

## Authority: establishing terms and their meanings

### Media and Communication



French, Lisa (2007). *Centring the female: The articulation of female experience in the films of Jane Campion*. PhD thesis, Applied Communication, RMIT University.

To avoid any confusion on the part of the reader, and to establish her political and feminist credentials, Lisa French (2007: 47-48) needs to clarify what she means by 'female', and distinguish it from 'feminine' and 'feminist'.

1. Highlight the verbs French uses to compare and critique meanings of 'feminist', 'female' and 'femininity'. Which verbs are neutral and which 'loaded'?
2. Find two sentences where French uses '**this research**' to emphasise her presence and authority.
3. French uses two quotes in the first paragraph. Why?
4. Read footnote 3. What phrase shows French's critical voice?

### Female, the feminine, and feminine subjectivity

In this research the term 'feminist' denotes political advocacy, 'female' refers to a fact of one's biological sex, and the concept 'femininity' refers to the way in which society has constructed notions of 'femaleness'. It is noted that many feminists have denounced 'femininity' as a patriarchal concept, arguing that celebrating the feminine and matriarchy could arguably "belong more to patriarchal ideas of femininity than feminist ones".<sup>1</sup> Femininity and femaleness have tended to be confused; as Toril Moi observes, patriarchy "wants us to believe that there is an essence of femaleness, called femininity".<sup>2</sup>

Women are female but they are not necessarily 'feminine', and concrete or fixed definitions of 'femininity' are potentially essentialist and patriarchal. Although female stereotypes abound, 'femininity' isn't a fixed or unchanging concept; this research understands 'femininity' as varying contextually, historically and across different cultures.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Stott, 'Celluloid Maidens: All teched-up and nowhere to go', in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, & Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling, Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications Pty Ltd, Richmond, 1987, p.16.

<sup>2</sup> Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, (eds.) *The Feminist Reader: essays in gender and the politics of literary criticism*, (2nd ed.) Blackwell Publishers, Malden, Great Britain, 1997, p.108.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis takes the view that femininity is an historically and culturally varying construction, and that attempts to fix the meaning of femininity contribute to essentialism and binary oppositions (for example women as the 'Other' to masculinity). See Moi, 1997, p.109.



## Answer Key

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### Female, the feminine, and feminine subjectivity

In **this research** the term 'feminist' **denotes** political advocacy, 'female' **refers to** a fact of one's biological sex, and the concept 'femininity' **refers to** the way in which society **has constructed** notions of 'femaleness'. It **is noted that** many feminists have **denounced** 'femininity' as a patriarchal concept, **arguing that** celebrating the feminine and matriarchy could arguably **"belong more to patriarchal ideas of femininity than feminist ones"**.<sup>4</sup> Femininity and femaleness **have tended to be confused**; as Toril Moi **observes**, patriarchy **"wants us to believe that there is an essence of femaleness, called femininity"**.<sup>5</sup>

Women are female but they **are** not necessarily 'feminine', and concrete or fixed definitions of 'femininity' **are** potentially essentialist and patriarchal. Although female stereotypes **abound**, 'femininity' **is not** a fixed or unchanging concept; **this research understands** 'femininity' as **varying** contextually, historically and across different cultures.<sup>6</sup>

### KEY

1. Neutral verbs in **blue**. 'Loaded verbs' in **red**. French is not only looking for definitions; she is critiquing the concept of femininity, contested in feminist theory.
2. **This research** in green. It emphasises the presence and authority of the researcher.
3. Quotes in **pink**. The quotes establish the writer's position, in this case, as a feminist. French is clarifying her world view.
4. Footnote in **purple**. If this statement underpins the researcher's argument, why did she leave it in the footnote?

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Stott, 'Celluloid Maidens: All teched-up and nowhere to go', in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, & Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling, Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications Pty Ltd, Richmond, 1987, p.16.

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