Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media by Ella Shohat; Robert Stam
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same time taking pride in the ideology of the “melting pot.” Thus her analysis is able to expose the equivocal or sometimes even contradictory nature of the Hollywood text. This is best exemplified in the chapter on *The Year of the Dragon*. Marchetti notes that spectacle, as a major icon of the film, “both attracts and repulses, encouraging viewer identification while keeping that involvement at a distance” (207). This spectatorial ambivalence is employed to generate a wide spectrum of meaning (interpretation) that cannot be ultimately determined. Unlike earlier films discussed in the book, the unfinalizing quality of this 80s film conveys a strong postmodern tone. The strength of the postmodern analysis also betrays a minor weakness, namely that there is no discussion of the transition of the classical Hollywood text of the 50s to the modern or postmodern text of the 80s. Perhaps the selection of a film from the 70s or early 80s would have helped to fill this gap.

Marchetti argues her points eloquently and convincingly. Her passion and dedication to her subject of inquiry is clear. In the preface, she implies that cine-feminism as a study of media construction of social hierarchy cannot avoid the issue of racism, which is an inseparable part of the complex and intertwined problem of the social construction of barriers. Her concern for ethno-feminism not only as an academic endeavor but as a political act which pursues social changes is a timely alarm bell in the current political climate of regressive conservatism.

**Jenny Kwok Wah Lau**

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**Unthinking Eurocentrism**

**Multiculturalism and the Media**

By Ella Shohat and Robert Stam.


$69.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

Shohat and Stam have given us the most comprehensive, indeed, electrifying apologia for a polycentric, multicultural perspective and practice yet. Theirs is not a demonstration of what a marginalized but specific perspective—such as that of a lesbian Chicana like Cherie Moraga, a black gay male like Marlon Riggs, or a Chilean exile like Raul Ruiz—might see or say, nor an explanation of what contestatory, subversive move-

ments from Brazilian anthropophagy to revisionist historiography might achieve. Instead it is a syncretic, carnivalesque celebration of what such individuals and initiatives might accomplish in aggregate. This accomplishment would break with the singularities of identity politics to inaugurate “a multifaceted polylog among all those interested in restructuring power in more egalitarian ways” (346). Such an ideal is clearly utopian and it is to this transformative, utopian spirit that their book is dedicated.

The all-embracing, equal-opportunity perspective of multiculturalism, though, is also easily coopted as the centerpiece of liberal, humanist tolerance. Who, other than the privileged but tolerant liberal or the controlling but egalitarian university administrator, can afford to put aside personal experience of injustices and indignities to insist on the equality of all? Shohat and Stam go to considerable pains to do what Sartre did so tellingly in *Anti-Semitic and Jew*: to differentiate their polycentric perspective from all those efforts to preserve the liberal, if also guilty, consciousness of the Eurocentric tradition that can relativize everything but itself. From their revisionist interpretation of Columbus and the *reconquista* in Spain to their treatment of the figuration of empire, the uses and abuses of stereotypes, and the suppressed but discernible presence of race and ethnicity in seemingly non-ethnic, “mere” entertainment, Shohat and Stam count the ways in which Eurocentrism and humanist tolerance share a profound blind spot produced by presumptions of universality.

Although the authors have consumed a vast amount of material and turned it all to their own ends in the spirit of media jujitsu (using the enemy’s strength to their own advantage) or anthropophagy (ingesting and absorbing diverse, eclectical traditions—including Eurocentrism—in order to effect a metabolic synthesis and transformation), they have given far more priority to examples and instances than to theory and concepts. Thoroughly informed as it is, this is less another book of theoretical interventions than a work attempting to make us see and act differently—not in accord with a governing theory but in the spirit of myriad examples of either subversive readings or contestatory practices. Examples cannot be successfully emulated through precise repetition. They do not specify the manner in which interpretations or practices should occur. The example “rubes off” rather than controls or determines. The classic trope of argument by example has a crucial place here; ironically, it is a rhetorical mode belonging most vividly to one of the central moments in the construction of a Eurocentric imaginary: the Renaissance.

