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# *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 288 pp.

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At a time when the issue of authorship—and of the closely related notion of auteurism—can be seen to be waning in some ways in academic film studies, as new concerns and new areas of research continue to come to the fore, and older disciplinary concerns—including auteurism—have fallen out of favour or been subjected to scrutiny, re-evaluation, and reconsideration, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* is a welcome arrival and an important contribution to the field. Certainly authorship—and its peculiarities and controversies—remains just as central an aspect of the cinematic medium as it ever was, and the very concept of the auteur director continues to be a vital aspect of how films are financed and produced, marketed and distributed, and received and exhibited, as well as how films are understood, even if this concept has been regularly redefined since it first took hold in cinephile circles in post–Second World War France in the late 1940s and 50s. One of the reasons for holding on to authorship and continuing to develop this aspect of film studies has to do with promoting expanded opportunities for women—especially in leadership and authorship roles—in film industries around the world *now*, especially in the wake of the international #MeToo movement and the systemic forms of discrimination and abuse it brought to light. Another has to do specifically with scholarship, with continuing to increase our understanding of film history and film theory by devoting more attention to all the women who have made significant contributions to the medium's development—including directors, producers, writers, editors, and other types of authors—from its earliest days to the present. As Paszkiewicz mentions in her introduction, while certain prominent women directors have been the subjects of thoughtful auteurist monographs (Chantal Akerman, Jane Campion, Claire Denis, and Sally Potter, for instance), vast other contributions remain overlooked and neglected (5).

But as the title of her book makes clear, Paszkiewicz is equally concerned with the issue of genre, and here, too, her contribution is compelling. Genre, of course, has been a central preoccupation of film studies since early in its history, and the issue of gender in relation to genre has been an important field of research since the pathbreaking studies of scholars like Charlotte Brundson, Carol J. Clover, Christine Gledhill, Annette Kuhn, Tania Modleski, Laura Mulvey, Constance Penley, Gaylyn Studlar, and others in the 1980s and 1990s. Frequently, however, such works have tended to focus on gender as it pertains to a single genre—be it horror, science fiction, the family melodrama, or some other genre—or in relation to the work of a single director, especially one known to be a genre specialist—Alfred Hitchcock or Josef von Sternberg, for instance (Modleski; Mulvey; Studlar).

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With this in mind, Paszkiewicz proposes a very different kind of intervention. In addition to two highly assertive opening chapters, including her introduction ("Impossible Liaisons? Genre and Feminist Film Criticism") and her first chapter ("Subversive Auteur, Subversive Genre"), which together provide a comprehensive overview of the debates and controversies that have swirled around issues of women in film, women's cinema, feminist filmmaking and feminist film theory, authorship, and genre, Paszkiewicz provides five detailed case studies of five very different sets of filmmakers: Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama, who collaborated on the contentious horror film *Jennifer's Body* (2009); Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), whose Best Director Oscar marked the very first time a woman had won this award; Kelly Reichardt's meditative, yet immensely powerful anti-western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010); Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), her bold, anachronistic initial foray into the costume drama; and, lastly, Nancy Meyer's *The Intern* (2015), a "(non-) romantic comedy" from one of the undisputed masters of the genre, and a true Hollywood insider (6).

From the outset, Paszkiewicz displays a fondness for controversy and a willingness to take on thorny issues and outsider positions. Her introduction begins with the case of *The Hurt Locker*, a film that won six Oscars at the 2010 Academy Awards, including Best Editing, Best Original Screenplay, Best Motion Picture of the Year, and, perhaps most notably, Best Achievement in Directing—the first time that a woman had ever been so honoured. What might have seemed like a pinnacle moment in the recognition of women filmmakers, if one that was sadly long overdue, turned out to be a hotly contested one. While many critics praised *The Hurt Locker* and cheered on Bigelow's victory as significant moment in the history of feminist film, others were highly critical of the film's lack of female characters, its embrace of a "male" genre like the war movie, and of the purported "tough-guy stance" adopted by Bigelow on this film (and others) (Paszkiewicz 1–5). Paszkiewicz returns to this notion of Bigelow as a "Hollywood Transvestite" later in the text and the significance of this film to the overall project is further indicated by book's cover image, which shows Jeremy Renner in full protective gear running in a state of panic away from a detonation. Intellectually, at least, Paszkiewicz does the opposite—she charges toward the fray, seeking out explosive issues. Her method is far from reckless, however. As she does throughout, her treatment of Bigelow and *The Hurt Locker* combines a detailed overview of the film's reception, close textual analysis, and careful consideration of feminist theory as it pertains to the "intersection of genre, authorship and women's cinema" (8).

