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Film Theory

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This chapter discusses four notable books concerning film theory that were published in 2023 and early 2024. Two of them are translated from languages other than English, and two are wide-ranging edited collections. The chapter is divided into five sections: 1. Nicole Brenez, *On the Figure in General and the Body in Particular: Figurative Invention in Cinema*, trans. by Ted Fendt; 2. Shiguéhiko Hasumi, *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*, trans. by Ryan Cook; 3. Craig Fox and Britt Harrison, eds., *Philosophy of Film Without Theory*; 4. Julian Hanich and Martin P. Rossouw, eds., *What Film Is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship*; and 5. Conclusion.

1. Nicole Brenez, *On the Figure in General and the Body in Particular: Figurative Invention in Cinema*, trans. by Ted Fendt

It might sound like a snide joke to say that two of the best books of film theory in English to be published as part of this year's work originally appeared in 1998 and 1983, in French and Japanese respectively. In fact, the situation is a cause for celebration. Historically, film theory has not been as well served by translation as it needs to be, in terms of both the range of texts translated and the quality of the translations that do exist. The shortcomings of Hugh Gray's translations of André Bazin have been very widely discussed (although perhaps overstated); we now have Timothy Barnard's translations for comparison. The considerable limitations of Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam's translations of Gilles Deleuze's two *Cinema* books have, for some reason, received much less attention. But many more extremely important books of film theory written in languages other than English have not even received the courtesy of an unsatisfactory translation. The appearance, therefore, of handsome editions of these books by Brenez and Hasumi—together with the existence of valuable initiatives such as the

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Society for Cinema and Media Studies' Translation/Publication Committee and its annual Call for Translations—is a welcome indication that times may be changing, as they need to if English-language film studies are to be as well integrated into global film cultures, both present and past, as they surely ought to be.

Brenez is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Paris 3/Sorbonne Nouvelle, and has been a curator of avant-garde film at the Cinémathèque française since 1996. Towards the end of his life, she became one of Jean-Luc Godard's most valued collaborators. A prolific writer, *On the Figure in General and the Body in Particular* is a collection of her relatively early work (Brenez was born in 1961), much of which had appeared before in journals or magazines. Although an increasing number of articles by Brenez have appeared in translation, her most substantial output in English remains her 2007 monograph *Abel Ferrara*, in Adrian Martin's exemplary translation. Martin, who has done as much as anybody to champion Brenez's work in the English-speaking world, translated the book from Brenez's manuscript; the English version was published before the book appeared in French. As the juxtaposition of Godard and Ferrara might suggest, her taste in and knowledge of films is extremely broad, but even this pairing fails to represent the range of cinematic work covered in the book, which is almost aggressively eclectic and programmatically blind to the existence of barriers between high and low culture. An opening chapter on John Woo is followed by a short piece on Jack Smith; the analysis of John Cassavetes' *A Woman under the Influence* (1974) is preceded by two paragraphs on Fred M. Wilcox's 1943 *Lassie Come Home*, which is compared, in all seriousness, with Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). In terms of theory, Brenez is less eclectic—there is an abundance of references to the likes of Hegel and Adorno, and none at all to the theoretical equivalent of *Lassie Come Home*, whatever that might be.

Fendt's translation is clear and lucid and, as far as I can determine, very reliable. Brenez's prose is not without its knotty aspects, but by and large the writing is clear, the difficulties coming from the thought rather than its expression. It is something of a shame that the copious illustrations that accompanied the original publication are missing (the English text contains no images), but that might have been too much to hope for. More regrettable is the fact that the text contains no acknowledgement that it is not a complete translation. Of the forty-four items listed on the contents page of the French edition, twenty-five appear in the English version. So, very welcome as this collection is, we will have to wait for the appearance in English of Brenez's reflections on, among other films, Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996) and Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). But

even this abridged version manages to squeeze in Robert Bresson, Jean Eustache, Philippe Garrel, Monte Hellman, Jacques Tourneur, Dario Argento, John McTiernan, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Genet, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Gus van Sant, Michael Cimino, Orson Welles, Maurice Pialat, Barbara Loden, Paul Sharits, Kirk Tougas, and more.

