

**Murray Pomerance. *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls. Gender in film at the end of the twentieth century* (SUNY Press: New York, 2001).**

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1 With the ever increasing interest in cultural (re)presentations of gender, the body and sexuality, *Ladies & Gentlemen* should find a warm reception and wide readership. The most remarkable aspect of this collection of essays is the enormous variety of geographical, theoretical and personal prisms through which films, film genres, filmmakers and actors/actresses are discussed, as well as the different formal and social concerns of analysis which the chapters cover. Though there is no way of doing each of the chapters justice, the following outline will hopefully delineate the complexity of concerns addressed.

2 In his introduction, editor Murray Pomerance points to the complex nature of cultural (re)presentations of, and our relation to, our performed and embodied gender:

As a symbolizing attribute, reformulated through staging, gender constitutes one of our many ways of dividing the world and then classifying and ordering the divisions [...]. As a mask, or public face- how many genders are there, and what suffices as a presentation of any one of them? [...] If a film can show us a gendered individual whom we can recognize, and if it can show how social forces conspire to shape and constrain classes according to classifications of gender, it can also narrate a circumstance we apprehend and experience as gendered viewers. (p.4, 5, 10)

Grounded in different personal viewing experiences, it is not surprising, then, that each of the 18 chapters of this book recognise and concern themselves with different aspects of cinematic representations of gender. The intermingling of personal and theoretical approaches towards viewing not only seems inevitable, but necessary for a better understanding of the "shaped and the expressed [...] the 'performative' and embodied" (p.3) characteristics of gendered "identity".

3 *Ladies & Gentlemen* is subdivided into three parts, of which the first investigates *Screened Gender beyond the Hollywood Hills*. It starts off with "No Safe Place: Gender and Space in Polanski's Recent Films", an essay on films directed by the Polish director "whose films have always been charged with violence emanating from and oriented around sex and sexuality" (p.19). But instead of perpetuating "the public perception of him as a manipulative misogynist" (p.19), Steve Woodward argues that, due to the immense popular media interest in Roman Polanski's personal life, its "scandals" and "misereries", too little attention has been paid to the actual politics and themes of his films. Woodward convincingly examines the recurring aesthetic and artistic patterns with which Polanski tells stories of abuse, revenge,

isolation, "the politics of power enacted in all sexual relationships" (p.35).

4 In the next chapter, "Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietemad's Films", Hamid Naficy illuminates the conflicting paradigms of the "populist cinema [which] affirms the postrevolutionary Islamic values more fully at the level of plot, theme, characterization, mise-en-scène, and portrayal of women" and the "quality cinema [which] engages with those values and tends to critique current social conditions" (p.38) that progressively shape Iranian cinema. By charting the development discernible in the career of Rakhshan Banietemad, which he sees as exemplary, he argues that "despite the continued oppression of women and Draconian censorship, the constraints on women's representation lessened, and filmmakers with each film pushed the boundaries of what was allowed" (p.51) in one of the most productive film industries in the world.

5 "Boy-Girls: Gender, Body, and Popular Culture in Hong Kong Action Movies", Lenuta Giukin's contribution, "concentrates on the use and implications of gender defining techniques in Hong Kong martial arts movies, where gender boundaries and narrative conventions are more flexible than in Hollywood action movies" (p.56). By looking at several examples of Hong Kong action movies, she links the unconventional hybridity of their heroines to the hybridity of Hong Kong culture as a whole:

[while] in Chinese cinema the authoritarian centralized regime forbids the presence in art of any ambiguous sexuality, Hong Kong had the freedom under the English rule to come in contact through mass media with popular debate(s) on gender issues (p. 68).

The diverse and sometimes contradictory gender portrayals in Hong Kong cinema therefore play with and mirror the subject's confused feeling of sexual identity "where convention and transgression are written on the body" (p. 69).

6 In "The Gender of GeneraAsian X in Clara Law's Migration Trilogy", Gina Marchetti also refers to the concept of "hybridity of transnational culture [which] has enabled the dismantling of stable categories and has created the potential for the reformulation of increasingly fluid notions of race and gender" (p. 71). However, with regard to the female protagonists of Law's Migration Trilogy, Marchetti argues that her films become morality tales, because they "cling to conservative closures for their narrative conundrums. Women's sexuality in particular poses the most salient threat and is the element most harshly reined in as each film works through to its conclusion" (p. 85). The fragmentation of the subject, the breakdown of fixed notions of racial, national and sexual identities in this case does not stimulate a way of creative reformulation, but rather seems to be answered with the cinematic portrayals of "the reconfigured presence of the liberated woman as the wanton vixen in need

of a clear lesson" (p. 5).

