

Women Filmmakers

Lecture 6: Revising History and Queering Genre



Portrait de la jeune fille en feu/Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Sciamma 2019)

Structure of the Session

Introduction to queer studies in visual culture

Heritage and history

Sciamma as queer feminist auteur(e)

- *Themes and visual style*
- *The star director and her films*
- *The question of autofiction*

Queerness and its Relation to Camp Aesthetics

For Susan Sontag, in her 1966 essay 'Notes on "Camp"':

- camp is a sensibility that is 'almost ineffable' but that is linked to 'things-being-what-they-are-not' and that thrives on **artifice** and **exaggeration**.



Some like it Hot (Billy Wilder, 1959)

Camp Aesthetics (Sontag cont.)

‘To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. **It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical.**’ (p.277)

And yet....

marginality may be a prerequisite – Cocteau not Gide* (p. 278); ‘[c]amp taste turns its back on **the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement**’, rejecting ‘**the pantheon of high culture**’ (p.286) [cf. postmodernism as a whole].

‘[E]very sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes it [... and] **Camp taste [...] definitely has something propagandistic about it**’ (p.290).

*Writer Gide much more defensive about his gayness than Cocteau, especially in his youth - as well as more ‘establishment’ in artistic style and positioning (e.g. won Nobel Prize)

'Camp and the Gay Sensibility' – Jack Babuscio (1980)

The explicitly stated aim of this piece:

'I define the gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed and defined by the fact of one's gayness'

Reproduced in Babuscio, *Camp* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

The Emergence of Queer (Studies)



- In the 1990s, lesbians and gay men identify their oppositional reading strategies of media and literary texts as ‘queer’.
- Away from the notions of oppression and liberation of earlier gay and lesbian criticism, **‘queer readings are fully inflected with irony, transgressive gender parody and deconstructed subjectivities.’**

The Oxford Guide to Film Studies (1998), p.142.

Leading to an expansion of queerness to take in but also transcend the category of sexual identity, including in cinema – in tandem with social changes, including in France.

