

# From Minor to "major" cinema? women's and feminist cinema in France in the 2000s

Ince, Katherine

DOI:  
[10.3828/AJFS.45.3.277](https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.45.3.277)

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Ince, K 2008, 'From Minor to "major" cinema? women's and feminist cinema in France in the 2000s', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 277-288. <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.45.3.277>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Author (Year) Title. Journal, Volume, Pages  
Ince, K.L. (2008) From minor to major  
cinema?: women's and feminist film-making  
in France in the 2000s. *Australian Journal of  
French Studies*, 45 (3), 277-287.

Version : post print

Date : Sept-Dec 2008

## **From minor to “major” cinema? women’s and feminist cinema in France in the 2000s**

As Alison Butler remarks right at the start of her recent study of the subject, women’s cinema:

is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It suggests, without clarity, films that might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three. It is neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates.<sup>1</sup>

The first chapter of Butler’s *Women’s Cinema: the Contested Screen* traces the history of its titular concept from the late 1960s and early 1970s, when, amid “the ferment of the women’s movement”,<sup>2</sup> it first took on meaning. Feminist film theory was also born at this historical juncture, and was characterized in the 1970s by an embrace of counter-cinema and its opposition to “an enfeebled mainstream industry”.<sup>3</sup> With only a fragmentary history to refer back to, critics such as Laura Mulvey argued that women’s cinematic aesthetics should confront narrative and the entertainment film, and function negatively and in an avant-gardist mode. But the revival of Hollywood and the return of conservative economic and cultural forces in the 1980s rendered Mulvey’s argument unsustainable, and feminist film theory gradually reoriented itself towards the mainstream and the pleasures of narrative, while continuing to aim at “another frame of reference, one in which the measure of desire is no longer the just the male subject”.<sup>4</sup> Feminist film criticism expanded to take in first television, then the proliferating field of

---

<sup>1</sup> Alison Butler, *Women’s Cinema: the Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.1

<sup>2</sup> Butler, pp.2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, p.8.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London : Macmillan, 1984), pp.8-9

new media. Butler concludes her introductory chapter by suggesting that the “plurality of forms, concerns and constituencies in contemporary women’s cinema now exceeds even the most flexible definition of counter-cinema”,<sup>5</sup> and it is therefore better described as “minor” rather than “oppositional” (where “minor” takes its meaning from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of minor literature as, as Butler puts it, “the literature of a minority or marginalised group, written, not in a minor language, but in a major one”<sup>6</sup>).

If “women’s and feminist cinema in France in the 2000s” is isolated as a corpus, it does have some identifiable boundaries – the obvious historical one, and the qualifications that the films in question must have been made in the French language and funded at least in part by France. I remain very aware, however, of the difficulties of defining the body of work concerned, which indeed possesses no common features of form or content, has not been the object of any particular new critical focus over this period, and has evolved in the context of a healthy but permanently threatened national industry as caught up in global economic forces as any other “world” cinema in the 2000s. Studies of French women’s cinema up to 2000 have shown it to be in a healthy state, but what is happening in the “noughties”? I shall attempt to answer this question in two distinct sections; first, by reviewing women’s cinematic production in France from 2000 to the end of 2007, suggesting headings under which it can be considered, and picking out some general trends. Secondly, I shall review two particularly strong films from the period directed by relative unknowns, Siegrid Alnoy’s *Elle est des nôtres* and Laetitia Masson’s *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?* after which I shall offer a somewhat more

---

<sup>5</sup> Butler, p.19.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, p.19.

extended discussion of the work of Catherine Breillat, who despite a contested reputation has indisputably gained broader international renown than any other female French director in the 2000s. On the basis of this necessarily limited look at the kind of work produced by three women directors, I shall then consider whether any new links may be seen emerging between it and the industrial context in which the directors are working.

