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Film Theory

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This chapter discusses work published in the field of film theory in 2016 and is divided into six sections: 1. *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*; 2. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*; 3. *Roland Barthes' Cinema*; 4. *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*; 5. *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary*; 6. *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*.

1. The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933

To Film Studies scholars it is not big news that early film theory or classical film theory has been subject to revision and reassessment, precisely because early writings on film in the beginning of the twentieth century were part of a broader interest in changing media ecologies and their social effects. As Thomas Elsaesser notes in *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*, discussed in Section 2 of this chapter, revisiting early film theory writings enables us to 'recover a more comprehensive view of the cinema' (pp. 103–4), while it also allows us to engage in a dialogue between past theory and current media practice that can be far more enlightening than simply repeating allegedly revolutionary outcomes brought about by digital technology. The potential to read old texts anew is offered by *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, an extraordinary volume edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, that assembles early writings in film by established film and media theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Lotte H. Eisner, Béla Balázs; film practitioners, including Fritz Lang, Hans Richter, Billie Wilder, Leni Riefenstahl, Ernst Lubitsch; novelists and theatre practitioners such as Alfred Döblin, Heinrich Mann, Ernst Jünger, Erwin Piscator, Carl

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Hauptmann, and Bertolt Brecht; journalists such as Herbert Jhering; and essays by film producers, technicians and anonymous authors. The collection brings together 278 texts (most of them hitherto untranslated into English) which address the ways the new medium transformed established ideas about art and brought about changes in the collective experience and understanding of the world. Amongst the highlights of this collection are Kracauer's critique of the newsreels, Balázs' passionate plea for a political cinema that is comprehensible to the wider masses (and indeed how relevant this argument is today), Piscator's refusal to subscribe to a critique of the transition to sound, Döblin's negative assessment of the medium that illuminates the idea of cinema as a recreational activity that distracts industrial workers from their alienated labour, Eisner's and Richter's belief that there can be an avant-garde popular cinema, and Lukács' first article on film.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first section is entitled 'The Transformation of Experience' and focuses on contributions concerned with questions of film as a new medium, travel narratives and film as a metaphor of modernity/capitalist expansion and colonization, the body and performance, cinema and visual pleasure, spectatorship, and the film theatre as a new public sphere. The second section, 'Film Culture and Politics', addresses issues with respect to the ways the new medium challenged the book culture and redefined canonical ideas of art, film as a medium of propaganda and agitation, the German fascination with American cinema (also known as *Amerikanismus*), stardom and cinephilia, modernity and film as a medium that can mobilise revolutionary change and consciousness. The final section is entitled 'Configurations of a Medium', and the essays included here are divided into chapters focusing on Expressionism, the Avant-Garde, the specificity of the silent film, film as a medium of knowledge that can be used for scientific purposes, the transition to sound, and questions of technology and intermediality. This fascinating collection of essays comes at a time that linear histories of media are being challenged by scholars working in the fields of media archaeology. As the editors rightly observe in the introduction to this anthology, the texts collected here 'gain unanticipated meanings' (p. 8) in light of the current age of the proliferated media technologies. Instead of dismissing these texts as products of their time with little relevance to the present, we should rather explore their nuances, and the ways they identify the effects of cinema on all aspects of social and cultural life. In the words of the editors, early film theory understood 'the medium as a form of art and entertainment but also as a medium of culture, science, education, training, politics, philosophy, and governmentality' (p. 2) and many of the issues it raised precede

contemporary questions in the allegedly 'post-cinematic' age. After all, early film theory mused on issues of technological mediation that are relevant in the present. In a passage that merits a long quotation, the editors explain that:

> the scope of this volume allows readers to see more clearly the ways in which early film theory was always already a form of media theory—one whose open, interrogative quality anticipates our efforts to assimilate 'new media' today. Many of the key topics of contemporary media studies—animation, immersion and distraction, participation and interactivity, remediation and convergence, institutional and nontheatrical uses of cinema, amateur filmmaking and fan practices, democracy and mass media—were already part of early film-theoretical discussion and can be fruitfully teased out of the texts in this volume. Such thoughts and questions were not entirely new even in the 1910s and '20s; most of them can be traced back to the visual and media culture of the nineteenth century and even before. But our present environment of proliferating screens and media platforms allows these aspects of early film culture to come to the fore in new ways, revealing the latent futures harbored within archives. (p. 9)

