

history since there is no possibility of adequately theorizing or historicizing without an integration of the two. Feminist historical practice, therefore, necessitates epistemological interrogation: it requires self-reflection, questioning, and theorizing what should be and what counts as knowledge.

I see four distinctive strategies shaping innovations in contemporary feminist film histories. Each strategy incorporates two theoretical assumptions that must undergird all future feminist film history: the serious limitations in focusing only on gender in subject formation and the critique of the knowable subject. With these assumptions in mind, I would characterize the productive possibilities of current directions in feminist film history as follows:

(1) Gendering the nation may overthrow the paradigm of US-centrist cinema studies. Women's roles in production around the globe are not all that have been eclipsed or lost; entire national industries have too often been overlooked by Anglo-American and European scholars, whose narratives of world cinema are usually centered in the West. Outside those spheres, media production generally receives recognition only when it emerges on the world stage. Of course, Hollywood has dominated international circulation—even while production has taken place around the world—since 1900. Yet by foregrounding women's roles in many media industries, we may recapture a world history that recognizes cultural imperialism and hegemony, but avoids a binary divide between a first world and everyone else.

(2) Another direction in feminist film studies involves the wedding of social history with theories of perception, visual culture, and gender; this magnifies the social aspects of perception and links the consumerist role of the gaze to that of sexual desire. These feminist histories discern an intimacy between consumerism and sexual desire as discourses that participate in and contribute to very real consequences or, as Michel Foucault would say, power effects. Scholarship that attends to and synthesizes both literal and symbolic social spaces associated with cinema challenges the historical paradigm of moviegoing as merely distracted, highly individualized self-absorption in the movie screen. As history in the hands of feminists, this work generalizes how media contribute to cultural practices, while keeping in mind the intensifying

bond between female sexuality and commodification at the very historical moment when women in Western industrialized societies appeared to be experiencing new freedoms and liberation.

(3) Likewise, theories of the body provide a strategy for deflecting prior obsessions with disembodied subjectivity. When foregrounding questions of gendered subjectivity, any new feminist history must also ask what can and what cannot be known about subjectivity, what can and what cannot be known about interiority through performance, physical appearances, and media images. Such considerations have long played a role in individual star studies or investigations of the ways that Hollywood celebrity generally synthesizes incongruous information about the public and private lives of these individuals, their appearances, and their enactments. We, however, need to expand beyond understanding the complex and even contradictory ways that physical attributes and behavior contribute to defining subjectivity. We need to reconcile our desire to celebrate human creativity in performance with our knowledge of the highly mediated ways that bodies are constructed through layers of representation.

One methodological model is Jacqueline Stewart's study of the early cinema representation of African American women.¹ She synthesizes the actresses' roles as active agents (both in performance and in the films' primitive narratives) with the cultural context in which the meanings read were mediated by popular stereotypes. Rather than dismiss these portrayals as mere caricatures, Stewart demonstrates that the representation of African American women invoked both display and agency—the articulation as well as the containing of imagined social threats posed by racial difference. New feminist histories must similarly overturn any lingering claims that cinematic women are empty vessels for meaning; this only reproduces the myth of Woman for all women. Rather, we must strive to understand women's roles as multiply constituted subjects who are active producers of meaning, however much those meanings are necessarily mediated by contemporary imagery and cinematic syntax.

(4) I have saved for last the work on women's biography, writing, and authorship because this has provided, from feminism's outset, a continuous and important thread. For want of a better title, this scholarship is often an enterprise of "lost and found." Scholars rescue from oblivion women actresses, writers, and filmmakers lost or relegated to passive roles when gender-biased authors made them the objects rather than the subjects of histories and memoirs.

For example, Paula Amad has demonstrated that the Belgian-born silent-film actress Ève Francis not only helped to establish and promote the French avant-garde's adoration of cinema but also defined cinephilia in relationship to a gendered experience of modernity. Only in the hands of later historians did Francis's passionate viewing practices become undermined for a more masculinist definition of cinephiliac spectatorship, while Francis herself was relegated to a silent role as Louis Delluc's muse.²

The radical politics of lost-and-found scholarship lies not in merely correcting a record that swept away women's contributions but in refashioning film theory and historiography. It develops a women's history that teaches the centrality of intimate, personal, and sexual issues, as well as of the spheres of the everyday that embrace subjects with lesser cultural status. It also interrogates and reinvigorates auteurism, a dominant force within the history of film studies.

The excavation of women producers initially provoked a conundrum: feminists critiqued the tradition of romantic authorship that had preserved patriarchal authority at women's expense while we also wanted to find women's voices. We had clung to a belief in unities of texts (fictions of the author) that allowed women's subjectivity to speak to us across those texts. Yet at the same historical moment that feminist biographers adapted auteurist criticism to female subjects, literary critics pronounced the death of authorship—a political fact most pointedly noticed by Nancy K. Miller as early as 1982.³ As authorship studies of women directors increased, the idea of a singular unified voice across any text gave way to consideration for such determining factors as reception, material and industrial conditions, and cultural contextualization.

More recently, Jane Gaines has elaborated further on auteurism—and by implication the idea of the author in general—as a romantic celebration of fathers and of the illusion of lone creativity in the face of the nature of industrial collaboration, analyzing how this critical ideology consequently serves to diminish women’s participation and their agency in a range of roles in the industrial process of filmmaking.⁴ However, when feminist desire motivates and undergirds an analysis of authorial unity, as in Judith Mayne’s study of Dorothy Arzner, speaking a desire for models of women’s or of lesbian subjectivities that organize the texts is less a historiographical liability than itself a political critique of dominant epistemologies. Authorship, in this regard, is not merely unity across the text but is contingent on human agency within industrial or artisanal networks and practices.⁵

We need to stop supporting media history that evacuates the politics and theory out of feminism and that undermines feminism’s relationship to praxis. Embracing history while dismissing feminist film theory can only be justified if the term *feminist* itself becomes merely a place holder, a signifier of an empty, already-fulfilled cause. Feminism is fundamentally about effecting social change, and that is the continuity between theorizing and historicizing, about any generalizations or claims made as feminist. Collectively, our task is formidable but the most exciting one imaginable—to change the intellectual, social, and material cultures in which we participate through constructing and championing new ways of thinking about their relationship to cinema.

Notes

1. Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
2. Paula Amad, “‘Objects Became Witnesses’: Ève Francis and the Emergence of French Cinophilia and Film Criticism,” *Framework* 46 (2005): 56–73. Another important historiographic example is Giuliana Bruno’s demonstration that Italian filmmaker Elvira Notari’s works were generally attributed to her husband because journalists either could not imagine a woman in charge or they

- refused to accept it. See Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
3. Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," *Diacritics* 12 (1982): 48–53.
 4. Jane Gaines, "Of Cabbages and Authors," in *A Feminist Reader for Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 88–118.
 5. Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Lauren Rabinovitz is chair of the Department of American Studies and professor of American studies and cinema at the University of Iowa. She is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Culture* (2004); *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema*, 2nd ed. (2003); and *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (1998). She is currently working on the cultural history of visual spectacles in twentieth-century America.

