

Self and Cinema

Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder

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Self and Cinema covers a total of 14 films, each of its six chapters taking a slightly different conceptual framework and developing it in a detailed analysis of two or more films. Bergman's *Persona* and *The Ritual*, for example, are examined in Freudian and Jungian terms; Godard's *Weekend* and Wertmuller's *Seven Beauties* are scrutinized in the light of Marxism and feminism; the chapter on Antonioni's *Red Desert* and Bresson's *Une Femme Douce* draws on the writings of R.D. Laing and B.F. Skinner; and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* provides the framework for the chapter on the "archetypal journeys" of *El Topo*, *2001*, and *Zardoz*.

The results are mixed as might be expected from a book that tries to combine densely detailed plot analyses with a vast and eclectic critical apparatus. Although Houston and Kinder attempt to define this method (which they call "Transformalism") in their Introduction, their definitions are so vague and so varied that one cannot see its usefulness. To say, for example, that Transformalism does not subordinate the individual text to any theoretical framework" but rather seeks to "integrate multiple conceptual frameworks into a holistic methodology" (p. 3) does not persuade the reader that the authors have successfully integrated the varied theories and critical methods they practice in the book. Although their theorizing does not diminish the value of their analysis of individual films, the formulation of theory is not a strong point of the book, and the constant shifting of focus from one corner of that theoretical field to another burdens the discussion with cumbersome and sometimes irrelevant digression.

The book is then unified not so much by its theory as by its encompassing thematic. The films discussed all embody what Houston and Kinder consider to be "an expanded vision" of the self in its inward and outward journeys. These films with their psychological, phenomenological or mythic content are praised for their radical presentation of human consciousness and an unconventionality of style which the authors feel has led to their neglect by "an audience whose expectations have been shaped by more conventional movies" (p. 10).

It is not surprising that the authors devote the major part of the book to European films of the 60's and 70's, but much of this work — the films of Bergman, Antonioni, and Wertmüller — is familiar territory, explored in numerous other studies. The less obvious and more interesting choices in the last two chapters seem more appropriate illustrations of their theme. The discussion in Chapter 5 of *El Topo*, *2001*, and *Zardoz* is often insightful although one feels that the authors are somewhat unfair to John Boorman in their assessment of *Zardoz* since his failure to make “a breakthrough toward expanded consciousness” (p. 325) seems justified less by the terms of their discussion of Frye's system than by a rather arbitrary assessment of his antifeminism presented in a digressionary reference to an essay by Susan Sontag.

One feels that a better case could be made for Boorman if more attention were given to the interrelationships among his films. This is what the authors do in their final chapter, the longest in the book, which is devoted to the films of Nicholas Roeg. Here is a director who most surely reflects in his work the concept of “expanded vision” and the authors make no attempt to disguise their enthusiastic admiration for his films, particularly *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which is given a detailed scene-by-scene analysis that examines the film's codes in the manner of literary critic Roland Barthes and semiotician Christian Metz, and then offers a rigorous structural analysis that relates this film to Roeg's other works, particularly to *Walkabout*. Of great interest here is the discussion of the cuts that were made in the print released in the United States (22 minutes were deleted which accounts in part for the puzzling aspects of its narrative) and their cataloguing of its departures from its source, a novel by Walter Tevis.

The strongly reasoned discussion of Roeg is to some degree a vindication of the book's uneasy fusion of vague theorizing and radical politics. Through no fault of the authors, the stills from the films are poorly reproduced and seem to bear no relationship to the text itself.