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REFLECTIONS ON A FEMINIST FUTURE: COOKING CAKES AND BAKING BISCUITS IN AN EARLY DOCUMENTARY FILM

Where are we now? To gain some perspective, I would like to briefly turn to the (first) Gender and Silent Cinema workshop, held in Utrecht in October 1999. The people were engaging. The films fascinating. And the histories compelling. I had just spent two years in archives in Paris and was tired of justifying why I was doing a Ph D in film history. I had also just finished 6 years of graduate school and was fast realizing that a dissertation on Sarah Bernhardt and silent cinema was leading me somewhere ‘outside’ film studies: to Theatre Studies, to Women/Gender Studies, perhaps on to History or even into European Studies. It was good, then, to hear people join film history and feminism. To hear debate opened. To realize that instead of writing my way out of film studies I had, perhaps, been inadvertently writing my way into it.

It was precisely this understanding— that what I had been writing was a feminist film history and that I was hardly alone in this undertaking — which most surprised me. Until the workshop, I had never considered it necessary to call myself a feminist film historian. In the first place, feminism seemed too obvious a term; it was something so integral to my research that it felt redundant to actually have it named. Worse, ‘feminism’ suggested a return to the 1970s and to all the misconceptions I had of this decade: to the simplistic division of the genders, to the separation of discussion into schools of thought, and to the elision of queer sexuality. At the Utrecht workshop, however, I finally heard scholars from this generation speak. And I finally understood the depth of my debt to them. As Heide Schipmann demonstrated in her presentation to us, the 1970s was a period of social and academic transition. At this time, silent film (like feminism and homosexuality) was making its presence felt (and seen) in public. The battles which were being fought were therefore at once institutional and deeply personal. They crossed and disrupted private and public spaces just as they crossed and disrupted the traditional divisions and hierarchies within the academy. My own research was enabled by these disruptions. A period I had only understood simplistically as one which collapsed difference into dichotomy and feminism into theory, was now appreciated for enabling the very research I undertook.

At this point a separation must be made between the ‘past-ness’ I saw in feminist film theory and the continuing relevance I saw in my engagement with feminism and film history. Even in the absence of an understanding, then, of how feminism had first met the study of silent cinema and of why my feminism might actually be named, I saw film history as part of a vital and ongoing project which took gender as its focus.

1 This was organized by Eva Warth and Annette Förster.
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1 This was organized by Ewa Worah and Annette Fleuster.
The term 'boredom' of Petro's women modernists. While the question of historical enmity might certainly have concretized with our discussion (see my comments below), ours was a project which was continually expanding, both horizontally through generations, and laterally across disciplines and discourses. In a paradoxical way, then, Petro attempted to enliven feminist film theory by historicizing enmity just as feminism enriched and diversified its presence in film studies via its turn to history.

I was pleased, at this point, to have Giuliana Bruno’s Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari8 as a concrete example of the kind of scholarship I thought we feminists might write. In this study, there was no sense of historical enmity and no mention of the fatigue which permeated mainstream feminist film theory. There was, instead, a palpable sense of discovery. As Bruno explains, she is returning to film history in order to look differently. Her desire is not, therefore, to desire. It is instead «a historical curiosity», «a desire to know mapped on the last of the eyes». We turn to history—and specifically to film history—in the effort to reveal and reveal in an absent knowledge. Bruno thereby begins Streetwalking on a Ruined Map in the following way:

Streetwalking on a Ruined Map, a study in cultural theory, offers a theoretical meditation on the problems of historiography and addresses the challenge posed by feminist theory to both film history and theory. Such a meditation is conveyed through, and grounded in, a microhistorical case: the lost or forgotten work of Italy's first film and most prolific woman filmmaker, Elvira Notari (1913-1966). The driving force of Dora Film (Naples, 1906-1939), author of approximately sixty feature films and over a hundred shorts and documentaries, in bringing to light this hidden area of knowledge, I am especially concerned with looking differently. My historical curiosity—a desire to know mapped on the last of the eyes—has resulted in a vision that combines the use of a microscope with a telephoto lens. While dissecting the minute and the microhistorical, my study maps out epistemological paradigms. Like a filmmaker using a rack focus, I attempt to connect the analytic detail with a panoramic vision.

