

The Body as Gendered Discourse in British and French Costume and Heritage Fictions

Corps, genre et identité sexuelle dans les films en costumes et les fictions patrimoniales du cinéma britannique et français

Julianne Pidduck

Volume 22, Number 2-3, Spring 2012

Genre/Gender

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1011657ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1011657ar>

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Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pidduck, J. (2012). The Body as Gendered Discourse in British and French Costume and Heritage Fictions. *Cinémas*, 22(2-3), 101–125.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1011657ar>

Article abstract

This article explores several articulations between gender and genre in contemporary British and French costume and heritage fiction. Genre is defined here both as a (gendered) discourse of cultural value that shapes the cultural meaning of costume and heritage fiction, and as a symbolic negotiation of shared cultural concerns. Through case studies of *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) and *Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois* (Pascale Ferran, 2006), the author examines changing generic accounts of female desire and sexuality, analyzing both textual and discursive framings of gender and other differences. These films exemplify an emergent attention to the body in intensive states of pleasure and suffering as a form of generic renewal in some recent British and French films. The broader theoretical ambition of the article is to explore how the body operates as a highly coded gendered and generic discourse in costume and heritage fiction.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores several articulations between gender and genre in contemporary British and French costume and heritage fiction. Genre is defined here both as a (gendered) discourse of cultural value that shapes the cultural meaning of costume and heritage fiction, and as a symbolic negotiation of shared cultural concerns. Through case studies of *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) and *Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois* (Pascale Ferran, 2006), the author examines changing generic accounts of female desire and sexuality, analyzing both textual and discursive framings of gender and other differences. These films exemplify an emergent attention to the body in intensive states of pleasure and suffering as a form of generic renewal in some recent British and French films. The broader theoretical ambition of the article is to explore how the body operates as a highly coded gendered and generic discourse in costume and heritage fiction.

Costume and heritage fiction set in the past constitutes an established and enduringly popular mode of film and television production in the United Kingdom and in France. Paradoxically, despite a broad appeal for generations of audiences and industrial success in domestic and international markets, this genre has been viewed with ambivalence in both countries. In this article, I consider the articulation of gender and genre in two ways: First, cinematic genre is understood as an exploration of shared cultural meanings that are often caught up with questions of gender and other differences. Second, I frame genre as a process of discursive categorization, where the names, characteristics and boundaries of particular genres are continually renegotiated in specific contexts. One salient aspect of generic categorization is the contestation over the “cultural value” attributed

not only to particular genres, but also to the audiences with which they are associated. In this light, an established tradition of British feminist scholarship, and more recently studies by French feminist theorists, intervenes in cultural discourse to *take seriously* the pleasures and symbolic work of a genre that in both countries has often been perceived, and frequently dismissed, as a “woman’s genre.”

In the context of this special issue, I have been asked to set in dialogue the play of gender and genre in French and British costume and heritage fiction. In both contexts, this mode of production is commonly associated, at least implicitly, with denigrated female audiences and taste cultures. In France, for feminist film theorist Sellier (2005), the *film en costumes* or the *film historique* has been frequently devalued in cinephile discourses since the late 1950s as a “popular genre”—a category of mass culture associated with femininity in French cultural discourse. In the British context, feminist scholars and critics have countered a widespread critical distaste for 1980s “heritage cinema” with an attention to the gendered experiences and pleasures associated with these works. Using the example of melodrama, Altman (1999, p. 5) argues that critics and commentators contribute to a continuous process of generic classification, and also potentially to “making genre a living, changing, active part of cultural development and self-expression.” In the case of melodrama, Anglo-American feminist film theorists have played a significant role in retrospectively reframing the cultural significance of melodrama and the woman’s film from the classic Hollywood and post-war periods. In this light, I will explore how changing industrial and critical discourses have shaped British and French understandings of the cultural value and social meanings of costume and heritage fiction in these two very different contexts.

The identification of specific semantic elements offers a useful starting point for generic categorization. Very simply, I would suggest that costume and heritage fiction is characterized by the semantic elements of period costumes and settings, and language. The notion of “period” costumes and settings is deliberately broad, as this genre lacks the iconic semantic elements

associated with the Western or the gangster film. Rather, generic representations of historical periods draw upon cinematic and cultural connotations which are continually reproduced, parodied and transformed. Period costume and settings point to the centrality of display or spectacle, where one of the genre's core pleasures is to appreciate elaborate costumes, period objects, art design, and sometimes music and dance. A final semantic element is the genre's valued performance of literary or theatrical language, either canonical (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1990) or modern (*The Madness of King George*, Nicholas Hytner, 1994).

