But this visual minimalism takes on new meaning when, as Cabañas explains, one learns that the film was meant to be projected onto a weather balloon. The film was not seen in any ordinary fashion. In Cabañas’s words, “With L’anticomic Wolman achieves physical body-to-body proximity by using a spherical screen that pushes the surface of the projection in the spectator’s direction and encourages physical confrontation rather than diegetic absorption” (8s).

Beyond this challenge to an exhibition practice centered on the flatness of the traditional movie screen, L’anticomic’s engagement with context gains even broader resonance, as Cabañas clarifies in a wonderful bit of social history: weather balloons in the postwar moment had militaristic overtones that were then symbolically being challenged by their incorporation through Wolman’s film into a site-specific deliberate aesthetic misuse. Like the chiseling of faces of power in Isou’s film, Wolman refers to military might but plays with it. Cabañas’s reading makes it clear just how much politically was at stake in the Lettrists’ experiments.

And yet, I still can’t shake the sense that there was something downright obnoxious or annoying about their avant-gardist enterprise. For the long last minutes of its soundtrack, L’anticomic ceases any vocalization other than an incessant stirring up of sounds from within the deepest recesses of the body: guttural intonations, retches, gurgles, pants, burps, rumbling and growling. Cabañas valiantly makes the best case possible for understanding such Lettrist sound practice as an earnest attempt to put a primal vocality of bodily expression onto the agenda of performance art, in a sound practice as an earnest attempt to put a primal vocality of bodily expression onto the agenda of performance art, in a persistently validating and permitting of loutish, barroom guy behavior. In avoiding hagiography to capture instead, as she puts it, the “unique historicity of Lettrist cinema [while] aligning it with broader cultural and aesthetic debates” (19), Cabañas’s careful account of the Lettrists gives her readers ample material to consider just what to make of these self-proclaimed and long-heroized bad boys.

CATHERINE GRANT
Women’s Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms by Patricia White

In the first pages of her magisterial work on the new, postmillennial generation of female filmmakers from around the world, Patricia White puts forward an intriguing idea: “Perhaps now more than ever, it is impossible to know in advance what to make of the fact that the director of a particular film is a woman” (18). In her embracing of uncertainty, White stakes out a deeply ethical position for feminist scholars to occupy in an era in which, as she demonstrates across the whole of her superbly researched book, “many more women in many more contexts have access to the tools of the fiction feature, the format of entertainment film” (9–10). An open-minded approach turns out to be far more generative at this point (from intellectual and political perspectives) than posing once more the relatively closed questions about gender and cultural agency with which many earlier critics and historians have chosen, if understandably, to frame their research on this topic: “Why are there so few female filmmakers?” “Why are there so few female auteurs?”

Feminist discussions of the triumphs and tribulations of women’s cinematic authorship have been going on for a long time, of course. As film theorist and historian Judith Mayne wrote in 1990, reflecting on the twenty years of scholarly debate that preceded one of her own essential contributions to the field, The Woman at the Keyhole: “ Virtually all feminist critics who argue in defense of female authorship as a useful and necessary category assume the political necessity for doing so” (Mayne, The Woman at the Keyhole, 97). Yet film critic (and FQ editor) B. Ruby Rich (writing in the same year as Mayne) was struck nonetheless by the enormous changes taking place around that time, not only in women’s film production and reception, but also in feminist and queer academia. Looking back, from that vantage point, at her own considerations of the field from the early, much more “precarious,” film-feminist days of the 1970s onward, in her groundbreaking book Chick Flicks (1998), Rich noted, “It’s already clear that the old categories and ways of thinking will not work well enough for us” (Rich, Chick Flicks, 83). Many further, and previously inconceivable, changes have since taken place and numerous important studies of women’s film authorship have been published (not least by Mayne and Rich themselves). All of these are reflected in White’s wonderfully readable book. Yet it is in the conception of new categories, and in the production and performance of new ways of thinking, that her work excels—a remarkable achievement given the deeply complex and rapidly evolving
landscape she surveys, analyzes, and also personally navigates, as a festivalgoer, a feminist film distributor (with Women Make Movies), a cinephile, and a scholar.

