

expression. Through its Anglo-Saxon bias the book misses out entirely on the situation in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, where AIDS education has been much more targeted at heterosexual men and women. It would have been an interesting case study if Wilton had tested out in practice if that has made a difference.

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A LITERARY APPROACH TO CINEMA

Maggie Humm
Feminism and Film

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997, 246 pp., ISBN 0-7486-0900-8

After the highly productive boom in feminist film studies in the 1980s, the stream of essays, articles and full-length books slowed down in the 1990s. This decade saw few(er) books on contemporary women's cinema. This was partly due to a shift to other areas in film research, such as (early) film history, studies of particular film genres, ethnography and especially the switch to cultural studies. Partly this was also due to a highlighted attention in feminist film studies to lesbian and queer theory and black studies. Maggie Humm's book *Feminism and Film* makes the point of such a context by putting the focus fully back on to contemporary (women's) cinema. As such it is a welcome addition to the body of feminist film research.

In what I would describe as a polemical starting point, Humm claims in her introduction that feminist film theory is more or less a closed system 'in the realm of pure difference' (p. 3). It is therefore in dire need, argues Humm, of the novel and richly diverse approaches of women's studies. In her view, feminist film theory is mostly concerned with sexual difference, being primarily based on psychoanalysis. This resulted in a binary opposition and a heterosexist bias. In order to escape its binary conceptualizations and pay attention to multiple differences, the 'more diverse tool bag' of women's studies should be brought to feminist film theory (p. 4). Moreover, Humm states with astonishing self-assurance that feminist film theory has often abandoned feminism. In introducing a range of ideas from areas of feminist thinking and applying these to films, Humm hopes to 'look differently, with different visual pleasures than ... has been possible to date' (p. 36).

These are provocative claims. The questions they give rise to are: Do these provocative claims stand their ground? More importantly, does Humm deliver the novel and fresh approach she promises? Does her approach yield a different, better, understanding of cinema? And, finally, is feminism regained for film theory?

For something to be regained, it has to be ascertained that it got lost in the first place. I, for one, am not so convinced that feminist film studies has ever lost feminism. Most feminist film critics have come to film studies through the women's movement or women's studies. Most of them are still deeply concerned with feminism. Humm's case about the divorce of feminist film theory from feminism rests on the idealization of avant-garde films at the expense of feminist documentaries. This is only partly true: early works by feminist film critics such as Annette Kuhn and Ann Kaplan certainly included chapters on documentary films.

It seems rather the case that cinematic practice has changed: these days women film makers make more feature films, while the documentary form favoured by second wave feminism has dwindled. Nowhere in her book does Humm address these historical changes in feminist film practice. I agree, however, that feminist film studies has dedicated relatively little attention to mainstream cinema made by women. Therefore, the chapters on the films of Marleen Gorris and on recent films such as *Daughters of the Dust* and *Orlando* are necessary reading for anybody with an interest in feminist film making.

Humm's main argument for film theory's abandonment of feminism is the occlusion of much of contemporary feminist theory. According to the author, perspectives from second wave feminism, literary criticism, reproductive theory, postmodernism, black feminism and feminist practice would greatly enhance the field of feminist film theory. Although I fully agree with this statement, it should be emphasized that these perspectives are in no way extrinsic to feminist film theory. On the contrary, one of the main reasons why I am intellectually attracted to feminist film studies is its broad, even eclectic, use of theories. Being a relatively new field, film studies has been more open to new and radical theories than other more established academic disciplines. It is historically false to equate feminist film theory with psychoanalysis; it was equally informed by Marxism, semiotics and poststructuralism. Indeed, one could say that from the late 1980s feminist film studies has been mostly informed by postmodernism, as witnessed in the work of Creed, Kaplan, Modleski and Penley.

This is not to deny that psychoanalysis has been by far the most influential discourse in feminist film theory. However, this historical fact and its theoretical implications have been acknowledged and addressed within feminist film studies from very early on, starting with Laura Mulvey herself. The shift to film history, ethnography and cultural studies, which I have already mentioned, was inspired precisely by a desire to break out of the dominance of psychoanalysis. Moreover, lesbian (de Lauretis, Stacey) and black critics (hooks, Young, Wallace) have opened up the binary concept of sexual difference. In her clear and informative chapter on feminist film theory, Humm competently acknowledges these developments in feminist film theory, but in doing so she contradicts her claim as to the novelty of her own approach to film theory.

