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## BI BOOK REVIEW

### Images, Lost and Found: *The B Word* (2013)

REVIEWED BY B. C. ROBERTS

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Do not let the academic credentials of Maria San Filippo's recent work, *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013) keep you from reading it. Based on a doctoral dissertation she produced at UCLA, San Filippo has transformed her project into a book that is engaging and entertaining and, I believe, essential to the literature of bisexual studies.

One of the book's many virtues is its decisive departure from a long-standing debate bi writers have been having about the visibility of bisexuality in film and other visual media. Some have lamented its inevitable erasure, pointing to an imbalance between an abundance of bisexual behavior on-screen and a lack of general recognition of it offscreen. Others have argued for its prodigious production, identifying the ways movies mobilize codes and contexts to generate a variety of cultural meanings associated with bisexuality. Yet each position leaves unexamined an assumption addressed by the other. We could not assess its erasure if a text did not formulate bisexuality in some fashion; nor would we bother analyzing its constructions if bisexuality itself were beyond dispute.

San Filippo's intervention in this debate is as elegant as it is effective. For her, visual texts are polyvalent: a film or a television series "facilitates, invites, and benefits from multiple interpretations and is thus widely dispersible and more likely profitable and popular" (p. 230). This approach not only frees her from seeking unambiguous images of bisexuality, as is perhaps the quest of studies that find it erased in texts, but also allows her to bracket culturally circulated meanings of bisexuality, the political underpinnings of which remain unchecked at times in studies that focus on its production. The films and television series she examines all partake in what she calls "strategic ambiguity," which means that their stories and characters enable us to read them as presenting some challenge to the ideology of either/or sexuality and gender-driven desire, even as the movie or show, overall, appears to promote the values of monosexism and heteronormativity. What

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San Filippo has devised, then, is a framework flexible enough to identify bisexual elements in otherwise multivocal texts, yet sturdy enough to account for the realities of a capital-intensive industry.

Another feature that distinguishes San Filippo's book from other work in the field is the attention she gives to the material and formal conditions of visual media. Indeed, these conditions function as an organizing principle, justifying her selection, arrangement, and examination of the corpus. For instance, her in-depth analysis of films like *Holy Smoke*, *Persona*, and *Mulholland Drive* in Chapter 1 is predicated on our understanding several key aesthetic differences between art cinema and commercial cinema, especially if we are to appreciate why bisexual imaging tends to flourish more in the former than in the latter. "Whereas commercial cinema generally relies on clearly motivated, rational characters and Manichean divisions between protagonists and antagonists to secure spectatorial identification, art cinema embraces ambiguity and illogicality as truthful rather than obfuscating" (p. 48). Along with smaller budgets and "associations with decadence (or deviance)," these features allow art films to explore "narrative ambiguity" and "complex characterization," all of which are conducive to creating space for bisexual si(gh)tings in these texts.

Several different film genres prove to be instrumental to a narrative structure she calls "bi-textuality," which invites us to read bisexuality "through another discourse pertaining to economic class, cultural heritage, ethnicity, gender roles, mental health, or psychological states" (p. 41). A genre is expressed through an established set of thematic and formal choices that filmmakers manipulate to guide their viewers' assumptions and expectations about the world created onscreen. As San Filippo demonstrates in the textual analyses she performs in Chapters 2 and 3, looking at a film through the lens of a genre is a particularly useful strategy for magnifying the "bisexual readability" of a text. Sexploitation films, for instance, "often construct dual discourses on privilege—socioeconomic and bisexual—whose simultaneous negation at the narrative level implies a relationship between them" (p. 96). In films such as *Black Widow*, *Single White Female*, *Wild Things*, and *Les Biches*, she foregrounds the "power plays" enacted between "the rich bitch and her disadvantaged female dependent double," where opportunism and selfishness (yes, those stereotypes) serve to underscore the "economic determinants of desire" at work in these texts.

Not only does San Filippo lay claim to film genres that, heretofore, have been the domain of lesbian theorizing (e.g., movies set in all-female institutions and those featuring female vampires). She also stakes out a revamped genre that, for the moment, remains up for grabs: the bromance. Films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Wedding Crashers*, and *Hump Day* revitalize buddy films from the late 1960s/early 1970s (e.g., *Midnight Cowboy*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *Scarecrow*), but with one important difference. Homosociality appears in the earlier movies as reaction to the social

upheaval of the period, the death (or psychotic breakdown) of one of the male partners serving as an attempt to reestablish heterosexual masculinity in the end. The bromance, by its very nature, requires that same-sex relationships hold as much (if not more) narrative weight as other-sex couplings. This generic feature allows San Filippo to develop readings that call into question the inevitability of monosexuality, at least within the universe of the bromance. However, she is well aware of how images of bisexual behavior may also be leveraged as a marketing strategy, helping big budget films attract audiences across genders and sexualities. Her exploration of the publicity campaign and critical reception of *Brokeback Mountain* beautifully illustrates the exploitation and containment of queer content at work in the selling of the film.

The last feature that sets this book apart is San Filippo's examination of a visual medium that has not yet received much attention from bi writers: television. Once again, she considers how its specific conditions contribute to bisexual legibility. "[T]he narrative open-endedness and expanded time-frame that characterize serial television drama offer a particularly promising site for mounting long-range and multifaceted explorations into bisexual characters' identities and experiences" (pp. 203–204). Not surprisingly, the episodic nature of series (*The L Word*) and even the explicitness of reality shows (*A Shot of Love*) can work to rearticulate either/or sexuality and gender-driven desire, even as they begin to imagine bisexual options. Although all too brief, her work here indicates the kinds of issues researchers need to address in future research.

For anyone interested in the politics of bisexuality, *The B Word* should be on your reading list.

*B. C. Roberts, PhD*, received her degree in Cinema Studies from New York University. Her dissertation examined the imaging of bisexuality in narrative film. Currently, she is an adjunct associate professor in the English Department at Pace University in New York City. She has had three other essays published in the *Journal of Bisexuality*: "Some Thoughts on the Benefits and Limitations of Using Film in Bisexual Education" (14:1), "Three Into Two Won't Go: *Heartbeats* (2010)" (13:1), and "Muddy Waters: Bisexuality in the Cinema" (11:2–3). This essay marks her first as the Film Review Editor for the journal.