Renaissance writers used the words and deeds of the ancients as examples or models for contemporary conduct or decorum. The goal was to overcome the inad-
equate models of the recent dark ages by activating narratives centered around the exemplary thought and conduct of the heroes of antiquity. A parallel here might be Shohat and Stam’s desire to overcome the inadequate models of bourgeois individualism and nation-state imperialism with examples that are “paramodern” and rooted in the egalitarian traditions of third and fourth world cultures (“para” rather than “pre” to reject the teleology of development toward a Eurocentric apotheosis). As Timothy Hampton notes in Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature, “Exemplarity aims at exhorting the reader to move from words to deeds, from language to action” (29), a goal abundantly evident in Unthinking Eurocentrism as well. With their plethora of examples and counter-examples drawn from Latin-American, African, Middle-Eastern, and some alternative media practice in the West, Shohat and Stam, then, use the trope of the example to exhort us toward a radical transformation of all hegemonic practices based on hierarchy and privilege. The goal seems nothing less than a reconstitution of the “arts of existence” (in Foucault’s words) whereby we shall make our lives and art into an oeuvre that embodies egalitarian values and polycentric criteria.

But reliance on examples also poses a problem, if not a paradox. To serve as truly exemplary, the chosen example or model must be seen to escape or transcend its immediate moment. It must attain to what Hampton calls “momentary universality,” where universality is, simultaneously—if fixed into principle, ontology, or essentialism—the fundamental obstacle to overcome. The example risks succumbing to a master narrative such as Christian salvation (or, to the extent it becomes just another “ism,” polycentric multiculturalism) that ultimately reabsorbs the specificity and historical uniqueness of the example back into an ahistorical teleology. The diverse interpretations of the life of Jesus Christ provide a vivid, if not paradigmatic, example.

How do Shohat and Stam avoid this problem? Largely by tending toward what, after Jacobson, we might call an emulation of “similarity disorder,” where the metonymic aspect of speech predominates over the metaphoric. Examples are strung together in a continual metonymic slide that resists condensation into a metaphor of principle or theory. Each example in this ever expandable series enjoys its moment of universality without attesting to the transcendent power of an underlying universalism. No one example achieves paradigmatic status. No governing law ensues. No final closure arrives. Like Kuhn’s scientific paradigms, these polycentric, multicultural examples serve as models of proper conduct, practice, or decorum which fail to serve their purpose when reduced to rules or laws. The form of the book’s narrative produces the effect of calling into being, or inventing, the utopian possibility and practical model to which the examples simultaneously attest.

If there are omissions, they tend to be of two sorts: one, a tendency to posit Eurocentrism as a consistent bias or even essentialism in ways that may sometimes simplify readings and praxis (for example, those who enjoy privilege should consider serving as “spies” [345] for those who don’t); and two, an absence of reference to other critics and film-makers in the West who have contributed to aspects of the project to contest, refuse, or overthrow exploitation and hierarchy. (Exploitation and class, though included in the “mantra” of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, are, along with gay and lesbian struggle, noticeably underemphasized in comparison with what Shohat and Stam call “epidermal,” nationalist, and ethnic hierarchies of oppression.)

In terms of readings, the Western film serves as an example of racism, with many fresh and cogent insights. The type of analysis offered by Will Wright in Sixguns and Society—one that would also posit a correlation between the development of capitalism and generic transformations in the Western—finds no place here. Ensuing complications such as the in-between or even outsider status of some Western heroes to their “own” communities remain unattended, giving a more black-and-white portrait than necessary. Eurocentric racism simply seems to take effect without the psychological/ Marxist explanations of Sartre, the paranoid theory of Jameson (and others), or the historical specificities of Wright.

Similarly, the work of a wide range of people (from Les Blank to Judith Butler, from Connie Field to Rea Tajiri, and from Vito Russo and Tom Waugh to Julia Lesage, Chuck Kleinhans, Jane Gaines, Christine Gledhill, and Ann Kaplan) as well as the overall efforts of contributors to journals like Women & Film, Jump Cut, Cineaste, Cine Action, and CineTracts or members of groups like San Francisco, California, New York, or Third World Newsreel, receives little or no acknowledgment. Some of these figures, along with others like Sartre or John Berger, are more classically Marxist or more identified with particular forms of identity politics than is the polycentrism of Shohat and Stam, and this book is clearly a radical departure from both the neo-formalism, cognitive study, and psychoanalytic-based feminism that are also not referred to significantly. The degree to which their call for multicultural media studies is made in the absence of a genealogy of or debate with the efforts to champion similar goals is nonetheless something of a disappointment.

