by Annette Kuhn, New York: Verso, 1994, 285 pp., $59.95 (cloth), $17.95 (paper).

When Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema appeared in 1982, it was the first single-author overview of the historical progression of feminist cinematic critical theory. Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul and reprinted in 1990 and 1993, it has now emerged in an edition containing three additional chapters. This somewhat overdue update forms a welcome supplement to Annette Kuhn’s earlier text.

At the time of the first publication, Griselda Pollock wrote a comprehensive review in Screen, contending that the book failed to make a strong enough case for feminist cinema’s extraordinary capacity for political efficacy. “The books we write,” wrote Pollock, “cannot underestimate the crisis of feminism’s continuing marginality nor its utter revolutionary purpose.”¹ Kuhn addresses how the situation has changed in the past dozen years in the new section called “Part V, Postscript.”

Chapter 10, “Bent on Deconstruction,” draws together various strands of feminist theory since 1980, examining aspects of psychoanalytic film theory since Mulvey, as well as the impact of feminist historiography and cultural studies on much-needed studies of audience reception. Kuhn seems to deplore the anti-essentialist trend of much contemporary feminist film theory, referring to this approach as a “grail” and a “quest above all.”² This position allies Kuhn with French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray, who attempt to link the female with a unique feminine or feminized language. Although she complicates the essentialist position, Kuhn seems to be waxing somewhat nostalgic for the good old days of the early seventies, when the new wave of feminism was young, politically “univocal,” and avowedly essentialist. Her emphasis on female authorship and the problems inherent in trying to separate textual strategies from issues of artistic intention are an intriguing political challenge or call, in the contemporary context, as are the two other areas she suggests have been underexplored—the viewer’s emotions, and questions of experience and phenomenology.

In Chapter 11, “Three Case Studies,” Kuhn deals with issues of female spectatorship, the “woman’s film” of the 1930s and 1940s, and femininity as masquerade. She grapples with the confusion of the spectator question, which has historically been analyzed through psychoanalytic and sociological methodologies. Kuhn concludes that the move towards cultural studies, and away from both psychoanalysis and the text, was so precipitous that important aspects of pleasurable cinematic identification became obscured. Yet cultural studies—which she asserts “was set up as the saviour”³—opened the way to consider the issue of reading competencies, which Kuhn uses to discuss melodrama and the woman’s picture. She then looks at the debates about femininity as masquerade and performance, which address Joan Riviere’s work as it has been taken up by Claire Johnston and Mary Ann Doane as well as Kuhn herself, Gaylyn Studlar, Judith Butler, and Jane Gaines.⁴

In “The Wild Zone,” Chapter 12, Kuhn analyzes several films, including popular Hollywood movies (The Accused, The Color Purple, and Thelma and Louise); four “art cinema” productions (The Crying Game, Orlando, A Question of Silence, and De Stilte (Christine M))

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SPECTATOR

WOMEN’S PICTURES: FEMINISM AND CINEMA, SECOND EDITION

Reviewed by Janice Kaye
three lesbian-themed movies (Desert Hearts, She Must be Seeing Things, and Born in Flames); and two feminist independent works (Ties That Bind, and The Body Beautiful). Her textual analysis of each of these productions is useful and informative, and yet the choices are somewhat arbitrary. For instance, she does not discuss the representations of feminist lesbians in Born in Flames. Although Kuhn mentions queer studies in passing, in the context of cultural studies, she neither adequately addresses the area, nor cites some of the latest literature. She acknowledges, however, that black and queer cinemas deal with political questions which she sees as “virtually absent from the straight, white, middle-class mainstream of feminist film studies.” Neither is the area of nationality covered in conjunction with reading competencies. This is a puzzling omission, not only in light of recent work completed on the intersections of nationality, gender, and cultural production, but because Kuhn herself adopts a nation-specific approach in her investigation into Britain’s Channel Four and particular feminist film distributors.

While Kuhn recognizes that the decade of the 1990s presents different theoretical questions from the 1980s, she maintains that continued adherence to feminist reading strategies and production activism is necessary in order to explore the relationship between feminist theory and practice. She notes the rise of women in filmmaking, the blurring of the categories of “art cinema” and “feminist independent cinema,” and the range of various postmodern and popular feminist practices. In attempting to assess how feminist theory may be used in filmmaking practices, Kuhn erases the clear distinctions made in the 1982 book between dominant and alternative film practices, now preferring the concept of a continuum. There is no longer (nor, it might be noted, was there previously) “a single feminist standpoint.”

It is clear that Kuhn believes that feminist film theory has lost its center and its political purpose, although she acknowledges the heteroglossia of the various feminisms which have developed since the first Women’s Pictures. She fears that feminist film theory’s acceptance into the academy might mean the loss of roots in feminist politics and the establishment of an institutional feminist canon.

I would applaud the entry of feminist theory into the university, however, and would argue that becoming mainstream must be part of the feminist project, an idea illustrated aptly by Thelma and Louise. Kuhn wonders whether the film is feminist because it “appeals to ‘popular feminism’—a type of feminism that does not name itself as such but which none the less takes for granted issues and ideas put on the agenda by feminists.” Two issues arise here: the political effectiveness of such a movie in moving forward feminist concerns; and the implication of the existence of some kind of ‘real feminism’ as opposed to the ‘popular’ kind.

These distinctions seem critical and yet potentially indistinguishable, since even art cinema has become more “mainstream,” with such relative hits as The Crying Game and Orlando. Kuhn points out that many feminist ideas and ideals have been incorporated into society in the past decade, but perhaps it misses the point to state categorically that Sally Potter’s Orlando is “less overtly feminist” than her earlier Thriller. If we are committed to change, must we cling to a model of early seventies grass-roots feminism which was perfect for the time, but the nostalgia for which could threaten huge inroads into the Hollywood mainstream? (This is not to say that alternative, independent and avant garde feminist cinema need not be nurtured and supported).

Kuhn does not discuss the question of the gains feminism has made from this point of view, but she does state one particularly important reminder:
Film theory needs cinema: many, however, might contend that cinema can get along quite well without film theory. It is also worth recalling that feminist film theory could not have come into being without feminist politics.¹⁰

I have quibbled with some of Kuhn’s assertions and directions, but the limited number of films she analyzes merely suggests how many books have yet to be written. That said, *Women’s Pictures* remains a lucid, historically grounded, theoretically informed trajectory of the direction of and the debates surrounding feminist film theory which now covers two decades of intense activity. It has been and will continue to be used productively by anyone interested in feminist and/or filmmaking theory and practice.

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³ Kuhn 208.
⁴ Kuhn does not privilege Butler in this analysis, as American writers tend to do.
⁵ In fact, “lesbianism” itself is subsumed under the category of “sexual identity” in the index, and bisexuality is not even listed. The concept is referenced, but never developed.
⁶ The bibliography is divided into two parts, for easy reference: before 1982 and since 1982. Important work on queer theory, such as that by Alexander Doty and Eve Sedgwick, however, is not cited.
⁷ Kuhn 202.
⁸ 248.
⁹ 230.
¹⁰ 216.