Indeed, one of the fascinating aspects of these texts is the way they saw cinema as a medium (and a public sphere) that brings about changes in our perception of the world. Yet the preoccupation of early film theory was not to offer a simple or unified definition of the medium, but an exploration of its potential and future development. The implication was that the transformation of experience brought about by cinema would have further consequences in broader domains of social reality. Going back to these texts allows us to see that the cinematic is far from being a term made obsolete by the digital revolution, given that many of 'the new media' (a very problematic term as media archaeology has taught us) still manipulate and push further visual tropes and effects associated with the cinema. Rereading texts by Arnheim, Kracauer, and Lukács, makes us also aware of cinema's privileged relationship with philosophy and its potential to stimulate philosophical thinking: as the editors astutely observe early film theory precedes many contemporary debates on film and philosophy, which are not as original as many Deleuzians or Cavellians might think. To this, I would like to add that the emergence of cinema exercised tremendous influence on all forms of writing, and it is important to point out that many of the film theorists included here started as film critics, whose writings were included

in popular German newspapers (and indeed comparing these essays with the sorry state of today's film criticism in popular media is disheartening). In his *Mise en Scène and Film Style* (Palgrave [2014]), Adrian Martin is amongst contemporary film scholars who refuses to subscribe to facile distinctions between theoretical film analysis and film criticism, and obviously the crossing between criticism and theoretical insights in early film theory is a starting point for film scholars and critics alike to re-evaluate the objectives both of film theory and criticism. This excellent anthology is also a book that will make a welcome addition to courses on film and media theory, film history, and film-philosophy. Hopefully, it will also motivate more film scholars and students to re-examine these challenging texts that can help us assess the complexities of our present media ecologies and understand that cinema is not something that has been surpassed, because as early film theory demonstrates, cinema was never a fixed concept (either as an art form or as technology), but something subject to historical change and transformation. Far from being passé, these texts urge us to approach the question of cinema as part of the broader contradictions of modernity and late modernity.

2. Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema

Media archaeology is not exactly a discipline, but rather a scholarly method that refutes the teleological histories of media and standard distinctions between old and new media. It aspires to write non-linear media histories that reveal how contemporary media practices have their origins in the past. As Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka explain in their introductory article to the 2011 *Media Archaeology Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (CaliforniaUP), 'the past is brought to the present, and the present to the past; both inform and explain each other, raising questions and pointing to futures that may or may not be' (p. 15). Research into the past allows us to understand the present and as Parikka explains in *What is Media Archaeology* (Polity [2012]), media archaeologists excavate the past not in order to fetishize it, but so as to get a better understanding of the contemporary media ecologies and practices. Aside from Foucault's archaeological digging into the past, other influential theorists on this 'discipline' include Walter Benjamin (one can recall his refusal to subscribe to teleological views of history and linear understandings of time), Marshall McLuhan, German Media theorists such as Friedrich Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski and Bernhard Siegert, and the New Film Historians that aimed to challenge evolutionary

histories of cinema (for instance, the work of the eminent film historian, Noël Burch).

Thomas Elsaesser's new book is the product of his media archaeological approach to film history within the last twenty-five years. As the author explains, the starting point for the arguments set out in the assembled essays in this book was his engagement with early cinema and later on with the cinema of Weimar Germany. The core of Elsaesser's book is that film history needs to be seen as part of a broader media history and in doing so we might be able to understand cinema history in non-teleological ways. What does this mean? Elsaesser urges us to abandon questions of medium specificity and start thinking about cinema as a cultural and social phenomenon that is omnipresent in various media practices, technologies, and social usages. Far from embracing banal ideas of the death of cinema, the author suggests that one of the reasons why cinema seems to be 'invisible' is because of its ubiquitousness (p. 19). Thus, to understand cinema's cultural, media, and social effects we need to change the questions we ask when aiming to offer a hermeneutic account of the medium. He writes:

> I no longer just ask 'What is cinema?' or 'What was cinema?'. As important is the question 'Where is cinema?' (at public screenings in purpose-built movie theatres or also on television screens, in galleries and museums, as well as on portable devices?). I also want to know 'When is cinema?': not merely performances at fixed times but an evening out with friends or lovers, irrespective of or in spite of the film; cinema as a state of mind or 'mankind's dream for centuries'? Is cinema an irreversible flow and thus a submission to the tyranny of time, or is it an experience that the viewer can control and should manipulate at will? Yet beneath these questions lurks another one that this book is delicately trying to formulate, namely 'Why is cinema?' or 'What is/was cinema good for?'. What role has cinema played—and is still playing—in the larger development of mankind, or more specifically, in our Western modernity and post-modernity?