I think it worthy of notice – and praise – that Humm's disciplinary background is literature and not film theory. Maybe that explains some of the refreshing boldness of her statements. Although her provocative attitude shows a remarkable independence from feminist film studies as a disciplinary field, this autonomy may also take its toll elsewhere. The main asset of *Feminism and Film* lies in its accessibility. Whereas many feminist film texts are marked by a high degree of sophisticated and often inaccessible theory, Humm's book is refreshingly free of jargon. She pays full attention to the films she discusses, placing them in their historical and cultural context.

In a chapter on pornography, Humm takes a look at the way in which *Klute* (Alan Pakula, 1971) and *Variety* (Betty Gordon, 1983) respectively repress and free female sexuality. In keeping with her quarrel with overspecialized feminist film theory, Humm claims a new approach by regarding not only the film's visual code, but also its verbal one. In her analysis, Humm makes her point by reiterating feminist arguments on pornography. Thus, she shows that female sexuality is repressed on both the visual and the verbal level in films like *Klute*, whose misogyny gets deconstructed in feminist films like *Variety*. Although Humm's film analysis is perfectly readable and acceptable, it does not live up to her claim of offering a novel reading.

A more interesting argument, in my opinion, is found in the chapter on David Cronenberg's films. Humm focuses on the materiality of the body, especially on the hysterical symptoms resulting in destabilizing gender and abjecting the maternal body. Cronenberg's films have often been read through Kristeva's notion of the abject. Humm suggests reading his films through the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein. Her reading is illuminating in that it shows that a film like *Dead Ringers* is a 'hugely accurate depiction of male infantile anxieties and desires' (p. 89). The male characters are caught up in a complex mixture of envy and fear of and desire for the maternal body.

Humm is at her best when she remains close to her own discipline of literary criticism. In a powerful chapter on the first mainstream African-American feature film made by a woman, *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), for instance, Humm places the film in the context of black women's literature. She carefully traces many characteristics of black women's novels which she also recognizes in the film, such as the celebration of motherhood and intergenerational relations, African rituals and heritage, and women's spirituality. Humm compares how black women writers construct multiple voices and histories, and thus privilege communities above individuals, to the way in which *Daughters of the Dust* breaks with the conventions of mainstream cinema. It does so in its sustained attention to communal space, rather than a use of individual close-up.

The comparison of Woolf's novel *Orlando* with Potter's film *Orlando* is an equally successful chapter. Humm's account of postmodernism and its potential use and dangers for feminism I find both accurate and compelling.

Feminism and Film is a good, informative and accessible book for students of women's studies with an interest in cinema. In this respect, Humm has fulfilled the purpose of her book. However, her repeated claim of the novelty of her approach reads as a systematically sustained attack on feminist film theory. This provocative criticism may not always resonate with the feminist student of film studies. Without this implicit polemics the book would have been even more of a pleasure to read, but without it, it would not be so necessary, or stimulating.

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FOR AWHILE, 'EVEN A GAASHA [FOREIGN NON-BELIEVER] IS A GABAN GUDBAN [CLOSED, VIRGIN]...'

Charlotte Beck-Karrer
Löwinnen sind sie. Gespräche mit somalischen Frauen und Männern über Frauenbeschneidung. (Lion Women. Conversations with Somalian Women and Men about Female Circumcision)
Bern: eFeF Verlag, 1996, 154 pp., ISBN 3-905561-03-4

'Hello? Is this eFeF Verlag [Verein Feministische Wissenschaft/Feminist Studies Union Publishers] in Bern? Tobe Levin in Frankfurt ... Fine thanks, and you? ... Listen, I'm several chapters into Beck-Karrer's *Löwinnen sind sie* and find it so important for FGM activists that I wanted to know right away – have you made arrangements for translation?' I envisioned a vigorous shake of the head on the other end. 'No. In fact, no one else has even enquired.' 'What a pity', I said, replacing the receiver. Next, an email. 'Dear Paola, please find room in an issue of *EJWS* for an extraordinary book. You know I've been involved with the issue of