

New Vision

Female Spectators: Looking At Film And Television
E. Deirdre Pribram Verso
 £8.95 pbk

The focus of much early feminist film criticism was the deeply-rooted patriarchal ideology in the structures of popular narrative film. Laura Mulvey, along with other feminist critics, found psychoanalysis, in conjunction with other post-structuralist theories, particularly effective for the deconstruction of the unconscious, as well as the conscious, pleasures Hollywood film offered to the male spectator. The conclusions of this early model of feminist film criticism were rather bleak: 'woman' was 'there to be looked at', on display for the voyeuristic and fetishistic pleasures of the male gaze.

How then were we to understand women's participation and pleasure in the cinema? **Female Spectators** is the latest in a series of books which address this question. Accur-

ately billed as a 'state of the art' anthology of 1980s' feminist film criticism, it challenges the textual determinism and ahistoricism of the earlier psychoanalytic criticism. Instead it analyses the processes of female spectatorship, determined not only by gender, but also by race, class, historical context and political consciousness. **Female Spectators** brings together a refreshing set of combinations: sociology and film studies, text and context, film theorists and film makers. Christine Gledhill emphasises the importance of the distinction between the *textual* and the *social* subject for a feminist understanding of the processes of female spectatorship. Drawing on recent approaches to popular culture, she offers the Gramscian concept of 'negotiation' to analyse the complex interaction of text, reader and context, arguing that cultural meanings are always contradictory and actively negotiated.

Taking her usual difficult but stimulating approach, Teresa de Lauretis challenges some of the basic assumptions of feminist uses

of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In rethinking the question of feminist aesthetics, she produces an analysis of Lizzie Borden's *Born In Flames* and argues that we need to analyse how films 'address the spectator as female' and to develop an 'aesthetic of reception'. She focuses on a theme which runs throughout the collection; the differences between 'woman' on the screen and women in the audience, and indeed the differences among women in the audience.

In what is, surprisingly, the only ethnographic piece in this collection, Jacqueline Bobo highlights the implications of cultural differences between women as spectators of Spielberg's *The Color Purple*. Her analysis challenges some of the widespread criticisms of the film, looking instead at black women's pleasures as spectators culturally marginal to popular cinema. This emphasis on the importance of cultural and historical context for feminist film criticism is one of the book's greatest strengths and is developed in several chapters. Notably, Linda Williams

looks at Michael Curtiz's 1945 film *Mildred Pierce* in the context of the second world war, suggesting the specificity of its meaning for women in 1945.

While this collection challenges many of the problems of the earlier psychoanalytic approaches to popular cinema, many of the articles demonstrate the need for further rethinking in this area of feminist work. Some of the articles, in fact, have a rather tenuous link to the question of female spectatorship producing a rather uneven anthology which does not offer a coherent new framework. Indeed, in turning away from psychoanalysis towards cultural theorists such as Gramsci, Jameson and Hall for an understanding of spectators as agents of history, rather than mere victims of ideology, we are in danger of losing sight of the specificity of patriarchy. Perhaps the pull of psychoanalysis was its ability to explain the detailed workings of patriarchy in film and certainly feminists have not yet found an alternative for this project. •
Jackie Stacey



Down On Drugs

The Health Conspiracy
Dr Joe Collier
 Century Hutchinson
 £4.95 pbk

The best critics tend to be insiders. But insiders prepared to be public critics tend to be rare in the complex mesh of relationships between government, industry and doctors that in combination decide which of the £2 billion or so of drugs a year that we swallow or inject.

People like Dr Joe Collier, a clinical pharmacologist at the St George's teaching hospital are thus worth their weight in gold. For Collier understands drugs, the way his colleagues work, the way the government regulates them and the way the industry functions and behaves. And he doesn't much like

what he sees.

For years he has been a determined critic of the way the industry promotes its products, of the secrecy which surrounds decisions on the marketing and safety of drugs, of the increasing financial links - both personal and in terms of dependence on research cash - between doctors and the drug companies. In **The Health Conspiracy**, he sets out to show how doctors, the drug industry and the government undermine our health. It is a pretty convincing case.

The book is strongest when it deals with what Collier knows best - drugs. It is weakest when he broadens his thesis into a more generalised attack on the government's handling of the NHS. When he strays into breast cancer screening, for example, he lambasts the staged introduction of screening. But in practice, expanding breast cancer screening too

fast, without the huge training effort needed to teach both radiographers and radiologists the necessary skills, would be more than likely to do more harm than good - leading to unnecessary biopsies and fear.

In a sense this is nitpicking. Pharmaceuticals are Collier's main target. And in a populist and accessible assault he sets out the case that change is badly needed. Names are named and there are hard examples to back the argument, some of which lead you to hope that Century Hutchinson's libel lawyers have done a good job.

His conclusions include the need to end the Department of Health's role as a double agent, charged with the task both of promoting the industry's profitability and of ensuring drug safety. The functions should be separated.

New drugs should only be marketed when they are shown to be genuinely better

than what is already available. Misleading advertisements should be dealt with under powers ministers already have but scarcely ever use. And the limited list - the list of drugs for which the NHS will pay - should be extended across all categories of medicines.

Patients have a key role in all this, Collier argues; demanding information and shouldering more responsibility for reporting side-effects, while being willing to volunteer for drug trials in return for an effective no-fault compensation scheme when things go wrong.

It is a challenging agenda, and much of it is achievable. But given the multi-national nature of the industry, one is left wondering how much of the industry Britain would have left if everything Collier advocates happened here, but not elsewhere at the same time. •

Nicholas Timmins

