



Book Reviews

Sex and the Cinema. By Tanya Krzywinska. London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2006.

Much academic writing has treated the steamy and perilous territory of sex and/in the movies. Most of it, however, has focused on a particular era, genre, or issue: gender and its construction, sexuality and sexual identity, censorship and pornography—I think of Thomas Doherty’s *Pre-Code Hollywood* (1999) and Eric Schaefer’s “*Bold! Shocking! Daring! True!*” *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (1999) on the one hand and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1977) and Linda Williams’ *Hard Core* (1990) on the other. The great virtue of Tanya Krzywinska’s *Sex and the Cinema* is that it does not confine itself to a single era, genre, methodology, or politics. Taking a social and historical approach, Krzywinska includes and yet resists privileging specific discourses of cultural studies, sociology, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, and their like. She provides a comprehensive, lucid, and sober overview of this minefield of a subject, treating *Birth of a Nation*, *The Wolf Man*, and *Pillow Talk* as well as *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Deep Throat*, and *Damaged Goods* and ranging from the birth of cinema—the Edison Company’s *The Kiss* (1896)—to Michael Winterbottom’s *9 Songs* (2004).

As an academic book, *Sex and the Cinema* is accessible and successful in its broad aim “to map out factors that help shape the portrayal of sex in the cinema” (84) from the mainstream to hard core, dividing this territory into two parts. Part I delineates the forms and contexts that lend shape to the representation of sex and sexuality in cinema, covering “knowledge frameworks” (mythology, Judeo-Christian mores, Darwinism, psychoanalytic and sociological constructs), formal conventions (such as the

ellipsis, melodramatic modes, and “ideal” versus “real” sex), narrative formulas (the proper/improper couple, sexual initiation, the “return of the repressed”), and institutional frameworks of censorship and regulation. Part II advances the true and perhaps unexpected argument of the book, however: that, in genres from romance and melodrama to noir and horror film, cinematic sex is rendered overwhelmingly in terms of highly exploitable “themes of transgression.” Returning to foundational assumptions including medieval notions of sin, the nineteenth-century sexologists, and Freud (while acknowledging currently more fashionable theories of Foucault, Bataille, and Deleuze), Krzywinska demonstrates that, where sex is concerned, legitimate and illegitimate cinemas alike are more or less reactionary. Movies from *The Bridges of Madison County* to *King Kong* to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* may be rife with motifs of adultery, incest, bestiality, BDSM, and hard core, but such themes serve in effect to reinstate rather than subvert institutionally sanctioned heterosexual monogamy. Because sex is articulated through “the dominant discursive frameworks that police sexuality,” when sex is “hot”—neither elided nor idealized into romance—it is usually melodramatically troubled, dangerous, perverse, or obscene. Desire as such gets short shrift. It is still Freud’s “‘gothic dungeon’ model of sexuality” that most attracts the cinematic imagination and provides the necessary frisson (92). Today, with the idealism of the “sexual revolution” a quaint memory, and in our increasingly puritanical twenty-first century culture—a culture also obsessed and bombarded with sex—her point is well taken.

It is surprising that within such a framework *Sex and the Cinema* has little to say about queer sex and sexualities. Granted, much recent scholarship on cinematic sex has taken gender and queer studies perspectives, but for that reason the omission is conspicuous. Wisely, Krzywinska restricts herself primarily to English-speaking films available in VHS or DVD formats, stipulating that some trends, national cinemas, and films are necessarily omitted. Exceptions are well-known recent European art films such as *Romance* and *The Piano Teacher*; international films surrounding the figure of de Sade, *The Idiots*’ notorious “real sex”



scene. One wishes that she had made a few more exceptions—analyzed at least one of Almodóvar’s sexy farces or treated the Lutheran repessions of Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*, or remarked on the artful elisions of New Iranian cinema.