These questions enable us to think of cinema in multiple ways, not simply as technology or solely as an art form (a debate that preoccupied early film theory in the beginning of the twentieth century). Elsaesser attributes the pertinence of media archaeology as a method to three important factors: 1. the re-evaluation of early cinema by the New Film History; 2. the shift from the analogue to the digital; and 3. the rise of media installation art that brought cinema to art spaces such as museums and galleries, which were considered to epitomise spaces of individualist absorption of artistic objects

and were seen as antithetical to cinema's reliance on collective reception (pp. 48–9).

As Elsaesser explains, one of the most influential figures in making us re-evaluate film history was Noël Burch, whose scholarship aimed to write a counter-history of cinema that defied the evolutionary understanding of its technologies and its cultural function. Like media archaeology, Burch's counter-history aspired to avoid linear trajectories and reveal that cinema's establishment as a narrative medium was simply only one of the possible roads taken, but that things could have been different. This rethinking of early cinema practices does not simply urge us to consider alternative futures; it also allows us to reconsider contemporary cinema practices in the era of the digital, which downplay narrative in favour of cinematic 'attractions' that captivate the audiences on account of the medium's capacities. Yet at the same time, the digital revolution has not radically altered cinema as we knew it, since inasmuch as it has brought about changes in the distribution and consumption of films, the digital turn has not radically changed the prevalent understanding of film as a narrative medium; in addition, cinematic practices have migrated to other media platforms, such as social media.[1] Finally, cinema's migration to gallery spaces and the museum has firmly validated its status as an art form making the binaries of film as art versus film as technology quite irrelevant.

A key thesis in Elsaesser's book is that despite technological change cinema will ultimately remain the same. Indeed regardless of all the hype concerning the death of cinema, a closer look at the past reveals how many of the artistic, but also industrial responses to media change do not vary that much from past solutions to similar problems. Elsaesser mentions, for example, the prevalence of the blockbuster as an event in a period that cinema faces competition from home entertainment services and the increase of media devices. As he explains, the solution adopted today—the 3-D blockbuster film—is not much different from Hollywood's response to the competition faced by television in the 1950s–1960s (p. 271). Furthermore, against the canonical understanding of 3-D technology as a new evolutionary development of film technology, the author points out that in actual fact 3-D technology preceded 2-D. It was the Lumières, in 1902 in Paris, who made 3-D exhibitions, but it was 2-D technology's grounding in photographic veracity that made it the privileged mode of cinematic exhibition (pp. 280, 287). 'Alternative genealogies' like this one can not only reveal how many of the present practices are rooted in the past, but they can also give us a better understanding of the technological, storytelling, and industrial methods of the past. In a Benjaminian way, the past and the present

intersect and illuminate each other. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* is an impressive collection of essays, which pushes further many of the questions raised by early film theory and enables us to understand cinema as a cultural phenomenon that still permeates all aspects of social life. Elsaesser's monograph is a major intervention coming out at a moment in history that film scholarship perpetuates many clichés regarding the death of cinema. Having read *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*, I will keep on taking these arguments with a pinch of salt.

3. Roland Barthes' Cinema

There is no doubt that Roland Barthes is one of the most influential cultural theorists of the twentieth century whose work has had tremendous impact on the broader field of humanistic enquiry. Thus, a book on Barthes' contribution to film is long overdue. Philip Watts' fascinating *Roland Barthes' Cinema* covers this scholarly gap and offers new insights on why Barthes' work matters in the field of film and media studies. The book is also valuable because Watts has translated nine texts on cinema by Barthes, which were hitherto unavailable in English. Watts passed away while writing the book, which was then generously put together and edited by Dudley Andrew, Yves Citton, Vincent Debaene and Sam Di Iorio. The core thesis of the book is that aside from the all too familiar Barthes, that is the Brechtian supporter of demystification, there is also another Barthes, one fascinated with surfaces and representational excess. This argument is already put forward on the first page of the monograph and elaborated throughout the book. For Watts, Barthes' work is situated between two different French intellectual approaches towards cinema. His writings on film echo criticisms of the medium by Sartre, Camus and Merleau-Ponty, but they also foreshadow the work of Deleuze, Badiou, Nancy, and Rancière, who saw cinema as constitutive part of their philosophical thinking. In many respects, Barthes bridges these two antithetical approaches to the medium and his intellectual trajectory is an apt example of the shift that took place in film theory following the mid-1970s: the idea of film as a medium that reproduces ideological clichés was replaced by the understanding of film as a medium that can produce thought. In the first chapter, Watts goes back to Barthes' early essays on film, and to his *Mythologies*, to unravel his commitment to demystification. It is in this period that Barthes is a fierce critic of mainstream cinema and its tendency to naturalise complex social phenomena. The author pays particular attention to Barthes' critique of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) and Kazan's famous film *On the*

Waterfront (1954). According to Watts these two scathing reviews are evocative of a broader theoretical tendency in French intellectual thought, which was committed to revealing the ways that mainstream (and/or seemingly radical) objects turned out to propagate ideological banalities. Demystification was suspicious of excess and surfaces and was very much suggestive of a 'left-wing asceticism' (p. 19). Yet asceticism was not the sole value embraced by Barthes, for as the author later on explains, the fundamental principle of demystification is that 'rhetoric can never provide anything than a partial truth' (p. 32). In this context, the task of cinema is not simply to represent but to provide the cues that can reveal something about the reality it represents.

