

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Coline Serreau



BRIGITTE ROLLET

Coline Serreau

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

ISBN 978 0 7190 5088 6 paperback

First published by Manchester University Press in 1998

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at high-school level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role

might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective of film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my department at the University of Portsmouth for their support during the writing of this book. I am also grateful to my research group, the Francophone Area Studies, for their financial support which enabled me to obtain teaching relief and to travel to France for my research. I also thank my students for their challenges and ideas.

I would also like to acknowledge the help of Martin Evans, Eleanor Steward-Richardson and Alasdair King in the reading of my prose, and more especially of Christine Bard for her unlimited support, her wide knowledge of French feminism and her invaluable suggestions.

My special thanks go to the series editors Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram who made extremely helpful comments at all stages of the writing. Others whom I should like to thank include Carrie Tarr and Susan Hayward.

Finally I am very grateful to Coline Serreau for taking time to meet me, and to her assistant Colette Sonnier for her help in providing useful information.

Dedicated to my parents Anne and Yves Rollet, and my sisters and brothers, Pascale, Bruno, Claire, Jean-François, Béatrice and Agnès

List of abbreviations

CNC	Centre National du Cinéma
FEMIS	Formation et Enseignement pour les Métiers de l'Image et du Son
FIFF	Festival International de Film de Femmes
FR3	France Région 3 (Third French channel), France 3
IDHEC	Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques
INA	Institut National de l'Audiovisuel
MLAC	Mouvement pour la Libération de l'Avortement et de la Contraception
MLF	Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes
ORTF	Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
PS	Parti Socialiste
RAI	Radio Italiana
RMI	Revenu Minimum d'Insertion
TF1	Television Française 1

Introduction

Coline Serreau's career makes her in many respects a typical 'product of her time'. A strong believer in 1970s' ideologies and ideas such as Marxism and feminism, she directed her first two films in the mid- and late 1970s, and reflected not only the concerns of the decade, but also the cinematographic choices made by many filmmakers – and more especially women – of the time. A decade later, and at a time of collapsing ideologies – culminating with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 – her interests seem to switch slightly away from post-May '68 agendas to more consensual 1980s' topics and filmic genres. Twenty years after making a documentary which is still hailed as *the* feminist documentary *par excellence*, she came back with her latest film so far – *La Belle Verte*, released in France in September 1996 – to 1970s' preoccupations such as ecology and the defence of the environment via a science fiction tale, with a typically 1990s' flavour. Although she shares similarities with other French female filmmakers who started their career in the 1970s, hers is in many ways unique, and it could be said that throughout her career she has skilfully mixed tradition and innovation, in topics as well as in very personal rewriting of existing narrative forms.

The first chapter of this book is devoted not only to some relevant biographical aspects of Coline Serreau's personal and artistic life, but also to the social, historical and political context of her debut. Since the beginning, she has seemed to follow different trends and traditions which are central to both French cinema and

women's films in particular. However, her main attribute is to 'confuse' the issue by making *auteur* films as well as commercial films, and by constantly mixing cinematographic genres within the same narrative. Her constant 'borrowing' from varied narrative genres, together with the recurrent topical elements of her films, are analysed to illustrate this aspect. In order to grasp the very specific mood of France in the late 1960s, the major social and historical turning point, the 'revolution' of May '68, is briefly presented. Significant issues related to this event, such as social movements, women's rights and the sexual revolution, are addressed. The characteristics and tendencies of post-1968 French cinema and the changing perception of culture overall and films in particular are also discussed. This leads to an analysis of the different ways women fit into this new cinematographic landscape, on both sides of the camera.

The second chapter deals with the 1970s' flavour of Serreau's work (film and drama) and more especially with the importance of politics. After a brief introduction on French political films and on the specificities of 1970s' French documentaries in this regard, *Mais qu'est-ce qu'elles veulent?*, Serreau's most committed film to date, is analysed. The recurrent double axis in Serreau's work, that of class and gender, is also examined. The element of utopia, which is typical of numerous 1970s' texts and has strongly inspired Serreau's career, is not the only influence to be found in her work. Ideas and genres related to seventeenth- and more especially eighteenth-century French literature are also an obvious inspiration.

