

book review

Renewing Film's Public Emphasis

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Patricia White

Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms

Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015

ISBN 9780822358053 RRP US\$24.95

Patricia White's thoughtful and constructive *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* begins with an anecdote. White evokes the moment when Barbara Streisand, announcing Kathryn Bigelow as the winner of the Best Director award at the Academy Awards ceremony in 2010, made a declaration redolent with 'liberal feminist outrage at the academy's previous exclusion of women from the prestige category': "'The time has come!'" (1) A broad interpretation of what Streisand's phrase might mean, one that brings into play a host of ways in which the 'celluloid ceiling' (2, citing Lauzen) can be broken,

ISSN 1837-8692

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Citation: Cultural Studies Review (CSR) 2015, 21, 4644, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i2.4644>

becomes the starting point for White's hopeful account of women's cinema as world cinema. Referencing Miriam Hansen's arguments regarding the role played by silent cinema in projecting a 'horizon of collective experience for heterogeneous groups of women coming into modernity' (3) about a century ago, White makes it clear early on that her analysis of women's films as world cinema is shaped by values central to various public sphere discussions. In these discussions, media such as literature and film are valorised on account of their public dimensions, their orientation towards matters of genuine common concern. In the issues brought to public awareness and the discursive, action-oriented responses that specific sites of reception foster, proponents of various public spheres—ranging from the bourgeois kind to alternative counter-publics—find contributions to community building and the formation of robust civil societies.

Whereas Hansen drew attention to the workings of an 'alternative public sphere' (3) in the context of film exhibition in the United States about a century ago, White foregrounds the potential that world cinema now has 'to renew [cinema's] public emphasis amid the privatization of global mass media'. (3) White finds 'a transnational feminist social vision' (5) in the work of the women filmmakers she discusses, and her aim is to capture the dynamics of its articulation and the social and institutional bases of its efficacy. Driving the narrative that is developed in *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* is a commitment to demonstrating the extent to which women's cinema, while 'much different than the cine-feminism of the 1970s' remains 'a dynamic force'. (11) This dynamism is seen as reflected not only in the 'strong identities' (11) that organisations such as Taiwan's Women Make Waves, Seoul's Women's International Film Festival, Ankara's Flying Broom, and London's Birds Eye View have been able to establish, but also in the thriving networks that bring these sites together on a global basis. Women's cinema today, White claims, 'encompasses a world of difference'. (12) More specifically, as a concept and category, women's cinema encompasses filmmaking from all parts of the world, and much of this filmmaking by women is concerned with issues requiring social and political change. Embedded within the filmmaking, in short, is the promise of new kinds of world making.

One of the strengths of *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* is the clarity with which White spells out the methodological choices and envisaged contributions that

structure her study. White extends Lúcia Nagib's influential definition of world cinema as 'simply the cinema of the world' (as opposed to what is left when Hollywood is removed from a binary opposition between it and the rest of the world). More specifically, White's claim is that 'women's cinema should always be seen as world cinema'. (4) While this claim could be seen as stipulating a particular definition of women's cinema—one that could well be in tension with a given historical reality—White's aim is to demonstrate its validity empirically and with reference mostly to filmmaking from the turn of the century onwards. This she does through careful analyses focusing on filmmakers 'from Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Peru, South Korea, and Taiwan'. (7) White also draws on Dudley Andrew's rethinking of the concept of world cinema, adopting his notion of an 'orientation map', in this instance to clarify what is to be gained by seeing the world through perspectives, or from angles, offered by women's cinema. (15) With her simultaneous emphasis on women's cinema and world cinema, indeed her construal of the former as a subcategory of the latter, White sees herself as insisting on the need to give gender its due, as film scholars pursue the project of rethinking cinema in light of globalisation and transnationalism. 'Women's cinema', White claims, is a term that is 'not in wide circulation today'. (200) The task of the book is to remedy this situation and thereby to realise the potential for change that exists in women's filmmaking: 'Contemporary cinema studies must now contend with a critical mass of films by women directors; doing so could change the world' (201) for the better.

White's focus is fiction feature films, her assumption being that 'feature films in international circulation are uniquely important vectors of transnational feminist imagination and publicity—in the dual sense of press attention and publicness'. (8) In terms of their production contexts, the feature films selected for discussion involve a considerable range, for whereas some are rooted in large as well as small film-producing nations with well-established industries, others are the products of emergent industries or the results of international co-productions. Another structural feature of White's book is the decision to concentrate on filmmakers from places other than the United States and Europe, (20) the point being to answer questions about the extent to which 'cinematic visions of women in the Global South [are] being coopted by European financing and the commodity forms of art house

distribution'. (20) Even with these emphases and exclusions, White's subject is potentially unwieldy, tending, as she herself puts it, towards the 'encyclopedic'. (20) White resolves this issue through another well-justified delimitation. The cinematic works through which White develops her argument were selected, we are told, on account of their 'aesthetic and cultural significance' but also because they 'reveal the institutional shapes of film culture', (7) through their ties to various 'industrial formations in their countries of origin' and their circulation via many of the 'same festival and art house networks'. (8)

