

REVIEWS

Jans B. Wager. *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in the Weimar Street Film and Film Noir*.
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Heide Witthöft

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Jans B. Wager's book, *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in the Weimar Street Film and Film Noir*, offers a reexamination of the Weimar street film and *film noir* from a female perspective. The author asserts that both types of film are not as focused on the male experience as argued in previous studies, but rather that they provide "stories that address a female spectator by providing her with various visual and narrative pleasures" (xiv). Wager intends to find out "what these films might communicate to a female spectator" (xv). The author accomplishes this through a close reading of selected cinematic texts, a reading that is informed by cultural and traditional film studies. This approach helps her situate a film in its cultural context and define the female audience that watched it. Wager acknowledges that her presumed spectator is a creation of her feminist perspective and is made in her image, "white, heterosexual, middle-class, and conscious of herself as a woman trying to negotiate her way through a patriarchal society" (8). This narrowly defined spectator seems to limit the interest of this study to a rather select audience; however, her findings in fact appeal to all those interested in film criticism and women's studies. Wager's claim that she employs a feminist perspective is somewhat dubious. Although she clearly interprets the films from a female point of view, in order to call her analysis feminist her findings would need to be a little more radical, and there should be more references to feminist scholarship.

Wager's book is very well structured; the introduction explains the author's fascination with the Weimar street film and *film noir* and the thematic concerns that connect both genres. She notes that they each "turn on the axis of female identity as well as male identity" (xv) and that an analysis of what the female characters might offer the women in the audience has previously been neglected. Twelve chapters follow the introduction, the first of which details the methodologies used for textual analysis: i.e., combining cultural and film studies for a close reading of the film text and defining the intended audience. Chapter 2 elaborates the thematic connection between the Weimar street film and *film noir* as texts concerned with female and male identity, and different instances of crime melodrama. Wager also introduces two key categories into which women fall in these films: the *femme-fatale* -- active, intelligent, charming, sexually aggressive -- and the *femme attrapée* -- passive, intellectually frustrated, dull, sexually submissive. All the women analyzed by Wager fit these descriptions to a greater or lesser degree and leave the female spectator very few choices for role models with whom they can identify. The *femme attrapée* leads a secure but boring domestic life in an unsatisfying marriage while the *femme fatale* experiences excitement and ventures out into the world, but ultimately her daring lifestyle leads to her punishment by death or imprisonment.

Chapter 3 offers a short but concise overview of the Weimar Republic and Weimar cinema in order to place the films historically and culturally. This chapter furnishes a list of some of the most important films of that period and narrows the author's project to focus on those street films that are "not directed specifically at a female audience" (25). This choice was made in order to demonstrate that even though these films do not specifically address women, they still "reflect, to some degree, their experiences" (26).

Chapters 4-6 present discussions of three Weimar street films: *The Street* (*Die Straße*, 1923), *Variety* (*Variété*, 1925), and *Asphalt* (1929). The first of these films, *The Street*, provides the basic paradigm for other Weimar street films: a man is lured from his dull life at home to the excitement of the street, has a bad experience with a *femme fatale*, and returns to the security of his home. Wager focuses on the *femmes fatales* in these films and proves that they shape their own fates. They are self-confident, sexually adventurous, and actively pursue their goals in life, but in all instances the social order is threatened by their agency and they are "contained" at the end, either through incarceration or death. The *femmes attrapées* do not receive nearly as much attention from Wager as the *femmes fatales*. This is understandable given that they do not receive as much screen time as their more alluring rivals and because they are confined to a home from which they rarely escape. Nevertheless, a deeper analysis of what their portrayal might mean to the female audience would have been welcome. Wager clearly shows that neither the *femme fatale* nor the *femme attrapée* is a model of female existence that the women in the audience could emulate. They are extreme examples of female reality and one wonders if there were no other possible choices for women to make regarding their lives. Although the female spectator may derive visual and narrative pleasure from seeing strong women actively shaping their destiny, this delight will certainly turn to anguish when they realize that the *femme fatale* is eventually subdued by the patriarchal system. Wager unfortunately neglects to explain what this means to the audience.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the sociopolitical scene in the United States after World War II and the development of *film noir* as a response to the postwar situation when men and women had to redefine their places within the social order. It also discusses what *film noir* is, its thematic orientation, and the role of women in it. Wager asserts that the dichotomy of *femme fatale* / *femme attrapée* is also prevalent here, but the depiction of domestic life is reduced to mere hints at familial interaction while the focus remains the *femme fatale* and her mostly criminal exploits.

Chapters 8-10 analyze three *films noirs*: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Gun Crazy* (1950), and *The Big Heat* (1953). Wager's analysis concentrates on different kinds of *femmes fatales* and their respective fates while the *femmes attrapées* are once again neglected. It is true that they rarely appear on screen; however, an investigation of their conspicuous absence would have shed more light on the prominence of the *femmes fatales* in these films. The author also devotes a lot of space to the discussion of the male protagonists in both *film noir* and the Weimar street film. Though it is certainly necessary to see both the *femme fatale* and the *femme attrapée* in relation to the male hero in order to define their roles adequately, there seems to be so much discourse devoted to the male that it detracts from the female characters who should be the center of attention.

Chapter 11 summarizes the findings of Wager's study, but adds nothing new to the arguments previously developed. While it is nice to revisit earlier conclusions in order to emphasize

major discoveries, it is not necessary here because the author presents her arguments explicitly through each film analysis. The book ends with Chapter 12, a consideration of recent films that seem to be following the "noir" tradition. The "retro-noir" *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), the German "neo-noir" *Happy Birthday Turk* (*Happy Birthday Türke*, 1992), and the American "neo-noir" *The Last Seduction* (1993) are presented for the reader's consideration.

Wager succeeds in convincing the reader that the Weimar street film and *film noir* indeed contain stories aimed at women, providing them with visual and narrative enjoyment. At times, however, the analysis does not examine the cinematic texts deeply enough to explain how the female spectators are supposed to process the visual information concerning the on-screen women. Neither the *femme attrapée* nor the *femme fatale* offers a satisfactory example of female existence, so what kinds of alternatives exist for women?

Despite the minor shortcomings mentioned, this book is worth owning because it sheds new light on the films discussed, is very readable, and stimulates the reader to revisit these and perhaps other films of those eras while looking at modern productions with a "Weimar" or "noir" eye.