

**Be(com)ing Reel Woman:
Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema**

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Abstract

Female filmmakers appear to have ample opportunity to exert their agency in 21st century cinema, given that technological advancement, in many ways, serves as a gender equalizer in the medium. Yet women wield only a modicum of power in mainstream cinema, and the number of female filmmakers is decreasing over time. What are the reasons for this absence of reel woman today? More significantly, what are the possibilities and limitations for her subjectivity and agency, in and on screen, in this increasingly male-dominated landscape? This paper describes how, as a female filmmaker, I conducted an autoethnographical scriptwriting-based investigation into this issue of female agency, by writing an original feature length screenplay, which was both a dramatic experiment and the creative outcome of my research. In this self-reflexive examination, I use the multiple logic of screenplay diegesis, to unravel the overt and latent sites of resistance for reel woman's actualisation today and to test whether it is possible for female filmmakers, and their female characters, to overcome the seemingly insurmountable odds facing them be(com)ing active agents. The paper documents my lived moments of struggle in a discipline still deeply rooted in male narratives and details the challenging contexts and contingent moments in my life during the scriptwriting process. I use personal exposition and creative analysis to deconstruct my lived experience and its conditioning of my identity as a reel woman, so as to offer a close-up lens through which to examine the agency of the contemporary female filmmaker, and that of the female characters she writes.

Key words: female subjectivity, female filmmaking, cinema, autoethnography, agency.

Be(com)ing Reel Woman:¹

Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema

Larissa Sexton-Finck

It is a terrible thing to see that no one has ever taught us how to develop our vision as women neither in the history of arts nor in film schools.²

Marie Mandy

At first glance, female filmmakers appear to have ample opportunity to exert their agency in 21st century cinema, given that technological advancement, in many ways, serves as a gender equalizer in the medium. Yet women still struggle to wield significant power in mainstream cinema. For example, of the top 250 grossing films in Hollywood each year over the past decade, on average only 6% are directed by women and only 16% contain leading female protagonists.³ When looking at the Academy Award, things are just as dismal as only one woman has won an Oscar for directing.⁴ Incredibly, the number of female filmmakers is actually decreasing over time.⁵ This directly contradicts the fact that, at large, women in western film schools and universities generally make up equal, if not higher, numbers of enrolments to men.⁶ What happens to these budding female filmmakers, once they enter teaching institutions and the film industry, to justify such disproportionate outcomes? More significantly, what are the possibilities and limitations for women's identity, both in and on screen, in this prevailing male-dominated landscape?

This paper describes how I conducted an autoethnographical scriptwriting-based investigation into female subjectivity and agency,⁷ by writing an original feature length screenplay, which was both a dramatic experiment and the creative outcome of my PhD research.⁸ I am attracted to writing in the way that sociologist Laurel Richardson describes, as a 'method of inquiry', a journey of discovery through which we can "investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and others, and how standard objectifying practices...unnecessarily limit us".⁹ In my thesis I positioned myself as a cultural agent, a subject-in-process,¹⁰ using the screenplay diegesis and central female character to unravel the overt and latent sites of resistance for reel woman's agency today.¹¹ I set out to investigate whether she can overcome the androcentric limitations in contemporary film culture, and

perform as an active agent of her own production in a discourse that still “insists on our absence even in the face of our presence”.¹² This paper summarises the key findings of my research in which I analysed the conditioning of my identity in a discipline still deeply rooted in male narratives, so as to ascertain whether I could write a different future for myself, and my female characters.

A Question of Influence: Framing a Personal History

In my undergraduate years as a film student in the social egalitarianism of laidback Australia, seemingly without prejudice, I became a naïve young filmmaker. I felt that I did not suffer from any obvious gender repression and, subsequently, saw no need for politics in my filmmaking. As a product of my generation, I inadvertently adopted individualism’s problematic ideology of meritocracy,¹³ unaware of my indoctrination and so, like many other complacent, young women, I became seduced by the media’s postfeminist imagery and its superficial sense of female empowerment. My thinking changed, nevertheless, once I embarked upon my postgraduate studies.