Overtly Queer Themes in French Cinema

Wild Reeds,
1994



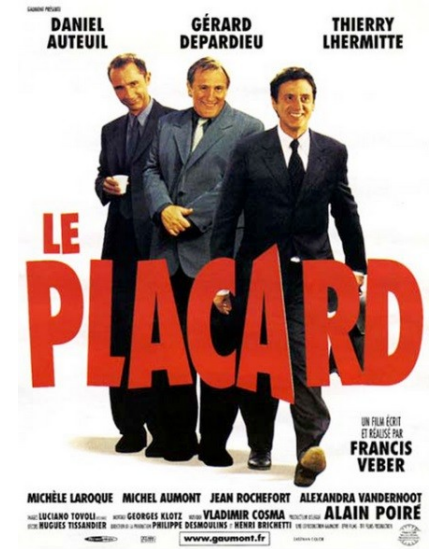
French
Twist,
1995



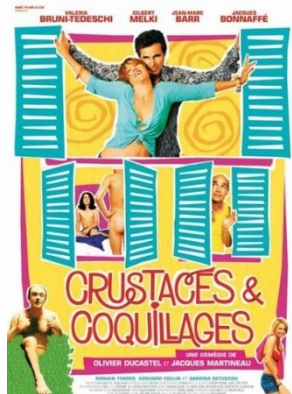
Man is a Woman,
1997



The
Closet,
2000



Cockles and
Muscles,
2005



Love Songs,
2007



Blue is the
Warmest Colour,
2013



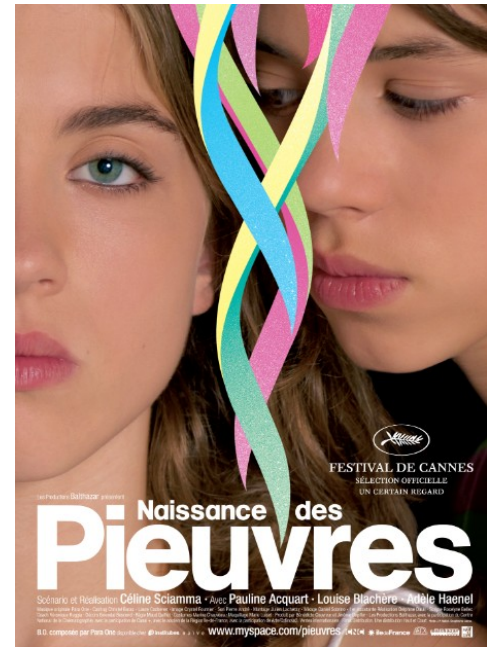
Marry Me,
Buddy
2017



2019



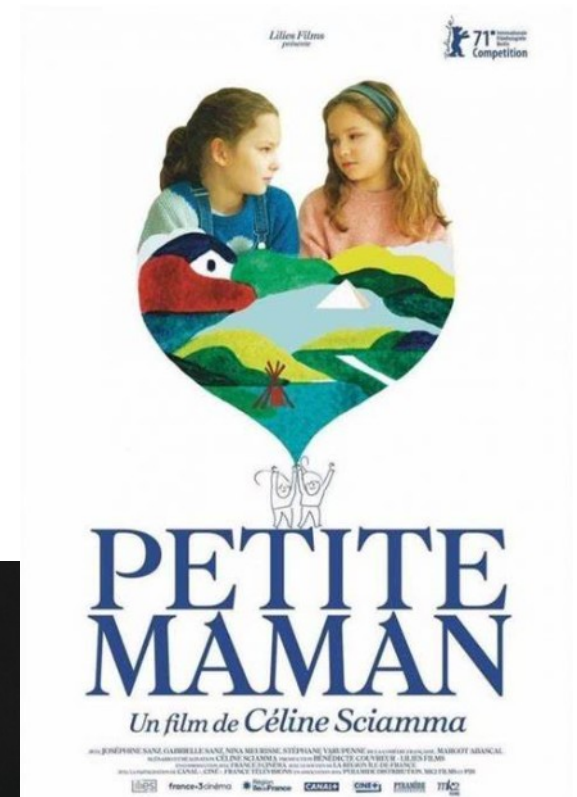
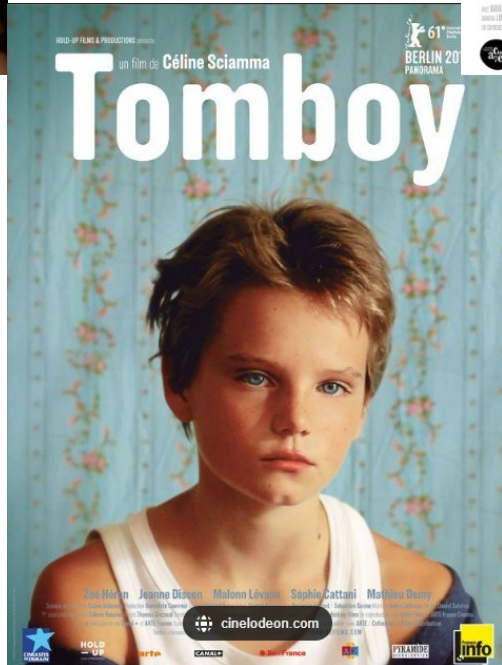
Sciamma's Directing Oeuvre



Waterlilies



Girlhood



Sight and Sound Poll 2022



The Greatest Films of All Time

In 1952, the Sight and Sound team had the novel idea of asking critics to name the greatest films of all time. The tradition became decennial, increasing in size and prestige as the decades passed.

The Sight and Sound poll is now a major bellwether of critical opinion on cinema and this year's edition (its eighth) is the largest ever, with 1,639 participating critics, programmers, curators, archivists and academics each submitting their top ten ballot. What has risen up the ranks? What has fallen? Has 2012's winner *Vertigo* held on to its title? Find out below.

Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019)



<https://www.pinterest.fr/pin/492581277999137401/>

["Page 28" Poster for Sale by VanillaBubble | Redbubble](#)

