Lawrence, Film Theory & Literature

Linda Mizejewski

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 38, Number 1, 1995, pp. 131-134 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/373532/summary
(Carbondale, 1965), devoted more than twenty pages to a study of the manuscripts of three poems from *The Wind among the Reeds*. One may well ask whether the Cornell edition will lead to a revision of Bradford's findings; I think that the Cornell editorial board should have addressed this question. I suggest that they rethink their ban on critical evaluation of the manuscript versions and their development.

The editor of *The Heme's Egg* had an easier task; there are only two unpublished versions prior to the printed text of 1938, one a manuscript, the other a typescript. The manuscript is already fairly close to the final text; the typescript is so close that it has been possible to cite variant readings from the published text in the footnotes. The reader is further helped by running titles over the transcriptions, indicating the scenes and lines of the published text. There is little work involved in tracing Yeats's revisions; apparently the whole play was well fixed in his mind before he began to write it down. For this reason, Alison Armstrong's introduction is not much concerned with editorial and technical matters; instead she focuses, quite helpfully and in disregard of the editorial board's policy, on questions of interpretation and on the possible sources and their transformations at Yeats's hands. There is, in fact, very little to be said about the changes from manuscript to published text.

The decision made by the editorial board of the Cornell Yeats to publish reference works rather than critical studies is perhaps understandable, but it does not work well, as these two volumes show. A preliminary discussion of the relevance of the manuscripts of *The Wind among the Reeds* to a poem's meaning by way of a few exemplary analyses should not be beyond the scope of the editor. On the other hand the reference character of the edition cannot be very pronounced when the manuscript material, as in the case of *The Heme's Egg*, is not particularly substantial or diversified. Yeats's early poetry is altogether more interesting in this respect; but, as noted above, there are formidable obstacles on the way to a sensible presentation and I am not sure that they can be overcome satisfactorily.

K. P. S. Jochum
Universität Bamberg

**Lawrence, Film Theory & Literature**


IN THE PAST DECADE, studies such as Anne Friedberg's *Win-
dow Shopping and Rachel Bowlby’s *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* have instructively eroded traditional boundaries between the study of visual and literary texts. While the politics and definitions of “cultural studies” remain in contention, one undisputed effect of these debates has been the reanimated attention to the relations between film and modern literature as co-products of culturally-produced ways of seeing. Thus Gavriel Moses in *The Nickel Was for the Movies* is able to describe the subgenre of the “film novel,” structured by cinematic forms and themes, and Joan Copjec’s recent anthology, *Shades of Noir*, can seamlessly include essays on Raymond Chandler and Cornell Woolrich in its project to challenge and redirect older assumptions about *film noir* as genre or closed set.

Yet the example of the Copjec anthology illustrates how the political stakes, especially for feminism, are raised in this redefined area of film/literary/cultural studies. An important precedent of the Copjec anthology is E. Ann Kaplan’s 1981 collection, *Women in Film Noir*, still in print and still vividly persuasive, with all its grainy stills and militant 1970s feminist usages of Lacan. *Shades of Noir* is able to broaden its political questions to include race, the cult of private enjoyment, and homelessness, but in its project as “cultural study,” what is lost is the urgency of specifically feminist questions, the hard and even bitter sex and gender questions intrinsic to *film noir*; the references to essays in Kaplan are polite but not central.

In contextualizing Linda Ruth Williams’s *Sex in the Head*, I have belabored this example from *film noir* criticism because one of the pleasures of the Williams book is its levelheaded feminist agenda, its clear articulation of how an interdisciplinary project can read against the grain of an infamously phallocentric modernist. Williams is neither buttressing the standard feminist arguments against Lawrence nor “saving” him for feminism. Her precedent, as she herself points out, is Tania Modleski’s critique of Alfred Hitchcock, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, which similarly illustrates how the work of a master misogynist works against itself, its sexism riddled with nervous disavowals of and identifications with the feminine. Williams is interested in Lawrence as a writer both obsessed with and contemptuous of the visual, his fierce advocacy of blindness and darkness centralized in his sexual metaphysics. Focusing on Lawrence as a “spectator of spectatorship,” a phrase she borrows from Bowlsby, Williams resituates Lawrence’s well-known lament about “sex in the head” as a question of
vision, knowledge, and sexual politics, a question of “what men and women can and cannot know, whether they can know the same things, and whether one sex has a stronger visual relationship with the world than the other.” Williams is thus able to utilize theories of vision and psychoanalytic film theory in a refreshingly materialist way, contextualizing Lawrence within the increasingly visual dimensions of modernity, within film culture, and within the history of public definitions of pornography.