Brenez's central notion of 'figurative analysis' is both intriguing and somewhat elusive, as is acknowledged by the book's introduction, which takes the form of a letter to the John Ford expert Tag Gallagher, and opens by quoting his advice to her that 'If you can't define it briefly in two or three words (and not two or three words in a figurative sense), you'd be better off considering another approach' (p. ix). The remainder of the introduction comprises an extended account of why Brenez does not follow Gallagher's advice, in part because she does not see 'why an analytic desire should be summed up in a formula (partly watering it down)' (p. ix). But she does offer four principles for her methodology. These are, firstly, what she calls 'figural analysis', which essentially means a dedication to an immanent analysis. Rather than studying films in context, she is more interested in how their formal details might open up aesthetic, historical, or philosophical vistas, quoting with approval Adorno's claim in *Philosophy of New Music* that '[t]he forms of art register the history of humanity with more justice than do historical documents' (p. xi). The second principle is 'figurative economy', which means a focusing of attention not on isolated elements but on their connections and transformations: 'Cinema is a generalized inquiry into linkages, connections and relations' (p. xii). It is here, I believe, that much of Brenez's originality as a close analyst lies. Her third methodological principle, 'figurative logic', refers to a decision to treat films as themselves making theoretical or philosophical propositions or, rather, questions, such as: 'What is the texture of a filmic body (flesh, shadow, proposal, affect, doxa)? [. . .] What kind of creature is it at heart (subject, organism, case, ideologeme, hypothesis)?' (p. xiv). This aspect of Brenez's work has clear affinities with contemporary film-philosophical claims that films themselves do philosophical work. Her particular slant is the way she connects this with the close analysis of individual films; she is less interested in the 'possibilities of the medium' in general than in how they manifest in particular: her method involves 'looking for how a film invents a figurative logic' (p. xiv). Each valuable film invents its own logic. Finally, as has already been hinted at, Brenez's fourth principle is a focus on the body, in order '[t]o see how cinema problematizes what it treats' (p. xvii).

Clearly, there is a great deal of complexity to wrestle with here. But, without attempting to boil or water anything down, one great virtue of

Brenez's approach is its catholicity. The figurative, or figural, energies and transformations that manifest in different films can take as many forms as films can invent logics. This means that it *may* be necessary to think in terms of, say, psychological depth and diegetic consistency, but then again, it may not. As she writes, 'in a film, very different regimes of figural energy always exist: The problem is grasping their convergence or divergence' (p. 13). Brenez's method does not require her to—in fact, it requires her *not* to—make decisions about what is or is not 'cinematic' in advance of the encounter with each specific film. This is one thing that I take from the following passage:

> Once one conceives of cinema as the organization of the arrival, departure and return of figures—as it seems to me is the case for Welles, Antonioni, Cocteau and Dreyer—a temporality and figurative events in competition with diegetic time are inevitably established. Figurative narration and storytelling are neither determined by nor subordinated to diegetic construction. (p. 90)

Such an approach is in no way a cop-out, and it seems to me that film studies would do well to pay it very close attention.

So how does this approach work out in practice? In her book on Abel Ferrara, Brenez discusses his 1993 film *Body Snatchers* as an instance of her claim that his work proceeds by 'composition by anamorphosis', which means that 'a key image is translated and metamorphosed in the course of a film' (2007, p. 13): 'At the start, in an eminently familiar domestic gesture, Marti, riding in the back of the family car, pushes away her stepbrother, Andy; at the end, she hurls him from a helicopter down into a world consumed by blood and fire' (p. 20). This is the kind of insight that transforms one's understanding of the film under discussion as well as opening the way to one's own discovery of comparable relationships in other films. Speaking personally, I haven't found any specific critical claims in this book that have struck me as much as this one, but I'm sure other readers will discover similar riches. Certainly, the flavour of the claim is very similar to many that are contained therein.

Having said that, I do find some limitations. Despite Brenez's intention to avoid privileging 'a universal method over the treatment of detail, a systematic approach over technical examination' (p. x), the desire to make theoretically striking claims sometimes gets the upper hand. The analysis of Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) is a case in point. Having made the nice point that 'Cosmo refuses the chase sequence the killer offers [. . .] restoring him to the inanity of his postures, the inanity of the action

movie in which he is acting and from which Cosmo removes himself', Brenez goes on to claim that '[t]he impossible billow of smoke rising around Cosmo when he reappears even though there is no cigarette in the shot results from the imaginary bullet that kills Mort without anyone having fired it' (p. 5). Certainly, there is a connection of cigarette smoke and gunsmoke, but we saw Cosmo smoking a few shots earlier. There is a very good observation here—namely, there is a sense that the killing somehow seems to be achieved by a gun consisting of a slamming door and cigarette smoke. But rather than exploring other apparent impossibilities in the film, or other figurative connections between different indices (cigarette smoke, gunsmoke; the sound of a gunshot, the sound of a car door slamming), Brenez concludes that '[h]ere, resemblance erases ontological and logical categories' (p. 6), thereby generalizing and leading away from the film rather than particularizing and leading further into it.