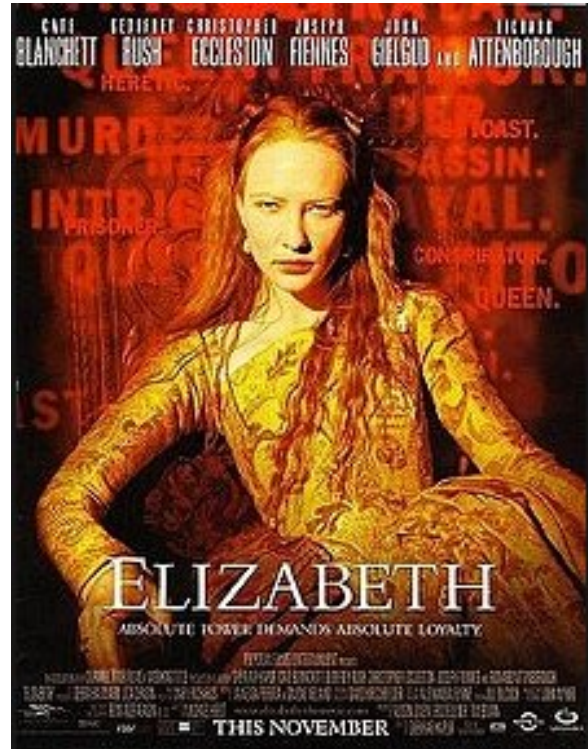
Heritage Cinema: Filming the Past

- Selling an image of the national past at a time when national identities are in question (1980s)
- Depicts middle- and upper-class experience for a middle-class, older audience
- Character, place, atmosphere and milieu favoured over dramatic, goal-directed action



Molière (2007)

Note difference from 'post-heritage' cycle since mid-1990s, characterised by more sex and violence, a faster pace and a 'showier', often faster-paced aesthetic.



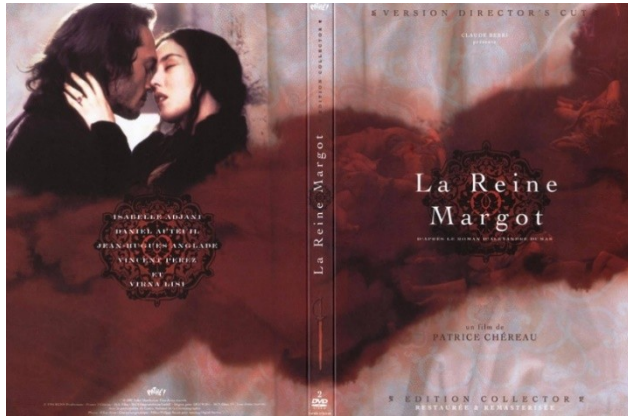
The Spectacle of the Past



*Tous les matins de
monde/All the
Mornings of the
World (1991)*



Painterly and Other 'High' Cultural References



See also Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).



Emma, 2020



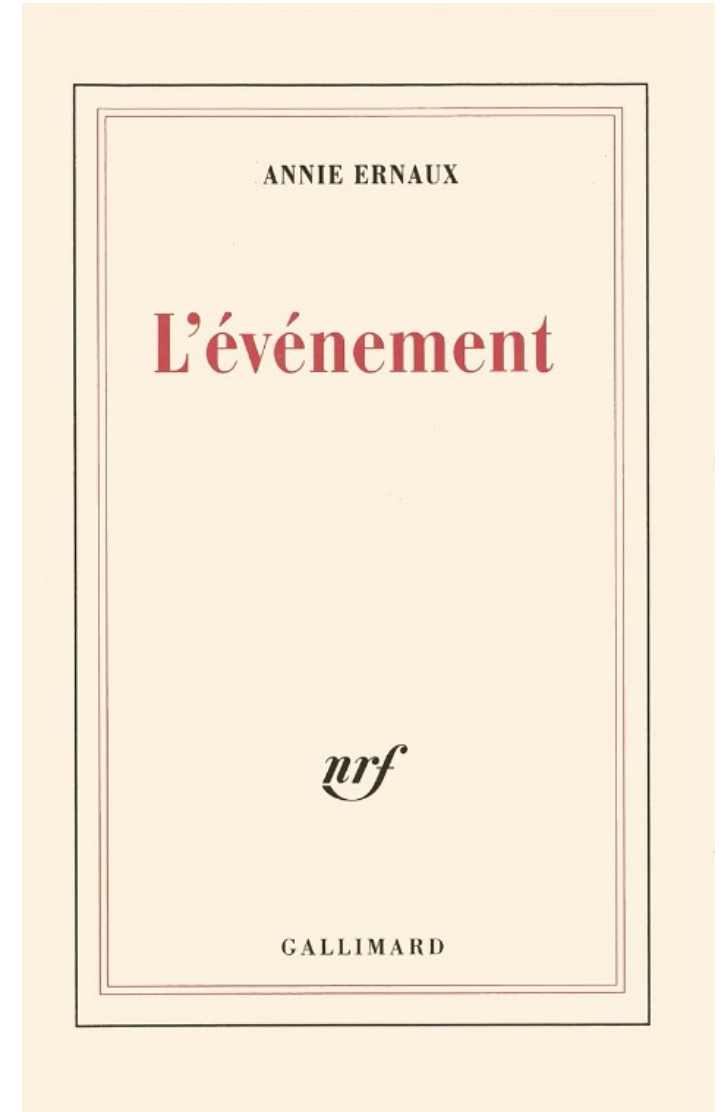
Heritage Critique

‘the past is displayed as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films’ (Higson 1993: 109)

