Theory

Looking On

Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media


Rosemary Betterton’s anthology contains a rich collection of essays on the construction of feminine images in advertising, fine arts, photography, and pornography. Compiled from a wide variety of mostly British publications, this collection probes what it means for women and feminists to “look on” at often contradictory images of femininity and feminine sexuality in both high and low culture. Though it contains no articles on film, the focus on how women participate in a male-dominated voyeuristic “culture of looking” will be of special interest to feminist film scholars.

Most of the contributions are situated within Marxist, structuralist or psychoanalytic perspectives. But they have been chosen for their practical, accessible analyses of specific visual media and are thus ideal for undergraduate courses in visual media. A first section offers a range of methods and approaches applied primarily to advertising images. It includes some of the ground-breaking essays in this field: Griselda Pollock’s important 1977 essay from Screen Education, Judith Williamson’s 1978 “Decoding Advertisements” and Kathy Myers’s 1982 “Fashion ‘n’ Passion.” These classic essays are counterbalanced in subsequent sections by more recent essays complicating and contextualizing representations of women with issues of class, race, and a wider range of media. A section on pornography includes a range of “positions” on the topic, from an interview with Andrea Dworkin (anti-pornography) to a remarkably concise gem of an article by Mandy Merk (anti-censorship) to Kathy Myers’s argument that pornography cannot be defined independent of its conditions of production and consumption. A final section on “new images” by women artists contains fine essays by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Rosemary Betterton, and Lisa Tickner.

LINDA WILLIAMS

Making Meaning

Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema

By David Bordwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. $29.50

It’s hard to avoid superlatives when talking about David Bordwell’s work. Let me simply say that here is a book which, for lucidity, breadth, erudition, and rigor, only he could have written. It addresses and analyzes interpretative practice in a way that only the most self-absorbed critic can ignore, and then only at his own risk. In 274 pages, Bordwell unpacks the underlying assumptions of what passes for the successful (i.e., publishable) interpretation of films. He does so out of solid and vast knowledge, not only of the literature that he targets—cinematic exegesis—but of thousands of pages in areas that the rest of us only hear about, but never find time to read. (As I. A. Richards once asked about René Wellek, “How can anyone have read so much?”) As in his previous work, Bordwell’s reading has filtered through a shrewd and sensible judgment. Yet his views are couched in language of almost sweet reasonableness; he takes critics on their own terms, gives them the benefit of the doubt, even when they seem to be saying pretty silly things. He seems constitutionally incapable of the cheap shot, despite the inviting postures of all those sitting ducks. Only in the last chapter does he make some general recommendations about changing the current state of affairs, and then he does so modestly and in the broadest terms, avoiding the ad personam, and generously including himself among those who could profit from a redirection of critical efforts.

Bordwell’s focus is Academic Film Interpretation (he calls it “Interpretation, Inc.”; dare I call it AFI?) He sees the emperor, without his clothes, as nothing but “institutionally sanctioned problem-solving.” He deflates—beyond counterargument, to my mind—the widespread and complacent assumption that correct AFI derives immaculately and solidly from currently fashionable film theory. As a matter of fact, he argues, AFI neither tests, deductively derives from, illustrates, nor offers fruitful insights into theories. Interpreters exercise