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Selected Film Essays and Interviews by Bruce Kawin (review)

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Selected Film Essays and Interviews. Bruce Kawin. London: Anthem Press, 2013. 215 pp. \$40 paper.

BRUCE KAWIN, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND FILM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF Colorado-Boulder, has been writing elegantly and rigorously (one of his mantras is “getting it right”) about film for around forty years and across an impressive number of books, chapters, articles, and interviews. The most significant of these have now been collected in one volume for the first time, and together represent the breadth and depth of Kawin’s interests and scholarship: American, British, and European film and literature; film, television, and video; and genre and art-house film.

Faulkner scholars will already be familiar with Kawin via his trailblazing scholarship on Faulkner’s screenplays and cinematic fiction—for Kawin, Faulkner is the most cinematic of authors. Not even a handful of scholars had taken seriously Faulkner’s relationship to film before Kawin’s initial foray into the field in 1977 with “A Faulkner Filmography.” He subsequently produced further essays, a book (*Faulkner and Film*, 1977) and a scholarly edition (*Faulkner’s MGM Screenplays*, 1982) on this cinematic Faulkner, concluding with the 2002 publication of excerpts from his 1976 interview with Howard Hawks not long before the director’s death. It was Hawks, of course, who first enticed Faulkner out to Hollywood where they collaborated on numerous projects over the course of two decades. This interview is published here in its entirety for the first time along with Kawin’s 1978 interview with silent-screen star Lillian Gish, who discusses, among other things, her collaboration with D. W. Griffith on *Intolerance* (1916) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

What Hawks has to say here about Faulkner’s and his own use of “opposites” (114-15) in their respective creative practices is particularly intriguing when read alongside Kawin’s arguably most important contribution to Faulkner studies, his 1979 essay “The Montage Element in Faulkner’s Fiction,” also collected here. Kawin’s insight is that Faulkner, in his “greatest novels and stories,” deployed the specifically cinematic trope of montage, evidenced in his use of “oxymoron, dynamic unresolution, parallel plotting, rapid shifts in time and space, and multiple narration” (136). To put it simply, Faulkner “was doing something that the cinema also did” (136). As incisively, Kawin observes that “Faulkner recognized a difference between the terms ‘Hollywood’ and ‘film,’ although many of his biographers, critics and colleagues seem

to have missed that particular boat" (141). In one fell swoop and over thirty years ago, Kawin writes back to those scholars who even today disavow or dismiss the cinematic Faulkner, be it the screenwriter, the avid movie-goer, or the cinematic novelist. Indeed, it has only been in this century that the implications of Kawin's cutting-edge readings of Faulkner have been fully appreciated and pursued.

Selected Film Essays and Interviews also includes a tribute to another Southerner, Horton Foote, whom Kawin characterizes as "a legend" of television's golden age. Unlike Faulkner's teleplays and screenplays, Foote's have seemed less controversial subjects for discussion, and include his original screenplay *Tender Mercies* (1983) for Australian director Bruce Beresford; his redaction of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962); and teleplays such as redactions of Faulkner's "Tomorrow" (*Tomorrow*, 1960; film, 1972), the "Old Man" sections of *The Wild Palms* (*Old Man*, 1997), and "Barn Burning" (*Barn Burning*, 1980), and also of Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" (*The Displaced Person*, 1977). I was tantalized by Kawin's description of *Baby the Rain Must Fall* (Mulligan, 1965), for which Foote wrote the screenplay, as "Foote's answer to Faulkner's *Light in August*" (152). As Kawin reminds us that Foote "spans the gap between the studios and the shoestring independents" (150), he also places him in direct dialogue with Faulkner and O'Connor in—who would have thought?—the televisual field.

And this is what is so valuable about Kawin's collection, particularly the manner in which it has been curated. The essays on two significant Southern litterateurs, better known for fiction or stage drama, are situated within the field of the visual (cinematic, televisual, video) and the scholarship that obtains there. The bulk of Kawin's *Selected Film Essays and Interviews*, as its title indicates, comprises essays on Hollywood and independent film from the silent era to *Avatar* (2009), and on television and video. These include his seminal essay on film violence, "Me Tarzan, You Junk" (1978); "Wild Blueberry Muffins" (1993), a manifesto in the face of film theory's alleged tendency toward a "certain snobbish, ignorant and downright nasty attitude that has poorly masked its rudeness and narcissism behind a set of rhetorical and ideological conventions" (32); "An Outline of Film Voices" (1985), which extends the examination of first-person cinema in his 1978 *Mindscreen* to include the second and third persons; and the concluding essays on television and video.

The way in which the volume situates Faulkner and Foote in—even surrounds them with—such groundbreaking film scholarship productively skews more conventional accounts of these writers—of Faulkner particularly, I’d hazard. This volume has the potential to help us think anew (again) of these Southerners as we read about them side by side with Gish on Griffith, with essays on film violence, film voices (which encouraged me to return to Stephen Ross’s *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*) and so forth. Kawin’s volume has the (no doubt unexpected) effect of asking us to expand the field of “Southern literature,” especially on the back of the cinematic turn that Southern studies has taken in recent years, exemplified by Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee’s 2011 collection, *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*. In particular, those who, like me, continue in this direction would do well to heed Kawin’s plea to “get it right,” to “stand up for accuracy.” I can think of no better model in this pursuit than his *Selected Film Essays and Interviews*.

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Conversations with Natasha Trethewey. Ed. Joan Wylie Hall. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 256 pp. \$25.00 paper, \$65.00 cloth.

NATASHA TRETHEWEY PROVES AN APPROPRIATE SUBJECT FOR THIS LATEST addition to the valuable series of collected interviews published by the University Press of Mississippi. Appearing for more than two decades now, these conversations and interviews include over two hundred titles ranging from Rudolfo Anaya to Zhang Yimou. For the most part, their subjects are newer writers, especially from the South, but national and international figures in literature and in many other arts are represented. The diversity of the series is notable, with its impressive representation of women and minority writers, artists, and filmmakers. All of the collections in this series are edited by academics knowledgeable about their fields and in their subjects, so these volumes all include thorough introductions, chronologies, and indexes that make the interviews more accessible and useful.

Born in 1966 in Gulfport, Mississippi, Trethewey is now known nationally as America’s Poet Laureate. The writer has a bi-racial heritage