‘Even those films that develop an ironic narrative of the past end up celebrating and legitimating the spectacle of one class and one cultural tradition and identity at the expense of others through the discourse of authenticity, and the obsession with the visual splendors of period detail’ (Higson 1993: 119)



Making Visible the Invisible: Women's Bodily Experiences

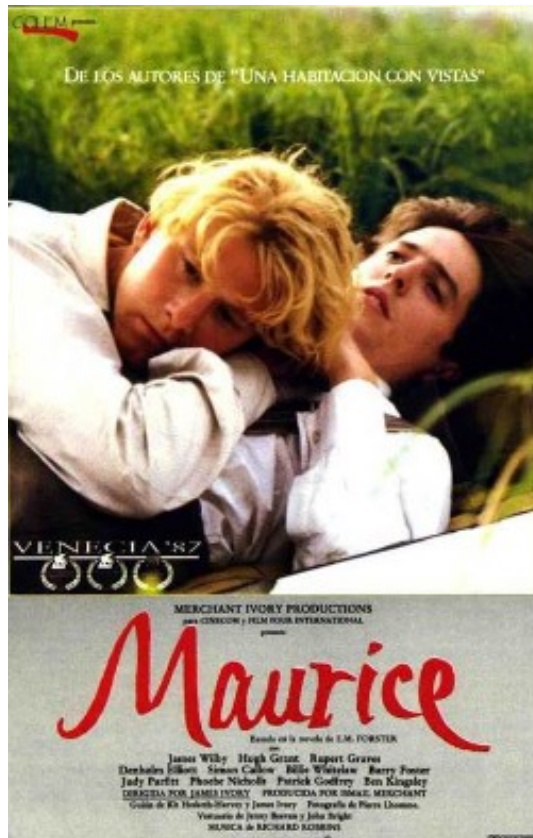


French Heritage Cinema

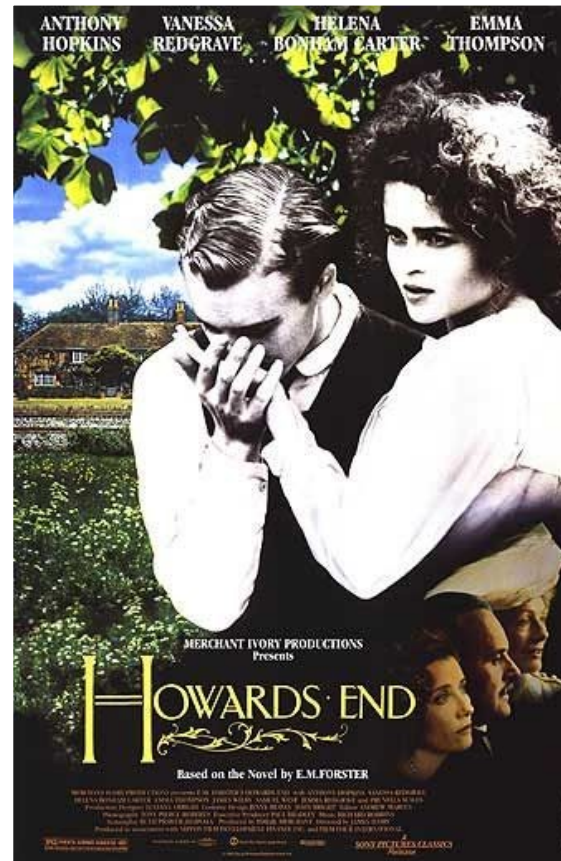
- ‘une nouvelle qualité française’?
- Promoted and funded by 1980s Socialist government as educational
- *Danton* (Wajda, 1982) contained an ambiguous message about France’s revolutionary heritage



