

BOOK REVIEW

Deconstruction, Feminism, Film

Sarah Dillon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-4744-3422-5 [paperback])

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Featuring Jacques Derrida as key interlocutor, in *Deconstruction, Feminism, Film*, Sarah Dillon uses tools from a deconstructive toolbox to argue that feminist film is a rich site for discovering female spaces of thought (what she calls a feminist film-philosophy) and relationality (sites of female–female intimacy). She is drawn to Derrida not because he wrote significantly about film, but because his “treatment of film is structurally comparable to his treatment of the question of Woman” (6). In Derrida’s thought, both film and Woman are figures of deconstructive undecidability, sites of opposition to abstraction, philosophy, truth, and logocentrism—spaces where we might discover and celebrate female difference.

The chapters are organized to mimic the “dual-action of feminism—critique and generation” (5) by pairing in each a key Derridian text or concept with a cinematic (or in the final chapter, photography-based) example of female relationality. The first chapter explains these pairings and the reasons for them by opening with Plato’s *Phaedo* and Derrida’s reading of it alongside Derrida commentary by Elizabeth Grosz and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The second chapter covers Ken McMullen’s film *Ghost Dance* (1983), which features Pascale Ogier’s interview with Derrida, who reflects on the status of cinema, technology, and spectrality. Chapter 3 turns to Joanna Callaghan’s film *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida* (2014), which itself is a feminist response to Derrida’s *The Post Card* (1987). Chapter 4 features Derrida’s life and work more broadly in the biographical film *Derrida* (2002) made by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman. This is paired with two feminist autobiographical films, Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1978) and Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012). The last chapter contends with Derrida’s invited response to the lesbian feminist photonovel *Right of Inspection* (1985), by Marie Françoise Plissart.

The book is a significant contribution both to Derrida criticism and feminist film studies as it looks to Derrida’s work to see what it may offer to feminist film criticism. At the same time, it rehearses the limits of Derrida’s work on feminism and gender and shows (sometimes inadvertently) how these limits become all the more pronounced when we try to use his methods for reading cinema and visual culture. Dillon pulls from Derrida’s deconstructive method to add to the feminist film critic’s toolbox two key concepts—close reading and a focus on detail—themselves studied and performed together. Although she uses this method throughout—close reading focused on singular, previously unnoticed, detail(s)—she doesn’t identify it outright until the last

chapter, nor does she, to my mind, claim it powerfully or clearly enough as her contribution until the book's final pages.

We do get a visual clue from the book's cover of what close reading and a focus on detail looks like, although Dillon never mentions this image within the book's pages. Here we see the face of a white woman who appears to be a 1940s film noir heroine, but with a twist: she herself is the detective, holding a magnifying glass that curiously enlarges one of her eyes. She is the feminist detective! She hunts for details, reads and watches closely, sees what others fail to notice, and keeps her keen eye on the lingering thread, the hum that is just below surface noise, the story that slips under the radar. These are the details others fail to see, precisely because they don't do the close reading, or they simply accept what others say they see. But these details jump out when the feminist detective uses her magnifying glass and looks closely! As film director Lisa Cholodenko puts it in one of the book's epigraphs: "Really close up is the thing."

Dillon explains this form of close attention to detail as what Derrida calls "metonymic reading" (138). Dillon says that Derrida recommends this particular kind of reading when confronted with a text (visual, written, or otherwise) that does not conform to the logic of narrative to which we are accustomed. The way to do a metonymic reading, according to this explanation, is to focus on the seemingly inconsequential detail in a slow and in-depth way while also moving with "sustained speed across the text" (139). The relationship between the part and the whole, between slow attention and quick understanding, is complex and vexed. How can we resist conjuring the "whole," or seeing like the panopticon, when putting all the details together? Or as Derrida would say, how can we avoid spectral logic that compels that the specter will remain even in the magnification of the detail?

Is it the text, the method, or the reader her/himself, that is important for resisting spectral logic? Certainly, the texts Dillon chooses are themselves resistant to narrative conclusion. They are each avant-garde, scholarly, deconstructionist; they are nonnarrative, experimental, and often quite dense. The "larger" meaning (if there is one) is elusive, hard to pin down; there is no overall "point" or "lesson" to be gleaned—this would undermine interpretive possibilities and the opening offered to spectators, viewers, readers. Dillon says, for example, that "*Right of Inspection* is a work deeply concerned with issues of representation and visibility, with interrogating who has the right to look, who is subject to the look, and what the laws of the look are or, more radically, could be" (129). It deliberately does not offer clear or easy conclusions.

