

Common Language, and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* that she's incapable of producing an undeformed reading of it.

In all this I am of course not arguing that Adrienne Rich can't put a syllable

wrong. I've been trying to give some account of why I find Keyes unconvincing at some of the crucial moments when she finds Rich unconvincing. *The Aesthetics of Power* shows that Claire Keyes likes and profoundly admires a lot

of Rich's poetry, and that she can enter into interesting, useful dialogue with a lot of it. I wish she'd been able to like even more of it and to engage Rich's later work in a more complete, less uneasy conversation.

FILMS FOR WOMEN

Edited by Charlotte Brunsdon. London: BFI Books, British Film Institute, 1986. Distributed in North America by University of Illinois Press.

Kay Armatage

Since the 1979 Feminism and Cinema Event at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, a group of films, both documentary and fiction, has emerged as a canon which has formed the basis of a body of theoretical and critical writings. This excellent and useful book collects together articles which have emerged as illustrative of the central tenets of the developing debate, and which also apply the theoretical precepts to the analysis of specific and fairly accessible film texts.

The films and the critical discussions are informed by a number of related issues, firstly the debate about realism, which was generated predominantly by the group of British feminist film scholars and activists who were the principal organizers of the first women's film festival at Edinburgh in 1972. Although the first article in the book, by Julia Lesage, a prominent American feminist writer, argues for the strength and political importance of consciousness-raising films which unquestioningly accept the conventions of documentary realism, the bulk of the other pieces operate at some level upon an hostility to realism. The way in which cinema works to reproduce dominant ideas is seen primarily at the level of form. Rather than simply the images presented, the 'reality effect' itself is ideologically questioned as working against radical social and political change precisely insofar as films are understood to offer up their representations as 'real.'

Secondly, the discussions are informed by the way in which feminist critics approached and understood mainstream (Hollywood) film production, an approach which hinges both upon notions of misrepresentation of women and the production of pleasure for the masculine spectator. In these arguments, the film form cannot just be used to present positive or alternative represen-

tations because the forms themselves are complicit in producing women as subordinate. Such an analysis demanded that feminists make films which, at minimum, interrogated and refused the established conventions of mainstream cinema. A feminist approach to cinema raised the corollary issues of articulation (how, from where, and to whom to speak) and language. If it is through language that we order our perceptions of the world, and that language is founded upon the repression of the feminine or the construction of the feminine as other, the feminine becomes, in such a theorization, outside or in the margins of language. The traces of the feminine are then found in disruption, the irrational, the avant-garde — the modernist canon represented by and best known through the films of Chantal Akerman, Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter.

Although this anthology traces the above arguments through well-selected exemplary texts by well-known writers like Jane Feuer, B. Ruby Rich, Sylvia Harvey, Pam Cook, Claire Jonson, Annette Kuhn, and Elizabeth Cowie, its stance is more balanced and in some sense 'corrective' to their academic and theoretical concerns, which are in any case well served by Annette Kuhn's 1983 state of the art summary and explication, *Women's Pictures. Films For Women*, while emphasizing the importance of such notions and usefully placing them in a specific historical context, also broadens the focus to include discussions of European art cinema (such as that of Margarethe von Trotta and Marleen Gorris) and traditional women's genres such as melodrama and soap opera in their current Hollywood expression as 'new women's films' (for example, *Julia*, *Mahogany*, *Personal Best*, *Lianna*). In addition, many of the articles, though nominally identified as the text of one writer, were written after collective work on a topic or film, and the results are discussions which combine depth and intricacy with clarity and conciseness.

The final section of the book (after Documentary, Fictions, and Hollywood) addresses the important questions of exhibition and distribution. This last section documents feminist interven-

tions into the distribution and exhibition of films, ranging from feminists picketing against films like *Dressed To Kill* to the formation of distribution companies which specialize in women's films across the range of filmic political expression from art to agit-prop. It is here that we encounter also the practical and material ramifications of theoretical issues such as the relation of women to language and specifically to cinematic language; the history of cinema and women's place in that history; the shifting significance of the 'politics of representation'; and the effect of gender positioning on viewing, identification, and pleasure. How do women watch and enjoy films? How do we account for the specific and varied responses of different groups of women? And how do we watch and produce films which recognize the diversity, heterogeneity and different determinations of cultural experience?

The majority of the articles included in the anthology were first published elsewhere, from 1978-1984. The book thus not only covers a significant period of developing feminist theory, but gathers together significant and illustrative texts from sources which are difficult to find except in specialized library collections. In this alone the book is eminently welcome; I for one have spent countless hours at a xerox machine, delicately pasting up and reducing my tattered old clippings from *The Village Voice* (Ruby Rich's deservedly praised article on *Not A Love Story*) or splitting the spines of my now-out-of-print volumes of *m/f* (Elizabeth Cowie on *Coma*), all the while risking jail or bankruptcy for copyright infringement. The publication of this book means that those days are over, at least for publications up to 1984.

Brunsdon as editor has also commissioned contributions on topics which had not been adequately dealt with in the existing theoretical canon, notably pieces on the popular feminist film *A Question of Silence* and the more problematic *Lianna*. Brunsdon's contributions of concise and telling introductions to each section are both helpful to readers who are new to film

theory, and also wonderfully usable for teachers who would like to structure courses around such texts. As a result, this anthology is not only rich in content, but eminently useful as a practical teaching tool.

Books Received

Ayanna Black, *No Contingencies*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace Publishers, 1986.

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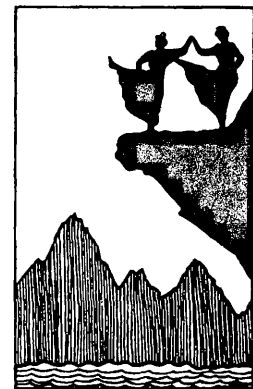
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Leslie Hall Pinter, *Under the House*. Vancouver: Talon Books, 1986.

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