

Feminist Film Criticism in the 21st Century

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Twenty-five years ago, at the time of writing, Patricia Erens, in her introduction to *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, wrote that “the rise of feminist film criticism is an outgrowth of the women’s movement, which began in the United States in the late 1960s, of feminist scholarship in a variety of disciplines, and of women’s filmmaking.” [1][#N1] Less than twenty years after the publications of Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women at the Movies* and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (the fortieth anniversary of which was marked in academic and public forums in 2015), Erens is already reflecting on the history of feminist film criticism at a moment when it was on the precipice of being both challenged and expanded by the rise in gender studies and media studies. As feminist film scholars looking back on these developments from our contemporary vantage point, it seems appropriate to consider what kind of challenges feminist film criticism may now be facing.

With the declining influence of cine-psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theory more generally, alongside the rise of television and media studies and the developments of gender and sexuality studies, it might seem as if feminist film criticism has been on the wane since the early 1990s. However, understood as a textual reading practice through which scholars and commentators alike mobilize a feminist frame for understanding popular cinema, one which is intertwined with feminist film theory, feminist cultural studies, feminist reception studies and feminist film (and other screen) histories, feminist film criticism’s legacy and continuing influence can be found anywhere that feminism and visual culture meet.

Feminist critical perspectives remain vital in feminist analysis of various forms of visual media. The programmes for the last few years of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies underline how much of the Society’s feminist energy is directed towards television/celebrity/social media/other new media. In this work, the feminist frame originally built on the analysis of film now frames feminist approaches to other popular media. With key terms originated by theorists such as Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Barbara Creed, and Carol Clover finding wider application across multiple media forms, the terminology, if not the primary object, of feminist film criticism remains resonant.

Moreover, with the growing profile of feminism in new media and journalism, there is widespread use of terms associated with feminist film theory; concepts such as “the gaze,” “to-be-looked-at-ness,” “monstrous feminine,” and “final girl” regularly appear in feminist magazines such as *Jezebel*, *Bitch*, *Bust*, and *Feministing*. While popular feminist criticism is not in the business of providing in-depth readings of individual texts, criticism of patriarchal cinema and media culture is now widely generated by journalists and other cultural commentators who use feminist critical tools to question the circulation of sexist images and gendered value systems.

For feminist *film* studies, some of the most recent ground-breaking work has been on recovering women’s film history. The discovery of many women working behind the scenes in key areas—directing, writing, producing, owning studios—in Hollywood’s early/silent period has changed our standard view of that industry’s history, as has the ongoing discoveries of women working in early cinema around the world. Such investigations have returned feminist film studies to a focus on authorship that takes an industrial-historical perspective. The rise of feminist film history has also coincided with a social-science approach to gender inequality in Hollywood. Data reports on inequality in cinema have garnered high

media profiles in recent years, prompting regular discussion about the lack of progress in raising women's numbers in key production roles above 20%. Numbers can speak loudly, and they can also be (necessarily) blunt. But the numbers alone aren't enough, and the lessons of history have not been learnt.

Despite the perennial anxiety expressed by film critics about the state of cinema (box-office receipts, dependence on franchises, digital piracy, the rise of quality television etc.), film still holds significant cultural value. We would argue this owes in part to (white) men's ongoing domination of the industry. As such, feminist critical analysis of the representation of gender and other intersectional identities of class, race and sexuality in film has remained a key component of the feminist critical studies approach to postfeminist media. The scholarship on women filmmakers, likewise, continues to use feminist textual analysis to make the case for the cultural and historical value of women's work even as we are routinely made aware how few have that opportunity.

The detailed work of film criticism may seem an outdated form of scholarship. Yet when engaged through a feminist perspective, film criticism notices the scandal of women's marginalization. It responds to that marginalisation in multiple ways—in detail, in outline, through engagement with history or writing about the contemporary moment. Motivated by an understanding of inequality and an interest in cinema, feminist film criticism offers a political as well as aesthetic response to visual culture.

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Notes

1. Patricia Erens, "Introduction," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xvi. [\[#N1-ptr1\]](#)

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