When I began my PhD, I initially set out to write a personal screenplay with a central female protagonist. I wanted the narrative to offer a subjective insight into the experience of being a woman in the 21st century. I had no idea what a confronting, complex *and* enlightening task this would turn out to be. The script’s introspective nature made it obvious to me early on in my candidature that I was struggling to connect with my female identity. This was confirmed in the initial meeting I had with my supervisor, whose challenging feedback to the script’s first full draft made me face up to my problem of agency as a woman. Let us briefly return to that moment.

Flashback 2003

It feels like I’ve been sitting here for ages like an obedient student. I have. You finally look up.

*“What I feel about your script is...nothing. What I feel for your characters is...nothing. Your writing is constipated, childish, and idealistic”.*¹⁴

*“There is some potential in the script and its undercurrent of feminist notions, but it’s clouded”.*¹⁵

I cringe at this only compliment. Feminism? I’m not a feminist. I’m not angry. Am I? I’m definitely not oppressed, I think. I want to make personal not political cinema.

*“Where are you in these words?” you ask. “They’ve all been written at a distance. You’re pulling the punches”.*¹⁶

What do you mean? I’ve worked hard at this script. I’ve honoured all the things that I was taught and now teach my scriptwriting students. It contains a solid three-act structure, well-developed characters, economical dialogue, and a strong dramatic drive. What more do you want?

*You haven’t finished. “ Who is this woman in your script? What are her fears, her contradictions, her desires? What are yours?”*¹⁷

I am alone in the safety of my car, sobbing, holding onto my 140 pages of ‘nothing’. I feel constipated, childish and idealistic. But I’m not crying because of your unwanted psychoanalysis. This goes beyond you. I’m crying because something in what you said tells a truth.

Why couldn’t I answer that last question?

My identity and postfeminist armour endured several heavy blows in the first script feedback session with my supervisor. His comments made me come to understand the meaning behind the feminist adage ‘the personal is political’, by exposing my patriarchal conditioning and its pacifying influence on my sense of self. I began to seriously question my postfeminist claims of free agency, as this notion now just felt like learned lip service, since I evidently could not engage with a strong sense of personal will in my scriptwriting. Why did I struggle to write my female character as an active desiring agent? Why could I not write subjectively or, more importantly, not know something as fundamental as what I desired? Canadian female filmmaker Paule Baillargeon suggests that the problem I encountered was related to the fact that:

women have never had the luxury to really desire. They were told what to desire. They were forced for so many hundreds and thousands of years. All these things are inside us. It's a legacy.¹⁸

I decided that it was critical that I address this notion of the 'nothing' of my female agency, and the reasons for why was I writing woman with such a red pen. I sensed that there were complex personal and cultural reasons behind my self-objectification and self-censorship as an agenic being, which deeply concerned me. In order to understand my problematic more comprehensively and exercise a stronger sense of control in the script's rewrites, it was necessary for me to shift to a theoretical examination as a backdrop to my life experiences. Autoethnographer Christine E. Kiesinger affirms that:

When our stories break down or no longer serve us well, it is imperative that we examine the quality of the stories we are telling and actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us to live more fulfilling lives.¹⁹

She calls this agenic process, *narrative reframing*, which involves "contextualizing our stories within the framework of a larger picture",²⁰ so as to remain open to the possibility that there might not be anything 'wrong' with us, per se, as individuals, "but rather something very wrong with the dynamics that dominate the communicative system"²¹ within which we operate: in the case of my project, the wider community and the discourse of film. This is where my process of narrative reframing began.