One of the major achievements of this book is Watts' careful and meticulous unravelling of the theoretical correspondences between Barthes and Bazin. Starting as a critic of Bazin's realism, Barthes' writing on photography shares significant affinities with the French critic's work, particularly in their mutual emphasis on questions of mediation, that is, how photography departs from artistic intentionality and redefines our understanding of art. Watts clarifies this connection and argues that both Barthes and Bazin share a suspicion of 'rhetorical excess' (the obviousness of the image), and argued for a type of realism that can generate emotions and pleasures. This could be rephrased as a realism of the senses that valorizes the trivial details of representation (p. 45). For Watts, Barthes's admiration of Antonioni is a clear index of his dialogue with Bazin. Barthes thought that Antonioni's films allow reality to reveal itself, without imposing a definite meaning and interpretation, and this corresponds with Bazin's understanding of neorealism as a film movement that did not impose authorial ideas, but enabled the audience to discover things about the world it represented (p. 48). As Watts cogently contends, Barthes saw in Antonioni's cinema an aesthetics of resistance to the late capitalist culture of consumption. I would add to this that Barthes here prefigures many of the contemporary debates on slow cinema (and indeed the author acknowledges this in the introduction to the book).

This is an impressive book that makes a strong case about the need to re-evaluate Barthes' contribution to film studies. In the remaining chapters, Watts close reads Barthes' famous article on Brecht, Diderot, and Eisenstein, analyses Barthes' points of convergence with French apparatus theory (and his eventual departure from this theoretical paradigm), and finishes with a discussion of Barthes and melodrama identifying at the same time connections between Barthes and Foucault, and Truffaut's post-1968 oeuvre. As already stated, this book is impressive both in its scope and its theoretical

approach. Yet I would like to point out one theoretical shortcoming in Watts' attempt to distinguish between Barthes' Brechtianism and his later fascination for surfaces and the trivial aspects of representation. This is made entirely clear in his discussion of Barthes' interest in Eisenstein and the gestural aspects of his films. Watts suggests that for Barthes, the political aspects of Eisenstein's cinema are to be located in the excess produced by the gestures and not in the dialectical contradictions they bring to the fore. Yet for Eisenstein (and Brecht) the gesture is a key aspect of the dialectic, made clear in Eisenstein's *Mise en Jeu and Mise en Geste* (Caboose [2014], p. 9). This is also made clear in the ways Barthes connects the Brechtian gesture with the Eisensteinian predilection for the fragment and the ways the dialectical interaction of the fragments can have enlightening effects. On this account, the gesture is not a simple valorization of surface, but the route to discovering the social implications behind the veneer of things. Note, for instance, this passage from Barthes' renowned *Image, Music, Text*, which Watts considers as symptomatic of his second theoretical phase:

> How many films are there now 'about' drugs, in which drugs is the 'subject'? But this is a subject that is hollow; without any social gest, drugs are insignificant, or rather, their significance is simply that of an essential nature—vague, empty, eternal: 'drugs lead to impotence' (*Trash*), 'drugs lead to suicide' (*Absences ripities*). The subject is a false articulation: why this subject in preference to another? The work only begins with the tableau, when the meaning is set into the gesture and the co-ordination of gestures. (Fontana Press [1977], p. 76)

Evident in this passage is that even when expressing his fascination for trivial details in Eisenstein's tableau, or gestures, and even when enthralled by cinematic excess, Barthes does not dissociate this form of criticism from a dialectical analysis. His valorization of visuals is not a naïve embracement of images as ends in themselves, but as materials that have a revelatory function. Surprisingly, it is Rancière who points this out in an interview included in the book, but even he is keen on pitting political demystification against visual excess. As Rancière states, there are two Brechtian traditions, one interested in using the image as a vehicle for dialectical enlightenment (demystification) and one fascinated with theatrical artifice (p. 101). Interestingly, Rancière points to Barthes' writings on detective films and the ways their gestures can be understood as Brechtian theatre, and indeed here the pleasure of the object is merged with its dialectical usefulness (interestingly Brecht mused on the political usefulness of crime novels, on account of their ability to merge pleasure with political enlightenment).