One of the keys to White’s approach is that she doesn’t write in defense of female authorship. Rather she often takes “breakthrough” moments, like that in the US culture industry of Kathryn Bigelow’s 2010 Oscar win as director for *The Hurt Locker*, or similar forms of evidence of female film directors’ recent cultural salience, as “the opportunity to explore further the pronouncement that ‘the time has come for women filmmakers’”—to attend to factors that by the first decade of the twenty-first century determined the specific articulation of gender, geo-politics, and cinema” (2). Starting from her own positionality as a spectator and analyzing the US art house and festival cultures as reception contexts, the main “connective rubric” for White’s focus on the personas and films of female directors is the way that “women’s work is reterritorialized through contemporary film culture” (13). She chooses to supplement or rework existing feminist approaches by painstaking consideration and theorization of institutional questions—of production, distribution, exhibition, as well as critical reception. It would be hard to imagine that any scholar could apply the insights of Pierre Bourdieu on cultural capital, Steve Neale and David Bordwell on art cinema, Timothy Corrigan on the “commerce of auteurism,” Hamid Naficy on exile and diasporic film cultures, Robert Stam, Ella Shohat, and Lúcia Nagib on relational, “poly-centric” approaches to world cinema, or Marijke de Valck, Skadi Loist, Kay Armatage, and others from the emergent fields of film festival studies and new cultures of cinephilia more productively to feminist film-authorial questions than White has.

That’s not to say that *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* doesn’t also have excellent, individual film director coverage. Significant space is given over to insightful and highly engaging case studies of the production, forms, and circulation of films by Jane Campion, Deepa Mehta, Lucrecia Martel, Samira and Hana Makhmalbaf, Marjane Satrapi, Shirin Neshat, Jeong Jae-eun, Nadine Labaki, Nia Dinata, Sabaisha Sumar, Zero Chou, Jasmina Žibanic, and Claudia Llosa. Films by many more independent and international female directors outside of North America since 2000 are explored along the way—-their differences studied as compellingly as their commonalities. White’s formal film analysis is superb throughout, and accounts for many of the pleasures of this book, as readers have come to expect from her ever since her earlier study, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999). Even as she more than ably “moves beyond the limits of textual accounts of authorship” to theorize “the forms of agency at work in women’s cultural production” (33), as well as their reception, she consistently succeeds in demonstrating that “the geo-political and material determinants of production are readable even in the traveling aesthetics of the festival film” (43).

The insightful attention White pays to lesbian films and queer-cinephile spectatorship is equally valuable. But it is her smart and committed ideological interrogation of the broad range of discourses that have facilitated the emergence of these women directors in recent years that is, perhaps, the most impressive new contribution she makes. As she surveys the status of women’s cinema in the early twenty-first century, her key discursive categories “elite auteurism, cultural authenticity, women’s genres, regional networks, and women’s human rights” (20) provide the focus of each chapter (not, it should be noted, auteurs, regions or countries, or particular film genres). These foster a truly international comparative approach, as do the specific taste categories that are enabling the circulation of current films by women that she so persuasively discusses throughout: prestige cinema, middlebrow Art House, humanist cinema, chick flicks. Given the timing of the research for her book, White can only note in passing one (humorous) consequence of algorithmically curated film culture in the burgeoning Netflix era (102). But it is already clear that her taxonomic insights and arguments about contemporary gendered forms of cultural distinction are going to be essential in future feminist studies of the emergent practices of digital distribution and discoverability, including the streaming of “women’s cinema.”

As Teresa De Lauretis pointed out back in her *Screen* article “Guerilla in the Midst: Women’s Cinema in the 80s” in 1999, “women’s cinema” is a term whose definition “is almost as problematic and contested as the term ‘feminism’ itself.” In setting that term with another relatively contested one—“world cinema”—in her book title, White opens up a space for exploration of the parallelism between them. In so doing, “a qualitative connection is also suggested—the implication perhaps that women’s films are worldlier than some other types of film, that they travel outside national boundaries more freely, on a particular kind of passport” (170). With her brilliantly clear-sighted study, White bestows on her readers the right not to be defensive about female film authorship quantitatively any longer. Her work argues, instead, that “women’s cinema” be understood, valued, and defended qualitatively as the key space of feminist film culture—as a “discursive terrain . . . still very much at stake” (3).
JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild by Miranda J. Banks

