

## Book review

***Cinematic Howling: Women's Films, Women's Film Theories.*** Hoi F. Cheu. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007; 206 pages; ISBN978-0-7748-1379-2; \$29.95 (paper).

With *Cinematic Howling*, Hoi Cheu departs from trends in feminist film criticism by developing feminist theories alongside films that are largely written and directed by women. Cheu argues that the lack of examination of films by women creates a form of *feminism without women* that inadvertently maintains women's exile from both film theory and production. Inspired by bell hooks' claim that "[w]e can deconstruct the images in the mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cinema for days and it will not lead to cultural revolution" (as quoted by Cheu, 8) Cheu turns to women's filmmaking, analyzing a wide range of woman-made films via psychoanalysis, philosophy, cultural studies, and feminist theory. In an effort to uncover a theoretical practice of women's filmmaking, Cheu focuses specifically on metafictional films (stories about storytelling), arguing that the multiple and intersecting layers of storytelling, authorship, and aesthetics that characterize women's metafictional films propel alternate voices and realities into being, effectively transforming and reconfiguring the borders between fiction and reality.

Of particular note is Cheu's rhetorical style, which often blends together descriptions of the original novel/script and the film itself, offering parallel and contrasting readings of the story from multiple perspectives. This provides further layering to the processes of storytelling, including how these processes are interrupted, transformed, and expanded in relation to cultural, historical, and social meanings. For example, Cheu opens with a discussion of Disney's *Mulan*, reading the gender subversion of *Mulan's* central female character as a weak Hollywood bastardization of the feminist potential inherent in the age-old myth of "The Ballad of Mulan" on which the film is based.

Chapters two through seven need not be read in sequence, as each provides a stand-alone theorization of a film or collection of films in relation to relevant post-structural theories. These chapters each have a unique flavour, and include among them the function of fairytales in making meaning of gender and identity in Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves*; the processes of collaboration that inevitably occur within filmmaking and the ways in which these collaborations echo throughout Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour*; and the exploration of Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious* alongside complex systems theory. Particularly engaging are chapters four and six, with the former providing a critical examination of Mulvey's legacy in feminist film theory, including how the *gaze* continues to operate from both male and female perspectives in Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions*, and the latter exploring transnational and diasporic filmmaking through Clara Law's *The Goddess of 1967*.

The final two chapters strengthen Cheu's thesis by attending to the material effects of women's filmmaking. Through a discussion of Canadian filmmaker Laura Sky's charitable foundation Skyworks, which is built on the belief that "film production can collaborate with the audience to achieve social transformation" (160), Cheu indicates that the potentialities of a feminist metafictional aesthetic include reframing human experience. Relying on the argument that "critical consciousness is only a beginning, that constructive story making should follow" (164), Cheu takes feminist theory one step further, illustrating the alternate paradigms of gender, sexual, and racial identity that are revealed in women's filmmaking, and the means by which these alternate paradigms constitute realities.

With its documentation of years of women's filmmaking from Canada to Hong Kong and its deft use of the works of Roland Barthes, Helen Cixous, and even novelist Jeanette Winterson, *Cinematic Howling* is a rich and multi-layered text that not only situates women's films within the history of filmmaking, but calls for active engagement with patterns of storytelling, and thus *meaning-making*, that have the potential to transform power relations within and beyond the boundaries of film. This text would be a useful tool for any course on film studies, undergraduate or graduate, and Cheu generously provides a teaching guide through the UBC press site to that effect.

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