Furthermore, Barthes' interest in films that produce a suspension of meaning (as evidenced in his admiration for Antonioni) is not necessarily antithetical to his Brechtian project. One may recall his *Cahiers du cinéma* interview in 1963 where he muses on the duality of the Brechtian aesthetic: in Brecht's work, there is the Marxist desire to produce meaning but also a desire to suspend it, because meaning 'takes the form of a question' addressed to the audience (*Cahiers du Cinéma: 1960–1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood*, HarvardUP [1986], pp. 281–2). Thus, for all his significant theoretical interventions, Watts does not go beyond the 1960s–1970s understanding of Brecht (still predominant in Anglophone film theory) and this does not allow him to see Barthes' theoretical trajectory in a non-linear way. This reservation aside, the book offers important and timely theoretical insights into Barthes' work on cinema and is a valuable piece of scholarship that clarifies why Barthes' cinema matters today.

4. Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film

Cormac Deane has made a great gift to many film scholars by translating into English Christian Metz's last and intellectually stimulating monograph, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*. Within the past two decades, Christian Metz has not been a darling of the film scholarship, and his work not subject to critical attention as is the case with other core important film theorists of the past (for example, Bazin or Kracauer). Richard Rushton and Warren Buckland are two scholars who insist on the importance of revisiting and re-evaluating the French film theorist's writings. *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* is a significant book because of the way that it prefigures and resonates with many contemporary debates in Media Archaeology and German Media Theory related to the agency of the machine and the challenge of media environments to ideas of authorial agency. This is adeptly discussed in Cormac Deane's introduction to the book—and indeed it is an introduction that brilliantly clarifies and unpacks Metz's complex ideas (p. x).

The core thesis of Metz's argument in this impressive book is that filmic enunciation is impersonal, and does not involve the standard communicative or linguistic system of a sender passing information to a receiver. Filmic enunciation does not proceed deictically, because it does not offer a dialogical exchange between the film and the audience. It is rather a series of reflexive constructions that point to the status of a film as a performance and act. Film has no meaning without the audience, because filmic enunciation relies on a series of reflexive constructs that emphasize its status as a filmic

performance. The concept of filmic enunciation urges us to think of apparatuses that are not 'anthropomorphic'. In an illuminating formulation Metz claims that:

> A film does not take place between an enunciator and an addressee but between an enunciator and an utterance, between a spectator and a film, that is to say, between a YOU and a HE/IT. When we distinguish between them like this, their meaning becomes blurred, since the only human subject that is right there, and capable of saying 'I', is precisely the YOU. It is moreover a common feeling, except of course in the specialised company of filmmakers, that the 'subject' is the spectator. This is certainly in evidence in works of psychoanalytic semiology that deal at length with the 'spectator subject'. (p. 9)

Filmic enunciation is a process that always comes back to being 'an enunciation about film' in the sense that it is not a communicative exchange between an 'I and You', but involves the uninterrupted passing of audio-visual information to the audience, which does not speak back (p. 18). The mode of address of cinematic enunciation is impersonal even when there are moments in a film or television programme at which the actor or presenter speaks directly to the camera addressing the audience. Yet this direct address is not an address to a visible audience; the actor addresses the apparatuses that make the very enunciation possible (cameras, technicians, for example) and as Metz explains s/he does not speak directly to the spectator, but speaks for her/him.

Film as medium is thus more an exhibitionist medium rather than a communicative one. Every film, from Classical Hollywood narrative to experimental cinema, does not simply tell a story but makes its own operations visible. This is an important observation, for this particularity of the medium tends to obfuscate the boundaries between material located within the object's story and those that are placed outside it. Metz brings a series of examples to illuminate this: (1) intertitles in Soviet cinema, whose source is neither the diegesis nor diegetic characters; (2) the complex use of voice-over in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), where the main character's extras-diegetic commentary is located in the present but refers to past events, while at the same time we see him acting and speaking in a narrative located in the past; (3) early cinema devices such as fade-outs; (4) and musical sequences within films where songs and dances are concurrently addressed to the characters in the diegesis and the public outside the diegetic limits. The boundaries between inside and outside are obfuscated, because every trope used in a film to tell a story, performs itself as a trope. Reflexivity and

commentary on the film's diegesis are part and parcel of every film. The difference is that some films are characterised by 'conspicuous enunciation', while in others enunciation is everywhere; for example, in a classical Hollywood film, every colour and every camera movement (which are important markers of enunciation) is absorbed by the narrative and becomes one with the story to the point of making us confuse the act of enunciation with the narrative itself. Yet there are numerous instances in a film of more neutral enunciation that point to its own cinematicity, to its performance as an act and not just a narrative (p. 136).

