

Reviewed by Alix Beeston

# *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*

by Genevieve Yue.

Fordham University Press.

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By the time I reached the midpoint of Genevieve Yue's ambitious and original first book, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*, I'd begun making a list of all the rolled heads. There was Mary Stuart's, tumbling off the executioner's block in Edison Studios' *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895); there were numerous heads of the Medusa, her severed neck impossibly smooth in Antonio Canova's nineteenth-century statue but a gory trail of tendons and blood in Benvenuto Cellini's sixteenth-century one. Lined up neatly on the page of my notebook, with bullet points like a row of spikes, these heads are significant for what they stand in for or exclude, namely, the women's bodies, chopped off and whisked away. In Edison's film, in fact, the Queen of Scots loses her body several times over. She's played by a male actor in a wig and a dress, whose substituting body is itself substituted by a dummy before the blade falls; even in the footage spliced out in service of this stop-motion illusion—some fourteen feet of film, as Yue notes—Mary's body is nowhere to be found.<sup>1</sup>

In *Girl Head*, Yue piles up women's heads as, she argues, film does. Just as Medusa's head becomes the *gorgoneion*, her face petrified by the reflection of Perseus's shield, so, too, does film transform the matter of the body, specifically the female body, into an image cut from life. Separating head

1 Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 78–81.

from body or face from flesh, this “conceptual decapitation,” as Yue writes in the introduction, involves a willful forgetting of the materiality of film and its production processes.<sup>2</sup> The material substrata of film—whether analog or digital—and the embodied labor of the film set, laboratory, editing suite, and archive are excised in its projection as a “virtual image,” an image that “conjures an absent presence by resembling it in another form.”<sup>3</sup> But the physical matter, bodily or otherwise, that conditions film in its virtuality is also concealed within it, like a corpse stuffed in a trunk. In classic feminist accounts of narrative cinema, such as Mary Ann Doane’s 1982 essay “Film and the Masquerade,” the absence of the objects that appear on the screen interact with film’s “illusory sensory plenitude” to produce the “absolute and irrecoverable distance” necessary for a fetishistic gaze.<sup>4</sup> In this view, cinema duplicates the measure of separation essential to the actions of the voyeur, actions that must always leave open the possibility of disavowal: *I wasn’t looking at you* or *It wasn’t me looking at you*. Yue’s critical move is to turn away from issues of representation and the structure of the gaze—to leave the voyeurs where they are, fiddling alone in half-grown bushes—and instead to interpret film’s absent-present bodies as figures for the gendered logic of film materiality itself. Feminist scholars have generally assumed the neutrality of film’s technical procedures and practices, but Yue maintains that these procedures—and the concepts of materiality that undergird them—have been “understood and manipulated according to social attitudes about gender.”<sup>5</sup> Inseparable from the cultural sphere that produces it, film’s materiality, she argues, “is itself gendered, meaning that it is inscribed with the character and associations of women at all levels of a film’s construction.”<sup>6</sup>

Yue argues that film production chops off heads and hides the bodies of its victims, women whose flesh is associated with the material of the filmstrip and is necessary to, but occluded in, the expression of film as virtual image. Across three key sites, which she examines in virtuosic technical detail and with deep theoretical insight, Yue tracks how film production is predicated on female bodies “as something to be utilized as functional material and also concealed as unwanted remainder.”<sup>7</sup> In the film laboratory—the location of her first chapter—Yue considers the ubiquity of “China Girl” reference images, which were first used in the 1920s and persist in some digital refining processes. Also known as a “girl head,” a less whimsical and more appropriately functional description that Yue adopts as her (wonderful) title, the China Girl consists of a close-up of a female model, almost always a white woman, along with swatches of various reference colors. She—it—is affixed to the header of a filmstrip, lengths of film not intended to be screened to audiences but instead to be scrutinized by film technicians calibrating the color, density, and tone of the image. A

2 Yue, 11.

3 Yue, 10.

4 Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1982): 78.