I wonder whether, in the final analysis, the sheer breadth of Brenez's knowledge, the suggestiveness of her claims, and the potential inherent in her method might not be more impressive than some of her concrete analytical results. But that is really to say nothing more than how extremely impressive those other virtues of *On the Figure in General and the Body in Particular* are. Its belated appearance in English deserves to make a significant impact on the field. Although it is not immediately obvious how this work might be of use to more historically or empirically oriented film studies (although it could give rise to some interesting questions that could be addressed with a digital humanities methodology), it has a great deal to offer any and all flavours of close analysis. What might result, for example, from a Brenez-inspired investigation into the figural energies of digital cinema or of contemporary affect theory?

2. Shiguéhiko Hasumi, *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*, trans. by Ryan Cook

I am in no position to pronounce on the accuracy of Ryan Cook's rendering of Hasumi's Japanese, but the English that he has produced is extremely readable and elegant, the claims and arguments cogent. Hasumi is an intriguing figure in Japanese cinematic and intellectual life. Aaron Gerow's valuable 'Critical Introduction', included at the outset of Cook's translation, sets out the relevant aspects of his life and thought. A scholar of French literature and thought with a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne whose interests in that line range from Flaubert to major poststructuralists such as Foucault and Deleuze, Hasumi eventually achieved the distinguished position of president

of the University of Tokyo. As far as film is concerned, in addition to his prolific activities as a critic, when he worked at Rikkyō University he taught, and was a valued mentor to, almost an entire generation of important Japanese filmmakers, including Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Masayuki Suo, Shin Aoyama, and Kunitoshi Manda. In the episode of the French series *Cinéma de notre temps* devoted to his work, Kurosawa says of this group of Hasumi's students that 'it really was a cult' dedicated to him and his ideas about film. And this by no means exhausts his major achievements—he won the Yuko Mishima Prize for one of his novels at the age of 80 (p. xxiii). It is almost impossible to imagine a comparable figure in UK or US intellectual life—one would have to imagine something (*very* roughly) akin to a cross between Marina Warner, Philip French, and Thorold Dickinson.

The surface texture of *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu* is very different from that of *On the Figure in General*. Gerow tells us that 'Hasumi originally came to fame in the broader intellectual sphere with his conception of "surface criticism" (*hyōsō hihyō*), which was a fundamental attack on many predominant forms of textual interpretation that seek to delve beyond the surface of the text to extract a meaning supposedly hidden underneath' (p. xxi). This has resonances with contemporary interest in 'surface reading', although Hasumi's approach does not demonstrate the general hostility to interpretation one frequently encounters in such work. For all Hasumi's expertise in the likes of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, the book is deceptively simple, and may at times seem to be more of a work of criticism than of theory (if such a distinction holds water), but as Gerow puts it, this book is 'not just an interpretation of Ozu's oeuvre, but an exploration of what makes cinema cinema' (p. xxiii). And in so doing, it is profound in its implications.

Hasumi's study of Ozu is broadly auteurist (as also, incidentally, is Brenez's work), gleaning intriguing insights into the way his films work by means of repeated patterns and tendencies. So far so familiar, but the insights that are thereby discovered are never routine, and often somewhat counter-intuitive. We learn, for example, that '[n]arrational structure in Ozu always deeply links the taking of group photographs with the thematic system of *separation*' (p. 172, emphasis in original), as well as that:

> In Ozu, sitting side by side, looking in the same direction, and groping at the same single object with two gazes gives way to moments of direct, mutually shared feeling among the living, much more so than when people exchange words or look into one another's eyes. (pp. 146–48)

Or, to give one more example, having drawn from Ozu's tendency to introduce laughter onto the soundtrack before we are shown people laughing the discovery that 'to see laughing and to hear laughter are two essentially different experiences' (p. 234), Hasumi builds towards the conclusion that even when 'the figures to whom [. . .] laughter belongs are nowhere to be seen on screen', we need to understand this 'not as lack, but as abundance—an abundance of joy' (p. 256). The book as a whole is a remarkable antidote to any tendency to think that we already know all that we need to about Ozu's style, its motivation, and its implications. For Hasumi, looking at the films' surfaces requires really *looking*, always suspicious of any sense that what is on the surface is simply obvious, or that seeing it is easy.

