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Book Review: Lauren Bliss, *The Maternal Imagination of Film and Film Theory*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

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Lauren Bliss, Lauren Bliss, *The Maternal Imagination of Film and Film Theory*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 183, ISBN: 9783030458966 (hb), €93.59; ISBN: 9783030458997 (pb), €67.59; ISBN 9783030458973 (ebook ePub), €74.89.

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Beginning the book by describing a vision of the reader as ‘generous and critical’, in possession of a ‘well-developed sense of humour’ and not fully convinced about the totalising and limited rhetoric which frames discussion of film and media images of the maternal, Bliss lays the foundation for the audacious provocations that sit at the heart of this book (28). One can almost hear the author take a deep breath before embarking on this meticulously researched and subtly articulated feminist critique of established film theory. Indeed, the central thesis of this book is that film theory, and feminist film theory in particular, have perpetuated a seemingly commonsense but problematic ‘assumption of an implicit patriarchal power that requires critique’ (13). Bliss situates this critique within debates that have cast the cinematic pregnant body and birthing body as only ever eroticised, demonised and objectified. As such, Bliss locates cinema and academic theory as key vehicles of the normalization and consolidation of gynophobia. Using a historically grounded and thoroughly informed interrogation of the relationship between the screen, the maternal imagination, theories of spectatorship, and figuration theory this book offers a perspective which, as Bliss suggests, ‘gestures towards an outside to patriarchy, cinema and visual culture’ in order to provide ‘a new entry point to critical debates about the perceptual effects of cinema and visual culture’ (15).

Although previous research has drawn attention to the imbrication of the maternal and birth in the language of early film practices, theories and cultures (Fischer 1996), Bliss consolidates the link by drawing parallels between the technical capacity of the film camera to the historical figure of the witch and the pregnant women. The cultural and academic coupling of these two female figures is not unusual— both have traditionally been viewed as historical touchstones for locating gynophobia and misogyny. However, for Bliss, the interconnectedness of the witch and pregnant woman is significant not because of the way they have been traditionally framed as demonised and non-agentive female figures, but rather because of the ‘power’ ascribed to them to alter the foetal body. Drawing attention to the theory of maternal impressions (a historical belief that pregnant women, when looking at art or other objects, could also manipulate and alter the foetal body image) and historical discourses which cast the witch as having the capacity to imagine change on the body of the unborn child, Bliss effectively lifts these women from a position of derogation and objectification to one where they have subjectivity and agency.

By identifying a synergy between the discourses surrounding the figure of the witch and pregnant female and feminist theories of objectification, the male gaze and the unconscious effects of cinema, Bliss suggests another way of looking which respects,

but also shifts away from psychoanalytical approaches to cinema towards a more embodied historicization of birth and the maternal body. Highlighting the metaphorical significance of both female figures, the 'work' of the book is to locate and interrogate their potential for disrupting 'commonsense' theoretical assumptions of patriarchal power.

Thus, in her analysis of a small corpus of films focused on birth, pregnancy, virginity, cannibalism, abortion and witchcraft, Bliss eschews a literal approach precisely because she is not so concerned with representational politics. Instead, the thematic concerns prioritised in each chapter are discussed with reference to the maternal and birthing body and foetus as metaphors. As such the analysis of these female figures is in keeping with the long history of using pregnancy and the maternal as a 'literalising metaphor for the relationship between 'artist and artwork, spectatorship and imagination' (13).

Given the complexity of the critical provocation offered in this book it is not surprising that the first section offers a careful but weighty critique of aspects of feminist theory. Paying respect to a wide range of feminist, philosophy and humanities scholars, Bliss shows how the 'commonsense' theory of the male gaze 'naturalizes patriarchy'. Calling into question the persistent framing of women on screen as either alienating or objectified, Bliss broadens the critical space for a 'renewed perspective onto the limits of conceiving of spectatorship as unconscious or objectifying' through what she refers to as an argument that 'gestures towards an outside of patriarchy, cinema and visual culture' (15). Making reference to Jackie Stacey's (2013) concern that there is 'no outside to objectification' and drawing from the concept and theoretical terrain of the imagination and imaginary (Kant 1998; Elsaesser 2015) Bliss contends that 'the history of the theory of maternal impressions and the witch hunts as a historical and material origin for the supposition of the loss of bodily perspective' disrupts the 'otherwise monolithic, gendered dimension of cinema's naturalised excess' (15).

