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Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 280 pp. Photographs. \$79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 13-978-0-8223-4175-8. \$22.95 (pb). ISBN 13-978-0-8223-4192-5.

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French film scholar Geneviève Sellier's most recent book, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, now available in a wonderful English translation by Kristin Ross, covers such a wide range of questions and problems that it will interest readers beyond the narrower fields of film or French studies. Readers interested in the larger questions of feminist history, French social history, and French cultural history will also find much to learn from her work. Sellier's project seeks to revisit and revise the historiography of the French New Wave period (loosely defined as 1958 to 1962) by analyzing "filmic representations as an element of a collective imaginary echoing the society of the times" (p. 4). Through her focus on analyses of the aesthetic features of individual works or by emphasizing a group of directors as cinematic *auteurs*, Sellier concludes that critical discourse de-historicizes and de-contextualizes the films themselves, especially concerning the question of gender. Many viewed and continue to view the French New Wave as the moment when cinema shed its popular roots and proved it could be a modern artistic medium. However, Sellier argues that the very means by which this reputation was established, namely considering movies from an abstract, formal perspective independent of socio-historical context, has obscured some New Wave directors' misogyny and political conservatism. In this way, Sellier sets out to complicate certain New Wave directors' representations of modern, independent women.

Most of the existing scholarship on the New Wave, Sellier argues, simply revalidates the historical legacy of the New Wave as a cult object in the history of international cinephilia. While there have been some attempts to reconnect individual filmmakers and films to their social and historical contexts, notably Kristin Ross' *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* and Richard Neupert's *A History of the French New Wave*, Sellier's approach differs in two important respects. First, she does not limit herself to the established cinephilic canon, but rather attempts to look systematically at the range of filmmaking during the New Wave period. She considers less-celebrated films by important directors and also films that have been largely forgotten. Second, throughout her study, Sellier examines the representations of sexual identities in the films and consistently connects these representations to the reception of individual films as well as larger social discourses about the changing roles of women in the post-war period.

The book's approach is rather unique and important in the way that it is deeply indebted to the first wave of feminist film theory (Laura Mulvey's work among others) and also to the more sociologically-oriented work of Pierre Bourdieu on the history of literature. While this combination might at first appear paradoxical, an important part of Sellier's project is the ambassadorial work of introducing American film theory to a French audience. At the same time, she succeeds in showing her American audience that theoretical and historical approaches to film scholarship need not be mutually exclusive. She offers a wealth of information about the reception of individual films that helps contextualize her discussions of gender and the canonization of the French New Wave. *Masculine Singular* will satisfy both

the film scholar in its attentiveness to questions of form and also the historian in its attention to cultural context.

Chapter One focuses on the gradual emergence of the modern woman after the Second World War. It contextualizes the anxieties around shifting gender roles at the time by discussing popular articles, studies, and surveys about the place of men and women in society. Chapter Two traces the rise of cinephilia in the 1950s and shows how the cinephilic gaze is ultimately an eroticized and sexualized one that reduces women to fetishized objects for the voyeuristic pleasure of the male gaze. The conception of the cinematic *auteur* that emerges from the *Cahiers du cinéma* depends on a Romantic conception of the artist as demiurge and idealist, one that reduces woman to, at best, a muse, or at worst, a threatening force. Chapter Three looks at the industrial changes and shifts in government support of the arts that enabled the simultaneous development of a commercial mass-market cinema alongside a more elitist *auteur* cinema.

Chapter Four looks at the reception of the subset of New Wave films which appealed to a broad section of the general population, which were not necessarily those films that cinephiles prefer. Sellier argues that the films that have come to represent the New Wave for critics and scholars are those which articulate a male subjectivity for an elite, cultured audience. Throughout her analysis of the New Wave's reception, Sellier looks for traces of female viewership and examines reactions to the contradictory images of female emancipation that both celebrated and lesser-known New Wave films offered. Chapter Five considers a series of underemphasized or even forgotten filmmakers and writers: Roger Vailland, Pierre Klost, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and Alexandre Astruc. Sellier argues that all four were attuned to the contradictions, instabilities, and resistances that arose around the changing status of women during the post-war Era. This chapter attempts to trace the blind spots of New Wave filmmaking and critical discourse as it affirmed its masculinity and aestheticism, often at the expense of women, social context, and politics.

Chapter Six chronicles the legacy of Romanticism within the so-called modernism of the New Wave filmmakers. What unifies the various films she considers in this chapter is the omnipresence of a creative, male subjectivity as the structuring presence in the films. The male figures within these films crave a tragic solitude from which to create. Women are represented as individuals who cause fear and anxiety, entrap men, and potentially impinge on the male's creativity. Chapter Seven looks at the ambiguities and contradictions of New Wave films that deal, however obliquely, with the political questions confronting early 1960s France. Sellier carefully shows that even filmmakers rooted in the left, like Doniol-Valcroze, imagined political commitment through a language of masculine virility and courage that looked backwards to the Interwar period and Romantic ideals of freedom rather than the specific contexts of the Algerian and Cold Wars. In this way, Sellier confirms the often conservative and retrograde politics of much New Wave cinema and its dependence on a heroic vision of masculinity that excludes women.

The next three chapters mark a shift away from the masculine protagonists towards an interrogation of the representations of modern, independent women through the star personas of selected New Wave actresses. Chapter Eight investigates the changes in the way female seduction was portrayed on screen. Despite the naturalness with which women were portrayed in New Wave films (no make-up, close-ups, often unflattering lighting), Sellier argues that it would be a mistake to see these versions of womanhood as somehow more authentic and liberated. Rather, they offer visions of women as seen by men at the period; women are mere object of analysis for men, not subjects in their own right. While the male directors are forced to come to terms with modern women, they do not offer them subjectivity or true autonomy. The quintessential New Wave stars Jeanne Moreau and Brigitte Bardot help illustrate this paradox further. In Chapter Nine, Sellier shows how Jeanne Moreau figures in New Wave films as the intelligent, self-aware, emancipated modern woman who, despite her independence, pursues love at all costs. The image her movies offer of female emancipation is one that occurs uniquely in the realm of

amorous relationships, not within the larger social or political world. If Jeanne Moreau was the female star adopted by cultural elite, Brigitte Bardot was the emancipated female figure associated with popular cinema. In Chapter Ten, Sellier traces the often-tendentious relationship between Bardot's powerful presence as a figure of female emancipation for many young women and the attempts of New Wave directors to submit her star persona to their creative control.

In *Masculine Singular's* final chapter, Sellier looks to the group of "Left Bank" filmmakers, as opposed to the more conservative *Cahiers du cinéma* group, for evidence of more progressive representations of the modern women. She finds a few instances of women portrayed as actual subjects in the films of Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda; however, she argues that these few exceptions simply serve to confirm the rule of male narcissism and dominance in the aesthetic realm. Ultimately, Sellier concludes, it will not be until the feminist movements of the 1970s that female points of view will be taken into account by cinema in a sustained way.

Sellier's fascinating new book is essential reading for students of French film history and specifically the New Wave. For those who regularly teach courses on the New Wave, Sellier's book offers a way to help students deconstruct some of the aura surrounding the period and better appreciate the cultural and aesthetic contradictions of French society in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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