

Female, Singular: Women and French Cinephilia

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The reference to “female, singular” in the title of this paper is to Geneviève Sellier’s book *Masculine, Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, in which the author draws attention to the homosocial and misogynist character of the *nouvelle vague*. In this and other publications, Sellier traces the origins of France’s male-centred film discourse back to the country’s idiosyncratic views of Modernity. In particular, she points to the ways in which the French Impressionist filmmakers and critics of the 1920s and 1930s—whom many scholars regard as the first cinephiles—would praise American cinema as the expression of a virile style, juxtaposed to European cinema as the manifestation of a feminized aesthetics (Sellier 2005). This gender-biased view of Modernity within French culture reflects a generalized tendency in Modernist discourse, which Andreas Huyssen defines as the “Big Divide” between high and popular culture, wherein Mass Culture is the vanishing Other of official art and is assimilated to woman, both as its ideal target and main consumer (1986: 44-64).

A gender bias also informs the official birth of French cinephilia during the 1950s as a sociocultural phenomenon linked to the assiduous frequentation of film theatres, cineclubs, and, most notably, of the *Cinémathèque Française*, as well as the proliferation of new film magazines and publications on cinema.. Like the Impressionists, the 1950s Parisian cinephiles appreciated male-focused genres and narratives and concentrated on aesthetic and formal analysis, rather than considering the socio-political implications of films. As Sellier phrases it, they wanted to “detach[ed] the films from the world, to make of them sublimated objects of a cult” (ibid). Laurent Jullier, echoing Sellier and Noël Burch’s writings on this matter, notes that this model of cinephilia, which in France and elsewhere soon became identified with cinephilia tout court, is instead “a modernist, formalist, and masculine attachment to cinema—and not at all, thus, the equivalent of the love of cinema” (202). For Jullier, the Parisian version of French cinephilia is based on a Kantian aesthetics predicating “an intuitive apprehension of Art and Genius (the Auteur), which purposefully dismisses the gender- transversal, popular phenomena of enthusiastic, intense, personal relations to films that have always punctuated France’s film culture” (ibid).

In adopting a female, singular approach to French cinephilia, I mean to restore the vernacular dimension of this sociocultural phenomenon, outside of the idealistic aesthetics and gender-biased discourse on Modernity that have been since the 1920s informing French film culture. French cinephilia's efforts to formalize the subjective, sensory-based, fetishistic attachment to films into rituals, institutional practices, and formalist appreciations betray an ambivalent and anxiety-ridden attitude vis-à-vis the industrial and commercial implications of art. As Catherine Russell and I have argued in an introduction to a special dossier on women's cinephilia in the 1920s published in *Framework* in 2005, women's participation in cinephilia is indissolubly linked with the vernacular genealogy of the female film spectator in Modernity and as such, it is founded on the interpenetration of consumer and cultural practices. Women's participation in cinephilia appears through private and unofficial channels and forms (e.g. diaries and correspondence, program notes for cultural associations, fanzines, etc.).

For this reason, the retrieval of women's uncharted contributions to French cinephilia entails a historical approach capable of addressing these methodological issues. Christian Keathley's proposal of a cinephiliac history stressing the participation of personal memory and subjective experience in this type of film reception offers an appropriate model (2006: 7). Keathley develops this new historical approach from the 'cinephiliac anecdote,' a type of historical writing based on Siegfried Kracauer's idea that films recover the fleeting and thus overlooked or repressed details in history, as well as on Walter Benjamin's idea of history as trace, allegory, and fragment (2006: 36-36). I contend that this historical method is not only coherent with the nature and the practice of cinephilia, but also consistent with a vernacular approach to Modernism responding to the solicitations of mass culture. From this perspective, the scant, fragmentary, and unofficial records about women's contributions to French cinephilia are not only the result of French film culture's gender-biased orientation, but a coherent manifestation of Miriam Hansen's definition of vernacular Modernism as "a cultural counterpart and response to technological, economic, and social modernity" (2000: 10). Following this premise, I offer that women's vernacular approach to cinephilia points at personal relations to films that do not discriminate other tastes or contexts and forms of reception, thus providing an ideal arena to examine the great Divide of Modernism from a different entry point and to the benefit of women's film history.