Desire in the Period Film



Dir. James Ivory, 1987 (Prod: Ismail Merchant) aka Merchant Ivory Productions



Dir. James Ivory, 1992 (Prod: Ismail Merchant) aka Merchant Ivory Productions



Dir. James Ivory, 1993 (Prod: Ismail Merchant) aka Merchant Ivory Productions

Historicising Lesbian Desire Onscreen

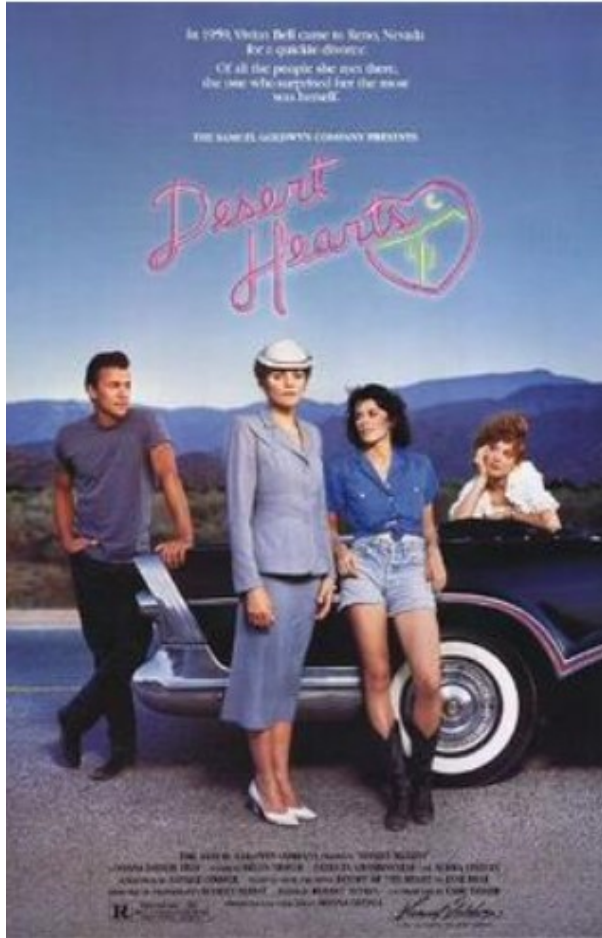


Henri-Georges
Clouzot,
1955



Peter
Jackson,
1994

Historicising Lesbian Desire Onscreen



Donna
Deitch, 1987
Set in 1959



Todd Haynes,
2015
Set in 1952

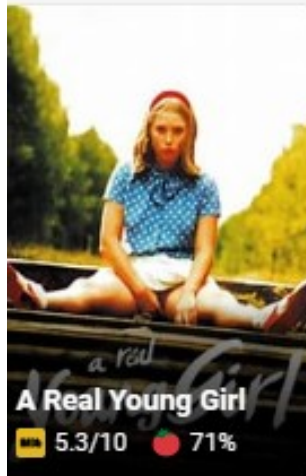
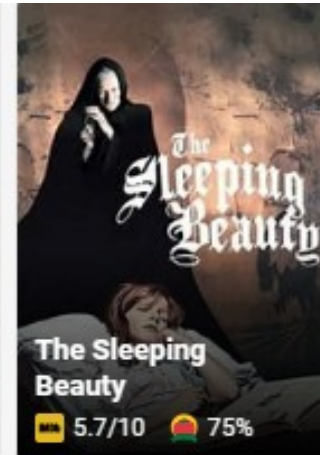
See Clare Bradbury-Rance, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

Sciamma



A proudly 'out' lesbian director

Catherine Breillat
(partial filmography)



France's 'Weinstein Moment'

Nov '19: Actress Adèle Haenel files sexual harassment claim against director Christophe Ruggia for crimes dating back to 2002, when she was 12 ; formal charges brought in January '20.

Interview with investigative media organisation Mediapart.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/1n1tb6czpx3w2a2iqf1nx/MediapartLive-Ad-le-Haenel-brise-un-nouveau-tabou-dans-le-cinematographique.mp4?rlkey=pr9yg04bgw3yoomu8hmq1bqzb&dl=0>

France's 'Weinstein Moment'

Feb '20: Haenel exits César Awards in protest at alleged rapist Roman Polanski's Best Director win, followed by....



Actress Adèle Haenel was one of several actresses to leave after Polanski's award was announced



Céline Sciamma, her colleague, onetime romantic partner and fellow activist

Ginette Vincendeau (2022). “Why has Céline Sciamma become so iconic?”



