three acts: “Money” (a cardsharp sets her sights on a wealthy herpetologist, only to fall in love with him); “Revenge” (the herpetologist, learning of her past, rejects her; to win him back, the cardsharp masquerades as a titled Brit, tormenting him on their honeymoon with a catalog of ex-lovers and prompting him to seek a divorce); and “Reconciliation” (the cardsharp drops the pose, reverting to her old self and thus reclaiming the herpetologist, now more tolerant of a woman with a checkered past). If that isn’t Aristotelian construction, what is? One should remember that Mamet began in the theater, where he learned the art of plotting. Even in his screenplays, he follows the classic situation-complication-resolution model; his adaptation of Terence Rattigan’s play, The Winslow Boy (1999), which he also directed, follows the same narrative path: situation (a false accusation), complication (mixed public reaction), resolution (vindication). Mamet’s other screenplays reveal the same kind of careful construction.

Mamet can be exasperating. His rants against Hollywood have become the equivalent of a leitmotif. He is still careless about details. In On Directing Film, he admits he cannot recall who has the band strike up the Marseillaise in Casablanca (1942) and drown out the German anthem. It is amazing that Mamet did not know that the character was Victor Laszlo, played by Paul Henreid, billed third after Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. What matters to Mamet is that the band played by Paul Henreid, billed third after Humphrey Bogart Mamet did not know that the character was Victor Laszlo, the herpetologist, now more tolerant of a woman with a checkered past). If that isn’t Aristotelian construction, what is? One should remember that Mamet began in the theater, where he learned the art of plotting. Even in his screenplays, he follows the classic situation-complication-resolution model; his adaptation of Terence Rattigan’s play, The Winslow Boy (1999), which he also directed, follows the same narrative path: situation (a false accusation), complication (mixed public reaction), resolution (vindication). Mamet’s other screenplays reveal the same kind of careful construction.

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BERNARD F. DICK is the author of a biography of Claudette Colbert, She Walked in Beauty (University Press of Mississippi, 2008).


MARTIN FRADLEY

Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema by Elisabeth Bronfen


Though they differ methodologically, these two books share a skeptical attitude to American ideals of family and domesticity. Elisabeth Bronfen’s psychoanalytically oriented Home in Hollywood contains close readings of a small but diverse range of films, from classics such as The Wizard of Oz (1939) and Rebecca (1940) through to Batman Returns (1992). The “home” of her title here refers less to a literal domestic sphere than to a whole national psychosocial realm of conflicted identities. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in a characteristically flamboyant endorsement, Home in Hollywood offers “the proper answer to the nationalist discourse of blood/and/soil!” The compensatory functions of Hollywood’s mass-produced fantasies are at the epicenter of Bronfen’s treatise: she argues that communal longings are continually underwritten in American popular cinema by “a knowledge of the uncanniness of existence [which] haunts all attempts at devising protective fictions that will allow us make sense of the contradictions and contingencies of our reality” (21). Bronfen finds in her case studies a reminder of the fundamental cultural and psychological impossibility of finding a home, and in turn she muses at length over the manner in which The Wizard of Oz articulates the prohibitive imperatives of the dominant culture: “Dorothy recognizes, for us all, that if we want to fulfill our desires, we must not look beyond our own backyard . . . We must instead deny the feeling of dissatisfaction that causes us to desire, that spurs us to go in search of desire” (69).

In thus dissecting the ideal of home as “a symbolic fiction that makes one’s real living conditions bearable” (73), Bronfen historicizes her analysis by turning to The Wizard of Oz’s representation of key national mythologies of the post-war United States and the film’s domestic rehabilitation on television in the 1940s and 50s. The totemic status The Wizard of Oz subsequently acquired was, according to Bronfen, precisely a palliative for collective unhappiness. The film became a
Yet the audience was also necessarily presented with the fiction of that selfsame belief. In a devastated post-war world characterized by the trauma of cultural displacement and mass global migration, for many of the populace there really was no place like home to return to. The historical context arguably justifies Bronfen’s psychoanalytic insistence on “the unremitting discontent that inhabits all human existence” (77), but at times the approach seems heavy-handed. It does not take much to get Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), with all its mirror imagery and fractured personalities, to yield to a psychoanalytic reading. And the same can be said of Bronfen’s argument that Fritz Lang’s *Secret Behind the Door* (1948) should be interpreted as a “cinematic homage to Freud’s speculations on the death drive” (166).