In this presentation I will focus on one of the most overlooked issues within the very small literature existing on women's contributions to cinephilia in France: women's personal and professional commitment to film archival curatorship and preservation. Since the 1930s, these activities notoriously shaped the emergence of cinephilia in France as a cultural phenomenon, particularly prompted by the initiatives of Henri Langlois, the cinephile/collector/archivist who created the *Cinémathèque Française* in 1936 and maintained for years total control over what soon became the temple of Parisian cinephiles. While Langlois was the iconic figure of French cinephilia for generations of film critics and filmmakers, he was also the object of critiques, including those that led to his dismissal as director of the *Cinémathèque Française* in 1968, by the then Minister of Culture André Malraux. Notoriously, the decision provoked a vast protest, which mobilized a large number of France's intellectuals and artists and brought the cause of cinephilia on the front pages of all newspapers and magazines. Langlois' "larger-than-life," hyper-mediatised public persona is an obvious example of how French cinephilia's homosocial structure contributed to erase women from the history of French cinephilia. Langlois simply obscured with his personality Marie Epstein, Mary Meerson, Lotte Eisner, and Renée Lichtig, the women who for years covered important functions at the *Cinémathèque Française*, collaborating with him to the organization and the conservation of the institution's film collection. Yet what most caused the passing under silence of these women within the history of French cinephilia was less Langlois' jack-of-all-trades role at the *Cinémathèque Française*, than these very women's attitude vis-à-vis their roles in that institution, which, I will argue, was a cinephiliac attitude par excellence and opens new possibilities for examining their work there within the framework of French cinephilia.

The true phantoms of the *Cinémathèque Française*: cinephilia, women, and the archive

Jacques Richard, in his documentary film *Henri Langlois, le Fantôme de la Cinémathèque* describes the founder of the Cinémathèque française as *the fantôme* (the phantom) of the French institution. Cinephilia's close rapport with film archiving and collecting has inspired some of the most interesting approaches to cinephilia within the relatively recent scholarship developed on this topic. Many of these studies (by Christian Keathley, Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, and Catherine Russell, among others), rely on Walter Benjamin's writings about the challenges of critical theory's approaches to mass culture, as well as his definition of modern history as a

photographic process, suspended in-between an immediate present and an artifactual past. The conceptualization of cinephilia as a metaphor for Modernity's obsession with the preservation of history and memory almost entirely eschews gender-specific perspectives or questions. This problematic overlook has further contributed to the oblivion of women within the scholarly approaches to cinephilia. My purpose here is to apply some of the issues addressed within that scholarship to the examination of women's roles in French cinephilia considered from the point of view of their relations to film archiving. In the wake of Lotte Eisner, Mary Meerson and Marie Epstein, Renée Lichtig was the last surviving close female collaborator of Cinémathèque Française founder Henri Langlois, whose post-war screenings she frequented, beside the regular members, of what would become the French New Wave. Lichtig arranged for Langlois to use on weekends the commercial editing rooms where she worked during the week. was instrumental in restoring Alexandre Volkov's florid 1927 "Casanova" starring Ivan Mosjoukine

Mary Ann Doane, in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002), argues that cinema symbolizes Modernity's fascination with contingency and the attempt to contain it. In case of cinema, this double mandate involves forcing the incommensurable, sensory-based, aesthetic dimensions of cinema into a capitalist – informed system of measurement and organization, also including the quantification of human life into retributive labor (202). The functions of Marie Epstein, Mary Meerson, Lotte Eisner, and Renée Lichtig at the *Cinémathèque Française* may be seen as aiming at negotiating contingency and capitalist economy, and points at these women's capability of balancing the double-faced nature of cinema as an art and a material artifact to archive and preserve. Significantly, Henri Langlois strived to maintain this balance all his life, yet not always successfully, making this enterprise a very public matter, for which he was both acknowledged and widely criticized. Conversely, these women's rather practical and non-sensationalist strategies for juggling the *Cinémathèque Française*'s commitment to art and preservation never got public recognition. In what follows I will try to demonstrate that this lack of recognition is to be attributed to these women's cinephiliac approach to film archiving, and address these case studies for addressing the history of women's cinephilia in France from within the framework of archiveology, that is, the study of how personal and collective memory intersect with practices of archiving and the media.

Before I develop my hypothesis, a brief, factual overview of the biographical and professional trajectories that led Marie Epstein, Mary Meerson, Lotte Eisner, and Renée Lichtig to work with and/or for *Cinémathèque Française* is in order. In my presentation, I will highlight some common elements in these women's personal histories, which, I offer, both contextualize and justify their cinephile-informed approach to archiving, allowing them to deal with films as art while preserving them as artifacts.

Mary Epstein became a conservationist at the *Cinémathèque Française* in the early 1950s, after the death of her brother Jean. Until then, Epstein had been working for over twenty years as a filmmaker and a screenwriter. Epstein started her career in the 1920s, collaborating with her brother on a number of films, as a screenwriter in three of his films, occasionally an actress in small roles, and as an assistant. She then began collaborating with her husband Jean Benoît-Lévy to several films, including the one which she personally directed and for which she is mostly known, *La Maternelle* (1933). At the *Cinémathèque Française* Epstein collaborated to the preservation of silent films. She is known to have restored Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927), as well as films by her brother. Although she retired from the *Cinémathèque française* in 1977, she maintained very close relations with this institution, as well as with a number of film archives and cinémathèques, especially for matters regarding the restoration or the screening of films by her brother.

