

Reviews

Dames in the Driver's Seat: rereading film noir

JANS B. WAGER, 2005

Texas, University of Texas Press

202 pp., 0 292 70694 4, hb £38.00/\$50.00; 0 292 70966 8, pb \$21.95

The title of *Dames in the Driver's Seat* suggests an approach to film noir whereby the roles of the white, male writers, producers and directors are usurped by an examination of women's empowerment through noir narratives. However, this is not the case. The text, positioned to appeal to 'general readers', in fact attempts new readings of classic film noir and contemporary films with a noir flavour. Further, it endeavours to transform film noir not just by examining gender perspectives but also by investigating class and race. The book does not entirely succeed in fulfilling both these aspirations, I feel, but it usefully outlines and furthers the typologies of film noir. The author classifies her films into *Classic Film Noir*, *Retronoir* (films set in the noir past but not made in the key noir period) and *Neo-noir* (films emulating *Classic Noir* style in some way but set in the present).

The introductory chapters chart the theoretical basis for the arguments, which the author then goes on to apply more closely to readings of *Classic Noir* and contemporary versions of it. *Retronoir* is referred to as reactionary and nostalgic for the filmic past of *Classic Noir*, denying social change and with outdated notions of gender, sexuality and race relations. Wager states that it reasserts the supremacist, white patriarchy of the male writers, producers and directors of film and she directs our attention to the lack of 'socially relevant femininity' of these texts (p. 10). *Neo-noir* on the other hand, Wager argues, gives revisionary representations of women where issues of race and sexuality are barely touched upon. With regards to the latter she asserts that these films are generally homophobic or 'homo-unsympathetic'.

Wager submits that the appeal of film noir generally is embedded in its links to ideological subversion (p. 3) and that the resistance of the femme fatale is nearly always fatal (p. 4). Her film readings reinforce this position and I counted very few women in this book who came anywhere near the driving seat. For this reason and because the author attempts to broaden her readings to include considerations of class, sexuality and race, the title of the book is inappropriate and may mislead her readers. Also, the following remark does not accord with the book's title: 'The focus here is not just on the oppression and resistance of women under the patriarchy, but also the ways that the capitalist patriarchy – even the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy – determines film form' (p. 6).

The author's literature review and mapping of other key theoretical texts in the field in the early part of the book define her approach but we are a good way into the text before these frameworks are applied and the work develops an identity of its own (albeit one not suggested by the book's title). There is value and interest in her

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descriptions of the femme fatale (who entices someone into crime and resists domesticity, resulting in her eventual demise) and the femme attrapée (the positive female character whose survival depends on either her acquiescence to domestic security or her transformation from femme fatale into a willingly confined domestic). Wager further carries these classifications forward to the homme fatal (who wants big money, seeks the dangerous dame, resists society and resents those who yield to capitalist patriarchy) and the homme attrapé (who accepts capitalist patriarchy and who reigns supreme domestically). Wager asserts that working class whites must be read relative to how other races and classes appear in film. She adds that *Classic Noir* offers a partial glimpse of black culture through the white male's association with it as a signifier of his 'hipness', which serves to enhance his white masculinity (the black world representing a socially liberal sophistication which is otherwise not seen). She draws our attention to the porters, musicians, shoeshine boys, janitors and maids of *Classic Noir* and the unusual appearance of two middle-class black extras in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), which suggested a comfortable off-screen black culture that did not in fact exist.

In her reading of *LA Confidential* (1997) Wager asserts that, as with *Casablanca* (1942), it is the lack of agency of the female character that saves her from the fate of the femme fatale. Wager places *Fight Club* (1999) firmly under the heading of *Retronoir* masquerading as *Neo-noir* in which the woman's only agency in the film is guilelessly to elicit the split in the personality of the male protagonist. Wager's readings of *Fargo* (1996) and *Jackie Brown* (1997) are by far the most engaging and because you should read them for yourself I will make no further comment.

In her concluding comments Wager brings our attention to fears concerning the passivity of the spectator of film and the need to guide progressive audiences towards more active questioning of the patriarchy, homophobia and misogyny represented by the late 1990s noir-style texts. *Neo-noir* is remarked upon as appropriating *Classic Noir* themes while allowing new views on gender and class (but not race) to permeate: '[I]n representing gender and class, neo-noir celebrates women, revolts against tradition, and at least partially unmoors the patriarchy' (p. 158). Perhaps the most important feature of the book is the author's selection of films for *Neo-noir* reading, which produces 'intense narrative and visual pleasure that [has] nothing to do with the sexual objectification of women' (p. 158).

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American Sweethearts: teenage girls in twentieth-century popular culture

ILANA NASH, 2006

Bloomington, Indiana University

264 pp., 0 253 21802 0, pb US\$21.95

American Sweethearts explores the representation of teenage girls in comedic forms of American popular culture, from the 1930s through the 1960s. Using a variety of methods to analyze literature, films, plays, and television, Ilana Nash argues

convincingly that recurring patterns existed across these decades and across media, which framed teenage girls as either angels or devils, but never as fully human beings. The predominant pattern she traces is an oscillation between the figures of the chaste/subordinate girl and the hypersexual/insubordinate girl. In both cases, teenage girls have consistently been represented from an adult male point of view that both sexualizes and punishes them.

Nash focuses the scope of her study on several significant 'narrative cycles' (p. 5), in which adolescent female characters like Nancy Drew, Judy Graves, and Corliss Archer were represented for extended periods of time (often several decades) across a variety of popular media. The popularity and longevity of these narratives is used as evidence of broad cultural trends that spoke to the mainstream beliefs of each period. The study is limited to comedic narratives because, unlike dramatic ones, they tended to problematize the newly emerging category of youth culture explicitly, and the study is also of necessity limited to images of white girls, as people of color were not represented nearly as extensively in any medium of the period under study.

Each narrative cycle is examined using multiple approaches, combining a primary emphasis on textual analysis with elements of social history, production considerations (such as changing audience demographics), marketing research and promotional materials, contemporaneous criticism, and limited amounts of ethnographic evidence. The result is a fascinating and ultimately disturbing look at some of the most common techniques through which teenage girls have been humiliated, infantilized, and sexualized in popular culture.

Going back at least as far as the early films of Shirley Temple, Nash notes a trend in which children are sexualized, a taboo that is made culturally acceptable by the children's ignorance of the implications of their provocative behavior. For teenage girls, this dynamic reemerges in their framing as liminal figures between adulthood and childhood, who have adult bodies but childlike minds. The 'chrysalis moment', as Nash calls it (p. 23), where the girl transforms physically into a woman, is obsessively fetishized, producing a pedophilic subject position for the viewer. Yet it also produces great anxiety. As the teenage girl steps into adulthood, the concern emerges that she may use her newfound power and sexuality to manipulate men or subvert the social order. This anxiety is allayed in two ways: by pairing the teenage girl with a punishing father, and by diminishing her strength and skills. Whether presented as angel or devil, the teenage girl is consistently framed as a sexual, childish, and incompetent figure, who is unknowingly receptive to a pedophilic gaze yet too immature to compete with, threaten, or even evaluate adult men.