Unthinking Eurocentrism is a work of remarkable force. Its limitations do not corrode its achievement. Assault on the new world order, transnational corporations, and the global economy may be of necessity ob-
constantly comparative. Each essay works with a cluster of texts, and the organizing topics are well chosen. After

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Book Notes

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David Desser is the Editor of Cinema Journal; Sidney Gottlieb’s Hitchcock on Film has just been published by the University of California Press; Amy Holberg is a graduate student in the Rhetoric Department at UC Berkeley; Harriet Margolis teaches at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; Eric Smoodin is a Visiting Associate Professor in Film Studies at UC Berkeley.

Davies, Anthony, and Stanley Wells, eds. Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. $59.95 cloth; $17.95 paper. There are worlds within worlds in this exceptionally rich collection of essays on what has finally, though not without difficulty, become an academic and pedagogical as well as mass media fact of life: the persistence of Shakespeare on film and television. Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells have taken six revised and updated essays from an earlier collection, Shakespeare Survey 39, and added eight new ones on a variety of broad subjects. The result is an appealing and accessible book that, much more than any of the recent contenders in this burgeoning arena, will join Jack Jorgens’ still indispensable Shakespeare on Film on the short list of required reading for, as Davies targets his audience, “both the student of Shakespeare and the general reader whose interest embrace the interplay of theatre, film and television” (xii).

One of the great strengths of the volume is that it is constantly comparative. Each essay works with a cluster of texts, and the organizing topics are well chosen. After opening chapters that stake out the territory—a fine review essay by Davies and a selective filmography—each essay examines a genre (chapters on Shakespearean comedies, histories, and Roman plays), director (chapters on Zeffirelli and Kurosawa, with the former under-and the latter properly appreciated), key play (two chapters on Lear and single ones on Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth), or a series, specifically the BBC Shakespeare, a galvanizing event examined specifically in two essays.

All the essays balance close stylistic analysis and historical contextualization, with history broadly conceived of as involving the events depicted or alluded to in the text as well as the text’s overall embeddedness in the circumstances of its creation and circulation. And while the authors are generally well versed in theory, the articles all favor the concrete over the abstract and the speculative. There are many nice surprises throughout the volume and occasional missteps. Overall, the emphasis is on the diversity and vitality of the whole project of bringing Shakespeare to modern audiences by modern media, and all the essays intelligently examine, exuberantly celebrate, and thereby contribute to this important project.

SIDNEY GOTTLIEB

Field, Simon, and Tony Rayns, eds. Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts/Indiana University Press, 1995. $9.95. Intended as a catalogue to accompany an impressive touring retrospective of the films of Suzuki Seijun, Branded to Thrill provides a brief introduction to the best contemporary Japanese director you probably never heard of. The lack of availability of 16mm or video formats in the U.S. has meant that Suzuki has been the province of the specialist, but a veritable cult has grown up around him in the U.S. and Europe, appropriate indeed for a director who has long had this status in Japan. A contract director at Nikkatsu studios from 1956 to 1967, churning out gangster films, war films, and lurid melodramas, Suzuki invested his work with an outrageousness of style and almost complete disregard of narrative conventions guaranteed to make him a favorite of cineastes everywhere (if not of his studio, which fired him in 1967 for making incomprehensible films). Independent production since 1980 has found him working within an art cinema tradition without, of course, abandoning the visual joie de vivre that distinguishes his work. That he is not more popular in the West is testimony to the sad state of affairs within film and video distribution. A provocative introduction by the always reliable and pithy Tony Rayns, a reprint of David Chute’s intelligently impressionistic piece on Suzuki from Film Comment, and a suggestive survey by Ian Buruma on Suzuki’s debt to traditional Japanese popular arts compromise an all-too brief but worthwhile intro-

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