### **Trends of the 2000s**

In attempting to isolate trends in the development of French women's cinema in the twenty-first century so far, it seems sensible to consider the continuing careers of established directors separately from "new talent" (which is certainly not in short supply). However, an intermediate category also suggests itself, which is a group of directors who found success in the 1990s and became associated with the *jeune cinéma français* "label" coined to refer to the unusually high number of first-time filmmakers who broke into the industry during this period.<sup>7</sup> These include Dominique Cabrera, Pascale Ferran, Laurence Ferreira Barbosa, Noémie Lvovsky and Laetitia Masson, all of whom have directed at least one more film in the 2000s, with Lvovsky's *Les Sentiments* (2003) and Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?* (2004) (she also released *La Repentie* in 2002) perhaps garnering the most attention. If the winning of awards is taken as a measure of success, then the female-authored film that stands out in the 2000s is Ferran's *Lady Chatterley*, which picked up the César for Best Film in 2007, along with its star Marina Hands, who won Best Actress, although two other films by women have matched the first part of this achievement in the 2000s, Tonie Marshall's *Vénus Beauté (institut)* in 2000 and Agnès

---

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. René Prédal, *Le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan/VUEF, 2002).

Jaoui's *Le Goût des autres* in 2001. One director whose career actually predates the 1990s but who only gained recognition (for the ambitiously entitled *La Nouvelle Eve* [1998]) late in that decade is Catherine Corsini, who has since produced *Mariées mais pas trop* (2003) and *Les ambitieux* (2007). Another name linked to the *jeune cinéma français* by Prédal and Michel Marie<sup>8</sup> and who has outproduced many of her peers in the 2000s is Anne Fontaine, with her three features *Nathalie* (2002), *Entre ses mains* (2005) and *Nouvelle chance* (2006).

Among established directors who have continued to work in the 2000s, Claire Denis (along with Catherine Breillat) stands out among female *auteurs*, for the alarming but fascinating quasi-horror film *Trouble Every Day* (2001), the much-admired “encounter” sketch *Vendredi soir* (2002) and her collaboration with Jean-Luc Nancy *L’Intrus* (2004). Other *auteur(e)s* still to feature are Claire Devers, with *Les marins perdus* (2002), Claire Simon, with *800km de différence – Romance* (2002) and the affectionate documentary portrait *Mimi* (2003), and Diane Kurys, with the divorce comedy *Je reste!* (2003) and *L’anniversaire* (2005). The two best known female directors of comedy, Josiane Balasko and Coline Serreau, continue to be active, with Serreau's *18 ans après* (2003) standing out from more run-of-the-mill comedy productions for measuring up to the strength of its 1985 predecessor *Trois hommes et un couffin* (that rarest of feats among sequels), and because of its strong performances. With other well-known directors such as Chantal Akerman and Nicole Garcia also still in the picture, the number of established female

---

<sup>8</sup> Michel Marie, *Le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan Université, 1998).

directors working in France in the 2000s numbers at least a dozen, a phenomenon unimaginable in many other European nations.<sup>9</sup>

Where the future vitality of French women's cinema is concerned, however, it is the first-time directors to have emerged in the new century who will be particularly important. Perhaps the clearest trend that can be picked out from among these – itself seemingly a sign that female film directors now informally constitute a mature sector of the industry – is for experienced actors and writers to move into directing. Agnès Jaoui's acclaimed *Le Goût des autres* and its follow-up *Comme une image* (2004) emerged out of an established professional and personal relationship with Jean-Pierre Bacri and writing credits for films as noted as Cédric Klapisch's *Un air de famille* (1996) and Alain Resnais's *On connaît la chanson* (1997), as well as a string of acting performances. Two writers with even longer careers to have moved into directing, both also in the field of comedy with which Jaoui's sharply observed social dramas overlap, are Florence Quentin with *J'ai faim!* (2001) and *Olé!* (2005) and Valérie Guignabodet with *Monique* (2001), *Mariages!* (2003) and *Danse avec lui* (2006). Long-established actresses to have tried