Beginning with the nearly unreadable Fantasia of the Unconscious and continuing through the major novels, Williams convincingly illustrates the value of film theory in dealing with a writer so absorbed in and nervous about visual relations, particularly the power and danger of the female gaze. Williams’s starting point for a reading of Women in Love, for example, is Nick Browne’s theory of the spectator-in-the-text, which describes the double positioning of the film spectator that enables paradoxical identifications with characters who are denigrated or rejected by the point of view by which they are known. The doubled reading position is crucial in Lawrence because readers “see through the eyes of women, but women are denigrated for seeing.” Thus, though Lawrence’s powerful, even deadly, female gazes seem to contradict some of feminist film theory’s arguments about specular power relations, the results are hardly progressive: “Lawrence’s women do not gain from their visual power or pleasure, moving only from the reactive pleasures of ‘sharp sight’ to self-castigation and back again.” However, female characters in Lawrence are also convenient voyeurs, allowing the incessant spectacles of the male body to parade in what seems like a heterosexual forum. The dynamics of this “cross-gazing,” as Williams describes it, are particularly cinematic in nature. Drawing on Christian Metz’s theories of distance and disavowal in film spectatorship, Williams describes how the erotics of Gerald and Gudrun’s relationship in Women in Love is dependent on the structures of voyeurism and exhibitionism, a relationship in which “touch becomes a metaphor for sight, the primary sense of desire.”

The importance of Gerald’s visualization by Gudrun prompts Williams to ask what Miriam Hansen asks about Rudolf Valentino (an actor despised by Lawrence): when the male body becomes the spectacle of desire, what happens to visual organizations of heterosexuality? It is not just Lawrence’s “mythical sexism” but his entire rhetoric of sexual difference that collapses in this dynamic, in which “neither heterosexu-
ality nor homosexuality emerge as pure forms of desire." The homoerotic aspects of Lawrence's work have been widely commented upon, but Williams's emphasis on specularity yields fascinating observations on the slippery relationship between the homoerotic and the heterosexual in Lawrence, the "sliding between identities and identifications, which is exposed at certain moments." The key trope here for Williams is exposure, not just in voyeurism and exhibitionism, but within cultural mores of "what can be seen" and what is scrutinized in Lawrence's banned books. Exploring Lawrence's paradoxical position as transgressive "dirty" author and grim campaigner against "genuine pornography," Williams illustrates how his own writing is characterized by a similar dialectic of "assertion and denial . . . exposure and quick silencing." The dialectic articulates Lawrence's "self-transgressions," in that "he wants to, but quite explicitly does not, keep the sexes pure." The anal sexuality in Lady Chatterley's Lover may be an obvious case for such ambiguity, but Williams positions it in a complex argument linking specular relations in horror films with Lawrence's horror of and fascination with the eye as penetrable surface, dilating orifice. Indeed, for Lawrence, visual relations compound sexual identifications because "the look—of desire, of men and women—subverts the fixed place of the seer."

Williams's argument for the primacy of visual relations in Lawrence is so strong and her movement between cinematic theory and literary text so elegant, that one is delighted—rather than shocked—to find, late in the book, that Carol J. Clover's Men, Women, and Chain Saws can be a valuable reference for an understanding of Lawrence's mobile sexual positioning. Readers of Lawrence will appreciate the originality of Williams's insights and scholarship, and scholars of film theory will also be excited by the possibilities of interdisciplinary practice suggested by this text. Written clearly and with a good sense of humor, the Williams book suggests how much film theory and literature have to say to each other and the value of such conversations in this era of scholarly specialization.

Linda Mizejewski
Ohio State University

Two On Lawrence