



*Vagabond (Sans toit ni loi, dir. Agnès Varda, France/UK, 1985)*

## ***Camera Obscura:*** **Feminism, Culture, and** **Media Studies**

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As I prepare my two courses this semester—one on melodrama, the other on history/memory and social conscience in the cinema—it occurs to me that while they are being taught simultaneously, these courses trace the thirty-year evolution of *Camera Obscura* from its inaugural designation as “A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory” to its present concerns of “Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies.” *Evolution* is perhaps too teleological a term, for the change in the journal’s subtitle is less a linear progression than a process of transformation in which the seeds of the earlier formulation continue to nourish the current rubrics.

My melodrama course has as its primary text Christine Gledhill’s *Home Is Where the Heart Is*,<sup>1</sup> a landmark book situated within the historic debates of the seventies and eighties over the social relevance of film theory and the necessity of blending textual and contextual analyses. It was in the heady days of these debates that *Camera Obscura* was born, asserting somewhat defiantly that the intersection of feminism and film theory—the dialectical and nec-

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essary interplay of these two perspectives, these points of analysis—provided an exciting and productive way out of the dichotomizing impasse of some of those arguments.

At the heart of the project was an understanding that textual analysis and theoretical work were engaged activities of commitment, that no matter how carefully a particular film might be analyzed in terms of formal configurations, enunciative strategies, and desiring constructions, the activity of analysis itself was already rooted in a socially critical perspective. That film theory had developed in the deceptive illusion of gender neutrality made the assertion of feminism imperative; that feminism had been understood, particularly in the United States, as a largely pragmatic form of activism made its partner term, *film theory*, equally important in the description of *Camera Obscura's* critical terrain.

Today, thirty years later (certainly a cause for celebration!), things are quite different. The case for theory perhaps does not need to be made in exactly the same way. At the same time, the concreteness of the three terms *feminism*, *culture*, and *media studies* reflects the need to objectively specify the indispensable engagement with a whole new range of contemporary discursive modes. The very fact that fresh perspectives from cultural studies, post-colonial approaches, theories of sexualities and gender, and the intervention of questions of race and cultural identity complicate the task of theory (and of feminist theory in particular) means that easy assumptions about the role of gender in highly mediated societies are quite literally impossible. Likewise, the ramifications for transformative thinking and political action implied by these intersecting discursive fields reaffirm the political commitment underlying the first formulations of *Camera Obscura* at its inception.

My other course, on history/memory and social conscience in the cinema, involves the analysis of films dealing, in one way or another, with France under the German occupation (and its counterpart until November 1942, Vichy), and this seems to place its concerns within the logic of *Camera Obscura's* triple rubric. In this respect, I find the journal's current stated fields very useful in designating areas of investigation most fruitful for understanding the

ideological and social consequences of representing the memory of historical fact. Because my current work broadens the scope of film analysis to include questions of cultural identity and history, culture and media studies are necessarily engaged. Because the focus is on ideologies of the family and systems of exclusion involved in gendering and mythologizing a national subject, *feminism* is a key term as well. The texts I find most useful are those by the feminist scholars Ginette Vincendeau and Geneviève Sellier, both of whom combine subtle textual analysis, original historical research, and sophisticated cultural theory to produce models of contemporary feminist scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Both scholars never forget the wider theoretical issues involved in dealing with any national cinema, and both are mindful in their analyses of the implications for feminism in their more general work, whether it be on European cinema or Jean-Pierre Melville in Vincendeau's case, or on forties French cinema or the New Wave in Sellier's work.

*Camera Obscura* was forged in the optimistic post-sixties era when social commitment and collective work were the sine qua non of any activity in the arts, with cinema (and cinema studies) being the most productive terrain for these engagements. Because it is a popular art, the cinema was seen as one of the most democratic of cultural forms; because it is a contemporary art form—the youngest in the history of representations—it was seen as the ideal place for critical innovation. *Camera Obscura's* commitment to theory redefined American feminist practice; its commitment to feminism reoriented American film studies. Today we face a different kind of challenge as global politics and transnational identities have broadened our focus and our objectives. The “third world” of seventies cinema studies has become too restrictive for the multicultural framework implied in all discussions of media production. The competing yet intersecting claims of diasporic and transnational communities, and the varied definitions and perspectives of “the feminine” amid these shifting demands and designations, complicate and enrich the work of *Camera Obscura* today. The journal is certainly up to the task. *Camera Obscura* has

evolved progressively with the changes in the terrain of our discipline. Because it has kept sight of these epistemological shifts, and because its solid historical base combines with its pioneering legacy, things certainly look bright for the future. Happy birthday, *chères collègues* and dear sisters!

### Notes

1. Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).
2. See Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d'un mythe (Jean Gabin: Anatomy of a Myth)* (Paris: Nathan, 1993); Vincendeau, *The Companion to French Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1996); Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris* (London: British Film Institute, 2003); as well as countless articles and anthologies. Geneviève Sellier, *Jean Grémillon: Le cinéma est à vous* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989); Sellier, *Les enfants du paradis: Marcel Carné et Jacques Prévert; Étude critique* (Paris: Nathan, 1992); Sellier and Noël Burch, *La drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan, 1996).

**Sandy Flitterman-Lewis** is an associate professor in the English department at Rutgers University, where she teaches courses in cinema studies, comparative literature, and women's studies. She was one of the four founding coeditors of *Camera Obscura*. Her book, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, expanded edition (1996), explores the work of three French women directors (Germaine Dulac, Marie Epstein, and Agnes Varda) from the standpoint of feminist film theory. Her coauthored (with Robert Stam and Robert Burgoyne) *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond* (1992), a lexicon of theoretical concepts, has been translated into four languages, and her essays have appeared in numerous anthologies. Her present book project, "Hidden Voices: Childhood, the Family, and Anti-Semitism in Occupation France," grew out of a conference she organized at Columbia University in 1998. She is currently at work on a watercolor sketchbook based on her photos of Paris.

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