

Abstract

Ingrid Lindell, *To see and be seen. Cinema, Gender and Cultural Modernity*. ISBN 91-7061-004-5. Dissertation in Swedish with an English summary, 264 p. Department of Literature, Gothenburg University, Sweden (2004)

Drawing on modern cultural theory, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse film as *signifying practice* on a metastructural level from a gender perspective in three steps. Primarily, my approach is to study the gender representation of most films on offer in cinema, television and a film festival in Sweden 1996. Secondly, I will address the negotiation of gender issues in film criticism and the ways in which the interpretation of a specific film takes on additional meaning in reference to the surrounding film context. The concluding part puts the gendered meta-story of cinema in connection with its supposed impact on the female spectator and our cultural identity.

Film presentations in newspapers show that the majority of the films under consideration concern stories by men about men; men directed 95 % and 72 % have men in the lead roles. Correspondingly, films by and about women amount to 3 % of the total. Films with female leads (17 %) are directed by men in four times as many cases as by women. In addition it was possible to deduce a selection of female stereotypes, stressing sexual performance. Although classified as art films, the festival examples didn't constitute alternatives, i.e. they did not reveal statistical deviation from the norms ascertained neither concerning directors and leading roles nor female stereotyping.

The critical debates appearing in Danish and Swedish newspapers concerning *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier 1996) are analysed. Since the main issue launching both debates was the allegedly degrading female portrayal in the film, my concern is the critics' various standpoints regarding interpretation, intertextuality and contextuality. The debate basically dealt with whether gender issues are relevant or not when appraising a work of art and consequently on what grounds the critics determined the boundaries of context. This thesis underlines the extreme ambivalence demonstrated by the critics. In conclusion, *Breaking the Waves* is considered as conventional in its use of stereotypes and in its depiction of a woman victimized through sexual violence in accordance with the context: the films of 1996.

Finally, I outline the impact this gender representation might have on female spectatorship in connection with cultural identity in late modernity. Drawing on theories on cultural modernity our experience of life are structured by a visual media culture, where the struggle for visibility is an apparent feature. In concordance, our identity projects are shaped by image and visibility. The investigated gender discourses in cinema and film criticism could be seen as part of a historically long-lived reiteration of a power structure, and exemplified challenges to it. In spite of dissolving tendencies in traditional modern social structures, gender in cinema turns out to be a tenacious and persistent cultural myth.

Key words: gender representation, film repertoire, stereotypes, the prostitute, film criticism, spectatorship, visibility, modernity, media culture, *Breaking the Waves*

