

Sue Harper

**Round Table 3: *Starting From Elsewhere: Questions of Transnational, Cross-Cultural Historiography***

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\*My own intellectual formation was first of all as a literary historian, then as a social historian, and then as a film historian. I am interested in the way that film is a part of a broader cultural history, and the way that women appear or are used in cultural texts. It seems to me that there are rigorous visual codes which are used to represent women (if indeed the term “representation” is not totally played out) and that they are historically specific. They change over quite small periods of time. Just as we need to historicise patriarchy (in some periods it is relatively insecure), so we need to historicise the codes which are used to describe women within it.

\*I don’t think a centre/periphery metaphor is particularly helpful in conceptualising film history or womens’ history. It can lead to a sort of “victim” approach. Rather, I prefer the metaphor of the **patchwork quilt** as a way of thinking through the cultural formation in gender terms. I wrote in *Women in British Cinema* that my aim was to construct an image of the cultural totality by “placing the red female cloth judiciously in the pattern - sometimes at the edge, sometimes at the centre, and sometimes not there at all.” I think that still holds good. We need to think about the roots of innovation too, and what the stimuli or conditions are which facilitate new ways of seeing.

\*I guess if the English language is a sort of hegemony which suppresses other languages or modes of expression because it has an inbuilt notion of empire and power, then of course it’s a bad thing. But if English merely operates as a sort of Esperanto, then it’s a convenience which helps us to reach easier mutual understandings.

\*In the British cultural context, “doing women’s film history” means a range of things. Firstly, researching, in a properly archival way, the conditions under which women film artists work. Secondly, accounting for the ways in which gender difference informs film response. Thirdly, addressing the gendered nature of film criticism. Fourthly, analysing the changing use to which the female image has been put in cinema. It has to be said that of latter years, women’s film history in Britain has been remarkably un-doctrinaire. It is broadly informed by feminism, of course, but a feminism with fairly generous proportions.

\*I personally have found an anthropological model the most useful in thinking through issues of female agency and representation, in particular the work of Mary Douglas. The way she offers up structures of the Sacred and the Profane, or Purity and Danger, are very suggestive, and have helped me to think through notions of pollution, dirt and taboo in cultural forms (in relation to gender).

\*Women’s film history offers a very radical challenge to the canon, just as women’s social history, when first mooted, threw down the gauntlet to the established discipline. Like women’s social history, women’s film history addresses those pushed to the periphery by conventional accounts. I want to stress that women’s film history is *necessary* because it restores a proper balance to an otherwise gender-biassed account of cultural forms.

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