5 Yue, *Girl Head*, 8.

6 Yue, 14.

7 Yue, 13.

“technical tool” designed “to create and maintain ideal appearance for the actors who appear on the screen,” the China Girl, Yue explains, is a nonrepresentational image essential to the representational world from which it is exiled. Its construction requires the model’s disappearance, as her singularity is “sublimated into function and [her] appearance is translated into quantifiable information.” Her body, Yue argues, “is instrumentalized for the production of the image, the face of the leading lady. . . . Its only trace is left on the margins of film, a disappearance deemed necessary as the condition by which the *proper* film image can appear.”<sup>8</sup>

The second chapter moves to the domain of film editing, where Yue narrates a history of what she calls *escamontage*, a portmanteau combining *escamotage*, French for concealment by trickery, and *montage*, the composition of a film through the assemblage of discrete elements. “Escamontage,” Yue writes, “is an editing *out* that also hides its own occurrence,” a form animated by a “fantasy of a cut without a seam.”<sup>9</sup> It is editing as cleaning up, covering up evidence as of a crime. It is the hidden splice that masks the missing footage in *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*; the strategies of elision and concealment that produce the illusion of temporal and spatial continuity in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948); and the varied practices of “invisible editing” in David Fincher’s *Gone Girl* (2014), which transform the filmic cut by integrating it within the repertoire of digital visual effects, as in the reframing of shots in postproduction and the use of split-screen performance scenes.<sup>10</sup> Since, for Yue, film materiality is allied to the materiality of the female body, it makes sense that the excisions of *escamontage* often accompany interventions into or disappearances of women’s bodies. Mary Stuart loses her head along with her body, and *Gone Girl*’s narrative turns on the vanishing act of its central female character; in the case of *Rope*, the near-absence of women from the penthouse apartment is registered in misplaced props and other elements of the *mise-en-scène*—the traces left behind by a “phantom maid” or by the film’s (uncredited) script supervisor, Charlise Bryant.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the book’s third chapter, Yue enters the film archive. Here she finds another site in which film’s material histories are produced as the remains of a woman whose body has vanished. This conceit structures both Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). and Bill Morrison’s *The Film of Her* (1996), a film documenting the survival of the Library of Congress’s Paper Print Collection. *The Film of Her* is plotted around copyright clerk Howard L.

8 Yue, 56.

9 Yue, 74, 79.

10 Yue borrows the term *invisible editing* from *Gone Girl*’s editor, Kirk Baxter, cited in Meagan Keane, “‘Gone Girl’ Marks Yet Another Milestone for Adobe Premiere Pro CC,” ProVideo Coalition, October 3, 2014, <https://www.provideocoalition.com/gone-girl-marks-yet-another-milestone-for-adobe-premiere-pro-cc/>.

11 D. A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72. Yue’s discussion of *Rope*’s *mise-en-scène* draws on Miller’s reading as well as on the feminist interpretation offered by Tania Modleski: “I like to imagine that the continuity girl cleaning up the messes made by men . . . performed a role in deaesthetizing the film and thus contributed to its understyle.” Tania Modleski, “Remastering the Master: Hitchcock after Feminism,” *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 153.

Walls's passionate search for the image of a woman he saw at the cinema as a child; in seeking this elusive image, Walls sorted and copied to paper 2.5 million feet of film that would otherwise have been destroyed. Meanwhile Derrida's account of the archive, Yue notes, derives its "model of the lost feminine" from a narrative of male obsession in Wilhelm Jensen's 1903 novella *Gradiva: A Pompeian Fancy*.<sup>12</sup> Derrida's theory, Yue convincingly argues, is founded on a gendered ideology that sublimates the material female body as it figures the archive through the ghostly, absent Gradiva and frames the archivist's work as a melancholic pursuit of the traces she leaves behind. In relation to film, in particular, such conceptions of the archive, which "cannot admit of the female *body* which drops out of the telling," extrapolate "an already uneasy relation between real bodies and those that appear on screen."<sup>13</sup>

Imaginatively conceived, elegantly written, and superbly researched, *Girl Head*'s three chapters work together to articulate, in compelling and often surprising ways, the gendering of film materiality. In keeping with the book's emphasis on how film is structured around its exclusions—the excess, physical material that is excised to produce the seamless virtuality of the image—Yue resists the positivist impulse of much feminist film scholarship, including work in production studies, to recognize and recenter the historical contributions of women filmmakers and film practitioners. *Girl Head* doesn't set out to recover or recuperate the female bodies cut out and discarded in the film laboratory, editing room, and archive; rather, its purpose is "to patiently observe the scenes of their disappearance," as Yue writes in the afterword.<sup>14</sup> The afterword is organized around a reading of Adrienne Rich's 1972 poem "Diving into the Wreck," which describes an underwater expedition to a sunken ship "long after the devastation has occurred," when, as Yue notes, "there is no one left to rescue."<sup>15</sup> In the poem, Rich's speaker expresses a desire to "see the damage done," to encounter "the thing itself."<sup>16</sup> This is, in Yue's gloss, the ship's "stripped-down contours, its brute material."<sup>17</sup> In attending to the brute material of film, Yue, like Rich, is not on a "salvage mission"; she instead issues the reader an invitation to visit, and witness, "the scene of disaster."<sup>18</sup>

