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Spaces of Women's Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking, by Sue Thornham. Bloomsbury, 2019, 226 pp.

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With *Spaces of Women's Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking*, influential feminist scholar Sue Thornham offers an academically rich and inspiring book exploring a distinctively female directorial authorship in cinema. Thornham engages with a wide range of critical and theoretical texts, from feminist, to cultural, sociological and philosophical works. Her rethinking of space, place and genre is a timely framework through which to explore the shifts occurring in the representation of seemingly fixed gender categories that have traditionally structured film's generic conventions and the image of women in art, literature and cinema. This book is divided into thematically broad chapters titled: "Wilderness Spaces", "City Spaces", "Interior Spaces", "Border Spaces" and "Double Spaces: The Landscape of Adaptation". In each, Thornham critically assesses how contemporary women's filmmaking has innovatively and rigorously repositioned women's role and recast their relational qualities within the heterogeneous topographies of contemporary cinema. Thus, she evokes aesthetics of "real", metaphorical and symbolical space and place, where both definitions coexist and intersect in women's cultural practice; their creativity often unveiling interstitial, yet affirmatively inhabited, environments.

Notions of space and landscape are historically identified with representations of empire in art and its mastery of space and nature. In "Wilderness Spaces", Thornham explores cinema as the interface between the real, natural world and its choreographed space. Specifically, in order to conceptualise representations of this spatial dimension, she explores how women's cinema narrates what "naturally" already was, and is, part of a new world, and thus suggests how women's creativity and critical practice redress their transformative potentials.

By drawing on Rebecca Solnit's and Anne McClintock's writings, Thornham conducts a useful historical survey of literature about American/western landscape art and nature photography; cinematic imaginings of "wilderness spaces". She subsequently examines a series of stereotyped depictions of femininity and imperialist fantasies of space projecting scenarios of conquest and subjugation. The image of femininity in art, Thornham explains, appeared as either idealised or deviant (19); while Black women had consistently been made invisible. Regarding historical representations of space, Thornham suggests that women's filmmaking has increasingly been offering more positive and powerful, and often less polarised, reimaginings of women's roles and subjectivities.

For example, she examines the recalibrated generic conventions of the classically masculine film genre, the western. She firstly explores Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) and explains how the filmmaker's vision of women foregrounds their qualities such as leadership, determination and resilience. On the one hand, despite the difficulties they encounter whilst travelling, women can be seen as transcending the asperity of the wide-open frontiers of the western landscape; whilst the slow pace of the film also reveals their experience of an intense situated-ness, persistence of vision and self-awareness. Through the use of the square frame (1.33 aspect ratio), Reichardt conveys women's constricted vision, reflecting how, in the nineteenth century, women used to wear a bonnet that limited their view over the expanse of the American desert (25). This visual aspect helps to construe an aesthetic of landscape, characterised by spatial symmetry, which may be seen as synonymous with women's moral and psychological stability in transcending these spatial limitations. On the other hand, Reichardt's vision may connote women's perception of spatial immensity as limited and constraining. Thornham argues that this "closed-in quality of the landscape" emphasises women's immanence in space and focus on their mundane tasks (25); hence providing another perspective on their strength and resilience, as the film's cinematography also imbues nature with a sense of awe and tranquillity. I would argue that there is formal continuity with Reichardt's latest revision of the western, *First Cow* (2019), in which the traditional Academy ratio is deployed to construct a perception of space and nature, as if it were a canvas, this time for male resourcefulness and intimacy; in contrast, the travellers in *Meek's Cutoff* often appear to float through space in long shots.

The conventions of the western may be diffused and dispersed, as the tangible equilibriums between space and time—the films' slow narrative and spatial continuum—seem to displace the traditional masculine physical heroics and fast-paced narratives. The filmmaker's depiction of space could be seen as a reflection of Simone de Beauvoir's "*dépaysement*" whereby, as Thornham mentions, when reading books de Beauvoir would "travel in the mind", so that "books displaced her from her own territory" (3).

Thus, Thornham suggests that the changing gender roles in society, and thus new subject positions, inspire contemporary women's cinema's reversal of generic conventions, as also attested to through her examination of cross-dressing in Maggie Greenwald's western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993). The author draws on Marjorie Garber's theory of "progress narratives" and cultural anxieties (32), as the protagonist Jo defies any typical idea of woman or man in this re-envisioning of the genre. "Wilderness spaces" suggests that women's cinematic reconfigurations of space and place emphasise a female subjectivity situated both in familiar places and inhospitable spaces, playing both maternal and paternal roles, as Thornham's exploration of Debra Granik's dependable young heroine in *Winter's Bone* (2010) testifies. By redrawing the map of the symbolic western frontiers, the author reminds us that contemporary women's filmmaking posits the erosion of masculinity's old code of honour and that women's thoughtful spaces of reflection, projecting new mindscapes, can displace traditionally male linear narratives.

