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USSY 227 – Ehrlich

Travel Writing on Screen

22 November 2016

In “Travel Writing and Gender,” Susan Bassnett explains how women travelers often had special access to women’s society and how they often focused on “the everyday” (CC pp. 229-230). Do you see these trends in the films for this second part of the class? (*Mystery Train, It Happened One Night, Grapes of Wrath, Spirited Away).* Draw examples from the films and readings.

The Trending “Everyday” Focus for Women in Travel as Depicted on Screen

In her essay *Travel Writing and Gender*, Susan Bassnett explains that women travelers often had special access to women’s society, and “as a result were able to describe … the normality of women’s customs and practices,” hence a focus on “the everyday” (CC 229). According to Bassnett, the typical male European traveler exoticized the Orient and their journey while the typical female traveler “had no desire to reinvent herself as someone else and certainly no desire to see travel as a means of escape from reality of home” (CC 230). In other words, female travel writers rejected self-dramatization. Depictions of women’s society in the 18th and 19th centuries, as offered by the male voice, overly sexualized the everyday women. In contrast, the traveling female voice offered a perspective that refutes the fantastical male accounts of deviance and repressed female sexuality. As a result of a widely established patriarchy, the controversial opinions of many female traveler writers were met with swift dismissal.

Susan Bassnett’s argument regarding gendered travel writing is not directly translatable to the films seen in the second part of class. The films that we have watched depict travelers instead of travel writers. Yet, I argue that Bassnett’s conclusions about the female focus can be extended to encompass travelers in general because traveling is a gendered act that should be indiscernible whether it is watched or read about. Writing is merely a method to eternalize ideas and actions. As depicted in films seen in the second part of class, female travelers’ special access to women’s society often gives rise to increased observational skills and a distaste for self-dramatization, hence a primary focus on “the everyday.”

In the film *Mystery Train*, a sleazy hotel in Memphis, Tennessee provides the backdrop for three separate tales: an eccentric Japanese couple, two women displaced by men in their lives, and a trio of inexperienced robbers. The second tale emphasizes the proposed idea regarding women travelers and “the everyday.” One of the travelers, an Italian widow named Lucia, escorts her husband’s coffin back to Italy. The second traveler, a young woman named Dee-Dee, is introduced as broke having just left her boyfriend. Their individual journey’s lead them to meet in a rundown hotel lobby where they agree to share a room for the night. The hotel room becomes exclusively reserved for the female travelers, and therefore, is dedicated as the area for their women’s society. In their room, each woman is forced to make small-talk with the other. They are complete strangers from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. They trade introductions and share stories from their everyday lives, a natural and everyday activity itself. During this discussion, Dee-Dee and Lucia experience senses of increased observation. Dee-Dee verbalizes thousands of thoughts a seconds and Lucia realizes she made a mistake to share a room. Nearly everything these traveling women do seems to be focused with ways in which people typically act, think, and feel on a daily basis. Their natural reactions to the chaotic events in their lives illustrates their focus on “the everyday.”

Moreover in *Mystery Train*, an eccentric Japanese couple illuminates an intense dichotomy between male and female travelers. The teenage couple explores Memphis during a journey across America because Mitsuko is obsessed with Elvis. The film follows the couple as they travel from the train station, through downtown Memphis and an exhausting tour of Sun Records, to the Arcade hotel. Their shared journey is marked by their clashing personalities. Whereas Mitsuko is depicted as an excited and eager traveler who cannot wait to do the next planned activity, Jun shows great hesitation. Mitsuko is observant of her surroundings. She takes in the entirety of her journey with awe. Jun, however, has a sense of melancholy towards his own existence. His attitude makes it seem as if he is not really there on his journey and Mitsuko is alone. The couple is an example of how travel can be perceived as a gendered act. The dichotomy shows the audience that females are often times more observant than their male counterparts.