2019



2017

See Karine Chevalier (2019). 'Repetition and Difference: The Representation of Youth in the Films of Céline Sciamma.'

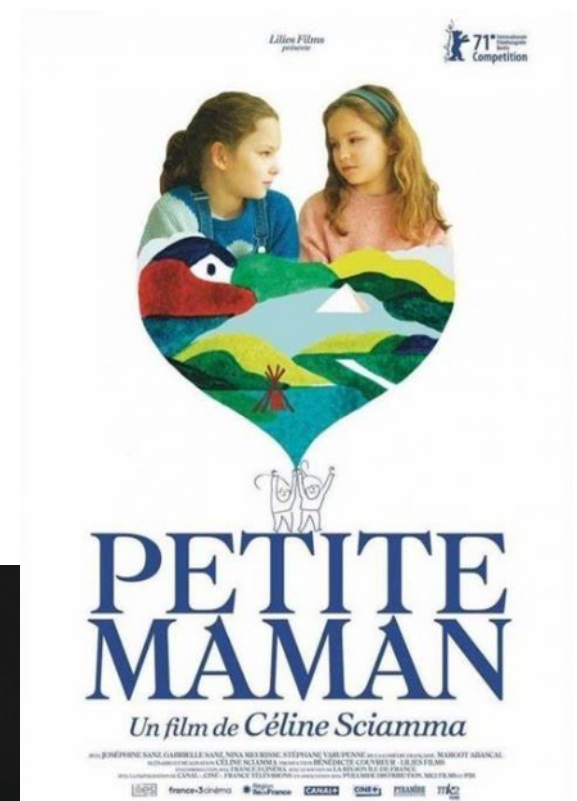
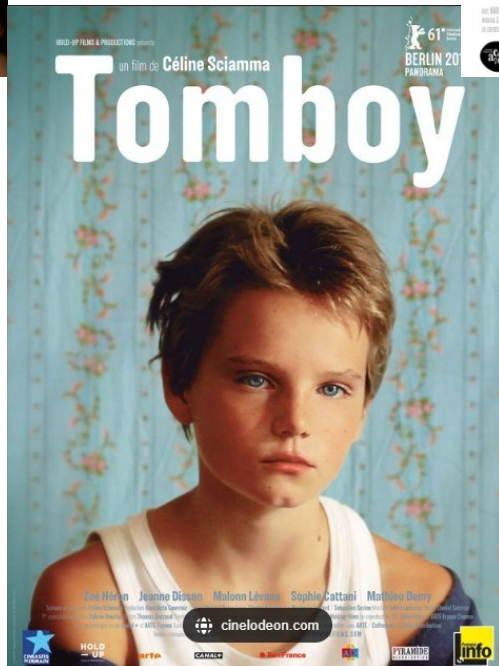
In *Screening Youth, Contemporary French and Francophone Cinema*, edited by Romain Chareyron and Gilles Viennot, 60-80. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.



Waterlilies



Girlhood



Naissance des pieuvres/Waterlilies



The Breakfast Club: 30 years of the brain, athlete, basket case, princess, and criminal

Tomboy



'Haptic' Style?

Haptic cinema 'encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image' (Laura U. Marks 2000, p. 164)



For Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, cinematic hapticity 'is itself queer', for 'it constitutes a disruption of dominant modes of heteronormative vision and provokes a relationship between spectator and screen that opens up the viewer to unexpected and transgressive intimacies' (2016: 237).

See also Vivian Sobchack, 'What My Fingers Knew' in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), pp.61-64.

Bande de filles



See Frances Smith (2020). *Bande de filles: Girlhood Identities in Contemporary France*. London and New York: Routledge.

Petite maman



See also Ellie Smith, '« Des plafonds dans les yeux »: Representing the New Town in *Naissance des pieuvres*.'