Another articulation of gender and genre that shapes this study is the notion that generic cultural production explores questions of shared significance for particular audiences. Costume and heritage fiction engages in the symbolic exploration of questions of contemporary concern through the prism of the past. In her evocative discussion of heritage (*patrimoine*) in the French context, Paveau (2009, pp. 32-33) describes "une mise en rapport entre un bien ou un ensemble de biens et une conscience nationale ou plus largement trans- ou internationale ou d'ailleurs plus étroitement collective (la famille, le groupe)." Alongside the material (monuments, buildings, sites) dimensions of heritage, she argues (pp. 33-34) that "le patrimoine appartient aussi à l'ordre du discours car il organise les représentations sociales. . . . Le discours patrimonial . . . organise en effet le temps humain et permet de tracer des lignes de vie dans le présent, d'organiser les rapports entre les hommes et entre l'homme et son environnement."

It is this powerful discursive dimension of the immaterial past that inspires this article, leading me to scrutinize how the genre offers compelling explorations of contemporary identities and power relations refracted through the distant yet familiar, imagined and changing past. While many authors have studied the articulation of national and indeed gendered identities in costume and heritage fiction, this article addresses the changing semiotic, affective and epistemological significance of the body as a vivid semantic element. Let me begin from the observation that the body in extreme states of pleasure, suffering, illness and

death has been foregrounded in certain French and British costume and heritage fiction since the 1980s. Many striking examples can be found in auteurist or avant-garde works such as *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986), *Edward II* (Derek Jarman, 1991), *La Reine Margot* (Patrice Chéreau, 1994) or *Vénus noire* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2010). Yet this phenomenon is also evident in popular fiction, including *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, 1988), *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2004) and *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007).

Incorporating trans-generic codes and associated contemporary audience tastes for graphic violence and explicit sexuality, these films draw on war films, horror, documentary and pornography to explore new modes of generic hybridity. In contrast with the genre's traditional mannered pleasures of witty dialogue, accomplished acting and elaborate art direction, these works develop visceral encounters with historical experiences, figures, events and periods—rendering them at once more viscerally immediate and distant, strange, barbaric. I draw on two studies to explore this phenomenon: Beugnet's (2007) study of a French auteurist "cinema of sensation" that evokes the tactile or haptic qualities of the medium; and Williams' (1991, p. 4) account of "body genres" that foreground "the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion."

This article explores the incursion of vivid corporeal imagery into some recent costume and heritage fictions through the prism of gender and genre. I examine the changing semiotic, ontological and expressive status of the gendered body, and the ways that discourses of cultural value shape the cultural meanings of these works in distinct French and British contexts. As the centrepieces of two synthetic accounts of contrasting national contexts, I analyze corporeal articulations of gendered power and desire in Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) and Pascale Ferran's *Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois* (2006). These case studies facilitate my investigation of the body as an epistemologically complex and highly coded signifier in particular genres, and in audiovisual culture more generally.

***Elizabeth* and the problem of the queen's bodies**

The invention of the influential and often pejorative category of “heritage cinema” in 1980s Britain exemplifies how critical discourse contributes to shaping the changing meanings and cultural value of genre. In a multicultural 1980s Britain fractured by class differences, Wollen (1991, p. 181) argues that a cycle of films including *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984) and *Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985) share a conservative nostalgia that “yearns for a nation in which social status is known and kept, and where difference constitutes rather than fragments national unity.” In the context of Thatcher’s Britain, the genre was widely associated with a “heritage culture” that undertook an ideological rebranding of the national past at home and abroad. For instance, Higson (2003, p. 39) describes an “aesthetics of display” common to these films, where a “pictorialist” camera style transforms “narrative space into heritage space: that is, a space for the display of heritage properties rather than for the enactment of dramas.”

Journalists and scholars associated with the heritage critique evoke a homogeneous national audience transfixed by a seductive account of the national past. Meanwhile, British feminist scholars have critiqued the implicitly gendered discourses surrounding costume and heritage fiction. For instance, Cook (1996, p. 7) writes: “Despite the fact that costume films are a staple of most national cinemas, they remain virgin territory critically. . . . It appears that costume drama’s perceived ‘femininity’, conflated with inauthenticity, may be responsible to some extent for the critical opprobrium in which it is widely held.” The British context has seen the emergence of a rich body of feminist scholarship and criticism grounded in cultural studies that has repositioned costume and heritage fiction as a “woman’s genre” produced for, and enjoyed by, female audiences.

Altman’s (p. 214) comments about the polysemy of genre are pertinent here, as he recasts the term “as multivalent [and] multiply and variously valorized by diverse user groups. . . . Genres make meaning . . . in an arena where users with divergent inter-

ests compete to carry out their own programmes.” These remarks are useful for reading competing discourses of genre in postmodern cultural contexts where, as Frow (1995, p. 1) argues, there is “no stable hierarchy of value.” Instead, Frow (p. 5) suggests that cultural value is “relational and practical, the outcome of practices of negotiation and contestation.” The power of critical discourses to shape the cultural meanings of genre comes into relief during periods of generic transformation.

