

What If I Had Been The Hero? Investigating Women's Cinema

Sue Thornham 2012

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In Passionate Detachments, her 1997 introduction to feminist film theory, Sue Thornham briefly discusses the early inter-relationship of feminist film theory and practice, noting that although that relationship had been almost completely severed by the 1990s, nevertheless the “histories of women’s activism and feminist film-making.... remain as shadow narratives in this book.” (1997, xiii) With this latest volume she returns to the “shadow narrative” of feminist film-making, to explore how films made by women engage with questions central to feminist film theory:

“questions of subjectivity, of narrative and its relation to gender, of fantasy and desire, of the gendered ordering of space and time, and of regulation and agency.”

(p.1)

Thornham’s focus is on the gendered construction of subjectivity within narrative, and the ways in which female film-makers have worked within, through and against dominant narrative forms to explore female identities and female desire. In the first part of the book, she unpacks the pertinent theoretical questions, looking at how they were debated and articulated in the criticism and film-making of the 1970s. In the second, she explores the ways in which later film-makers have engaged with these same questions.

Chapter 1 rehearses key theoretical issues drawing on a broad range of theorists, but always bringing the focus back to the representational and structural challenges faced by the feminist film-maker. Thornham argues, with Teresa de Lauretis, that the function of dominant, heroic forms of narrative is “to produce the

subject as male.” (p.12) This creates an almost insuperable problem from a theoretical perspective --- particularly a perspective informed by psychoanalysis, where subjectivity is founded on a “loss” constructed as inherently male. In this respect, however, Thornham suggests that feminist film practice may have a recuperative effect, since the films themselves are so often imbued with just such a sense of loss, or ‘melancholia’. This, she suggests is associated with the interchangeable nature of identification and desire for the female subject, which undermines narrative structure and so defies articulation.

She goes on to explore issues of narration, drawing on literary theory to bring to her subject a depth of analysis not always afforded by film theory, and so segues into the much-debated territory of authorship and its relationship to ‘woman’s discourse’. For theorists and film-makers alike, one solution to both the problems of authorship and the difficulties associated with the appropriation of dominant narrative forms was the oppositional practice represented by the avant-garde. Thornham, however, draws out a number of contradictions inherent in this practice, returning to the critical role of narrative in the formation of identity and thus in finding a discourse that speaks to women’s fantasies and desires.

Chapter 2 examines some of the documentaries and short experimental films that dominated the early days of the feminist film movement. Thornham’s approach reflects the intertwined nature of feminist film theory and practice at the time, analysing in detail both the films themselves and critical responses to them, as they address the difficulties of identifying and defining a feminist aesthetic. Many feminist writers at the time were critical of women who were seen to be moving closer to the mainstream with the production of narrative fiction films; Thornham, however is clearly fascinated by fiction film as a form of feminist practice, being

“more ambiguous, more concerned with the setting and scenarios of fantasy and desire, with narrative and myth, with a discourse that presents itself as histoire, with images and identifications” (p.66). In Chapter 3 she reviews four such films made in the 1970s, all controversial in their treatment of fantasy and the romance narrative, and all giving rise to a wealth of feminist criticism which is arguably as central to Thornham’s study as the films themselves.

The second part of the book explores a range of fiction films made between 1990 and 2010, conceptually contextualised in terms of narration, landscapes and sexuality. While the discussion of individual films is always engaging, the way in which they are grouped together seems tenuous at times. Of the four films, for example, which Thornham presents as exploring subjectivity through the “textual figure of the writer” (p. 99), only one actually features a writer-hero; the extension of the term to include any kind of storytelling or creativity arguably stretches the conceit to breaking point. Similarly Deepa Mehta’s Water (2005) does not sit entirely comfortably in a chapter addressing the relationship between landscape, story and the hero. The chapter on sexuality, on the other hand, presents a more coherent whole, challenging the tendency within feminist theory to shift discussion from female desire to female agency and transgression, thus avoiding the treacherous territory of female sexuality.

While Thornham does not set out to present a comprehensive history of women’s film-making, some consideration of the historical and political context for each film would have contributed to the reader’s understanding; as it is, that other ‘shadow narrative’ --- the history of women’s activism --- remains eclipsed. Nevertheless, Thornham’s close readings of individual films are thoroughly absorbing, offering fresh insight into those texts that are familiar to the reader, and

motivating a desire to view those that are not. Above all, she makes a compelling argument for the importance of “continuing to ask the questions which are side stepped when difficult feminist theory is replaced by post feminist celebration,” (p.188) and for the view that it absolutely matters whose desire is represented on screen.

#### REFERENCES

DE LAURETIS, TERESA. 1984. Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan

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