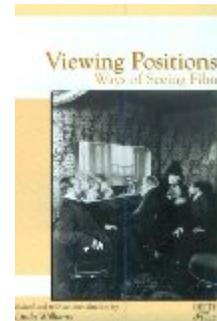


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda Williams. *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film (Rutgers Depth of Field)*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2132-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2133-6; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-485-30075-8.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
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Intended to provide readers with the latest theoretical and historical thinking on spectatorship in cinema, this volume's nine essays (seven of which have previously appeared in print) all critique, from various points of view, a line of cinematic interpretation that was dominant in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Advanced by such poststructuralist film theorists as Jean-Louis Baudry, Mary Ann Doane, Stephen Heath, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, and Kaja Silverman, this interpretive model argued that films (like other works in the visual arts) presumed a particular spectator (usually presupposed to be a bourgeois male) and that dominant cinema was structured around the anxieties, emotional needs, and power aspirations of that invisible viewer. Further, these essays seek to refine and historicize Habermas's conception of a public sphere and particularly cinema's role in it.

The first of the book's three parts, which examines changing conceptions of vision, argues that a basic presupposition of the poststructural theorists—the notion of a centered, unitary, distanced, objectifying spectator—needs to be located in historical context. Jonathan Crary argues that the notion of vision as a neutral registerer of images had already begun to break down in the early nineteenth century to be replaced by new notions of vision that emphasized the importance of subjectivity. Vivian Sobchack, then, critiques three commonly adopted models of cinema—as frame, window, and mirror—and advances a more dialectical phenomenological interpretation in which a film neither structures a viewer's perception nor is the film merely an object of the viewer's vision. Anne Friedberg concludes this section by tracing the transformation since the late nineteenth century of the gaze into a commodity to be sold to a spectator-consumer.

The volume's second section, in which historians view cinematic spectators, argues forcefully that viewers have perceived films in quite different terms over time. Vanessa R. Schwartz looks at precinematic visual attractions in late 19th century Paris, including the Morgue and the wax museum, and chronicles a shift in subjects, from rural landscapes to urban representations. Tom Gunning next contends that early spectators had a distinctive mode of perception that he calls the "aesthetic of astonishment," more interested in the "exhibitionist display of events and actions than in the expression of a narrative." Miriam Hansen, then, argues that classical Hollywood cinema, with its conception of a homogeneous audience and passive spectators, was a product of particular configuration of social, cultural, and economic circumstances, and that recent changes in the organization of media have given birth to very different notions of spectatorship.

The book's concluding section, which offers gender- and sexuality-based challenges to the idea of a unitary spectator, advances revisionist interpretation of the horror film genre which reject the notion that such films' essential goal is to sate the sadistic impulses of a heterosexual male viewer. Building on Stuart Hall's distinction between dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of texts, Judith Mayne argues that film-viewing can generally best be understood as a process of negotiation in which audiences "see" those things that meet their own diverse needs but only within certain cultural, ideological, and sociological constraints. Carol J. Clover and Rhona J. Berenstein then argue that masochistic identification with passive female victims in horror films is as important as sadistic and voyeuristic master as source of the genre's appeal.

A demanding yet highly rewarding work, prefaced with an introduction that is a model of conceptual clarity, *Viewing Positions* offers an exceptionally valuable entry-way into contemporary film theory.

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