

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ramona Curry. *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. xxii + 217 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2791-2; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2790-5.

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Recent years have produced many academic interpretations of such popular cultural icons as Marilyn Monroe and Madonna. But the prototype for such figures—Mae West—has received much less scholarly attention. Although she has been the subject of four biographies since 1982, by George Eells and Stanley Musgrove, Carol Ward, Maurice Leonard, and June Sochen, which reconstruct the details of her life and trace her career as a performer, no previous work has examined in detail the varied cultural functions that Mae West's image served. What Ramona Curry has done in this theoretically sophisticated and innovative work of cultural analysis is to examine three issues of primary importance in media studies. First, she analyzes how a star image emerges and spreads through a culture; second, she reexamines West's role in the development of film censorship during the 1930s; and third, she uses West to address existing theories about sexual representation (dealing with such issues as spectacle, excess, parody, and camp) and explores how West's transgressions of gender, class, and racial expectations have made her a popular figure for many contemporary gays and feminists.

Curry's book is primarily interested in the varied political functions that have been served by West's transgressive sexuality. Thus, she is able to show how, following her rise to stardom in 1926, she became a symbol of female creativity, power, and economic self-sufficiency; how, during the early 1930s, she served as a Depression-era challenge to middle-class ideals of female chastity and modesty; how in 1936 and 1937 the power and pleasure the Mae West icon derived from sexuality came to be viewed as a liability by the film industry; and how, after 1937, West's comedic mode shifted from satire to parody and to self-parody. Especially innovative is Curry's

discussion of the class and racial overtones in West's sexualized image.

This volume sheds fascinating light on many significant issues in film history. It shows how West became embroiled in the mid-1930s in the dispute between film distributors and independent exhibitors over the practice of compulsory block booking and blind buying (which required exhibitors to rent whole sets of films which they had not had an opportunity to screen). She also examines in detail the debate within Hollywood during the early and mid-1930s about how female sexuality might best be marketed. This book offers a great deal that will interest film theorists. Not only does it offer extensive analysis of the nature of the appeal of West's jokes, the volume also questions the argument advanced by Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath that a singular male gaze structured by an Oedipal narrative pattern dominated classical Hollywood cinema. Curry describes a complex system of multiple gazes in West's films.

Especially interesting is Curry's discussion of the controversies the Mae West icon has generated among gays and feminists, between those who argue that West demystified femininity, undercut conventional sex roles, and adopted a proto-feminist persona, and those who have argued that her representation as an excessively sexual, gender-transgressive woman had an essentially misogynist appeal. Curry's interpretation seeks to transcend this debate by stressing West's importance as a symbol of "unbridled fantasy, visual pleasure, or social subversion" (p. 125). Women's historians, film historians, and students of gender all will find exciting new arguments and ideas in this volume.

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