---

<sup>9</sup> As Jonathan Romney remarks, there are currently “a host of French women directors who manage consistently to get features made and to evolve a distinctive voice from film to film – something still unimaginable in Britain” (Jonathan Romney, ‘French Exceptions’, *Sight and Sound*, 18, 5 (May 2008), 42-44 (p.44). Women filmmakers included in Romney's article, which reviews “the density of talent French cinema can draw on” and emphasizes what a small proportion of this work now travels outside France other than on DVD (Romney, p.42) are Sandrine Veysset, a *jeune cinéma français* director whose 1996 début *Y aura-t-il de la neige à Noël?* was widely admired, Laetitia Masson, Siegrid Alnoy, and newcomers Anne Villacèque and Emilie Deleuze (the daughter of philosopher Gilles Deleuze).

their hand at feature-film directing include Sophie Marceau (*Parlez-moi d'amour* [2002] and *La disparue de Deauville* [2006]) and Julie Delpy, whose recent *2 Days in Paris* (2007) successfully aped the narratives and format of Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004), in which she starred. The César for *Meilleur Premier Film* has been awarded to a female director three times between 2000 and 2007, to Julie Bertucelli (not a performer, and a first-time writer) for *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* in 2004, to established actress but first-time writer and director Yolande Moreau for *Quand la mer monte* in 2005, and to the long-established actress and writer Isabelle Mergault in 2007, for *Je vous trouve très beau*. But actresses who first came to attention in the 1990s such as Valérie Lemercier and Marina de Van have also directed their own features, a category in which Valéria Bruni-Tedeschi's is perhaps the name to stand out, with her admired 2003 début *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*, which she recently followed up with *Actrices* (2007). There are of course also numerous women directors new in the 2000s who are simply new to the film industry, such as documentary-maker and *auteur* Valérie Mréjen, but the quantity of familiar names to feature as first-time directors is one of the striking characteristics of a review of women's cinematic production in the decade so far, and one which must indicate that many of the old barriers to women directing their own films are gradually coming down.

### **Women in the French film industry**

Just after the millennium, two noteworthy studies of women's cinema in France during the 1980s and 1990s were published: Françoise Audé's *Cinéma d'elles 1981-2001*, the successor to her *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles*, and Carrie Tarr's *Cinema and the Second*



*Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*.<sup>10</sup> Both Audé's books focus explicitly on the situation of women filmmakers in the French film industry, and *Cinéma d'elles 1981-2001* devotes a first part to the "implantation" of women directors in the industry and a second to an overview of the variety of their work before moving on to the films themselves, while Tarr's book offers readings of a significant proportion of French women's entire cinematic output of the 1980s and 1990s by grouping her corpus into "Personal Films" and "Genre Films", subdividing the former by theme and the latter by genre. Tarr's invaluable year-by-year filmographies of "all feature-length and medium-length films directed or co-directed by women and produced with French or majority French funding (whatever the nationality of the director) during the period 1980-1999"<sup>11</sup> indicate an average annual production of ten to eleven films in the 1980s and over seventeen films in the 1990s (the totals she lists for 1980-1989 and 1990-99 being 106 and 174 respectively). Cataloguing a similar constituency of films over the eight years from 2000 to 2007 (although I have not been able to check the criterion of the degree of French funding in co-productions) indicates a continuing steady rise in the number of films women have directed (either on their own or with others): the total over this period is 240, an annual average of thirty, with a "low" of twenty-three in 2000 and "highs" of

---

<sup>10</sup> Françoise Audé, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles: situations de femmes dans le cinéma français 1956-1979* (Lausanne : Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1981) and *Cinéma d'elles, 1981-2001, situation des femmes cinéastes dans le cinéma français* (Lausanne : Editions l'Age d'Homme, 2002). Carrie Tarr with Brigitte Rollet, *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001.)

