

Book Reviews

Kiss Me Deadly - Feminism & Cinema For The Moment. Laleen Jayamanne, ed.; Power Publications: Sydney, 1995; 285 pages; ISBN 0-909952-26-4; \$14.95 US.

Feminism and Film. Maggie Humm; Edinburgh University Press/Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997; vi+246 pages; ISBN 0-253-21146-8; \$16.95 US.

Kiss Me Deadly - Feminism & Cinema For The Moment (1995) and *Feminism and Film* (1997) are both concerned with using novel feminist approaches for film study. The first book, edited by Laleen Jayamanne, is a collection of eight diverse essays which pursue a common goal: "to bring film out of the shadow of feminist film theory to discover what it can do for feminism" (p. 4). The second monograph, written by the British scholar Maggie Humm, intends also "to bring film out of the shadow of feminist film theory" but this time to discover what feminism can do for film. Thus, the authors of *Kiss Me Deadly* reclaim film as the primary signifier in a feminist theoretical practice where new perspectives collide with novel interpretations of old ones, whereas Maggie Humm's major concern is to prioritise theory while staging encounters between films and feminist theories tangential to film theory. As a professor of Women's Studies she is less aesthetically concerned about the cinematic body than the authors of *Kiss Me Deadly* whose backgrounds are mostly in film studies, cultural studies and art history. However, what both Maggie Humm and Laleen Jayamanne's works clearly demonstrate is the importance of timing to the act of theorising and criticism.

This crucial aspect of the production of meaning is strongly inscribed in the subtitle of the first book: *Feminism & Cinema For The Moment*. What is underlined here is the transient nature of a way of thinking linked to how theorists and critics "apprehend that elusive 'object' film through [their] viewing, reading and writing practices" (p. 2). What

is encapsulated in the catchy and puzzling title *Kiss Me Deadly* is the feeling that in the late 70s and early 80s feminist film theory "was killing a certain experience of cinema" (p. 3). It serves as a reminder of the danger of not apprehending film sensuously. Finally, it is a tribute to Robert Aldrich's film noir *Kiss Me Deadly* which was read in contradictory ways by feminist film theorists and reflected the inventiveness of a director who "powerfully modified the 40s image of the femme fatale" (p. 3). Concepts taken from Deleuze's books on cinema and from Benjamin's study of allegory, the image and memory inform five of the essays. As for the analysis of the films of Alexander Kluge and Raul Ruiz, they are based on the philosophical stances of the two filmmakers.

In the first essay, "Five Ages Of Film Feminism," Patricia Mellencamp establishes an enlightening parallel between Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* and feminist film theory, to present us with a provocative, at times humorous, and firmly anchored cinematic view of the limitations of feminist film theory since its beginning twenty years ago. She successfully argues that by choosing psychoanalysis or other theories of male subjectivity, during what she maliciously labels (St)Ages One and Two, "intellectual" and "irascible" (p. 21), feminists could not find the answers for women. Mellencamp, echoing Virginia Woolf, believes that feminist film theorists would have been better inspired by talking money, work and knowledge, rather than by focusing almost exclusively on sex and power. She points out that when they tried to reclaim power, they ended up replicating power structures and values, remaining within the terms of the theories they critique. During (St)Ages Three and Four the point of view shifted to women with the release of Sally Porter's *Thriller*. However, Mellencamp ends by saying that today "sexual discourse [is still] the source of intellectual pleasure and that even resistant sexuality can work to conceal discrepant economics" (p. 32). She then proceeds to fill the important theoretical gap she has just clearly identified. What she offers her readers is a thought provoking reading of Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*; *Thelma and Louise*; Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*; *Rehearsing*, a simple Super 8mm film on

video by Jayamanne; *BeDevil* by Moffat, and finally, *Daughters of the Dust*.

The seven essays which follow Patricia Mellencamp's address questions of spectatorship, genre, representation. Jodi Brooks "explores contemporary modes of cinematic fascination" (p. 10); Needeya Islam discusses how Kathryn Bigelow "divests the foundations of action cinema of its masculine privilege" (p. 122). In "Fourth Person Singular," Melissa McMahon addresses the question of "how to think the cinematic body itself without subordinating it to theoretical categories" (p. 11). In a very precise and insightful textual analysis, Michelle Langford shows how Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Von Braun* "can create historical memory without simply representing the past" (p. 9) and how Alexander Kluge's allegorical figures offer a way to apprehend *The Female Patriot*. The analysis of *Bad Timing* by Toni Ross requires a knowledge of art history to be fully appreciated. As for Laleen Jayamanne's study of "the femme fatale and the maternal constructed [...] as allegory" (p. 13) in the work of Raul Ruiz, it is as challenging as the film itself. A special mention should go to the last essay. It is a fascinating study of *The Red Shoes* and *Raging Bull* unexpectedly united in this "Meditation On Violence" concerned about the nature of editing. The fragmented nature of the essay is true to its content and intent. Thoughts flash through the text interrupting its flow as if crossing the mind of someone who is meditating. This new way of writing about film will certainly attract the women who, according to some Italian feminist theorists, when watching a film, single out moments of significance rather than being caught up in the discursive nature of the plot.