Unlike Petro, Bruno did not position her turn to film history within a theoretical paradigm which had been espoused by the mid-1980s. That is, Bruno was not trying to reenactuate a stalled or stalling theoretical discourse and so did not concern herself with questions of closure and boredom. To the contrary: she brought to light the lost work of a 'silent' women filmmaker and so concerned herself with questions of openings and beginnings. In a related move, Bruno’s turn to history was not positioned within a uniquely feminist or film studies framework. What I mean by this is that she was writing somehow from 'outside' the discipline or feminist discourse, just that she turned to the same period which was re-presented to me at Utrecht (the 1960s and 70s) and cast her work as a continuing part of its project. Hence, instead of seeing a separation between feminism and traditional historiography, she explains how the work of Carlo Ginzburg, especially his The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller8 prompted and inspired her own scholarship. And rather than presuming that feminist film theory could be contained within a definitive tradition with its own

enabled younger scholars like myself to appreciate the continuing relevance of feminism. On the one hand, then, traditional scholarship offered me a model of academic success whereby feminism occupied a precise and contained disciplinary moment. And on the other hand — and this is what Utrecht brought home to me — feminism was part of an ongoing and expanding attempt to unsettle traditional presumptions of power.

I am afraid that my attitude towards feminist film historiography has today changed. While at Utrecht I found a female audience reassuring, encouraging even, almost decade later I wonder where my male colleagues are. Where I then saw feminist film history as a way into so many other disciplines and discussions, I now wonder why other interests must be cited if I wish to return to my corner in any meaningful direction (here I am writing, admittedly, from within Old Europe). What concerns me the most, however, is the fact that contemporary film history is considered a development of 1970s feminist film theory. The argument — which is certainly convincing — runs something like this: Mulvey politicized the act of spectatorship which, in turn, nudged us towards a reconsideration of how we saw film history.22 This is compatible with Petro’s thesis on feminist ennui, since it presumes that the 1960s and 1970s were followed by two decades of feminist inactivity. What I instead want to ask is how my predecessors could so obviously forget the lessons of feminism when it was this which apparently prompted their turn to film history. Why, for example, do women remain an attraction in the cinema of attractions? Why, for example, is no female practitioner brought forward to illustrate film history, the avant garde, or popular culture in Gunning’s famous article? And whatever happened to homosexuality in our turn to film history? What I would cite here is that model of disciplinary division mentioned above. In other words, the field divides into two. On the one hand, feminism remains tied to a fixed disciplinary debate in a fixed disciplinary moment (and it is this which I obviously resist). The casualness of attractions can thus silently triumph the fact of male success and a generation of young feminists can be conceived as some kind of naive rear guard, plugging in all those gendered gaps a generation of senior scholars seem to have overlooked. On the other hand, feminism moves on. Generations engage in dialogue whilst female practitioners remain to be found, Disciplinarity, in this instance, is replaced by a broader history of academic inquiry.

Conferences, individuated film programmes, and a fast-growing body of feminist literary literature can attest to the phenomenon which continues to drive this act of feminist recovery.23 While these materials are important, what I want to instead offer is a brief illustration of how feminism can inform how we look at and think about film. I want, in other words, to illustrate how feminist film history is not just a retaliatory act of self-definition abstracted into so many academic biographies or edited collections. And I

22 See T. Gunning, Attraction: How They Came into the World, in W. Strayton (ed.), The Cinema of Attractions Revisited, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 31–40. Here, p. 35, Gunning explains how he was indebted to the way in which Mulvey showed that spectatorship itself included possibilities of difference and therefore asks: “If a gendered spectator had to be considered, then isn’t a historical spectator also in need of discussion?”

