

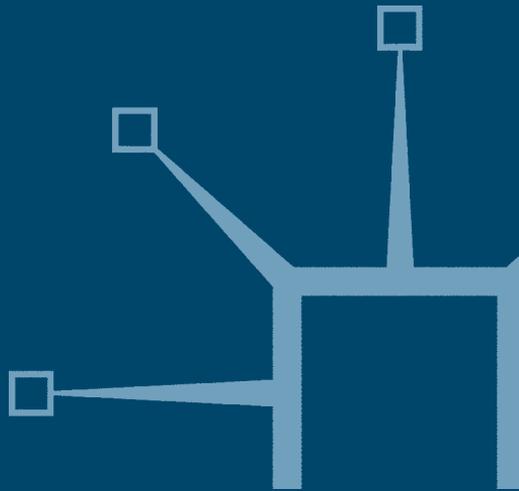
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# A Feminine Cinematics

Luce Irigaray, Women and Film

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Caroline Bainbridge



# A Feminine Cinematics

*Also by Caroline Bainbridge*

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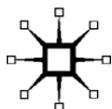
# A Feminine Cinematics

Luce Irigaray, Women and Film

Caroline Bainbridge

*Reader in Visual Culture, Roehampton University, London, UK*

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*This book is for my parents, Mary and Ed,  
and in memory of Edie, Eddie and Dave,  
with love*

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# Introduction

Luce Irigaray's extensive work has recently enjoyed something of a renaissance with a smattering of translations of her most recent work appearing in English (1983/1999; 1994/2000; 1994/2001; 1999/2002a; 2002b; 1985/2002c) and a number of monographs sketching the ongoing interest her work holds for feminists interested in the politics and philosophy of the feminine (Deutscher, 2002; Ives, 2003; Krappala, 2000; Martin, 2000; Stone, 2006), as well as a special issue of *Paragraph: A Journal for Modern Critical Theory* arising from a conference in the UK dedicated to Irigaray's work, in which Irigaray herself participated (Irigaray (ed.), 2002). This more extensive availability of Irigaray's thought inevitably leads to a deeper interest in how engagements with culture (in all its forms) might profit from taking on board the politics of her philosophy. This book sets out to do this in relation to women's cinema. Irigaray's elaboration of the difficulties and potentialities of the feminine and a politics of sexual difference seems very pertinent to discussions around the status of women in film, and this book makes a specific link to a series of woman-directed films that appeared during the 1990s in which the cultural politics of gender was placed centre-frame.

This book takes as its starting point an engagement with recent work done in film theory on the question of gender and spectatorship and attempts to signal how Irigaray's work opens up new possibilities for thinking through issues of representation, spectatorship and authorship. This book, then, is an attempt to set out the textual-political value of Irigaray's work and also to signal how this work provides a useful insight into the broader context of women's film-making. This seems particularly important in the current theoretical moment of film theory, when debates about the 'auteur' are resurfacing with particular reference to women's film-making (see, for example, Ramanathan, 2006).

This book diverges from the contemporary scene of feminist film theory by attempting to rethink feminist approaches to cinema through the work of a philosopher who is frequently misread and misrepresented. Many titles in feminist film theory engage with a notion of the feminine that is predicated on absence and/or lack. This is especially true of film texts that use psychoanalytic theory as a paradigm for the analysis of gender and difference more widely. Consequently, many of the key texts on women and film might be seen to neglect the specificity of women and the feminine. A recent article in *Screen* by Alison Butler (2000) highlights the incongruent aspects of such feminist approaches to film at the turn of the century and urges feminist film theorists to seek out new methods of engaging with film. She draws attention to the large number of films released during the 1990s that were made by female directors and pitched at and enjoyed by (predominantly) female audiences. The shift in approach advocated by Butler has parallels with the project being set out here.

Irigaray has been a key figure in feminist literary theory, yet her work has not been used extensively in relation to film. Irigaray is often discussed under the heading of 'French feminism' or '*écriture féminine*' despite the very clear-cut differences between her work and that of others such as Julia Kristeva, Michelle Montrelay, Michelle Le Doeuff and H  l  ne Cixous. In particular, Irigaray's work focuses on the specificity of the feminine and how symbolic discourses of gender and sexuality traditionally diminish this through their insistence on repressing and disavowing the feminine in culture, language and subjectivity. The focus of her work has its basis in sexual difference as a defining category of subjectivity. She argues extensively for the specificity of the feminine and a sexual/textual/psychical/philosophical/spiritual economy in which the feminine is defined in and for itself. Irigaray does not argue for a writing of the female body (despite the claims made by some literary theorists); she argues for the need to speak the feminine, to articulate it and to give it room for enunciation. Cinema arguably provides a cultural arena in which to begin to explore these ideas and to put them into practice. Irigaray's work thus becomes apposite to the challenge laid down by Butler to find new ways of approaching the seemingly vexed question of the relationship between women, the feminine and cinema.

