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Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema, 1930-1956*. Trans. Peter Graham. Durham, N. C. and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 373 pp. References and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8223-5547-2; \$28.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-5561-8.

Review by Colleen Kennedy-Karpat, Bilkent University.

An especially perspicacious addition to the ranks of better-late-than-never translations, Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier's *Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema*—first published in French in 1996 [1]—uses cinematic narrative to trace shifts in gender roles and representations in the decades surrounding and including World War II. While I would encourage those so inclined to seek out the original edition instead, for reasons explained below, this translation is to be commended for bringing such a stimulating, highly original work to a wider readership.

The exceptionally ambitious corpus of *Battle of the Sexes* encompasses all genres and every level of prestige over more than a quarter century of French film production. One surmises very quickly that the authors have seen *everything*, a completist approach echoed in Colin Crisp's magnum opus *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929-1939*, which appeared six years after the French edition of Burch and Sellier's book.[2] But Crisp's encyclopedic approach—which produces an exhaustive compendium of themes, tropes, and topics that dominated that decade of French cinema—differs fundamentally from the specific analytical axis of *Battle of the Sexes*. Crisp paints the big picture of a single era's films more or less for its own sake, whereas Burch and Sellier expand this picture to zoom in more clearly on the tug of war taking place between the sexes.

In 1930s cinema—which boasts by far the largest share of extant critical attention, and which the authors dispatch with justifiable efficiency—the overriding pattern stems from the dominance of an “incestuous” father, who clashes with younger men (“sons”) over the affections of young women (“daughters”). This family affair is entirely upended by the Occupation, the period that garners the authors' most detailed dissection. Burch and Sellier argue that Occupation-era films used “an ailing patriarchy as a sociopolitical metaphor” (p. 96) to reflect a broader crisis of masculinity triggered by the shame of defeat. In film, this crisis ushers in a new cast of character types, including the gentle male, the mothering father, the *zazou*, and women—situated more frequently in leading roles—who are empowered by work, hobbies, sexual desire, and carefree youth. Still, this shift represents less a reversal of 1930s misogyny than a new set of contradictions that temper—somewhat problematically—how women (and men) are represented on film. Finally, in the postwar era, Burch and Sellier contend that representations of women suffered a severe backlash as “the exemplary female icons and stars of the Occupation cinema suddenly vanished” (p. 241). Men became dominant once again, with many films marking this triumphant return of patriarchy by demonizing the women who had benefited from its recent stumble. Still, traces of women's progress remain after the war: some films at least pose the question of working women, and a star like Danielle Darrieux could slide into roles that emphasize her intelligence and even a certain degree of autonomy.

Burch and Sellier's use of films as a gateway to the “vast intertext that gives them [the films] meaning” (p. 344) sidesteps the thorniest, insiders-only strains of auteurism and formalism found in academic film

criticism. Unencumbered by theory and armed with this sheer volume of films as evidence, they persuasively demonstrate that any given moment's most interesting or most representative work is just as likely to come from a little-known director as from one of French cinema's anointed luminaries. Pursuing this assertion by example, they devote virtuosic close readings not only to films made by canonical directors—such as Feyder, Carné, Renoir (twice), and Bresson (twice)—but also to those by *metteurs-en-scène* who have generally been excluded from this pantheon, among them Pierre Chenal, Jacques de Baroncelli, Yves Allégret, Henri Decoin, and Jean Grémillon.[3] Yet this aversion to knee-jerk auteurism does not preclude the occasional foray into director studies. Their disdain for *Cahiers*-style auteurism emerges most strongly in a spirited defense of Henri Decoin, particularly his film, *La Vérité sur Bébé Donge* (1952). Highlighting the work of Jacqueline Audry, one of the rare women to direct films at this moment in French history, they situate her *oeuvre* within an emergent feminist vein that ran counter to the postwar resurgence of patriarchal values. As for formalism, while film aesthetics are sporadically addressed, they always take a back seat to narrative content, a focus on screenwriting that offers clarity even to readers who might not be able to tell a crane shot from a jump cut.

