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**Lesbian cinema after queer theory**, by Clara Bradbury-Rance, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 208 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781474435369

Clara Bradbury-Rance's book *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* addresses a deceptively simple question with broad implications: can there be a lesbian cinema after queer theory's critique of politics that are built around stable gender and sexual identities? The question is made more urgent by the crucial changes our media landscape has undergone simultaneous with the rise of queer theory over the past two decades. Just as they have become theoretically suspicious, lesbians have also seemingly become representationally ubiquitous. Like my own writing on lesbian cinema after 2000 (which spurred my interest in this book [Horn 2017]), Bradbury-Rance's work must therefore contend with the transformation of the lesbian's cinematic status from invisibility to hypervisibility. Against this backdrop, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* offers a provocative argument against both the 'visibility imperative' (xiii) and the representational hegemony of climactic sex scenes as the litmus test of 'authentic' lesbian representation within contemporary cinema.

In this endeavor, Bradbury-Rance draws on the pantheon of lesbian and feminist media studies written at a time before the contemporary moment of exploding visibility. Andrea Weiss and Judith Mayne's respective studies provide crucial histories of lesbian representation (1993, 2000). Even more prominently, however, quotes from Jackie Stacey, Teresa de Lauretis, and Patricia White pervade the book and ground its arguments in a psychoanalytic legacy of film studies, in which identification is eroticized and desire is a matter of gazes rather than actions (1994, 1994, 1999). Such framing not only makes sense in a book which starts from the premise that 'socio-historical contexts have become formal cinematic languages on-screen' (xi), but also supports analyses which 'read

through psychoanalytic language that moves beyond the testimony of the physical' (80). *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* is thus not limited to films in which protagonists identify as lesbian or even films which are themselves commonly identified as lesbian. The book therefore examines canonically queer examples such as *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) (which has recently been most productively read as a bisexual text by Maria San Filippo [2013]), as well as lesser known and less 'lesbian' movies such as *Water Lilies* (Céline Sciamma, 2007), whose promotional material makes no mention of the homoerotic component of the tensions between its rival teenage protagonists. Besides the thematic and stylistic diversity indicated by those two titles, Bradbury-Rance offers a refreshing alternative to the usual focus on Anglo-American productions and includes movies produced in France, Iran and Sweden. Her corpus ultimately ranges from more obvious works like *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015, which is prominently featured on the book's cover), *Mulholland Drive*, and *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013); to more obscure films such as *She Monkeys* (Lisa Aschan, 2011); as well as several in between: *Nathalie...* (Anne Fontaine, 2003), *Water Lilies*, *Chloe* (Atom Egoyan, 2009), and *Circumstance* (Maryam Keshavarz, 2011). Such eclecticism not only strengthens her arguments about a noteworthy shift in lesbian cinema after queer theory, but also reflects and underlines the changing contexts of transnational queer film production and reception.

Framed by a preface outlining the genealogy of the book, an introduction that traces its theoretical influences and cultural context, and a conclusion reiterating the stakes of lesbian cinematic representation, the book's analyses proceed in six chapters. These follow the chronological order of the respective films at their center, with chapters 2 and 4 breaking the one-film-per-chapter structure by building on a dialogue between two movies. Chapter 2 critically investigates the translation of the French production *Nathalie...* into the U.S. adaptation *Chloe*, the latter of which 'makes graphic – as in visual, but also as in explicit or indisputable – what is only implied or obscured in the original' (40). *Water Lilies* and *She Monkeys* are paired in chapter 4 for their similar thematic exploration

of teenage rivalry and erotically-charged athleticism. In both movies, the 'queerness of lesbian desire is evoked [...] as a series of affects outside of figurative norms' (xiii).

Within the sections focusing on a single work, chapter 1 places *Mulholland Drive* in the context of the censored limitations of Hollywood representability and the necessary doubling of the threateningly queer women at its center. *Circumstance's* projection of Western identity politics as liberating is at the heart of chapter 3, which explores how 'desire for identity' is formed 'as a fantasy through the negotiations of private and public space' (56). Chapter 5 takes on the most controversial film of the book: *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Prior to the release of *Carol*, the Palme d'Or-winner would have constituted a fitting end point to the book's discussion. Now, instead, the two films emphasize the contradictory impulses of excess and reticence in contemporary lesbian cinema. Rejecting visibility and 'bodily exhibitions of desire' (xiii) as the center around which lesbian representation must necessarily revolve, *Blue* is here discussed not in terms of the explicitness of its lesbian sex, but the queerness of its temporal and spatial presentation. Chapter 6, in turn, focuses on *Carol's* circular regime of gazes rather than its genre-breaking happy ending. Bradbury-Rance can put these disparate movies in conversation with each other because sex is not at the heart of her discussion of lesbian representation. Instead, she is interested in the affective dimension of lesbian representability and its queer formations—that is, she is investigating specifically cinematic evocations of desire aroused before and without physical intimacy and erotic longing not governed by sexual identity. Queer, therefore, is understood in the book 'as an elaboration (rather than replacement) of lesbianism that captures what is not only before speech but also before (sexual) touch' (13).

Considering its geographic and temporal scope as well as its bold theoretical claims, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* is a relatively short book. Each of the six chapters makes its point in approximately 20 pages, with preface, intro, and conclusion limited to even fewer pages. Arguments are often accordingly presented in dense prose and in a concise manner, which assumes the reader's

familiarity not only with the specific films, but also the book's larger cinematic and theoretical references. Frequent summaries of prior points and references to other chapters, however, are successfully employed to help orient the reader and underline the cohesiveness of the argument. Moreover, the book is rich in detail, especially when it comes to framing its readings of films within histories of various film genres and types, ranging from U.S. film noir, sports movies, and mid-century melodrama to French art cinema and pornography. Analyses of the movies themselves are similarly exacting, with specific shot lengths, sequence numbers, and even word counts of censorship decisions noted. This combination of precise textual detail and insightful contextualization can be seen, for instance, in discussions of *Blue*'s break with cinematic traditions through its lack of close-ups and extradiegetic music in its infamous sex scene. Bradbury-Rance further fleshes out the cultural and commercial contexts surrounding the book's firmly film theory-based debates through extensive research on audience numbers, revenue, and details about gender ratios in award statistics and festival line-ups.

Naturally, there are some issues which might have deserved more attention. The preface, for example, raises the issue of 'lesbian studies' [...] 'whiteness' (xi). While subsequent discussions of *Mulholland Drive* and *Circumstance* include references to the universalizing effect of whiteness, the overall racial uniformity of the book's examples remains unchallenged. Relatedly, the reasons behind the choice of movies remains implicit, as neither commercial and critical success, nor national unity, nor stylistic similarity act as a single, unifying basis for the book's selections. In proceeding from chapter to chapter, one therefore wonders why other movies which are mentioned in its extensive contextualization – such as *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016) or *Clouds of Sils Maria* (Olivier Assayas, 2014) – are not deserving of an analysis in their own right.

These are, however, minor complaints about a book whose overall project is a resounding success. Setting out to interrogate 'the ways in which we might simultaneously trouble and sustain lesbian cinema in the era of the visible' (xiv),

*Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* not only does that, but also asks its readers to consider their own assumptions about the meaning (and conditions) of contemporary lesbian cinema and the appeal of queer affect over unambiguous representation.

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