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Conference reviews

Contemporary Women's Cinema

Global Scenarios & Transnational Contexts (28-29 May 2013, Roma Tre University, Italy)

Melis Behlil

A conference that has 'women's cinema' in its title faces a considerable challenge just in defining the term. As Teresa De Lauretis argued over two decades ago, it is 'a term whose definition … is almost as problematic and contested as the term "feminism" itself'.[1] The organisers of the conference Contemporary Women's Cinema: Global Scenarios & Transnational Contexts at Roma Tre University last May recognised the futility of discussing the definition and opted instead to consider women's cinema as an umbrella term for films 'made by, addressed to, or concerned with women'.[2] With this in mind, participants focused on the latter part of the conference title: global scenarios and transnational contexts. The panels opened up discussions on many levels regarding global, regional, and national cinemas, and the position of women within these networks. Some scholars focused on women filmmakers within distinct national frameworks, while others focused on individual directors and films. The diversity as well as the heterogeneity of films by and for women was universally acknowledged.

The two-day conference was hosted by Roma Tre University with additional support from the university's Center for American Studies (CRISA) and the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University. A follow-up conference is planned for autumn 2014 at Stony Brook, to be organised by E. Ann Kaplan. The local team in Rome under the leadership of Veronica Pravadelli did an impressive job of bringing together scholars from a wide variety of national backgrounds and research interests. The geography of universities represented spanned the entire globe, including Argentina, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, Greece, Turkey, Iran, and India.

The conference was part of an ongoing project on women's cinema at Roma Tre. The aim of the project is to investigate the politics and forms of contemporary women's cinema, considering the ways in which women's cinema engages the contemporary scenarios of global change. The project introduction states that 'while

1970s feminist cinema focused in particular on women's sexuality and the private sphere', women's contemporary practices move within different contexts. Also, that 'women's cinema now tends to converge women's personal and private trajectories with historical, social, political, and religious dynamics'. Another theme rising from these new contexts is the relation between non-Western women's cinema and Western cultures, values, and habits, as well as the opposition between East or South and West, often expressed through the duality of modernity versus tradition. Yet another theme concerns production, distribution, and exhibition of women's films. The project's insistence on the inclusion of the non-Western was evident in the final programme, with overviews of lesser-known women's cinemas from Greece, Turkey, Iran, and India, as well as a number of papers on South American women filmmakers such as Lucrecia Martel, Verónica Chen, and Petra Costa.

While the conference did not directly tackle questions of feminism, politics, and democracy, the organisation was much more democratic than most conferences in that there was no keynote speech but rather six panels each with two to three 30-minute presentations and plenty of time for discussion. The opening presentation was by the co-organiser of the conference, E. Ann Kaplan. Kaplan presented a detailed analysis of Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), a highly praised feature-length documentary about the work of photographer Ed Burtynsky. The documentary focuses on landscapes that have been altered by large-scale human activity, with photographs and footage from factories across China where appliances headed for the Western world are produced. Kaplan argued that the film is implicitly stating that if we do not take responsibility for global changes we cannot have any hope for the future of our planet. Also on the same panel, titled 'Women's Cinema, Trauma and Global Scenarios', Adrián Pérez Melgosa focused on the work of Argentinean filmmaker Verónica Chen, analysing her 'bodies of memory'. He suggested that the local and global dynamics clash in the bodies of the characters in Chen's films through her use of surveillance cameras as part of the narrative. These two papers set the tone for the rest of the conference, throughout which discussions of the local and the global intertwined.

A number of presentations were devoted to individual women filmmakers or to the analyses of specific films and themes. By way of these pinpointed examinations the presenters reached conclusions or made suggestions that addressed the wider issues within women's cinema. The Argentinean auteur Lucrecia Martel was a popular choice and the subject of two presentations. Kathleen Vernon reflected on the relationship between sound and space in Martel's films, and Uta Felten's paper (read in absentia) discussed body, gaze, and perception in the filmmaker's *La Salta Trilogy*. Pravadelli's paper on women's friendship titled 'The Transnational Politics of Female Friendship in Women's Cinema of the Mediterranean' focused on *Caramel* (Labaki, 2007) and *The Wedding Song* (Albou, 2008). Both films, in

addition to having been directed by Arab women, share stories of interracial female friendship that is largely developed in confined spaces. The confined spaces in question are a beauty parlour and a courtyard, respectively, both traditionally associated with female presences. Pravadelli argued that these were safe spaces for women to exist and to discuss what it means to be a woman.

The two papers on the panel 'The Affective Politics of Women's Documentary' both examined very powerful documentaries with first-person narratives. Luz Horne presented an analysis of *Elena* (Costa, 2008) and Sabrina Vellucci explored Kym Ragusa's videos *Passing* (1995) and *Fuori / Outside* (1997). All of these works feature an openness that comes with their form: essayistic films addressed to close family members. While seemingly building identities of the filmmakers as well as the addressees, these films diverge from classical documentaries. Horne argued that with *Elena*, a letter 'written' to an older sister who has committed suicide, Costa resisted an essentialist definition of an identity. Ragusa's videos are her way of talking to her grandmother, functioning as a political reflection on female agency. Maria Anna Stefanelli's analysis of Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious* (2001) focused on sexual identity and the question of queering the spectator.

