

Review Essay

Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*. Fordham University Press, 2020.

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In *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*, Genevieve Yue makes a persuasive case for film materiality as an object of feminist film analysis. Not to be equated with film production practices or the physical appurtenances of film, film materiality is the ensemble of production procedures, techniques, and materials inherent to film itself as a medium, the “set of technical and material conditions for the image onscreen [that] *already* includes explicitly gendered bodies” (Yue’s emphasis, 7). Yue’s wide-ranging film and media theoretical account of this materiality rests, first, on the relation that she draws between “the material of the woman’s body” and “the material constitution of the filmstrip” (11). Second, Yue considers psychoanalytically informed readings of the figure of Medusa as a “sign and symbol of all possible otherness” (18) to posit a “virtual-image” that, at times congruous with the screen image, emerges from the severance and repression of the “material-body.” In other words, film as a technology—and its related techniques and practices—not only disrupt the gendered “body-as-material engaged in production processes,” the sublimation and dematerialization of the woman’s body in the image “corresponds to the forgetting of the image’s subtending materiality” (12).

Yue interrogates film materiality and its attendant logic at three “sites” that map respectively onto *Girl Head’s* three chapters: the film laboratory, editing practices, and the film archive. The opening chapter discusses the “China Girl,” the frames on the head or tail leader on a film reel in which a woman is depicted.¹ The China Girl is associated with the field of sensitometry, the reading of the filmstrip for color, density, and other values and was a standardization

metric in the film laboratory—used, for instance, to calibrate the exposure on film reels or test film developing and printing machines.² Through extensive archival research and interviews with film archivists and technicians, Yue demonstrates how the China Girl and related film technologies emerged with the development of standards for film developing, printing, and quality control.³ Because the China Girl is not meant to signify in “any way other than visual information,” its fundamental incongruity resides in how it “does not have to ‘be’ anything particular” other than a duplicate of itself (41). Epitomizing the Medusan logic of film materiality, the China Girl remains “a nonrepresentational, nonscenic, and literally marginal figure” that “connects postproduction laboratory procedures to the apparitions onscreen” (59).

Yue keenly observes the tension between the subjective perception of the film technician and objective calculation of film processing technology that the China Girl encapsulates (47). Just as representational tropes in cinema are deeply veined with racial and gender biases, Yue demonstrates how the “materiality” of film itself is structured by “arbitrary preferences for *certain* skin tones and a *particular* gender” and made to accord with “supposedly objective and neutral technological procedures” (Yue’s emphasis, 56). It is in experimental cinema that filmmakers have extricated the China Girl from its marginalized status. Yue views Morgan Fisher’s *Standard Gauge* (1984), Michelle Silva’s *China Girls* (2006), and Barbara Hammer’s *Sanctus* (1990)—which make visible the China Girl and associated images through different visual effects—as well as Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder’s projection performance *A Sourceful of Secrets* (first staged in 2002)—which enacts the literal disintegration of the China Girl image through the heat of film projector lamps—as critical reflections on film materiality. Through the manipulation of scanned images of 35mm China Girl frames with digital effects such as morphing and compositing, Cécile Fontaine’s digital video *China Girl* (2010) sets up what Yue casts as an encounter between film’s physical materiality and the immateriality of digital media.⁴ For Yue, Fontaine’s video reiterates the persistence of the China Girl to the present day—

as a figure of the continuity of “ideological orchestrations of discourse and practice” across the digital divide (69).

Girl Head's second chapter is devoted to Yue's concept of escamontage—a portmanteau neologism that comprises “*escamoter*” (French for concealment or trick) and “montage” (the construction of meaning from the assembly of film fragments)—“a form of [film] editing whose compositional principle is to conceal *mise-en-scène* elements or postproduction visual effects in order to produce narrative meaning” (74). Yue's central example is *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1897), an 18-second film that depicts the realistic beheading of a woman in a restaging of the historic event. Shot by Thomas Edison in his Black Maria studio, the film is often recognized as the first use of the stop-motion substitution technique. Consistent with the logic of Yue's film materiality on two levels, *Mary, Queen of Scots* first of all involves the destruction of the woman's body at the level of the screen representation—the act of regicide mirrors Medusa's decapitation. Second, the execution of the trick effect would have required film splicing or the physical excision and rejoining of the filmstrip, which was an unusual procedure at the time of the film's making. Escamontage denotes such filmic editing where the continuity of filmic action is an outcome of concealed film splicing, what Yue also succinctly refers to as a kind of “composit[ion] through concealment.” Positing that escamontage marked a “foundational moment for a wholly alternative form of editing,” Yue demonstrates how this editing technique is distinct from visual effects and continuity editing (74). Yue goes on to trace the device of escamontage in a gendered reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), a film renowned for its hidden cuts, while her analysis of Jennifer Montgomery's experimental film *Transitional Objects* (1999) emphasizes the trauma of the cut's materiality. While the chapter's subject matter recalls Karen Redrobe's study of the vanishing woman motif in cinema as it often related to stage magic, Yue builds on Redrobe's work by providing technologically and ontologically nuanced distinctions between varieties of cinematic disappearance.⁵

Yue's account of escamontage commences with *Mary, Queen of Scots* and rounds off chronologically with David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014), a Hollywood thriller whose female protagonist sets up her husband as her murderer. Yue suggests that *Gone Girl*'s steely and flawless aesthetic is an outcome of digital filmmaking techniques. Fincher's team deployed digital cameras that provide more data than actually required—which allowed for new frames and camera movements—featured split screen techniques to link discrete shots, and made pioneering use of Adobe Pro Premiere postproduction software. Employing such digital editing technologies, *Gone Girl* realizes the “fantasy of a cut without a seam” through the direct manipulation of digital information that do not comprise cuts in the traditional sense, and can “accommodate an array of ‘digital events’ that conceal the evidence of any kind of postproduction intervention” (94). Yue's analysis of this contemporary instance of escamontage prompts her to scrutinize the extant vocabulary around film editing—“previously straightforward terms” such as frame, shot, cut, and edit appear inadequate, while terms associated with digital filmmaking like workflow and compositing “demand fuller theoretical elaboration” (94-95).