It is for this reason that Metz is quick to dismiss the apparatus theory of the 1970s (and indeed his early work has many associations with it), which reacted against Hollywood cinema as a cinema of transparency and illusionism. For Metz, this argument does not hold because every film sign is reflexive and not transparent. The difference is a matter of degree, since Avant-Garde films and modernist cinema have a stronger enunciative presence than a narrative film; then again, there is always an enunciative presence behind film tropes devoted to narration. The process of something being shown on screen is always in dialectical interaction with what is shown (pp. 146–7). The apparatus is always exhibited, the difference being that in some films the demonstration of the apparatus becomes part of the content. Earlier in the book, Metz sets as an example films that show cameras filming the storyline only to question their radical affectations. For the cameras we see within the story are secondary ones, and not the ones with which the film, which we are watching, is being filmed. In this respect, it is only through the use of a mirror that a film could expose the source of its recording. Nonetheless, the fact that these radical films incorporate the apparatus of their enunciation in their storylines does not make narrative films transparent, but simply reliant on less conspicuous enunciation.

Towards the end of the book, Metz clarifies his preference for the term enunciation as opposed to narration. He correctly explains that enunciation is a more valid term precisely because it is applicable to multiple media narratives (pp. 147–8). This is a very astute observation that proves the historical relevance and foresight of this fascinating book originally written in 1991. One only needs to think of the enunciative tropes in current usages of social media and the ways that the act of enunciation (the medium's performative tropes) is merged with the ideas and comments we share. The process of the media performing themselves cannot be dissociated from the communicated content. Metz's book is rich with ideas and brings a plethora of examples from the history of cinema; it engages dialogically with many ideas from European film theory and narratology of the

Anglo-American tradition. It is a provocative book that will hopefully urge scholars to rediscover this inspiring film theorist, whose work offers fresh insights on film theory, and invites us to draw on them so as to understand the most complex media ecologies of the present. The book includes an informative afterword by Dana Polan, who also unpacks and explicates some of Metz's complex arguments.

5. Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary

Bill Nichols is one of the most important scholars on documentary cinema to the extent that, for many of us, his name is a synonym for documentary scholarship. This book contains updated essays on documentary cinema written by the author within the last thirty years. *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* is not just a piece of impressive scholarship, but also a labour of love. The essays are both strongly argued, and also make evident the author's passion for the genre to the point that they urge the reader to go back and search for the case studies discussed so as to revisit old favourites or discover objects that s/he is not familiar with. If the point of film scholarship is to inspire and invigorate love for the cinema, then Nichols' book achieves this by proving the currency of the questions he has been raising on the ethical, political and formal implications of the genre. I would also like to add that the book is written in a clear manner that makes it accessible both to the informed academic, but also to the interested non-expert.

The book is divided into five thematic units. The first covers the relation between documentary and the avant-garde; the second, audio-visual issues starting from the ways that the transition to sound impacted the genre, as well as the role of music; in the third section, Nichols draws attentions to questions of dialectics and the ways that documentaries go beyond 'facts' to address epistemological and historical questions; the fourth section is concerned with the interconnection between documentary and ethics; and the last focuses on political documentary. One of the most valuable contributions in the first section of the book is Nichols' apt explanation of the affinity between early documentary and the modernist avant-garde. While in the 1970s, documentaries were often subject to charges of uncritical empiricism, this was not the case at the beginning of the twentieth century, where documentary films shared the modernist avant-garde's desire to make the world strange so as to see it anew. Modernist strategies of representation were a solution to the problem of how to narrativize historical experience