Paszkiewicz's treatment of Bigelow and *The Hurt Locker* is a well-chosen case study, and one that is deftly handled, but there is perhaps no better example of her willingness to challenge the very concept of the auteur director than the chapter she devotes to *Jennifer's Body*. Here, instead of simply providing an analysis that focuses on Karyn Kusama and her turn to horror and gender, Paszkiewicz approaches the project as a complex collaboration involving two principal authors: Kusama, who had first made a name for herself at Sundance with the release of *Girlfight* in January 2000, which she wrote and directed; and Diablo Cody, the film's screenwriter, and an author who had become both a celebrity and a *cause célèbre* in the wake of the phenomenal success of *Juno* in 2007–2008. Though the debates surrounding the film have dissipated considerably in the decade since its release, *Jennifer's Body* remains a highly contentious film among critics, fans, and scholars alike, and thus a very useful one from the standpoint of this book. As Paszkiewicz puts it, "[t]he controversies around the feminist, anti-feminist or even post-feminist label of

*Jennifer's Body* reveal complex processes of negotiations concerning horror film and its ability to address gender politics" (65). Irrespective of the film's merits as a work of art—although clearly Paszkiewicz thinks quite highly of *Jennifer's Body*—this is a production that proved unusually volatile, even before it appeared on screens. This was due to a number factors outlined in the chapter, which together generated tremendous sparks, including Cody's "biographical legend" and her newly achieved status as a celebrity writer (67–9); the producers' apparently male-oriented marketing campaign, which "focused almost exclusively" on the objectification of Megan Fox and her "'to-be-looked-at' celebrity image" (70–3); and the film's knowing intervention into the horror genre, the feminist scholarship this genre has generated, women's contributions to this famously male-dominated genre, and female spectatorial pleasure in relation to horror films (76–97). Ultimately, however, it is the generic interventionism of *Jennifer's Body* that is its greatest source of value to Paszkiewicz's study. "Rather than *being* a horror film," she writes, "*Jennifer's Body participates in* horror film, inscribing itself in wider trends of its time and offering—and inflating to the fullest—certain clichés and representations," thus generating its unusual degree of polysemy (96).

To some degree, because of the way they align with my own teaching and research interests, it was the two chapters in *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* having the most to do with independent cinema—the ones dealing with Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* and Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*—that I found to be the most compelling. This was in spite of some odd claims from time to time with regards to art cinema, independent cinema, and genre. For instance, is the topic here "genre film" or "popular genre film"? And are art cinema and genre somehow at odds? or indie cinema and genre? Isn't even the most austere, highly experimental, and wilfully unconventional art and indie cinema often indebted to at least one genre or another? And isn't the history of authorship and auteurism largely also a history of genre and its manipulation? Overall, though, I found these chapters to be significant contributions to the literature on Reichardt and Coppola, and on independent and art cinema, more generally—both of them thoughtful, well-researched, and meticulously detailed.

But, here again, in many ways it is Paszkiewicz's chapter on *Marie Antoinette* that is the standout, precisely because of the considerable controversy that has surrounded Coppola throughout her directorial career, because of her status as "Hollywood royalty" (177–8), and because her playful, brazenly anachronistic, and impressionistic take on the life of *l'Autrichienne* created such a firestorm of criticism and was such a contentious and enormously divisive follow-up to *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lost in Translation* (2003) (174–9). Coppola's signature aesthetic is based on issues of "spectacle, surface and repetition", but where others see merely a cinema of style and superficiality, fashion and frivolity, Paszkiewicz finds something more sophisticated and nuanced (201–3). *Marie Antoinette* may be a film that is focused primarily on "surface and appearances", but its politics are anything but superficial. "Surface cannot be separated from the content" in a film like *Marie Antoinette*, Paszkiewicz argues quite convincingly, "and it is, in fact, possible to reconcile image and complexity, production and reproduction, creation and consumption," as her analysis of the film's cinematography and mise en scène illustrate (203). Finally, this is a film that showcases Coppola's savvy, and her grasp of the metaphorical potential of cinema, for in many ways *Marie Antoinette* amounts to a character study of a particularly notable (and infamous) example of the insider/outsider, made by a director whose career has been defined by this very same tension (201).

The only time when *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* shows signs of strain is in the book's final chapter—the one dealing with Nancy Meyers's *The Intern*. There's a fallacy that Paszkiewicz falls back on from time to time throughout this book which is perhaps at its most acute here. Is there any film genre that is so maligned that it remains beyond redemption? It is hard to think of one—even the most "disreputable" genres generally include examples where some group of talented filmmakers or another found a way to take its conventions and mould them into "art". And in spite of Paszkiewicz's assertions, the history of auteurism is inextricably tied to the reworking of popular genres, from the crime/detective film, to the family melodrama, to the horror film, the science fiction film, the Western, and so on. Certainly, the romantic comedy can't be one of these irredeemable genres. Taking into account American film alone, quite a number of the acknowledged "masterpieces" of cinema fall under this category, from the silent era through the heyday of the Classical Hollywood to the New Hollywood and beyond. When one considers other national traditions, the list expands exponentially. And if one looks at the place of the romantic comedy in the realm of literature and theatre, the idea that this genre is a primary source of the antagonism toward Meyers's work seems spurious. It is not clear to me that the "usual scorn for the 'women's genre' of the romcom and for the female audiences that enjoy it" is the problem (211), especially when Pazkiewicz goes to the trouble of including critiques of Meyers's films that seem level-headed, on point, and not at all dismissive of genre (like that of *The New York Times*' Manohla Dargis) (213).

All in all, Katarzyna Pazkiewicz's *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* remains a significant achievement. It is a bold and painstakingly researched book, a highly readable one, and one that displays a certain fearlessness when it comes to addressing controversies in the realm of cultural politics. It is a book that is perfectly timed for the #AfterMeToo era, but one that will surely prove to be of lasting import.

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