



Current Contents

Past Issues

Reviews

□ Kuhn, Annette:

*An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory.*

London, I. B. Tauris (2002). ISBN 1-86064-791 (pbk), pp. vii + 273

Particip@tions Volume 1, Issue 2 (May 2004)

## A Review by Alexander Dhoest

In this book, Annette Kuhn investigates British cinema culture in the 1930s through ethnohistorical research. She reconstructs the position of cinemagoing in everyday life, relying mostly on interviews with viewers. Pleading for inclusive analysis and triangulation, she also draws on traditional historical sources and textual analysis of key films of the period. Central to her account is the cinemagoing experience, exceeding the act of film viewing and including the setting and the broader connotations and feelings mobilised by filmgoing.

This is an important book, both for the concrete research it presents, and as an intervention in the field of film studies. To start with the latter, reception remains the least developed aspect in film studies, where the film text keeps its central position. The contrast with television studies is striking, where reception is a key concern both in the longstanding tradition of effects research, and in the alternative qualitative, 'ethnographic' tradition. Therefore, as a book mostly dedicated to viewing processes, *An Everyday Magic* is a valuable addition to film studies, all the more so because of its historical approach. There are obvious practical reasons for the dearth of historical reception research, both in film and television studies: sources tend to be few, hard to track and mostly quantitative (box office figures or ratings), while first-hand accounts of viewers are rare. Retrospectively reconstructing actual viewing experiences, as Kuhn does, is not only a cumbersome process, but also one fraught with methodological complications. The intervention of the researcher in constructing 'data', unavoidable in any audience research, becomes almost overdetermining in ethnohistorical research. As there is no viewing process to be witnessed, all that is left are memories to be constructed for the sake of research. However, this isn't necessarily an insurmountable problem, as Annette Kuhn's work demonstrates.

Robert C. Allen (1990) distinguishes four aspects in the historical study of film audiences: exhibition, audience (size and constitution plus social meanings of cinema-going), performance (social and sensory context of reception), and activation (making sense). Discussing memories of cinema interiors, Kuhn's book partly intervenes in the third field, which also stands central in other recent research such as that of Jancovich and Faire (2003), investigating the concrete spatial viewing context of film theatres. However, the most important contribution of the book is situated on the fourth field, that of sense making. Thus, Kuhn inscribes herself in a limited tradition of historical reception research focussing on the use and interpretation of films. One key work in this tradition is Janet

Staiger's *Interpreting films: Studies in the historical reception of American cinema* (1992). Describing her work as a 'materialist historiography of American cinema', Staiger analysed the historical discursive context of reception practices, mostly relying on existing historical evidence such as reviews. Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship* (1994) made an important contribution to this field by conducting research into actual viewing processes. Stacey envisioned her work as a deliberate intervention in feminist film studies, with its traditional focus on the textual spectator. She didn't straightforwardly reject the model of the implicit reader, but aimed to reconcile it with the analysis of actual social readers. Methodologically, she used letter's responding to ads in women's magazines, followed up by a questionnaire addressing the themes emerging from the letters.

As all methods in this field, letters provide an indirect way into the past through retrospective reconstruction. However, Stacey pleads not to consider the unavoidable processes of representation as barriers to meaning, but rather as the form of meaning. This is also very much Annette Kuhn's approach, which moves on from Stacey's work and develops it on important points. While her book less deeply engages with debates in the field, Kuhn also very much works from a feminist agenda, in particular by taking seriously the strong engagement with cinema by 'silly' female fans. In this respect, Kuhn's book draws on the cultural studies approach of media, focussing on the use of popular culture by 'ordinary' users in everyday contexts. With Stacey, and significantly within feminist film studies, she shares an interest in the social audience rather than the spectator as constructed by the text. Methodologically, Kuhn adds to this a deeper and more direct engagement with viewers responses, through extended interviews.

Theoretically, too, Kuhn develops the ground laid out by Stacey by elaborating more deeply on the crucial role of memory in the process of reconstructing the past. Drawing on viewer memories, the historical narrative is strongly mediated through representations. This may be unavoidable, but it is worth reflecting on the discourses mobilized in the interviewing process. Kuhn introduces the term 'memory texts' to describe the recorded acts of remembering, where the past is produced in the activity of remembering. Interviews don't provide a 'window on the past', but stories possible tainted by forgetting, selective memory and hindsight. In recounting the past, informants are doing 'memory work', staging and performing memories. All this confirms the view that informants' accounts are not simply data, but discourses to be interpreted. In her interpretation, Kuhn searches for 'tropes', or discursive registers, in the cinema memories of her informants. She considers the interviews as stories - narratives but not fiction - and studies their narrative organisation and themes. Her analysis covers a variety of themes ranging from 'scenes' of cinema-going (topographical memories of cinemas) and particular genres (horror, musicals), to activities associated with cinema-going, such as children's play and adolescent's courting.

Apart from the first, introductory chapter, the book is very much organised around the interview material. The chapter structure is based on themes emerging from the

interviews, and the text is richly illustrated with excerpts of interview transcripts. Rather than moving on from preconceived theoretical issues, Kuhn charts patterns in the viewer responses which she then frames and interprets, taking care never to stray too far from the respondents' own experiences. The book strongly respects the voice of 'ordinary' viewers, presenting a rich and detailed description of cinemagoing experiences. As such, the insights offered by the book are quite 'local', speaking primarily to a readership interested in British cinema culture in the thirties. However, as an engaging analysis of everyday cinema culture and as an example of methodologically sound ethnohistorical film research, it is also relevant to a broader readership.

This being said, one of the problems with this kind of research - apart from the huge effort involved in conducting and transcribing interviews - is in the presentation of the material. Drawing on a wealth of individual responses, and sharing the ethnographic and feminist respect for the voice of common viewers, hesitating to overly textualise and theoretically frame their responses, the account tends to become very concrete and descriptive.<sup>[1]</sup> While staying this close to the material certainly offers advantages, such as a very good sense of the actual language and categories used by viewers, there is the danger of myopic vision: being too close to reality, offering all but a one on one map of reality. Kuhn avoids this pitfall, as she adds a level of abstraction by categorising and theorising. However, this book does illustrate the difficult exercise researchers in this field are faced with: remaining faithful to the material while also opening up the account to wider cultural and societal dynamics. In this respect, the inclusiveness and triangulation championed by Kuhn could be further developed to add more layers to the reconstruction of everyday cinema culture. The combination of detailed audience memories with more elaborate research on texts as well as production and cultural contexts would certainly make for an even more enlightening account of cinema culture. However, as it is, *An everyday magic* is a beautifully balanced work capturing the combination of ordinariness yet extraordinariness of cinemagoing in the thirties, and offering a challenging benchmark for further investigations in the field.

Contact (by e-mail): Alexander Dhoest

## References

Allen, Robert C., 'From exhibition to reception: Reflections on the audience in film history', *Screen*, 31 (4), 1990, pp. 347-356.

Jancovich, Mark & Lucy Faire with Sarah Stubbings, *The place of the audience: Cultural geographies of film consumption*, London: BFI, 2003.

Skeggs, Beverly, 'Theorising, ethics and representation in feminist ethnography', in Beverly Skeggs (ed.), *Feminist cultural theory: Process and production*, Manchester:

Manchester University Press 1995, pp. 190-206.

Stacey, Jackie, *Star gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1994.

Staiger, Janet, *Interpreting films: Studies in the historical reception of American cinema*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.

---

[1] On the ethics of feminist ethnographic research, see Beverly Skeggs 1995.

