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Ivone Margulies and Jeremi Szaniawski, eds., *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. vii + 397 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £81.00 (hb). ISBN 978-15013-3246-3; £24.99 (pb). ISBN 978-15013-3245-6.

Review by Rosanna Maule, Concordia University.

“Women’s film” is a category that feminist scholars, critics, and women filmmakers frequently eschew on account of its essentialist, universalizing, or ghettoizing implications. For this reason, it is not surprising that *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*, coedited by Ivone Margulies and Jeremi Szaniawski, should start off on a meta-methodological question about the viability of this label in present-day global cinema, less to answer it than to open up its weak points to discussion through the recognition of “a continued need for feminist correctives to existing and accepted canons” (p. 2). To this effect, the collection picks up from the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman’s idea that women’s film is “personal cinema” and a minority perspective inspired by the scholar and experimental filmmaker Laleen Jayamanne to explore a wide spectrum of films directed by women within an inclusive context of independent, noncanonical, and experimental cinematic practices. Drawing on a feminist- and queer-informed theoretical framework that articulates the concept of women’s films by challenging traditional notions of the *auteure*, the book proposes a deterritorializing view of personal cinema attentive “to the convergence of a movement of thought and women’s movement” (p. 5). Specifically, it inquires into the interface of affect and materiality in the works of filmmakers whose intermediation and reinscription of marginal subjectivities, invisible bodies, silenced minorities, and queer subjectivities counter fraught constructions of femininity and women’s agency in dominant and neoliberal discourse (p. 8).

Using films that reflect the contributors’ investment in cultural diversity, intersectionality, and aesthetic experimentation, the book presents women’s films as personal cinema through an original and assorted corpus. The examples include various cinematic forms (e.g., feature films, documentary films, experimental films, video art, hybrid genres) and modes of productions (all independent yet coming from disparate geocultural areas and periods, from the 1960s to today). Acknowledging this heterogeneity, the coeditors underscore its analytical range and the scope of its film selection, including “works by far less known, but no less crucial emerging voices ([Maria] Ramos, Xialou Guo, Valérie Massadian)...and established, lionized figures in the arthouse and festival circuit (Malgorzata Szumowska, [Lynne] Ramsay, Lucrecia Martel, Akerman, Claire Denis) and the art world (Hito Steyerl)” (p. 3), as well as some nationally recognized figures (Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Maria Ramos, Huang Yu-shan), and the cross-generational Agnès Varda. The contributions to the volume—divided into nineteen single-

authored chapters—mirror the variety of the film selection, as they bring together an international and intergenerational group of scholars, independent writers, critics, and artists from different disciplines, at various stages of their careers. The collection is divided into five parts, which incorporate what the coeditors identify as “reading keys,” specifically: “embodiment; self and authorial inscription; subjectivities across cultural, (trans)national, and neoliberal logics; duration and in/significance; silence, talking heads, and collective matters; women’s imaginaries; psychic spaces, and samesex worlds” (p. 8). These keywords, which cross over the parts and the overall purpose of the book, are discussed in detail in the introduction.

This is an essential part of the volume as it succeeds in interlacing a constellation of films and relative analyses without imposing privileged or predetermined hermeneutics. In it, Margulies and Szniawski first opportunely situate the notion of women’s films in regard to the theorization of women’s cinema and in relation to the critical redefinition of authorship, referring back to recent books that complicate these concepts through new gender-informed strategies or tactics of expression.^[1] From this perspective, they look at the formulation of women’s cinema as minor cinema, as a formal and cultural strategy, as a new form of agency or queer expression, as a shifting politic of feminist representation in nondominant paradigms, and as an issue of ownership. While recognizing the difficulty to reconcile authorship with the varying situations of women’s cinema and women’s situations, eventually they identify a tentative criterion for evaluating women’s films into a poetic set at the intersection of global identity and spatio-temporally contingent forms of embodiment.

In the following sections of the introduction, Margulies and Szniawski illustrate the book’s content, less by adopting a traditional chapter-by-chapter order than by discussing the aforementioned “reading keys” in light of individual contributions. They start with embodiment and material self-inscription, describing it as a strategy of feminist remediation in the works of Valie Export, Claire Denis, and Hito Steyerl—a subject included in the third part of the collection in essays by Katrin Pesch, Nora Gortcheva, and Jennifer Stob (pp. 8-10). They continue presenting self-inscription as a form of minor agency in contributions from the first two parts of the collection, including Rebecca J. De Roo and Jean Ma’s analyses of Agnès Varda’s documentaries *Ydessa, the Bears, and etc.* (2004) and *Lions’ Love (and Lies)* (1969). They also identify self-inscription as a strategy of deindividuated representation in Patricia White’s reading of Xia Xuo’s film *She, A Chinese* (2009) and as a nonlinear, multidimensional mediation in Michael Cramer’s analysis of Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar* (2002), chapters that appear in parts four and three of the collection, respectively.

