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Images of Sexually Deviant Women in French Film

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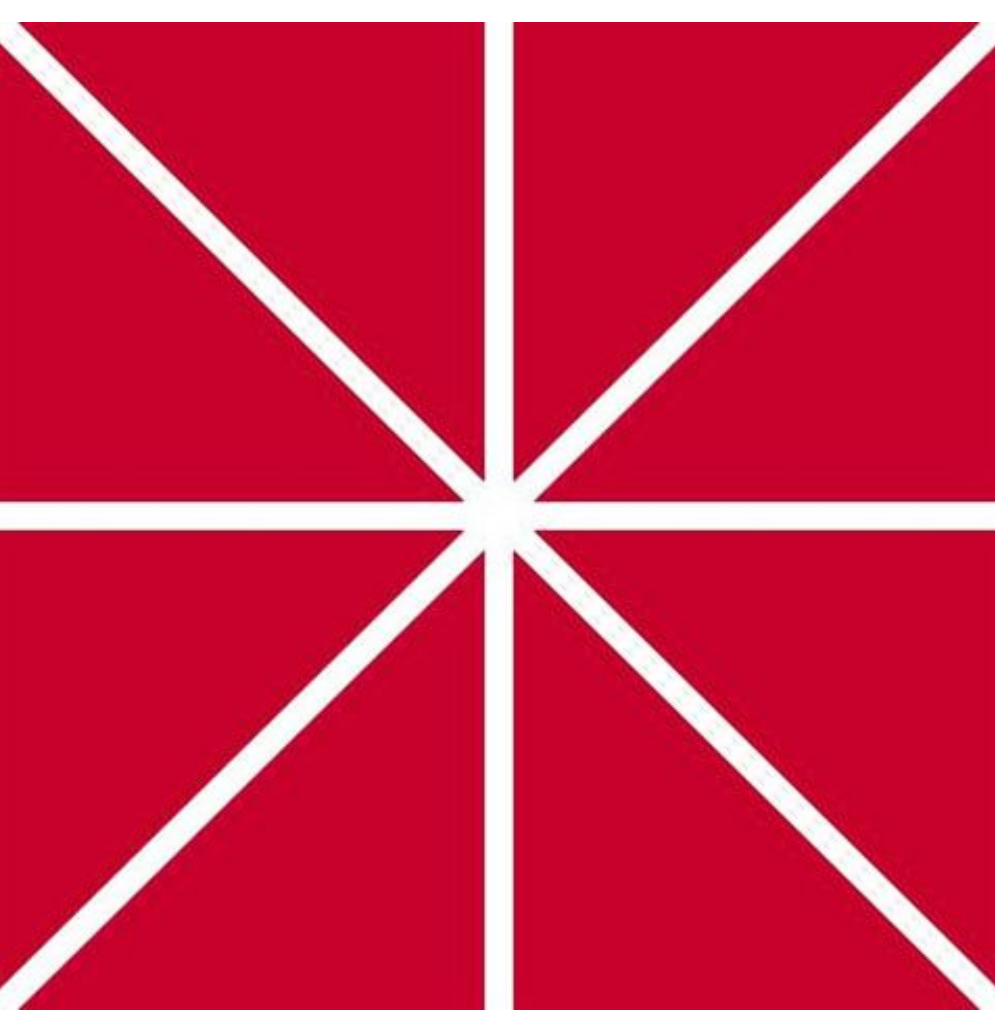
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Abstract

This research explores representations of sexually deviant women in French film beginning with the New Wave film movement of the 1960s and continuing to present day. This work examines the extent to which the gender of a film's director affects the presentation of female nudity, infidelity, homosexuality, BDSM, and pornography onscreen. Through the lens of scholarly articles of film theorists and feminists such as Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hélène Cixous; and of both feministic and anti-feministic works of famous French directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Catherine Breillat, and Emmanuelle Bercot, this capstone work identifies filmic triumphs and failures of French feminism. Furthermore, by applying feminist film theory, it analyzes which cinematographic, rhetorical, and narrative techniques best serve to liberate women onscreen and tell the stories of their sexuality accurately and honestly in the hopes of creating a reference point for future feminist filmmakers. The probable conclusion of this research is that in most every instance, with few notable exceptions, only a female director can truly express the sexual lives of designated female at birth individuals (DFAB). It is important to note that this work excludes an examination of transsexuality in French film, due to a lack of existing scholarly works on the subject, and focuses exclusively on representations of the DFAB sexual experience.

There is no masculine psychology in my cinema. There is only the resentments and desires of women. A man should not attempt to recognize himself in my male characters. On the other hand, he can find [in the films] a better understanding of women. And knowledge of the other is the highest goal.

Catherine Breillat

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the basic theme is the dichotomy of womanhood. the woman cut in two. every society creates laws to exercise power over women and exclude certain parts of the woman.

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Catherine Breillat

Notable Research and Preliminary Conclusions

After researching and watching French films about or containing sexually deviant women from the 1950s to present day, the predictions of film theorist Laura Mulvey and feminist author Hélène Cixous prove to be well-informed and increasingly quantifiable. Cixous has long asserted that only women are qualified to represent the truth of womankind; especially their sexual truths. She states in her book *The Laugh of the Medusa* "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women into writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (37).

Mulvey uses these ideas to translate the call to action of Cixous into the more presently relevant medium of film. As Mulvey describes in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures*, "these demands [for increased feminist representation] are directed primarily at commercial and popular cinema" and they necessitate "a confrontation with the sexist nature of the industry itself and its discrimination against women" (120).

After researching many jarring examples of the misrepresentation of the sexual lives of women in male-directed film and, conversely, many equally jarring feministic representations of sexually liberated women; the precursory conclusion of this research proved to be in accordance with Mulvey and Cixous. Only women can accurately represent the sexuality of other women.

Conclusion

The preliminary conclusion prompted further research into those films found to be most effective in their honest representation of the subjective feminine experience of sex and sexuality. The films of Breillat and Bercot, for instance, manage to conquer the longstanding cinematic objectification of women in spite of the industry itself being overwhelmingly phallogentric. Which techniques were employed by them to achieve this and are they easily identifiable as components of a template for future filmmakers of any gender?

Abdellatif Kechiche's masterpiece *La Vie d'Adèle* stands in direct contrast to the theories of Mulvey and Cixous. Though criticized, like the works of Breillat, as pornography, the film aligns itself with the principles of visual subjectivity of the female—and in this case queer—representation of sexuality. This new information led to the final conclusion that though traditionally, male directed images of deviant female sexuality are influenced by the male gaze and are, therefore, inherently sexist; there are easily replicable film techniques that can and should be used by male directors to accurately capture and communicate the female experience.



"Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard."

-Helene Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

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Emmanuelle Bercot