While *Feminism and Film* does not offer the originality of approaches proposed by *Kiss Me Deadly*, it provides the viewer with a very well researched monograph. It offers first a clear and concise theoretical context: Feminist Theory; Feminist Aesthetics; Feminist Film Theory are surveyed. It should be noted that while the author lists the psychoanalytic (Mulvey), materialism (Kuhn), postmodernism (Kaplan) and Black feminism (hooks), under film theory she mentions, just in passing, Queer theory. Then she focuses on

specific films before ending with a study of feminist film praxis. The insertion of a summary and structure of the book before the various analyses of the selected films is very helpful since it gives the viewer a focal point which becomes essential when the text, loaded with theoretical references, proves to be suffocating, engulfing the film in the shadow of feminist theories. Contrary to Jayamanne, Maggie Humm does not seem to be as "keenly aware of the function of criticism as a staging of an encounter in which both subject and object mutate" (p. 4). For example the analysis of Cronenberg's films is caught in "a web of theory interweaving points about [them] to illustrate feminism's cluster of ideas" (p. 59). As a result a film like *Dead Ringers* is "killed" (to use Jayamanne's expression). It is reduced to be nothing more than a mere illustration of feminist theories of mothering. However, for readers less aesthetically concerned, the analysis of *Klute* and *Variety* constructed "as a series of interconnected visual and verbal discourses" (p. 57) could prove very satisfying. As for the study of *Daughters of the Dust* which "answers spectacularly to [...] the new celebrations of Black feminist theory" (p. 37), it is a convincing complement to Mellencamp's analysis. The discussion of *Orlando* illustrates quite well what constitutes a postmodernist film. Finally, the reading of Marleen Gorris' films based on concepts derived from feminist literary theories about authorship may appeal to some. To others, it could prove to have a sense of "déjà vu." After all, to talk about "inflections" in the films is nothing more than talking about *leitmotifs*, a term widely used in textual analysis of films, regardless of the chosen theoretical framework. The decision to conclude with a chapter connecting feminist theory to feminist media practice is quite relevant. It allows Maggie Humm to clearly demonstrate how "with tape slides students can undertake the political task of addressing social issues in a public way while making visible and legitimate their personal views and lives in a visually pleasurable way" (p. 193). This last section of the book could prove very valuable to individuals involved in the teaching of film studies and/or women's studies.

Kiss Me Deadly will appeal to readers interested in a faithful and creative textual analysis

of the aesthetics of film. Also, by working with Deleuzian concepts of time and memory and Benjamin's work on allegory, its contributors reveal new ways of viewing at times foreign to feminist film theory. On the other hand, *Feminism and Film* offers a very serious and clear review of contemporary feminist film theory before attempting to open new theoretical pathways. Unfortunately, in her desire to bridge the gap between feminism and film, Maggie Humm sometimes creates a distance much too wide between the filmic text and the theory she favours. The film then vanishes behind the theoretical discourse. Only when it does not, does the argument become thought provoking. However, what both works certainly offer is a variety of insights which demonstrate the plurality of feminist film theories. This richness of theoretical perspectives confirms the presence of "multiple voices in film criticism." Since some of the films selected are usually considered part of an official canon, it is also an invitation to revisit the films that were analysed, in the hope of sharpening our critical subjectivities.

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Feminism and Contemporary Art: the Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter.

Jo Anna Isaak. Routledge, London and New York, 1996.; illustrations; xiv + 247 pages; ISBN 0-415-08015-0.

An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body. Rosemary Betterton. Routledge, London and New York, 1996.; illustrations; xiv + 240 pages; ISBN 0-415-11085-8.

How is it that so many educated persons have learned *not* to see contemporary visual art? Speaking as a university curator, I find it a cruel irony that the struggles of feminist artists to gain a purchase in critical discourse should be frustrated

not only by sexism, but also by an academic disciplinary hierarchy that privileges verbal texts. Not to mention the campus feminisms that profess to rescue women from victimization by images. I undertake this review in hopes that Jo Anna Isaak's and Rosemary Betterton's interdisciplinary scholarship will persuade readers of the relevance of critical visual practice to the feminist project.

Rosemary Betterton teaches art history at Sheffield Hallam University in England. Jo Anna Isaak, who years ago taught English at Mount Saint Vincent University, now teaches at William and Mary College, New York. Both authors avoid defining feminist artmaking as either simply a matter of artistic intention, or as a fixed set of appearances. Instead they analyze the discursive effects of visual art on the viewer - in this case, themselves. Both support their arguments by citing individual works of art within a specified theoretical context, giving their observations a concreteness and a tendentious urgency that I find engaging. The level of these texts is far from elementary, however; readers with background in cultural criticism, psychoanalytic theory and perhaps art history will find them easiest to read. Both books are extensively illustrated in black and white.

Rather than trace a history of feminist artmaking, each writer has divided her book into thematically discreet chapters. Betterton, for example, treats the problematic of artistic gender and authorship and the representation of maternity and women's sexual desire in the course of seven intensely focused essays. Her anthology marshals its argument through a study of the imagery of women's suffrage, an overview of strategic uses of abjection in art, a journey through women's non-representational painting, and a lucid analysis of the implications of assisted reproductive technologies for a feminist politics of representation. While citing these issues in passing and invoking many of the same theoretical sources (Irigaray, Kristeva, Haraway) Isaak proceeds rather differently. To my mind, this difference between an art historian and a literary scholar reveals the structuring effects of the authors' respective disciplinary orientations.

While ostensibly sharing Betterton's concern with women's reclamation of bodily