The 1998 film *Elizabeth* demarcates key changes in the industrial strategies, aesthetics and public discourses associated with British costume and heritage fictions. In contrast with the “quality”¹ acting, studio sets and an emphasis on constrained, theatrical dialogue associated with British heritage film and television from the 1970s, Kapur develops a strongly visual, sensual and violent aesthetic—an aesthetic firmly embedded in the flesh rather than the word. The film reinvents the Elizabethan period through a hybrid generic lexicon drawing from the historical epic, the thriller and Bollywood aesthetics. At the time of the film’s release, British critics highlighted the film’s hybrid generic aesthetic and its flagrant disregard for historical accuracy, notably a controversial and highly sexual depiction of the “Virgin Queen.” Perceived as a daring and irreverent departure from the genre’s established “quality” and heritage roots, and from its persistent concern for historical authenticity, *Elizabeth* is a polysemic text designed to engage multiple and mass audiences in the U.K. and internationally.

Celebrating the film’s refusal of what he sees as a conservative heritage aesthetic, Higson (p. 198) argues that *Elizabeth* develops “an *exploration* of Englishness, a historical meditation on the making of modern England and the construction of a central icon of the national heritage.” Meanwhile, the film’s proto-feminist narrative foregrounding female sexuality and power played well with female audiences, particularly in the United States. *Elizabeth* was released in an increasingly transnational film industry, where British films including *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995) were gaining a significant audience share in North America. With its \$28 million budget, North American

success was crucial for *Elizabeth*. Producer Alison Owen comments: “American women responded far more excitedly to the character of Elizabeth [than British audiences]. . . . In America, women were jumping out of their seats shouting ‘Go, girl!’” (quoted in Marriott (1998, p. 29)).

The film’s British marketing campaign consistently distinguished Kapur’s film from more traditional costume and heritage fiction. Notably, producer Tim Bevan is quoted in the British press book: “We were keen to do a period movie, but one that wasn’t in the recent tradition of what I call ‘frock flicks’. We wanted to avoid . . . the Merchant-Ivory approach. . . . We also wanted to stamp a contemporary feel onto our story . . . we decided to structure it as a conspiracy thriller” (quoted in Higson, pp. 196-97). Bevan’s refusal of “frock flicks” distances *Elizabeth* from the feminine connotations of earlier costume film, a stylistic shift (and a ploy to attract younger and male audiences) announced by references to *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) in the film’s publicity.

With a bold aesthetics of saturated colours, vertiginous camera angles and rapid editing, *Elizabeth* destabilizes the mythic account of the peace and harmony of the Elizabethan period. Highlighting the uncertainty of the young queen’s rise to power, Kapur uses a cinematic language of corporeal intensity to



A river runs red with blood in a Scottish battlefield.
Elizabeth (Shekhar Kapur, 1998). © PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

dramatize the English Reformation and the gender dynamics of absolute power. The film opens on a graphic scene, shot close to the body, of Protestant heretics being burnt at the stake during the reign of Bloody Mary. The heretics are shaved with a blunt knife that leaves their scalps bloody, marched up to the pyre and set on fire, with the soundtrack dominated by their screams. Later, we see a battlefield in Scotland dotted with injured, dead and dying English soldiers, where a river runs red with blood. Finally, there are two gratuitous and invented scenes, where Marie de Guise and one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting die gruesome, lingering deaths from poison.

Elizabeth exemplifies how certain semantic and stylistic elements associated with body genres are making incursions into costume and heritage fictions. Williams' account of horror, pornography and melodrama—and I would add the war film—as “body genres” brings into relief the cultural resonance of the body in particular cycles of films.

The deployment of sex, violence and emotion would thus seem to have very precise functions in these body genres. Like all popular genres, they address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities. The deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is thus in no way gratuitous and in no way strictly limited to each of these genres; it is instead a cultural form of problem solving (p. 9).

In what ways might vivid corporeal spectacles contribute to the genre's cultural practices of problem solving? In the case of *Elizabeth*, tableaux of violence and death render obscure and complex historical dynamics of power strikingly legible, and arguably more immediate for the contemporary viewer. Meanwhile, a foundational English mythology of the cultural Renaissance and political stability of the Elizabethan period is symbolically transformed into a strange and barbaric scene of intrigue, poison and torture. This popular “rebranding” of the Tudor period, where historical accuracy, quality scripts and acting give way to a more popular and corporeal cinema, continues with subsequent productions *The Tudors* (Michael Hirst, 2007-10) and *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick, 2008).