X Marks the Spot

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted...censored...whatever is mis-named as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried...under an inadequate or lying language - this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.²²

Adrienne Rich

Women are supposed to be the view and when the view talks back, it is uncomfortable.²³

Jane Campion

In the face of the capitalist power structures restricting the performance of reel woman in today's mainstream industry, particular obstacles present as seemingly insurmountable, most notably relating to ideology, commercialised sexism, spectatorship, and censorship. Mainstream cinema remains a critical form of cultural identification that embodies and (re)creates pervasive gender myths. Its imagery acts as a *mediating* principle in western culture's visioning of the Self, and its representations (re)organise the identity politics and power structures of society.²⁴ This is a troubling notion for women, given that female

filmmakers have historically occupied a tenuous position of power in the commercial industry. A male perspective has consequently come to dominate popular depictions of female subjectivity and agency on screen, which tend to be derogatory (through various incarnations of the screen bitch) and/or purely decorative (through forms of the screen muse).²⁵ These dichotomising depictions are reflective of what feminist psychologist, Polly Young-Eisendrath, terms the ‘double-bind’ of contemporary female authority:

women are damned if they claim their authority (they are called controlling, dominating, bitches, or even feminazis) and damned if they don’t (they are called dependent, depressed, or worse, immature and self-defeating).²⁶

As in many high pressure occupations, an accepted explanation for women’s under-representation in the mainstream film industry is that the medium’s competitive, high pressure climate forces many women to choose between filmmaking and starting a family. While this reality is no doubt a contributing part of the problem, Professor Martha Lauzen’s survey statistics into women working behind-the-scenes in mainstream cinema, suggest that it is more directly due to ‘The Celluloid Ceiling’,²⁷ a term she uses to describe the implicitly male-dominated studio system that prevents most women from moving beyond minor success in the industry. This invisible ceiling works on many levels of control and indoctrination: take, for example, the fact that men own and run most of the film funding bodies, powerhouse production studios, and distribution companies in Hollywood; hold almost every influential film critic position in the mainstream media; make up the majority of Western film censorship boards; pioneered the overall narrative organisation and mechanisms of popular cinema, and continue to be the primary educators and facilitators in film universities and institutions, which teach us to favour androcentric characters and stories.²⁸ This scenario perpetuates the “nearly seamless dialogue among men” in film culture.²⁹

What this means is that, although women regularly participate in film production, and appear on screen, mainstream cinema continues to afford women definition solely through male association, and curtails female authority by defaming reel women who attempt to exercise more than a modicum of power. This is most evident in the incongruent censoring of films made by a succession of women working in independent cinema who offer more commanding female representations in their films.³⁰ The mass media has an uneasy relationship with these subversive works. This is not only because they push the boundaries

of acceptable femininity by experimenting with various female ‘transgressions’, and speak confrontational truths about the female condition, but, moreover, because these truths are spoken from the lips of women. To diminish the political impact of these films, the media and censorship boards initiate their silencing by way of controversy and incongruent classification. As a result, these films are unjustly ghettoised and forced into independent or underground distribution. So, even when women go against the odds and make films that attempt to define the vicissitudes of female desire and represent their vision of the world, mass society is hardly ever exposed to these critical images of women.

Censorship is a complex issue, as it is not only directed on a physical and political level at female filmmakers and their films, but also routinely curbs woman’s sexual expression in social forums through the tacit insinuation that female filmmakers (and characters) who push the boundaries of their passive sexual positioning and pursue their own pleasure and power are in some way dirty, dangerous and/or morally corrupt.³¹ Young-Eisendrath argues that this cultural anxiety regarding women’s apparently overwhelming and unhealthy sexuality and power, which needs to be restrained, is associated to the pre-Oedipal mother who continues to evoke terror in the psyche of patriarchal society by threatening the subject’s autonomy.³² It is these types of everyday acts of censorship of female agency that expel women’s voices and bodies from mainstream society, and, more damagingly, from women themselves. As French filmmaker Catherine Breillat proclaims: “You can fight against [legislative] censorship but if a society itself self-censors something, that’s far more terrible”.³³

Female compliance and alienation is not only enforced in the film industry, it is also (re)constituted in film discourse and scholarship in the fact that women have never had significant control of screen pedagogy and scholarship in the critical areas of their own domain. This has detrimental effects on the development of female students’ creative identities, as became most evident to me when my journey of narrative reframing progressed to me deconstructing my educative and pedagogical history.