By focusing on narrative cycles rather than distinct periods or media, Nash is able to study cultural patterns as they evolve over time, and as they are translated from one medium to another. Some of the most compelling sections of her argument detail the loss of selfhood and dignity that occurs when texts with relatively strong female protagonists aimed at adolescent girls are translated into mainstream texts aimed at cross-gendered, cross-generational audiences. She walks the reader through the translation process, demonstrating, for example, how Nancy Drew shrinks from a heroic, autonomous crime solver (in the literary version), into a squealing, ditsy sidekick whose role is to watch her boyfriend solve crimes (in the film version). At times, this squelching of female autonomy is quite severe, as in the case of Corliss Archer, who, in spite of her boyfriend's repeated threats of violence, requests of him, 'If I *ever* act like such a *heel* again – *please* biff me in the eye' (p. 154). More disturbing yet are the many, many

images Nash describes in which the father–daughter relationship is coded as incest, and then played for laughs.

Nash writes with great wit and passion for her subject, and her study is strongest where it is based on close readings of texts, including some fascinating analyses of movie scenes, promotional material, and film studios' marketing research. Audience research from these earlier periods is obviously limited, however, and Nash makes good use of what evidence she can find, including reconstructing social context through advice literature and social history, and speculating on audience reaction through contemporaneous popular criticism, a 1942 survey of magazine readers, and smatterings of ethnographic insight, gleaned from her discussions with readers. While Nash is usually careful to word her comments speculatively, she does sometimes assume that her textual analysis is a sufficient indicator of cultural beliefs and audience desires, as in the following examples: 'The lack of realism adults considered a flaw was thus the very component that made these books so successful with their intended audience' (p. 31), and 'When girls crave Nancy Drew and other figures of solo, powerful females, it is psychological virginity that offers the most pleasures' (p. 52). This is, however, a relatively minor (and hardly uncommon) flaw in an otherwise outstanding analysis of the specific mechanisms of popular culture that demean and diminish teenage girls.

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The Contest for Knowledge: debates over women's learning in eighteenth-century Italy

MARIA GAETANA AGNESI *et al.*, 2005 (Ed. and translated by Rebecca Messbarger and Paula Findlen with an Introduction by Rebecca Messbarger)

Chicago, University of Chicago Press

208 pp., 0 226 01055 4, pb £13.00

The Italian Enlightenment is remarkable for the widespread attention and importance it gave to issues concerning the education of women. The ideas it gave rise to were widely circulated in the press in journals such as *Il caffè* founded by Pietro Verri, on stage in plays such as Carlo Goldoni's *Donna di garbo* (1743), and through the independently minded heroines of Pietro Chiari and Antonio Piazza's bestselling novels. An even more striking feature of the debate was the active participation of women themselves, who contributed both orally in the form of addresses and orations, and in print. It is an important aspect of how women were gaining access to areas of cultural life that had in previous centuries been closed off to them. Learned women, not only from the aristocracy, were admitted into some of the most prestigious literary and scientific academies of Italy and a small number of women with influence went on to found academies. Others gained university degrees and indeed held university teaching posts, among them Laura Bassi, Professor of Experimental Physics and Philosophy at Bologna, and one of the writers included in this book, the mathematician Maria Gaetana Agnesi, who was awarded a chair at the same

university. Eighteenth-century Italy did not enjoy the political unity of a France or England and its cultural life was organized around many different centres throughout the peninsula without any one exercising a hegemonic lead. This, in combination with the weakening of the Spanish influence, which was gradually replaced by the French, may well have contributed to easing women's entry into what had in the previous century been male-only preserves.

The Contest of Knowledge, which maintains the high standards of scholarship that characterize the University of Chicago's series 'The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe', offers modern translations of four contributions to the debate on women and education from eminent women of the day. Their involvement takes different forms – a preface to a translation, an oration delivered to a Brescian academy, and responses to a debate at one of the most prestigious academies of the day, the Paduan *Accademia dei Ricovrati*, which counted Galileo among its founding members. The opening chapter traces how under the impact of the Enlightenment's secularized ideals the previous century's *querelle des femmes* moved away from its often futile and misogynistic discussions about women's intrinsic worth towards an investigation into ways that women might contribute to the social, public good. This overview, taken in conjunction with the 'Translator's Preface' that precedes each of the four translations, contextualizes the debate for the reader at both the macro- and micro-level.

The volume opens with Giuseppe Eleonora Barbapiccola's introduction to her translation of Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* (1722) which she had prepared for a female readership. As part of her rebuttal of the view that women are not capable of learning, she explains here why the cornerstone of female education should be rational philosophy for which, she argues, women have a natural talent. A year later the *Accademia dei Ricovrati* in Padua held an all-male debate on women's education which saw it adopt an extremely conservative line arguing in favour of access to intellectual education for a small minority of women while denying education to the majority. The furore these conclusions gave rise to led to a substantially amended printed version in 1729 which now included two female contributions, one by a Sienese noblewoman, Aretafila Savini de' Rossi, and the other, in Latin, by a nine-year old child prodigy, Maria Gaetana Agnesi. Their presence demonstrated that the *accademia* believed that it could no longer maintain its reputation for serious enlightened debate without bringing women into its circle. The debate continued to resonate through the decades and some forty years later, in 1763, the mathematician and poet Diamante Medaglia Faini returned to it for her own 'Oration on which studies are fitting for women' where she argues in favour of an education for women that is based around philosophy and the sciences.

Rebecca Messbarger and Paula Findlen are to be congratulated, for making available for the first time in English the contribution of four erudite Italian women to the debate on women's education and the role of women in advancing the public good. They have given us access in clear English to a collection of writing that will be of great interest to readers familiar with the debates on women and education being waged elsewhere in eighteenth-century Europe.

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The Fabric of Gender: working-class culture in Third Republic France

HELEN HARDEN CHENUT, 2005

Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press

436 pp., 0 271 02520 4, hb £45.50

The year 2005 was momentous for the textile industry in France when faced with the flood of cheap imports. The strong textile tradition in France is spread over several cities and middle-sized and smaller towns. This once key industrial sector has undergone profound changes in the past. So too has the gendered study of labour relations. This 2005 work is testimony to Helen Chenut's in-depth research of Troyes, a key city in the French textile industry. Carefully annotated, beautifully illustrated it contains a substantial bibliography ranging over the past three decades. Many layers of the history of Troyes are blended with gender: a detailed study of the French hosiery and knitting industry; a methodology to incorporate a gender-inclusive analysis into social history; a long view of the evolution of France as a consumer society; a review of the origins and changing nature of trade unions and political parties of the Left during the Third Republic; and history at a microcosmic level. This makes the book a compelling read. Chenut's work recalls past moments when global conditions played an equally important part in the economic performance of the companies of Troyes.

Her study begins with a remembrance of one of the most bitter struggles in Troyes, the Great Strike of 1900, where syndicalism was struggling to survive. The work ends with the Popular Front and goes some way to explaining the political allegiances of the French in 1940 after the bitter industrial relations of the slump years of the 1930s when mill owners ruthlessly lowered wages of men and women, at different rates. The study is both thematic and chronological: the shapes of textile work, industrial relations, consumerism and gender relations are presented before and during the Great War and then later in the 1920s and 1930s.