Yet to the extent that the chapters valorize the living, laboring female body in film history, *Girl Head* might be said to share more with the recovery project of feminist production studies than it admits. Each chapter concludes by examining experimental works that meditate on the physical bodies in and of film materiality. For instance, chapter 1 ends with Mark Toscano's *Releasing Human Energies* (2012), which incorporates found footage of a woman posing for a China Girl reel. By presenting an uninterrupted stretch of her sitting at attention, shifting facial expressions in response, presumably,

12 Yue, *Girl Head*, 103.

13 Yue, 103.

14 Yue, 131.

15 Yue, 130.

16 Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (1973; New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 23, 24.

17 Yue, *Girl Head*, 130.

18 Yue, 131.

to off-screen directions, the film “restores a sense of labor and endurance, of life itself, to the woman in the China Girl image. Here she is as she is truly never seen: uncomfortable, awkward, and very much alive.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the second chapter’s discussion of hidden editing culminates with Jennifer Montgomery’s *Transitional Objects* (2000), a film that begins and ends with shots of Montgomery struggling to tape-splice strips of 16mm film using her bare feet. Feet moving clumsily, toes nicked by the slicer’s blade, Montgomery offers up an alternative vision of editing practices, one that is not “seamless and pristine,” as in Fincher’s films, but viscerally physical, a procedure both “painful and arduous.”<sup>20</sup>

The chapters thus drive toward—or dive toward, to borrow Yue’s underwater metaphor—reflexive film works that dredge up female bodies from “below the surface” of film and its histories. Deep in the ocean, as Yue writes at the very end of the book, there are women’s bodies, and they are “quietly and insistently alive.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, each chapter presents a drama of revelation, progressing from female bodies hidden in film processes to female bodies disclosed by them. And in so doing, the chapters enact a kind of conceptual vitalization of those bodies: from absent and dead to present and living.

In saying this, I don’t mean to dismiss Yue’s important point that in reflecting scholars’ desire to “restore female presence to the historical record,” the recuperative posture of feminist film studies rests on a theory of film history derived from film’s representational functions and hence treats film as a medium of presence rather than one constituted by its absences, by all the material that remains off-screen.<sup>22</sup> Yet even as *Girl Head* engages female figures that appear barely if at all, and proves the value of a feminist theory of film in its negative valences, Yue’s work should, I think, be contextualized alongside the large body of feminist recovery work—if not exactly within that body of work. For *Girl Head*’s conclusions are broadly compatible with feminist studies that reclaim the concealed or occluded labor of women at every level of film production, including labor that leaves few or no signs on the screen or in the archive.<sup>23</sup> Such scholarship, especially in production studies, subtends Yue’s discovery of living female bodies in the works of Toscano, Montgomery, and others, even as that scholarship is enriched and complicated by Yue’s tight focus on the material construction of film.

19 Yue, 72.

20 Yue, 100.

21 Yue, 131.

22 Yue, 17.

23 Relately, Yue perhaps overstates the distinction between *Girl Head* and Karen Redrobe (Beckman)’s 2003 study *Vanishing Women*. In addition to noting her attention to “sites of material production where gender is not explicitly marked as a foremost concern,” Yue differentiates her work from Redrobe’s by emphasizing unspectacular forms of vanishing (137n28). This is, in my view, a difference in degree rather than in kind. Redrobe’s acknowledgment of how spectacular acts of vanishing in film, which usually center white women, may serve to screen the non-appearance of other bodies offers a point of departure for Yue’s argument. Moreover, there is a marked (but unremarked upon) correspondence between Yue’s analysis of *Rope* and Redrobe’s analysis of Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), as both scholars connect the effects of the editorial splice to the motivated elisions of particular subjects within the films’ diegetic worlds. See Karen Redrobe (Beckman), *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 129–152.

This genuinely innovative history of film materiality shows how deep film's gendered logic goes. And although it doesn't try to bring up women long drowned, or to reattach their severed heads to their bodies, it still manages to breathe life into them.

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