In addition to its violent dramatization of the Elizabethan period, this is also a strikingly sexual work that reframes Elizabeth I through the lens of youth, desire and passion. Screenwriter Michael Hirst (1998, p. 7) remarks:

I wanted to show her as a young woman—the young woman arrested for treason and afraid for her life; the young woman passionately in love with Robert Dudley—and not the white-faced, pearl-encrusted icon of her later years, and of historical memory. Indeed, I was intrigued to know how and why that iconography had been created; what and where the motivations, political and personal, behind the Virgin Queen? What did Elizabeth, as a Queen, gain by its creation and what, if anything, did she lose as a woman?

For a contemporary (post)feminist society intrigued by the articulation of femininity, sexuality and power, the portrait of a young Elizabeth confronts liberal feminist dilemmas: How do women negotiate the conflicting pressures of social decorum, sexual desire and power? Cate Blanchett's performance stages an encounter between a contemporary Anglo-American feminist sensibility and the crusty iconography of history—an encounter that I call “the problem of the queen's bodies” (Pidduck 2004, pp. 169-73). Comolli (1978, p. 46) argues that in historical fiction, “the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much.” Finally, to add more bodies to the mix, in Tudor legal parlance the king's two bodies were known as the immortal “body politic,” and the mortal “body natural” (Axton, 1977). Kapur's film accentuates the contrasts between the queen's body as property or embodiment of the state and her personal body and desires as a woman.

As with *The Madness of King George*, *Mrs Brown* (John Madden, 2007) and *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009), Elizabeth presents an irreverent passion play of the English monarch's secular “body natural.” The film chronicles Elizabeth's transformation from a modern young woman shown controversially in bed with her lover Robert Dudley (the body natural) to her mythification as the “Virgin Queen” (the body



Cate Blanchett incarnates the young, modern Elizabeth.
Elizabeth (Shekhar Kapur, 1998). © PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

politic). Central to *Elizabeth* and its sequel *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007) is the tension between personal desire for love and strict state control of the queen's body. This tension can be seen in the scene after the coronation, when the young queen halts all of the proceedings to declare: "Play a volta!" A space is cleared in the middle of the ballroom and a ritual dance takes place with the camera spiralling around the couple. Intercut with reaction shots of the crowd, the

voluminous stiffness of the colourful costumes and the volta's ritualistic gestures make for a highly erotic moment. Robert (Ralph Fiennes) lifts Elizabeth in slow motion, and the arc of her body and elaborate dress are suspended in mid-air. The shocked and titillated reactions of the Court metonymically invoke something of the film's impact in contemporary Britain as a daringly sexual revision of a sacrosanct national myth.

In the *Elizabeth* diptych, Elizabeth's unfulfilled love life poignantly dramatizes the discourse of the queen's body as an empty "vessel" for the succession requiring completion in marriage. Notably, Sir William Cecil pointedly reminds Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting that: "Her majesty's body and person are no longer her own property. They belong to the State." The end of the film crystallizes a transition from the queen's naturalistic contemporary body to an icon of the British national past. The "Virgin Queen" steps out of a blinding light to appear in Court powdered and elaborately coiffed, her body encrusted with embroidery, lace and jewels. Immobilized as her own portrait flanked by the coat of arms, Elizabeth has become Britannia, freezing Blanchett's modern and sensual Elizabeth into a statue.

Comolli's account of the competing bodies in historical fiction brings into relief the corporeal generic coding of gesture, costume and performance. Blanchett enacts the princess's



Elizabeth transformed into Britannia at the end of the film.
Elizabeth (Shekhar Kapur, 1998). © PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

transformation from a naturalistic contemporary physicality toward a mythic, stern and dusty icon (the final shot of the Virgin Queen is based on historical portraits of Elizabeth). This case demonstrates how the body of the actor functions as a crucial point of identification, a hinge between contemporary sensibilities and the past. In a discourse of generic renewal, the film's explicitly corporeal retelling of a familiar tale is crucial to the film's perceived contemporaneity. Significantly, critics frequently contrast *Elizabeth* with previous depictions of the monarch, including the 1971 BBC series *Elizabeth R* starring Glenda Jackson. I would argue nonetheless that the body, disciplined and transformed through changing generic codes of gesture, costume and performance, is central to the cultural meanings and values attached to various incarnations of the genre, including "quality" television, heritage cinema and parodic works.

***Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois*: Negotiating gender, class and sexuality**

Beugnet describes recent auteurist French films, including *Beau travail* (Claire Denis, 1999), *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes, 2000) and *Wild Side* (Sébastien Lifshitz, 2004), as a "cinema of sensation." These films operate, she argues (pp. 6-7), at a primary level of identification "with the material aspect and transformations of the film body itself above identification with its figurative and narrative content." This author (p. 125) suggests that while these works "often draw on and subvert generic elements, the end result is neither predefined nor determined by the narrative or discursive operations of genre." While for Beugnet the cinema of sensation is ultimately an "artistic choice," I consider how this stylistic modality articulates with questions of gender and genre in recent French costume and heritage fiction. The centrepiece of this discussion is Ferran's *Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois*, a sensuous corporeal exploration of sexuality marked by differences of gender and class.