This focus here, then, is on the relevance of the work of Luce Irigaray to feminist film theory and criticism. The chapters that follow take up the question of what it is possible to understand by the term 'feminine subjectivity' and how this finds new avenues of expression and reception through recent films by women. The book sets out to address

both narrative content and film-form to highlight the importance of reconceptualizing the theorization of the feminine in cinema. It also raises important questions about the specificity of women's political engagement with film, considering this in relation to contexts of direction, production and reception. While the opening chapter briefly discusses the phenomenon of 'girl power' and its impact on recent cinema seen in the release of films such as *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, US, 1995), the majority of this book is structured around detailed readings of eight independent films, each of which is directed by a woman. Chapter 2 considers the historical and contemporary backdrop of feminist film theory while Chapter 3 examines the contextual elements of these films' production in more depth. Chapter 4 examines *Female Perversions* (Susan Streitfeld, US, 1995) and *Under the Skin* (Carine Adler, UK, 1997) in the context of fantasy, while Chapter 5 centres on how cinema might be seen to speak (as) woman in *Silences of the Palace (Saimt el Qusur)* (Moufida Tlatli, Tunisia, 1994), *Antonia's Line* (Marleen Gorris, Netherlands, 1995) and *Faithless (Trolösa)* (Liv Ullmann, Sweden, 2000). There are very detailed readings of *Orlando* (Sally Potter, UK, 1993) and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, NZ, 1993) in subsequent chapters that point toward the richness of reading cinema through an Irigarayan lens. Some of the pitfalls of an exclusively sexual emphasis on the importance of difference in women's culture and politics are set out in the closing chapter, where there is further discussion of *Silences of the Palace* as well as a brief examination of work emerging from the Iranian context in the form of *The Apple (Sib)* (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran, 1998).

The choice of these film texts relates, in the first instance, to thematic concerns around aspects of gender. The feminine and the specificity of women constitute important aspects of plot and narrative in each of these films. Irigaray's work calls for cultural critics to take on the challenge of seeking out texts that grapple with issues of the feminine, and it seems to me that these texts foreground how this might be done. There are very specific aspects of the feminine which are of interest to Irigaray and which (coincidentally) are represented within the film texts examined here. These include notions of female genealogy and the female imaginary; the question of woman's association with nature and/or with madness; the difficulty of language and discourse; the cultural determination of what constitutes the feminine; masquerade and mimesis; structures of enunciation and subjectivity; sexuality and mediation. The broader question of the gaze combines with issues of desire and subjectivity within each of these film texts and their effect on the spectator.

Secondly, several of the directors discussed here are women who have had extensive involvement in feminist film-making (Potter, Gorris and Champion). The films under scrutiny in this book represent a shift in the film-making objectives of these women, involving as they do a move toward the mainstream. Spectatorial and narrative pleasures become central here, because these films reached a wider audience as a result of their more mainstream focus. How does this impact on their effectiveness? Are the film-makers compromised in their politics due to this shift, or is it rather the case that the films become more political because they reach wider audiences? Other directors examined here make specific reference to feminism: in *Female Perversions*, Streitfeld draws on Louise Kaplan's monograph of the same title (Kaplan, 1991); Tlatli's interest in women's liberation in Tunisia is fundamental to the genesis of the film; Adler's work on sisterhood, relations between mothers and daughters and notions of female sexuality, madness and violence clearly relates to a number of key feminist ideas and Adler acknowledges Estela V. Welldon's work (1988) as a key source for her writing; Ullmann is known for her work as a prominent actor on the art house scene (working especially with Ingmar Bergman) and has turned to film as a mode of reflection and commentary on the role of women in cinema and within the imaginations and fantasies of men; more recently, Samira Makhmalbaf has emerged in the context of a swathe of Iranian films, many of which foreground gender in their narratives. Working under the auspices of her father's company, Makhmalbaf has acknowledged the formative experience of the restrictions and limitations imposed on women in Iranian society and the effect that this has had on her work.

Each of the films discussed here has its roots in feminism and/or independent cinema. It is interesting that these films emerged during and shortly after the 1990s as popular accounts of feminism begin to use terms such as 'post-feminist' and ideas about 'new feminism' began to be promulgated by writers such as Natasha Walter (1999). The films provide a snapshot of the socio-political mood in relation to feminism as a movement in this context.

