

'0-60 Seconds iNTELEVISION Commercial Producers'
PO BOX 82 Mirrabooka, 6941, WA Ph: +61 8 9471 8200 Fax: +61 8 9471 8200
Email: digi_filmprod@hotmail.com



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Different Modes of Expression: Subtle Offensives

Ella Jasiowka

Malgorzata Radkiewicz: *W Poszukiwaniu Sposobu ekspresji. O Filmach Jane Campion i Sally Potter.*
Krakau: Verlag der Jagiellonen-Universität 2001, 184 S., broschiert, ISBN 83-233-1370-9, € 6,50

What happens if the filmmaker directing the audience's gaze is a woman? Radkiewicz uses two very different examples of "female" film art to portray the two directions into which this kind of undertaking can lead. In so doing, she demonstrates that traditional methods of analysis no longer suffice to thoroughly examine the work of an artist. Since there is no neatly defined category of "feminist art," one has to take into consideration different kinds of approaches in order to do justice to the work of film directors like Jane Campion and Sally Potter. Radkiewicz does exactly that in her work, and thus provides an analysis that is informed by a feminist perspective. She includes the filmmakers' artistic trajectory, background, biography, and goals into her interpretation of Campion's and Potter's films. While Radkiewicz does not re-invent or expand feminist theory, she succeeds at providing a complex portrayal of the two filmmakers and their work, and offering a good overview over their work. The conciseness of Radkiewicz's book provides a useful introduction to these issues and invites its readers to further explorations.

A short story on feminist theory

The introduction of this book covers quite some ground: Radkiewicz provides a brief summary of the epistemology of feminist theory, using as her starting point the artist-as-subject in search of modes of expression. In her summary, Radkiewicz favours a certain group of women artists, namely artists who specifically address issues of womanhood in their work. Radkiewicz places and portrays them in the tradition of avant garde art, a trend which developed out of historical and cultural changes in society and which opened up new questions and modes of perception for interpreting reality. Thus, Radkiewicz's overview at the beginning of the book is not a standard introduction, but offers an independent, essay-like introduction into the epistemology of feminist art theory.

Jane Campion

Radkiewicz's analysis focuses on three works by director Jane Campion: *An angel at my table* (1990), *The Piano* (1993), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996). Radkiewicz examines the three films focusing on a set of issues, while carefully paying attention to each film. The focus of her analysis lies in elements which are commonly associated with and recognised as "women's issues," and which range from biographical vicissitudes (especially with regards to the breaking with traditions) to the relationship between nature and culture and the role of clothing and costume.

The multi-layered analyses, together with the essay style in which they are being presented make this work as readable as fascinating. General observations, e.g., reflections on the way in which Campion positions her heroines in space and landscapes, are skillfully combined with analyses of individual still pictures, e.g. that of the mirrored image of the husband in his wife's glazed portrait.

Radkiewicz fails to make it clear that Campion has managed to find her place in commercial and conventional cinema by using a subtle kind of storytelling that does not explicitly violate the rules of conventional cinema. While Radkiewicz does mention that Campion employs this strategy, she does not portray it as a possible (and not at all uncommon) approach employed by women directors.

Sally Potter

The artistic trajectory and works of film director Sally Potter is strongly influenced by performance art on the one hand and the British women's rights movement of the 1970s in the other hand. Potter aims to question the media used by her in her work, as well as to thoroughly analyse the phenomena "woman" and "gender." Each of her movies uses new ways of staging, and addresses a very different set of questions. Radkiewicz deals with the variety of Potter's work by analysing her works mostly on a film-by-film basis, examining in her book *The Gold Diggers* (1983), *Orlando* (1992), as well as *The Tango Lesson* (1997).

Potter breaks with conventional cinema not only with regard to form (e.g., there is no script, her films do not portray time in a linear way, and the director lacks some kind of distance to her work), but she also creates a different and highly adequate way of staging each story. For Potter, what is most important is to make art and to show how art can enable one to pose and respond to questions, which Potter does by consciously inserting herself into her films as a subject and as a woman.

Impulsiveness, cyclical time units, body, communications – these are the motifs which Potter depicts consciously and openly, hence opening them up to the audience. Her aim is not to entertain but to disrupt and to unearth the modes of manipulation which are inherent in constructions of film. In this part of the book, Radkiewicz pays greater attention to the modes of production and the artist's personal motifs than she does when analysing the work of Campion. In so doing, Radkiewicz succeeds at reflecting Potter's work in her writing.

Radkiewicz's closing observations and an appendix with a bibliography of films and short biographies of the filmmakers round off this slender volume. The reader will notice Radkiewicz's enthusiasm about her topic throughout the book, often inspiring a kind of awakening which appears almost exaggerated upon closer examination. However, this can be easily forgiven considering the feminist diaspora in Poland. Radkiewicz should furthermore be commended for including citations by Polish authors. Also, her comments on the difficulties of translating certain terms into Polish, especially as concerns the attempt to find gender-neutral descriptions, are most appropriate. *W Poszukiwaniu Sposobu ekspresji (In Search of Modes of Expression)* is a successful attempt at taking a fresh look at film beyond traditional modes of interpretations, and will inspire its readers to watch these movies once again.

Ella Jasiowka

Studentin am Osteuropa-Institut der FU-Berlin

e.j.freiraumbureau.de

Translated by Susanne Unger

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