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# REVIEWS

## Women at the Movies

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*Red Velvet Seat*

*Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema*

ed. Antonia Lant with Ingrid Periz, Verso, 2006.

Women joined mass culture because of and through the institution of cinema, according to *Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema*. In fact, the writings collected in Antonia Lant's new anthology, edited with Ingrid Periz, suggest, as Lant notes, "that cinema made women's new participation in public life evident and concrete as nothing before it had; that the female collectivity of the auditorium was part of female suffrage; that, in some way, cinema expressed that women had arrived." Yet women's responses to and perspectives on their cinematic experiences were far from homogeneous. Indeed, the more than eight hundred pages that make up this volume suggest a vast array of concerns, opinions, and approaches, as well as a remarkable passion and eloquence regarding the nature and import of cinema. Lant's selection of articles,

authors, and themes aims for breadth and diversity, and it succeeds not only in raising numerous issues of interest to contemporary film studies, but also in reminding us of the tremendous significance of cinema and cinema studies for our understanding of the twentieth century.

The historical and social experience of cinema—as lived, understood and written about by women in their infinite diversity—is brought to life by this anthology. We are privy to detailed descriptions of neighborhood theatres and picture palaces, of varied and often vocal audiences, and of the personal and political investment of eager or wary consumers, commentators and participants in this image industry. We can hear chatty audiences at ethnic theatres in lower Manhattan, and see the solitary mothers, "figures of weariness at rest," at the London matinees.

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We can smell “the dark, ill-ventilated little theatres in Vienna” where “men smoked and wore their hats, and . . . a boy with an apparatus . . . went round spraying the air” or share Elizabeth Bowen’s excitement: “like a chocolate-box lid, the entrance is still voluptuously promising: sensation of some sort seems to be guaranteed.” From Emily Post, we learn rules of etiquette when attending the movies in the early twenties: it’s alright to attend a matinee with a man, but reading captions out loud is considered annoying. For Dorothy Richardson, however, a loquacious fellow viewer, whose commentaries accompany entire screenings, reveals to her that cinema is a public place where women *can* speak out loud and that “the onlooker is a part of the spectacle.” With the coming of sound film, poet H.D. expresses her deep ambivalence about the new talkies—fine for Lindbergh and newsreels that try to generate international understanding, but devastating for the stars. On the other hand, sound gives Geraldyn Dismore hope for greater African-American participation in film, given the power and beauty of black voices.

In addition to the critics, poets, activists, actresses, screenwriters, columnists, psychoanalysts, proponents and critics of censorship, and specialists in etiquette and fashion, the voices of women directors are also significant in this collection. Alice Guy Blaché, Lillian Gish, Lois Weber, Germaine Dulac, Lotte Reiniger, and Maya Deren each give us their personal visions and hopes for cinema or describe their methods

of work. Reiniger’s essay is of particular interest, in the form of an imagined dialogue in which she argues the importance of the frame, composition, and what she calls “space-time diagonals,” while Maya Deren’s frank autobiographical piece for *Mademoiselle* illuminates her evolution as a young filmmaker. Nor is fiction excluded from Lant and Periz’s anthology, when it so ably conveys the psychic investments of women in the world of cinema as in Katherine Mansfield’s and Zelda Fitzgerald’s finely honed stories of characters either deluded or empowered by their desire to be in the movies. And Virginia Woolf, here essayist and critic rather than novelist, tells us that “while all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say.” Yet she imagines a day when cinema will discover how to express “visual emotion” and anticipates some of film’s more recent experimental techniques.

Several writers have numerous pieces. The wry Dorothy Richardson—novelist and frequent contributor to the early film journal *Close-Up*—has top place with eight selections, while other writers with at least three essays include writers Djuna Barnes and Colette; narrative, avant-garde, and newsreel filmmaker Germaine Dulac; critic and MoMA Film Library curator Iris Barry; and African-American actress and columnist Fredi Washington. But there are numerous others, more and less well-known, whose passionate, pointed opinions and lucid descrip-

tions grace the pages of this volume. It is, indeed, full of astute and revealing observations, written by women of varying economic, ethnic, and professional backgrounds, and before film analysis became the province of academia with its characteristic disciplinary distance. It is also full of conflicting positions—on whether and which films have cultural or educational value, social impact, or need censorship. Lant allows, sometimes even pushes, the tension between contradictory opinions to surface, and the value she places on the diversity of women's attitudes is part of what makes the volume so rich.

This cursory overview of some of the contributions in *Red Velvet Seat*, however, does not do justice to the intellectual rigor and expansive historical research that underlie Lant and Periz's work. With its hundred and sixty-odd articles by more than one hundred authors, the book is divided into five sections with Lant's scholarly essays introducing the volume as well as each section. The first section contains numerous accounts of film-going, with much attention to the gender, class, ethnic, and racial make-up of audiences. Then "What Was Cinema?" focuses on writings addressing aesthetic and ontological concerns. Essays in "Cinema as a Power" examine the (potential and actual) effects of cinema on spectators and society and questions of censorship from the point of view of social reformers, activists, and critics. "The Critic's Hat" focuses on criticism and analysis, and finally "Cinema as a Job" contains writings by

women working in the field of film—as actresses, screenwriters, directors, theater-managers, and more—as well as depictions of the lure of cinema as a locus of fantasy and economic transformation. Each of the five sections is in turn divided into thematic subsections that bring together writings across a fifty-year period. This idea-driven, rather than chronological, organization of the book encourages readers' engagement with Lant's concerns, in spite of the occasional anomaly of reading an essay before the one to which it was responding.

Constituting about a fifth of the book, Lant's eloquent contributions anticipate many of the questions raised by the texts, point out resonances and contradictions, contextualize the writings with numerous other historical sources (citing texts by numerous—female and male—writers not included in the anthology), and relate the materials to areas of current theoretical concern, such as reception studies and the recent focus on embodiment. While the anthology is obviously defined by gender, she never shirks questions of race or class, and she has done an excellent job of including texts that bring these issues into the spotlight.

Lant and Periz's volume will certainly become a major reference for women's writings on cinema during the first half of the twentieth century. Its thematically defined structure, variety of writing genres and topics, and in-depth contextualization allow for multiple uses, both in and outside the university classroom. One can read thematically following Lant's groupings, or chronologically (here

it might have been helpful to have the publication dates listed in the table of contents), or selectively, to gain insight into an individual writer or historical moment. Lant's essays alone provide a discerning overview and analysis of the period. Explicitly resisting generalization, she raises questions rather than providing pat answers, thus complicating our sense of what cinema, and its reception, was and is. In addition, each selection is carefully annotated and complemented by a biographical note on

the writer, and the book includes extensive notes and substantial primary and secondary bibliographies. It also contains a fabulous array of images—portraits of writers; illustrations of audiences; and cartoons depicting correct, or incorrect, behavior. One could not ask for a more thorough and engaging sourcebook, one that will also inspire subsequent study and research. As such, it both serves and bodes well for the ever-expanding field of film studies.

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