(p. 23). Nichols brings examples from films by Buñuel, Richter, Vertov, Ivens and Vigo and clarifies how this documentary tradition did not dismiss the medium's photographic veracity but made use of it so as to represent the historical contradictions of the time (in a less fetishistic way). The implication of his thesis is that formal experimentation and the photographic authenticity of the medium were not seen as antithetical, as it was the case in the Screen theory of the 1960s–1970s. As he argues: 'A great many works began with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it' (p. 23).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the book is Nichols' discussion of documentary re-enactment. As he explains, these films draw their representational vigour not from photographic indexicality, but from the historical event itself and the attempt to recover it for the purposes of understanding it (p. 35). Re-enactment provides a good solution to the paradox of representing something objectively, given that it does not pretend to have resolved the gap between subjective representation and objectivity. As he argues: 'Re-enactments are clearly a view rather than the view from which the past yields up its truth' (p. 41). Nichols engages with numerous films and makes evident his impressive awareness of the genre. Some of his most fascinating analyses are his discussions of Patricio Guzmán's *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1999), Irene Lusztig's *Reconstruction* (2002), and Werner Herzog's *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997). It is through these case studies that he reveals the ways that re-enactment can be an effective means of accessing the past event through the production of social gestures that provide a sense of typicality (p. 46). Nichols returns to re-enactment in his stimulating analysis of the much-discussed *The Act of Killing* (2012) and clarifies the ways the film negotiates its commitment to an ethical or political revisiting of the past while choosing to give voice to the perpetrators rather than the victims. As he explains, the film's formal organization allows us to distance ourselves from the narrative of the victors so as to question our relationship to reality (p. 175). In this context, the film's ethics derives from its capacity to 'provoke, challenge, and question fundamental assumptions by gesturing toward the inexplicable' (p. 179). Nichols understands the film's dialectics to be a product of its irony and its refusal to subscribe to liberal and conservative truisms and binaries of 'truth and falsity' (p. 179).

It is hard to summarise all the great ideas included in the essays featured in this book. In bringing this section to a close, I would like to draw attention to Nichols' discussion of the representation of terrorist events and his scathing critique of the tendency to measure aesthetic objects using questionable criteria of social impact. In his discussion of documentaries dealing with terrorist attacks, Nichols draws on Hayden White's definition of the

modernist event, which is characterised by its resistance to closed categories and its openness to multiple meanings. In other words, the modernist event is not self-explanatory and undermines facile categories of factuality. Focusing on the media's response to the 9/11, Nichols suggests that their failure to offer any substantial commentary lies in the fact that they treated a modernist event as if it was a traditional one (p. 117). In effect, they located the causes of the terror outside the USA without acknowledging the dialectical counterpart of state terror. Failing to acknowledge the complex traumatic aspects of the event they are open to charges of 'narrative fetishism' that 'converts catastrophe to evil, trauma, and crime' (p. 126). Nichols' analysis here is remarkably thorough, dialectically rich, and extremely pertinent when it comes to rethinking recent historical disappointments and contradictions.

Equally invigorating is his concluding article in which he criticises certain funding models, which privilege films that produce measurable results and impact. Nichols looks disparagingly on this reductive understanding of social impact and suggests that the fallacy of this model lies in the fact that it relies on 'ameliorative rather than transformative' methods. It proceeds from the erroneous position that ideology does not exist and inhibits the production of political documentaries concerned with unpacking the contradictions of the past and present historical reality. A proponent of aesthetic experimentation that can make us see familiar things anew, Nichols expresses his scepticism towards the funding privileging of empirically measurable results. He concludes with a passage worth quoting:

> Despite the social impact metrics movement, radical, galvanizing work will continue to find its way before us but perhaps with less support and more obstacles, at least until this ill-conceived movement acknowledges that the immeasurable, incommensurate, and inexplicable are as tightly bound to the political as radical, transformative vision is to the measures taken. (p. 229)

These observations are depressingly pertinent when one considers film funding models and the fetishization of 'social impact' in British academia, a tendency that privileges the familiar, measurable, and empirical results (often for their own sake) at the expense of radical and transformative intellectual thought. *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* is a strongly argued and intellectually stimulating book, whose dialectical approach to complex historical, ethical, and political questions raised by the documentary genre is a glimmer of hope in a largely depoliticised academic milieu.

6. Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film

Robert Sinnerbrink is one of the most important authors in the field of film-philosophy. His work merges film and philosophy without necessarily privileging one discipline against the other. Furthermore, Sinnerbrink is a scholar well-versed in film theory and analysis so unlike many other philosophical traditions that reduce films to 'illustrations' of philosophical ideas he is able to tease out complex philosophical ideas with reference to aesthetic questions that are specific to film as a medium. In this book, Sinnerbrink is curious about cinema's relationship to ethics. The book's starting point is how narrative cinema can engage us in aesthetic and emotional ways so as to develop but also 'challenge our ethical understanding' (p. xi). The merit of his project—and this is in line with my above-mentioned comment on Nichols' work—is that it is written in comprehensible and jargon-free way that makes it accessible not only to experts in the field of film-philosophy, but also to students new to the field.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first section, Sinnerbrink illuminates his understanding of cinematic ethics. He suggests that there are a series of approaches to cinematic ethics that may involve questions of ethics raised within the films' dramatic content, ethical questions with respect to aspects of film production and spectatorial reception, and finally cinema as a sociocultural phenomenon that generates ideological effects, ethical and social values (p. 10). What is refreshing in Sinnerbrink's account is that he understands cinematic ethics in a manifold way, something that is clearly put forward in this section where he states:

> Ethical experience in the cinema does not generally involve an intellectual or abstract reflection on moral problems or ethical dilemmas, but unfolds rather through a situated, emotionally engaged, aesthetically receptive response to images that work in us in a multimodal manner, engaging our senses, emotions, and powers of reasoning. (p. 20)

Moreover, Sinnerbrink acknowledges the duality of the medium as far as ethics are concerned in the sense that film can either offer enlightening knowledge effects, but can also be in service of ideological manipulation. Sinnerbrink's argument is that the latter aspect of the medium has received disproportionally more attention as opposed to the former and it is this gap that the book intends to cover. He proposes that cinematic ethics can

revitalise and even 're-appropriate' research concerned with the political dimensions of the medium (p. 5).

The book's second section addresses philosophical approaches to questions of cinematic ethics focusing on Cavell, Deleuze, and cognitivist film theory. This section would be an ideal starting point for students with an interest in film-philosophy or scholars interested in getting a basic introduction to the key debates in the field. Sinnerbrink offers an extensive summary of these different scholarly approaches with regard to cinema and ethics, and he simultaneously offers a critique of these traditions. For instance, in his discussion of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism he rightly questions its social efficacy due to its overemphasis on individualism that fails to open questions related to the social scheme of things (pp. 48–9). Similarly in his discussion of Deleuze's modernist belief in art's capacity to transform our historical experience, he expresses his scepticism suggesting that Deleuze's project can be better understood as an ethical project rather than a political one despite the French philosopher's assertions (p. 67). All the same, in his engagement with cognitivist film theory, Sinnerbrink acknowledges that there are potential pathways of intersection between the continental and analytical traditions of cinematic ethics, while at times he expresses his scepticism by claiming that cognitivism's scientific pretensions run the risk of 'naturalizing' pernicious social fallacies (pp. 84–5).

Yet the questions that Sinnerbrink seeks to answer go further to explore the prospects of cinemas of ethical and political resistance following the downfall of the paradigm of modernist political cinema. This is the subject of the last section in the book, which addresses cinematic ethics with reference to melodrama and films such as *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Talk to Her* (2002); and melodramatic realism, using as case studies *Biutiful* (2010) and *The Promise* (1996). In the last chapter he proceeds to a detailed and engaging discussion of *The Act of Killing* (2012), especially convincing in its desire to delineate an ethical approach that manages to make the leap from ethics to politics. Equally intriguing is the author's take on Almodovar's *Talk to Her* and the way the film uses standard dramatic tropes as a 'trap' that forces the audience to abandon facile moralist judgements. Similarly engaging are the author's analyses of *Biutiful* and *Promise*, but given his consistent interrogation of the potential for cinemas of ethical and political resistance, references to scholarship on the cinemas of precarity would have strengthened the argument. Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (DukeUP [2011]) is noticeably absent from the book, for example. Furthermore, one is left with the question that now that the political communities of the past have been redefined (as per Deleuze's famous formulation) what are the potentials of the medium to provide a sense of ethical and political enlightenment in a period that cinema

as a form of a public sphere faces unprecedented challenges from the new media technologies that render film consumption an individualist experience. Years ago Rudolf Arnheim predicted the dangers of new media replacing the then established understanding of cinema as an agora with the individualist experience of the 'lonesome consumer' (*Film As Art*, CaliforniaUP [1957], pp. 197–8). These changes in the media environment affect cinema's capacity to become a vehicle of ethical experience, because ethical, social, and political changes are contingent on the existence of communities. Add to this the marketization of culture and aggressive distributional practices that render many of the films that Sinnerbrink discusses inaccessible to vast segments of the population. Overall, Sinnerbrink's book is an excellent contribution to the field of film-philosophy that makes a convincing case about cinema's capacity to provide complex ethical experiences which go beyond the reproduction of banal moralist assertions.

Note

1. To this one should add that despite all the talk about the digital challenging film's material connection with the reality it represents, questions of 'record and evidence, of truth and authenticity' are still prevalent. For instance, the video capture of the horrible (and indeed very much redolent of standard cinematic adventures) attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, did not make anyone question the validity of the event. To this day, discussions of the event seldom focus on whether the cameras that captured it were digital or analogue.

Books Reviewed

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Metz, Christian. *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*. ColumbiaUP. [2016] pp. 256. £25 pb ISBN 0 2311 7367 9.

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Sinnerbrink, Robert. *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*. Routledge. [2016] pp. 231. £79.39 pb ISBN 9 7811 3882 6168.

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