<sup>11</sup> Tarr, p.285.

thirty-seven and thirty-four in 2001 and 2007 respectively.<sup>12</sup> Although this seems initially to be a big increase on the 1990s, overall French-funded film production has also risen to a constant level of over 200 films per year in the 2000s (whatever the success these films have had at the box-office when compared with non-French imports), meaning that the proportion of films directed by women has in fact increased only slightly: whereas Tarr's figure for the 1990s (1990-99) is 13.7 per cent of national production, the proportion has risen to approximately 14.4 per cent over the period from 2000 to 2006.<sup>13</sup>

This modest increase of proportion, however, may be exactly the kind of shift that indicates real progress for female directors – a slow but undeniable gain in “market share” over a period when sociocultural and ideological factors have not assisted women's participation in the film industry in any readily identifiable ways. In France as in most of Europe and the Western world, the huge gains in rights and freedoms made for women by collective feminist action in the 1970s slowed markedly at the start of the 1980s, then petered out altogether. Various media commentators started to diagnose a “post-feminist” age in which women had achieved all the gains they could possibly desire and attained equality, so had nothing left to fight for: feminism could be relegated to the dustbin of history. Uncertainty about the current and future status of feminist politics, in France as elsewhere, underlines the difficulty of the category of ‘women's cinema’, since collectively-held, common goals – a united feminist narrative of progress – can no longer easily be identified in women's cinematic productions. What has emerged to replace this,

---

<sup>12</sup> Figures have been compiled from the lists of films released each week published by *Le Film français*.

<sup>13</sup> Based on a total of 207 films produced out of 1433. Annual totals of French film production for 2000 to 2006 have been taken from the CNC statistics at

<http://www.cnc.fr/Site/Template/T3.aspx?SELECTID=1040&ID=402&t=3>, accessed 12 June 2008.

however, seems to be a new focus on the complexity and difficulty of women's individual experiences that cinema is just as well-placed to convey, thematically and formally. Female subjectivity, rather than feminist politics, is now the domain in which the most urgent questions are asked, and this is reflected in the films by Siegrid Alnoy, Laetitia Masson and Catherine Breillat I shall now consider.

### **Intimate dramas**

According to Chris Darke, Alnoy's *Elle est des nôtres* can be seen as "one of a number of recent French films about the human cost of neo-liberal economics".<sup>14</sup> The ominous hush, out-of-focus camerawork and quiet musical accompaniment to the opening scenes of the film effectively set up the menace, violence and aggression that lurks just beneath the surface of the entire film, in which friendless everywoman figure Christine Blanc (Sasha Andrès) goes from one temping job to the next, failing to make any impact in society until she spontaneously lashes out one day at Patricia (Catherine Mouchet), the temping agent she has successfully befriended, but who has pressured her into making an unwanted visit to a local swimming pool. (A brief shot of Christine underwater just before she pushes Patricia to the floor cuts to a shot of her driving with her eyes closed, both powerful images of the loss of control that is about to occur.) Immediately after killing Patricia, Christine passes her driving test, although she is unable to celebrate with the colleagues who are pleased for her, and a sequence of shots follows in which she is still unsmilingly "outside", separated by an invisible barrier from the

---

<sup>14</sup> Chris Darke, in his review of Nicolas Klotz's *La Question humaine* (2007), *Sight and Sound*, 18, 5 (May 2008), 66.

social activity that surrounds her. But further successes follow: she is offered a job at which she excels, displaying the confidence and authority of a top executive, and begins a relationship with Eric. Inevitably, though, Christine's crime begins to catch up with her: she is visited and later arrested by a blackly comic duo of policemen who talk across one another at high speed, followed by a vigilant, silent but ultimately sympathetic workplace assistant, and interviewed over a restaurant dinner by the authoritarian senior police officer Degas, who is apparently disarmed by the ease by which she is able to talk about herself and her sense of alienation from contemporary society: she likes empty places, she says, because "eux, ils ne me demandent rien". Christine's father hesitatingly signs a police statement giving her the alibi of being at her parents' for the day of the murder, her work colleagues speak in favour of her many qualities, and her boss advises the police that it may be better not to charge her, but ultimately Christine walks out onto a zebra crossing in front of an unmanned parked police car, gets into the back of it and waits to be apprehended.