But such wishful thinking serves primarily to point out Krzywinska’s achievement. In its scope alone, *Sex and the Cinema* is groundbreaking, and it speaks well for Wallflower Press’s tradition of providing clear, straightforward overviews in film studies for scholars and students. The chapter covering “knowledge frameworks,” for example, is short and student-friendly, and subsequent chapters draw on it to treat specific films thoroughly in crisp, jargon-free prose. The book’s clarity and range assures that it will become an important reference and text for the number of courses having to do with sex, gender, desire, and transgression.

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Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream. By Florian Keller. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

A fascinating examination of one the twentieth century’s most enigmatic performers, Keller’s book analyzes the dance of identity inherent in Kaufman’s work, and in the process exposes a central paradox of American identity as well.

In his first sentence, Keller stresses that his book is *not* a study of comedy. Rather, he is interested in revealing a central conflict within “the American social imaginary” (vii), and he argues that Kaufman’s unique art laid bare that conflict. He defines this ideological contradiction as a clash between the belief in success for all (what Keller calls “a democratic promise of stardom”) and the promise of limitless “re-creation of one’s self” (xiii). Keller argues that these two “myths” ultimately result in a terrible void of self-dissolution, and he reads all of Kaufman’s performances as revelations of this ideological blind spot. All of the masks that Kaufman created,

from the Foreign Man to the inter-gender wrestling champion, are read here in this context.

Keller begins and ends with a discussion of Milos Forman's biopic of Kaufman, *Man on the Moon* (1999). This opening strategy is very effective because it illustrates the problem of Kaufman's identity in a specific manner. Keller relates how the film's writers struggled to find a narrative thread to the Kaufman story; there was seemingly no core, or key, to their subject, no "Rosebud" (70), as they put it, referring to the key of *Citizen Kane*. Their decision was to portray Kaufman as "budless," a solution that Keller finds wanting because the absence of a key becomes the key itself. Keller's Rosebud, of course, is his reading of Kaufman's literal enactments of the American dream, which is revealed as the *impossible* dream.

Drawing primarily upon the work of Slavoj Žižek, whose work is central to Keller's overall theoretical framework, Keller identifies "overorthodoxy" as Kaufman's chief strategy, which aims "to take the ideological text more literally than it is prepared (and 'designed') to be taken" (44). Keller finds ample evidence in Kaufman's performances to support his contention that Kaufman's hyper-literal renditions of the American dream repeatedly and consistently underscored the dream's void of identity. Even Kaufman's stint as a busboy, Keller argues, works in this vein because he is subverting the rags-to-riches narrative by deliberately confusing its sequence. Throughout his analysis, a number of pop culture touchstones are also used in order to further explore Kaufman's ideological takedown of that dream, including Andy Warhol, Woody Allen's *Zelig*, and Lenny Bruce.

Keller concludes with a reading of Kaufman as "Elvis Presley's uncanny sibling" (159), beginning with a discussion of Kaufman's brilliant Elvis imitation, much loved by the King himself. This is, arguably, a weak spot in the overall discussion, in part because Keller seems to overemphasize one brief scene in the conclusion to *Man on the Moon* in which, after Kaufman's death, there appears a short nightclub scene that features Tony Clifton's lounge act. Of course, Keller has previously discussed the

gamesmanship with which Kaufman repeatedly problematized Clifton's *real* identity. In the book's conclusion, though, he views Clifton's re-emergence at the end of the film as a mark of "Kaufman's interminability" (158), as if the cultural status and very idea of Kaufman, like Elvis, is being immortalized through replication, post-mortem. The question is whether that brief scene from the film can prop up this hefty connection.

It is not just that Elvis's star easily eclipses his uncanny little brother; Keller is careful to make that essential qualification. Rather, by evading comedy itself as a subject in his discussion of Kaufman's work, Keller also minimizes the generic significance between the two. Resisting, for instance, Greil Marcus's argument that Kaufman's Elvis impersonation is more a parody of other Elvis impersonators, Kaufman wants to claim an "implicit alliance" (153) between the two based on the ideology of the American dream. Yet, one begins to wonder if perhaps Kaufman has duped Keller in this instance because even a qualified acknowledgment of parody could actually work to the advantage of Keller's thesis. He effectively shows in the penultimate chapter how Kaufman parodied the world of wrestling, so it is unclear just what is at stake in his resistance to that same line of argument in the case of the King. After all, the genius of Kaufman's impersonation lies, in large part, in its literal excess, which is a hallmark of parody as well as a cornerstone of Keller's central argument. This particular line of criticism, though, takes us back to the book's first claim, that it is not "about comedy." To make the same claim about Kaufman, though, as Keller at times seems to do, risks reading his performances literally to excess.