Spaces of Magic and Possibility



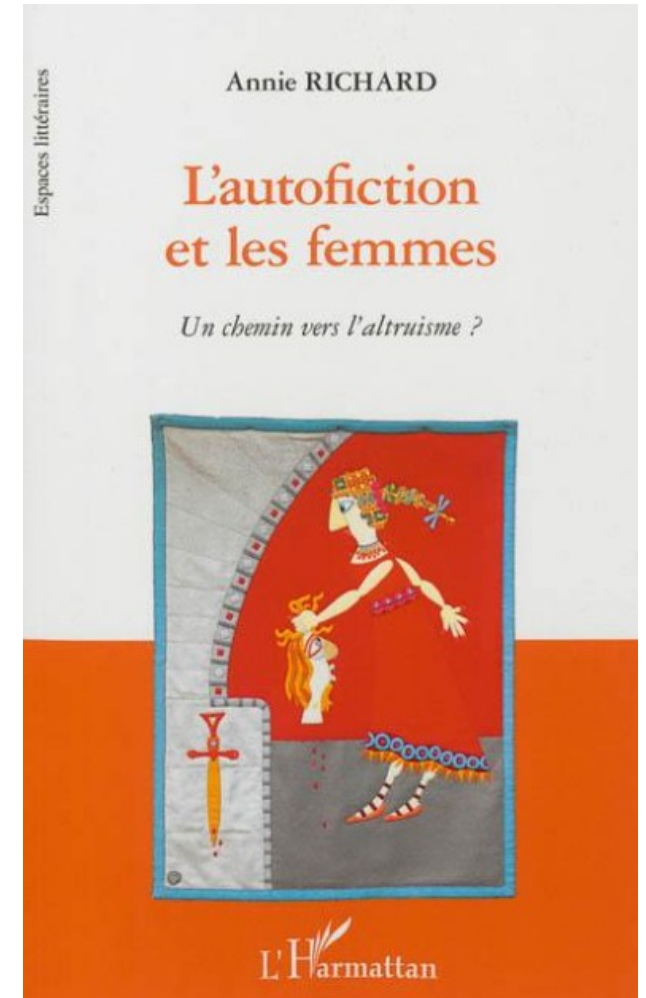
Architectural improbability



From autobiography to autofiction

One began to be tired of 'I'. Not but what [*sic*] this 'I' was a most respectable 'I'; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that 'I' from the bottom of my heart. But [...] **in the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist.**

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1939)



Mary Harrod (2022). 'Staging the generic self: Céline Sciamma's autofictional praxis'

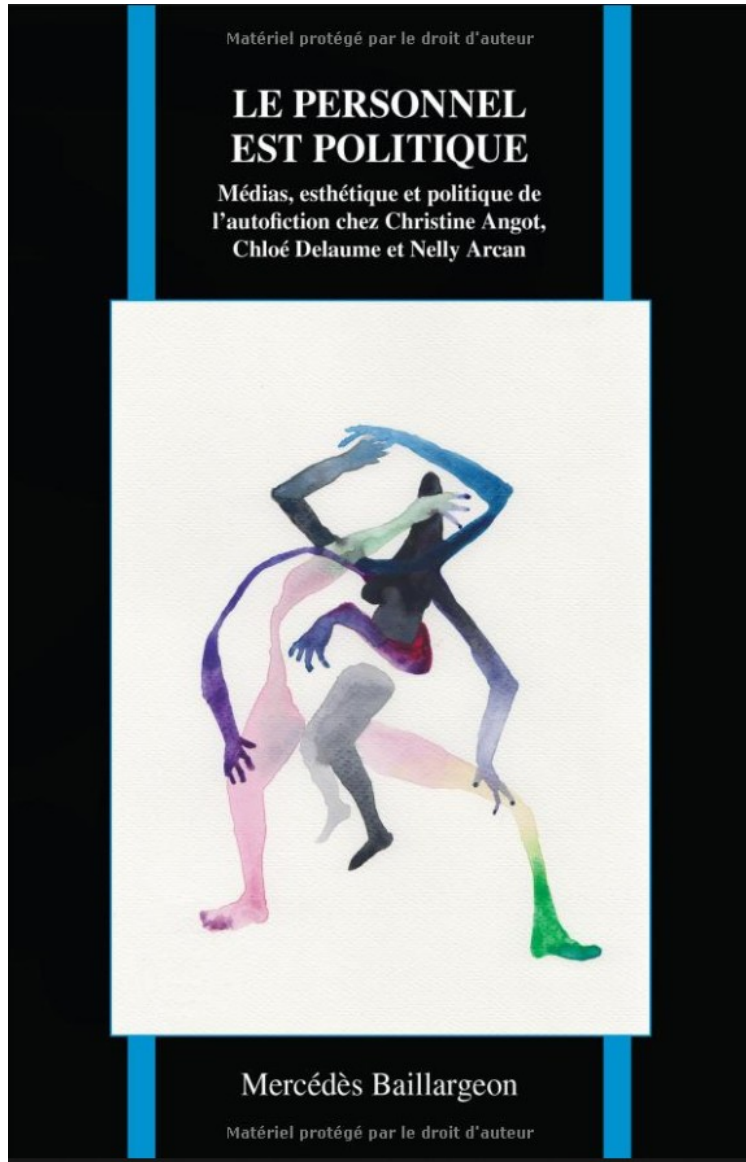
French Screen Studies, DOI: [10.1080/26438941.2022.2149171](https://doi.org/10.1080/26438941.2022.2149171) (open access)