The two other women who had crucial roles within this institution are Lotte Eisner and Mary Meerson. Mary Meerson, who arrived to Paris from St Petesburgh with the Diaghilev Ballets in 1912 and married the set designer Lazare Meerson. Meerson met Langlois in 1940 and soon became one of his closest collaborators, as well as companion, and one of the most influential personalities at the *Cinémathèque Française*. Lotte Eisner, who was born in a Jewish family, worked as a theatre and film critic after her university studies and in 1933 moved to France to escape Nazi persecution. She soon established a collaboration with Langlois and the *Cinémathèque Française*, even while she had to live in the South of France under false name, before being apprehended by the Nazi and imprisoned in a concentration camp. After the Liberation she returned to Paris and worked there as Chief Archivist from 1945 to 1975.

The last female collaborator is Renée Lichtig (an editor), half-sister of Lucie Lichtig (a script girl). The two sisters, of Russian origins but since the Teens moved first to China (where Renée was born) and Japan before returning to Europe in the mid-twenties, were longtime

friends and occasionally collaborated with him, before becoming integrated into the *Cinémathèque Française*, Renée as head of the Restoration Department, in 1981 and contributed to restore or preserve more than a hundred films during the fifteen years she worked there. Her 2007 obituary in *Variety* recites . . .

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These women were all immigrants who arrived to France as a consequence of the political events in their own countries. Two of them escaped racial discrimination and then persecution: Eisner left Nazi Germany, Epstein migrated from Poland. The other two moved from Russia before (Meerson) or after the Soviet Revolution (Lichtig). All of them, at different degrees, were good friends of Langlois' and maintained an affectionate, family-like relationship with him at the *Cinémathèque Française*, very protective and defensive vis-à-vis his detractors and critics, and always respectful of his decisions, even when he was leaving for long periods of time to pursue his museum of cinema project or to teach in Paris or Montreal. Another element in common in the biographies of these women is that they were all mainly invested in other areas or professions than film archiving: Eisner was a critic who became the most prominent film historian of German cinema; Epstein was a filmmaker and a screenwriter; Meerson was a dance choreographer, a producer, a professor, and a writer; Lichtig was a famous editor, who re-edited (with Langlois) Enrich Von Stroheim's *Wedding March*, and edited films by Nicholas Ray and the last three films by Jean Renoir . In their successful careers, their contributions to the *Cinémathèque Française* might seem of secondary importance and indeed, with the exception of Meerson, who worked at *Cinémathèque Française* from the early 1940s, these women became regular employees (or should I say executives) at this institution only at a later stage of their professional lives. Eisner, the film historian and theorist who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933 to escape persecution being a Jew, began her regular collaborations with the *Cinémathèque Française* in 1937, the same year when she helped Langlois and Georges Franju found the film magazine *Cinématographe*. Eisner, who lived under a false name since the German occupation before being apprehended and imprisoned in a concentration camp, was crucial in the rescue of some secret collections when the institution was seized by the German army. Having survived the

camps, she returned to Paris after the Liberation and became Chief Archivist there until her retirement in 1975.

As I mentioned before, the common elements in the biographies of Epstein, Meerson, Eisner, and Lichtig point to the cinephiliac nature of these women's affiliations with the *Cinémathèque Française*. These women collaborated with Langlois because of the respect (indeed, the awe), they had for him on account of his commitment to film preservation, as well as of the love for cinema which they shared with him. Indeed, they came to Paris because of their passions for films and they pushed this cinephiliac passion to the point of jeopardizing their lives.

In presenting these women's approach to their archival activities as cinephiliac, I mean to stress the resistant and potentially oppositional potential of cinephilia for women's cinematic practices in a homosocial context such as that of the *Cinémathèque Française*, and of France's film culture in general. As I mentioned above, the type of cinephilia I associate with women relates to Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism as a dynamic negotiation with the social, economic, and industrial aspects of mass culture, opposed to the official tradition of French cinephilia as an elitist, formalist relation to films. For Epstein, Eisner, Meerson, and Lichtig, cinephilia offered not just a form of personal agency within a homosocial system, but the possibility of having a vaster range of choices within their profession.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, the first scholar who revalued the role of Marie Epstein in French cinema in her book *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema* (1990; 1996) Epstein was "a woman in the shadow". In her overview of Epstein's work as concentrating on feminine issues, as well as in the following contextualization of Epstein within 1930's French cinema and film culture, Flitterman-Lewis applies what she describes "feminist archeology" to the analysis of Epstein's self-effacing and humble career and "position at the borders of the cinematic activity of the time" to make a case for the significance of Epstein's contribution to a feminist theorization of the cinema" (141). Epstein (as well as Meerson, Eisner, and Lichtig's) politics of anonymity and self-effacement at *the Cinémathèque Française* aimed at assuring continuity and managerial control within an institution constantly struggling with issues of funds, resources, and structural deficiencies, further aggravated by occasional accidents. Hence the discretion and the modesty of these women (Epstein in particular) regarding their work and their contribution to French cinema points less at a self-conditioned reaction to an homosocial context

than to a strategy of self-positioning within it. Cinephilia in France, was, in this respect, a female, singular concept.

