

Book Reviews

Les Comptes rendus

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Thomas Waugh. *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. xii + 312 pp. ISBN

JIM ELLIS (University of Calgary)

One consequence of the distance the gay and lesbian community has traveled in the past thirty or forty years can be seen in the exaggerated historical divides between its various generations. This is to be expected in a movement that underwent frequent self-examination and self-invention, demanding (at times fairly harshly) that its adherents adjust themselves to the latest theoretical and political developments or be left behind by history. The most obvious instance of this call for self-invention was the shift from "gay and lesbian" to "queer," which, whatever else was at stake, was in part fueled by a desire to be free from a difficult and painful history. The result, of course, was a kind of anxious forgetting.

Thomas Waugh's *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* offers both evidence of this generational amnesia

(he often notes how his students simply don't understand what is at stake in films that were vital ten or twenty years earlier) and a series of writings that may help to overcome it. The book reproduces articles written by Waugh from 1977 to 1997 for a number of venues: the leftist film journal *Jump Cut*, the revolutionary Toronto gay and lesbian newspaper *The Body Politic*, various other gay and lesbian community publications, academic conferences and essay collections on queer cinema. What is probably most interesting and most valuable about these pieces is that they are *not* a retrospective look at key developments in the gay and lesbian movement, or the cinema that accompanied it, although Waugh does provide commentary at the beginning of each piece, often reflecting on how his views have changed. What we are offered instead is the perspective of someone who was vitally engaged in the movement, giving us a response to these films at the moment of their emergence. How did the first audiences react to the revolutionary documentary *Word is Out*? What did they see in it that they had never seen before? What was it like to watch Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* with 700 gay men on opening night in Montreal in 1978, before anyone knew who Derek Jarman was? Younger readers are reminded that the world was not always thus, through essays that give us a privileged view on what it was like to be gay in the academy, or in a leftist film journal, or at a film festival in the 1970s and 80s. Equally importantly, we are reminded of important gay and lesbian films that most of us have forgotten, or never heard of in the first place.

In the foreword to the volume, filmmaker John Greyson writes that reading these reviews makes him "embarrassingly nostalgic" (x) for the political engagement they display. Most readers are likely to have that nostalgia counterbalanced with a certain relief to be past the particular kind of ideological rigor that the movement once demanded. Waugh himself comments humorously on the "positive image Stalinism" (4) displayed in the early pieces, a mode of criticism that is understandable given Waugh's own leftist beliefs, and the venues in which he was publishing. The reviews are thus marked by a willingness, indeed eagerness, to call to task critics or filmmakers, gay or straight, friend or foe, on their various shortcomings. Most often these criticisms still seem justified (and occasionally show us how little has changed): leftist critics are chastised for their unconscious homophobia, Montgomery Clift's biographers for

reproducing stereotypes of the tragic gay artist, gay film makers for blithely reproducing middle-class values and ignoring lesbians and other oppressed groups. At other times the "ideological checklists that constituted so much of the film criticism of the day" (259) make the complaints now seem startlingly beside the point, as when he castigates fictional features, such as Ron Peck and Paul Hallam's film *Nighthawks*, for failing to address all of the items on the oppression list. Either way, the commentary is instructive.

What now can be seen to have been missing in much of this era's criticism (and the comparison to socialist realism is telling) is a concern for aesthetics and especially for the politics of aesthetics. Remembering both the publication venues and the tenor of the times, this is not to be wondered at, but it does perhaps account for the celebration of directors and films that would rapidly fade into obscurity, and the inability to appreciate the early work of directors who would go on to greatness, such as Jarman or Almodovar. Hindsight is, of course, 20/20, and there are myriad reasons why films disappear or directors stop working (and bad films, it has to be said, can often begin to look good in the light of later work). Nonetheless what one misses in here, and what one is grateful that these reviews paved the way for, is criticism that can be more relaxed and more complex in its assessment of a particular film's merits, without at the same time losing sight of the larger political issues. We can certainly see those aesthetic concerns lurking in the background of many of these pieces, but given the brevity of the review genre, we are most often given narrative summaries and an indication of how well the film satisfies the particular representational demands of the moment. Nonetheless, it might have been illuminating, in either the introduction or an afterword, for Waugh to have offered to us a reflection on his own aesthetic sensibilities, and how they shaped or were shaped by his politics. Or, to take this in a slightly different direction, to have looked at how the political demands of the times shaped the aesthetics of these filmmakers.

In light of the particular critical history on display here, it is no surprise that the latter-day Waugh seems most comfortable talking about censorship and the ethics of representation, and dealing with genres that have a certain claim on the real: photography, documentary, and pornography. The final essays in the volume take up these issues at length, discussing the history and the particular

innovations of gay and lesbian documentary, and detailing the long and difficult struggle to publish his illustrated history of homoerotic imagery, *Hard to Imagine*. As with the earlier pieces, these essays display a passionate engagement that is fortunately matched with a sense of humour. There is much to be grateful for in this volume, not just for its documentation of the battles that have been fought and the ones that remain, but for the revolutionary energy that produced these writings (and their subjects) in the first place.

bill bissett. *b leev abul char ak trs*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000. 144pp. \$16.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-433-1

Mark Cochrane. *Change Room*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000. 144pp. \$15.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-432-3

Daphne Marlatt. *This Tremor Love Is*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001. 112pp. \$15.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-450-1

Erin Mouré. *Pillage Laud*. Toronto: Moveable Type, 1999. 99pp. \$25(Cdn) ISBN 0-9684908-0-8

Erin Mouré. *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001. 131pp. \$16.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88784-660-2

nathalie stephens. *Somewhere Running*. Vancouver: Advance Editions, 2000. 96pp. \$13.95(Cdn) ISBN 1-55152-089-3

Rachel Zolf. *Her absence, this wanderer*. Ottawa: BuschekBooks, 1999. 71pp. \$14.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-9699904-8-0

Charles Watts and Edward Byrne, eds. *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1999. 464pp. \$35(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-388-2

JOHN C. STOUT (McMaster University)

Contemporary poetry – in Canada and elsewhere – affords the most interesting site for doing, and for studying, experimental writing. Among the many highly talented and original poets producing experimental work in this country, queer poets have made an especially outstanding contribution. In this review I want to focus on seven recent books of poetry by queer writers, along with a volume of critical essays on radical poetics in honour of Robin Blaser. These eight texts – all first-rate, in my opinion – demonstrate the range and vitality of these new poetics.