Taking intertextuality in its broadest sense, Chapter 3 will assess the strong literary influence on the tone, genre and content of Serreau's films and dramas. Fairy-tales and philosophical tales, together with the social and political satire characteristic of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literature, are combined with a 1970s' flavour by the director-dramatist who addresses issues of gender and race which were not on the agenda of the male French writers of previous centuries. While their texts suggested a direct or indirect 'moral' in accordance with their time's concerns, Serreau offers a modern version of the

seventeenth-century French moralists tinged with eighteenth-century use of humour.

The fourth chapter is devoted to another major aspect of Serreau's creation and is concerned with the cinematographic genres she uses. In this regard as in others, her choices could be seen as in accordance with the main tendencies of French cinema as a whole, as well as the French cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. This chapter deals mainly with a description and an analysis of Serreau's comedies, within the wider perspective of French comedies (or *comedies à la française*). The aim is to show to what extent her comedies both reproduce and reject the usual and typical 'ingredients' of the genre. The specificity (or the lack of specificity) of French comedies in general is also considered. After a presentation of the genre, which is one of the most popular in France, the issue of its traditionally male-centred humour and joke-making is addressed. The possibilities of women's reappropriation of laughter is then considered before Serreau's humour is examined in more detail. Keeping in mind the success of Serreau's comedies abroad (leading to an American remake of *Trois hommes et un couffin* (1985)), this chapter will also suggest an analysis of national versus universal humour.

The fifth – and last – chapter deals with the element of 'family' or community which is recurrent in Serreau's films and plays. Issues related to sexual and gender roles are explored and the ubiquitous maternal figure is put in the wider perspective of France's long tradition of family policies. French feminists' sometimes uneasy concern with such a complex issue, and the numerous 'solutions' they have advocated since the early 1900s, are also presented in order to underline Serreau's tradition and novelty in this field.

1

Coline Serreau, May '68 and the 1970s in France

It runs in the family: Serreau's family background

Coline Serreau is one of the most famous female French directors alive, not only in France but also abroad. She is the only woman with a film figuring in the list of the twenty most popular French movies since the start of the Fifth Republic (1958), reaching fourth position with *Trois hommes et un couffin*.

Coline Serreau was born in Paris on 29 October 1947, the daughter of Geneviève Serreau (1915–1981), a writer and translator, and of Jean-Marie Serreau (1915–1973), a stage director considered by some as one of the most important of the 1950s, whose works include *inter alia* stage adaptations of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Aimé Césaire and Eugène Ionesco. Both her parents had been resisters during the Second World War and were left-wing political activists. Her mother was among the 121 writers and artists who in 1960 signed the 'déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission en Algérie',¹ which defended the right of soldiers to refuse to do their military service in Algeria.

In 1952, Geneviève and Jean-Marie Serreau created the Théâtre de Babylone where the theatrical avant-garde met. As far as their work was concerned, they were in many regards innovators in their respective fields. Her mother was the first translator of Bertolt Brecht and shared her taste for discovering new talents (such as the novelist Georges Perec and the playwright Francisco

¹ 'Declaration for the right to avoid the draft'.

Arrabal) with her daughter. Her father was a former pupil of Charles Dullin, an actor-director whose name is closely linked with the Front Populaire (Popular Front, 1936–37) and the *théâtre populaire* (theatre of the people). It was Dullin's report for the Front Populaire about the state of theatre in the provinces which initiated a series of state-led innovations in theatre, amongst these the creation of the Centre Dramatiques Nationaux in the late 1940s.

Jean-Marie Serreau was actually the stage director who made Beckett, Genet and Ionesco's plays known and available to French theatre-goers. His desire for cultural experiments was wide-ranging and included contemporary music as well as video long before they became fashionable. Serreau often emphasises in her interviews the bohemian lifestyle of her parents, and the effect of this on her childhood. On the one hand she inhabited the privileged cultural environment where playwrights who would later become world famous, such as Beckett or Ionesco, would often come to her parents' house, and on the other hand in material terms the household was far from privileged. Serreau often underlines her family's lack of financial resources. The community-like atmosphere of the Serreau household when Coline was in her teens can be found in many of her films (see Chapters 3 and 5). The family tie between Serreau and her brothers Nicolas and Dominique is also obvious from the very beginning of her career. She toured with the latter in the year of her *baccalauréat* and both her brothers have played parts in her films and plays.