At certain junctures, however, *Home in Hollywood* is very persuasive. The reading of *Rebecca* draws intriguing parallels between the melancholy of Hitchcock’s dislocated heroine and the director’s own self-imposed exile. Elsewhere, a sensitive and intelligent analysis of *Batman Returns* offers compelling returns to the reader in both its penetrating analysis of the film’s proto-feminism and its mournful illustration of Bronfen’s overarching thesis: that unhappiness, dislocation, and alienation are the sacrifices we all make for the sake of social belonging. For Bronfen, then, *Batman Returns* exposes the painful compromises demanded by society’s ideological imperatives. It is in the compensatory “virtual home of cinema” (29) that we may find a refuge to which we compulsively retreat in order to inhabit the gratifying illusions of Hollywood’s dreamscape.

Judith E. Smith’s *Visions of Belonging* interrogates shifting conceptions of American citizenship in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. Emphasizing the manner in which national unity was continually figured in terms of family unity, Smith concludes her book with a prolonged discussion of Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 Broadway hit *Raisin in the Sun*. Arguing that this play—the first ever on Broadway written by an African American woman and the first for fifty years to be directed by an African American—directly challenged “the white boundaries of everyman universality” (281), Smith compellingly claims that *Raisin* “dramatized African-American citizens as integral to the fabric of American life, their inclusion requisite to fulfilling the promise of postwar American democracy,” the play simultaneously celebrating “the rich history of black resistance and the momentum of worldwide anticolonialism as contributing to the transformation of American life” (314–15). Yet *Visions of Belonging* is keenly alert to the dramatic and radically shifting political context of the period: despite Hansberry’s impeccable liberal credentials, by the time of *Raisin*’s adaptation by Hollywood in 1961 critics on the radical Left would contemptuously dismiss her interracial cosmopolitanism as mere “glorified soap opera” (326).

*Visions of Belonging* traces the uneasy and contested terrain of American national identity in the post-war period immediately prior to the birth of identity politics, and there is certainly a tangible sense of post-nationalist nostalgia underpinning the volume. Having carefully analyzed how diverse was the cultural and critical reception of progressive works, Smith’s concluding sentences strike a distinctly poignant note. The political landscape which her book covers, she argues, “reminds us of deep yearnings for cosmopolitan crossings, social kinship, and political interracial solidarity that must animate any hopes to realize the unfulfilled promise of meaningful social transformation and democratic inclusion” (327). Indeed, *Visions of Belonging*’s analysis of the popular-culture terrain during World War II and the early cold war years itself critically engages with the comfortably nostalgic templates for “an expanded postwar citizenship and realigned heterosexual partnerships” (3). As Smith suggests, however, using the family as a universal metaphor for nation inevitably marginalized people who deviated from the norm. Thus, the progressive initiative to envision a multiracial democratic citizenship was perpetually entangled with the political conservatism of the era: the critique of race relations in Lillian Smith’s interracial romance *Strange Fruit* (1944) was countered by the success of Cid Ricketts Sumner’s pro-segregationist *Quality* (1946); the film adaptation of Arthur Miller’s 1947 play *All My Sons* found its politics muted by an industry fearful of HUAC’s investigative gaze; and Elia Kazan’s adaptation of *Pinky* in 1949—“the year,” according to a breathless *Variety*, “of the negro problem pic”—attracted criticism on the Left for its “elisions and evasions” (197), but nevertheless prompted calls for censorship in enraged Southern states. Highly readable and sensitively written, *Visions of Belonging* demonstrates both the ambitions and the limitations of post-war liberalism; like *Home in Hollywood*, it is infused with a symptomatic combination of hopefulness and melancholy in its consideration of collective longings for optimistically imagined communities.