Pulling Focus

The film department at my undergraduate university was comprised of just two women to eleven male lecturers, tutors, and technicians. More disconcerting than this, during my four-year screen honours degree I was never once required to watch or analyse the works of any

female filmmaker, nor was I introduced to any feminist film theory. One could assume that this, most likely unintentional, absence of ‘reel women’ in my film curriculum was a matter of supply and demand, given the small number of women in the industry. In response to this I draw attention to Linda Nochlin’s essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, in which she points out that it is this type of questioning that “points to major areas of intellectual obfuscation beyond the specific political and ideological issues involved in the subjection of women”³⁴ and “falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time that it insidiously supplies its own answer: ‘There are no great woman artists [filmmakers] because women are incapable of greatness’”.³⁵ In their construction, mainstream screen curricular condition our value systems to privilege androcentricism, and perpetuate the notion that women still bear little significance in intellectual and cultural arenas, thereby repeating the cycle of female inactivity.³⁶

It was not only the absence of female content that was troubling in the curriculum of my undergraduate degree, but also its overall epistemological framework, which presented an equally dismal culture of female invisibility. As is still the case in many universities, for the most part, this curriculum involved a rationalist epistemology based on the Law of the Father, which employed a scientific, outcome-oriented pedagogical model that almost totally denied experiential process-led investigation, the issue of affectivity, and supported omniscient narratives over personalised ones. From my teaching experience I am aware that this epistemology still prevails in most film pedagogy today.³⁷

A major contributing factor to this rigid curriculum, to a large extent, is the increasing pressure departments are under to achieve greater economic efficiencies and student numbers. It seems that this commercial push has resulted in a fear of risk in tertiary screen education, which is now primarily focussed on standardising students for the mainstream film industry, “reproduc[ing] the values, meanings and logic of [its] capitalist system”,³⁸ rather than on encouraging students’ experimentation with limiting norms of identity.

This scholarly environment presents numerous sites of resistance for the identities of emerging female filmmakers in particular, as it upholds entrenched norms of male entitlement and female pathologisation.³⁹ Its Cartesian model of subjectivity, which favours

masculinity, radically “undercuts women’s epistemic authority”⁴⁰ by preventing us from engaging with experiential knowledge. Psychology professor Mary Field Belenky calls this method of understanding *subjective knowing*,⁴¹ and maintains that, on account of women’s oppositional positioning as border voices in society and most areas of organised culture, over time a large majority have developed stronger skills in, and learnt to engage more successfully with, multi-sensory impulses and non-rational processes of communication and comprehension that fall outside normative discourse, a trait often trivialised as feminine intuition.⁴² Yet, sensory knowledge cannot be underestimated as a significant contributor to many creative women’s cumulative life values and intellect, including my own.⁴³

The disavowal of affectivity in the current pedagogical organisation of dominant screen scholarship is crippling to the development of emerging female filmmakers. Adrienne Rich acknowledges the alienating impact that this type of ‘intellectual and spiritual blockading’ can have on a female student:

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into the mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game of mirrors.⁴⁴

As an undergraduate student, I learnt I should hide myself in my praxis by strictly following the screen course’s cognitive model of analysis. In doing so, I took on the persona of an honorary man. This forced me to deny my senses and to work solely on a rationalist level, which inhibited the exertion of my agency and stripped me of the emotional attachments that could make it possible to write authentically as a woman.⁴⁵

In my teaching experience I have found that most of my female students display similar symptoms of alienation and male imitation in their praxis. It appears that the ubiquitous objectification and denigration of women in mainstream cinema has become normalised and has established a distorted self-consciousness in female spectators that encourages their conformity, since “[w]oman’s image of herself is so entwined in the tangle of myths and inventions made by man that it is hard to look at it straight”.⁴⁶ This presents a particularly complex scenario for female filmmakers attempting to self-mediate within this mediaisation.