Nevertheless, this book is an insightful and provocative examination of Kaufman that makes a compelling case for the American dream as key to his art.

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The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. By Matthew Pateman. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.

Matthew Pateman's *Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may not be the only "Buffy studies" book you'll ever need, but it should certainly be on any list of essential readings in the field. Pateman approaches the pleasures of *Buffy's* "text" as television—recognizing and analyzing the production parameters, while at the same time demonstrating his thesis, "Buffy is television as art, not because it tries to . . . ape the supposed purer realms of literature or even film . . . but because . . . *Buffy* has propelled the possibilities of televisual aesthetics and has done so by embracing and critiquing the cultures that inform, sustain, and sometimes threaten it" (12).

Following an introduction in which "culture" is defined from several perspectives, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, "Aesthetics and Cultures," explores in the first four chapters various ways in which the series represents, interrogates, and resists cultural definitions and perceptions of knowledge and power, ethnicity, history, and ethics. In each of these chapters, Pateman offers significant insights that both acknowledge and reposition previous interpretations. He considers the influences of colonialism, of medieval eschatology, and the signification of good and evil—which Pateman's analysis reveals as more complex on *Buffy* than "good pretty, evil ugly," as has occasionally been supposed. Particular episodes are explored in greater depth: "Tabula Rasa" for commentary on British ethnicity, and "Pangs" for its peculiarly conflicted takes on American history. Pateman's discussion of "Pangs" (in chapter three, "Aesthetics, Culture and History") is typical of the book's method in that it offers tangential opportunities for analysis of "Britishness," one of the topics of the previous chapter on "Ethnicity."

In Part II, "Restless Traditions: The Aesthetics of Involution in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Pateman defines his central interpretive hypothesis, "the aesthetics of involution," and demonstrates its application through



four chapters corresponding to the four dreams that make up the final episode of *Buffy* season four, “Restless.” Although others have commented on *Buffy*’s singularly complex implementation of inter-, intra-, and extra-textuality, Pateman’s theory of involution seems most capable of dealing with a television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which is serial, yet recursive and allusive, “that revels in its own textual excess, that seems to enjoy rewriting its own premises and dismantling the world it had created, that invites the audience to laugh at itself and the show, while being utterly serious in its commitment to a notion of art and artistry that pushes television to places it has not been before” (112). Readers already familiar with the various critical elements from which Pateman constructs portions of his theory of involution—for example, narrative theory, or the work of Lyotard—may find the author’s detailed explanations tedious, but for novices—such as many undergraduate readers of this book are likely to be—they should prove helpful.

A key element of the aesthetics of involution is that any particular scene, line, or even a name or image in one episode may launch, in Pateman’s term, “an involutorial trajectory” leading backwards or forwards (or both) in the episode or series, as well as, possibly, outward into cultural allusions beyond the show itself. Therefore, one strength of the book is the author’s seemingly effortless encyclopedic knowledge of even minute details of 144 episodes of seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. For readers who are not such devoted viewers of the show, these references, sometimes taken out of context as the “involutured” allusions wind back and forth, in and out, may give them the verbal equivalent of whiplash.

Pateman’s conclusion addresses some of the continuing controversies regarding the value of television studies in general and *Buffy* criticism in particular: Is television unworthy of critical consideration? Is the very concept of aesthetics (“quality television”) to be rejected as elitist? Pateman’s no-nonsense answer is “Both positions . . . are clearly stupid.” And *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*



demonstrates just how stupid, contributing not only a valuable addition to the study of *Buffy*, but also a significant step forward in television studies in general. Pateman's "theory of involution" should certainly be applicable to other complex, challenging television shows.

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