Herein lies her originality. *The Fabric of Gender* is multifaceted and shows how gender reveals a new dimension to the history of Troyes. Women were treated differently not just by employers but by unions, parties, designers, advertisers and vendors, whether as workers or as consumers. While gender is the leading inspiration in the inquiry and is therefore of interest to many scholars for that social analysis, Troyes is unavoidably the centre of the study. It is examined through a wide prism that will appeal to political, urban and economic historians alike. Woven throughout the chapters are stories of many aspects of the daily lives of the inhabitants of Troyes – of men and women as workers, as union members, as voters and as consumers. Chenut illustrates how the textile industry was slow to see its workers as producers and how the evolution of the industry was indissolubly linked to the way clothing was gendered. She probes into limitations of gender history as she describes the skilled and unskilled jobs and technical tasks allotted to men or to women in the division of labour that was constantly being adapted by the Troyes employers. At the same time she refers to the national and international economic backdrop of depression and recovery through the Great War, the 1920s and 1930s. Her details come from many sources: oral accounts and a variety of archival documents ranging from death registers to company accounts of export sales. Hers is a cumulative piece of research as she refers to many scholars who have broken new ground over the past thirty years, particularly in cultural

and social history. Her illustrations are gems and include advertisements for the famous brand of children's Petit Bateau underwear and the visiting card of a commercial agent for the producers. Alongside the gender-specific historical analysis the next most significant facet of this work is the breadth of analysis of working-class politics including the Laborieuse (the Troyes cooperative movement), that tried to remain aloof from party politics but important for its part in consumer development. When the twentieth century brought new pressures that impelled employers to devise new production methods, the ensuing downward mobility affected men and women in different ways. In contrast, expectations of a better living standard, including the right to purchase affordable garments, were rising constantly. New demands for social rights through recognition of the value of labour were gender specific. As they provide practical examples of gendered work issues they make the work accessible to the less informed readers of gender social history.

Occasionally twenty-year-old works are cited as recent and there is room for further development of the themes brought to light: the author explains tantalisingly little about how employers were quick to divert work to the rural population and in particular towards rural women when it suited them. She could have expanded further her survey of the representation of working class clothing and class identity in the cinema. However, the rich tapestry of Troyes history has to end somewhere. These minor quibbles aside, *The Fabric of Gender* is a tour de force for French history.

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British Women Writers 1914–1945: professional work and friendship

CATHERINE CLAY, 2006

Aldershot and Burlington, VT, Ashgate

184 pp., 0 7546 5093 6, hb £45

The journal *Time and Tide* is crucial to an understanding of the feminist literary culture of the inter-war period. Apart from a rather disappointing anthology of extracts introduced by Dale Spender as *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (Spender, 1984) it has never received the critical attention that a publication of its importance merits. In its day, the influence of *Time and Tide* was analogous to that of *MS* in the United States or *Spare Rib* in Britain. With a circulation of forty thousand in the 1940s the journal considered itself a cut above the popular weeklies for women such as *Women* and *Woman's Own* in its appeal to a serious, although not 'high brow', predominantly middle-class readership. For many years *Time and Tide* served as a rallying point for feminists when the suffrage movement disbanded after the vote was won in 1918 and combined coverage of politics, society, economics and current affairs with a lively discussion of literature, culture and the arts.

Time and Tide began its life in 1920 as the brain child of the former militant suffragette, Margaret, Lady Rhondda, who ploughed something like two hundred and fifty thousand pounds of her personal fortune into subsidies. From its inception, the periodical acted as a magnet for the great and the good, as well as for many other women whose horizons and

aspirations had been expanded by their experiences in the First World War and who wanted to make a career for themselves as professional journalists. In *British Women Writers 1914–1945: professional work and friendship*, Catherine Clay shows how the journal serves the historian as a barometer whose fortunes indicate the changing face of British public life, as unprecedented numbers of educated women entered the professions transforming the nature of the white-collar work force.

Clay draws upon letters, poems, diaries, journalism and fiction in order to chart the ‘web of connections’ between women that provided *Time and Tide* with its organisational base and support and provides a useful flow chart of women who moved within its orbit. This web of friendship in practice turns out to be a composite web made up of smaller networks, which in turn consist of loose groups of friends who knew each other socially and professionally, as well as some women who were in more committed emotional and physical partnerships. The circle of friendship extends to the generation of pre-war suffragists, and ‘old’ feminists from before the war, as well as to ‘new feminists’ who wanted to move beyond agendas of formal equality and to some literary modernists. It includes Lady Astor, Clare Leighton, Ellen Wilkinson, Gwen Raverat, Naomi Mitchison, Laura Hutton, Theodora Bosanquet, Stella Benson, Virginia Woolf, Rose Macaulay, E. M. Delafield, Rebecca West, Cicely Hamilton, Elizabeth Robins, Mary Agnes Hamilton, Christopher St John and Helena Swanwick. The key contexts in which women’s friendships are discussed are the ‘professionalization’ of the woman writer and the shift in the cultural recognition of lesbian identity attendant on the trial of Radclyffe Hall’s novel, *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928.

British Women Writers 1914–1945 interestingly maps out the geographies of work and pleasure extending over particular locations in London. Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Radclyffe Hall, Una Troubridge, Violet Hunt, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West, for example, all had addresses in close proximity in the districts of Kensington and Chelsea. Six literary-historical case-studies representing different kinds of friendships between women are discussed. These are what Clay terms the ‘trade in work and desire’ that characterised the relationship of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, the ‘romance of business’ between Winifred Holtby and Viscountess Rhondda, the ‘triangulation of desire’ between Vera Brittain and Storm Jameson, the lesbian body in relation to Stella Benson and Laura Hutton, and the ‘triadic model of friendship and desire’ in the relationship between Stella Benson, Naomi Mitchison and Winifred Holtby.

There is a lot that one already knows about women like Vera Brittain from existing biographies and period studies but not much is known about some of the other women writers and Clay’s study makes impressive, rigorous, and highly intelligent use of archival sources, as well as bringing many little-known connections to light. As many second-wave feminists were to learn, emotional bonds between women represented the strongest expression and fulfilment of their individual needs and the deepest and most significant of connections to others they were ever to experience. But, in practice, sisterhood could prove a huge disappointment leaving pain and disillusionment in its wake when high expectations were not met. Clay does not gloss over the denials and difficulties that can bedevil women’s friendships and has done the ground work in mapping out the connections between such friendships and women’s professional work. Readers of this informative, very well-researched monograph will perhaps want to

reflect further upon what such work-based friendships and connections mean. All who are interested in the history of feminism in the twentieth-century will hope that *Time and Tide* will eventually be properly indexed and made available to scholars digitally and on line.

References

Spender, D. (1984) *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora Press).

