

# Cinema Plastique

*Cinéma, Art(s) Plastique(s)*, Centre Culturel International de Cerisy, France, 14-21 June 2001

## **A report by Julia Hammett-Jamart, University of Wollongong, Australia, and l'Universite de Paris-III (La Sorbonne Nouvelle), France**

The 2001 Colloque de Cerisy brought together a number of prominent theorists from France and North America to discuss "cinema" and "les arts plastiques". Under the direction of Claude Murcia (l'Université de Poitiers, France) and Pierre Taminiaux (Georgetown University, USA), the tone of discussions was uncensored and highly productive. Participants sought to explore the relationship between cinema and the fine arts and also to understand the way in which cinema itself can be considered to embody the principle of "plasticity". A surprising level of consensus surrounded the presupposition that film constitutes an art which can be attributed to an "auteur" (individual or collective).

The title of this conference was no doubt devised with the intention of provoking debates about the ontological status of "cinema", with particular reference to "les arts plastiques". The term "arts plastiques" is generally translated in English as "fine arts". However, this translation overlooks the materiality evoked by the French term. Two key questions underpinned initial discussions: in light of its commercial and industrial underpinnings, can cinema be considered an "art"; and, in the second instance, to what extent can cinema be considered an "art plastique"?

The pairing of two distinct domains for the purposes of this conference can be partially explained by the persistent reluctance of academic institutions to recognize film studies as an independent field of inquiry. Most often, film studies in France are taught as a subject within the discipline of "arts plastiques". There are a few rare exceptions, such as the UFR "Cinema et Audiovisuel" at La Sorbonne Nouvelle. Michel Marie, director of that particular department, was predictably the most vocal opponent to the theme of the conference.

The first paper was presented by Dominique Chateau (l'Université Paris-I) whose recent monograph on aesthetics informed his thesis on "The Concept of Plasticity". Chateau spoke about the value of isolating and identifying aspects of a medium (cinema) with a view to better understanding its nature. He thus drew a distinction between the "côté poétique" and the "côté polyetic" of film, opposing the "spirit" of a work to its physical form. Chateau drew upon Plato's reflections on plasticity as the transformation of nature, its "becoming", which might sustain the definition of cinema as an "art plastique".

Michel Marie (l'Université Paris-III) indicated his emphatic opposition to this notion. During the ensuing discussion, Reda Bensmaïa (Georgetown University, USA) insisted on the need to move beyond the materiality of cinema. He observed that, after the initial inscription, which gives rise to thought, the subject becomes poetic/intellectual and is not anchored in its plasticity. The discussion concluded with general concurrence that the concept of plasticity is

often construed in an overly abstract manner. It was suggested that, very simply, the malleability of cinema be considered as central to its classification as "art plastique".

The film excerpts selected by participants to support their papers accordingly revealed a preoccupation with the physical aspects of cinema. Godard was repeatedly cited as the director whose work might be considered to most effectively exploit the materiality of the cinematic medium. Thus papers by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, Laetitia Fieschi-Vivet, and Marie-Françoise Grange all analyzed the "dimension plastique" of films by Godard. The latter developed an extremely interesting thesis on the question of self-portraiture in the cinema.

Grange (l'Université de St-Etienne) proposed a reflection upon the degree to which cinematic self-portraits resemble/differ from self-portraits in the visual arts. She considered the manner in which an author might be said to inscribe traces of "self" within a cinematic work. Numerous fascinating observations were made in response to Grange's paper. There was a discussion around the distinction between cinematic self-portraiture and cinematic autobiography, with the suggestion that the latter is more firmly attached to the narrative and chronology than to plasticity. Commenting that the film *JLG par JLG* constituted a fairly unproblematic example of the genre, Reda Bensmaïa noted that self-portraiture does not require personification. Dominique Chateau suggested that the model be reversed, i.e. that perhaps the very quality which defines an auteur is to make of his/her film a self-portrait.

This final reflection brought the discussion to an interesting impasse for the author of this report. At my home institution, film studies are offered as part of the Communication and Cultural Studies program. Textual analysis is therefore informed by a post-structuralist perspective which recognizes the production of meaning in films as a social process, involving the interpretative activity of the spectator as much as it does the creative capacity of the director/writer/producer etc. This perspective would reject the very notion of authorship which was at the center of the preceding discussion, i.e. as an object of study, "cinematic self-portraiture" presupposes the identification of a subject/author.