7 Part II of *Ladies & Gentlemen*, entitled *Genders and Doings* begins with a chapter on "Eating and Drinking, Men and Women". Rebecca Bell-Metereau scans the ways in which "the two most fundamental and life-affirming pleasures - eating and sex" (p. 91) are highlighted and linked in various films, and what this reveals about the power relations of traditional gender roles. "Aside from the sex act, few human activities carry as much gendered psychological baggage as that of eating" (p. 92). Metereau holds that notions of body functions, of consumption and union, of "the oral and sexual roots of the psyche" (p. 93), associated both with eating and sex, are loaded with feelings of pleasure and guilt. Eating, as something too easily taken for granted, has most often been naturalized as self-evident. But:

Fear of death and the yearning for an undifferentiated connection with another human being find expression in images of eating and sex. [...] Films about food are about anything but food. They allow audiences to displace anxieties about sex and death onto images of consumption (p.106-107).

8 In the following chapter "Boys Will Be Boys: David Cronenberg's Crash Course in Heavy Mettle", Murray Forman questions the critically challenging impact ascribed to Cronenberg's acclaimed film *Crash*. While seen by many critics as an attack on America's obsession with car culture and the associated discourses of masculinity, virility, and power, Forman, by focussing on its conceptualization and portrayal of masculinity, persuasively explains by example that, "rather than dislodging dominant forms and concepts of sex, sexuality and gender, Cronenberg has instead kept them in circulation, revitalizing standard practices (p. 125)."

9 The next essay, "The Wabbit We-negotiates: Looney Tunes in a Conglomerate Age", directs attention to gender portrayals in cartoons which, according to Kevin S. Sandler often feature

momentary and vicarious transgression(s) of gender boundaries. However, by film's end, any suggestion of sexual or gender indeterminacy is eventually negated, stopped and corrected through the reconstitution of gender difference and heterosexual preference. [...] The masquerade in these cartoons does not challenge gender constructions. It continually reifies gender and sexual difference by ridiculing femininity and labelling the feminized male as absurd. (p.131)

Sandler's investigation, especially of the marketing strategies of Disney and Warner Bros., compellingly reveals the dominant ideology at work behind gender inscriptions in cartoon characters.

10 As the title of the subsequent chapter, "Real Men Don't Sing and Dance: Growing Up

Male with the Hollywood Musical - A Memoir", suggests, its main emphasis is on Garth Jowett's personal experience of how the musical genre initiated and shaped his identification with white, heterosexual masculinity as performed on the screen. Though his declaration of love for Hollywood musicals and their specific importance of presenting a 'different' kind of 'maleness' is certainly widening the gender debate, his occasional ridicule and resentment of recent feminist and queer film and body/gender theory will presumably jar with many readers.

11 Gaylin Studlar's essay, "Cruise-ing into the Millennium: Performative Masculinity, Stardom, and the All-American Boy's Body", explores the phenomenon of Tom Cruise's enduring high profile as both an actor, tabloid regular and American icon. She persuasively explores Cruise's ambiguous cinematic and media performance of (sexual) agency and objectification, which grants him sex symbol status while keeping both straight and queer readings possible. Given the latest tabloid news, one can be sure that Tom Cruise would not enjoy reading this chapter.

12 In "Strange Days: Gender and Ideology in New Genre Films", Barry Keith Grant looks at the challenging and reformulating aesthetics of the so-called new genre films. He argues that Hollywood movies "have come to an ideological crossroads, increasingly pressured to address, if not redress, the regressive implications of conventional representations of gender and race" (p. 185). The growing awareness of gender and racial issues and the commercial success of *Thelma & Louise* (1991) initiated a wide reaching revision in what Grant terms postclassical Hollywood, of genre films such as western, science fiction, thriller and road movies, which before tended to portray masculinity and femininity in fixed and traditional, hetero-normative terms.

13 The seven essays in the third part of the book, *Paragons and Pariahs*, again illustrate the apparently contradictory or indecisive state of gender representations in recent (American) cinema, where the depictions of socially marginalized individuals obtain increasing interest as both instances of subversion and correction, embracing difference as attractive. But, by presenting them as different, they often leave traditional and popular assumptions on gender and sexuality unchallenged.