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Gender and Empire

ANGELA WOOLLACOTT, 2006
Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan
164 pp., 0 333 92645 5, pb £16.99

Gender and Empire aims to bring together in a single authored book the most influential studies in gender in the 'new imperial history' and, by and large, it succeeds in this challenging brief. The chapters focus on major episodes and topics in the history of the British Empire from the eighteenth to twentieth century that emphasize gender. Themes include women and unfree labour, including slavery, indentured labour and convict transportation (Chapter 1); narratives of interracial sexual assault and crises of imperial rule (Chapter 2); masculinities, imperial adventuring and war (Chapter 3); gender and everyday life under colonial regimes (Chapter 4); women and gender in anti-colonial and nationalist movements (Chapter 5); and gender and empire in the metropole (Chapter 6). In conceptualizing the modern British Empire as an 'integrated entity', Woollacott aims to outline imperial interconnections not previously 'visible' and make plain the central role of gender in the British imperial enterprise (p. 1). Her synthesis is based on recent scholarship blended with some fresh primary sources, embraces men and women of different cultures who 'inhabited variously racially marked social positions', and highlights gender as 'ideology and as material and cultural practice' (p. 3). The study is clearly informed by the language, concepts and approaches developed as imperialism has been re-conceptualized in the last decade by the 'new' imperial historians in dialogue with postcolonial theory. Thus the works of historians such as Antoinette Burton, Kathleen Wilson and Catherine Hall provide key reference points.

A main strength of *Gender and Empire* is that it effectively summarizes the evolving debates and central issues relating to the link between gender and empire that have preoccupied historians over the past decade or so. I enjoyed Chapters 1 and 2 and Chapter 2 offered some illuminating insights into the links between captivity narratives of early modern Europe, the commercialization of such narratives in the nineteenth century, and sensationalized stories of sexual violence committed by colonized men,

epitomized in the moral panics over, for instance, the 1857 Indian Mutiny. In such imperial 'crises' the need to protect white women was used to justify harsh measures against the colonized, to change colonial policies and/or to further the interests of imperial administrations and colonists. Thus, according to Woollacott, such sensationalized stories, synchronized with shifts in imperial priorities, were published and circulated in the metropolis to secure continuing support for the British Empire. Chapter 3 on masculinities also worked well and I liked the section on 'martial races'. Woollacott ably demonstrates how militaristic definitions of masculinity became dominant in the late nineteenth century, underscoring the link between war, violence, masculinity and empire. I am not convinced, however, by the concluding comment about 'gender ideology' driving wars (p. 77). This needed fuller explanation. In a change of focus Chapter 5 provides some well-chosen case studies of women's participation in anti-colonial struggles and the final chapter on gender and empire in the metropole has some interesting, if brief, sections on colonial subjects in Britain, female emigration and imperial exhibitions.

Chapter 6 on gender, culture and colonialism, one of the prime focuses of recent research, worked less well. The content seemed rather fragmented and did not always reflect the aims – to look at 'the body and the household as crucial sites of gender contestation across the empire' in order to show 'how ubiquitous were the daily intersections of gender and colonialism' (p. 81). I was not convinced that sections on engineering and construction, although illuminating, actually demonstrated this. More generally, the book might have more incisively tackled the link between gender orders and class inequalities, and the influence of economic and political power structures on the ways in which culture (including gendered identities) is articulated. To be fair, there is a section in the final chapter on 'the gendered imbrocation of race and class' but I would have liked to see more discussion of these intertwined concepts, in particular where gender, culture and colonialism were discussed.

Given these reservations, I am aware of the difficulties of synthesizing a wide and complex field of study. In deciding what to include and what to omit you leave yourself exposed to criticisms from the specialists in the different areas you cover. The value of *Gender and Empire* is its accessibility for the informed non-specialist who wishes to find a clear introduction to the field. It is a timely book that provides the reader with a good overview of the diverse strands of research into gender and empire that have undoubtedly enriched the field of imperial history and should thus be an essential text on undergraduate courses on the British Empire and, more generally, gender history and modern British history. Pioneering historians have been engaged for a number of years now in putting gender on the agenda, so to speak. As Woollacott stresses, much has been achieved but there is still plenty of research to be done and this book provides some useful pointers and directions. Hopefully there is now sufficient 'gender awareness' for gender to be fully integrated into imperial histories without having to have the 'gender ... and' tag necessary when it was more marginalized. In reaching out to a wider audience, Woollacott's book will certainly help to centre gender more firmly within the mainstream of imperial history.

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Rethinking Orientalism: women, travel and the Ottoman harem

REINA LEWIS, 2004

New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press

256 + viii pp., 0 8135 3543 3, pb \$29.95

Reina Lewis confirms in Chapter One of *Rethinking Orientalism: women, travel and the Ottoman harem* that the harem as a topic ‘sold books’ and, as she points out: ‘This book, my book, also has the word “harem” in its title’. It is required to ‘pique the reader’s interest’ even as Lewis ‘struggles to control the peculiar fecundity of its associations’ (p. 12). Admittedly, the use of the word is, perhaps, not only unavoidable, but also necessary. A cursory glance at the French Orientalist art in the Louvre, for instance, reveals a particular set of fantasies about the segregated domestic quarters of Muslim women, stereotypes that came to dominate male European discourse and painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the same time, the British Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Embassy Letters* (1763) reveals the harem as a space that was open to Western women, just as it was closed to their menfolk. Privileged European women travellers, then, from Montagu onwards, had access to the harem, a distinction that endowed them on their return to Europe with a great deal of cultural authority, an authority that they largely lacked at home. For some of these women – although it is important not to homogenize their experiences – travel and the examination, albeit cursory, of Ottoman domesticity became a means through which they explored self and status at home.

Lewis is no stranger to this field of Orientalist enquiry. Her previous work, *Gendering Orientalism: race, femininity and representation* provided, among its excellent chapters, a fascinating examination of the remarkable harem paintings of the Anglo–French painter Henriette Brown, in which the segregated space is depicted in terms more familiarly ascribed to a medieval convent. In the years before and since this publication, increasing interest in women travellers in the Orient has generated much critical inquiry, and Lewis’s interest in the representation of the harem places her in a critical terrain that has derived much impetus from Billie Melman’s work, in particular.

What distinguishes the outstanding *Rethinking Orientalism* from previous critical work, however, is its focus on the experiences of primarily (there is one exception) Ottoman women and their representation of segregation. Lewis explores a number of previously unknown travel narratives, memoirs and fictions published in the early twentieth century by relatively unknown Ottoman women (Halide Edib, Demetra Vaka Brown, the sisters Zeyneb and Malek Hanım) and, from Britain, Grace Ellison who travelled in the Ottoman Empire, Europe and the United States. By presenting fresh sources for inquiry, Lewis’s project is to explore the ‘segregated domains of Ottoman women as spaces of political agency and cultural production’ (p. 2). The text clearly provides a much-needed critical intervention into long-standing artistic and literary Orientalist stereotyping.

