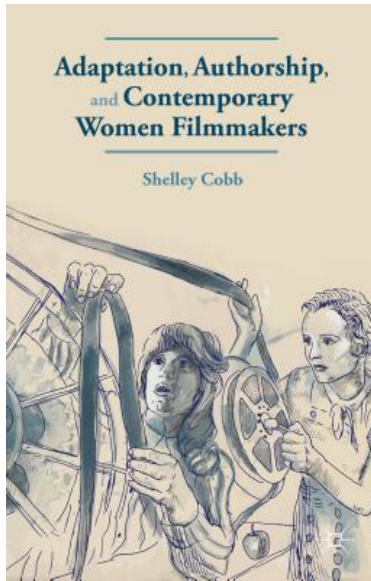


Shelley Cobb, **Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers**, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 167 pp. \$100 (hardcover).

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While statistics on the lack of women directors working in Hollywood and the issue of gender inequality in the film industry have made unprecedented headlines in the past few years, feminist media scholars like Shelley Cobb have made it part of their professional endeavors to examine the role of women working in film and its implications. **Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers** investigates the subversive authorial potential in cinematic adaptations made by women filmmakers and taken from source material from women writers.

In this book, Cobb rigorously examines 11 film adaptations made by women filmmakers during the “postfeminist” era (after 1990). She interweaves authorship and agency of the female writer and filmmaker to provide an analysis of the literary and cinematic representations of the woman author, female relationships, gender politics, and much more. This study provides an unprecedented and overdue look at contemporary women’s film authorship through a feminist lens, examining texts that deal with issues such as “subjectivity, narrative, fantasy and desire, space and time, and most importantly, agency through the figure of the woman author” (p. 4). Cobb writes in the introduction, “Agency, Adaptation, and Authorship,” that

in all the films examined in this book, I see the figure of the woman author in the text functioning as both a representative of female agency and as a vehicle for representing the authorizing of the woman filmmaker, thereby making a claim for the cultural legitimacy of female film authorship. (p. 1)

Cobb suggests that the study of *auteurism* as an “exclusionary model of authorship” with “masculine connotations” has kept both women filmmakers and scholars away from an in-depth investigation of media authorship. She establishes that her motivation for this book is rooted in feminist politics:

It seems to me that for feminist academics our main weapon against complacency—in the face of the low numbers of women who get to make films and the potential exclusion of those films from canonical histories— is to write about films made by women. (p. 3)

For Cobb, a feminist approach to authorship begins with understanding it as a collaborative effort rather than one attributed to a single auteur. In chapter 11's "Envisioning Judith Shakespeare: Collaboration and the Woman Author," she looks at adaptations of two canonical texts by female directors: Sally Potter with Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1993) and Patricia Rozema with Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1999). Cobb asserts that "Potter and Rozema sought collaboration with two of the most well-known women authors of the literary canon in order to have a conversation about women authorizing themselves, instead of waiting for confirmation from the patriarchy" (p. 21). Throughout the book, Cobb fuses industry context and paratexts with feminist theory and textual analysis. She sees "authorship and intertextuality as inextricably linked" (p. 29). Cobb also addresses the discourse surrounding the lack of female filmmakers and how these professionals must frequently convey a pragmatic attitude toward handling feminist identity and politics in a rigidly male-dominated industry.

In the next chapter, "Adapt or Die: The Dangers of Women's Authorship," Cobb affirms that success as a woman filmmaker is rare and precarious, citing Jane Campion as the only woman to have won the Palme D'or at Cannes (for *The Piano*, 1993) and Kathryn Bigelow as the only female director to have received the best director Oscar (for *The Hurt Locker*, 2009). She examines films by both directors: Campion's *In the Cut* and Bigelow's *The Weight of Water* (based on Anita Shrevel's novel).

The third chapter, "Authorizing the Mother: Sisterhoods in America," looks at *Little Women* (Armstrong, 1994), *How to Make an American Quilt* (Moorhouse, 1995), and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Khouri, 2002) and examines how each film adaptation—ranging from a classic adaptation turned women's heritage film to chick lit to chick flick subverts traditional postfeminist narratives of white heterosexual closure through representations of female agency, intergenerational bonding, and, most of all, women's authorship. She discusses the often overlooked *Quilt* and *Sisterhood*, but what stands out is her reassessment of *Little Women*'s matriarchal world and the narrative trajectory of Jo (Winona Ryder) as a prototypical unruly woman—and most of all, Jo's drive to become a writer in the mid-19th century. In addition, the sense of sisterhood and bonding further asserts the collaborative nature of women's work and hints at the embedded process of collaboration in cinematic adaptations and film work as a whole.

The final chapter, "Postfeminist Austen: By Women, for Women, about Women" explores the devoted female Austen reader-fan depicted in *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Swicord, 2007) and *Austenland* (Hess, 2013). Cobb suggests

that the popularity of Austen-related media narratives might indicate the use of Austen by her fans as a symbol of a lost feminist identity that signals a discontent with the strictness of postfeminist culture underneath the cover of her association with romance and "spaces where girls can be girls." (p. 115)

Again, despite the conventional romantic plot in the two movies, Cobb addresses the threads of feminist concerns in these adaptations.

In the conclusion, "The Secret Life of Bees and Authorial Subversion," Cobb revisits her previous assertion of the overall whiteness of the films analyzed thus far, revealing the lack of racial representation

in popular female-led films on both sides of the pond. She cites the careers of Gina Prince-Bythewood and Kasi Lemmons, who struggle with both their gender and race when selling their films, and examines subsequent narratives of black female protagonists. While men directed box office successes like *Waiting to Exhale* and the *Joy Luck Club*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, directed by Bythewood, offers an interesting case for dissecting the intersections between authorship, adaptation, and divides between race, class, and gender. In *Bees*, set in the 1960s, the black female characters, through Bythewood's insertion of the mammy stereotype, resist simply serving as support for the white characters. For Cobb, Bythewood's authorial voice in the film adaptation further proves the subversive potential of women filmmakers. The black female director gives nuance to the white female's original book, and "the figure of the young white female author in the text [film], whose non-biological inter-racial family reflects that of the director herself" (p.145).

Cobb's monograph is an ambitious and astute addition to scholarship on authorship and feminism. Using a methodology inspired by feminist media studies and cultural studies, she dissects the industrial context of production, distribution, and reception of women-centered films in terms of authorial intent and textual analysis in an unprecedented and significant manner. Rather than isolating these issues, she weaves their connections to give meaning to the intertextuality of authorship. Hopefully Cobb's work will inspire similar examinations, providing a full analysis of the role of women filmmakers and how their films make meaning in terms of feminism and feminist concerns.