14 Frances Gateward's discussion of images of women riding motorcycles in "She-Devils on Wheels" extends and accentuates Barry Keith Grant's chapter on New Genre Films. Gateward postulates that "(i)n the case of female biker films, the appropriation of formula allows women to challenge gender roles by reclaiming the popular genre of action adventure" (p. 215). As movies which disrupt the ongoing association of cars and motorcycles with masculinity and virility, a point that is already suggested in Murray Forman's study of David

Cronenberg's film *Crash*, they deserve more public attention. But, by referring mainly to independent films, this chapter also accurately contrasts their marginalized status with mainstream Hollywood's presentation of female biker chic as fetishized and objectified.

15 John Sakeri's look at Hollywood's latest portrayals of homosexuality also contrasts art house or fringe productions with mainstream offerings such as *In & Out*. As the subtitle of this chapter, "Howard's First Kiss: Sissies and Gender Police in the New Old Hollywood" suggests, big American productions still maintain the notion of homosexuality as a confusion of gender and sex. Because queerness would otherwise pose a serious threat to any conception of sex and gender as a binary system, it has to be constantly presented as outside the norm, different, manifesting another dichotomy of hetero- versus homosexuality, with hetero-normativity remaining uncontested at the end of each film. So, although films such as *In & Out* do try to create sympathy for their homosexual characters, a triumph of some sorts, they do not seriously defy the power balance and the heterosexual matrix.

16 In the following chapter "Hipsters and Nerds: Black Jazz Artists and Their White Shadows", Krin Gabbard explores the equally socially marginalized figure of the white, male (jazz) record collector. What at first seems like a personal self-explanation and defence (Gabbard ends his essay with the words: "If I am wrong about all this, I still have my record collection" p. 246) gains more and more argumentative value, as he dismantles how "American masculinity is built upon the great contradiction that it is performative at the same time that, at least for familiar middle-class white versions, it must not present itself as performance" (p. 235). The high profiled displays of action film heroes such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sean Connery and Harrison Ford, account for the simplification of popular images of 'typical' masculine identity as white, spectacular, testosteronistic (should we add aged?) which suppresses 'different' identificatory possibilities.

17 The film *Thelma & Louise* gets mentioned throughout this collection of essays as a ground breaking reconfiguration of gender portrayal in mainstream cinema, and "Let's keep Going: On the Road with Thelma and Louise" dedicates one specific chapter to this movie which, according to Janice R. Welsch, mirrors the women's movement by

redefining and sampling an array of ways to be in the world, pressing men to adjust and rethink their positions as well. *Thelma & Louise* suggests how difficult this process is, given the patriarchal restraints still in place. (p. 263)

Welsch brilliantly examines her own as well as the public's vivid and often ambiguous reception of the film's revisionary daring characterisation techniques, its plot, ending and the ongoing heated debate about the feminist and/or moral value of the film.

18 The figure of the male Jew is the focus of David Desser's study, entitled: "Jews in Space: 'The Ordeal of Masculinity' in Contemporary Film and Television". Again, the mutual process of 'different' male self- and re-presentation and conceptualisation is scrutinised. Looking at influential writers, directors, actors and various portrayals of Jewish males in the culture industry, Desser argues that "associations with bookishness, education, the arts, entertainment, and the like have been historically more associated with racialism, and anti semitism than with desirability and sex appeal" (p. 278). Desser traces the subsequent ambiguity of both embracing and struggling with this image in cultural representations.

19 In the next chapter "Gender and Other Transcendences: William Blake as Johnny Depp", Michael DeAngelis examines and links 'difference' from yet another angle, namely the seemingly opposing racial and gender attributes comprised and epitomised in the poet's body of work and the actor's persona. What becomes obvious is the attractiveness of the outsider figure as an embodiment of liberation from society's constraints of identification and classification.

20 The last chapter of this book, "Marion Cranes Dies Twice", reveals the evolution of "screened gender" in Hollywood by looking at the original (1960) and the remake (1998) of one of the most popular films ever, namely *Psycho*. Murray Pomerance compellingly argues that "(d)ying a second time, Marion Crane is not a protagonist packaged in guilt or gender, but only and pathetically a passer-by in the wrong place at the wrong time. [...] (G)ender and brutality are mundane facts of late twentieth-century life, not moral mysteries" (p. 314). With so many articles on Gus Van Sant's remake as being a superfluous undertaking for either equalling or disgracing Hitchcock's classic, Pomerance's forceful analysis illustrates how, when viewed through a "gender prism", their 'difference' becomes undeniably evident and significant.

21 While the book's subdivision into three parts at times appears arbitrary and forced, this collection of essays accounts for the complexity of possible gender readings and their importance in structuring our world. The eighteen chapters also point to our diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations, hopes and fears of how and why 'we' believe our 'identity' is represented. With the stunning variety of concerns addressed, this book is highly recommended to everyone interested in questions of gender.