A second drama about intimate, difficult personal experience, Laetitia Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil*, released one year later than *Elle est des nôtres* in September 2004 and slightly unkindly described by Romney as a "self-referential fiction...about the difficulty of making films when you're Laetitia Masson",<sup>15</sup> is in fact a fascinating exploration of the difficulty – indeed, the seeming impossibility – of making "first-person" cinema. The film's title comes from Christine Angot's novel *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, in which the relative youth and open future of Brazil as a nation acts as a metaphor for the hope and euphoria experienced in a new love affair. Angot's novel is a first-person narration of her relationship with a Jewish man named Pierre Louis, seemingly the least

---

<sup>15</sup> Romney, p.44.

likely sort of novel to be adapted to the screen, a problem confirmed when the fictional Masson (Elsa Zylberstein) declares it “inadaptable” to top producer Alain Sarde. The difficulty is compounded by her friendship with Angot, who appears in the film and speaks interestingly, although with a notable lack of fluency, about the uncensored “haine du secret” that characterizes her writing and the intensity and violence of “moments de création”, and by her acquaintance with Pierre. Masson hypothesizes that what she needs in order to be able to make the film is to re-experience new love (although she is herself married – to Angot’s publisher [Marc Barbé] – with two children), and so she tries to involve her child’s paediatrician (Pierre Arditi) in her idea, first by asking him if she can use the story of his new love affair, then by flirting with him herself. It becomes apparent that drafts of the film’s screenplay are being written during her attempt to re-enact Angot’s passion when Masson’s husband slams a copy of one of them down on their kitchen table, demanding to know what is going on between his wife and the paediatrician. After further wittily dramatized alternative possible adaptations of the affair at the heart of *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, the “truth” of first-person experience to which Masson is trying to get access continues to evade her and to recede, until while walking along the station platform at Nancy (as Angot does in the final scene of her novel), she is forced to conclude: “Je ne vis pas les choses pour faire les films, je fais des films parce que je n’arrive pas à vivre des choses”. *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* sustains such a degree of self-referentiality throughout that it does not actually resemble a dramatization of Angot’s *Pourquoi le Brésil* at all, but as well as being an entertaining autofiction about the process of directing, it also constitutes an absorbing meditation on the art of adaptation and the differences between the media of literature and film.

Comparing Alnoy's and Masson's films is illuminating where the problematic category of "women's cinema" is concerned. In part because of a remarkable central performance by Sasha Andrès, who has also collaborated with Alnoy on other productions, and because of the unforgettable murder scene, where Patricia lies wailing and moaning in a foetal position on the changing room floor, then screams when Christine approaches her, *Elle est des nôtres* feels like a feminist companion to recent memorable envisionings of alienation and schizophrenia such as Klotz's *La Question humaine*. Alnoy persistently films her characters' bodies from behind or square-on from the front (Christine is seen prostrate on her bed with her arms spreadeagled, or supine in the same posture), but mixes these techniques of distancing up with point-of-view camerawork and sound (Christine's panicked breathing during a driving lesson at the start of the film and the ominous recurrence of the sound of trickling water as she gives herself up) that compel the spectator to identify with her to some extent. Masson, however, rarely uses such techniques, and in the director's interview included on the DVD issue of *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil*, reacts cageily to the very category of "women's cinema", and specifically about whether her film offers any privileged identification with its women characters (she thinks she is "in" the men just as much). Despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* revolves around the difficulties of adapting a novel by a woman writer who has done more than any other in recent times to confront and push back the cultural taboo on incest, Masson ultimately seems as interested in her potential male actors (Daniel Auteuil and Francis Huster) as in her female subject.

