

Drew Bassett

Christina Lane: Feminist Hollywood. From Born in Flames to Point Break

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**Christina Lane: Feminist Hollywood.
From Born in Flames to Point Break**

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It must be frustrating that the only example of a publicly recognisable female auteur Christina Lane has to offer is Kathryn Bigelow who has not only collaborated closely with Hollywood „übermensch“ William Cameron but was in fact married to him. To further muddy the ideological waters, Bigelow’s list of favourite directors includes Sam Peckinpah, Walter Hill, Oliver Stone and Martin Scorsese, male directors not often identified with women’s issues or feminist politics.

Finding female directors, feminist auteur or otherwise, in an industry which has permitted only fifteen mainstream films to be directed by women between 1949 and 1979, is to say the least, difficult. As Lane points out, perhaps Bigelow’s public recognition stems more from the male establishment’s appreciation of her good looks and their inability to see the challenges to their ‚natural‘ position in society inherent in her re-workings of genre films.

The issue of auteurism is only one of many discussed in Lane’s study of feminist directors working in contemporary American cinema. By analysing the career trajectories of six contemporary directors: Susan Seidelman, Martha Cooledge, Kathryn Bigelow, Lizzie Borden, Darnell Martin and Tamra Davies, Lane interrogates the current inter-relationship between counter cinema and mainstream film. Through careful textual analysis of their work inside and outside the system, she demonstrates how the dominant cinematic codes of the former have been challenged by the feminist avant-garde realist ideologies of the latter, and how the directors’ ability to reflect upon feminist consciousness has been compromised by working in the male-dominated mainstream.

Through primary interviews and detailed textual analysis Lane recounts the experiences of these women working in contemporary cinema and outlines the strategies they employ in their work to focus on the issues of interest to them. For example, Lizzie Borden centralises „feminist debates by creating fantasy spaces

in which women's relationships to each other can be examined" (p.125), whereas Darnell Martin (the first African American woman to direct a major studio feature -according to the Columbia Picture marketing department) insists on „troubling conventional conversations about race, gender, class and heterosexual marriage" (p.174).

Martha Coolidge went to film school where she directed some experimental documentary shorts before making a semi-autobiographical film about rape *Not a Pretty Picture* (1976) funded by the American Film Institute (and her friends). She then made *Valley Girl* (1984) which established her as a mainstream director, *Rambling Rose* (1991), *Angie* (1994). Although she is outspoken on issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment, she has served on committees for the Directors Guild of America and the American Film Institute and has become a „model feminist director" (S.97).

However, Tamra Davies, who started her career making music videos, spent six years making the critically-acclaimed *Gun Crazy* (1993). She then developed the screenplay *Bad Girls* with her friend Becky Johnson and was slated to direct it for Twentieth Century Fox, but was fired several weeks into production over issues of the feminist content. Lane's comparison of the original script and the finished product illuminates the attitudes of the predominantly white male executives and their antagonism to female directors.

Lizzie Borden, who made the feminist pseudo-documentary *Born in Flames* with grass roots feminists in 1983, and demythologised prostitution in *Working Girls* (1986), faced similar problems when making the psychothriller *Love Crimes* (1991). Miramax, who produced the film, saw it as a mainstream erotic feature targeted at males between eighteen and thirty-four. Borden envisioned a small art film aimed at women over thirty. These directors began their careers outside the Hollywood system and now oscillate between the studios, independent productions, cable and television; cable and television, in some cases, affording them more creative freedom. In fact defining „independent" or „mainstream" cinema has become difficult as companies such as Miramax and New Line blur the boundaries, and the different media are increasingly interdependent.

What makes this book valuable is the excellent introduction which mixes academic discussions on genre and authorship with an overview of the current state of the industry, the detailed biographies of the directors (the Internet Movie Data base has no biographical information on Tamra Davies and Lizzie Borden, for instance) and the use of primary material. Although the textual analyses are often insightful Lane sometimes maps her own concerns onto the material and tends to ignore the aspects of the directors' work which do not fit neatly into her interpretations, or her definitions of feminist issues. The chapter on Bigelow being a case in point.