



## A Review of: "Bainbridge, Caroline. *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women, and Film.*"

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To cite this article: Reviewed by Lauren J. DeCarvalho (2011) A Review of: "Bainbridge, Caroline. *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women, and Film.*", *Women's Studies in Communication*, 34:1, 104-105, DOI: [10.1080/07491409.2011.566534](https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.566534)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.566534>



Published online: 18 May 2011.



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## Book and Media Reviews

Bainbridge, Caroline. *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women, and Film*. Basingstoke, England and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 1 + 223 pp. \$90.00 (hardcover). ISBN-10: 0230553486.

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In *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women, and Film*, Caroline Bainbridge sets up the difficult task of trying to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. As she elucidates at the beginning of her text, film theorists have recently begun inquiring about the intersection between gender and spectatorship. Bainbridge acknowledges that many feminist film theorists have opted to utilize the work of feminist theory as a way to both reconceptualize film theory and open up new dialogues within the realm of cinema. However, she argues that some feminist theorists, whose works have been cited time and again in various other disciplines, still remain unrecognized in relation to cinema. As such, their theories, which often parallel discussions within feminist film studies, are neglected. For Bainbridge, one such theorist is Luce Irigaray.

With this in mind, Bainbridge's main aim is to connect Irigaray's theories and feminist film theory. From the start, she recognizes the potential of Irigaray's work for reconceptualizing notions of authorship, representation, and spectatorship in film studies. Taking women's cinema as her backdrop, Bainbridge does a commendable job of working through the theorist's complex concepts. As those who are familiar with Irigaray's writing already know, this is not an easy task, as the feminist philosopher is distinguished for her complicated prose and style of writing.

The logical structure of the book aids Bainbridge in guiding readers throughout the chapters. Upon explicating her aim and impetus in the introduction, she uses the first chapter to discuss Irigaray's concepts. From there, she details important dialogues occurring within feminist film theory. Bainbridge then utilizes the next two chapters to demonstrate how some films (unknowingly) centralize and elucidate Irigarayan concepts. This approach is a crucial one, as it allows readers to get their feet wet before jumping into the denser waters of an Irigarayan analysis. Once this is accomplished, Bainbridge analyzes two filmic texts, Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993).

Bainbridge pushes readers through her utilization of Irigaray's work to reconceptualize how "the feminine" is represented in cinema. Some of the Irigarayan concepts and notions that she assesses include the following: female genealogy, mediation, *parler femme*, sexual difference, and specula(riza)tion. Her application of these theories to various films, such as Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* (1994), Liv Ullmann's *Faithless* (2000), and Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line*

(1995), helps readers internalize, interpret, and rethink women's cinema altogether. In addition, her application reifies how different films reflect an Irigarayan perspective.

Aside from its well-crafted structure, the book has a couple of key strengths worth noting. First, the explication of her rationale for choosing the particular films she does is commendable. Bainbridge astutely criticizes mainstream Hollywood cinema's proclivity toward reasserting women into their "proper" place within society, particularly through postfeminist motifs: "It would appear, then, that the Hollywood appropriation of post-feminist girl power is to be understood as a recuperative move, designed to offset the threat of femininity in control of itself to its discursive values and systems of representation" (p. 31). She continues to explain that these films, which she points out are produced purely for entertainment's sake, make a point to uphold "the sexual status quo" (p. 31). Taking into account both this tendency and Irigaray's claim that art is an area where creative discursive space is allowed, Bainbridge opts to select films that are either artsy or independent (or both) and that were made by feminist filmmakers.

A second strength is her use of an Irigarayan lens to read two feminist films. Bainbridge's analyses of the films *Orlando* and *The Piano* lay the foundation for, by far, the most intriguing and insightful chapters of the book. For instance, in her discussion of *Orlando*, Bainbridge argues that the film is the epitome of what Irigaray discusses as "the problematic of gender" (p. 125). Adapted from Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando: A Biography*, Potter's film articulates gender in relation to subjectivity. Critiques concerning sexual difference and gendered identities, which are central to Irigaray's work, are highlighted in the film. Bainbridge argues that "Potter's film moves beyond simple critique to open up a space for the contemplation of alternative modalities of thinking" (p. 125). Her intense scrutiny of these two films allows readers to see the practicality and significance of integrating Irigaray's work into the area of feminist film theory.

In considering the book's strengths, one must also consider its weaknesses as a means of providing a thorough evaluation. Due to the complexity of Irigaray's prose and style, readers would benefit from having a prior familiarity with the theorist's work. While Bainbridge does the best she can in her explication of the philosopher's theories, a reader who is unfamiliar with Irigaray may find the first chapter confusing. A second weakness, which is this time a flaw on Bainbridge's part, is that she tends to gloss over criticisms of Irigaray's work by arguing it is simply misread, or rather misinterpreted. While these two weaknesses do not necessarily hinder the book's overall significance and contribution, they do need to be acknowledged as areas that could potentially undermine some of Bainbridge's arguments.

Addressed to an academic audience, this book sets out to prove the importance of integrating an Irigarayan lens in feminist film theory. Intent on having theory meet practice, Bainbridge is superb in making the connection between Irigaray's work and her selected films. It is recommended that anyone interested in feminist theory, feminist film theory, and gender studies in general should read this book. Bainbridge's keen insight contributes to her success in carving out a space for the reconceptualization of "the feminine" within women's cinema. In doing so, she enlightens readers through her utilization of Irigaray's theories and highlights the importance of transgressing invisible boundaries among disciplines as a mechanism for creating new dialogues.