In brief, Chapter One, ‘Harem Travellers’, commences with an examination of the field of harem literature into which these women’s accounts emerge. It provides detailed biographies of each of these transculturated women, whose writings chart a struggle for emancipation while critiquing Western misconceptions of Ottoman society. Chapter Two, ‘Empire, Nation and Culture’ charts the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the period leading up to and just beyond World War I and its impact on gender relations. Chapter Three, ‘Harem: the limits of emancipation’ examines how Ottoman women presented their

fight for emancipation and how they struggled to create a voice that would distinguish them as Ottoman and as female while avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping. A process is at work in their writings, Lewis contends, in which they attempt to position themselves as Oriental women (a term that they employed) while attempting to dislodge the misrepresentations of Orientalism and struggling against the conservative forces at home. Chapter Four, 'Eroticised Bodies: representing other women' examines how descriptions of Ottoman women, their clothing and beauty dominated Orientalist discourse but its performative aspects were deployed by Demetra Vaka Brown in particular, to present an image of the Oriental female unfamiliar to the Western viewer. Chapter Five, 'Contested Behaviours, Gendered Spaces' examines the harem as an inhabited space and explores Western women's depiction of the veil as an extension of the harem and how this item of clothing becomes a contested sartorial symbol in debates on modernization and emancipation. Chapter Six, 'Dressing Acts: the shifting significance of clothes', examines the sartorial question through photography. One of the most interesting arguments in this chapter centres on the Hanım sisters' depiction of the Ladies Club in London as a 'curious harem' and the Ladies Gallery at Westminster as a latticed space: 'Is it in Free England', Zeyneb writes with sarcasm to Ellison, 'that you dare to have a harem?' (p. 223). Zeyneb 'exerts a haremising gaze' (p. 222) and although her work rejects the limitations of the Ottoman harem, she discovers that the European alternatives are neither better nor 'sufficiently different' (p. 223). By exploring the writings of these women Lewis reveals a complex and heterogeneous set of preoccupations about structures of power and strategies for resistance, the meanings of visibility and the question of identity. The questions raised here, Lewis concludes, have contemporary relevance as the 'body and the voice of the veiled and the unveiled woman continues to transfix observers from inside and outside veiling communities' (p. 268).

Rethinking Orientalism is a *tour de force* of immense relevance for readers in women's studies, literary and cultural studies, travel writing and history.

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The Melodrama of Mobility: women, talk and class in contemporary South Korea

NANCY ABELMANN, 2003

Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press

325 pp., 0 8248 2596 9, hb; 0 8248 2749 X, pb

This is a unique intellectual product in which Nancy Abelmann examines familial production of class and social mobility through interviews with eight middle-aged South Korean women. While reading *The Melodrama of Mobility* we glimpse the radical

transformation of gender norms and social hierarchies subsequent to the watershed of the Korean War (1950–1953). An understanding of these women's histories is further contextualized by more recent South Korean history and in particular the considerable class anxiety, social transformation and speedy economic realignment taking place after the political democratization of the 1980s.

The main point of interest centres around the book's exploration of how, when and whether people's chances of social mobility have changed. Abelmann explores the concept of social mobility through tracing the lives of these women as they travel back and forth from countryside to city, across class lines and generational divides and across ever-shifting landscapes of memory and desire. Her investigation results in a satisfying analysis of some of the root causes of the Korean people's confusion and anxiety, specifically from the gendered view of these eight women, women who have lived through the half-century which followed the Korean War, a period of tremendous change in the social, political, economic and cultural landscape. These women's life stories are not simple, social maps, but form a complex narrative project showing in detail the workings of gender and class in the social and ideological context of Confucianism and of the workings of patriarchy in South Korea.

The distinctive capacity for self-reflection of these eight women circumvents some of the difficulties of describing and narrating the way in which family and gender interact with social mobility throughout the compressed modernity of South Korea. In the stories as narrated by the Education Mother, the Laundress, Hye-min's Grandmother, The Janitor, The Moviegoer, Mi-yon's Mother, The Twin's Mother and Mrs. Pak, there is evidence of perceptive insight by the women into what they have witnessed. This serves to demonstrate their decisive contribution to individual and family class position and hence social mobility, and also their central socio-economic role during the period of rapid development in South Korea.

It is interesting to consider why Abelmann focuses on women in this specific generation and their narratives to examine women's roles for their familial/individual social mobility. It proves both their decisive contribution to class distinction and the central socioeconomic roles they have played over the course of South Korea's era of rapid development.

The kinship and cultural configurations of South Korean patriarchy play a crucial role in understanding the ways in which these women contribute to change. Abelmann considers women, especially housewives, to be critical agents in the production of a family's material and moral life, class identity and social mobility. She believes that gender, as it is inscribed through social life and narrative, 'does' rather than 'is'. As an example she examines how these eight women consider '*yoksim* and *pe'pum*' ('greed and generosity') (pp. 88–99), arguing that the balance of these two in a woman's personality is a crucial motivation to social mobility.

Abelmann suggests that a 'melodramatic sensibility' in Korean life and the profound personal dislocations that accompany it underpin South Korea's rapid social transformation. She interprets melodrama as a narrative convention and focuses on the moments in which these eight women's fates had turned suddenly. In this way she is able to articulate social history in a distinctive style.

In South Korea stories about educational achievement act as a barometer of potential social mobility. Education becomes a critical gamble for the working classes in their struggle for social mobility and Abelmann reveals how education in every family is an emotionally, socially, and politically complex issue. She offers the Education Mother's

story, 'An Education Rescue Story' (pp. 110–113), as that of a mother who went to great lengths for her son. The Education Mother however considers women's education to be more important than men's as the woman is at the heart of family life. Simultaneously she regards it as potentially ruinous when women leave the confines of the household and deprive their children of maternal love.

Social mobility itself is difficult to measure but these stories capture the sensibility of an era, treating the productive activities of any woman's husband – a commonly used indicator of social class – as only one narrow measure of the family's situation. Even beyond these women's formal employment, Abelmann shows how their informal labour and extra-wage contributions by real estate and stock investment are also critical to the household's position and identity.

Abelmann does not categorize these women by class but states in her conclusion that:

Class identifications have, in this paradoxical context, been just as hard to pin down. Origins and destinations – critical to class identifications – have hardly stood still for the women in this book. ... Class identities, then, are inextricable from what happens to people in families and to the manner in which they recall and reconstruct their childhoods.

(p. 285)

Abelmann's skilful weaving of the women's narratives engages the reader and on this count her book may be firmly recommended. However, there are drawbacks: her theoretical and methodological discussions are rather too detailed, bordering on the verbose, to the extent that readers unfamiliar with South Korean politics and culture may find it difficult to maintain interest. More scrutiny of the relationship between the narratives as presented, especially their melodramatic sensibilities, and the phenomenon of social mobility might have widened her readership.

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Home Away from Home: Japanese corporate wives in the United States

SAWA KURUTANI, 2005

Durham, Duke University Press

241 pp., 0 8223 3622 7, pb \$21.95/£14.95

Sawa Kurotani offers an engaging and persuasive account of how the *kaigai-chūzai* experience, or corporate overseas posting, affects Japanese housewives. As an anthropologist, Kurotani has relied primarily on interviews with Japanese corporate wives living in three different regions of the United States: an undisclosed Midwest location called 'Centerville', home to a major Japanese auto manufacturer; the greater New York area; and Research Triangle, North Carolina. Although I am no social scientist, I have noticed a tendency for some studies of this sort to rely on too few interviews, but

this is not the case with *Home Away from Home*. Kurotani interviewed some one hundred and twenty subjects for her study. She places the *kaigai-chûzai* experience in the context of globalization theory, demonstrating how the local (and also the domestic sphere) must always construct the global as well as vice versa.