### **Speaking the body**

Where feminist credentials are concerned, as I have already suggested, Catherine Breillat can be said to be in a league of her own, but like Alnoy and Masson, dramas of intimate experience are the mainstay of her cinema. Now the director of eleven sober, serious and concentrated features, Breillat seemed to mark a clear change of direction when she shifted from original auteurist narratives to literary adaptation with *Une vieille maîtresse*, her version of Barbey D'Aurevilly's 1851 novel that premiered at the Cannes film festival in May 2007. (She has suggested since that the continuity of *Une vieille maîtresse* with the "décalogue" of original stories that preceded it is just as noteworthy as its discontinuity, an argument borne out by the reading of the film made by Douglas Keesey.<sup>16</sup>) Breillat is a novelist as well as a filmmaker, and her cinema is remarkable for the literariness of its narratives – their carefully paced twists, turns, languours and violent episodes. Their dialogues and interior monologues are as vital to the meanings the films convey as their images are, and she has published numerous reflective essays and interviews in addition to novels and her eleven films. *Romance* (1999) has been particularly admired for the sobriety and cleanliness of its *mise en scène*, which makes bold and striking use of monochrome white sets with occasional splashes of vibrant colour (a red dress worn by the central female protagonist Marie), as well as of theatrical locations, both interior (the opulent apartment inhabited by her headmaster-lover Robert) and exterior (the vast sands of the Camargue at Aigues-Mortes, not far from Marseilles). But the film's published "screenplay"<sup>17</sup> is a separate work from the film that contains commentary and "stage directions" that make it resemble a play more than any other

---

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Keesey, *Catherine Breillat* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Breillat, *Romance* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999).

literary form, or – since the additional *didascalies* often offer interpretations of the characters’ words and states of mind – a strange mixture of play and novel.

The majority of Breillat’s films have a woman or women as their leading protagonists, the exceptions (where a male character or characters are as important as focalizers of the narrative) being *Sale comme un ange* (1991), and to an extent, *Parfait Amour!* (1996), *Brève Traversée* (2001), and *Anatomie de l’enfer* (2004). Female subjectivity is therefore central to her cinema. On this count alone, Breillat should rank high in any list of women artists offering narratives of freedom and autonomy no longer prominent in the “post-feminist” 1990s and 2000s. And for the same reason, the concepts and tools of pre-poststructuralist feminist theory, a marked preference for which has recently developed among feminists working on Simone de Beauvoir,<sup>18</sup> may offer the best route into her work. The existential phenomenological feminism Toril Moi and Sonia Kruks espouse by placing Beauvoir at the centre of their arguments has as its key tenet the embodied nature of subjectivity: in this obverse of the Cartesian “mind/body split”, the mental cannot exist independently of the physical, or as Juhani Pallasmaa puts it: “We do not live separately in material and mental worlds; these experiential domains are fully

---

<sup>18</sup> For Toril Moi, “the poststructuralists” have lost sight of what feminism’s key objective should be – freedom from oppression for women. (Moi entitles the new Part I of her tome of mainly republished essays *What is a Woman?*, “A Feminism of Freedom”, not just, she says, because freedom is “the fundamental concept in Beauvoir’s feminism”, but because “[c]ontemporary feminist theory has yet to attempt the radical task of rethinking feminism from a vantage point outside the exhausted categories of identity and difference”), Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? and other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.vii.



intertwined”.<sup>19</sup> The centrality of the body and bodily experience to Breillat’s films makes them highly suited to a phenomenological approach, I would suggest, but perhaps not quite the one preferred by Moi and Kruks, who both turn their backs on poststructuralism’s emphasis on textuality and discourse, Moi because of the “off-putting obscurity” she finds in much recent theoretical writing “that wishes to make a political or cultural difference in the world beyond the academy”,<sup>20</sup> Kruks because she considers that “postmodern” explanations of subjectivity as an “effect of discourse” are inadequate.<sup>21</sup> No opposition or conflict is necessary between a phenomenological understanding of the world and language, since embodied subjectivity speaks: language and signs are as indispensable to human existence and survival as freedom is. If freedom is the principal value and goal shared by existential phenomenology and anti-poststructuralist feminism, I would argue that freedom cannot even be dreamt of – much less aimed at or achieved – without language and a theory of language to accompany this dream. It may even be true to say that “free” speech has a meaning not intended in the use routinely made of the expression in political theory (most famously in the First Amendment to the United

---

<sup>19</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image* (Helsinki: Building Information Ltd (Rakennustieto Oy), p.18.

