

Reviews

Norman K. Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*. London. Sage Publications, 1991. 157 pages plus bibliography. *Theory, Culture and Society*, ed. Mike Featherstone.

The first half of Norman K. Denzin's *Images of Postmodern Society* offers a useful summary/critique of the postmodern social theory of Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson, and proposes an "Interpretive Interactionism" somewhat ambiguously derived from C. Wright Mills' "radical democratic politics" as the basis for an analysis of seven recent American films. Denzin's principal argument with the postmodern theorists is that they ignore "the decisive performances of race, ethnicity, gender, and class," which are enacted in the "epiphanal moments" of cultural self-revelation he seeks to locate and analyze. These performances, he argues, remain central to defining the "postmodern self." His aim, then, is to reinsert these issues into a discussion of movies that image this postmodern self.

Denzin is certainly in the vein of the scholars he critiques when he justifies film as his data by asserting that "the postmodern terrain is defined almost exclusively in visual terms.... The search for the meaning of the postmodern moment is a study in looking" (p. viii). When Denzin himself "looks" at these contemporary films, he sees, with a few notable exceptions, attempts to frame resolutions to real cultural conflicts in terms of the increasingly illusory but compelling (to most Americans) discourse of the dominant groups in the society. *Blue Velvet* is a "postmodern nostalgia text" that, while it seems to valorize individuals on the margins of society, actually exploits and contains them within reactionary political boundaries. Oliver Stone's counter-myth of love, family and hard work in *Wall Street*, which appears to challenge the materialistic ethos and power structure of 1980's America, ultimately diverts attention from the contradictions and conflicts inherent in this very structure. And the "cultural logic of postmodern love" in *sex, lies and videotape* and *When Harry Met Sally* endorses a conservative economy of sexual pleasures concealed behind a facade of truth that "offers emotional, romantic solutions to 'real' gender, economic, (class [and racial] problems which will not go away with the singing of a song from the 1950s" (p. 123).

The exceptions that Denzin singles out for praise, Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, are both auteur films that create communities of characters and intricate signification systems which give equal weight to various positions across the spectrum of opinion on gender and race, and thus continually cut across any easy solutions to the divisions and anxieties existing within both "the postmodern self" and American culture at large.

The two main sections of the book—one of theory, one of practice—never finally mesh. Although Denzin's criticisms of the theorists are cogent, an elaboration of their inadequacies is, beyond a carry-over of terminology and a few theoretical notions, of minimal use when he comes to his main project: an examination of the cultural tensions inscribed in mainstream American cinema in the late 1980's. *Images* comes alive, however, when he gets to the films. He chooses them with care for their representa-

tion of major cultural themes and values, deconstructs them convincingly, and writes with pace and incisiveness. Further, his discussion of the films is girded with a moral earnestness that invigorates both his ideas and his prose; this is certainly Denzin's most important inheritance from his hero Mills.

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