Moving on to the discussion of subjectivities across (trans)national and neoliberal logics, Margulies and Szniawski link self-inscription to environmentally and geographically specific visions. This motif appears in the work of the Taiwanese’s filmmaker Huang Yu-sha as discussed by Zhen Zhang, and of the Polish filmmaker Małgorzata Szumowska, examined by Izabela Kalinowska, in part four of the book. The editors then concentrate on the thematic cluster of insignificance, which they associate with the aesthetics of endurance and duration. They find this aesthetic continuing with Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* (1970), in the works of Chantal Akerman and Mireia Sallarés, as well as in relation to techniques of reenactment. Other instances of the aesthetic of endurance are and continue with Maria Ramos’s social documentaries and in two films by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad—all included in the first two parts of the book. This part begins and continues with chapters by Elena Gorfinkel, Ivone Margulies, Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, Andréa Franca, and Laura Mulvey, as well as in Cecilia Mangini’s documentary *Essere Donne*

(1965), about which Noa Steimatsky writes at the beginning of the second section. Margulies and Szniawski conclude their presentation with films that address women's imaginary and queer spaces as personal ways to deal with traumatic or sensual events, a topic treated in the last part of the collection with contributions by Rebekah Rutkoff on Chick Strand, by Liza Johnson on Lynne Ramsay and Catherine Breillat, by Karen Redrobe on Lucretia Martel and Denise Goçkalves, and by Jeremi Szaniawski on Valérie Massadian.

The purposefully nonlinear illustration of the book's content might seem a counterintuitive choice, and it could be a bit frustrating for a reader expecting to be navigated through almost 400 pages of distinctive insights on a vast spectrum of cinematic practices. However, it coheres with the editors' self-conscious decision not to interfere with the contributors' choices of subject "at the risk of overlaps and glaring lacunae" (p. 4). This style of presentation also reflects the collection's impulse to mobilize original scholarship on works that are picked for their "specific and broad capacity to embrace, to shape, and question the world" (p. 5). In return, this methodology has produced a rather cohesive assemblage, which find its internal coherence thanks to the suggested keywords, as well as through intertextual links and spontaneous convergences among the filmic texts and some of the contributors' positions. The parts, all equally compelling, reflect the contributors' palpable enthusiasm for works and case studies that reconfigure women's films as personal visions developed through affective and mediating representations of women's material conditions and imaginaries in circumstances of social and cultural marginalization.

"Phrasing (in)Significance," part one of the collection, stands out for its refreshing take on recurring topics in women's films such as labor, trauma, marginalization, and censorship through the focus on endurance. In bracketing the first two letters of "insignificance" in the title of the section, the editors stress the double meaning embedded in this word and the films considered in this section, wherein endurance is associated with a corporeal and material aesthetic drawing on the long take.

In a chapter dedicated to Barbara Loden's masterpiece *Wanda*, Elena Gorfinkel attaches insignificance to endurance, duration and its derivative neologism, endurance, to the film's aesthetic, which, she continues, resonates with the slow unfolding of the protagonist's passive, obstinate drift away from her family and from society altogether. In the film, insignificance is ingrained in the apathetic nature of the titular protagonist (interpreted by Loden herself), a working-class housewife in a Pennsylvania coalmining area, for whom, Gorfinkel explains, Loden found inspiration in her own personal experience and professional trajectory in Hollywood. The iconography of feminine fatigue and exploitation present in *Wanda* has another echo in an archival image of Loden, a promotional photo that seems to foreshadow her representation of Wanda as antiglamorous and weary. According to Gorfinkel, the aesthetic of endurance has a formal as well as historical, social, and affective value. From this viewpoint, she claims that "*Wanda's* politic of slowness rests in its emphasis on the valuation and recognition of a woman's experience, its failures, dead ends, and ambivalences, and of the oppressive demands to perform for another, rather than oneself" (p. 45).

