

BOOK REVIEW

SEEING SENSE OR SENTIMENT ?

Seeing Sense - on Film Analysis

By **Leon van Nierop**

With contributions by Norman Galloway (NG) and Tascoe Luc de Reuk (TLdR)
1998. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 217 pp, soft cover, illustrated.

Shop around, the price ranges from about R74 - R90

Reviewed by **Stella Viljoen**

Film analysis is framed by a discourse of sociable, even symbiotic tensions - between the remnant of a clannish Formalism and the traces of an elastic Postmodernism; between written traditions and improvisational whims; between formula and novelty; between connoisseur and opinionated pleb. The (happy?) medium may perhaps be found in the visually and technologically overstimulated youth of today who, on the surface at least, seem so adept in film analysis. Yet, although these juvenile experts are experienced in casually reading signs, they are decidedly deficient in formally elocuting them. Enter Leon van Nierop.

Seeing Sense, an introductory text, was inspired by students who, in van Nierop's words 'had no idea how important elements such as editing, subtext, directing and irony are in a film. As a matter of fact, some scarcely understood what these words meant in this context' (p vii). If, as a lecturer, he is confronted with this kind of innocence on a tertiary level, one can hardly imagine what film analysis must be like in secondary education. Herein one can establish the market of *Seeing Sense*. It is most certainly not aimed at finessed film buffs, nor does it attempt to be a 'formal theoretical document on film analysis. It simply tries to answer the questions put by scholars and students who need guidance in their courses on film analysis or appreciation' (p vii). It's a bridging course, if you will, from enthused interest to intelligent understanding.

The basic theory cited in the book is based on van Nierop's lectures for Film Appreciation and Development 1 and 2 at the Cinema and Television school of the Technikon Pretoria. The contributions of two of his senior students are added to, as he puts it, 'enhance the student-driven approach of the publication.' Van Nierop slowly orientates the reader in early chapters by considering questions like *Why should we analyse film?* (chapter one) and *How do we analyse film?* (chapter two). He then goes on to give essential explanations of fundamental film theory ranging from the technical mechanics of cinematography, sound and editing to the abstract psychology behind acting, directing and interpreting. In particular the technical side is covered quite capably in a sensible, useful and digestible way.

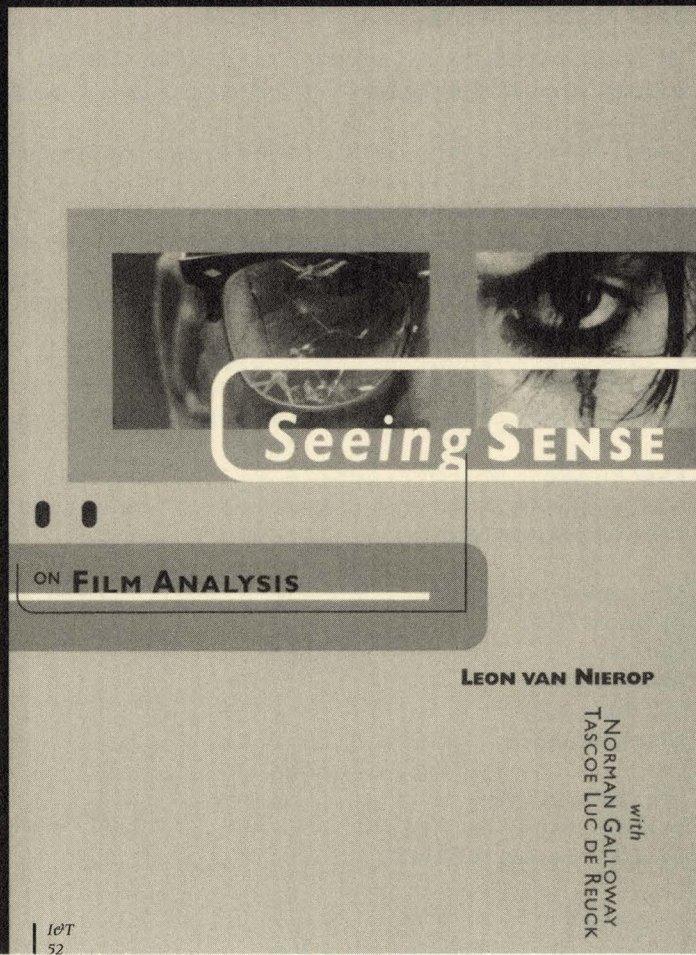
Seeing Sense is particularly helpful from a school perspective since special attention is paid to issues that are the direct concern of scholars. Films that form part of the visual literacy syllabi in schools (*Chariots of Fire*, *The Mission*) are mentioned repetitively and within different chapters to encourage a sense of continuity and totality.

My favourite and probably the most obscure chapter, is an essentially miscellaneous one (found near the end of the book) entitled *Additional elements*. This portion may be particularly useful to teachers and lecturers as it identifies and explains the abstract notions their students often have difficulty grasping. Such concepts as subtext, allegory, leitmotif, contextual dissonance and parody are briefly yet sufficiently addressed to leave all students (and their mentors) in the clear.