While the argument about gender representations forms the crux of their argument, some details that Burch and Sellier include unlock a flood of potentially fruitful questions in other areas. For example: What does it mean that the “zazou film” contained within its diegetic universe, namely in *Mademoiselle Swing*, a proto-Manic Pixie Dream Girl [4]? Who is Daniel Gélin, and why was he seemingly *everywhere* after the war—acting in many films and directing *Les Dents longues*? What does it say that there were *so many* adaptations constantly on offer at the box office in France? Following the implications of these questions, however trivial they may seem, ultimately leads to currents in film studies that have only strengthened since the late 1990s, particularly the burgeoning subfields of stardom and adaptation. Gesturing towards star studies, Burch and Sellier sketch intricate constellations of French actors, beginning with the 1930s, then retrace these patterns for each successive shift in ideology. Adaptation, too, is a recurring motif; their analyses reconnect many films to source texts inside and outside the literary canon, an intertextuality that may help reframe some of these films as part of what Thomas Leitch identifies as the distinct genre of adaptation.[5] Thus, without great fanfare, *Battle of the Sexes* uncovers a great deal of uncharted territory to which film scholars would do well to lay claim.

In contrast to the authors' prescient outlook on French film studies, the translation and re-edition of this book reveals a disappointing lack of vision. Most immediately noticeable are the changes in illustrations—for the better, in a few cases—but overall, their number has been slashed, primarily affecting the film analyses and the cluster of chapters on the Occupation. Worse, this revised array of images is lamentably homogenous, dominated by fairly tightly-framed shots of actors that privilege stars over set design, group shots, and other interpretive windows on the films represented in these images. Comparing the two covers gives an example of how these changes flatten visual interest while obfuscating dramatic tension. On the French cover, a woman (Danielle Darrieux) in the foreground, her eyebrows arched and eyes downcast, raises a cooking spoon to her lips to cool it while a man (Fernand Ledoux) gazes at her with an enigmatic, vaguely malicious grin (from the film, *Premier rendez-vous* [1941]). Instead, *Battle of the Sexes* shows a stone-faced, well-dressed woman (Darrieux, again) gazing sidelong into the middle distance while a man (Henri Vilbert), eyes closed, emphatically kisses her hand (from the film, *Le Bon Dieu sans confession* [1953]). The former, with its inscrutable domesticity, better anticipates the broader cultural argument contained within, and it represents the era of French filmmaking on which the authors lavish the most critical attention. In the latter, Darrieux's cold, uncomfortable stare and luxurious furs suggest narrative problems confined to movieland (or at least to the impossibly wealthy), creating a false impression of Burch and Sellier's findings.

The translation itself occasionally misses the mark, sometimes even more spectacularly than the images. On the whole, Peter Graham conveys the brisk, frequently witty tone of the original French; nevertheless, the text trips up in some baffling ways. Whether taking French idioms too literally (e.g., “in the final account” for *en fin de conte*) or settling for questionable phrasing (e.g., the irksome,

inexplicably frequent recurrence of “to-ing and fro-ing”), these quirks too often derail the clarity and flow of otherwise enjoyable, eminently readable prose. Additional footnoting and editorial intervention at the translation stage would also have been helpful, since Burch and Sellier presume a vast amount of shared knowledge rooted in French culture writ large and French film culture more precisely, for example, political orientations of filmmakers or publications. Some of these terms and facts, while reasonably taken for common ground among French readers, probably should have been glossed for a non-French readership.