Philippe Dubois (l'Université Paris-III) alluded to this paradox in his paper on cinematic figuration. He began by emphasizing the fact that cinema is neither an "art plastique" nor a "literary art" nor a "dramatic art" nor even necessarily an "art" at all, but rather an amalgam of a number of different forms which brings forth a new capacity for creating meaning. He suggested that it is this aspect of the cinema which provides such fertile ground for multidisciplinary study. It is perhaps also for this reason that the Colloque de Cerisy, which brought together a disparate group of international scholars, proved to be so engaging.

The Colloque was held in a magnificent chateau in the Basse Normandie. The locale was difficult to access but once there, participants stayed together, ate together and relaxed together. A single paper was presented at any one time, which meant that participants drew upon a common resource of accumulated knowledge. This shared vocabulary resulted in an enriched level of discussion, which moved out of the conference rooms and into the dining rooms. The Colloques de Cerisy are programmed in accordance with a tradition which has in the past welcomed such luminaries as Christian Metz and André Malraux. The principle objective of the Colloques is to forge intellectual communities, through lively and candid discussion as much as through the formal presentation of research. This context was not negligible in creating an atmosphere of stimulating and candid intellectual debate.

# Sissies, Sailors and other Masculinities

*Exploring Masculinities and Film* at the Centre for Research into Film and Media, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2-4 July 2001

## A report by James Leggott, Newcastle University, UK

*Exploring Masculinities and Film* took place in early July 2001, and was arranged by Newcastle University's Centre for Research into Film and Media. The conference, which covered three days and was organised by Phil Powrie, Chris Perriam and Ann Davies, attracted a range of speakers and panellists from the UK and North America, and roughly a fifth of the papers were given by postgraduates. Such was the spectrum of theoretical approaches on offer, the attendee was often daunted by the choice of parallel panels; was it to be, say, "Production and Reception of North American Masculinities", "The Gaze" or "Early Cinema Masculinities"?

Decisions may have been taken, alas, in the hope for a less clammy venue, for the conference seemed to coincide with a heat-wave that disorientated visitor and local alike. With the conference rooms lacking air-conditioning, and the frequency of shutters being drawn for film clips, one often felt that an ice-cream cone on the seafront would be a more sensible proposition. I'm not sure if the delegates I heard planning a trip to Whitley Bay ever made it, but a good number of ice-creams did get consumed on the second day, when the conference took residency in the local NFT-affiliated Tyneside Cinema for a couple of keynotes and a showing of Minnelli's *The Pirate* in anticipation of Steven Cohan's paper on Gene Kelly. The soaring temperatures did have the unfortunate effect of diminishing people's capacity for rigorous concentration, let alone participation, and I felt that the odd contentious statement might have caused greater friction had the overall energy levels not been sapped somewhat.

Steven Cohan's paper, "Dancing with Balls in the 1940s: Sissies, Sailors, and the Camp Masculinity of Gene Kelly", examined the "camp masculinity" of the dancer's persona in the context of the unstable status of masculinity itself in mid-century US culture; an intriguing proposal for, as Cohan noted, studies of musical camp have tended to focus on female stars. The contemporary extra-filmic commentary on Kelly, alongside the musicals that craft a "homosocial" pairing with male co-stars, and the solo numbers that eroticise the body, added up to, in Cohan's words, the "cultural oxymoron" of the erotic spectacle of male dancer, which problematised notions of masculinity and heterosexuality. Having defined "camp" in terms of tensions between form and content, or discourse and reference, with an excessive, theatricalised style that "queers representation", Cohan stressed the features that rank Kelly alongside other (female) camp icons, and allow his body to function as a site of indeterminate meaning, a problematic performance of masculinity that transgresses categories of straight or queer.