This situation is not helped by the frequent misuse of the feminist label in mass culture and the media today, which presents feminism “as a contemporary folk devil”⁴⁷ and has made the term almost ideologically redundant. This results in emerging female filmmakers rebelling against the very ideology that attempts to fight for their status and autonomy.⁴⁸

So where does this predicament leave a female filmmaker trying to formulate her vision of the world, and write herself and her female characters out of this situation? In my research I was lead to ask, as film theorist, E Ann. Kaplan does, whether it is possible for a woman to be the controlling agent in the film: whether there can be “such a thing as the female subject of desire?”⁴⁹

The Female Gaze

Feminist filmmakers have always been particularly concerned with the retrieval of female agency by reworking conventional mechanisms in their construction of the *female gaze*: a narrational technique of resistance, used to counter the male gaze, that sets out to actualise and empower reel woman by allowing her subjectivity and desire to govern the point of view and plotline of a film. This gaze is primarily focussed on valuating the body as a site of resistance and employs an aesthetic greatly influenced by French poststructuralism, which strongly opposes the minimisation of the mother in traditional psychoanalysis and discourse, emphasising her significant role, and that of her pre-linguistic language, in subject formation.⁵⁰ French poststructuralists assert that creative forms, which subvert the Law of the Father’s strict margins and evoke affectivity, allow a subject to transgress their social construction and (re)engage with the repressed maternal realm, thereby enabling women to explore their own specificity.⁵¹

It was this female gaze and specificity that I set out to define in my scriptwriting. This involved me employing a number of discourses of identity and writing resistance including French poststructuralism, autoethnography, existentialism, alternative scriptwriting theory and affirmative feminist cinema, which serve to disrupt phallogentric systems of representation by allowing women to re-engage with maternal language, and to incorporate their lived experiences of self in their writing. In this experimental process I employed a less formulaic approach to the script’s diegesis, which eventually enabled me to develop a female-

oriented gaze that generated new meanings and active characterisations of woman in my script's final draft.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that beyond the obvious sites of resistance contributing to the paucity of reel woman's agency, are subtler psychological forms of persuasion related to the long term effects of female oppression. I recommend that future research would therefore benefit from analysing reel woman and her ways of knowing, from a non-deficit perspective. I further argue the consequent need for more inclusive modes of practice within film discourse and pedagogy, and across the film industry, that acknowledge that the phallogentric model of operation must be abandoned in favour of one that is cognisant and respectful of female filmmakers' difference, and supportive of their approach to knowledge and to filmmaking.⁵²

For female filmmakers themselves, I propose that the first critical step is to find a way of reworking their self-perceptions. Together with ongoing lobbying to improve women's status in film, from my research I have come to recognise the advantages of employing subversive writing processes that allow women greater opportunities for self-definition. I suggest that female filmmakers can use our films to keep feminist ideals circulating in the public domain, however, in a way that does not see our films suffer from ghettoisation. Rather than abandoning mainstream cinema's conventions, I suggest female filmmakers must also become active within this medium to critique and rework its oppressive mechanisms and not deny women the pleasures and political advantages of this popular discourse.

It would be satisfying to pull together some of the loose ends that my PhD and this paper have unravelled concerning contemporary reel woman, but I believe that we are still a long way from understanding, and being able to write the final word on, female subjectivity and agency in film. As for me, I aim to use the insights gained through my PhD research, which have helped me to understand the difficulty I had in expressing my Self in my creative practice, to live a more active and informed life as a woman, filmmaker, and academic, and to encourage my female film students to do the same.

Notes and references

¹Inspired by Helene Cixous's concept of the Newly Born Woman – which involves woman continually renewing herself through passages of the other in herself, and of herself in the other – in this paper I adopt the notion of be(com)ing woman as a metaphor for both my subjectivity-in-process, which developed through the research, and to represent resistance and otherness, all that is absent in traditional signification.

²Marie Mandy. *Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema* Filmmaker Statement 2000 [cited 13th August 2005]. Available from http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/press/fides_presskit.pdf

³Martha M. Lauzen. *Thumbs Down - Representation of Women Film Critics in the Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers - A Study by Dr. Martha Lauzen* [Newspaper Article] 2008, 5 [cited 25th July 2008]. Available from <http://awfj.org/hot-topic/thumbs-down-representation-of-women-film-critics-in-the-top-100-us-newspapers-a-study-by-dr-martha-lauzen/>.