The aesthetic of insignificant endurance returns with different resonances in Ivone Margulies's definition of Chantal Akerman's work as a byproduct of what the filmmaker refers to as her "ruminations," that is, her obsession with Jewish history and her mother's past (p. 50). Akerman's ruminative economy adds a moral dimension to Gorfinkel's "sustained motif of fatigue" (p. 51). Considering Akerman's affinity to the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom fatigue "is a

horizon of subjective self-consciousness, a product of effort, and a confrontation with indeterminacy” (p. 52), Margulies presents Akerman’s relations between exhaustion and rumination as “a thematic concern that structures the very notion of Akerman’s artistic signature and her repeated enactment of autonomy” (pp. 52-53). It is from this perspective that Margulies proposes Akerman’s self-absenting gesture of exhaustion from the ruminative economy of her work as an aesthetic measure, recurring in three elements: the room apart, the extended take, and the lengthy sitting. As an artistic signature, exhaustion guarantees her mental space, maintaining the filmmaker formally separate from her mother, her history, and her creative self. Akerman’s figures of exhaustion are also part of an “aesthetic of irresolution” present not only in films, but also in her installations, where the beholder remains suspended between waiting and sitting, as well as in some of her shorts, like *La paresse* (1986) and the mini-manifesto *Lettre de Cinéaste* (1984), where the trope of waiting and sitting articulates a more autobiographical subject (p. 64).

The last two chapters of part one deal with insignificance and temporality via the use of similar instances of cinematic techniques; e.g., the long take, reenactment, and realistic cinematic style—yet in different types of films. On the one hand, the long take and reenactment are used to film the behind-the-scenes of trials or to substitute the reverse-shots of minors in trial procedures of correctional institutions for minors in the social documentaries of the Brazilian filmmaker Maria Ramos, analyzed by Andréa Franca. In her justice trilogy—*Justice* (2004); *Behave* (2007); and *Hills of Pleasure* (2013)—Ramos adopts techniques of direct cinema to create a “mise-en-scène of waiting” (p. 73), scrutinizing the vulnerable bodies of people waiting for trials in the judicial system of Brazil. Commenting on Ramos’s use of direct cinema’s aesthetic to capture these scenes, Franca concludes that “the mise-en-scène of waiting is a way of restoring the expressive realities of words and experiences of obscured and undistinguished lives” (pp. 85-86). The purpose of Ramos is to bring attention to the gender and racial differences of Brazilian society by making visible the vulnerable bodies of its marginal communities.

The final instalment of this section looks at silence as central in women’s oppression under patriarchy from the point of view of cinematic representation. Realistic style and self-reflexivity appear in two feature films by the Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, examined by Laura Mulvey. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Iran’s foremost woman filmmaker, has had a long experience in the recording of silenced oppression as a documentary filmmaker before completing the two feature films at the center of Mulvey’s analysis, *The May Lady* (1998) and *Under the Skin of the City* (2001). Both films link silence to questions of representation, the former featuring a female filmmaker as a lead who fails to give voice to the oppressed, the second in a narrative that at the end recurs to a self-reflexive strategy of representation hinting at the impasse of cinema to help the cause of women.

Part two applies the notion of women’s film self-inscription to documentary cinema, articulating an apparent oxymoron in this type of film: the collective experience of the subjects and the individual poetics of the filmmaker. The chapter includes different types of documentary approaches and styles, covering a period from the mid-1960s to the first decade of the 2000s. In *Essere donne* (*Being Women*, 1965) Cecilia Mangini documents and denounces the harsh labour conditions of women in Italy in the early 1960s. As Noa Steimatsky notes, “*Essere donne* cultivates a poetic vernacular by which even the minor gesture comes to endow the plight of women with epic grandeur” (p. 108). Another example is Mireia Sallarès’s *Las muertas chiquitas* (*Little Deaths*, 2009) a five-hour talking-head documentary collecting testimonies about orgasms from Mexican

women of different social and cultural origins. In her analysis of the film, Salomé Aguilera Skvirky cogently suggests that the film expands much beyond the topic and become a pretext for the women to talk about “birth and death; pleasure and pain, sex and violence. They talk about their love affairs, their children, their parents, coprophagy, failed revolution, torture, discrimination, femicide, feminism, La Malinche, Mexican identity, etc.” (p. 126). Part two ends with two chapters about Agnès Varda’s hybrid documentary work. The first one is dedicated to *Ydessa, les ours, et etc.* (*Ydessa, The Bears, and etc.*, 2004), a film developed on the basis of an art installation about anonymous family photographs including teddy bears, exhibited by the Tronto-based artist and curator Ydessa Hendeles at the Haus Der Kunst in Munich in 2003. In her essay about the film, Rebecca J. DeRoo brings attention to how both Hendeles and Varda “explore concepts of the photographic document and archive- examining how and to what degree they evoke layers of personal and cultural significance, and how they take on additional meaning when recontextualized in the exhibition and in the film” (p. 148). The last contribution to this part, is Jean Ma’s reading of *Lion’s Love (and Lies)* (1969), a docudrama that Agnès Varda filmed in 1969 in Los Angeles during the first of her residencies in the city. Featuring Viva, one of the superstars in Andy Warhol’s Factory entourage, Jerry Ragni and Jim Rado, co-authors and protagonists of the Broadway version of the musical *Hair* (1967), with a cameo from the independent filmmaker Shirley Clarke, and Varda herself as the filmmaker. Set in a house in the Hollywood hills, the film follows Viva, Ragni, and Rado in a fictional ménage à trois, mixing fiction and reality, characters and the subjects’ real personae. Highlighting the hybridity of a film including strategies of collaboration, intertextuality, and improvisation, Ma concludes, “The film’s unstable ground and doubled surfaces serve as an ideal medium for Varda to reflect on her practice as a filmmaker working in between disparate cultures, artistic sites, and spheres of influence” (p.164).