Thornham draws a historical map of gendered narratives in the chapter "City Spaces": the urban space of modernity structured by man is a space of culture, civilisation and rationality; in contrast, the space of nature, narrated as female, is pure, uncharted and potentially turning to wilderness. The author points out different perspectives and characterisations of space: the city has both public spaces and private places, where both men and women live, and of which they become custodians. If, for Deborah Parsons, women in the city of myth personify myth itself, for Elizabeth Mahoney city spaces can be considered

both as geographical topographies and concept: "philosophical conceptions of time and space spatialize the feminine, and particularly the maternal body" (52), which may remind us of the continuous circular panning in Laura Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's seminal experimental film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977).

Thornham alludes to the difficulties of un-fixing gendered ideas of space stemming from the concept of the city in modernity. She notes that if nature is coded as feminine, the city can equally be regarded as feminine, as city spaces are feminised by the woman's presence and consumer gaze. By drawing on Michel de Certeau's writing of the late twentieth century city, a "Concept-city", both a place and a complex, wandering, mobile space (53), Thornham describes how a woman, being a roving observer and onlooker, typifies "a specifically female *flânerie*" (54). She thus traces the cultural legacies of women's exploration of city spaces and finds that in the late nineteenth-century these also included department stores and pre-cinematic machines such as the panorama and Diorama, through which they could become *voyageuses*. The author mentions Giuliana Bruno's and Ann Henley's writings on female "autonomous selfhood", defining woman's private mindscape as entering a "privatized dream-world" (56). Thornham reminds us, then, that women's filmmaking conceives space as both "real" and "concept", "experienced and narrativized" (53).

Thornham brings to the reader's attention convincing examples of women's mapping of new cinematic topographies. One is Kathryn Bigelow's neo-noir *Blue Steel* (1990), which marks a shift in perspective from film noir's generic conventions and its male-coded urban worlds. Thornham writes that in *Blue Steel* "the phallic femininity it implies [is] a performance not an essence" (58), as the female heroine, cop Megan Turner, outwardly expresses, rather than represses, as in film noir, a tougher, "masculine" exterior. This reconfiguration of a woman's urban mindscape invokes Judith Butler's theory of the "performativity" of gender, de Beauvoir's existentialist approach, and proto-feminist criticism of the category of "woman" defined by essential qualities in relation to man's transcendental abilities. Film auteur Bigelow situates the heroic subjectivity of a "phallic femininity" within both public spaces and private urban places, regulated by harsh processes of becoming and negotiation with societal norms. Thornham evaluates how the filmmaker offers a female "cross-dressed in her cop's uniform" different possibilities and pleasures through structured *seeing* regimes as Megan inhabits gender-regulated spaces (61): in the suburban place of her family home she is a girl, in the urban streets of New York, a masculine cop.

For Thornham, in *Red Road* (2006) Andrea Arnold instead rewrites the conventions of the British social realist film, using her confident authorship to shift the generic markers to the woman's gaze. Thornham concurs with Charlotte Brunsdon (62): through the female protagonist's ostensibly transcendental gaze, the film peers into a woman's potential to control and objectify the world that surrounds her. As both a subject and object of viewing regimes, Jackie is a Glasgow CCTV operative, who experienced a primal scene of sorts and is compelled to confront her past. Arguably, by being situated within and outside public and private urban spaces, her vision disrupts and recasts the masculine space of the city. Her watchful vision turns into an introverted, inward gaze, which engenders both consciousness and confusion as to how to comprehend and reconstitute her (traumatised) subjective plenitude. Thornham's attention to a woman's sensory and empathetic exploration of the city is underpinned by Vivian Sobchack's and Laura U. Marks's theories on "vision as mimesis" (73). Drawing on Northrop Frye, Thornham explores the space of woman in Coline Serreau's

Chaos (2001), which, in contrast to *Red Road*, is defined by her outward gaze, as her subjectivity interfaces between civilised urban places, the family home, and the wide-open seascape (80). This, in my mind, may echo with Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) with the female protagonists' vision turning from restrictive social and family norms to the sea.

In the chapter titled "Interior Spaces", which seems to follow in natural succession, the central notion of women's subjectivity is connoted by mobility. Thornham mainly draws on the insightful writings of Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray and Dorothy Leland to ask how in cinematic spaces women move beyond an "internalized", private and homely "geography" (92). This chapter considers Grosz's theories on architecture, envisaging transformative possibilities for women's "movement across and within the places that at present enclose and fix them"; namely, the traditional family home (95). Well-chosen film examples set out contrasting thematic and critical approaches. The aesthetics of documentary realism and poetic symbolism in Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (*Panj é asr*, 2003) combine to present ruined spaces as an evocation of how women's passage across stringent social and urban structures is marked by circular time. While in Makhmalbaf's film women find "a space of liberation" in school, in Carol Morley's all-female environment *The Falling* (2015) and Jessica Hausner's hyper-romantic resolutions in *Amour Fou* (2014) closed interiors are irremediably overwhelming, causing women distress and insanity. This is where Thornham's book becomes less favourable to women.