While *Elizabeth* as a popular film is associated with industrial transformations of British costume and heritage fiction, in France the ideal of auteur cinema operates as an important and



A key publicity still brings into relief the emphasis on female subjectivity and tenderness in Ferran's film.

Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois (Pascale Ferran, 2006). © Kino Press International.

often implicitly gendered discourse that shapes the cultural perceptions of the genre. Sellier argues that a cinephilic film culture emerging with the New Wave produced an enduring over-valuation of a masculine and individualist mode of auteurist production; in the process, popular genre cinema was subsequently "feminized" and devalued in French cultural discourse. For instance, with the mid-1950s creation of "qualitative aid" in French film funding, this author (p. 35) identifies "a modification of the hierarchy of the arts at the heart of French society [in which] . . . the value of the auteur was increasing at the expense of that of film genre or star." Sellier (p. 69) correlates this historical distinction with Huyssen's account of the "tendency of elite male culture to distinguish itself from mass culture associated with an alienated femininity."

In this context, filmmakers and critics often point to a directly corporeal aesthetic in order to distinguish auteurist works from genre productions with which they share certain semantic elements. For instance, Serge Toubiana, writing in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, argues (1994, p. 10) that Chéreau's *La Reine Margot*

“impose son rythme et son énergie . . . sur le genre lourdaud du ‘film historique’.” While *La Reine Margot* stood out among the “super-productions” of the late 1980s and early 1990s for its graphically violent dramatization of the Massacre de la Saint-Barthélémy, *Lady Chatterley*’s corporeal cinema functions at a far more intimate scale. Nonetheless, Ferran’s film is consistently differentiated in the cinephile press from popular genre film.

For instance, a *Cahiers du cinéma* critic describes *Lady Chatterley* as “un film contre-époque [dont] . . . l’objet est le présent” (Burdeau 2006: 9-10). Further, critics hardly ever associate Ferran’s film with popular genres: Marc Allégret’s 1955 *L’amant de Lady Chatterley* starring Danièle Darrieux and Just Jaeckin’s 1981 soft-core erotica version featuring Sylvia Kristel are rarely mentioned, and then only in passing. Instead, using a selective deployment of cultural and cinematic genealogies, critics attribute auteurist value to Ferran’s film, comparing it to Terrence Malick’s *The New World* (2005) and situating it within a French tradition of lyric realism associated with Renoir, Grémillon and Pialat. Finally, critics frequently note the source work, D.H. Lawrence’s *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, the second version of his infamous *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Significantly, the emphasis in the reviews is not on the scandalous reputation of Lawrence’s banned work, but rather on a prestigious modern literary antecedent.

Ferran’s film was released in two versions: a two-part television movie running three and a half hours aired initially on Arte in July 2006, and a subsequent 168-minute version that had a theatrical release in November of the same year. The film won five Césars including best film, best actress and best cinematography, as well as the prestigious Prix Louis-Delluc. How can we best understand the historical anchorage and contemporary meanings of *Lady Chatterley*? One theme closely related to French auteurist discourses is the frequent insistence by critics on the film’s modernity. For instance, Mury (2006, pp. 46-47) identifies Constance as “une femme étonnamment moderne . . . qui s’évade pour aller à la rencontre d’elle-même.” Yet the notion of the modern cannot account for a mobilization of historical signifiers which allow Ferran’s film to grapple with

contemporary cultural dilemmas. My analysis frames *Lady Chatterley* not only as a singular auteurist work, but also as an exploration of gender, class and sexuality within a distant yet familiar historical milieu.

While recent Anglo-American productions contribute to a generic resignification of Tudor England for British and transnational audiences, the period during and after World War I figures centrally in recent French costume and heritage fiction. Rural England of the 1910s, as depicted in Lawrence's novel, is a period still governed by sexual repression and rigid class and gender norms—norms that render the heroine's corporeal and spiritual transgression all the more vivid. *Lady Chatterley's* unconventional and transformative love affair transpires in the wake of the carnage of a war that is not directly depicted on screen, but rather instantiated by the crippled body of Sir Clifford Chatterley (Hippolyte Girardot). As the narrator comments in voice-over, *Lady Chatterley's* (Marina Hands) husband returned from the war "more or less in pieces." Similarly, Jeunet's popular film *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* contrasts a bucolic rural setting with the corporeal and psychological ravages of war inscribed on men's bodies and minds. Also, the French/European co-production *Joyeux Noël* (Christian Carion, 2005) deploys special effects to dramatize the boredom, terror and corporeal ravages of trench warfare.

