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Universität
Basel

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Filmstills from "Taste of Cherry" (Iran 1997, Abbas Kiarostami)



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Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism

Lecture and
Workshop "Hiding in Plain Sight:
Shame, Hejab, Cinema"
September 22, 2017

Prof. Joan Copjec
(Brown University, Providence)

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Workshop / Lecture

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Conducted by: the Seminar for Media Studies of the University of Basel in Cooperation with eikones.

An invitation in the framework of the ongoing SNF research project “Afterimages of Revolution and War. Trauma- and Memoryscapes in the Postrevolutionary Iranian Cinema” (Seminar for Media Studies)

Concept by Sulgi Lie and Matthias Wittmann

Registration for workshop and/or lecture:
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Workshop

Hiding in Plain Sight: Shame, Hejab, Cinema

13:30–15:30, eikones Forum

There is no cinema without censorship; but Iranian cinema raises to a fever pitch the questions surrounding what is and is not permitted to be shown. Based on the modesty system, the censorship rules that govern its film-making practices require not only that on-screen women be veiled (even in diegetically private spaces normally exempt from the sanctions), but also that the spectatorial gaze itself be lowered, circumscribed. Women are thus absolved of the “to-be-looked-atness” (Mulvey) by which they are defined in Hollywood-dominated cinemas of the West.

It has been claimed that this deviation from the hegemonic logic of the look produces a feminist cinema. How to square this with the critique of the modesty system made in many of the films themselves?

Modesty bears particularly on sex and sexuality, which are what must be covered up in order to protect the self from exposure. If we take seriously the psychoanalytic theory of sex, however, a number of difficulties arise, for there sex is what makes the subject opaque not only to others but also to herself. Sex, by its very nature, provides the subject a privacy that cannot be breached. How are the experiences of privacy, shame, and modesty rethought through this lens and in the films?

Lecture

Battle Fatigue: Kiarostami and Capitalism

18:30, eikones Forum

This lecture will examine Abbas Kiarostami’s film, “Taste of Cherry”, winner of the 1997 Cannes film prize. The film centers on the attempt of its protagonist to commit suicide. Since suicide is strictly prohibited in Islam, the first question one must ask is: how is it that the film escaped censorship? The answer I give is that despair is not automatically condemned in the culture but is regarded, rather, as part of a trial of faith. It is this trial, and the internal battle it entails, on which the film focuses.

The desolate conditions depicted in the film are the result of a certain battle fatigue caused by the devastating Iran-Iraq war, which followed almost immediately its equally devastating Revolution, and by the capitalist manipulations of these conflicts, which prolonged them for sheer financial gain. Under such circumstances, in which one’s fate seems already to have been decided, suicide presents itself as the only option. I turn to an early text by Levinas in which he offers a remarkable theory of fatigue that is simultaneously a critique of 1) capitalism, particularly its obsession with fatigue; and 2) Heidegger’s concept of being-toward-death. Capitalism survives by promoting an idealist notion of freedom in which the subject is able to shed all encumbrances; Kiarostami and Levinas offer an alternative notion, one that does not serve at the subject’s pleasure.

Biographical note

Joan Copjec is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Before moving to Brown she was for many years Director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at the University at Buffalo. She is the author of Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists (MIT Press), later republished in Verso’s “Radical Thinkers” series; Imagine There’s No Woman (MIT); and of the forthcoming book, “Cloud: from Paris to Tehran.” She is also the co-founder of the Lacanian journal, Umbr(a), and a long-time former editor of October. She has edited a number of book collections, including Jacques Lacan’s Television; Shades of Noir: A Reader; Supposing the Subject; Radical Evil; Giving Ground (with Michael Sorkin), among others.

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