This is clearly a creditable, conscientious, intelligent, and useful book, but I feel obliged to confess at the outset that I don’t feel like I’m one of its ideal or intended readers. The subtitle loosely describes its contents, but “A Business History of Hollywood Screenwriters and Their Guild” would come much closer to the mark, even if it might make the book less marketable to me and some others. And the unexceptional simplification of the title and subtitle is part of what gives me some trouble: it’s the business of Hollywood, after all, to convince the public that “American screenwriters” and “Hollywood screenwriters” amount to the same thing. And the moment that any meaningful distinction between the two collapses, then the studios, one might argue, have already won the battle.

I don’t expect my own bias about this matter to be shared by many of Film Quarterly’s readers. Writers who blithely and uncritically toss about terms like “Indiewood” designed to further mystify the differences between studio work and independent work probably don’t think they’re working for the fat cats, but from my vantage point as a journalist who thinks that these distinctions deeply matter, they’re the worst kind of unpaid publicists. This isn’t to say that my own two decades of weekly film reviewing for the Chicago Reader weren’t bracketed by the same sort of market forces—only that it’s important to provide some clarity about who is being hustled, who (or what) is doing the hustling, and why.

Not that Miranda J. Banks is being in the least bit cagey about her focus in The Writers. A key line in her Introduction explains: “I define screenwriters as industry professionals who write for screened entertainment, whether their work appears on film, television, a video game, or streaming video” (3). This obviously rules out a lot of screenwriters who aren’t for one reason or another regarded as industry professionals, and even though Banks plainly appears to be on the side of all screenwriters, and not on the side of their actual or prospective industry bosses, it’s still these bosses and not their actual or potential employees who decide who is and who isn’t an “industry professional.” And unavoidably, this condition winds up determining much of the history and workings (past, present, and future) of the Writers Guild, however exalted as well as reasonable its aims might be. The unreliability of a good many writers’ screen credits as they’re given today—and the rapidity with which they flash by in trailers, designed to satisfy neither the audience’s curiosity nor the vanity of those writers lucky enough to be named, but only the lawyers and other bureaucrats who are running the show—is only one example of what I mean.

Both because of and in spite of this brutal fact, the story of the Writers Guild that Banks recounts is a rocky and rather torturous one, and not a tale in which the writers always or necessarily emerge as the heroes. If, on the one hand, the formation of the Motion Picture Academy was motivated by a desire to steal thunder from the Guild and obfuscate as well as undermine its power by replacing it in the mid-1930s by what Banks correctly calls an “ersatz Guild” (32)—the Screen Playwrights, a group that “plotted to get the union and lure away writers” (55)—the true-blue Guild, “by agreeing to the MPAA’s loyalty requests . . . effectively aided in the institution and enforcement of the blacklist” (105) for more than two decades (1951–1973).

For all of Banks’s discernment in teasing out the paradoxes inherent in the Guild’s formation and implementation, history invariably gets written by the victors, so the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, however dubious its origins and ongoing motivations, is far more respectable in contemporary mainstream culture than the Guild itself, which is more apt to be regarded as a special-interest group of lobbyists by comparison. By the same token, figures such as Elia Kazan who cooperated with the blacklist are viewed ambivalently at best, while the studio heads who actually put it into practice are more likely to be commemorated today as demigods and role models. Given such a climate, it’s small wonder that Banks can classify Citizen Kane as “classical [sic] Hollywood filmmaking . . . at its finest in 1941,” along with How Green Was My Valley, The Lady Eve, The Maltese Falcon, Dumbo, and Sullivan’s Travels, regardless of how it was regarded both inside and outside the industry in 1941 (74–75). But if Citizen Kane with its unorthodox techniques was (or is) “classical” Hollywood filmmaking, one can only wonder what her non-classical examples might be. (Easy Rider, perhaps?)

Banks, an assistant professor of visual and media arts at Emerson College, draws on her own detailed interviews with sixty screenwriters (including such figures as Mel Brooks and Ring Lardner Jr.), as well as the archives of the Writers Guild

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