

Judith Mayne. *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Pp xxiii, 226. \$18.95.

Judith Mayne introduces her recent book on feminists and lesbians in contemporary media culture by distinguishing between “feminist film studies” and “feminist film theory,” and firmly inscribing *Framed* within the former category (xi). Her eleven essays, written since 1987, elegantly attend to the particular and eschew generalizing theoretical claims whether her critical gaze is turned to mass culture (for example, prime time feminism on *L.A. Law* or Clint Eastwood’s *Tightrope*) or analysing works more regularly associated with theoretical explorations (the experimental lesbian videos of Su Friedrich and Midi Onodero or the femme fatale in New Wave French cinema). Mayne wants to distance herself from “feminist film theory” so as to resist the mastery of theoretical paradigms over the films they speak to; instead, she is interested in “incorporating theoretical inquiry into studies of individual films” (xi).

Mayne is no stranger to theory as her earlier books attest (*The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema; Cinema and Spectatorship*), but her proclaimed shift away from theory has, at its roots, the desire to get outside the theoretical paradigm that has dominated feminist film criticism for the past twenty years: theories of spectatorship which followed the publication of Laura Mulvey’s 1975 spectacularly influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey’s essay set the terms for most film criticism in the 1980s and into the 90s. Either one took up her analysis of the way film — in particular, classic Hollywood cinema — assumed an active male gaze looking at the passive female image, or one examined how the female spectator interrupted, resisted, and inverted the male gaze. In either case, sexual difference and the male gaze were the dominant categories of feminist film analysis. Mayne shifts these categories from spectatorship to framing, here understood both in its traditional sense (“framed by male desire, framed by plot, framed by the conventions of Hollywood” [xxii]) and in the structural sense that no representation — including theory itself — happens without some kind of frame. “Framed,” Mayne concludes her polemical introduction, “refers simultaneously to the limitations and to the possibilities of film and mass culture, and equally to the limitations and possibilities of theory and criticism. Framing embodies the contradictory impulses that I think are central to feminist critical practice” (xxii-xxiii).

Contradiction and ambiguity are positions Mayne returns to again and again throughout these essays. Far from being a weak position of non-committal, her revelations of ambiguities lead to incredibly complex and elegant analyses of specific films, videos or television shows. The theoretical meaning, here, is in the detail. Whether discussing mass culture (such as the media’s representation of Tonya Harding’s

attack on Nancy Kerrigan) or avant-garde productions (for instance, Julia Zando's video art), Mayne brings the same uncompromising rigour to all her objects of study. She is not interested in positioning one form of feminist or lesbian representation above another as more radical, more resistant, or more intelligent. Rather, her analyses of narrative structures, camera techniques, or reception history, disclose the paradoxical sexual and gender frames circulating in contemporary media culture. Her astute and always engaging readings lead her to examine the "double positions" repeatedly offered to feminists and lesbians as filmmakers, spectators, consumers, and subjects of media culture. In her essay on the star status of Marlene Dietrich, Mayne challenges the strategy of reading for resistance that pervades most feminist and lesbian work. Resistance readings of Dietrich interpret her sexual ambiguity and androgynous beauty as a site of subversive rereadings and reclaimings, but Mayne questions how "against the grain" such interpretations actually are, and sees Dietrich as offering a far more complicated model of gender identification and cinematic seductiveness than the duality that resistance models provide. She argues that male spectators are precisely seduced by Dietrich's cold disdain of men and appropriation of the male gaze and that the risk in "ascribing a resistant function to an element" of Dietrich's persona, is that it "may function quite well within the logic of patriarchal discourse" (17). After brilliantly exploring the multiple positions of identification within Dietrich's signature film *Blue Angel*, Mayne concludes that a "figure like Dietrich is both contained by patriarchal representation and resistant to it; this 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' constitutes the very possibility of a feminist reading of performance" (17).

The "both/and" argument may frustrate propositional impulses, but Mayne's uncompromising attentiveness to the complexities of her texts makes the reader feel like doors of feminist and queer thinking are constantly being swung open, even if we are not sure where the 'both/and' will lead. The metaphor of doors swinging open is not a random choice for Mayne's essay on "prime time feminism" in the popular late-1980s television show *L.A. Law* gravitates around a phrase — "the door that swings both ways" — repeatedly used on the show (for example, in one episode, the womanizing Arnold Becker convinces a male client to sue for alimony, arguing that "the feminist door swings both ways" [84]). Feminist critics often read representations of feminism in mass culture with skepticism, suspicious of ideological appropriation. Mayne refuses such an approach to popular culture, one that remains on the level of representational politics and counts "good" versus "bad" portrayals of feminist and lesbian characters. Instead, she concentrates on the original narrative structure of *L.A. Law* (an ensemble cast with 3 intertwining yet separate plots per episode) to elucidate how the feminist door swings both

ways. *L.A. Law* is not feminist or anti-feminist, she argues, but often uses the multiple narrative format to make contradictory claims (the famous lesbian kiss episode between CJ and Abby is coupled with another plot line that equates homosexuality with pederasty). The show is framed such that it benefits both from feminism and from the status quo, getting to swing both ways. What I like about Mayne's close readings of the swinging doors in media culture, is that it shifts feminist and queer arguments away from moral claims ("this is good" or "this is bad;" "this resists" or "this is co-opted"), to specific analysis of the workings of gender and sexuality.

The pleasure of reading *Framed* comes from the minute and multiple moments that take one beyond the male gaze and open into a labyrinth of possibilities for analysing the pleasures and frustrations of watching today.

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Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999. Pp. 232. £42.

Indian writing in English has charted a different course since the eighties, registering in some ways the shift from the teleological, identity-based model of Commonwealth literature criticism to a kind of postcolonial criticism that is increasingly concerned with the locations of cultural self-representation. The four stages of Indian English writing that S. K. Desai saw as paralleling "a counter-historical consciousness," starting with the uncritical acceptance of colonial modernity, followed by ambivalence, then a return to roots and traditions, and finally the establishment of a separate and relational identity, hinged on an idea of postcolonial Indianization marked by a (re)discovery of "the 'genuinely' Indian" sensibility (57). Current postcolonial discourse largely rejects this notion of an authentic, unified, homogeneous recovery of traditions and pasts, demanding, instead, greater attention to the exclusions of history, its gaps and silences, and the relations of class, caste, religion, gender, and language that structure representations of history and culture.

Rumina Sethi's *Myths of the Nation* starts from the premise that it is the thematics of Indianness or Indianization in Indian writing in English, particularly in the periods of nation-building, that can explain its "persuasive, and even progressive form, and its consequent reach towards 'reality'" (7). Historical fiction does not only reflect the nationalist ideology but also constructs models of cultural identity through various narratological forms, such as oral history, vernacularism, parabolic, and prophetic legends, myths, and folktales. The focus of the study is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, first published in 1938, a