While these works develop fascinating and often deeply physical accounts of wounded masculinity and working-class men used as cannon fodder, numerous other film and television productions explore women's experience: *Le réveillon des bonnes* (Michel Hassan, 2007), *Séraphine* (Martin Provost, 2008), *Coco Chanel* (Christian Duguay, 2008) and *Coco avant Chanel* (Anne Fontaine, 2009) return to the 1910s and 1920s through the point of view of female (and often working class) protagonists. Profound historical transformations of sexual, gender and class norms are depicted through a relatively new scrutiny of embodied feminine and working class historical experience. The Chanel biopics, for instance, not only chronicle the designer's rise to fame, but also develop a vestimentary account (most pronounced in Christian Duguay's television docu-drama *Coco*

Chanel) of how women's clothing design contributed to the corporeal shaping of the "modern" French woman.

Despite many resonances with French popular costume and heritage fictions, *Lady Chatterley* is consistently framed by reviewers, and by Ferran herself, within an implicitly masculine auteurist genealogy rather than in relation to social histories of gender and class—or indeed feminist debates about gender and sexuality. In keeping with a French discourse of universal citizenship and authorship, Ferran does not speak as a female filmmaker, but rather discusses her film in terms of auteurist innovation. Notably, she describes developing a new cinematic language for sexuality. Rather than traditional euphemistic signifiers of "violins, slow motion and fades," or a more recent "desire as animal pulsion," Ferran seeks a third strategy, one "un peu plus fidèle à l'expérience qu'on peut avoir, ou en tout cas que je peux avoir, de ces moments-là dans la vie" (quoted in Lequeret, p. 12). Further, in contrast with the sexual transgression associated with Breillat's films, including the period film *La vieille maîtresse* (2007), Ferran evokes "un partage d'expérimentation entre spectateurs et personnages. Pour ce qui est de la nudité, de la sexualité, j'avais envie que les spectateurs ne soient pas placés dans le voyeurisme" (Widemann 2006).

Ferran's quest for a more quotidian cinematic sexuality and for non-voyeuristic points of view resonates with a feminist call for egalitarian representations of women's bodies and sexuality, although her film is very rarely framed this way in critical discourse. Consistently shot from Constance's point of view, the film traces the heroine's sexual awakening through a series of intimate encounters with the woodsman Parkin (Jean-Louis Coulloc'h) set against the changing seasons. Indeed, Ferran describes her film as a "coming of age" story, in which Constance initially resembles a teenager, but, as in a fairy tale, "une femme du XIX^e siècle . . . devient une femme du XX^e siècle; son trajet, sa transformation, est ample et multiple" (quoted in Lequeret, 2006, p. 11). Significantly, with this statement Ferran announces an allegorical (if not directly political) film about the transformation of women's experience across time.



Constance's physical, sexual and spiritual transformation, walking through the woods.

Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois (Pascale Ferran, 2006).

© Kino Press International.

Constance's transformation is evoked through Hands' subtle corporeal performance. At first, the depressed and uncertain young wife is consistently pictured alone inside or near the empty house: in a series of brief yet languorous shots, she cleans the silverware, hangs up sheets to dry, plays the piano, and spends more and more time in bed. One striking sequence shows her bathing her taciturn husband, who remains completely unresponsive to her touch. These early sequences during the winter months depict Constance suffering from what the doctor calls a "loss of vitality." From this low point, Ferran chronicles Constance's physical, sexual and ontological transformation through the spring and summer as she walks through the woods, cheeks flushed with pleasure. In a film where language is used sparingly, corporeal discourses of performance and encounter supplant or supplement more traditional semantic elements of dialogue, period costume and decor. The narrative arc of *Lady Chatterley* resonates with Beugnet's (p. 149) account of the cinema of sensation: "Beyond the 'cinema of psychological situations' and that of pure abstraction, the cinema of

sensation opens a space of becoming, a space where the human form is less character and more figure, a figure caught again in the material reality of the film as event.”

A generation of Anglo-American feminist film theory has established that the cinematic language of point of view is central to gendered dynamics of desire and objectification. In French cinema, which like many national cinemas frequently films the female body voyeuristically for a desiring gaze understood to be male, *Lady Chatterley* stands out for its exploration of female desire and sexual pleasure. For instance, even before meeting Parkin, the heroine’s body is filmed in a naturalistic manner, as when Constance, bathed in natural light, impassively appraises her naked body in the mirror; later, she pleasures herself in bed, alone. Constance first glimpses Parkin from a distance as he washes himself in the open air; agitated and excited, she hides in the forest to watch as he scrubs his muscular torso. This sequence reverses conventional gendered dynamics of the gaze, highlighting female desire and reframing as object of desire a male body that does not correspond to commercial norms of male beauty.

