

norms and goals she believes we can, and should, be seeking to realize. I think she would agree, however, that we can't get our theory right in a vacuum, and that it is impossible to make judgements about the sensitivity and strategic implications of social theory independently of consideration of what we want to achieve politically. Or if we are being invited to view all attempts to name

a truth in politics as misconceived, perhaps we shouldn't trade on the idea of a 'politics of truth' at all?

**Kate Soper**

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## Lighting up the Screen: Feminism and Film

### The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema

Judith Mayne

*Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 1990*

ISBN 0 253 20606 5, \$12.95, £8.99 Pbk

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### Issues in Feminist Film Criticism

Edited by Patricia Erens

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If you will excuse the irresistible pun, female spectatorship is one of the Mayne issues in feminist film criticism today. Patricia Erens's new collection, an overview of 1980s feminist work on film, and Judith Mayne's original and suggestive revision of theoretical knots in the history of feminist engagement with cinema, demonstrate clearly how much of a hold the problem of the female spectator has on the feminist imagination. Active or passive, masochistic or narcissistic, unified or dispersed, sociologically researched or theoretically postulated, the female gaze is beset by all the questions of female subjectivity plus those that the study of patriarchal

and commodified culture has brought in its train. Why should this be? Why privilege spectatorship over the analysis of text, institution or film's social and political functioning in the public sphere? Women's pleasure, it seems, is still an obscure object of desire.

Years ago, German film theorist Gertrud Koch posed the question of why women go to see men's films at all, if Laura Mulvey's analysis of the look in dominant cinema as intrinsically masculine was right, thus precluding female pleasure in film viewing. In response to Mulvey's pessimism also, Mary Ann Doane shifted her sights from men's film to the woman's film of the 1940s, and came up with an equivocal answer with women's pleasure hovering between masochism and narcissism. A recent collection by Philip Schlesinger *et al.* researches the experience of women viewing violence on TV and film; here, the term 'pleasure' does not figure anywhere. *Unpleasure of the female spectator* ('why am I watching this?') is, we might say, a more likely candidate for feminist analysis than its utopian or compromised counterpart. In popular cinema, the woman of the 1980s and 1990s, from *Fatal Attraction* to *Basic Instinct*, is brought face to face with her worst nightmares far more often than with her dreams.

In Erens's book, Robin Wood attributes this phenomenon to a 'massive retaliation' against femin-

ism on the part of Hollywood (p. 341). One would expect then, that recent feminist film criticism would engage with this historically specific moment of misogyny (and homophobia) in the production of popular culture, but no such luck. Both Erens's selection of representative articles from the 1980s and Judith Mayne's evolving theoretical and critical work exhibit a concern with the female spectator which is resolutely stuck in accentuating the positive: the search for female pleasure in women's films, or a recuperation thereof in dominant cinema, if at all possible. By default, this results in the reproduction of a by now familiar canon of 'women's cinema', which can roughly be subdivided into the categories of older movies (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Stella Dallas* again, *The Big Sleep* again and the films of Dorothy Arzner); avant-garde films (Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman, Helke Sander) and more mainstream films with a pinch or, occasionally, a good shot of feminism thrown in (*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *A Question of Silence*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*). The absence, then, of the 1980s backlash movies can be explained in large part by a search for female tradition in film-making and spectatorship, by recuperative readings, and by the turn to psychoanalytical and semiotic paradigms in film analysis at the expense of more sociological, institutional and historical concerns.

This theoretical turn is well-documented in Erens's collection and exemplified in Judith Mayne's critical engagement with the history of feminist film criticism and theory. Organized in three parts, addressing spectacle and narrative, female authorship, and early cinema in relation to women's films respectively, *The Woman at the Keyhole* is constantly in dialogue with her theoretical foremothers. Laura Mulvey plays a part in the first chapter which tries to theorize the screen as a more complex figure for cinematic spec-

tacle than Mulvey's deterministic look. Claire Johnston's work on Dorothy Arzner provides Mayne with an opportunity for a subtle critique, resulting in a promising re-evaluation of issues of female authorship and lesbian signature in Arzner's oeuvre.

Mayne's exploration of the 'primitive' in 'primitive' (=early) cinema draws on and questions Linda Williams and Lucy Fischer's re-examination of Meliès as well as Burch, Gunning and other analysts of early cinema. It is here, especially in the final section on Trinh T. Minh Ha's *Reassemblage* and Laleen Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon*, that Mayne really begins to extend the familiar paradigms of feminist film theory into a novel and highly suggestive exploration of race and the avant garde. Suggestions, however, need following up, and Mayne's largely intra-theoretical brand of criticism does not as yet promise a new direction for the 1990s in terms of race, spectatorship and film-making, badly needed though that is.

More surprisingly perhaps, Erens's *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, in its very diversity and quantity of theoretical and critical material, manages not to give much serious attention to the female spectator of colour, whether implied or empirical either. Jane Gaines's 'White privilege and looking relations: race and gender in feminist film theory' (1986) is the sole representative of a developing body of work on the racial look, and therefore carries the burden of absences elsewhere. Her sophisticated reading of *Mahogany* combines issues of production and the iconography of the star (Diana Ross) with formal analysis and a discussion of Black history and politics in the US – such a range of concerns is rare in this collection. No wonder then that in the end Gaines can do no more than make a beginning in theorizing race as a factor in cinematic language.

