Chapter Three: 
Genders and Discourse

Moving beyond a focus on ethnicity, this chapter will examine the ways in which gendered identities are also portrayed, renewed, and renegotiated across the same bodies of film. In the introduction to *Gender and French Cinema*, Alex Hughes and James S. Williams make clear the importance of ‘situating gender-related analysis as central to contemporary critical work on representation’ (2001: 1). In light of this, and given the significance of questions of representation and the discursive depiction of minority groupings in film, it is clear that gender cannot be overlooked as a prism for analysis. However, it is also crucial to make clear that the focus will be very much on both genders, rather than focussing primarily on only men or women.

For Tarr and Rollet, in the introduction to their consideration of French women’s cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, the founding supposition is that ‘women (in itself a heterogeneous category), experience different sets of social relations and discourses which potentially inflect their cinematic production’ (2001: 8). While this observation may well be accurate, if brought into dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari-inspired views of minority/mainstream relations, it becomes apparent that the very difference Tarr and Rollet highlight makes sense only in relation to the norm from which it is said to differ, namely, in this case, men and male cinematic production. It is my intention here to examine the ways in which both genders are challenged, constructed, and negotiated, examining the ways in which challenges to the one impact upon the other,
'form[ing] the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (Hughes and Williams 2001: 3).

As the cinematic statistics cited by Tarr and Rollet demonstrate, there remains disparity between contributions and outputs of men and women within the French film industry. For instance, films directed by women represented only 6.4 per cent of total French cinematic output for the 1980s and 13.7 per cent in the 1990s (2001: 3, quoting figures issued by the Centre National de la Cinématographie, relating to films over 59 minutes in length). However, it is my contention that this disparity is better addressed in academic circles by an insistence upon the interdependence of gendered identities. The central notion of cinema as a site of verbal exchange, interaction, and relations will thus be strengthened, and the chapter will point towards ways in which, as with ethnic identities, cinema is used as a site of negotiatory discourse between minority groupings and a republican mainstream model around questions of gendered identities and their interactions with ‘racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities’ (Butler [1990] 1999: 6). The question of gendered identities as constructed through dialogue in minority cinema is particularly relevant in contemporary French cinema, and, by extension, contemporary French society, for a number of reasons, not least because of the ways in which it interacts with broader questions of a redefinition of French republicanism.

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Hughes and Williams (2001: 1-4) explain the relevance of gender debates within the French context and, perhaps more interestingly, vice versa, in terms of the broad theoretical framework with which they engage. They do so by highlighting the contribution made by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) to modern thinking on gender in her paradigmatic text *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and her influential assertion that ‘one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman,’1 whereby she suggests a distinction between anatomical sex and categories of gender which are both

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1 On ne naît pas femme, on le devient.