

November 2006

Kelley Conway: Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film

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Recommended Citation

Lawber, Katherine M. (2006) "Kelley Conway: Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol1/iss1/4>

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Kelley Conway. *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 246 pp. Appendix, references, index. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 0-520-24407-9.

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Kelley Conway's in-depth study of the realist singer in French cinema of the 1930s offers far more than one might expect at first glance. This is a book, in truth, not destined for the film specialist and connoisseur alone, although it makes a significant contribution to that area of study, but for a much wider audience that might include scholars from such disciplines as French, history, sociology, and cultural and feminist studies, to name but a few of the possibilities. This work is also a fascinating read for anyone who is a Parisian at heart and who is interested in the recent history and evolution of this city. That is not to say, however, that because this work will undoubtedly resonate with multiple audiences, that *Chanteuse in the City* will not reach readers in all of these areas in a significant way. The multifaceted nature of Conway's study only enhances the depth of her research and the contribution that this research makes to all these disciplines. In her introduction, Conway carefully delineates her indebtedness to previous scholarship (including her departures from earlier analyses) and shows how her own study draws on that scholarship while still breaking new ground, particularly in the area of feminist film studies.

Although the focus of Conway's inquiry is the persona of the realist singer in 1930s French film, her discussion is not limited to this decade alone. Rather, she examines in great historical detail the precursors of this figure in live-entertainment contexts starting with the café-concert of the nineteenth century (going back even earlier to find the origins of the café-concert in the eighteenth century—1731 to be exact—at the Palais-Royal in Paris). She then continues to trace the development of the realist singer through the rise of the music hall in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conway's investigation culminates with a comprehensive study of the figure of the realist singer in French cinema of the 1930s. She includes great women entertainers who are an integral part of this historical and cultural development such as Theresa, Mistinguett, Damia, Frehel, Eugenie Buffet, Josephine Baker, Jane Marnac, Louise Brooks, and ultimately, the later inheritor of the realist singer tradition, Edith Piaf. Conway does an admirable job delineating the contribution that each of these women made to the role of the realist singer in particular and to the representation of femininity in general. Conway's painstaking analyses of the films of the 1930s that, taken together in their historical context, form the basis of this work are very well done and quite accessible even if one has not seen the films in question (although familiarity with the films obviously will add a richer level of understanding to the reader's appreciation of the material in question and of Conway's analyses and interpretations). The films that are key to Conway's discussion include *Prix de Beauté* (1930), *Faubourg Montmartre* (1931), *Paris-Beguine* (1931), *La Tête d'un Homme* (1932) *Le Bonheur*, *Zouzou*, *L'Atalante* (1934), *Rigolboche* (1936), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936), and *Pepe le Moko* (1936).

Of equal interest in the cultural history that underlies this study is the connection

of the realist singer to the world around her. Conway shows in numerous examples that the characters brought to life in the films very often share a life with the actresses and singers who portrayed them. She also discusses at length the importance of the songs these women sing—songs whose lyrics often reflect the singers' own life experiences. The realist singer thus becomes a metaphor for the Parisian underworld, for the struggles of the working class as a whole, or for the struggle of women in a time when the role of women was changing dramatically. Conway delves into the many facets of this "particular construction femininity" that, for her, is the figure of the realist singer.

The strength of Conway's work lies particularly in her adept handling of the tremendous breadth of material that lays the groundwork for her interpretation(s) of the films themselves. Her notes and references are exhaustive and will serve both the film specialist and the scholar from other (related) disciplines quite well. She also has provided translations from the French to help the non-Francophone reader along the way. If there is any drawback to this work, it stems from exactly the same breadth of material that is its strength. The details—historical, cultural, and cinematographic—might at times be cumbersome for readers (especially nonspecialists) as they make their way through them. The effort, however, is well worth it, as *Chanteuse in the City* has much to offer