Compared to the previous chapter, "Border Spaces" reinscribes the author's positive approach to women's spaces in cinema. By tracing the legacy of pre-cinematic media, she deploys the idea of the map traversed by female travellers as a metaphor to suggest that filmmaking is a spatially related activity; like drawing an imaginary cartography. She links women's contribution to creating a culture of pre-cinematic image projection and exhibition through their work with the magic lantern, moving panoramas and travelling lectures. The architecture of these exhibitions suggests how women may have perceived private and public space, mastering its border spaces both visually and physically through self-aware distance. Thornham persuasively draws on Tom Gunning's and Noel Burch's theories about the role of narrative frames and spectatorship in order to underpin women's work in a proto- and early cinematic world, in which they conveyed a perception of immersiveness and spatial depth, at times inducing disorientation (127). Also useful is Giuliana Bruno's testimony about the geographical map as a text with shifting positions, another metaphor for women's filmmaking, which over time has orchestrated the perception of filmic space as mobile and ever-changing (130). Consequently, Thornham conceives of women as both mastering space and being marginalised by its borders, often traversing impenetrable landscapes, or situated within its liminal spaces of transition. Claire Denis's *White Material* (2009) exemplifies this, as the French protagonist has resided for a long time in African territory and experiences life as an outsider.

This book is also evidence of how both real (social) and metaphorical narrative spaces—unravelling both on and offscreen—are crucial to contextualise female subjectivity, as Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) exemplify. By exploring the latter film, Thornham perceptively engages with Manthia Diawara's perspective on Dash's new cultural space where Black women are placed in a liminal territory. The beach of Ibo Landing, one of the Sea Islands, functions as an imagined border space, which separates the lived experience of a multi-generational Black community from offscreen space, the constantly evoked future life in mainland America. The wide open

seascape is the backdrop to the island's multi-layered cultural fabric which inspires the narrativized, spatial aesthetics of a mythical time on the island. Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of a border space as "at once the site of multiple occupation and colonization and a hybrid space of future possibilities" is particularly persuasive (151). Dash inscribes female subjectivity by drawing on Black American women's storytelling about the island being a place of resistance to slavery.

The analysis of women's filmmaking as provider of a discursive space for women's subjectivities continues with the chapter "Doubled Spaces: The Landscapes of Adaptation", in which Thornham constructively references Linda Hutcheon's notion of the palimpsest as the spatial metaphor for the haunting relationship of the original literary text to cinematic adaptation (159). Hence, Thornham refers to Seymour Chatman's perceptive analysis of the limitations of space of cinematic adaptations, through the example of Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (1936), adapted from Guy de Maupassant's short story; as, for Chatman, the cinema is otherwise versed to describe the "interior" qualities of time (160). Arguably, the latter also create an aesthetic of diegetic space as, for Laura Mulvey, women's on-screen presence "tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (161). Thus, it could be argued instead that contemporary women filmmakers' doubled spaces entail (co-)authorship through the female protagonist, which suggests her compelling qualities to both halt and regulate the "interior" temporal qualities of diegetic space.

Thornham elicits female co-authorship in both literary and cinematic texts through the example of Marleen Gorris's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997), in which the protagonist personifies Virginia Woolf's vision enmeshing of a personal and imaginary landscape. Thornham points us then towards the co-existence of authorial female subjectivities through the "autobiographical I" of Janet Frame's storytelling mode, which inspires and guides Jane Campion in her film *An Angel at my Table* (1990). Both authors interweave their female protagonists' perspectives throughout spaces and places designed by societal norms. Here, Thornham cites Muriel Andrin, who points out how Campion creates a "breathing space" (182), partly fictional and partly autobiographical.

In conclusion, Thornham's *Spaces of Women's Cinema* exemplifies an inspiring epistemological journey throughout a heterogeneous, spatialised and narrativised cultural map, which attests to growing scholarship in historiographical and authorial approaches to women's filmmaking. In seeking to identify women's innovative, discursive subject position, through a mostly persuasive selection of films, Thornham has clearly provided an interdisciplinary approach and very engaging insights into ideas of space, place and genre in contemporary women's cinema.

References

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The Falling. Directed by Carol Morley, Cannon and Morley Productions, 2015.

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The Piano. Directed by Jane Campion, Jan Chapman Productions, 1993.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire. Directed by Celine Sciamma, Lilies Films, 2019.

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Riddles of the Sphinx. Directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, BFI, 1977.

White Material. Directed by Claire Denis, Why Not Productions, 2009.

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