This book also offers a number of theoretical perspectives on Irigaray's writings, theories of spectatorship and questions of textuality in the cinema. The chapters are organized around key themes in Irigaray's extensive work. Chapter 1 sets out a theoretical overview of Irigaray's work, situating and contextualizing it in relation to feminist film theory more broadly. Key concepts and themes are defined and explored in an effort to show their relevance to engagements with cinema. Of crucial

importance here is the move made by Irigaray from critique to politics/praxis. In a way, this move provides a model for the structure of the book as a whole, with the opening chapter interrogating traditional representations of the feminine and focusing on films that parody these. Subsequent chapters grapple with films that are motivated in more starkly political ways, foregrounding the scope of Irigaray's work for thinking through cinema.

Chapter 2 analyses a number of theoretical aspects of film. Setting out an overview of the debates around female spectatorship and women in film more broadly, it then seeks to build on work done by Mayne (1993) on how it might be possible to take forward ideas about active female spectatorship. Irigaray's work on mediation broadly refers to the need to construct an interval or 'between space' in which it is possible to locate the other in its own right. For film theory, it is argued, this has a bearing on theories of spectatorship. Film theory has (like other theories) tended to couch discussions of femininity in terms of otherness. Irigaray's work on ethics and the importance of mediation raises a number of critical questions about the effects of alterity for the female subject. This chapter uses Irigaray's ideas to counter the tendency in film theory to discuss the female spectator in terms of otherness and to articulate readings of the feminine that are premised on lack and absence. By formulating a mode of spectatorship which might be understood as 'osmotic' in structure, this chapter moves toward the fundamental role played by the notion of mediation in Irigaray's recent work on ethics with the aim of reconsidering ideas about the female spectator.

Chapter 3 sets off from a different perspective, setting out ways of conceptualizing the contextual elements of film and the importance of these for understanding how cinema is able to open up challenging new spaces for theory and criticism. Here, the focus is on the contexts of direction, production and reception, and the chapter draws on Irigaray's work on gesture and on the need to establish spaces for a woman-to-woman sociality in order to move beyond the restrictive confines of symbolic cultural practices. In tandem with the previous two chapters, this discussion sets the ground for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy and its importance in debates about the representation of women in film. Irigaray's critique of symbolic discourses of the feminine forms the basis for a detailed analysis *Female Perversions* and *Under the Skin*. Through theoretical and critical analysis, the discussion here tries to demonstrate the formal propensity of film to elucidate and articulate female sexuality. The distinction drawn by Irigaray between masquerade and mimesis is

crucial in this context and the chapter sets out some of the ways that this distinction intersects with the play on unconscious fantasy in Irigaray's formulation of the female imaginary. Connections between cinema and fantasy are also explored with a view to illustrating how the cinematic apparatus may lend itself to a radical revisioning of the feminine through the specificity of its own properties.

Chapter 5 is driven by Irigaray's notion of *parler femme* (often translated as 'speaking (as) woman'). The central contention here is that women can profit by exchange amongst themselves. Language and processes of enunciation are crucial to Irigaray's theory and relate very clearly to psychoanalytic theories of the subject. The key film texts in this chapter are *Antonia's Line*, *Silences of the Palace* and *Faithless*. The intersection of fantasy and the feminine in these films combines with the processes of exchange to produce a distinctively feminine subject. The importance of flashback narrative devices and cinematic structures of enunciation also begin to be examined here, forming the basis for the readings in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 6 and 7 extend the scope of the potential of an Irigarayan approach to film by presenting detailed readings of *Orlando* and *The Piano*. In my reading of *Orlando*, there is a focus on space and time, concepts which have played a central role in the history of philosophy and which are essential to cinema. My reading attempts to forge links between film theoretical work on the spectator and the cinematic practice of editing. It also engages with the narrative structure of the film to show how cinema as an institution is a useful forum in which to rework traditional perspectives on gender. Similarly, in my discussion of *The Piano*, my aim is to structure a detailed analysis of a film text that draws together the key ideas laid out throughout the book. By reading the narrative through fantasy, *parler femme*, and mediation, and by reading the film-form through space and time, this chapter reads against the grain in an effort to show how feminist film theory can combine critique with politics by highlighting the specificity of the feminine. Key themes here are desire, language and enunciation, and Irigaray's theorization of the death drive. The latter relates back to pleasure in the cinema, as well as to identification and thus to notions of spectatorship.

