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Abstract

Review of Mariah Devereux Herbeck. *Wandering Women in French Film and Literature: A Study of Narrative Drift*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Keywords

Book Review, Mariah Devereux Herbeck, *Wandering Women in French Film and Literature: A Study of Narrative Drift*

Mariah Devereux Herbeck. *Wandering Women in French Film and Literature: A Study of Narrative Drift*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 199 pp.

Drawing on narrative theory, film theory, and gender studies, Mariah Devereux Herbeck proposes a new concept of narrative drift in her examination of literary and cinematic women who walk or run with no particular destination. *Wandering Women in French Film and Literature: A Study of Narrative Drift* offers close analyses of French works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to argue that accounts of wandering women characters establish them as independent on both the mimetic and diegetic levels, frustrating the efforts of male characters to know, control, and contain them. These female characters thus serve as catalysts for narrative forms that themselves meander, include contradictions and gaps, or multiply. Though Herbeck alludes to many works, she focuses on André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), Jean-Luc Godard's film *Vivre sa vie (My Life to Live)*, (1962), Marguerite Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein (The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein)*, (1964), Laetitia Masson's film *A vendre (For Sale)*, (1998), and Agnès Varda's film *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)*, (1985). Each chapter develops an aspect of Herbeck's notion of narrative drift through a close study of one or two of these fictional works. Throughout, Herbeck situates her work in the tradition of feminist film theorists Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis; the narrative theories of Ross Chambers and others; and criticism specific to the works, authors, and directors she addresses. This book is of particular interest to French Studies scholars, especially those who work on feminist analyses of literature and film in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or who study the particular novels or films she analyzes.

The first chapter stands out from the others, serving as an introductory scan of relevant feminist and narrative theory that situates Herbeck's work in relation to other scholars. While her first chapter does make a persuasive case for analyzing the cinematic gaze in tandem with the accounts of literary narrative agents and distinguishes twentieth and twenty-first century fictional female meandering from notions of *flânerie*, it does not adopt the playful tone nor conduct the incisive close analysis of the other chapters and might be better framed as a stand-alone introduction than as a first chapter. Herbeck hits her stride in chapter 2, "Qui suis-je?" "Who Am I?" or "Whom Do I Follow?" which lays out the central concerns of her idea of narrative drift through a close reading of *Nadja*. Herbeck persuasively argues that in Breton's novel, as well as in subsequent works she addresses, the male narrator's attempt to understand a meandering woman turns into an obsession that can lead to nothing other than self-discovery. It also establishes what is new about the ways in which *Nadja*'s story is told, in contrast to those of Zola's *Nana* or Mérimée's *Carmen* who wandered through novels of the previous century—namely, the eponymous character interrogates the narrator, corrects his account,

and remains enigmatic (and thus to some extent liberated) despite the latter's textual and photographic account. Herbeck demonstrates how subsequent additions to the text introduce a new layer of narration through an editorial voice that adds to and reframes the original text and further complicates Nadja's character. Variations of these narrative traits reappear in the subsequent stories Herbeck addresses.

Herbeck executes a *tour de force* in her feminist analyses of films and fiction in chapters 3, 4, and 5. She conducts compelling studies of *My Life to Live* to examine the detachment of what she terms the "impersonal" narrative of Godard's Nana that adopts no singular perspective but is replete with gaps and discordances; *For Sale* and *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* to establish "personal" narration in which male characters turn their observations of wandering women into tales about their own processes of self-discovery; and *Vagabond* to propose that the film's "pluralized" narration, in which multiple characters relate their interactions with Mona in various ways, results in inconsistencies and more questions about the drifter than it answers. Scholars of these works will find her analyses particularly useful, even separate from Herbeck's concept of narrative drift, and those unfamiliar with them will benefit from Herbeck's succinct synopses. She offers multiple new insights into the structures and details of these films, including the ambiguity of Godard's intertitles, the relative silence of Masson's protagonist, or the ways in which "interviewees" in Varda's film look or do not look into the camera, to mention only a few examples. However, despite her care to avoid conflating the director Godard with the narrative agent of his film, Herbeck does rely heavily on interviews with Varda to justify her analysis of *Vagabond*, which could easily and more persuasively stand on its own. In contrast, the attention Herbeck gives to the literary works is a refreshing shift away from the biographical criticism of many writers on Breton and Duras.

At the conclusion of these close analyses, Herbeck posits that the ways in which narratives about female wanderers are replete with lacunae and break with literary and cinematic traditions (such as continuity editing) say much about the male narrative characters and raise only questions about the female protagonists. Herbeck's feminist interpretation of her primary works demonstrates how the narrative styles of accounts of drifting women characters challenge the scopophilic gaze as well as notions of diegetic unity. In the final section, Herbeck ties her central questions into contemporary problems of immigration and labels of deviance in France, a move that attempts to demonstrate the timeliness of such a study. However, while the political landscape of France has changed drastically since the time of publication, the book's work on narrative and feminist analysis remains highly relevant and a necessary addition to existing scholarship in French studies.

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