Coline Serreau studied music at the famous Conservatoire of the rue Blanche in Paris together with modern and classical dance. She also trained as an acrobat and specialised in the trapeze. This artistic versatility probably explains the extreme variety and the multifaceted nature of her career. Her latest film so far – *La Belle Verte*, released in France in September 1996 – epitomises this as she not only directed it, but also played the leading part, indulging in the last sequences in some trapeze exercises, and wrote the music soundtrack.

She started her acting career as a theatre actress and musician in the late 1960s. In 1970 she played the leading role in *L'Escalier*

de Silas. Very early, she pursued acting (on stage, for television and cinema) and writing simultaneously. In 1971 she collaborated with the radical stand-up comedian Coluche in both the writing and the acting of the show *Thérèse est triste*, performing mainly in the fringe cabaret setting of the *café-théâtres* which flourished in Paris at the time thanks in large part to their iconoclastic humour. At the same time, she was acting for television and cinema, sometimes writing the script and/or the dialogues such as in Jean-Louis Bertuccelli's film *On s'est trompé d'histoire d'amour* released in France in 1974 (see the filmography and below for more details). In 1975 she made her debut as a film director. She directed a short fiction film, entitled *Le Rendez-vous*, for the second French public channel.

From feminist activist documentary to mainstream comedies: genres and mixture of genres

In an interview in February 1977,² Coline Serreau told the journalist who asked her whether she would continue to make documentaries that 'j'ai envie de continuer la fiction aussi, et j'ai envie de continuer à jouer: pour moi, tout cela c'est la même chose ... La fiction est un moyen essentiel pour dire d'autres choses à un autre moment. Je peux revenir à l'un comme à l'autre. Et je peux revenir au théâtre parce que c'est un des rares moments, un des seuls moments où on apprend vraiment à communiquer avec le public'³ (Serreau 1978a: 5). This statement could easily summarise Serreau's career twenty years on. She has remained faithful to the artistic versatility she so valued at her cinematographic debut, and has always refused to be restricted to a specific genre. This chapter will therefore present the director's

² Published only in April–May 1978, that is, a few months after the release of her first films – one documentary and one fiction film – as a director.

³ 'I want to continue with fiction as well, and I want to continue with acting: for me it's all the same ... Fiction is an essential way to say other things at other moments. I can move from one to the other. I can come back on stage because drama is one of the rare moments, one of the only moments, when one learns to communicate with the audience.'

films in chronological order and situate them in their political, social and cultural context. It will examine as well the different genres and narratives from one film to the next, and show how they illustrate various aspects of Serreau's art: first the wide variety of her cinematographic skills and influences, and secondly the multiple means she used and still uses both to entertain and to make her audience think. The way her films epitomise the evolution of French cinema and society in the last twenty years will also be considered.

From acting and scriptwriting to directing

Serreau's early career is typical of many of her female contemporaries. Although a few older female filmmakers (such as Agnès Varda, Marguerite Duras and Nelly Kaplan) managed to make films in the 1960s (even late 1950s for Varda), most of the baby boomers became directors only in the 1970s. They often started with acting and felt, as numerous actresses did at the time, either a growing frustration with the roles they were offered and/or an intense desire to make their own films. As will be seen in the next chapter, there was a long way between their initial desire and the actual realisation of their first feature film. The intermediate step between acting and directing was often scriptwriting. Coline Serreau did both as she played the leading female part in the filmic adaptation of her first script directed by Jean-Louis Bertuccelli in 1974, *On s'est trompé d'histoire d'amour*. As will be shown later, this film dealt with a lot of women's and women's movements' concerns at the time, such as unwanted pregnancy and contraception. It also illustrates Coline Serreau's attention to issues which affected her whole cinematographic career, whatever genre she used, and which are closely linked to May '68 and the different social movements that followed.