Yet it is an important beginning.

Without explicitly addressing questions of race, several other articles in Erens's anthology can be used in support of Gaines's attempt at a more complex view of cinematic language via the diversified look. In 'Rethinking women's cinema: aesthetics and feminist theory' (1987) Teresa de Lauretis offers a fascinating account of how film can construct and address a diverse audience in her analysis of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*. And Jackie Stacey, in 'Desperately seeking difference' poses the question of women's desire for each other and its place in the theory of the look: 'Do all women have the same relationship to images of themselves?' (p. 368) In these examples, lesbian spectatorship and spectatorship of colour are aligned in a radical questioning of the premisses of both the male and 'the' female gaze.

While offering few new departures, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, true to its stated programme of selection, presents at least a wide variety of approaches. Structured in four parts (Women and Representation, Rereading Hollywood, Critical Methodology: Feminist Filmmaking, and Assessing Films Directed by Women), it gives a good picture of the main debates in feminist film criticism over the past twenty years, even if on individual films the excitement of such debate is often lost in the tedium of repeated plot synopses and re-statement of previous critics' positions. The same is true of Erens's introductions to each part of the collection, which rather lazily cite bits from the articles themselves rather than provide an overview of the field under discussion.

Read in sequence, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* furthermore charts the aforementioned turn away from sociology ('positive images') to theoreticism and, later still, a self-reflective concern with spectatorship. While I doubt the need for yet another reprint of seven-

ties pieces such as Mulvey's, and Johnston and Cook's article on Raoul Walsh, it is good to see many old favourites all together, as well as some new ones: B. Ruby Rich's 'Antiporn: soft issue, hard world', Tania Modleski on Hitchcock, Julia Lesage on feminist documentary film-making, Kaja Silverman's 'Disembodying the female voice', Jane Gaines on alternative pleasure, and Teresa de Lauretis and Jackie Stacey, as mentioned before.

But the largely missing issues are perhaps the main ones. In 'Illicit pleasures: feminist spectators and *Personal Best*', Elizabeth Ellsworth argues for the vital role that feminist film criticism has to play as an interpretive community of resistance to dominant cultural values. Her article is important because it focuses two issues absent in the rest of Erens's collection: (1) the notion of community which challenges the still all too common assumption that film viewing is a private affair of isolated individuals in the dark, rather than a social activity in which meaning is produced through a negotiation of personal experience/pleasure and public discourses; and (2) the notion of a feminist, as distinct from a female spectator *per se*. As I see it, feminist spectatorship is informed by a specific political consciousness which intersects with female pleasure but can quite easily be at odds with it too. The female gaze, as an empirical or theoretical entity, is not necessarily co-extensive with a feminist view of film. And since cinema is not just fantasy, but – perhaps paradoxically – also a particularly powerful form of legitimation of fantasy, it is all the more important for feminists to keep their political eyes peeled at the keyhole of what is still overwhelmingly a patriarchal, racist and homophobic cultural industry.

**Maria Lauret**

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## Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories

Edited by Diana Fuss

Routledge: London, 1992

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ISBN 0 415 90236 3, £40.00 Hbk

Underscoring *Inside/Out*, the latest title from Routledge, is the subheading 'lesbian theories, gay theories'; a separation between two communities is thus implied. In fact, and to the book's credit, neither its format nor its politics recognizes any such separation as its lesbian and gay contributors play in and out of others, and each other's, paradigms and conclusions. This is, as the fly-leaf promises, work from the second wave of queer theory, with a determination to go beyond identity politics, though often using their essentialism as a starting point. Anti-essentialist while recognizing essentialism's seductions, one senses some anxiety as to where politics might go 'post-identity'. A particular problem, as Diana Fuss points out in her excellent introduction, is how to retain a notion of alterity (that we, as homosexuals, are different from and in opposition to the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality) without resorting to simple binaries which assert difference at the expense of any correspondence, since, 'Every outside is also an alongside' (p. 5). The politics she proposes is a chameleon one where identity is more performance than epistemology, continually posed then called into question, 'less a matter of final discovery than perpetual reinvention' (p. 7). Inside/outside, homosexual/heterosexual, Fuss argues for

the deconstruction of such categories, asking, what gets left out of these by now well-established binaries which continue to present, 'an opposition which could at least plausibly be said to secure its seemingly inviolable dialectical structure only by assimilating and internalizing other sexualities . . . to its own rigid polar logic' (p. 2). Her point is convincingly argued though it could be said that she misses the opportunity for a more effective destabilization of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in failing to follow through her remark about what we might call, the 'queerly queer'. These days this is an expansive category, representing not only the bisexuals, the transvestites, and the transsexuals whom her category invokes and who have always had a problematic relation to the homosexual community, but also the daddy boys, the politically queer and the lesbians who sleep with men who re-present themselves as a colourful and contentious part of the contemporary lesbian and gay scene.

In itself the book is well centred in that it combines a traditional literary and film criticism with a theoretical intentionality that is always at some point concerned to ally itself with a contemporary politic. The sections devoted specifically to activism foreground such concerns, but most of the essays begin out of a specific historical situation. Of course, this combination engenders its own issues and debates. The question of the colonization of AIDS work by the academy is raised in Thomas Yingling's 'AIDS in America: postmodern governance,