⁴Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. *Awards Database* 2010 [18th July 2010]. Available from http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/BasicSearchInput.jsp.

⁵Lauzen. *Thumbs Down - Representation of Women Film Critics in the Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers - A Study by Dr. Martha Lauzen*.

⁶For example, in 2008 in Australia, women made up 50% of students enrolled in the Victorian College of the Arts' Bachelor of Film and Television (Tracey Claire, Personal Communication, February 18, 2009), 55% of Curtin University's Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Film and Television (Amy Leung, Personal Communication, February 20, 2009) and 57% of Murdoch University's Bachelor of Media, majoring in Screen and Sound. (Office of Policy and Planning. *Enrolments by Programme, Attendance Type & Gender*. Murdoch University 2008 [cited 1st November, 2008]. Available from <http://wwwplan.murdoch.edu.au/stats/student/table12/default.asp?YEAR=2008&SEM=1&CAMPUS=0&FEE=0&SEX=0&NEW=0&ATTEND=0&EQUITY=0&DIVISION=16&AOU=0>).

⁷I define agency as an intuitive energy, fuelled by corporeal and psychosocial desire that determines the capacity for an individual to make their own free choices and act on their will, in the face of external forces. This is not too dissimilar to Freud's theory of libido, and Nietzsche's will-to-power: a concept he used to describe the instinctive force within all of us to exercise our individual desire and power in some way.

⁸See Sexton-Finck, Larissa Claire (2009) *Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema With Particular Reference to Independent Scriptwriting Practice*. Phd Thesis, Murdoch University. Available at <http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/view/author/Sexton-Finck,%20Larissa%20Claire.html>

⁹Laurel Richardson. 2000. Writing: A Method of Inquiry in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln. Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications, 924.

¹⁰This is a French poststructuralist term, used to describe the fluid and continuous process of subjectivity, first taken up by Julia Kristeva in her French text Polylogue see Julia Kristeva. 1977. *Polylogue*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 55-106.

¹¹My use of the term 'reel woman' is a reference to women, both behind and in front of the camera, in feature filmmaking. I would like to note here that I do not classify woman as a homogeneous entity and therefore do not presume to represent all female filmmakers in this autoethnographical research. Saying that, however, while I wish to respect critical differences among female filmmakers, and acknowledge the need for multiple subjectivities within film feminism, I do believe that a selection of female-made films today share a voice of resistance: a commonality of subversive themes, and the reworking of conventional film techniques and constructions. I propose that this is most likely due to our mutual exclusion, as women, from the main power sources of film. Consequently, this collective difference to the prevailing framework of cinema can be used as a political strength.

¹²B. Ruby Rich. 1998. *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 60.

¹³I suggest that this ideology is problematic for women because, although it suggests that merit is exploitable for all, it fails to acknowledge that merit is a quality evaluated by the power structures of capitalist society. Individuals whose characteristics and abilities do not meet the patriarchal paradigm consequently *lack* merit.

¹⁴Dr Josko Petkovic, personal communication, Perth, September 2003.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸*Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema*. 2000. Marie Mandy. Women Make Movies: France.

