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# REVIEWS

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Kathleen Anne McHugh. *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama*. New York: Oxford, 1999. 235p.

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Two important observations prompted the study that would become Kathleen Anne McHugh's *American Domesticity*. "the chronic suppression of representations of domestic labor" (193) and the tacit equation of domesticity with white, middle-class womanhood. As its central project, the book locates and explains the link between these two invisibilities — the invisibility of housework and the invisibility of non-white and non-middle class women in discussions of domesticity. McHugh convincingly argues that while the mystification of housework carries implications for gender relations, it also functions to establish and maintain other social hierarchies. The book identifies the source of this connection in nineteenth-century domesticity manuals, follows its effects through film melodramas' representations of housework, and ends with a consideration of feminist films that seek to undo this pattern. In addition to her text-based analysis, McHugh offers a meta-critique of critical practice in the 1970s and '80s. She notes that her interest in gender issues as a feminist scholar enabled her to see the implications of invisible labor for notions of femininity, but it did not enable her to see the exclusion of other social groups. She blames her oversight on psychoanalytic approaches, which rely too heavily on universal notions of sexuality and fail to historicize subjects. She sets out to refine previous studies of domesticity that have focused almost exclusively on gender and sexuality, taking instead a materialist approach to her topic.

The body of the text falls into three sections (each consisting of three chapters). In the first, McHugh examines the textual roots of the mystification of the labor of domesticity and its implications for race and class inequalities. She reads nineteenth-century advice books and housekeeping manuals, namely Lydia Maria Child's *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829) and Catherine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), and turn-of-the-century texts from the domestic engineering movement. As part of their goal to distinguish the home from the public sphere, these theorists imagine a home that is a site of neither production nor work. Domestic discourses idealize women's dependence and lack of legal sta-

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tus as selflessness, superior spirituality, and delicacy and, as a sign of these qualities, encourage women to cultivate an unlabored appearance.

Those not sharing these traits (African Americans, working-class women) could be excluded from womanhood on the basis of this lack rather than on the basis of demographics. Domestic discourse, therefore, “accommodates democracy’s inequities by finding a place and constructing an identity for those subjected to these inequities, converting the terms of subjection to the features of a particular social subjectivity” (58).

In the book’s second section, “Housekeeping in Hollywood,” McHugh looks at the way cinema built upon nineteenth-century domesticity. She examines several films from the early Hollywood era, including such silent films as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Mothering Heart* (1913) by D.W. Griffith, *Making of an American Citizen* (1912) by Alice Guy Blaché, and *Too Wise Wives* (1921) by Lois Weber, and classical Hollywood melodramas such as Dorothy Arzner’s *Craig’s Wife* (1936), King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* (1937), and Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Her analysis focuses on the way cinema constructed notions of femininity and domesticity through its representations of housework. D.W. Griffith’s portrayals of idealized femininity valorized household industry and disparaged leisure. With the increase of consumerism, however, cinema needed to promote leisure among housewives. Later directors would offer a message more conducive to the cinema and the values of capitalism. *Craig’s Wife*, for example, vilifies excessive housekeeping and fastidiousness as indicative of deficient affection. *Stella Dallas* and *Mildred Pierce* attempt to undermine the self-sacrifice associated with motherhood by aligning the ability to love with the ability to consume. In all these melodramas, differences in class and race are represented in terms of standards of femininity and domesticity.

McHugh ends her study with a look at feminist filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s who have responded to the previous models. In this section she examines four films: Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), Patricia Gruben’s *The Central Character* (1977), Marleen Gorris’ *A Question of Silence* (1982), and Zeinuba Davis’ *Cycles* (1988). Rather than making housework invisible, these films aestheticize it, foregrounding that part of women’s lives and treating it as central to their narratives. So doing, the films seek to disrupt “the hegemonic vision of domestic femininity perpetuated by the American culture industry” (154). Following the trajectory of the argument about the maintenance of a private sphere as necessary to the maintenance of capitalist society, McHugh shows that these filmmakers deconstruct the separate spheres. In true second-wave feminist fashion, they demonstrate that the personal (housework) is political.

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McHugh complicates her analysis throughout the book and especially in the final section by taking a meta-critical approach to feminist film theory. She attempts to demonstrate that psychoanalytic approaches, which lent themselves well to gender analysis, led in the 1970s and '80s to a tendency to imagine a universal womanhood, to read gender as a category apart from race and class. Linking this to the trajectory of the book's argument, she argues that "psychoanalysis, as it was initially taken up by feminist film theory, participated in the ideological process whereby housework became invisible" (158). Her focus on labor from a materialist approach attempts to rectify this critical blindness. According to McHugh, the films themselves subvert a psychoanalytic approach. Jeanne Dielman, for example, presents a woman's situation that a strictly libidinal economy cannot explain. Jeanne's actions are motivated less by desire than by economics.

McHugh covers a lot of territory and works with many ideas, and at several points the connections between the argument's primary threads become hazy. The dual focus of the book -- its critical analysis of domesticity's tacit assumption of a universal woman and its meta-critical analysis of feminist film theory's similar assumption -- muddies the effect of the argument at times. Her succinct and elegantly written epilogue, however, quite satisfyingly brings the many strands together.

The most compelling aspect of McHugh's study is her attempt to explain the inextricability of the categories of race, class, and gender. She does not simply tack race and class onto the already much analyzed topic of gender in an effort to round out her discussion. Rather she shows how these oppressions have worked inextricably together, negotiating the contradictions between democracy and capitalism. And although several scholars have observed that nineteenth-century notions of True Womanhood served to exclude non-white women from its definition and therefore from the classification of "woman," McHugh's tracing of that phenomenon into the twentieth century takes that scholarship in exciting new directions. This study makes an important contribution to American studies and is worthwhile reading for any Americanist. ✨