Taking this line of complaint one step further, while the book’s conclusion has been perfunctorily expanded to acknowledge the authors’ and others’ more recent projects, even more useful would have been an introduction in which a US- or UK-based scholar could take stock of how and where this book—which is nearing the twentieth anniversary of its publication in French—has made an impact on the scholarly arc of French film criticism. One might sympathize (somewhat) with the troublesome issue of length, and thus (mostly) forgive this missed opportunity; still, length be darned, this book’s most unfortunate amendments to the French edition involve outright cuts to its supplementary material. This translation has done away with the authors’ endnotes (!), a lightly annotated filmography, and a timeline chronicling the historical events of 1930-1956, alongside major literary works and films from each year. To be fair, the argument stands even without these paratexts—although the timeline succinctly emphasizes the assertion that cinema both absorbs and helps to create its *zeitgeist*—but removing them betrays an insufficient recognition of the book’s overall purpose among its intended audience. An annotated filmography, particularly one as extensive as Burch and Sellier’s, can be a tremendously useful reference, and including it would also add value to this full translation of *Battle of the Sexes* when we consider that an abbreviated version already appeared in print back in 2002 (an edition that managed to keep the relevant endnotes).<sup>[6]</sup>

Setting aside these publication quibbles, *Battle of the Sexes* deftly combines content analysis, close reading, and contextualization to elucidate the mechanics of individual films while articulating their specific resonance for contemporary audiences. Burch and Sellier argue that these films “cannot be described as a reflection of some social reality; the cinema seems rather to play a role in the construction of a collective imaginary” (p. 342). This book is a master class in balancing the uniqueness of a film—indeed, *any* film—with the inexorable mold of the culture that produced it, a factor that wildly exceeds any single representation. Burch and Sellier describe the forest in vivid detail, but never at the expense of the trees. This translation also brings a French application of Anglo-American cultural studies back to readers who are, by now, probably well accustomed to the contours of this field, yet the authors’ choice to let the films speak for themselves (i.e., without the mediation of theory or a narrow concentration on form) remains a striking approach in film scholarship. Anyone interested in French cultural history will find much to glean from this elucidating discussion of film culture during those tumultuous years.

## NOTES

[1] Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français, 1930-1956* (Paris: Nathan, 1996).

[2] Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[3] Sellier has recently devoted an entire book to Grémillon: *Jean Grémillon: Le cinéma est à vous* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2012). The potential to reclaim director studies from the constricting grip of auteurism is a recurring theme in *Battle of the Sexes*.

[4] The term “manic pixie dream girl,” also given the untidy abbreviation MPDG, first emerged in a 2007 film review by Nathan Rabin, who describes a certain type of young American woman who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (<http://www.avclub.com/article/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-emeli-15577> accessed 29 Aug 2014). It is worth mentioning that Rabin has recently, and somewhat disingenuously, apologized for coining this term, mostly because it has been co-opted by those whose agendas undermine his critical intent ([http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im\\_sorry\\_for\\_coining\\_the\\_phrase\\_manic\\_pixie\\_dream\\_girl/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/) accessed 29 Aug 2014). Granted, the call to seize life by the horns, as personified by a carefree young woman, would have had very different connotations for Occupation-era French youth than it does for disaffected, twentieth-century American twentysomethings; yet, despite their divergent readings of misogyny and feminism embodied by these characters, the parallels between Rabin’s MPDG and Burch and Sellier’s female *zazous* remain striking.

[5] Thomas Leitch, “Adaptation, the Genre,” *Adaptation* 1/2(2008): 106-120. The tendency, acknowledged in Leitch’s proposal, to consider canonical literature as standard source texts for adaptations while overlooking the contributions of popular literature may not apply as clearly to French film production as it does to Hollywood; in any case, Burch and Sellier’s work contains an implicit invitation to pursue this and other questions about adaptation in a France-specific context.

[6] Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, “The ‘Funny War’ of the Sexes in French Cinema,” trans. Alan Williams and Noël Burch, in Alan Williams ed., *Film and Nationalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 152-177. This heavily condensed translation makes a valiant effort to preserve the wordplay in the original French title, a cause that the full book rightly (though, one hopes, reluctantly) abandoned, opting for clarity over fidelity.

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