The film’s six sex scenes are shot close to the body, emphasizing the awkwardness of the initial encounters and tracing the lovers’ growing physical and emotional intimacy. In one key exchange, Parkin asks Constance if she wants a baby from him. Hesitating, she responds: “C’est de vous que j’avais envie . . . et aussi peut-être d’un bébé. . . . Votre corps me plaisait.” Dumbfounded, he responds: “Je n’arrive pas à imaginer que vous aimez me toucher comme j’aime vous toucher.” After Constance responds that she enjoys touching him, but that she is afraid, Parkin invites her, almost formally, to touch him if she likes. In a long, slow sequence, she gently caresses his face and chest with her fingertips, and slides a hand under his nightshirt onto the back of his thigh. Beugnet (pp. 177-78) describes the haptic quality of *Lady Chatterley* as follows: “Neither identification nor projection, in Ferran’s film, the relation between the lovers is like touch, based on the reversibility of experience.”

Beugnet, like many critics, pinpoints the film’s tender corporeal ethics. Yet in an extensive study of the film’s reception I

found only one review that takes up the film's unusual gendered account of sexuality: "Suit une scène de caresses filmée selon son point de vue à elle, et selon les canons habituels des scènes d'amour, masculines toujours" (Tessé 2007, p. 90). While *Lady Chatterley* offers an innovative textual exploration of sexuality, the auteurist critical discourses surrounding Ferran's film preclude a discussion of the film as a representation of past and present social experiences of gender, sexuality and class. In the British context, in contrast, Jane Campion's auteurist film *The Piano* (1993), which shares some common ground with *Lady Chatterley*, helped galvanize a vibrant public and scholarly feminist debate about costume and heritage fiction.

I have argued to this point that critical discourses play a major role in shaping the cultural meanings of genre. In the absence of an articulate public discourse, however, can texts associated with broader generic cycles signify in ways for which critical discourse does not have words? To complicate Beugnet's auteurist account of the cinema of sensations, it is useful to return to Williams' argument that generic deployment of explicit sexuality can operate as a form of cultural problem solving. Notably, it is suggestive to consider Ferran's film alongside several popular and auteurist films directed by women from the 1990s and 2000s: *Marquise* (Véra Belmont, 1997), *Artemisia* (Agnès Merlet, 1997), *Les enfants du siècle* (Diane Kurys, 1999) and *La vieille maîtresse*. These diverse works foreground female experience and point of view, scrutinizing highly sexualized relations where power dynamics of gender and class are played out, at least in part, in directly physical encounters of desire, exploitation and violence.

Considered against a broader exploration of gender and sexuality in French costume and heritage fiction, *Lady Chatterley's* non-voyeuristic organization of the gaze and its emphasis on the reciprocal discovery of touch and pleasure are formal elements that contribute to a tender and egalitarian depiction of sexuality. In a society of sexual repression and class hierarchies, Ferran sets out to describe "une utopie relationnelle à l'œuvre dans le livre: une alliance très spécifique du corps, de la parole et de la pensée des personnages qui fait qu'à deux, à mains nues, ils arrivent à



Constance and Parkin make love in the rain: a problematic natural order.
Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois (Pascale Ferran, 2006). © Kino Press International.

s'inventer un monde habitable" (quoted in Lequeret 2006, p. 11). Near the end of the film, the lovers cavort naked in the driving rain, make love in the mud and adorn one another with flowers; this sequence implies a pristine natural order where sexuality has the liberatory power to break down social hierarchies. This seemingly naturalistic filmic sexuality framed through a female point of view struck a favourable chord with many critics; for instance, both Ferrari (2006) and Burdeau (2006) praised the film's unusual portrait of sexual "tenderness."

On a critical feminist reading, however, any claim to a "natural" gendered sexual order is suspect. The opposition between the mannered and hierarchical world of the house and the woods implies that the social and sexual relations of the forest are somehow "spontaneous" and "natural." Framed by a sensitive portrait of the changing moods of the woods, Constance's sexual awakening aligns with an implied "natural" (hetero)sexuality; indeed, the revelation that Constance is carrying Parkin's child completes an idealized heterosexual family unit. Further, while Ferran offers a nuanced portrait of female desire and subjectivity, the character of Parkin remains somewhat static. Of

course, the film's sex scenes negotiate class differences both through the awkward bodily encounters and through words. The lovers alternate hesitantly between *tu* and *vous*, and Parkin asks Constance: "Vous n'avez pas l'impression que vous vous êtes abaissée?" Nonetheless, Parkin's working class social sphere remains undeveloped compared with the meticulous portrait of life at the Chatterley manor. These stilted and awkward exchanges between the lovers, particularly in a strongly hierarchical society, heighten the film's depiction of sexual and social transgression.

