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***Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mise en Scène in Hollywood*. Stella Bruzzi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013 (181 pages). ISBN: 9780748676163.**

A Review by Ian Murphy, University College Cork

Recent developments in film theory have seen an attempt to integrate formalist and cultural modes of film analysis that have traditionally been opposed. In diverse ways, scholars such as John David Rhodes, Nick Davis and Rosalind Galt have mobilised close attentiveness to visual style and mise en scène as a means of exploring broader social issues like race, class, gender and sexuality. At its best, this approach demonstrates that the performance of stylistic analysis in film studies—which David Bordwell claims has long been overshadowed by a "literary turn of mind" (33) that privileges the study of narrative, theme and identity politics—need not lead to a dead end of aestheticism for its own sake. Also exemplary of this approach, and its fruitfulness, is Stella Bruzzi's *Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mise en Scène in Hollywood*. Starting from her conviction that the surfaces and textures of film are frequently more expressive than the representation of character, Bruzzi deftly interweaves sociological and psychoanalytic theories of gender, desire and identification with vivid close readings of the aesthetic tropes and stylistic effects that define male-centred genre films to evaluate how images of masculinity are conveyed in classic and contemporary cinema.

At a lean and well-paced 181 pages, the book consists of a substantial Introduction and three broadly chronological chapters, during which Bruzzi moves from discussions of 1940s film noir and melodrama into critiques of modern action blockbusters. In the Introduction, subtitled "Towards a Masculine Aesthetic", she contends that the vast majority of scholarship on masculinity in cinema which emerged in the wake of 1970s gaze theory and psychoanalytic feminism has, almost without exception, focused on representations of male identity and, more specifically, the male body. The limitations of this approach become evident when discussing emblematic "men's cinema" texts such as *Point Break* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1991) or *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011), whose action set pieces offer a dynamic fusion of stunts, spectacle and male heroics that engender visceral, affective responses with the body of the film rather than the protagonist, or place us "in a position of quasi-identification, not so much with the hero as with the film's visual style" (5). Drawing firstly upon the models of embodied spectatorship pioneered by Steven Shaviro and Vivian Sobchack, as well as Thomas Elsaesser's claim that classical Hollywood melodrama transmits its concern with gender politics through the careful orchestration of mise en scène, Bruzzi posits that the most telling aspects of cinematic masculinity are rarely conveyed through the narrative construction of character. Instead, they are communicated through an abstract yet potent synchronicity of framing, blocking, montage, music, and camera angle and movement that facilitates more fluid and mutable modes of viewer engagement. She usefully locates this formalist assertion within a psychosocial dialogue about Sigmund Freud's oddly progressive vision of hegemonic masculinity as itself being far more labile than is widely

accepted within dominant culture—his belief, in other words, that there is no such thing as "normal", only the performance of normality—and further broadens the discussion to encompass queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that our subjective responses to cultural stimuli are rarely restricted to our gendered identity positions. From this complex but accessible theoretical baseline, Bruzzi seeks to establish men's cinema as a discrete category of sensual, high-energy, intensely physical filmmaking that, within the confines of a conservative Hollywood system, yields unexpectedly liberal and inclusive spectatorial pleasures. For the author, those moments when a traditionally male-centred film "elicits a visceral, emotive response from its viewers as well as an intellectual one" constitute a "response to its liberating, intense visual style just as much as to any nebulously defined notion of the phallus" (28).

