

More Than Just a Simple Refrain?

The Figure of the Girl in International Cinema

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BOOK REVIEW

Handyside, Fiona and Kate Taylor-Jones (eds.) 2016. *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



The recent volume, *International Cinema and the Girl* (2016), edited by Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones, is a welcome and important contribution at the intersection of girls studies and feminist film theory. As the editors suggest in their introduction, the girl is a figure that enables debate; in this volume we find a worthy collection of chapters that begin to plot out some crucial areas for the study of the girl in international cinema. The collection does not offer a survey of the field but, rather, offers various detailed and specifically situated investigations. From the perspective of girlhood and international cinema this collection addresses wider concerns, including the legacies of feminism (with some authors taking up the term post-feminist more easily than others), and the impact of globalization on a local and transnational level.

If we agree that most of the scholarship on girls' film culture focuses on Hollywood, as does much of film scholarship itself, *International Cinema and the Girl* broadens our view with an analysis of films from various geographical locations. The essays in the collection discuss different genres of film in which the girl has been foregrounded, and they engage with a number of different theoretical frameworks or approaches to film analysis. The four sections, into which the chapters are divided, make this clear with, for example, titles like "Philosophies of Girlhood in Film" and "Sonic Youth: Girlhood, Music and Identity" that guide the reader into different areas of concern. Different perspectives are also offered on what constitutes the girl for each author and, as you would expect, the volume refrains from offering a fixed view on who or what a girl is.

The essays in this collection deal with the experiences and representation of female-identified children on screen, but also with the notion of girlish-



ness as it is played out in adults, children, or in cultural imaginaries. Lara Cox's chapter, in its examination of *Bye Bye Blondie* (Virginie Despentes 2011), is of particular note here in its reflections on girlishness and femininity in relation to younger and older women.

One of the strengths of the collection is the articulation of a variety of views that foreground the impossibility of a universal girl figure being represented on screen. For example, surface level readings of a makeover scene, in Danielle Hipkins's chapter, are complicated by a shift in attention to the affective quality of mother and daughter interaction. Taylor-Jones's essay seeks to show how patriarchal ideologies are shored up by the visibility of girl soldiers in film, rather than questioned. Affinities and commonalities between the chapters emerge even as they provide suitable sites of tension and/or juxtaposition. The collection shows that the girl on screen can be politically transgressive, yet she can also be the figure through which the status quo is reinscribed most voraciously. This kind of scholarship helps us to negotiate this tricky landscape since the authors carve out different ways of approaching the sometimes amorphous, yet often blithely homogenized, category of the girl on screen.

The collection opens with an essay by Danielle Hipkins that carefully sets up the Italian context of girlhood and cinema. Hipkins turns her attention not only to cinema and girlhood here but also to economic deprivation, politics, post-feminism, and consumer cultures. For Hipkins, *Un giorno speciale* (A special day) (Francesca Comencini 2012) and *Come tu mi vuoi* (As you desire me) (Volfango De Biasi 2007) challenge straightforward readings of the *velina* (television showgirl) and the young spectators of the films. The specificity of her analysis allows Hipkins to problematize and foreground economic precarity and political corruption; she cites, for example, the venality of ex-Prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and, in particular, his interactions with young girls that constrain the girls' lives in significant ways.

In the section "Philosophies of Girlhood and Film," Lucy Bolton writes that *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold 2009) "might look like social-realism but is also phenomenological experimentation" (76). With this remark and a brilliant analysis of this film, Bolton foregrounds the importance of feminist phenomenological strategies for articulating what it is *to be* a girl in this particular situation. She considers how film can represent individual experience without falling into a trap such as the stereotyping of youth or into well-worn narratives of broken families. Pointing to the limits of narration, Bolton eloquently outlines how embodied experience and complex social relations are captured and articulated through the medium of film. For Bolton, *Fish*

Tank eschews clichéd narratives, with no “moralizing message, overt political agenda or pop culture burden” (83). It speaks, rather, to “*this* girl’s experience” (78)—a point that is vital to acknowledge and one that needs, of course, to be thought through constantly in film studies and in girlhood studies.

In her discerning reading of *Pariah* (Dee Rees 2011), Clara Bradbury-Rance explores the spatial metaphors of queer adolescence. Bradbury-Rance asks why there has been an under-theorization of the adolescent figure so that she can then offer us a compelling study that addresses this deficiency through a queer-feminist framework. The dislocation and in-between-ness of both queerness as a political strategy and adolescence as a stage in life are brought together exquisitely. Here, queerness and adolescence are not simply related to sexuality and chronological age, but, put together, offer affectively charged possibilities with the potential for resistance to heteropatriarchal normativity. The spatial construction of *Pariah* is meticulously traced by Bradbury-Rance in relation to this yet her observations here explore broader political issues of queerness and the problem of representation as well, particularly in relation to the intersection of gender, sexuality, and adolescence.

In their respective chapters, Mary Harrod and Fiona Handyside both address French cinema’s ability to represent young women on screen and its concerns about this. In particular, Harrod outlines the specificity of the French so-called chick flick. The politics of feminism (and post-feminism) and notions of girliness in the context of French cinema are compared to how these are represented in US films and in Anglo-American feminist narratives. This allows Harrod to make a number of observations about motifs and themes in the films she discusses. French chick flicks such as *LOL* (Lisa Azuelos 2008), which stands in textspeak for *laughing out loud*, are read for their difference compared to their US counterparts, and Harrod aligns this divergence with the formation of intellectual French feminist debates on femininity that emerged in the late twentieth century.

The importance of the specificity of French feminist politics and discussions of girlhood on screen is highlighted in Fiona Handyside’s chapter which examines the role of music in *Naissance des pieuvres*, marketed in English as *Water Lilies* (Céline Sciamma 2007), and *Un amour de jeunesse*, marketed in English as *Goodbye First Love* (Mia Hansen-Løve 2011). The chapter’s careful attention to form, voice-over and the implications of the sonic privileged over the visual, is a welcome and valuable shift from the visual analyses that concern the greater part of the volume. Handyside develops an astute and richly contextualized analysis of the films’ scores to argue that music in these texts “articulates the shifting terrain of girlhood itself” (128).

In her essay, Kate Taylor-Jones shows the global and local complexity of debates concerning international cinema and girlhood in her excellent account of the depiction of African child soldiers in *Rebelle* (War witch) (Nguyun 2012), *Johnny Mad Dog* (Sauvaire 2008) and *Feuerherz* (Heart of fire) (Falorni 2009). For Taylor-Jones, these internationally oriented films fail to articulate the figure of the girl in warfare outside of hackneyed tropes. She makes the case for how the characters and narratives are constrained by dominant gendered ways of thinking and the shadow of the global North's relationship to Africa. Despite the girl as soldier being central to the diegesis, Taylor-Jones affirms that "the call in girlhood studies to hear the girl would seem to meet with constant deaf ears when faced with the transmission of the tales of former child soldiers" (190–191).

This is a balanced and exciting collection of essays. While some might rest on familiar ground there is much here that takes us in new and important directions. The editors have achieved their aim of assembling an impressive collection of essays that reassert the specificity of the girl on screen in her local and individual context, while also attending to the global issues that the films address. They do all this while also making clear the value of such work to broader questions of gender, feminism, and film.



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