On the surface van Nierop handles film theory and its language from the perspective of a student with ease and efficacy. *Seeing Sense* is sure to elevate the rhetoric and reading of any student, but on a more abstract level one cannot avoid questioning the way he goes about this.

In his attempt to facilitate easy comprehension, van Nierop quite often speaks down to the reader and at times is annoyingly 'basic'. His didactic tone allows the reader complete certainty as to his point of view, but at times at the cost of sounding prescriptive. Static explanations dictate the response one should have to a film and leave little or no room for multiple interpretation.

Unfortunately the science-textbook-like appearance of the front cover is a fair indication of the contents. Even the gray capsules within the book (containing the case studies of TLdR and NG) remind one more of highlighted experiments than the 'pop video' inserts of VHI. The cover may be an attempt at Postmodernism, but the content certainly is not. In their crack at simplicity NG and TLdR don the outdated hat of connoisseur through one-sided explanations of symbolism without the safety net of words like 'possibly' or 'likely'. This does, however, make for easy reading and will probably prevent tender minds from being intimidated or scared off, but in the subjective world of analysis, and in particular *film* analysis,



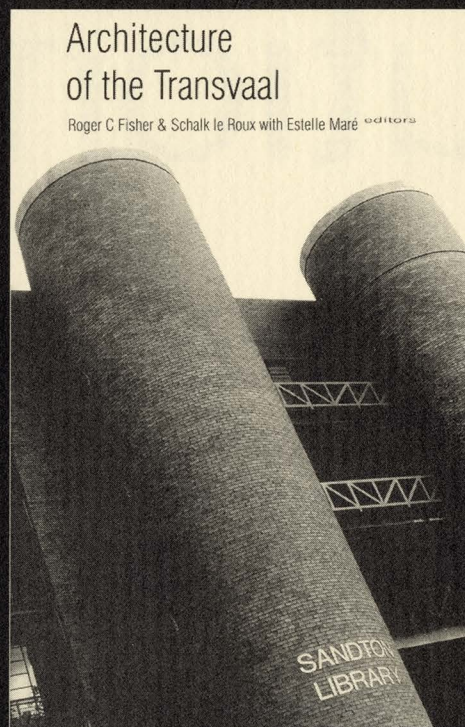
in which everyone's an expert, it seems irresponsible to present personal opinion as fact. Most especially now that Outcomes Based Education is in vogue, students should be encouraged to indulge in their own interpretations and be exposed to the cautionary practice of Postmodernist discourse.

Even more annoying is the way in which van Nierop uses stereotypical interpretations, for instance, by describing the action genre as less 'artistic' than, 'art films which require more from the viewer than merely looking at pictures' (p 2). There is also a tendency to be too classificatory; for example, in chapter one, van Nierop categorizes *Face/OFF* with *Speed 2: Cruize Control* as the 'ham-burgers of film (a great insult to John Woo in my opinion).

Van Nierop endeavors to make *Seeing Sense* current through a rather artificial focus on a number of recently released films. In fact there continually seems to be an unjustified preoccupation with films from 1998. Occasionally reference is made to the 'cult cannon' of film from the past (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Psycho* etc), but on the whole one feels the relevance of a film is often sacrificed for the sake of being contemporary. Admittedly the emphasis should deservedly enough fall on prominent 1990s examples (*Trainspotting*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Lost Highway*) but films are frequently referred to, that while 'mainstream' today, will most likely be difficult for future readers to identify with (*Evening Star*, *In Love and War*, *Fierce Creatures*).

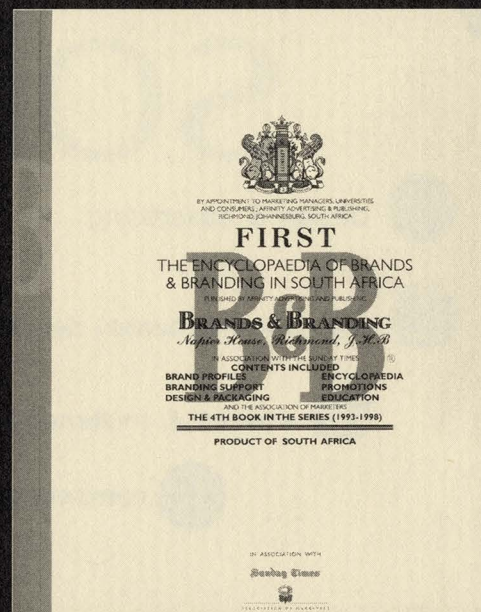
Seeing Sense is a useful book. It is well thought out, practical and highly contemporary and I am convinced it will prove a great success in especially secondary education. Yet since creativity need not necessarily be sacrificed for empiricism, it could have provided the reader with a more stimulating and balanced experience. Van Nierop's stated aim is to 'enhance your enjoyment of film' and in view of this, the reviewer feels *Seeing Sense* would have been more illustrative of its subject matter or simply a more enjoyable read if its language had been punctuated with a little humour. After all, today's experts are 'allowed' to indulge in the facetious follies of sentiment.

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338 pp, hard cover, illustrated.
Price ± R139.



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