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A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity, Patti Gaal-Holmes (2015), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, ISBN 978-1-137-36937-6, (hbk), pp. 256, £60

Reviewed by Lavinia Brydon, University of Kent

The striking cover to Patti Gaal-Holmes' detailed account of 1970s experimental filmmaking in Britain offers a compact illustration of the book's core concern, namely to call attention to the various and varying works that resist the labels traditionally attached to the decade. By including images from David Larcher's 16mm travelogue *Monkey's Birthday* (1975), Derek Jarman's Super-8mm landscape film *Journey to Avebury* (1973) and Jeff Keen's 16mm *Rayday Film* (1968-70 and 1976) as well as a black and white photograph taken of Annabel Nicolson's performance piece *Sweeping the Sea* (1975), the cover thus serves as a pointed reminder that the decade continued to produce personal, poetic and playful work despite growing interest in 'serious' structural and material film experimentation. It is worth noting that the cover also presents images from more recent work, including a detail from Tacita Dean's 35mm film installation *FILM* (2011) and Gaal-Holmes' own 8mm film *just looking* (2004), signalling that the ensuing 'historical reclamation' (1) is an attempt to (begin to) understand the historical trajectories for contemporary moving image works. This is an important point, not least due to film's increasingly fragile status as a fine art medium.

In the few first pages Gaal-Holmes introduces the reader to a clear and coherent line of inquiry that she firmly maintains throughout the book, though there are several apologies for pedantry. She states that her re-evaluation of the 1970s does not seek to dismiss the importance of the non-illusionist structural and material film experiments that occurred during the decade but, rather, 'integrate films that have not received adequate attention into the field alongside those that stand as accepted texts' (1). She quickly becomes more specific, pointing out that the dominance of the works and words of structural and material filmmakers/theorists Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice in discussions of the era problematically suggests that image-rich forms of filmmaking disappeared and only made a return towards the end of the decade. Seeking to redress this oversimplification then, Gaal-Holmes includes a wide range of work in her book and logically organises the six chapters thematically with 'Experiments with Structure and Material' nicely sandwiched between 'Visionary, Mythopoeia and Diary Films' and 'Women and Film'.

However, prior to these film-focused chapters the first two – ‘Questions of History’ and ‘Institutional Frameworks and Organisational Strategies’ – examine the structures and strategies historicising and facilitating the decade’s filmmaking. These chapters are especially helpful for the uninformed reader, not least because they work through several key essays: Malcolm Le Grice’s ‘The History We Need’ (1979), Lis Rhodes’ ‘Whose History?’ (1979) and David Curtis’ ‘Which History?’ (2001). The first chapter also crucially expands the introductory comments regarding the thorny ‘return to image’ thesis that Gaal-Holmes holds responsible for producing and perpetuating biased accounts of the decade. Indeed, at this point, the book begins to show some spirit with Gaal-Holmes weaving her way through several of these accounts identifying particular points of contention. A.L. Rees’ comments that the period witnessed a ‘minimalist paring down of the image’ (1983, 288), for example, are cleverly countered by mentioning Anne Rees-Mogg’s *Real Time* (1971-74), Margaret Tait’s *Place of Work* (1976), B.S. Johnson’s *Fat Man on the Beach* (1973) and David Larcher’s *Monkey’s Birthday*. As Gaal-Holmes emphasises the latter was ‘anything but pared down with its multi-layered images, montage style and hand-worked frames’ (25). On following pages, statements and sentiments occurring in the work of Michael O’Pray, Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Wollen amongst others are also questioned, the highest raised eyebrow perhaps reserved for Wollen’s summary of 1970s and 1980s filmmaking because it ‘apportions out the history as if only two forms of filmmaking [structural and New Romantic] were evident in the decades’ (29).

The challenges to these biased accounts inevitably gain momentum through the textual analyses that occur in chapters three to six. Beginning with ‘Experimental Film and Other Visual Arts’ the chapters also position the works within broader frameworks, permitting looser and, therefore, livelier discussions. This approach certainly benefits Chapter Three’s section on Derek Jarman, whose Super-8 films exhibit a range of influences from landscape painting to Jungian psychology and, therefore, resist easy categorisation. It also gives rise to subsequent thought-provoking sections on Colour Field painting and Cubism, drawing on film and the ‘No-film’ film amongst others. By revealing the many reference points for 1970s filmmaking Gaal-Holmes underscores the numerous artistic approaches to and afforded by the medium, and, importantly, how this flexibility was appreciated by non-structural/material and structural/material filmmakers alike.

The next two chapters serve to confirm the ‘true richness of the decade’s experimentation’ (9), navigating the personal, expressive and, sometimes, anarchic work of visionaries (such as Stephen Dwoskin) and diarists (such as Ian Breakwell) as well as the ‘more rigorous agenda’ (128) pursued by the structural and material filmmakers who primarily worked at the London Filmmakers Co-operative. The final chapter then explores a range of films by women, detailing the feminist discourses that informed the filmmaking and contemplating the possibility of a ‘feminine aesthetic’. What is especially impressive about these chapters is how Gaal-Holmes manages to convey the diverse thematic and aesthetic concerns of the various works using no illustrative material. Her descriptions are incredibly rich, allowing the reader to swiftly recall (or imagine) the work under consideration including those that incorporate elements of performance. Arguably, these enthusiastically detailed observations and the subsequent in-depth analyses best reveal Gaal-Holmes’ dual role as film historian *and* artist/filmmaker.

As a final comment it is worth mentioning the timeliness of this publication. It responds to the increasingly urgent call ‘for the recognition of film at the moment of its possible demise’ (189), helping to raise awareness of the specifics and history of the medium whilst acknowledging that further work needs to be done. As Gaal-Holmes puts it, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film* offers a ‘certain road-map to be taken forward’ (188). But while A.L. Rees and David Curtis note in their generous forward that Gaal-Holmes is ‘free of the blinkers of direct personal involvement at the time, so bring[s] fresh insights to the works’ (xv), she also clearly gained much from conversations with key 1970s figures, such as these two. With the passing of Rees in November 2014 it thus seems important that Gaal-Holmes’ ‘road-map’ is taken forward sooner rather than later.

References:

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