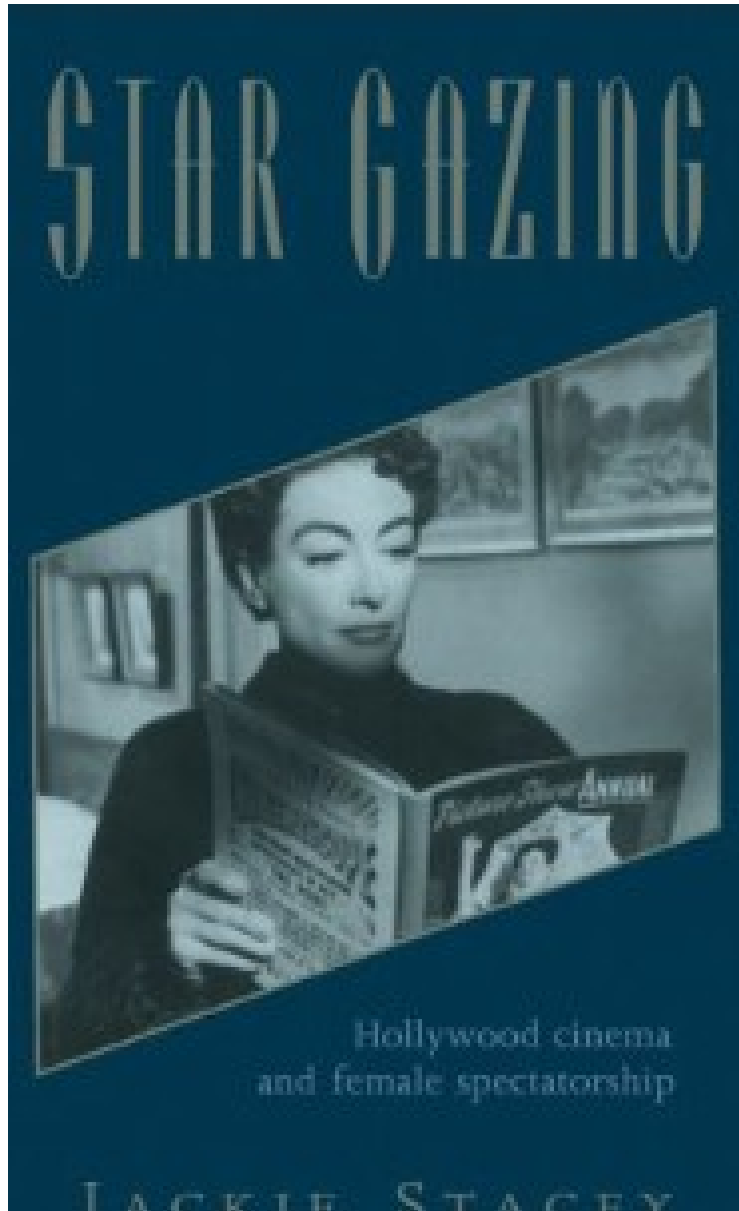




(Un)veiling the Other



Interchangeability and Substitution as (Proto-?)Queer



See also *Clouds of Sils Maria*

Personal Shopper

On *Waterlilies*: 'synchronized swimming [...] symbolized something I wanted to be or somebody that I wanted to love.'
(Sciamma in Harrod 2023)

1994

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Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.

Ellie Smith, '« Des plafonds dans les yeux »: Representing the New Town in *Naissance des pieuvres*.' *French Screen Studies* 23:2-3, 133-144.

Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', London: Penguin Modern, 2018 [1966].

Ginette Vincendeau, "'Why has Céline Sciamma become so iconic?': The auteure as celebrity' *French Screen*