Chapter One, entitled "How *Mise en Scène* Tells the Man's Story", extends these preliminary concerns into a fuller assessment of the relationship between masculinity and mise en scène in classical Hollywood narrative. Bruzzi firstly considers how "white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity" (32) is constructed as the normative subject position by the invisible unity of the continuity system, and is either affirmed or undermined by the degree to which films adhere to this convention. For instance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962) uses a self-consciously unobtrusive visual regime built around static camera and emotive close-ups to suture us into the subjectivity of its liberal male lawyer protagonist (Gregory Peck)—particularly during his nine-minute courtroom speech—and thus "cement the symbolic bond between hegemonic masculinity, ideology and audience" (35). In contrast, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Fritz Lang, 1956) denaturalises the accord between dominant masculinity and continuity editing by employing oppressively flat, borderline-theatrical camerawork in the service of a perverse twist ending, which retrospectively reveals this style as an unreliable affectation that is "all about surface and performance" (36). Bruzzi then turns to an intriguing discussion of how male anxiety in domestic melodrama is figured through the deployment of nonnarrative elements, such as the visual construction of the family staircase as an enclosing barricade in *There's Always Tomorrow* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), the framing of a bedroom window as a psychosexual prison in *Written on the Wind* (Sirk, 1956), and the use of awkward blocking, low angles and CinemaScope to translate James Dean's neurosis into a kind of abstract expressionism in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Such anxieties surface more forcefully within film noir, whose "suppressive narratives" (38) and manipulation of light and design signify the claustrophobic dread or morbid panic experienced by the threatened hero. Her examples of noir's projection of anxiety onto the body of the film include the proliferation of framing devices in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), where Robert Mitchum's central investigation is relayed through a maze of apartments, nightclubs and underlit doorways, and the climactic shootout in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), in which the hall of mirrors refracting multiple distorted images symbolises the genre's "omnipresent lack of clarity, stable identities and sound knowledge" (49). These case studies represent Bruzzi's most persuasive dissections of male trouble, as the harmony of style and theme richly evokes those moments where the normative male subject, "having thought it was the identity position against which its 'Others' were defined, … discovers, in fact, that it is the most precarious and unsustainable of identity positions" (50). Moving towards a darker strain of "polymorphous perversity" (63), she closes the chapter with a study of colour in *Dead Ringers* (David Cronenberg, 1988), reading the eruption of red across the film's chilly blue mise en scène as a return of the repressed within the precariously balanced intersubjectivity of its identical twin protagonists. While this film easily ranks among the cinema's most unnerving portraits of annihilated masculinity, its citation here feels somewhat anomalous: Cronenberg's brand of postmodern body horror is

too idiosyncratic, too unmistakeably Canadian, to be comfortably located within the book's mainstream Hollywood contexts and traditions.

The book's second and shortest chapter is entitled "Towards a Masculine Aesthetic", and in it Bruzzi offers a close study of three canonical postclassical texts that, in different but equally important ways, have shaped the subsequent style and identificatory dynamics of men's cinema. She argues that the cold, self-conscious artifice of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C'era una volta il West*, Sergio Leone, 1968) reroutes conventional investments in character towards a set of audiovisual gestures and motifs: Ennio Morricone's elegiac score, the sweeping crane shot of Claudia Cardinale arriving at the train station, and the low-angle widescreen composition of a group of men walking slowly and purposefully towards the camera, which "draws us into a complex form of identification, not with the men so much as with the feelings provoked by the synchronisation of the men's actions with the camera's angle and movement" (74–5). These aesthetics of male camaraderie and communal identity are again evoked through the "walking posse" motif in *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), though in this case it is the film's breakneck montage and overt fetishisation of gun violence that have proven most influential on everything from blockbuster action franchises to the oeuvre of Quentin Tarantino. Turning her attention to *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), Bruzzi posits that the title character's conservative, right-wing hypermasculinity is slyly undercut by the film's economic minimalism, driven by handheld camera, jerky whip pans and natural lighting schemes that quickly entered the visual lexicon of men's cinema. Taken collectively, these three films exemplify how stylistic effects and techniques can be "adapted as well as assimilated" (92) across different generic and historical contexts.

The third chapter, simply titled "Men's Cinema", is the book's longest section, an extended study of a wide range of contemporary films whose tropes crystallise masculine aesthetics. While Bruzzi's writing style remains astute and often witty, I have some reservations about her choice of case studies here. In some cases, the texts under consideration are film studies mainstays that are unavoidably crucial to the evolution of modern men's cinema, but are unfortunately a little too well chronicled to generate fresh enthusiasm: *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990), *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) and *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992). In other cases, the selections are too similar to significantly advance the argument: once Bruzzi has identified the prevalence of "exaggeratedly upbeat and macho style (lots of rivalry, shouting by men in uniforms, whooping and high fiving)" (113) in 1980s and 90s action films via her study of the homosocially hysterical volleyball game and flight training sequences in *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), we gain little from an analysis of the gung-ho, MTV-style firefighting montages in *Backdraft* (Ron Howard, 1991). In other cases again—the study of Michael Douglas's Monday-morning "power walk" to the Oval Office in the romantic comedy *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995), or the patriarchal construction of the tragic warrior hero through slow motion, close-up and POV shots in *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000)—the films simply feel too safe, too entrenched in the genre conventions and industrial practices of mainstream Hollywood, to produce the kinds of richly ambiguous aesthetic signification we saw in the classical noirs and melodramas. Towards the end of the chapter, however, Bruzzi returns to the type of inward neuroses that made the earlier studies so compelling. She describes an increased focus upon introspection in recent men's cinema, as exemplified by the frenetic montages of amnesiac Jason Bourne struggling to reconstruct his traumatic history in *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), the use of austere Scottish landscape as an objective correlative to James Bond's conflicted psyche in *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012), and the manner in which so-called puzzle films *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and