- ¹⁹ Christine E. Kiesinger. 2002. My Father's Shoes: The Therapeutic Value of Narrative Reframing in *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, edited by Arthur P.; Ellis Bochner, Carolyn. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 107.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 108.
- ²¹ Ibid, 109.
- ²² Adrienne Rich. 1979. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 199.
- ²³ *Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Cinema*. Mandy.
- ²⁴ See Richard Dyer. 2002. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*. 2nd ed. London; New York: Routledge.
- ²⁵ For an elaboration of this see Sexton-Finck. *Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema With Particular Reference to Independent Scriptwriting Practice*. 140-154
- ²⁶ Polly Young-Eisendrath. 1999. *Women and Desire: Beyond Wanting to be Wanted*. London: Harmony Books, 4.
- ²⁷ Martha M. Lauzen. *The Celluloid Ceiling* [Report]. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film San Diego State University 2008 [cited 17th November 2008]. Available from <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/Celluloid%20Ceiling%202007%20Full%20Report.pdf>.
- ²⁸ See WMC. *The Women's Media Center: Statistics Summary* [Report] 2008 [cited 11th October 2008]. Available from <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/research.html>; Lauzen. *Thumbs Down - Representation of Women Film Critics in the Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers - A Study by Dr. Martha Lauzen*; Gerald Wright. 2007. Leading Ladies Need Not Apply. *The West Australian*, Friday October 19, 2007; Lisa French. 2003. On Their Own Merits: Women and the Moving Image in Australia in *Womenvision*, edited by Lisa French. Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 26.
- ²⁹ Lauzen. *Thumbs Down - Representation of Women Film Critics in the Top 100 U.S. Daily Newspapers - A Study by Dr. Martha Lauzen*, 6.
- ³⁰ Among this list is Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999). Director: Catherine Breillat. Trimark Pictures Inc.: France. Producer: Jean-Francois Lepetit, *A Ma Soeur* (2001). Director: Catherine Breillat. Trimark Pictures Inc.: France. Producer: Jean-Francois Lepetit. and *Anatomie de L'enfer* (2004) Director: Catherine Breillat. Tartan Films: France. Producer: Jean-François Lepetit; Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* (1997) Director: Carine Adler. Arrow Films: United Kingdom. Producer: Ben Gibson and Kate Ogborn; Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke!* (1999) Director: Jane Campion. Miramax Films: Australia. Producer: Jan Chapman and *In the Cut* (2003) Director: Jane Campion. Pathe Productions & Screen Gems: Australia. Producer: Laurie Parker; Cate Shortland's *Somersault* (2004) Director: Cate Shortland. Hopscotch Entertainment: Australia. Producer: Anthony Anderson and Jan Chapman; Ana Kokkinos's *Book of Revelation* (2006) Director: Ana Kokkinos. Palace Films: Australia. Producer: Graham Begg, Jamie Carmichael and Al Clark; Jeanne Labrune's *Si Je T'aime, Prends Garde a Toi* (1998) Director: Jeanne Labrune. Intermedia Arc Pictures: France. Producer: Philippe Liégeois and Jean-Michel Rey; Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (1996) Director: Lynne Stopkewich. 21st Century Pictures: Canada. Producer: Dean English and Lynne Stopkewich and *Suspicious River* (2000) Director: Lynne Stopkewich. Motion International: Canada. Producer: Michael Okulitch; Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise Moi* (2000) Director: Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi. Film Fixx: France. Producer: Philippe Godeau, and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) Director: Claire Denis. Wild Bunch: France. Producer: Georges Benayoun.
- ³¹ See Sexton-Finck. *Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema With Particular Reference to Independent Scriptwriting Practice*. 182-188.
- ³² Young-Eisendrath. *Women and Desire: Beyond Wanting to be Wanted*, 19.
- ³³ Chris Wiegand. *A Quick Chat with Catherine Breillat* 2002 [cited 3rd August 2005]. Available from <http://www.kamera.co.uk/interviews/catherinebreillat.html>.
- ³⁴ Linda Nochlin. 2003. Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones. London: Routledge, 231.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 230.
- ³⁶ For an interesting discussion regarding the male-centered culture of universities in general, see Rich. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, 125-155.
- ³⁷ Students are generally taught the ins and outs of film equipment and techniques; the paperwork logistics of film management such as budgets, scheduling, copyright and insurance; and are required to write countless

essays analysing the works of celebrated (male) filmmakers. This is all very relevant, but I suggest that an additional educative orientation on how to negotiate the more intangible, self-reflexive elements of filmmaking praxis: how to analyse one's own filmic intention and artistic process; how to work with the non-rational particularities of the creative unconscious; how to subvert the homogenising constructions of commercial cinema and write with a distinctive voice; or how to deal with the psychoanalytical, ethical and political issues of representation in one's films, would help to provide a more rewarding and comprehensive approach to film pedagogy. This significant absence in dominant screen curricula indicates that such fundamental theoretical insights are extraneous to a field that is becoming more mass-market focussed.