23 See, most notably, J.M. Buen - D. Neeva (eds.), A Festivaletrieve in Early Cinema, Duke University Press, Durham/London 2002. The Women and the Silent Screen conferences were held, consecutively, at Santa Cruz, Montreal, and Guadalajara. Next year (2008) the conference will be held in Stockholm. Note the programming at festivals such as Cinema RivaRolo in Bologna (Luci Peller, Donna Dei, Sarah Berhardt last year, Ash Nielsen this year). Note also conferences such as “Non Solo Diva: Pionere del Cinema Italiano” to be held in Bologna in December this year. The Women’s Film History Project (directed by Jane Gaines) is also undertaking a series of Women Pioneers Source books.
cake which, with another cake, is then held open for display to the camera. These cakes are very different from those which we have seen the women decorating. As the ensuing shots announce, they are ‘City Luncheon’ tinned cakes. They emerge smoothly (in their glistening tins) from another large machine, they have their lids mechanically clamped upon them and then welded these tight. Another worker pastes glue onto the mechanically spinning tins which are then collected onto trays and carried away. As the ‘City Luncheon’ title makes evident, the cakes are meant for the anonymity of the modern metropolis. We thus see—in the first shot outside the factory—boxes of the cakes being carried away from the factory by horse-drawn carriages. The men and boys of the factory are then shown leaving work, walking along the street. The women then follow. The final shot is of a young girl, seated before a table in a garden, eating biscuits under the smiling supervision of an attentive nanny.

Through all this making and baking, packing and wrapping, what we therefore seem witness to is a kind of modernization of the earlier (and very famous) Sortie d’usine and Repas de bébé, both made in 1905. In the instance of the former, we are now able to enter the factory and see what happens behind those closed doors. We are now also witness to a clearer division between the sexes: that surge of men and women joining together as they exit the factory in Lyons is now an orderly walk marked, like the labor itself, by the separation of the genders. In the instance of the latter film—where Auguste Lumière and his wife feed their daughter in a spectacle of homely sociability—we are now able to see the processes which, in the modern city, make the moment of the child’s feeding possible.

A comparison between Repas de bébé and Baksery is particularly interesting since it highlights the very changes heralded by the modernity of the new century. For example, in Repas de bébé the parents come together in the garden to feed their child. It is a very ‘manual’ process since each mouthful has to be spooned by Auguste Lumière into his baby’s mouth. Shot by his brother, Louis Lumière, the film appears as something of an early home movie, inviting the viewer into the privacy of the home and into the intimacy of a familial exchange. The family unit has evidently not yet been transformed by the processes of modernization. We join figures we can identify (the Lumière’s) around an action and object with which we are already familiar (two parents feed their girl at a family table). The camera and the figures frontality—the scene’s very legibility—of course, however, remind us that this is a staged event. What we see is thus both private and public. What the Lumière’s are bringing to us is not, however, the Swallows and Amazons and Artell goods so evidently advertised in the posters and packaging in Baksery. Instead, their child eats so that we might feast our eyes upon film; she eats so that we might get our fill of the new technology of the cinema. There remains something very artisanal about this piece of work (or ‘slice’ of film): we have returned to the beginnings of the cinema (the single shot and immobile camera), and we are watching a baby being fed. There is the sense that at any moment the film will stop, the baby will unexpectedly refuse the food, flay her arms, upturn the cup, or drop the biscuit she is later handed. We are uncertain, then, of what will happen next. Actions, although recorded mechanically, have not yet themselves become synchronized to the mechanical inevitability of the machine.

By the time of Baksery, a recognizable family unit has been replaced by an unknown nanny and child, attention has shifted from the Lumière’s home to the Swallow and Artell premises, and a ‘cinema of attractions’ has developed into a cinema ofuger narrative denouement. The most interesting aspect of this development lies in the fact that it is an object as quintessential as ‘the biscuit’ which now receives the camera’s attention. Uniformly made and neatly packed by a bevy of anonymous workers func-

tioning in synchronicity with the machines, the biscuit comes to represent one small unit which, broken even further into its component parts (the flour, the mixing of the ingredients, the boiling, the icing, the packaging) becomes representative of a larger whole. This ‘larger whole’ is society itself, with its gendered division of labor and social stratifications. It is not, therefore, the workers themselves shown at home feeding their children cakes and biscuits in the film’s conclusion. It is instead an anonymous maid (a woman) who is shown referring to the needs of the bourgeois child. It is therefore also the men who negotiate the machines in the factory, the women concerning themselves instead with ornamentation and packaging.