Enrico Carocci's presentation on Paola Randi's *Into Paradiso* (2010) was also concerned with issues of identity, but in this case focusing on migration and cultural identity. Drawing attention to the fact that films about migration are rarely comedies, Carocci argued that this comedy about a Neapolitan local befriending a migrant Sri Lankan cricket player represents Italian national identity in the age of migration. Employing Thomas Elsaesser's term 'double occupancy', Carocci's choice was a good example of a film by a female filmmaker yet not necessarily about women, reminding us of the breadth of the definition of women's cinema.

Other presentations similarly connected individual works or filmmakers with a larger national, regional, or global context. Hilary Radner introduced Gaylene Preston's *Perfect Strangers* (2003), one of the few exceptions in the largely 'male cinema' of New Zealand. Despite the international recognition of Jane Campion, Preston is more beloved in her home country and although her film invites global viewers to enter New Zealand for women's stories, they are not widely distributed. Ilaria de Pascalis focused on two films within a European context: *Regarde-moi* (Estrougo, 2007) and *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* (Şamdereli, 2011). Both films made bold stylistic and narrative choices in telling their stories of migration and identity, and addressing issues of adaptation and in-betweenness.

While these were the feature debuts of their respective directors, Patricia White analysed another set of two films by women filmmakers. This time the directors were famous figures, considered 'world cinema auteurs' and regulars on the film festival circuit: Claire Denis' *White Material* (2009) and Kelly Reichart's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). White argued that within the 21st century transnational women's

cinema, these filmmakers provide an authorial 'phantasmatic'. On the same panel, Rosanna Maule responded to White's analyses by reminding the participants of Butler's suggestion to see women's cinema as a 'minor cinema', sharing the key concepts of displacement, dispossession, and deterritorialisation with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'minor literature'.[3]

In her paper 'Dislocated Screens: Globalization's Spatiotemporal Borderlands in Contemporary Women's Cinema in India', Neepa Majumdar presented the case of India, perhaps the largest 'national' cinema in the world. She focused on three recent films by women, each with a narrative of a different class and location: *Peepli* (*Live*) (Farooqui/Rizvi, 2010), set in a small village among poor farmers; *Mumbai Diaries* (Rao, 2010), which tells the stories of intersecting lives in contemporary Mumbai; and *English Vinglish* (Shinde, 2012), about Indian ex-patriots in New York City. These films present the culture of consumerism across different sites and offer a wide spectrum of power relations. Majumdar put forth the idea that although these are all Indian films they are also global, since, as Saskia Sassen has suggested, domains once understood as national are no longer national. Cinema itself is simultaneously de- and sub-nationalising.

While these presentations focused on the transnational aspect of contemporary cinematic landscape, overviews of singular national women's cinemas were also a strong presence at the conference. The call for papers made it clear that even though the title of the conference stressed the global Scenarios and transnational contexts, any geographic area or national context was welcome. Somayeh Ghazizadeh presented Iranian women's cinema, which barely existed during the two decades after the Islamic Revolution yet thrived in the new millennium under the rule of Khatami. My presentation on contemporary women filmmakers in Turkey who work largely on the margins of arthouse filmmaking with very limited budgets was in close dialogue with Eliza Anna Delveroudi's overview of Greek women's cinema, which showed very similar developments. Both presentations also took a political-economic perspective, discussing the new funding and distribution facilities in an age of global economic crisis. Antonia Lant presented an overview of contemporary British and Irish women directors such as Sally Potter, Andrea Arnold, Gurinder Chadha, and Lynn Ramsay – auteurs who have much wider access to global audiences than their Iranian, Greek, or Turkish counterparts.

In regards to distribution and audiences, one paper took a different position than nearly all others, focusing on New York City-based Women Make Movies, 'a multicultural, multiracial, non-profit media arts organization which facilitates the production, promotion, distribution and exhibition of independent films and videotapes by and about women'.[4] Based on her doctoral research, Kristen Fallica presented a historical and descriptive outline of the organisation, which ultimately led to discussions about new paths of distribution and archiving. These issues also

tied in with the presentations on national cinemas, as the official state archives of both Greece and Turkey are limited and not easily accessible, resulting in the increase of 'unofficial archiving' done by fans on YouTube.

This first conference proved to be a success, providing two full days of intense discussions and exchange of ideas, facilitated by the outstanding hospitality of Roma Tre and the fantastic Italian food. As international women's cinema continues to produce interesting new films and filmmakers, I am looking forward to the second conference at Stony Brook University in autumn 2014. My own primary research area is not necessarily women's cinema, but the field has been of interest to me since I served on an all-woman jury at the Antalya Golden Orange International Film Festival in Turkey.[5] As a result, I have found the debates at the conference to be quite stimulating.

On another personal note, the conference coincided with the first two days of the Gezi protests in my hometown of Istanbul. These protests, noted for their heterogeneity, relied on a very strong female presence. In fact, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the peaceful and creative nature of the protests may have been largely a result of this presence. The protests have been well-documented, often by women filmmakers. Having experienced these events firsthand and seeing some of the documentaries that are currently being produced, I might have a different take on cinema in general and women's cinema in particular by the time we convene in Stony Brook.

Notes

1. De Lauretis 1985, p. 6.
2. Butler 2002, p. 1.
3. Butler 2002, p. 20.
4. http://www.wmm.com/about/general_info.shtml
5. See the review of this festival written by Murat Akser and published in the current issue of NECSUS.

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