Throughout the conference, there were numerous mentions of the "hard body", and the organisers were pleased to welcome Susan Jeffords, whose paper ("The Face of Terror: Why Are We Afraid of Average White Men?") addressed the depiction of undistinctive white men as national enemies within the post-Oklahoma bombing climate. She used the popular

Hollywood films *Arlington Road* and *Breakdown* to explore the shift in the portrayal of the national enemy from the "other" to the average male. This was an engaging paper, containing a good balance between textual analysis and cultural commentary. It also led to one of the more lively debates, following John Hill's suggestion that her focus was too American.

From the popular to the arcane: Kaja Silverman's paper on Godard took place at the Tyneside Cinema, which allowed for some clips from his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, a work with which I am not familiar (outside the Godard faithful, I suspect I'm not alone). Entitled, "The Dream of the Nineteenth Century", this rigorous paper explored Godard's acknowledgement of his "awakening" from a masculine ideal through his collaborations with Anne-Marie Miéville. Maybe it was the heat, but I experienced Silverman's paper rather like a dream; utterly logical and convincing while it unfolded, but difficult to pin down afterwards.

In anticipation of her book on Jean-Pierre Melville, Ginette Vincendeau spoke on the excessively masculine world of *Le Cercle Rouge*. She used the film to discuss the importance of aspects of masculinity both to the audience of Melville's thrillers, and his own critical reputation. For Vincendeau, *Le Cercle Rouge* was his "apogee and swansong", and she focussed upon the film's multiple generic formulation: its relationship to American and French gangster films and Japanese "samurai" films.

John Hill prefaced his paper with an apology for his apparent focus upon matters of class rather than gender -- needlessly, as it happens, as the "Masculinities" banner generated a variety of hybrid approaches that tackled representations of gender in the context of (among others) class, national identity, genre, star studies, sexuality and Early Cinema. Hill's paper, "A Working Class Hero Is Something To Be?: Changing Representations of Class and Masculinity in British Cinema" used a comparison between two key British films, *Kes* and *Billy Elliott*, to explore the latter's apparent hostility towards a traditional male working-class culture. In a subsequent panel on "British Identities", Joyce Woolridge also used a cycle of films, this time, the British football films of the past two decades, to chart shifting attitudes toward working-class identity and community, and the move from "hooligan" to "New Lad" films, which promised football as the source of an affirmative, instant identity that ignored class distinction. If these papers, and others, assumed a "crisis" of some kind in modern masculinity, such an approach, according to Anna Claydon, in a second "British Identities" panel, betrayed an unsatisfactory determinism. In her provocative paper, entitled "New Perspectives on British Cinema: Going Beyond the 'Crisis' in Masculinity", she argued for an analysis of British masculinity that escaped the premise of a "crisis". The perspective she offered, however, which, if memory serves me right, drew from psychoanalytic theory, struck me as equally deterministic.

With ninety minutes for each panel session, and three speakers to get through, it was perhaps inevitable that there was often insufficient time for discussion, and that no major theme dominated the event. However, the range of national cinemas under discussion was most impressive, with papers on Yiddish, Northern Irish, Hindi, Italian, North American, German, French and British Cinema. I was intrigued by Brett Allan Enemark's "Gigolo Beat: Masculinity in the early films of Larry Kent (1963-7)", a major figure in the emergence of the modern English Canadian film. If a major characteristic of the new Canadian masculinities of the 1950s was an "open avowal of victimhood", Kent's early films displace established masculinities with the "existential, anarchic" ideology of Beat culture.

Also notable was the variety of papers on stars and their reception; American stars dominated (Gene Kelly, Clark Gable, Clint Eastwood, William Powell, Frank Sinatra, Bruce Willis), but there were also pieces on Alain Delon and Nanni Moretti. Although I missed Peter Homden's "Getting Into Shape: The Economic Body of Gentlemen Jim Corbett", I was intrigued by his abstract, which promised an examination of the contemporary identifications made with the boxer (the first heavyweight champion of the world to be captured on celluloid) and a demonstration of how even at its inception, cinema was "marketed towards a controlling and desiring male gaze".

Having only seen a third of the fifty or so papers on offer, it is difficult to comment on the overall quality; furthermore, the unfavourable conditions made me less sympathetic towards the more demanding papers and the less experienced deliverers. I thus await with interest the forthcoming book proposed by the organisers.