The mission of the Japanese corporate housewife is to create a stable and harmonious 'Japanese' home away from home so that her husband can be as productive as possible. Or, as Kurotani puts it, 'to create a bubble of Japaneseness in the middle of foreignness' (p. 12). Her study seeks to uncover 'how this bubble is established and maintained', and 'how it is challenged and renegotiated' (p. 13). As a Japanese woman herself, she is ideally suited to conduct this research. However, she describes frankly an important difference between herself and the women she was interviewing:

The fact that I did not have children was perhaps the most significant factor that made my working relationships with Japanese corporate wives awkward. I was Japanese, I was female, and I came from a family background that was very similar to that of many of the women. However, I did not take the typical path of a woman from such a habitus . . . Instead, I moved to the United States, went on to graduate school, married a foreigner, and postponed having children.

(pp. 131–132)

This fact made it difficult for her subjects to understand precisely what Kurotani was up to, but it may also have caused them to reflect more deeply on their own lives and domestic roles. Although she argues that no *chûzai* housewife would embrace the traditional 'good wife, wise mother philosophy', virtually all her respondents embrace their role as domestic caregivers. '[T]hey appear to define their feminine selves', she notes, 'through the fulfillment of their domestic roles, at least in part'. She goes on:

Every act of homemaking produces 'ideal' femininity in these women that not only conforms to the normative concepts of gender and Japaneseness, but also propagates them by providing a space of cultural reproduction in a foreign environment.

(p. 13)

According to materialist–feminist studies upon which Kurotani relies, capitalist societies have historically undervalued women's labour and limited it to the domestic sphere which is one of the root causes of women's subordination. Japanese women wind up completely internalizing this ideal of 'feminine domesticity' by which they 'privilege the wishes and well-being of their husband and children over their own' (p. 218). The principal question that her study poses is whether the expatriate experience is sufficient to cause Japanese women to question 'the ideological underpinnings of their own femaleness based on domestic labor' (p. 219). Kurotani would like to argue that it is. She detects currents of ambivalence about the ideal of feminine domesticity in the discourse of her interviewees, and even finds hints of resistance to it. In her view, the expatriate experience has transformative potential for Japanese women and their partners. Children came to their parents to discuss personal issues much more frequently in the foreign setting than they would in Japan and couples often found themselves in a more

genuine marriage partnership than before. Global forces enter the local, and family life is altered accordingly. Kurotani even makes effective use of the often over-utilized *uchi-soto* binary – the dichotomy between inside and outside, between Japan and others – when she argues that ‘by delegating the identity-maintenance tasks to the domestic sphere and by exposing *uchi* to a foreign *soto*, transnational corporations may, quite inadvertently, have initiated a transformation in their corporate subjects’ sense of *uchi*, thus undermining its own structure of power from the inside out’ (p. 220).

There is much to recommend in this enjoyable and elegantly written study. One of my favourite parts comes in Chapter 5 where the author draws on the immensely popular television drama *Long Vacation* as a way of conceptualizing the *chûzai* experience. The main characters in this drama, she reminds us, were caught in an ‘in-between’ or ‘liminal’ state, i.e. ‘a temporary existence removed from . . . normal life’ (p. 178). The male lead in the drama (Kimura Takuya) had excelled as a piano student but had not taken the next step since his graduation; the female lead (Yamaguchi Tomoko) was stood up at the altar in the opening scene and was at sixes and sevens with her life.

The Japanese expatriates assigned to live and work in the US experience a similar kind of in-betweenness as they live a materialistically opulent lifestyle without many of the cares and pressures normally associated with Japanese life. Enjoying a variety of individual freedoms and a capacity for self-expression that constitutes its own form of a ‘long vacation’, these women may question some aspects of their Japanese identity upon their return to Japan and may become open to more truly global forms of citizenship. It is a plausible contention but one that is often undermined by Kurotani’s subjects’ personal accounts which are striking for their near total acceptance of the ideal of the good Japanese wife.

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Countering Gender Violence: initiatives towards collective action in Rajasthan

KANCHAN MATHUR, 2004

London, Sage

380 pp., 0 7619 3244 5, hb £35.00; 0 7619 3245 3, pb £14.99

Countering Gender Violence explores a wide range of gender violence in India and couples this with a case study from the state of Rajasthan. The latter documents an attempt to initiate transformative change in the form of the state-directed Women’s Development Programme (WDP). Kanchan Mathur’s extensive involvement with the WDP in Rajasthan provides her with a wealth of experience and data for this book. Her emotional investment in mobilising strategies towards transformative change surfaces several times, imparting a strong sensation of struggle, representative of the experiences of those involved.

Her aim is to link the ‘theoretical complexity of violence to strategies for countering gender violence’ in order to find ways in which gender-biased power relations can be transformed in women’s favour (p. 12). Her focus on rural Rajasthan stems from two

decades of involvement in the WDP initiated there in 1984. This programme was one of the earliest instances of change in perspectives and strategies towards gender violence, development, and human rights in India (p. 13).

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework; the second gives an overview of gender relations and violence in the Indian context and in the state of Rajasthan more specifically. Chapter Three follows with an analysis of the state response to gender violence. The WDP in Rajasthan is the central focus of the next three chapters which look at the programme overall, at detailed cases and at some key areas of concern. Chapter Six reports a study of the role of NGOs involved with the WDP. A concluding chapter brings together the main findings of the study with propositions for future consideration.

Kanchan Mathur, following Naila Kabeer, approaches gender violence through a combination of institutional and social relations perspectives. This distinguishes her account of violence against women (VAW) from those of her contemporaries. According to Mathur, conventional explanations that draw on the concept of 'patriarchy' are often unable to account for the complex ways in which gendered power relations are manifest in social practices. For her, gender violence is not simply an individual phenomenon, nor is it restricted to the 'criminal use of physical force' (p. 11). Instead, it is conceptualised through a more relational framework incorporating the 'substructures that interweave in different ways to structure social relationships between women and men' (p. 43). Four societal institutions, namely the family, the community, the market or workplace and the state provide the gendered substructures for the reproduction of gender violence in complex ways.

Mathur's search for transformative strategies does not lie in legal redress. Legislation has proved less than effective in the past due to pervasive gender bias in the judiciary system, corruption in the police force, and social stigmatisation arising from the public acknowledgement (and associated shame and dishonour) of what is a 'private' matter. This bias highlights the dual role of the state with regard to gender violence: the state defines itself as the protector of women but at the same time is complicit in perpetuating gender violence. What is needed is transformative change in social attitudes; this would challenge the existing social norms and conventions which perpetuate gender violence. This echoes elements of the 'conscientisation' approach advocated by Paulo Freire. Researching gender violence in this manner necessitates breaking the individual silences which forestall the growth of collective awareness of the varied manifestations of gender violence. And this, in its turn, involves a participatory and sharing methodology and the development of collective experience.