Shutter Island (Scorsese, 2010) marshal colour, editing and camera movement to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality experienced by their tormented heroes (played, in both cases, by Leonardo DiCaprio).

The more qualified successes of this final chapter lead me to ponder some potentially fruitful areas for expansion. Although Bruzzi is not concerned with auteur issues, she might have further explored filmmakers like Michael Mann or Kathryn Bigelow, both of whom have built careers upon the kinds of affective materiality, visceral action sequences and themes of embodied subjectivity that she repeatedly associates with men's cinema. As noted earlier, she mounts a strong analysis of the nongenderised pleasures of surfing and skydiving in *Point Break*, but equally ripe for theorisation are *Blue Steel* (1989), where Bigelow's trademark masculine style is strikingly mediated through the presence of a female protagonist, or *The Hurt Locker* (2008), for which her mastery of classic men's-cinema terrain significantly made her Hollywood's first and, to date, only female filmmaker to win the Best Director Oscar. More than the underrepresentation of specific directors, though, Bruzzi's understandable eschewal of the thematic and identitarian approach occasionally compromises her thesis. After all, the evocations of masculinity in these films are never simply pure distillations of an abstract male style, but are rather permeated and intersected by a whole range of other cultural dynamics. The soaring rockets of *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983) index American patriotism as much as Lacan's absent phallus; the gritty credit montage of auto factory workers toiling to the blues rhythm of Jack Nitzsche's "Hard Workin' Man" in *Blue Collar* (Paul Schrader, 1978) conveys a masculinity that is sharply divided along racial, economic and institutional power lines. Our spectatorial response to their masculine aesthetics is thus also an engagement with related social discourses that may fall outside the scope of Bruzzi's project, but whose absence nevertheless tends to limit its political vitality. In the Introduction, Bruzzi concedes that the feminist effort to define women's cinema in the 1970s and 80s "was always a different project from any potentially comparable definition of 'men's cinema', as the former necessarily had an urgent political and ideological root, and aesthetics were inevitably allied to this political struggle" (11). The comparative lack of urgency becomes palpable in some of these later readings where there seems to be less at stake, especially in those highly commercial films that uphold rather than critique normative modes of articulating hegemonic masculinities.

Indeed, this brings me to my final reservation: I am not quite convinced by the purportedly unifying and affective "inclusiveness" of a men's cinema that is almost exclusively populated by white heterosexual protagonists, and I wonder how Bruzzi's thesis might benefit from a more productive dialogue with LGBT and queer film. Certainly homosexuality is, as she stresses, already subliminally inscribed in many of these films through its uneasy textual absence, and the ways in which films like *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) or *Top Gun* visually betray their heroes' failure to embody the ideal of exemplary heteronormativity. Yet it does not follow that these are the only enunciation strategies or types of queerness worth exploring, and she forecloses too quickly upon the identificatory potential of films that deal more directly with homosexuality. To cite but one obvious example, *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) enacts the masculinity crisis suffered by its closeted cowboys precisely through its evocative play on the aesthetic tropes, mythic iconography and spatial relationship between man and landscape popularised by that most hallowed men's-cinema genre, the Western. Again, it seems that a little more diversity in the case studies could foster exciting new dimensions to Bruzzi's thesis. Ultimately, however, my misgivings about some of the directions in which she takes her study are grounded in enthusiasm about its obvious critical fertility and engaging, thought-provoking

nature. This is a lucid, highly enjoyable book that will undoubtedly stimulate further interesting research on the relationship between gender, aesthetics and spectatorship.

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