In the film *It Happened One Night*, spoiled heiress Ellie Andrews impulsively becomes engaged to the scheming King Westley, leading her wealthy father to command her away on his yacht. After escaping, Ellie encounters the cynical newspaper reporter Peter Warne, who offers to help reunite her with King Westley in exchange for an exclusive story. Ellie’s extraordinary wealth would mistakenly make her out as the antithesis to idea of the female traveler focusing on daily routines. For most of her life, Ellie has been a spoiled heiress who likely never worried about the average person’s daily routine. However, amidst Ellie and Peter’s shared journey, Ellie embraces women’s society and “the everyday” when she becomes separated from her father’s wealth. Ellie’s financial predicament forces her into conditions outside of her comfort zone. For example, she must stand in line to shower at the public washroom. Ellie’s bewilderment to standing in line tells the audience that she likely has never shared a washroom before this moment due to extraordinary wealth, putting her out of touch with reality. The women’s restroom and its line denote the boundary of women’s society in the film due to its gendered access. In this instance, Ellie’s transition into the women’s society returns her to reality. Upon entering the vicinity of the washroom, Ellie must adhere to the natural ordering of events and wait at the back of the line, so the other women would validate her right to shower. Ellie’s compliance completes her transition from heiress to everyday person. Her gender-defined access to women’s society allowed her to return to reality and focus on “the everyday” by transitioning from a lifestyle marked by the extraordinary to a lifestyle marked by the ordinary.

In the film *Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family is looking for a better life and untold riches in California. After their drought-ridden farm is seized by the bank, the family loads up a truck and heads West. On the road, the Joads meet dozens of other families making the same trek and holding onto the same dream. Once in California, however, the Joads soon realize that the promised land isn't quite what they had hoped. The Joads encounter hardship upon arriving as they realize that California has very limited opportunity for work with the current surplus of cheap labor. Consequently, the family spends their time in a camp reminiscent of Hooverville, a shanty town built by the homeless during the Great Depression, during which the women partake in “the everyday” role of cooking, cleaning, and nurturing the children. Ma Joad and the other female family members put up the tent, and then prepare dinner with the family’s already exhausted resources. A while later, the family provides food to many of the camp’s children, an extremely human reaction to the sorrow that fills the camp. Moreover, the female family members clean the family’s assigned cabin on the peach farm and Ma Joad exclaims that life will not be that bad when their work is completed. The female family members are in charge of cooking and cleaning while the male family members earn wages. The family’s shanty town tent and peach farm cabin act as the haven for the female family members’ women’s society. These locations are one of the few areas in the movie where an aggregate of women live together in a more or less ordered community to act out a particular purpose. It was stereotypical of the time period for women to actively engage themselves in the roles that we see them take in *Grapes of Wrath*: cooking, cleaning, and nurturing. The stereotypes were “the everyday” of the household women in the early to mid-20th century. When the women enter their women’s society, there is a return to their everyday roles. Hence, the access to women’s society has allowed them to focus on “the everyday.”

In the film *Spirited Away*, ten-year-old Chihiro and her parents stumble upon a seemingly abandoned amusement park, acting as a gateway into the spirit world. After her transition into the beyond, Chihiro meets the mysterious Haku, who explains that the park is a resort for supernatural beings who need cleansing as a result of their time spent in the earthly realm. Chihiro must work there to free herself, so she embraces the working conditions of the fellow female servants. The spirit world and more specifically the bathhouse act as Chihiro’s place for women’s society. Chihiro finds herself surrounded by many female servants all working with a shared purpose; they are servants for a powerful witch named Yubaba. Even though Chihiro finds herself in an extraordinary situation, it is clear that she behaves in ways in which people typically act, think, and feel on a daily basis. She is seen working to support herself, so she may return to the earthly realm with her parents. We see Chihiro care for those around her, even though many are displeased by her presence and act out against her. We see Chihiro display a great sense of maturity when she supports and protects her friends from those who threaten them and when she rejects additional payment from the No-Face spirit. Upon entering the spirit world, Chihiro is in a liminal state. Entering the spirit world and working in the bathhouse has forced Chihiro to reject her childish ways seen at the beginning of the film. Chihiro then must act with greater maturity to survive and return home, a normal action for a person in her position. Therefore, Chihiro’s access to women’s society has allowed her to focus on “the everyday.”

As we can see, the four films from the second part of the course all have aspects of female characters with an “in” to women’s society. Beyond their inclusion in this group, each character remains focused on “the everyday,” such that each aforementioned female character remained somewhat unchanged by a series of dramatized events and continued to complete normal daily routines. Two women share a hotel room in *Mystery Train*; a group of women share a public bathroom in *It Happened One Night*; a wife and her children cook, clean and provide childcare in *Grapes of Wrath*; a group of women act as servants and help each other in *Spirited Away*. More interestingly, each of these movies and their characters seem to be connected by a place reserved for wives and female servants. The reserved area in combination with their femininity gives the traveler their “in” to women’s society. Each of these films play on the female role that Susan Bassnett described in her essay, *Travel Writing and Gender*. Therefore, this theme certainly trends in the films for the second part of class but we need to be careful not to essentialize the genders. There are many examples road movies or actual travel where genders break away from their stereotypes.