White's approach is a capacious one that makes productive use of insights derived from her own close involvement (through *Women Make Movies*) with relevant networks, from cultural and stylistic analysis, and from an analytics of context that takes seriously practitioner's agency and its institutional conditions of possibility. Methodologically, White's position is clear: 'categories we have used—authorship, aesthetics, and address—remain vital, yet they are insufficient at this juncture. They must be supplemented by consideration and theorization of institutional questions.' (13) White does not speak very directly to the question of how the conceptual framework is to be expanded, but it is clear from her discussion that 'institution' encompasses phenomena such as film festivals, activist networks, film education and training, and film policy. In *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* White pursues her commitment to methodological diversity through a constructive conversation with a range of thinkers who are generously cast as likeminded fellow travellers of sorts. Indeed, a striking and appealing feature of White's book is her tendency to frame the discussion in ways that recognise the contributions of earlier work on women's cinema, on cinema's contribution to the formation of publics and counter-publics, on the specificities of small-nation cinema and peripheral cinema, on film festivals, and on art cinema, transnational cinema, and world cinema. The result of White's approach is deeply compelling, for in her book emphases that are often exclusive—authorial and institutional ones, for example—are made to work together, so as to reveal the complexities of women's cinema as world cinema. In *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*, the figure of the director is a robust one—'the personae of women directors are read as closely as their films' (21)—that effectively clarifies what the idea of a female auteur looks like in practice. Yet, in White's study, the larger dynamics that constrain and enable the female auteurs from a Global

South are equally apparent: 'the politics of funding and programming', the protocols by which celebrities are reviewed and anointed, and the 'political agendas' (7) that are variously in play.

Women's Cinema, World Cinema encompasses five chapters, an introduction and an afterword. White is clear about the organisation of the five chapters. Eschewing organisational principles based on 'director or region', (20) White opts to devote each chapter to the analysis of 'a discourse that has enabled the emergence of young women directors in recent years'. (20) The discourses in question have to do with 'elite auteurism, cultural authenticity, women's genres, regional networks, and women's human rights' (20) and these are explored through case studies with a comparative dimension. In each chapter, what White calls 'the problem of the world'—the relevant issue of public concern—is brought to the foreground through comparative discussions of at least two works and filmmakers. *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* charts the transnational circulation of films by women, but it does not lose sight of the role that national and regional factors play in facilitating this process. White is emphatic about her position in this regard: 'The national does not disappear in the transnational, either in considerations of production cultures and policies or in reception contexts'. (21) It is White's contention that 'older national cinema models' (201) are poor vehicles for understanding the conditions enabling contemporary women's cinema and the promise that this cinema holds, yet there is no intent here to deny the efficacy, at times positive, at other times negative, of national discourses, identities and institutions. White's nuanced and balanced perspective on the intertwining of subnational, national, regional, transnational and global dimensions of women's cinema as world cinema makes for analyses that are highly persuasive.

It is helpful, in conclusion, to provide a sense of the specifics of the five case studies. The first chapter, an exploration of the discourse of elite auteurism, asks where 'women's cinema [is] lodged between the discourses of auteurism and (expanded) national representativeness' (38) and answers this question through careful consideration of the practices and works of New Zealander Jane Campion, Argentinean Lucrecia Martel and Iranian Samira Makhmalbaf, as these interact with an elite festival culture. Deepa Mehta, an Indian-Canadian, and Marjane Satrapi and Shirin Neshat, both part of the Iranian diaspora, provide the focus for chapter two,

which looks at the ways ‘films by women directors’, especially those from the Global South, ‘are positioned within a humanist definition of art cinema’, (68) one where notions of sincerity, justice, taste and courage are recurring themes. In chapter three White takes on the work of South Korean Jeong Jae-eun and Lebanese Nadine Labaki, the point being to understand how the globalisation of a genre such as the ‘chick flick’ can serve feminist ends. In chapter four, the relation between women’s filmmaking and networks—construed in both narrative and sociological terms—is given due attention, through cases based on the cinematic practices of Indonesian producer-director Nia Dinata and Taiwanese director Zero Chou. In the final chapter, dealing with women’s rights as human rights, White sets the stage for her discussion of filmmaking by Pakistani Sabiha Sumar, Bosnian Jasmila Žbanić and Peruvian Claudia Llosa by referring to the United States’ failure to date to ratify the UN General Assembly’s Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. (170) White concludes *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* by highlighting women filmmakers’ role in mediating ‘contemporary human rights issues through idioms and institutions of world cinema’. (26) At the same time she draws attention to the challenges that such a process involves, including the risk the director runs of having her identity be defined in terms of victim status and access somehow to a given ‘nation’s trauma’. (25)

Patricia White’s *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* makes many contributions and deserves to be read by cinephiles, scholars and students alike. The book really does end up being precisely the kind of ‘orientation map’ White sets out to create, for it does indeed show us what the world looks like from the perspective of women filmmakers from the Global South. White has dealt with material that is dauntingly unwieldy and has provided the great scholarly service of making it far less so for others. She has provided a wonderful ‘map’, one that enables an informed and focused engagement with the very best of contemporary women’s cinema from the Global South. Her book makes a very strong case for the importance of women’s cinema as world cinema. I recommend it most warmly.

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