Two features of the book stand out as particularly significant. Firstly, the account of the Women's Development Programme provides a rare insight into the gendered micro-practices and power relations of development programmes in India. It complements the documentation of various national and state-level initiatives on gender violence and development in earlier chapters; more importantly it demonstrates the processes and interactions at the grassroots which may prove crucial to the success or failure of transformative strategies.

Secondly, Mathur illustrates the broader link between development and gender violence through the concept of empowerment, a popular notion in gender and development discourse throughout the 1990s. She argues that attempts to improve the socio-economic and political status of women, without addressing the issue of gender violence, are incomplete. This is particularly pertinent in that development issues, in terms

of institutional responsibility and policy discourse, are often separated from so-called 'atrocities' against women which are dealt with as social welfare issues.

Kanchan Mathur's *Countering Gender Violence* will appeal not only to readers specifically interested in gender violence and gender and development programmes such as NGO workers and activists, but also to students and academics interested more generally in gendered power relations in an Indian or South Asian context.

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State Feminism and Political Representation

JONI LOVENDUSKI (Ed.), 2005

New York, Cambridge University Press

315 pp., 0 521 85745 7, hb £40.00/US\$65.00; 0 521 67414 X, pb £14.99/US\$22.99

This volume marks a resurgence of interest in political representation by feminist scholars. At one level, political representation is the most visible aspect of women's entry into political life and political institutions. On account of its visibility, the study of women's political representation attracts considerable attention. Yet, despite the quantity and intensive nature of the research into the gendered nature of political representation carried out over the last two decades, few new insights have emerged. The concept of critical mass first utilised by Dahlerup (1988) is still in use today; the identification of facilitating and inhibiting electoral arrangements explored by Rule (1987) is now an ever-present feature of analysis; the barriers and opportunities for political access explored initially by Norris (1987) remain the bedrock of gender and party research. This volume focusing on selected countries represents a new and welcome addition to studies on women's political representation. In exploring in detail the relationship between the women's movement, women's policy agencies and policy outcomes on political representation, it offers insights into the gendered nature of political representation that reveal new patterns, confirm some older findings, and indicate a new way forward for comparative feminist research in this field.

The primary focus is on the role of women's policy agencies (WPAs – for example, equal-opportunity bodies, women's units within government) in facilitating interactions between the women's movement and the state on the subject of women's political representation. The book is part of the state feminism series produced by the international research group RINGS (Research Network on Gender Politics and the State) which has developed a unique methodology for comparative qualitative research. It opens with an introductory chapter in which this methodology is discussed, the research model presented, and the five main hypotheses to be tested outlined. This is followed by eleven studies drawn from countries in Western Europe and the United States. In each the authors explore three debates on political representation for each country: the impact of the women's movement, the nature of the policy outcome, and the role of women's policy agencies in the process. The final chapter brings together the findings of these debates and analyses the results in terms of the research model.

Overall, the book works well. It allows for the detailed study in each country of political representation, and traces the 'gendering' of the debates on this topic thereby shedding much new light. Given the current concentration on quota debates, it is refreshing to find an eclectic mix of issues debated in this volume. Although one half of the case studies focused mainly on quotas the other half was largely concerned with different means of engendering discussions about descriptive and substantive representation.

Although not explicitly designed as such, this volume is a history of the women's movement and its political influence in Western Europe and the United States over the last three decades. The chapters on individual countries offer fascinating insights into the efficacy of the women's movement in achieving gender equality in public and political life. They also illuminate both the impact of feminist activism on women's representation within parties, and the importance of electoral, constitutional and party renewal in pushing for their greater representation. However, centre stage is given to women's policy agencies, their efficacy in supporting the demands of the women's movement, and their capacity to support policy outcomes sought by the women's movement. One strength of this volume is that it does not shrink from discussing areas in which the women's movement has failed to secure a positive outcome. Nor is it afraid to note instances where the women's policy agency proved ineffective. This is a 'warts and all' book, and the findings, and insights along the way, are all the stronger for it.

The concluding chapter undertakes the ambitious task of relating the disparate debates to the model presented in the introductory chapter and of drawing generalised findings from the rich qualitative data. This is the most difficult chapter in the book, but merits close reading. The clear picture that emerges is that, on their own, women's policy agencies cannot bring about policy changes needed to support women's political representation. They cannot act as a substitute for a women's movement. A successful outcome requires a cohesive women's movement, one which gives women's representation a high priority. In these circumstances, the support of a sympathetic women's policy agency can be important. The study notes that left-oriented governments can, through facilitating the advocacy of women's policy agencies, assist a positive outcome; this finding confirms previous research.

This brief account cannot do justice to the richness of the patterns of relationships revealed between the women's movement, women's policy agencies, and the state. As a comparative qualitative study it produces richer data and a deeper analysis than can be provided by studies of single nation states. As a work of feminist scholarship in political science, it is outstanding. It deserves to be widely read.

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Carnal Thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture

VIVIAN SOBCHACK, 2004

Berkeley, University of California Press

328 pp., 0 520 24129 0, pb £15.95/\$24.95

Carnal Thoughts brings together a number of essays by one of the most interesting scholars in film, media and cultural studies, who has brought the novel approach of existential phenomenology to bear on one of the major themes that haunts this interdisciplinary field: the body. Whereas the theories that have dominated film studies for so long, psychoanalysis and semiotics, stressed – perhaps overstressed – the meaning of the body and its meaning-making processes, Sobchack foregrounds the body as matter, as a ‘sentient, sensual and sensible ensemble’ (p. 2), which is materially grounded in the here and now. Embodiment entails ‘the lived body as, at once, both an objective subject and a subjective object’ (p. 2). This focus allows her to shift away from the body as mere representation to the experience of being embodied. In accounting for the lived body as the source of subjective sense perception, Sobchack radically changes the terms of the prevailing feminist analysis in visual culture to view the (female) body as object of the (male) look. While gender is not necessarily a term of analysis in this book, its spotlight on issues of enfolded embodiment is obviously pertinent to gender studies.

This is most apparent in the first part of the book, in particular in the chapter where Sobchack explores the vicissitudes of women ageing. Contemporary American culture (and much of European and probably other cultures as well) is insistently oriented towards youth and hyperconscious of images, which may explain why growing old is perceived as ‘embarrassing’ and as a ‘narcissistic injury’ (p. 36). Sobchack argues that this perception cannot be separated from the objectification of women’s bodies ‘as images and representations rather than as the means of our being’ (p. 36). She traces the monstrous representation of older women in cinema, and shows how some recent films make a spectacle out of rejuvenation through cosmetic surgery, driving the message home that youth and beauty are the main objects of female desire. Technologies are at the service of a younger look. A funny example is a ‘skin contouring’ television camera that makes wrinkles invisible (‘video collagen’), producing an unreal image of ageing stars or news anchors to look younger (p. 39). Sobchack’s persistent point is that ‘the plasticity of the image . . . has overwhelmed the reality of the flesh and its limits’ (p. 50). I was particularly moved by her witty account of her own despair at seeing a face in the mirror that seems too old for her. She confesses considering cosmetic surgery. However, afraid of turning into an uncanny double of herself and dreading that others – or even worse – that she would no longer recognise herself, she shies away from such drastic measures. But she does avoid facing herself in mirrors. And don’t we all after reaching a certain age? Sobchack offers solace in the realisation that the image remains a reproduced surface, ‘thin and chimerical’, whereas every body is ‘grounded in the fleshy thickness and productivity of a life’ (p. 52). If only we can remember our material ground, we may experience ourselves as – in Sobchack’s beautiful phrase – ‘not so much ever aging as always becoming’ (p. 52).