But Derrida himself, master theorist of the detail and close reading, cannot, as Dillon rightly notes, "see queerly" (130) when he "reads" *Right of Inspection*. The idea of seeing queerly comes up in the last chapter, following upon Dillon's introduction of what she calls "*quer* cinematic autobiography" (97) in chapter 4. *Quer*, she explains, is the German cognate of "queer," and when "used to describe a glance means 'directed sideways'" (98). When Dillon says Derrida cannot read *querly/queerly*, she notes that he fails to "recognize and take up the lesbian subject position created by the photonovel" (132). Is he a bad user of his own method?

Who *can* see *querly*, and what is at stake in the question? Is this a method anyone can use? Moreover, how is seeing *querly* related to, or different from, seeing from a feminist perspective? I wish that Dillon had taken up these questions, especially as they relate to understanding if and how it matters when and whether the "detail" is gendered, whether and how the gender/subject position of the critic/author matters, and how we create, acknowledge, participate in, are advantaged or disadvantaged by, and/or critically contest a shared world when we confront an accumulation of details.

Early on in the book, Dillon credits Rosi Braidotti as noticing that “Derrida’s work is part of a tendency within contemporary theory to use the metaphor of Woman to question the status of truth, knowledge, and subjectivity at the expense of women’s concrete social struggles” (19). Would reading “queerly” or “as a feminist” indicate the ability to visualize or acknowledge the struggles of individual women? Does Derrida’s use of “Woman” as disruptor to male logic inadvertently erase these details? When, how, and whether women can appear becomes a question in Dillon’s chapter “Auto/biography,” as she contrasts the biographical film *Derrida* with feminist autobiographical cinema that she clearly prefers and deems more successful. “Feminism has always necessarily understood *its* realism *against* the traditional notions of biography and identity as Derrida portrays them, since such traditional notions have always already excluded women and our representation” (108; emphasis in original), Dillon concludes.

Another way to pose these questions is to ask: if Derrida fails in his readings, how might we ensure better success? What is at stake politically for feminists as we engage with male theorists and seek to apply and transform their work for feminist (or queer) projects? In the last pages of the book, Dillon turns to Roland Barthes whose insights on the “punctum” she uncritically introduces. Noting that the detail can be a masculinist concept associated with fetishization, Dillon seems to agree with feminist thinkers such as Naomi Schor, Teresa de Lauretis, and others that the detail must be degendered. What would this mean? Must the text, the method, or the reader her/himself be degendered?

Recall that in *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes searches for a photograph of his deceased mother that will bring her back for him. Calling it the “punctum” of an image, he hopes to locate the small detail that pierces him and triggers his own memories. But we must note that the punctum pierces only him—it is entirely subjective. Here we have a text (photo), a method (look for punctum), and a reader. Looking at the same photo, and using the same method, a *different* detail, or none at all, might jump out at someone else. The detail, or the punctum, is contrasted with what Barthes calls the “studium,” which he says is the shared cultural meaning that locates the photo for all of us. Since it is presumably the same for *all of us*, we don’t really notice it. It passes by, escapes our motivated attention. He says the studium is transparent, even uncontroversial, but we cannot predict what will break through as punctum for any individual viewer.

Dillon introduces Barthes near the end of the book to feature his method as one that feminist film critics might adopt even though Barthes himself did not think his work applied to cinema.

There is now compelling evidence that Barthes was disingenuous in his division of the *punctum* from cinema in *Camera Lucida*. There is a body of work that demonstrates the origin of his idea of the *punctum* in his close analysis of stills from the films of Sergei Eisenstein in “The Third Meaning” and his tentative development there of the idea of an obtuse meaning in images. In that essay, Barthes acknowledges his “taste for stills” (1977: 66) and states that “a theory of the still becomes necessary” (1977: 67). With the idea of metonymic reading, developed out of an engagement with *Right of Inspection*, Derrida provides such a reading. (143–44)

But to which still, which detail, which punctum, should we turn our attention? If we assume, contra Barthes, that the studium is *not neutral*, if the background shifts and changes for different viewers, details will “pierce” each of us differently. We glean

insights from feminist theory and criticism as we focus our attention on individual and collective struggles of women as they unfold in different racial, colonial, and class contexts, for each the “studium” that situates experience.

And so, I come back to the feminist detective on the cover with her magnifying glass at the ready. The power of close reading clearly pays off in the very rich and provocative sections that Dillon offers on each of the films and texts she analyzes. Dillon is a skilled feminist detective, and I learned a great deal from this book. It will be of interest to scholars and graduate students studying Derrida, and to film scholars and students as well. Dillon chooses fascinating objects, homes in on revealing details, and makes a strong case for ways in which Derrida’s methodology might be utilized for feminist film critics. I have not taken the space to delve into the deep substance of any of the chapters, but each is well worth reading. Instead I have here posed some larger theoretical and political questions that remain unresolved and unsettled for me long after I finished. The feminist detective has not yet solved the crime, but she has exposed several relevant details for us to trace.

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