What is important to realize about this gendered division of labor is the fact that what we are watching is that last kernel of the home (the kitchen, traditionally a very female space) opened up and transformed by the industrial process. That is to say, baking is not a personal and private initiative, linked to its own specific history (which biscuit to bake, whose recipe to follow) and taking place in an intimate, inclusive space (often marked by the presence of an aged or aging female), has here been replaced by a progressive modernism of man and machine. This replacement ushered in a whole new set of temporal co-ordinates: the dough rolls smoothly through the rollers, the trays slide cleanly out of the oven, the cakes move uniformly forward. We are thus witness to a kind of nascent ‘fast food’, one which replaces the possible calamities and the very slowness of the traditional kitchen. Here it might be realized, however, that there is something encouraging about the fact that women remain associated with the fact of physical labor. Their tasks might be repetitive, they are certainly banal, but the possibility nevertheless remains for difference and disruption. By this I mean that women continue to make their mark; they continue to literally shape the materials they touch. In contradistinction to Petro, I would contend that it is actually men (at least in this particular instance) who inherit the banality and boredom of modernity. I would therefore argue that twentieth century boredom might not be characterized so much by the image of the bored housewife as it might be characterized by this image of man joined to his machine, ensuring the machine’s everydayness, protecting its functionality, willing its relentless repetitions.

The fictional baking-disaster films, appearing around this time, might also be seen in tandem with Baksery. D. W. Griffith’s Her First Biscuits (1909) provides a case in point: here Mrs. Jones (Florence Lawrence) bakes a batch of biscuits for her husband (John Cumpon). He tries one, finds it inedible, throws most of the batch out of the window, and goes to work. Mrs. Jones, mistakenly encouraged, brings some more to his theatrical booking office. Visitors to his office unwittingly eat the biscuits. So too does an aceman, a housebreaker, and a policeman back at the Jones’s home. Like Mr. Jones himself, they all suffer terrible indigestion. As the description in the Biograph Bulletin of 1909 relayed, ‘in a short time the assemblage is a writhing, struggling, screaming mob and for a time it looked as though Mrs. Emma Jones was guilty of wholesale manslaughter. The trouble subsides, however, the victims convalesce and peace is restored when

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8 As Petro notes, twentieth-century boredom is indeed very different from the male melancholia of the nineteenth century, transmitted to us via the image of a tortured but creative male genius. Petro is here citing Juliana Scherlitz (cit. p. 190): ‘The great melancholic of yesteryear would have been a tortured but creative male genius, but the stereotypically depressed person of today is an unhappy and unproductive woman’. A friend (Kristen Hunt) recently commented, after reading my response to Baksery, how ‘We understand Emma to be the housewives when in fact it is the home of industrial workers; personally I have never experienced anything like the boredom. I suffered working in an office job.’
Mrs. J. hurfs, though with reluctance, the pernicious pabulum into the streets. Mrs. Jones's inability to cook biscuits is specifically cast, by the Biograph Bulletin, as an inability to emulate mother in her culinary proficiency. What we are thus witness to is not so much the boredom of the housewife as the drama she provokes when she tries to perform her housewifely role. That this drama concatenates around a standardized product—the mechanically made biscuit, always uniform and predictable—is important since the spectre of female touch again ensures the fact of female agency. In precipitating disruption, Mrs. Jones thereby actually reveals how women continue to make their mark. In a sense, then, those flourishes of the laborers in Bakery, where we see each woman attending to her own differentiated cake, is here comically returned to us.

Women continued to make their mark; this is a point that needs some reiteration. Indeed, even within the context of the film industry itself, we tend to forget that it was women who hand tinted the prints or who joined pieces of films together. Alternatively, when we do remember this fact, we tend to forget that these women—like those women in Bakery—were actually changing and effecting the object they touched. Here it might be remembered that the real drama of industrialisation—the uncertainty of the male job market, the threat of physical redundancy—was predicated upon a sense of dispensability which clearly had impact upon the traditional dynamic of the bourgeois family. It might also be remembered that the image of Auguste Lumière, spoon feeding his child in Repas de bébé, would therefore be superceded in the twentieth century by the image of man joined to his machine. The repetitive, mechanical and, ultimately, boring nature of this joining is nicely articulated by Luigi Pirandello in his novel Shoot, written in 1925. Here Pirandello laments the impotence with which man is joined to the cinematograph, seeing in his relentless turn of the handle man's reduction to the status of automaton. What might be suggested is that it is actually men who, during the early twentieth century, had to begin Petro's fight for the everyday on behalf of the everyday. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the emergence (and even the popularity) of the cinema of attractions as a valid historicizing model is a response to this, since it moves us away from a discussion of mechanization towards an acknowledgement of the thrill and spectacle of man's engagement with the cinema. And I would go on to suggest that the attention today being paid modernism and modernity is a logical development of this, since the period which then follows—the Classical Hollywood Cinema—is otherwise imagined in terms of industry and Taylorisation.