I singled out the issue of ageing but her chapter on being oriented (or lost) in space and the gender differences in dealing with space is equally engaging and informative. In other chapters Sobchack critiques the postmodern tendency towards disembodiment, especially

in cyber subcultures. She is highly critical of, if not downright upset with, the alienating trend of treating our lived bodies as “things” to be seen, managed, and mastered’ (p. 182). Her anger is partly fuelled by her own experience of cancer and the consequent amputation of her leg. Time and again she brings back the phenomenological axiom that ‘our bodies are ourselves’. This pun on the title of a famous feminist classic drives home the ontological status of always already being embodied. Never reducing the body to any essentialist view, but rather working from experience and perception, Sobchack carefully maintains the *va-et-vient* between the body and its historical and cultural existence. For her, the subjective body and the objective world are inextricably intertwined. It is through her ‘passion of the material’ (as her last chapter is called) that she elaborates an ethical position for the subject. Sobchack argues that the awareness of being materially grounded calls for the reflective experience of ‘response-ability’ (p. 295), because the subject in its own objectivity must always recognise the subjectivity of the other (object). Situating the moment of transcendent consciousness in the objective immanence that the lived body experiences, she opposes any metaphysical transcendence and remains ruthlessly atheist. She calls this reversible structure of empathy between the body and the world ‘interobjectivity’. This position allows for the ‘sanguine sense of not merely being-in-the-world but of also belonging to it’ (p. 317).

Sobchack’s passionate plea for an ethics and aesthetics that puts the body first in all its radical materiality is at times amusing and moving, sometimes polemical, often courageous, and always clear and rigorous. I believe that this collection of essays shifts the grounds for the field of visual studies. *Carnal Thoughts* is a thought-provoking pleasure to read.

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Managing the Monstrous Feminine: regulating the reproductive body

JANE M. USSHER, 2006

London, Routledge

219 pp., 0 415 32810 1, hb £45.00; 0 415 32811 X, pb £15.95

Readers acquainted with Jane Ussher’s prolific output over the past fifteen years will find themselves on familiar territory with her latest offering, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: regulating the reproductive body*. Published recently by Routledge, the study merges Ussher’s work on constructions of femininity in popular culture¹ with central issues in women’s mental health.² It elaborates on an interest in the reproductive body evidenced in earlier projects such as *Body Talk: the material and discursive regulation of sexuality, madness and reproduction* (Routledge, 1997). In *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, Ussher employs historical survey, cross-cultural observation, the clinical interview, discourse analysis and pop-cultural critique in her diagnosis of the ways in which women have been positioned as ‘mad, bad, or dangerous’ on account of their physiology (p. 25). Her study focuses on three aspects of women’s reproductive life cycle: menstruation, pregnancy and the menopause. These foci are united, however, by Ussher’s

general contention that women are distracted and disempowered from expressing legitimate distress at the circumstances of their lives by the positioning and pathologisation of women's reproductive bodies in cultural and, in particular, in bio-medical discourse. So hegemonic is this cultural misogyny that women are persuaded to collude in their own silencing, actively and dutifully policing their bodies and blaming biology for unhappiness that is actually the result of gendered social injustice.

Beginning with menstruation, Ussher historicises misogynist pop-cultural and religious constructions of menarche before revealing the ways in which such misogyny has been institutionalised through bio-medical regimes of knowledge that pathologise the menstrual experience through PMS. Next, she examines the pregnant and post-natal body, detailing the ways in which medical discourse and hetero-normative scripts of femininity have conspired to reduce pregnant women to the status of passive incubators and prisoners of their biology. Particularly interesting is her analysis of the idealised notions of maternity that make women vulnerable to bio-medical interpretation of the stresses of new motherhood as post-natal depression, which explains the experience as a hormone-induced physical and psychological disorder. Finally, she critiques cultural and medical constructions of the menopausal body, revealing the ways which women's ageing has been positioned by a culture obsessed with youth and fertility, until this too is regarded as a pathological process requiring drastic medical prevention and interventions such as HRT, hysterectomy and mammography.

Ussher's interdisciplinary approach not only honours the complexity of the problems surrounding women and reproduction, but also informs the model of intervention she posits to solve them. Ussher encourages her readers to correct the gendered imbalance surrounding women's reproduction by using a 'material-discursive-intrapsychic approach'. The term is, admittedly, awkward, but it allows Ussher to outline a multi-pronged approach. Women are encouraged to embrace not only material interventions (such as increased self-care for those experiencing reproductive distress), but discursive re-framing (especially by rewriting the scripts of femininity to reflect a more realistic picture of women's experience) and the intrapsychic support of a therapist (particularly in place of indiscriminate prescription of anti-depressants or SSRIs).

Readers should be cautioned, however, that Ussher's study, valuable as it is, may offer an unbalanced picture of women's reproductive experiences. Her qualitative research inevitably over-represents the trauma surrounding women's experience of the reproductive body because it is largely based on the testimony of women whose participation in clinical interview was predicated upon experiences distressing enough to cause them to seek clinical help in the first place. Her admonition to feminists, in the book's final chapter, to celebrate the testimony of women who have successfully negotiated their reproductive life-cycle consequently is advice that Ussher herself has neglected, so the reader is left with a largely pessimistic picture of women's reproductive experiences. Also cause for some concern is the fact that, though Ussher's feminist critique of bio-medical interventions in women's health is long-overdue, she does not finally articulate a 'solution' to this particular problem: the 'big, bad wolf' approach to medicine may lead the reader to fear that the bio-medical establishment no longer has any legitimate role in women's reproductive life-cycle.

Having said this, Ussher's study constitutes an important contribution to the field of feminist scholarship in general and women's health in particular. For feminist cultural critics, clinical psychologists, and interested lay people alike, *Managing the Monstrous*

Feminine will provide invaluable insight into the complex issue of women's reproduction. Ussher's study not only provides a sophisticated analysis of the misogyny latent in the culture of women's fecundity, but also articulates a strategy by which women may begin to resist it.

Notes

¹ See, for example, *Fantasies of Femininity: reframing the boundaries of 'sex'* (Rutgers, 1997).

² Ussher is the author of *Women's Madness: misogyny or mental illness* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), editor of *Women's Health: contemporary international perspectives* (Routledge, 1992), and co-editor of works such as *Gender Issues in Clinical Psychology* (Routledge, 1992) and *Psychological Perspectives on Sexual Problems* (Routledge, 1993).

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