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review:

Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Theories of Representation and Difference Series). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, 260pp.

ANNEKE SMELIK

While classical Hollywood cinema has always served as the main point of departure for feminist film theory, attention to women's cinema has on the whole been sparse and scattered. However, things seem to be changing of late. Having reached an apotheosis in the late 1980s in numerous rigorous and insightful readings of yet more Hollywood films, feminist film theory has come of age. The time has surely now come for the theoretical process to advance itself further by tackling contemporary women's cinema in its full range and diversity. Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole* is one of a number of recent books dedicated to this project.[1] Since Mayne also tackles some of the principal dogmas of feminist film theory to have emerged from its almost exclusive attention to Hollywood, her book is a timely intervention in the field of feminist film studies.

Mayne's objective is to examine contemporary women's films which reinvent cinema as a narrative and visual form, placing them within the context of feminism and film theory. The ambiguity of the term 'women's cinema' is carefully retained throughout the book 'to suggest simultaneously the enormous impact of Hollywood's versions of femininity upon our expectations of the cinema, and the representation of other kinds of female desire'. (p. 5) It comes as rather a surprise, then, that large parts of the book focus upon Hollywood films which can in neither sense be regarded as 'women's cinema' – though this has partly to do with the way it is organized. *The Woman at the Keyhole* is composed of three more-or-less

1 See also: Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Two books discuss women's films in specific national contexts: Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti (eds), *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

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autonomous sections, each concentrating on a critical concept negotiating the shift from Hollywood to women's cinema: the screen, female authorship, and 'primitive' narration.

In a move which recalls C.S. Peirce's concept of the ground as a structuring relation between object and representation, the first section displaces the privileged concepts of feminist film theory ('the gaze' and 'the spectacle') by focusing on a different component of the cinematic apparatus: the screen as the ground of both image and gaze. (p. 36) Mayne's notion of the screen may be considered groundbreaking: not only in the ordinary sense of the word, but also in that it shifts the ground, changing established habits within feminist film theory.[2] The screen's ambivalent function – as both passage and obstacle – makes it a privileged figure for 'feminine' narration in women's films, as Mayne shows in her stimulating readings of *Redupers* (Helke Sander, 1977), *Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1983), *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Patricia Rozema, 1987) and *The Man Who Envied Women* (Yvonne Rainer, 1985). The metaphor of the ambiguous screen surface accounts for these films' simultaneous complicity with, and resistance to, dominant film forms.

While the figure of the screen proves most productive in interpreting contemporary women's cinema, Mayne's subsequent argument is disappointing. Although it might be true, as Mayne contends, that women's films push at the limits of theory and criticism, the structure of her book actually detracts from this important point. For by grounding her pivotal and innovative insights in classical Hollywood cinema, then applying these insights to contemporary women's cinema, Mayne in the end fails to deliver on her promise to undo the rigid opposition between Hollywood and alternative cinema. Nor does she make the necessary move back to theory in order to extend its limits further: for example, the notion of the screen as the privileged site/sight of cultural exchange could have been deployed to elaborate the Lacanian theory of the gaze.[3]

Female authorship has long been a neglected category in feminist film criticism, which is partly due to eager recitations of the dangers of essentialism by feminist critics, Mayne, however, does not shy away from these 'essentialist detectors' (p. 90), and courageously tackles the theoretical difficulties associated with the idea of authorship in cinema: 'The notion of female authorship is not simply a useful political strategy; it is crucial to the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators'. (p. 97) It is perhaps no coincidence that the lacuna around authorship leads Mayne to a further structuring absence of feminist film theory: that surrounding lesbianism. She draws attention to the frequently reproduced images of Hollywood director Dorothy Arzner, fully recognizable in her lesbian identity; images which stand in stark contrast to silence surrounding Arzner's

2 For a lucid discussion of Peircean semiotics, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 167–82.

3 Kaja Silverman makes this suggestion in 'Fassbinder and Lacan: a reconsideration of gaze, look, and image', *Camera Obscura*, no. 19 (1989), pp. 54–85.

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lesbianism. Lesbian desire – at once so over(t)ly visible (not only in photographs of Arzner, but even more so in contemporary women's cinema) and yet disavowed – points compellingly to a fetishistic dynamic at work in feminist film theory. Mayne sees Arzner's authorial inscriptions precisely in the problematization of (lesbian) pleasure: in the relations between and among women and in marginal lesbian gestures. Although Arzner's lesbian irony is lost on me, I agree wholeheartedly with Mayne's critique of the homophobia implicit in feminist film theory: its inability to conceive of representation outside heterosexuality and its consequentially restrictive focus on sexual difference.[4] Mayne's innovative approach allows her to recognize the ways in which lesbian subjectivity and desire are represented in terms of conventional fantasies, and yet also as radically different, in films like *Je tu, il, elle* (Chantal Akerman, 1974) and *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, ('Ticket of No Return', Ulrike Ottinger, 1979).

The final section of *The Woman at the Keyhole* addresses another issue which has hitherto received scant attention in feminist film theory: an analysis of early cinema is put to use in an exploration of the relevance of 'primitive' narration for women's cinema.[5] But while a 'primitive' fascination with otherness and with narration may well persist in the films of, say, Germaine Dulac and Maya Deren, extending this conceit to more recent films (*Cléo de 5 à 7* ['Cleo from 5 to 7', Agnes Varda, 1961] and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* [Chantal Akerman, 1974], for example), in which, according to Mayne, 'female narration . . . is a reexamination of the traditionally and stereotypically feminine' (p. 211), does seem a little contrived. If films like *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982) and *A Song of Ceylon* (Laleen Jayamanne, 1985) deconstruct western notions of the 'primitive', does this necessarily imply that these films recycle a 'primitive' cinematic style? It seems to me that the way in which these films represent and question the female body suggests a postmodern mode rather than a redefinition of 'primitive' narration as Mayne would have it.

Mayne's analysis of early cinema is convincing enough in itself; but reading this cinematic mode directly into contemporary women's films does raise the spectre of anachronism. Again, the book's structure proves problematic: to appropriate for the analysis of women's cinema concepts produced in entirely different contexts seems a forced and undialectical move. The pleasing polemical tone of *The Woman at the Keyhole* might have gained in richness had its compelling analyses of women's films fed back into theory. Disappointingly in a book otherwise so refreshing and original, discussion stops short of taking this step.

The screen, lesbian authorship and 'primitive' narration – the three focal points that Mayne singles out in her analyses – reveal the

4 The chapter on Dorothy Arzner has recently been reprinted in Bad Object-Choices (ed.), *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 103–35.

5 Uncanny coincidences? In the same year as *The Woman at the Keyhole* came out, one of Germany's leading feminist film theorists published a book on early German films: Heide Schlüpmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: Das Drama des frühen deutschen Kinos* (Basel/Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990). Schlüpmann extensively researched the aesthetics of a 'cinema of attractions' around 1910: films with a female protagonist showing her point of view, and even female voyeurism. She draws very much the same conclusions as Mayne: in those early days cinema was relatively discontinuous in terms of sexual difference: the possibilities of a female cinema disappeared, however, with the emergence of narrative cinema.

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force of ambivalence in women's cinema. Ambiguity is definitely the favourite trope throughout *The Woman at the Keyhole*. Ambivalent tensions in women's cinema work against patriarchal dualisms and push at the limits of representation. It is in this manner that Judith Mayne's work points towards some overdue changes in the agenda of feminist film theory.

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