I began this article by lamenting the way in which I had feminism taught me to at graduate school as a temporarily enclosed and disciplinarily specific moment. And I went on to ask where my male colleagues were, what happened to queer theory, and why it was that feminism is seen as a self-absorptive discourse which has, of necessity, been supplanted in our wholesale move to film history. And although I have traced an alternative model of feminist engagement, I am aware that this model is, to some, invisible. In this sense, I must again cite the sense I have of a disciplinary divide which is producing two very different versions of feminism and two very different interpretations of what film studies might actually be. The real problem here is that feminist film history is writing its way out of film studies just as film studies accepts feminism as a historically important moment in its development as a discipline. I would therefore say that I was correct, some ten years ago, in presuming that the audience for feminist film history was elsewhere. What I had not yet understood—and it is this which has taken me the major part of a decade to digest—was that all that turning and panning, that moving and touching in Bakery, provides a visual description to what it is we feminist film historians actually do. My point of academic departure is not, in other words, a discipline with its narratives of theoretical succession, but a vibrant and fluid feminism.

RESUMÉ
Malgré l’accentuation d’abstraction et d’absence d’une base historique, les Feminist Film Studies ont donné une contribution très importante à la recherche historique, en soulignant la valeur culturelle de la représentation et de l’acte de voir. L’analyse des origines des deux textes du cinéma et leur comparaison rend explicite la fonction du cinéma comme un instrument de définition de l’identité de genre et sollicite une réflexion sur les valeurs associées aux femmes au début du siècle dernier. En particulier le texte détecte une stratégie de représentation de la femme valorisant la créativité et la liberté en opposition à une image de l’homme séculé et assujetti aux logiques productives.

SUMMARY
Despite the accretion of abstraction and of lacking an historical base, the Feminist Film Studies have considerably contributed to the historical research, underlining the cultural value of representation and of the act of watching. The analysis and comparison of two texts belonging to the cinema of the origins make explicit the function of cinema as an instrument for the definition of gender identity. It also stimulates a reflection on the values associated with women at the beginnings of the last Century. In particular the essay detects a strategy of representation of women enhancing their creativity and freedom versus the one of men, alienated and subject to production logics.

RIASSUNTO
Nonostante l’accusa di ortonismo e di astrazione, i Feminist Film Studies hanno dato un contributo rilevante alla ricerca storica, sottolineando il valore culturale della rappresentazione e dell’atto di visione. L’analisi di due tesori del cinema delle origini e la loro messa a confronto esplicitano la funzione del cinema come luogo e strumento della definizione dell’identità di genere e sollecitano una riflessione sui valori associati al femminile agli esordi del secolo scorso. In particolare il saggio rileva una strategia di rappresentazione della donna che ne valorizza la creatività e la libertà a fronte di un’immagine dell’uomo assoggettato alle logiche produttive e alienato.


186. VICTORIA DUKEETT.


18. Films which featured the kitchen as a site of (female) madness could also be considered here. See, for example Grifith’s The Maniac (Cook) (1908) where a cook goes insane and attempts to roast her employer’s baby in an oven; again I would like to thank Mayer for bringing this film to my attention. Earlier films, featuring a kitchen as a site of prurience might also be considered. See, for example, Edison’s The Trump in the Kitchen (1898) (where the womanelope with the trap), the American Mutoscope and Biograph’s No Salad Dressing Wanted (1902) (where an older woman in a kitchen, warm from cooking, removes most of her clothes and is then horrified to see a young man seated in the adjoining room).