<sup>20</sup> Moi, *What is a Woman?*, pp.133-134.

<sup>21</sup> In a chapter entitled “Going Beyond Discourse: Feminism, Phenomenology and Women’s Experience”, Kruks argues that feminist theory “must attend to the ways in which experience can exceed discursivity”, Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.133. She may well be right about the inadequacy of “postmodern” thinking about the subject, but poststructuralist thought on “discourse”, which can take the form of Foucauldian discourse, Derridean writing, the “letter” of the Lacanian unconscious or Barthesian “text”, is particularly diverse and complex, and should not be rejected as if it were some monolithic mistake.

States Constitution). What if “freedom of speech” related as much to utterance – the physical act of speaking – as to the content of what is uttered? The particular role of speech in *Tapage nocturne* and *Brève Traversée* is the aspect of the two films to which I shall now turn.

*Tapage nocturne* is Breillat’s second film but the first to receive a proper release,<sup>22</sup> and was written and shot in the chaotically productive context of late 1970s French feminism, while *Brève Traversée* was one of ten films commissioned by Pierre Chevalier for ARTE’s 2003 season “Masculin/Féminin”, a follow-up to the channel’s successful series “Tous les garçons et filles de leur âge” (1994). Half-anticipating her much later autofictional reflection on the activity of film directing, *Sex Is Comedy* (2002), *Tapage nocturne*’s chief protagonist is a young female director, Solange (Dominique Laffin) who leads a liberated if disorganised personal life, and although married, conducts multiple affairs with men, at least until she meets and falls in love with Bruno (Bertrand Bonvoisin). In *Brève Traversée*, the literal crossing of the title is an overnight ferry journey from Le Havre to Portsmouth in which 30 year-old Englishwoman Alice meets 16 year-old Thomas (the film moves between French and English throughout). In both these films dialogues and conversations are subordinated to an insistent, if interrupted, female monologue that narrates the protagonist’s views about relationships, sex, and the difficulties brought about by living her desire.<sup>23</sup> In *Brève Traversée*, Alice and Thomas

---

<sup>22</sup> The more provocative *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976) was only released after *Romance* brought Breillat long-awaited acclaim, in 2000.

<sup>23</sup> In interviews Breillat has emphasized her closeness to – in fact, inability to detach herself from – the material from which her films are made, and this apparently disorganised and unrevised condition of

spend most of their evening together (before their mutually consented-upon night in Alice's cabin) in the ferry's bar, talking and drinking. During the lengthy discourse about men and their behaviour to which Alice treats Thomas in the bar, she makes continued reference to men as a class ("ils", or "vous" when she is addressing him directly), in statements such as

"Quand on fait le bilan, ils sont tous pareils"

"C'est vrai, non, les hommes sont comme ça? Vous êtes tous comme ça. Vous avez raison, c'est votre force"

"Eux sont simples et nous on est compliqués".

"Il n'y a que les femmes que la vie mutile parce qu'elles sont plus généreuses que les hommes"

When Thomas does finally object to being classed with an invariable group all branded with the stamp of patriarchy, Alice agrees he is an exception, "beaucoup plus charmant". In *Tapage nocturne*, Solange's speech is every bit as prominent, and she vocalizes both the transitory pleasures brought by being in love (which she always is) and her prevalent discontentment noisily and continuously, to her lovers themselves, to a female friend, and to her long-suffering husband, who tries to imitate what she tells him her lovers do in bed in an apparent effort to win back her fidelity. Talking too much is a problem of hers, she is aware: in the second of her eight brief passages of interior monologue on the film's sound track, she comments: "Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de parler. Et d'ailleurs c'est comme ça que je découvre ce que je pense". Solange would like everyone to talk about

---

women's contributions to dialogues in some of her films is much in evidence in the two films discussed here.

