

Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires and Gay Cowboys

Barbara Mennel. New York and Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Jenny Barrett

The *Short Cuts* series, for those who are unfamiliar with it, is designed to offer introductory Film Studies texts, virtually pocket-sized, attractively styled and collectable. They contain minimal notes but eminently helpful bibliographic lists, and so are immediately recognisable as undergraduate summaries of a topic that act as a means of familiarising the student with the key concepts, luminaries and movies of the topic in hand. Consequently, as one would imagine, such texts are not going to progress an academic field critically or conceptually, but they draw together the recognised debates, texts and summaries of significant historical moments that otherwise exist across diverse published sources. These books can form the basis of undergraduate study, and equally offer a door to knowledge for enthusiasts, treading a careful line between accessibility and critical efficiency.

It is this reach and accessibility that the series is known for, and so topics as diverse and notoriously slippery in meaning as ‘queer’ or ‘queer cinema’ could suffer much from summary and expurgation. Mennel’s book, however, deftly avoids this danger. She describes her book as part of “a larger project of queer Film Studies: an archaeology of an alternative cinematic aesthetics organised around non-normative desires” and herein lies the challenge that she rises to. ‘Queer’, in its multiple uses as label, identity, critical sensibility or cultural category, is known for its polysemy. To organise this vast conceptual field as if conducting an archaeological dig is an apt metaphor for the organisation, analysis and interpretation that is necessary for queer’s complex cultural artefacts to be understood in their varied contexts. Mennel chooses to tackle the complexities of the term using a chronological, text-focussed framework, loosely gathering films into five chapters that focus upon key moments or eras when queer cinema can be found to flourish or flounder under the social and legal pressures of, principally, western nations such as the US, Britain and Germany. Each chapter incorporates selected critical frameworks or commentaries upon films and historical periods, both established and more recent scholarship, that help to invite the reader to investigate the topic further. Hence anyone using the text for an introduction to queer cinema is able to pursue the more cerebral, theoretical concerns of this cinematic category with relative ease, pivotal pieces of scholarship and commentary such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) and Susan Sontag’s ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964).

For many, the study of queer film is often restricted to New Queer Cinema, the category or, more accurately, 'moment' in the early 1990s which saw a sudden resistance to mainstream convention in gay and lesbian filmmaking in the US and Britain. Mennel's survey, however, reminds us that for there to be a 'new queer' there must have previously been a queer cinema. Beginning with the period of the Weimar Republic in post-World War I Germany, Mennel identifies the films and filmmakers who are regarded as establishing the 'origins of queer cinema', homosexual rights film *Different from the Others* (Richard Oswald, 1919) for instance and the schoolgirl *Urtext, Girls in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), which emerged from an era known for its relative tolerance towards diverse cultural, sexual and gendered expressions. Mennel sees these early films as blueprints, gay and lesbian movies that now can be seen to have shaped the conventions that are discernable in the queer cinema of later years further west.

Mennel consistently directs the reader to her sources, making the book a genuinely useful resource for the student and the enthusiast. She contextualises the films in their historical moments, the Weimar period, the women's movement, the Stonewall rebellion and so on, and thus helps to situate the films socially and critically. The textual analysis is often refreshingly critical despite the limited format, by which I mean that it moves comfortably beyond description and straightforward textual and ideological analysis. Mennel can often be found to problematize obvious readings, choosing to remain critical of films such as Robert Aldrich's 1968 lesbian film *The Killing of Sister George* and John Waters's *Desperate Living* from 1977. It is also encouraging to see meaningful discussion of films that might not make it into another similar text, such as Radley Metzger's *Therese and Isabelle*, part-art film, part-sexploitation.

Mennel remains alert throughout to interpellation, actively asking who this cinema had been made for and answering this question variously by regarding the details of production, the personnel involved and the intricacies of cinematic style. A case in point is her analysis of the 1985 lesbian romance *Desert Hearts*, in which she identifies mainstream strategies such as the isolation of the lesbian affair that works to contain the relationship as temporary, and yet highlights the stylistic resistance to convention in the sex scene. Whilst the film sanitises and makes safe the prospect of lesbianism for the heterosexual viewer, it equally offers a lesbian viewing position instead of following the filmic strategies commonly used to appeal to the straight male.

There are times when the necessary brevity of the Short Cuts format mean that summaries leave one wondering how much the novice might reasonably learn, such as the anomalous conclusion which makes films about cross-dressing seem something of an after-thought, and there is a perceptible favour given to the analysis of lesbian films in terms of linespace. It is heartening to see a discussion of Asian queer cinema, but again it is hindered by its brevity. Little attention is given to the problem of 'queer', the deliberately offensive term that is rejected by many who identify as gay and lesbian.

Despite this, there are many occasions where Mennel's prose helps to condense a concept into a striking turn of phrase that any undergraduate lecturer will appreciate, sound bite statements such as 'queer film is inherently political', or the description of

certain New Queer films as ‘aesthetics as politics’. The spirit of the book, however, is one of breadth and inclusivity. The last two chapters, particularly, remind the reader how truly diverse the queer cinema category can be seen to be. Then, if one regards New Queer Cinema as an influential moment in cinema history, it becomes possible to discuss films as dissimilar as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Rouch, 1999) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (Valerie Faris, 2006).