The closing chapter elaborates the prospective shifts enabled by the readings set out here. It also addresses some of the pitfalls in Irigaray's work around modalities of difference other than the sexual. Through a return to *Silences of the Palace* and a brief discussion of *The Apple*, this chapter shows how differences between women are rather eclipsed in Irigaray's focus on an economy of sexual difference. In some of her

most recent writing (1999/2002a), Irigaray suggests that sexual difference provides a basis for thinking through other experiences of difference. This chapter asks whether this claim, which is based in an acceptance of multiculturalism, stands up to scrutiny, drawing attention to how the textual-political elements of women's film-making often set out to foreground the experience of difference in terms of ethnicity and class as the ultimate terrain for political scrutiny.

# 1

## Reading the Feminine with Irigaray

Luce Irigaray is a theorist whose work has been examined from many different perspectives in the last thirty years. Her work has both been scrutinized by feminists sympathetic to her writings and by those who are more hostile to her engagement with philosophy and psychoanalysis. There is a panoply of views around her work that defies attempts to categorize them. There are three key positions that are commonly held in relation to Irigaray's work. Certain feminists have challenged Irigaray's work as (biologically) essentialist. Critics such as Moi (1985), Plaza (1978), Sayers (1982) and Segal (1987) argue that Irigaray's work is based on a notion of feminine specificity that is somehow grounded in the psychic or material female body. There are, of course, many shortcomings in this approach to Irigaray's work, perhaps the most important of which is that such analyses miss the very point of Irigaray's engagement with the monolithic and monological texts of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Important responses to this criticism of Irigaray are made by Fuss (1989), Whitford (1991), Braidotti (2002), Deutscher (2002) and Stone (2006). The critique of essentialism in Irigaray's work does not take account of the very radical attempts made throughout her work to posit a critique of patriarchy that makes possible a mode of change that has ramifications for notions of gendered subjectivity. In claiming that Irigaray's work is ahistorical and non-materialist, such accounts reveal the extent to which Irigaray's work has been dismissed on the basis of misreadings of her earliest texts. As Schor has pointed out, Irigaray is not interested in *defining* 'woman', but is, rather, committed to *theorizing* feminine specificity in terms that give due consideration to questions of sexual difference (Burke, Schor and Whitford, 1994: 66).

Secondly, further studies suggest that Irigaray's work is anti-feminist because of her insistence on the alterity of the feminine within symbolic

practice. This is, perhaps, most clearly seen in the Lacanian critique which argues that Irigaray attempts to misrepresent Lacan's teachings (Ragland Sullivan, 1986). This work focuses on the imaginary-centred perspective on Irigaray's elaboration of the feminine. Taking Lacanian ideas about the non-existence of 'the the woman' at face value, such accounts diminish the importance of Irigaray's ironic and critical engagement with Lacanian thought, taking it rather literally.

Thirdly, some feminist commentators have been more willing to engage with the deconstructionist element of Irigaray's work and use it to uncover the repressive mechanisms used within socio-symbolic praxis to disavow the feminine (Braidotti, 1991; Burke, Schor and Whitford, 1994; Connor, 1992; Deutscher, 2002; Fuss, 1989; Gallop, 1982; Grosz, 1989; Stephenson, 1991; Schwab, 1991; Stone, 2006; and Whitford, 1991). These critics advocate engaging with Irigaray's thought and discursive style in order to re-vision her work as a 'philosophy of change'. Most notably, in this respect, feminists such as Grosz, Stone and Whitford have made important arguments in favour of reading Irigaray on her own terms. Whitford has stated that

to ask whether Irigaray herself is speaking a masculine or feminine discourse would be to hypostatize a process. To attempt to mine her writing for models of *parler femme* would be, I think, to miss the point which is that she is initiating a possible dialogue between herself and her readers.... Her work is offered as an object, a discourse, for women to exchange among themselves, a sort of commodity, so that women themselves do not have to function as the commodity, or as the *sacrifice* on which sociality is built. (1991: 51-2)

Many of Irigaray's critics have wrestled with her often difficult and challenging work in an attempt to produce an understanding of her objectives that is accessible to feminists struggling for women's rights and for female subjectivity. The ways in which this has been done are myriad and complex and there are already several overviews of the debate about Irigaray's work.

A number of textual theoreticians have made use of Irigaray for textual/political purposes. The large majority of this work situates Irigaray (often alongside Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous) in the context of *écriture féminine* (Apter, 1990; Jones, 1981, 1985; Simpson-Zinn, 1985; Worsham, 1991). Yet, as Whitford has pointed out,

[t]his reading blurs the differences, both theoretical and political, between the three women. But it also reduces the complexity of