³⁸Nick Mansfield. 2000. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, *Cultural studies*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 53.

³⁹ Part of this problem can be traced back to the fact that the notion of the universal (male) subject still greatly influences how we imagine and organise global communities today. See Mansfield. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, 54.

⁴⁰ Jane Tompkins. 1993. Me and My Shadow in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, edited by Diane Freedman; Olivia Frey and Frances Zauhar, Murphy. New York: Duke University Press, 26.

⁴¹ Mary Field Belenky; Clinchy Blythe; Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule. 1986. *Women's Ways of Knowing: the Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 68.

⁴² Also see Lorraine Code. 1991. *What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. New York: Cornwell University Press.

⁴³ In my employment of subjective knowing I do not mean to take recourse to the essentialist claim that women are *naturally* more connected to, or dependent on, their bodies for meaning-making. Rather, for me, it is through a combination of biological and social determinants, along with my difference to the symbolic order, that subjective knowledge has become my preferred approach to knowledge. In contrast to anti-essentialist feminists, who contend that women's bodily connections should be wholly rejected, given that this link has historically been used to undermine women's status as rational agents in society, I find that this connection, which forms the fundamental basis of French poststructuralist theory, can be used as a powerful tool of agency and resistance against patriarchal discourses, without reinforcing limiting essentialist notions. Feminist theorist Diana Fuss (1989) likewise affirms that, "there are such ways to elaborate and to work with a notion of essence that is not, *in essence*, ahistorical, apolitical, empiricist, or simply reductive". Diana Fuss. 1989. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 55. She defends French poststructuralism's defining of women from an essentialist position, by highlighting that this is not to "imprison women within their bodies but to rescue them from enculturating definitions by men. An essentialist definition of "woman" implies that there will always remain some part of "woman" which resists masculine imprinting and socialization". Fuss. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, 61.

⁴⁴ Adrienne Cecile Rich. 1987. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979 -1985*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 199.

⁴⁵ In light of this, I propose that even though contemporary women like myself now enjoy markedly more social freedom than female filmmakers of the last century, it takes many generations to overcome an oppressive discourse that has existed for centuries, and that is so intrinsically ingrained in our female imaginations and bodies. This innate conditioning prevents us from knowing how to exploit this liberty and so, in many ways, it is rendered ineffective. In accordance with this view, film feminist Fiona Carson (2001) argues that while women today no longer wear the 'Victorian corset', many of us now carry "an internalised, invisible, psychological and physiological" that restricts us from spiritual freedom and self-actualisation. Carson, Fiona. 2001. *Feminism and the Body* in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Gamble, Sarah. London, New York: Routledge, p. 119.

⁴⁶ Molly Haskell. 1987[1974]. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Second ed. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 278.

⁴⁷ Kylie Murphy. 2002. *Bitch: The Politics of Angry Women*, Division of Social Sciences Humanities and Education, Murdoch University, Perth, 11.

⁴⁸ Many young women I teach perceive feminism as a rarefied subculture. Their definitions generally relate to its 'unappealing' dogmatic representation. They view it as a humourless, outdated, fundamentalist ideology, as opposed to a multifaceted and life-affirming value system that can be adapted to many levels of their contemporary lives. Naomi Wolf confirms that, "*the definition of feminism* has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women's individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined *in the popular imagination* as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements". See Wolf in Gamble. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 49.

⁴⁹ E. Ann Kaplan, ed. 2000. *Feminism and Film*. Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 122.

⁵⁰ See Julia Kristeva. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 242.

⁵¹ See Julia Kristeva. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 79; Luce Irigaray and Margaret Whitford. 1991. *The Irigaray Reader*. Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 45.

⁵² Adrienne Rich's chapter *Toward a Woman-Centered University* offers a number of valuable suggestions of how to overcome this issue in university pedagogy and culture. See Rich. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, 125-155.