Mobilising the work of Nicole Brenez (1998), Bliss uses the idea of figuration to rethink subjectivity and embodiment. The concept of figuration serves as a useful and productive framework for prioritising screen images because the 'figural opens up the historicity of the film text so that the event's past is also its "coming to presence' (Routt 2011). Bliss pays very close attention to the historicization and contextualisation of the image to support her quest to challenge the ways that 'film theory and film history has generated its sense of patriarchal origins' (16).

Having situated the analysis within a re-conceived theoretical context, the second half of the book focuses on films/moving images where thematic concerns are tied to the maternal. Bliss uses a condensed body of films some of which, like Stan Brakhage's

1959 film *Window, Water, Baby, Moving*, have already been the subject of passionate feminist debate about the eroticization of the pregnant and birthing body. Bliss outlines these debates before going on to contend that because the ‘images of Jane giving birth are contrasted through the montage that abstracts her body against itself’ (117) their wider significance also evacuates a sense of objective visual mastery over the body on screen. As such these films have the potential to disrupt ‘the commonsense idea that a male filmmaker cannot legitimately produce a cinematic representation of women without conforming to a patriarchal view’ (117).

Other chapters use a diverse choice of screen texts which are successfully situated within their wider social, historical, cultural and political context. The first of these chapters focuses on the 1973 French documentary *Histoires d’A* by Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel. Bliss demonstrates how the film, which became a reference point in the advancement of French abortion law, interrogates the subjective agency of the female protagonist and the audience.

In a subsequent chapter, the figuration of virginity through the use of sound and vision in the French films *Le livre de Marie* (Mieville, 1985) and *Je vous salue, Marie* (Goddard, 1985) becomes the central point of focus of Bliss’ argument that in these films ‘Virginity is not limited to its stereotypical significance [but] rather, virginity becomes the site of its own unknown, forming itself as figure’ (94). In another chapter, foetal cannibalism in the Chinese film *Dumplings* (Chan: 2004) is explored in gruesome detail to support the argument that rather than seeing this film as a reflection of Chinese state capitalism, ‘the figurative form of a cannibalised foetus, whose significance is effected as known, imagined and felt, rather than censored, ignored and unconscious’ can be read as a comment on ‘the spectator–screen relationship in horror cinema’ (131).

Although this is a thoroughly informed and deeply informative work, it would perhaps be more productive to discuss the actual films and images somewhat earlier in the chapters; taking some time to get to the films, Bliss runs the risk of undermining her own argument about the primacy of image and significance of figuration. Additionally, because this book is dealing with a number of different theoretical positions such as (but not limited to) maternal events and imagery; history, culture, politics; filmmaking processes; genre, as well as prioritising a new theoretical approach, more direction from the author (perhaps by reworking the titles and subtitles) would help to consolidate the overall unity of the book. This is not a ‘dip in and out of’ book, it demands attention and sometimes feels as if it is covering so much material it might have been more effective as two separate volumes. Furthermore, whilst the range of films under discussion are diverse in genre, production values and cultures, a choice which does consolidate the effectiveness of the approach, it would have been interesting to see how the use of

figuration here could also be applied to more mainstream texts. Altogether though, this book is a deeply fascinating, exciting, forceful and 'disorderly' intervention. My hope is that it opens up a new critical space for future 'disordered' perspectives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Typesetting queries

1. The following Reference is incomplete Data. Kindly advice.
 - a. Routt, William D 2000