

European cinema: male domination masked by art

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ABSTRACT

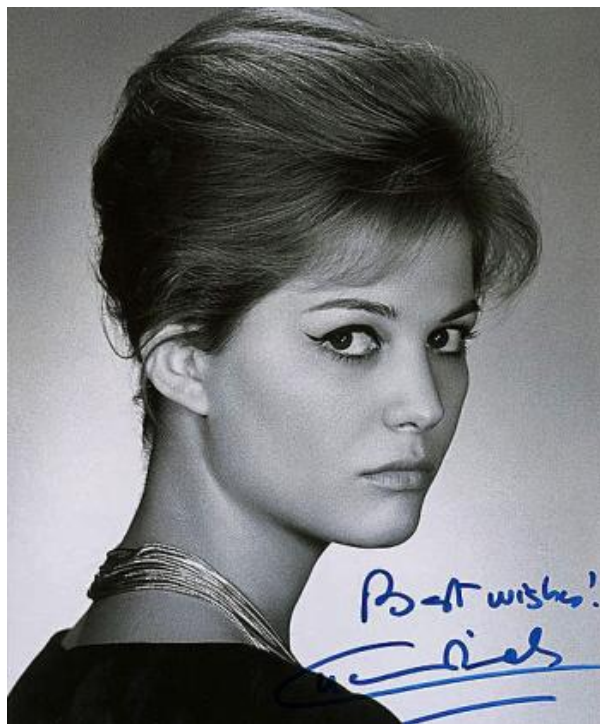
European cinema built itself opposite Hollywood as an “arthouse cinema,” in which geniuses have shined since the 1910s, their films celebrating actresses who are their “creation.” However, European cinema is also a popular cinema that stands out through genres and stars offering greater diversity. The rare female directors have been forgotten by historiography. While their numbers have risen since the 1980s, they are limited by a glass ceiling that the European Union is trying to break with varying degrees of success.



Alice Guy, Apeda Studio New York, 1913. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Sara Montiel, 1955. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Claudia Cardinale, circa 1960. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

European cinema is often considered to be “arthouse cinema”—from the Scandinavian cinema of the 1910s to the German expressionism, Soviet avant-garde, and French impressionist avant-garde of the 1920s, up through

today's "auteur cinema"—facing up to the "commercial" cinema of Hollywood. It is still primarily associated with a pantheon of exclusively male "geniuses" (from Georges Méliès [France 1861-1938] to Jean-Luc Godard [Switzerland 1930-], Roberto Rossellini [Italy 1906-1977], Ingmar Bergman [Sweden 1918-2007], etc.), whereas the image of Hollywood cinema, all things being equal, is marked by greater attachment to the female stars whose influence it helped spread (from Lillian Gish [1893-1993] to Marilyn Monroe [1926-1962] and Sharon Stone [1958-]). This "auteur" cinema often constructs female characters as objects of male desire or more rarely as victims to be rescued, when they are not being transformed into deadly or diabolical creatures, thereby betraying that they are first and foremost the product of a male and patriarchal imagination.

The director has long been seen as the primary source of creativity since Abel Gance (France 1889-1981) and Victor Sjöström (Sweden 1879-1960). During the 1950s, the *Cahiers du cinéma* theorized the "auteur approach" by forming an exclusively male canon, by virtue of a masculinist bias inherent to the notion of "genius." The existence of equally original female directors was systematically underestimated when not ignored altogether: Agnès Varda (France 1928-2019), who won the Golden Lion in Venice for *Vagabond* (1985), demonstrated a poetic aesthetic that was equally original as her topics focusing on women (*Cléo from 5 to 7*, 1962), feminism (*One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, 1977) and relationships (*Happiness*, 1965); Kira Muratova (URSS-Ukraine 1934-2018) had to contend, from her first feature film *Brief Encounters* in 1967, with a Soviet censorship that delayed the release of her second film, *The Long Farewell* (1971), until 1987; her poetic-political accounts focused on the difficult daily lives of women, while men fled this bureaucratic society. The British Sally Potter (1949-) is known for her poetic adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1992), in which Tilda Swinton plays a character who travels through the centuries by changing gender.