themselves as freely as she does: her opening gambit to Bruno, which he twice refuses with a smile, is “Racontez-moi votre vie; il n’y a que ça qui m’intéresse”. Saying “Je t’aime” to a man, however, is something more serious, a declaration it takes Solange some time to build up to, and an act whose effects she tries to calculate before sending Bruno what she calls her “télégramme d’amour décomposé” (“broken down” or “distracted” love telegram), which is actually three telegrams bearing the syllables “je” “t” and “aime”. Shortly after having sent these to Bruno, though, things go back to exactly the unsatisfactory state they were in before, except that she starts giving her phone number out to other men as well, specifically a rock musician she then also takes up with. Not long afterwards a pattern of domination and submission begins to set in between Bruno and Solange, leading to her writing him a love letter that is read out on the sound track as the sixth and by far the longest passage of her “interior” monologue, as she walks to a hotel room through the snow with another new lover met in a café. For the second time, Solange resorts to writing, but what the film resorts to is speech: the letter declares itself “une lettre de parole...parce qu’inexplicablement je n’arrive pas à en avoir”. Unlike *Brève Traversée*, which seems generally to have been well received, *Tapage nocturne* was widely criticised for its “gaucheries et incertitudes”,<sup>24</sup> for the mediocrity of its script, and for its uninteresting *mise en scène*. What is of undeniable interest about the film, however, is the reflection on speech it contains, and a kind of contract with its spectators in which words unspeakable in the film’s diegesis are voiced only to them. This is shared by *Brève Traversée*, where Alice’s monologic diatribe about men seems mostly to go over Thomas’s head (he rarely comments and displays little emotion). In both films it seems as if Breillat is using her women protagonists as

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Fieschi, ‘Tapage nocturne’, *Cinématographe* 51 (October 1979), 47.

mouthpieces for a feminist discourse – but with the vital proviso that they are *embodied* mouthpieces. When this is not the case, as in the usually brief passages of Solange’s interior monologue (a more extensive use of which is made in *Romance*), Breillat’s words seem intended solely for women’s ears – perhaps because of their content, but more strikingly in the way their speech is reserved for the film’s spectator, inaudible to the film’s other characters.

The kind of female subjectivity proposed by *Tapage nocturne* and *Brève Traversée* is both phenomenological and “discursive”, both embodied and fully social. Both Solange and Alice are married, the only married women among Breillat’s female protagonists, but it may well be because of the limits imposed by their status that their free, bodily speech makes itself heard with such intensity and urgency. The “feminism of freedom” Toril Moi thinks has been submerged in the denial of agency and ponderous obscurity of poststructuralist feminist theorizing is most definitely proposed by Breillat’s cinema, in the situated, bodily *and discursive* sexual subjectivity of her female protagonists.

As I began by stating, and have re-emphasised at certain moments in this discussion, women’s cinema is a difficult concept to define. Global feminisms of the 2000s are in an embattled condition, where they survive, and films directed by French women over this period are much less likely to contribute to any united feminist narrative of progress or liberation than they were in the 1970s. Notwithstanding the health of a sub-area of cinematic production as significant as comedy, though, it seems that since the start of the new millennium, French women directors have shifted their attention away from explicitly political concerns to more personal questions of social agency and the representation of their intimate experience. This shift has clearly not been a

predominantly positive one for feminism, but it can be argued – and I would like to maintain – that Laetitia Masson’s reluctance to be pigeon-holed as a woman who privileges female characters and their dilemmas enriches the complex identity of ‘women’s and feminist cinema’ just as Alnoy’s bleak depiction of the limitations on women’s opportunities and agency in our alienating twenty-first century society does. Breillat, meanwhile, has in the 2000s finally produced the philosophically and politically uncompromising body of work promised by her 1970s films, one based entirely on dramas of female subjectivity. French women’s cinema of the 2000s may still constitute less than 15 per cent of France’s annual cinematic production, but it has found a voice and a place in French cinematic production it does not look likely to lose. Underpinned in singular but powerful style by *auteurs* such as Alnoy, Masson and Breillat, contemporary French women’s cinema is as strong as, if not stronger than, any other in the world.