Class and gender differences are accentuated in the corporeal contrast between the slim and refined Hands and the woodsman's rough and massive body. Notably, Mury (p. 47) notes that Hands "offre à Lady Chatterley son délicat maintien aristocratique, face au massif et plébéien Parkin." Further, if bodies in costume and heritage fiction are marked by differences, Ferran's film reinscribes conventional gendered and classed corporeal norms. The contrast between the refined and repressed Clifford Chatterley and the virile and inarticulate Parkin mobilizes certain stereotypes about class and masculinity; this contrast is accentuated when Clifford gets stuck in the woods with his new electric wheelchair and stubbornly refuses Parkin's help. As mentioned above, the portrait of Clifford as a physically and psychologically broken man is a dense and polysemic signifier in a narrative set in a moment of social upheaval. Despite his crippled state, Sir Clifford remains the owner of the manor and the coal mine, although it is highly significant that the woodsman fathers Clifford's heir.

To read gender and class relations together in *Lady Chatterley* is to confront generic corporeal economies of difference that include, but are not limited to, gender differences. In the context of this special issue on gender and genre, I would argue for the importance of intersectional feminist methodological and conceptual frameworks that scrutinize complex and multiple codes of difference and identity. One of the major findings of my research on Anglo-American costume film, for instance, was the recognition of the genre's rich and persistent retrospective exploration of bourgeois women's experience and desires—a generic

meditation that systematically excludes the voices, points of view, experiences and desires of working class characters. While my research on French costume and heritage fictions is not yet as extensive, it is fair to suggest that past bourgeois experience also dominates the genre on the other side of the Channel.

In this light, it is interesting to contrast *Lady Chatterley* with popular fiction such as *Le réveillon des bonnes* and *Séraphine*, which chronicle the arduous labour and aspirations of female working class protagonists. For instance, Yolande Moreau's almost primal performance brings to life the artist Séraphine Senlis, who climbs trees and wades nude into a river to express a deep physical and spiritual communion with nature; she labours cleaning houses every waking moment in order to buy expensive art supplies. Meanwhile, the ensemble cast of *Le réveillon des bonnes* invokes a diverse community of maids who live in cramped quarters and undertake repetitive physical work; the mini-series evokes moments of solidarity, diverse aspirations and complex negotiations of sexual relations across class lines.

Conclusion

This article identifies the emergence of corporeal intensities in some recent British and French costume and heritage fiction films that produce vivid audiovisual experiences of power, difference and desire. Some critics and scholars on both sides of the Channel equate the genre's incorporation of direct and graphic violence and sexuality as a form of generic renewal or auteurist distinction. While these works seem to offer a more immediate engagement with the past, I point to the ways that cultural discourse contributes to shaping the reception and perceived cultural value of these films. Notably, in the British context, some critics perceive the popular film *Elizabeth* as a welcome departure from the earlier tradition of heritage cinema. Meanwhile, in France, many critics highlight the aesthetic innovation of *Lady Chatterley* in order to distinguish the film from denigrated popular genre productions. Through these case studies, I point to how critical and industrial discourses operate through the gendering of the cultural value of genre and taste formations associated with genre.

Central to each of these case studies, and to the broader theoretical intervention of this article, is a scrutiny of how generic codes of corporeality are structured through difference. In addition to my account of the ways in which discourse shapes the meanings of genres, this article studies the semiotic and expressive dimensions of the body as a semantic element of genre. I suggest that processes of social and subjective transformation, power and difference are inscribed, through generic codes, on the body. While this study responds specifically to the sensuous and graphic corporeality in recent costume and heritage fiction, I begin here a larger investigation into the fascinating and under-theorized dimensions of body, gesture and performance in genre cinema.

Université de Montréal

NOTES

1. For a discussion of industrial and cultural debates about “quality” television, which is central to British discourses of the genre’s cultural value, see Brunsdon (1990).

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RÉSUMÉ

Corps, genre et identité sexuelle dans les films en costumes et les fictions patrimoniales du cinéma britannique et français

Julianne Pidduck

Cet article explore plusieurs liens qui unissent identité sexuelle et genre cinématographique, en particulier dans les fictions patrimoniales et les films en costumes du cinéma français et britannique récent. Le genre y est défini comme un discours sexué dont la portée culturelle façonne la signification de ces deux types de fiction, mais aussi comme une négociation symbolique entre diverses préoccupations culturelles communes. Les films *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) et *Lady Chatterley et l'homme des bois* (Pascale Ferran, 2006) permettent ainsi d'examiner l'évolution des représentations génériques de la sexualité et du désir féminins, en insistant sur l'analyse textuelle et discursive des dif-

férences identitaires, sexuées ou autres. À l'instar de certains films britanniques et français récents, ces deux exemples témoignent d'un certain renouvellement du genre, lequel porte une attention accrue au corps en état de souffrance ou de jouissance intense. Dans une perspective théorique plus vaste, cet article a pour ambition de comprendre comment le corps parvient à agir comme un discours hautement codifié, porteur à la fois de marqueurs sexués et génériques, tant dans les films d'époque que dans la culture audiovisuelle en général.