Within the collection, one of the most diversified sections is part three, “Embodied Configurations: Material and Self-Inscriptions,” which includes films from different genres, forms, and geocultural contexts, from Claire Denis’s postcapitalist noir/family tragedy *Les salauds (Bastards)*, 2013) to Hito Steyerl’s multimedia essays on self-suspension as a process that reflects on the process of enslavement of the artist-performer, to Valie Export’s feminist remediation of the hypermediatized, to Lynne Ramsay’s encouragement of authorial negotiation in *Morvern Callar*.

Part four, “Subjectivities Across Local National and Neoliberal Logics” and part five, “Women’s Imaginary, Same-sex Worlds” advance the book’s vast scope and penchant for inclusivity, including contributions about women’s authorship from within a transnational framework and tackling issues of cultural and sexual identity, historical and personal memory, female same-sex desire.

Patricia White opens part four addressing the question of transnational feminist authorship outside of Western contexts through the case of the Xiaolu Guo, a diasporic British-Chinese filmmaker whose film *She, A Chinese* (2009) reflects her own experience of globalization. Zhen Zhang brings attention to the work of Huang Yu-shan, a prolific Taiwanese filmmaker and a member of the Taiwan New Cinema, whose work has been overshadowed by male auteurs of the same movement known outside of their country (p. 268). Focusing on the filmmaker’s early “Feminist Tetralogy” and what she identifies as her postcolonial trilogy, Zhang brings attention to how her films “consistently present a gallery of female characters of different ages and class backgrounds, alternately nourished and undermined by the specific geo-cultural environments

surrounding them” (p. 268). The discussion of Polish director Malgorzata Szumowska’s oeuvre, centred on the mechanisms of mourning, closes part four.

The collection ends with an overview of women’s films from the viewpoint of their representation of women’s sexual imaginary and queer desire. Rebekah Rutkoff’s well-documented analysis of *Soft-Fiction* (1979) contextualizes the film in relation to Chick Strand’s practice in experimental ethnography, particularly her late 1970s portraits of women as an exploration of female consciousness. In the following chapter, Liza Johnson inquires into the representation of on shame in a number of feminist and queer films, including Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar* (2002), Denise Gonçalves’ short film *Sounds of Steps* (1996), and Catherine Breillat’s *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*, 1976). In inquiring into this corpus, Johnson aims to “to position, as critically powerfully and usefully feminist, films that take advantage of the expanded range that the contemporary moment offers for working with and through negative affect” (p. 328).

The last two chapters of the collection are devoted to the discussion of female imaginary and sexuality in women’s films that feature adolescents and girls. Karen Redrobe rethinks the relationship between female global authorship and the figure of the holy girl in Lucrecia Martel’s eponymous film, *La Niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, 2004) from the viewpoint of a filmmaker from the global south “who explicitly and repeatedly engages domestic, local, and female concerns” (p. 352). The chapter by the collection’s co-editor, Jeremi Szaniawski, concludes the book with an analysis of the début film of French filmmaker Valérie Massadian’s *Nana* (2011), a realist and intense study of a little girl living in a poor farmhouse with her single mother, who at one point abandons her with her old grandfather. As Szaniawski notes, adopting a fairy tale approach to the little girl’s difficult experience, “Massadian’s vision is that of one who has lived on the periphery and carefully sees the world at the center with changed eyes, and to whom cinema offers a means to express this estrangement and attentive gaze” (p. 383).

This collection, which addresses an academic and specialized audience within a transdisciplinary framework of interests in women and gender studies, film and media studies, and cultural theory, will be a precious tool in curricular courses on women and film, gender embodiment, and queer representation in film. It is also an engaging, highly readable book that broadens the definition of women’s film through a wide selection of case studies and approaches.

NOTES

[1] See, among others: Kristin Lené Hole and Dijana Jelača, “Women Filmmakers and Feminist Authorship,” in Kristin Lené Hole and Dijana Jelača, eds., *Film Feminisms: A Global Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2018), and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2018).

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