The leitmotif of *Girl Head*'s third and final chapter is the spectral Gradiva (“the girl splendid in walking”), through whom Yue contemplates the film archive. The fictive figure in Wilhelm Jensen's novella by so resonated with Sigmund Freud that Freud, following the completion of his work on dreams, studied Jensen's narrative as a case in *Delusions and Dreams* (1906). Yue parses the distinctions between Freud's and Jensen's texts to explore Derrida's reading of *Delusions and Dreams* in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996), where Derrida cast Gradiva as the figure of desire that haunts the archive. Via Derrida, Yue detects a Gradivian logic to the constitution of the first film archives of the 1930s in Western Europe and America. These archives were created in anticipation of the vanishing of their repositories' holdings, rather than arising from a situation of material plenitude.

Yue further draws out how Derrida's *Archive Fever* is characterized by the omission of the character of Zoë, who in Jensen's novella and Freud's retelling is

the foil to the ghostly Gradiva: Zoë—meaning “life”—is the childhood sweetheart whose chance encounter with and eventual marriage to the story’s protagonist Hanold cures his neurosis. Zoë’s absence in Derrida’s conception of the archive in turn has implications for an understanding of the film archive. The film archive’s gendered materiality, to cite Yue, is built on both “a woman whose chimerical image and displaced non-bodily material remains motivate the construction . . . of the archive”—that is, Gradiva, figuring as another sublimated and dematerialized Medusa—and “a physical presence that must be suppressed in order to do so”—Zoë (115). Yue analyzes Bill Morrison’s *The Film of Her* (1996), Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and the collective Radha May’s 35-mm film installation *When the Towel Drops, Vol. 1, Italy* (2012) as investigations of film archival logics represented by Gradiva and Zoë. Self-reflexively staging mirage-like “Zoës” and disappeared “Gradivas,” the three works explore how such logics of the archive are respectively entangled with those of medium transfer, racism, and censorship.

By interrogating film as a technology and a set of practices that are fundamentally gendered in their historic and contemporary sites of production, *Girl Head* stages a methodological intervention in feminist film scholarship. While there have been feminist film histories that critique screen representations or draw attention to overlooked bodies of work, Yue points to the absence of scholarly accounts of filmic techniques and practices as inherently gendered. By “mov[ing] inquiry away from representation, which looks at the image onscreen, and toward industrial and institutional processes which, though hidden from view, are no less gendered,” *Girl Head*’s argument for film materiality establishes an alternative site of inquiry for feminist film scholarship (2). Yue’s excavation of film materiality’s “subterranean” histories is handily backed by the archive and evoked in compelling examples from early, classical and contemporary Hollywood, as well as works of artists’ and experimental cinema (115). Drawing together film historical and media theoretical lines of inquiry, Yue uncovers structural invisibilities and conceptual blind spots to yield a reflexive feminist critique of film that fundamentally questions “film’s myths about itself” (130).

Yue's vivid reconstitution of film history's objects of study may motivate feminist scholars of film to frame their inquiries according to similarly differentiated understandings of film as media. Each of *Girl Head's* individual chapters—and especially the first and second on the China Girl and escamontage respectively—are novel conceptualizations and self-contained cultural histories of media techniques that film and media scholars would equally find generative.

Examining film materiality from the vantage of the digital present, Yue ultimately sets up film materiality as a line of medium-specific thinking about film in the face of its “destabilization” as a medium. The program of film materiality is grounded in the historicity of film as a technology and set of techniques, or, as Yue puts it, “the reality of film material as it is organized in historically specific forms and processes” (11). Her study, it follows, insists on “the medium specificities of film as well as digital or ‘postcinematic’ media” (15). Yet a nuancing of discussions of cinema in the digital age may require the articulation of film's different ontologies and temporalities that Yue appears to disavow—and which need not be mutually exclusive to her materialist account.

¹ Yue uses “China Girl” over the titular “Girl Head,” which is another synonym for the filmic device—the former term, she remarks, is more recognizable and “somehow more sanitizing and romanticizing, and more offensive, all at once” (5).

² Yue provides a helpful description of a possible use of the China Girl: when developing film, “a technician would run a few frames of China Girl leader with the film, then examine the developed filmstrip against a previous one to check that the film or chemicals are consistent” (40).

³ In the chapter, Yue also details the rise of the associated technology of film test cards, which feature similar female subjects, as a result of cooperation between film laboratories and industrial research in the 1920s. Until the 1920s test card images facilitated the visual check performed by a film technician to verify the quality of a film print, and continued to be used in the ensuing decades, even as laboratories developed technologies that would aid the human eye.

⁴ With Kodak's development of the Laboratory Aim Density (or LAD) system in 1976, which gives a more precise radiometric reading of density, the China Girl leader was effectively rendered obsolete, if it had even been necessary except to serve an “aesthetic” function. In digital filmmaking, the China Girl still persists as a visual check that serves only to “provide a recognizable form” for sensitometric calibrations made with machines (57).

⁵ Karen Redrobe (Beckman), *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.