

## Compte rendu

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Ouvrage recensé :

*The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s.* By Liz Conor. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xx+334, ISBN 0-253-21670-2)

par Jodi McDavid

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many of us have on Native fisheries, only to spend a few hundred plus pages countering that notion altogether. If this was the author's intention, then he has succeeded.

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**Reference**

Coates, Ken. 2000. *The Marshall Decision and Native Rights*. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press.

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***The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s.***

By Liz Conor. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. Pp. xx+334, ISBN 0-253-21670-2)

This book is a study of women and their interaction with popular culture in 1920s Australia. The book focuses on the woman as a spectacle (hence *The Spectacular Modern Woman*), especially in postwar industrialisation with readily available magazines and newspapers and the increased disposable income for working women that enabled them to buy advertised products. About these images of women, Conor states:

Visual representations of women may construct a range of meanings, imaging them as anything from willing victims of male violence to assertive feminist heroines. However, across this spectrum of meanings there remains one constant: images of women are always producing meanings of women's visibility. Consequently, feminine subjectivity has come to be increasingly performed within the visual register (xv)

Following an introduction and a chapter entitled "The Status of the Woman-Object," Conor arranges the book in two parts: "The Modern Scene" and "Modern Appearing Women," each consisting of three chapters. The former discusses "The City Girl," "The Screen-Struck Girl," and "The Mannequin," while the latter deals with "The Beauty Contestant," "The Primitive Woman," and "The Flapper." This is followed by her conclusion, "Feminine Identity and Visual Culture."

One drawback of the book is that it focuses solely on Australian culture, which is not immediately made clear. At some points this research is backed by sources from elsewhere, and similar findings from

other countries are held up comparatively, but by and large this book draws on images in Australian city newspapers as an interesting merge of popular culture perspectives and feminist theory.

Some aspects of the book are quite unique; Australia has a complicated past in terms of their treatment of indigenous peoples which Conor addresses in her chapter “The Primitive Woman in the Late Colonial Scene.” Although there are historical differences, due to some possible parallels this chapter may hold interest for those studying the Aboriginal people of North America. In the introduction, Conor sets that stage for her approach in her discussion of Australian film actress Lotus Thompson. Thompson went to Hollywood in the hopes of pursuing a film career; however, she had various roles as a “leg model” or body double for other actresses. Apparently frustrated with her career, she poured acid on her legs in order to disfigure them, an event that Conor calls a “poignant and desperate protest against her treatment within these new conditions of women’s public visibility” (1). Conor’s ultimate point, here, is that filmmakers were often creating collages of women from several actresses, and creating unreal expectations for women (and men) viewing these images. Furthermore, women had more participation in the film scene, but their images were reproduced in a very controlled and manipulated way. Although valid points, especially for modern times when filmmakers make use of digitally enhanced images and body doubles, building on this incident is problematic because although it is legendary it may be historically inaccurate (and possibly a publicity stunt).

Conor uses the term “appearing,” which she attributes to feminist philosopher Judith Butler. The crux of the argument here is that there is more at work in these images than simply the objectification of women, that the images changed the perception of women and created a new modern woman. It seems that to say this was the start of the visual objectification of women in the mass media would be true, but folly, because certain women took these images and perceptions and used them for their own purposes and meanings much the same way we do today, creating a bricolage. A parallel example can be seen in Fiske where he discusses Madonna fans reproducing aspects of her style for their own meanings, consumers’ “[active contribution] to the social circulation of their meanings of the primary text” (174).

The author illustrates the changing behaviour of women with naturalistic footage shot in Australia in 1896. The film footage of public

events shows far fewer women in public spaces than that of 1910-1920s, and those that are in these public forums are typically with their male partners. But according to Conor, newspaper accounts and public forums which associate this “new” behaviour with the war are not totally correct. During that time, many women had entered the workforce previous to this as shop girls because of other economic circumstances. In Australia in 1921, women composed 22.4 percent of the workforce. These “New Women” and “Modern Women” had the economic freedom to remain single, and the number of unmarried single women in Australia peaked in 1921 (47). This created a concern among traditionalists about young women’s sexuality when it was not confined to marriage.

In Chapter 5, “The Beauty Contestant in the Photographic Scene” Conor explores the use of photographic portraiture in tabloids and newspapers from Mildura, Sydney and Melbourne. This bathing suit photography was often accompanied by measurements. Using commodified beauty culture (such as creams and corsets), the women attempted to achieve the best possible photographic impression of their “performance” of femininity. Conor examines these women as “Seekers of Publicity” who, much like others who wrote letters to the editor, wanted to participate in the public venue of the newspaper. However, they did so in a venue which was more generally acceptable at the time for people of their age and gender. Interestingly, Australian beauty contestants were of a distinct racial type (the author suggests based on a feminine version of the World War I Australian soldier), and the photographs were often captioned by nationalistic and jingoistic phrases in newspapers.

This book is one of many in a growing field which reassesses advertising and the media in order to determine women’s experiences historically; however, it uses the theoretical construct of “appearing” which differentiates it from other books of its type. One notable thing about the tone of the book is that while it takes an academic and theoretical approach, it is often strangely confessional, especially as the author discusses her own love affair with “visual style” in the 1980s, a trend that did not necessarily reflect her feminist perspectives.

Conor talks about her experience as a feminist academic who enjoyed her femininity and all the trappings of the communication of it to the world via fashion and media, before dwelling on her subsequent feelings of marginalisation from aging but also her role as a mother, and the retirement of her “kittenish apparel”. As folklorists we are

comfortable with the “ethnography of self,” but it seems out of place in this book and, frankly, sad.

For scholars interested in gendered studies, or regional studies, this book would be a good resource. Select chapters may be useful for instruction and class discussion, but the theoretical concept is most probably one not easily grasped by undergraduate students.

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#### Reference

Fiske, John. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

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***Le Diable à la danse***. Par Jean Du Berger (Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, Collection Ethnologie de l'Amérique Française, 2006. Pp. 246, ISBN 2-7637-8377-5)

Parmi les nombreux mémoires de maîtrise et de thèses de doctorat déposés chaque année, certains réussissent heureusement à sortir de l'ombre pour devenir des livres accessibles à un vaste public. C'est le cas de la thèse de Jean Du Berger qui nous parvient enfin sous forme de publication, vingt-six ans après sa rédaction.

Pendant longtemps professeur de littérature québécoise et d'ethnologie à l'Université Laval, Jean Du Berger a beaucoup étudié les contes et les légendes de l'Amérique française et s'est interrogé principalement sur le sens et les fonctions de ces récits. Il nous livre ici le fruit de ses réflexions en nous présentant une version remaniée de sa thèse, qu'il a actualisée en y incluant les récits mettant en scène le Diable et des danseurs, récits transmis au cours des dernières années par les canaux de la tradition ou d'autres modes de diffusion. Le Diable hante encore notre imaginaire, au travers de livres, pièces de théâtre, ballets, émissions de télévision, films, chansons, œuvres d'art et même de sites Internet. L'ouvrage de Jean Duberger est très fouillé et abondamment documenté; de nombreux récits se côtoient traitant des allées et venues de Satan au Québec et ailleurs dans le monde. Jean Du Berger ne s'est en effet pas contenté de rassembler tous les récits recueillis