However, this focus on "arthouse cinema" overshadowed European popular cinema, which is accessible to a wide audience because it follows generic conventions and includes stars: Alice Guy (1873-1968) at Gaumont invented fiction films in close contact with societal issues (*The Consequences of Feminism*, 1906). Jacqueline Audry (France 1908-1977) emerged in the 1950s and 1960s through Belle Époque period dramas and adaptations of Colette to recount stories of women's liberation; Doris Dörrie (Germany 1955-) chose comedies in order to mock male sexual obsessions (*Men...*, 1985; *Me and Him*, 1988) and relationships (*Naked*, 2002). Thanks to these female directors, who are rare in the majority-male field of film, the screen has included women of all ages, who are the subjects of their own stories.

In Europe, film genres are less gendered than in Hollywood, although some that have been identified as typically male in the United States have also had European variations, such as the Italian spaghetti western with Sergio Leone (1929-1989). Detective movies or thrillers, which became major genres in postwar Europe along with noir realism in France, are more mixed-sex in their distribution, but often characterized by aggressive misogyny. This popular genre favors heroes, with women simultaneously being objects of desire, threats, and obstacles, as in *Divorce Italian Style* (Pietro Germi, 1961), in which Marcello Mastroianni, who is in love with the young Stefania Sandrelli, thinks up a plan to kill his wife, as divorce was forbidden in Italy. Comedies remain a clearly male and misogynous genre in Europe, even though women have tried to redirect the source of humor (*Three Men and a Cradle*, Coline Serreau, 1985; *French Twist*, Josiane Balasko, 1994).

Since the 1970s, heritage film is the only popular European genre that is exported globally. While it is often accused of being conservative due to its classical narration, it is a genre that is traditionally enjoyed by a female audience, partly because it gives prominence to female characters: *The Leopard* (Luchino Visconti, Italy, 1963) made a star out of Claudia Cardinale, the pretty commoner that the aristocrat Alain Delon falls in love with; in *A Passage to India* (David Lean, Great Britain, 1984) a young British woman (Judy Davis) meets a young Indian doctor who reveals to her the colonial racism of 1920s India; *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, Denmark, 1987), recounts how the French domestic worker (Stéphane Audran) for two old Puritan sisters thanks the community that welcomed her with a lavish meal. While the female figures in European films were more rooted in social types and a realist

context than in Hollywood productions, they were often constructed in reference to an “eternal feminine.”

European stars, and women in particular, have for a long time achieved international stature by pursuing a career in Hollywood: Greta Garbo (1905-1990) came from Sweden in 1926 and became the biggest Hollywood star by personifying an androgynous and powerful femininity; Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992) emigrated from Germany in 1931 with her mentor Joseph von Sternberg, who over the course of seven films established her as a femme fatale; Ingrid Bergman (1915-1982), who was “imported” from Sweden in 1936 by the producer David O. Selznick, was awarded an Oscar in 1945, and became the highest earning star by embodying a femininity that was both sensual and moving. Sophia Loren (1934-) enjoyed success in the popular Italian cinema of the 1950s; she pursued an international career between Hollywood and Italy, and was awarded an Oscar and the Best Actress Award in Cannes for *Two Women* (Vittorio de Sica, 1960).

Yet many actresses enjoyed tremendous popularity in their country and sometimes in Europe, but remained unknown across the Atlantic. Martine Carol (1920-1967) enjoyed success in the early 1950s with *Dear Caroline*, and was both a model of femininity and an erotic object, before being dethroned by Brigitte Bardot (1934-), who was famous worldwide; the Swede Zarah Leander (1907-1981) was famous in Nazi Germany without compromising herself with the regime, with her sexual liberty making her a gay icon; the Spaniard Sarah Montiel (1928-2013) initially enjoyed success in Mexico and Hollywood, but become an idol in Francoist Spain by acting in musical melodramas.

However, the struggle against gender stereotypes was curbed by the cult of the “artist”—the director as author. Female directors continued to be discriminated against in terms of budget and salary, while actresses were discriminated against in terms of age and role, while women generally did not win awards at international festivals. Since the 2000s, various European and national efforts have helped increase the number of films directed by women to 20%, with great disparities between countries (less than 10% in Southern European countries, as opposed to 30% in Sweden). Despite the mobilization of 82 female film professionals at the Cannes Festival in 2018 demanding equality in the world of cinema, the #MeToo movement has had an unequal impact in Europe.

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