There are also important interventions in familiar critical debates. In the book's final chapter (which derives from the expanded version of the book, first published in 2003), Hasumi engages with the interpretations of the famous—even notorious—'shot of the vase' from Ozu's 1949 film *Late Spring* that have been offered by the likes of Paul Schrader, Noël Carroll, and Donald Richie. Hasumi is dismissive of interpretations that see nothing but emptiness expressing itself: 'Despite the plurality of visual information it contains, this shot can hardly be said to perform a "decentering" function or to "suspend the diegetic flow." On the contrary, it can even be said to take on the function of actively articulating the "diegetic flow"' (p. 292). Hasumi gently but firmly puts vague claims about 'Japanese aesthetics' in their place: 'Observations about meaninglessness or vacuums of meaning simply reflect problems of interpretation on the cultural level' (p. 287).

In fact, one of the things that most strikes me about Hasumi's criticism is the way it handles the relationship between the concrete and the abstract, the narrative and the formal. Although he is adept at handling the latter of each pair, there isn't a trace of the dismissal of the former that is so familiar from a whole range of anglophone traditions of radical criticism. (The vase shot isn't exciting because it means nothing, it is important because of how it develops the film's narrative and characterization.) One straightforward example of this is the way that Hasumi uses the notion of 'theme'. We are accustomed to thinking of themes as illuminating abstractions from concrete detail, expressed in particular motifs. See, as just one characteristic example, Jim Kitses' list of 'antinomies' in his 1969 monograph *Horizons West*, which includes the likes of 'freedom', 'honour', 'self-knowledge', 'integrity', 'self-interest', and 'solipsism' set against 'restriction', 'institutions', 'illusion', 'compromise', 'social responsibility', and 'democracy' (p. 11). The themes Hasumi names, however, include things such as 'changing clothes' or 'eating' (p. 53). I find it hard to express why something so apparently simple strikes

me as so radical, but my intuition is that if we were really to attend to the implications of thinking that 'eating' could be one of a film's themes—rather than merely a *vehicle* for a theme—we might be able to reorientate our sense of both *how* and *what* films mean in some very clarificatory ways.

I have already mentioned Hasumi's counterintuitive side; indeed, this tendency often goes as far as outright provocation. To give just two examples: 'If this is what formal necessity looks like, it can only be said that form itself is unnatural' (p. 112); 'To look at an Ozu film is to maintain the eye in a state of constant and continuously renewing agitation' (p. 157). One could easily understand somebody claiming that what we see here is a desire to be contrary for its own sake; indeed, I do not think that such a claim would be too far from the mark. But Hasumi's care for the details of the films and the experience of attentively, and repeatedly, watching them means that he never falls into the trap of using them simply as pretexts for 'clever' arguments. His provocativeness is, it seems to me, ultimately motivated by a desire not to come to films with their significance as it were 'pre-seen', so that we already know what we're going to discover. I don't feel qualified to agree or disagree that he is 'the greatest film critic in the world', as Adrian Martin says on the book's back cover, but he is without doubt a great critic, and it is a boon to have this important book finally available in English. It is very much to be hoped that before too long we will get more of his work in English. Ozu seems to be a perfect match for his critical method, but we will get a better sense of exactly what that method is when we're able to see it in operation at length on other filmmakers.

3. Craig Fox and Britt Harrison, eds., *Philosophy of Film Without Theory*

The title of this collection, which forms part of a developing series of investigations spearheaded by Craig Fox and Britt Harrison that began with a conference at the University of York in 2019, might seem to place it out of contention for consideration in this review article. That would only be the case, however, on the narrowest possible construal of what is entailed by the notion of theory. Although I am not sure that the editors would be entirely happy with this way of putting things, it seems to me that in many ways it is an overly restricted understanding of theory, rather than any broad notion of theory *per se*, that the volume is intended to challenge. The essential problem is not new; it was excellently stated by the eighteenth-century scientist and philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: 'Nature creates, not *genera* and *species*, but *individua*, and our shortsightedness has

to seek out similarities so as to be able to retain in mind many things at the same time. These conceptions become more and more inaccurate the larger the families we invent for ourselves are' (p. 21). The editors worry that the broader and more elaborate the theoretical constructions we produce about film, the 'more and more inaccurate' our claims about individual films risk becoming. It is, I think, this broader worry that underlies the editors' desire to challenge 'the contemporary academic assumption that engaging philosophically with film must be a theoretical activity' (p. 1).

Two thoughts immediately come to mind in response to this. The first is the standard worry that aiming to work without *any* theory is incoherent. Any intellectual activity—which certainly includes the discussion of films informed by philosophy!—must make both presuppositions and generalizations. One of the chief values of theoretical reflection is precisely to bring presuppositions out into the open and to interrogate how best to generalize. The editors' introduction is, in my view, sometimes a little too breezy about the coherence of doing entirely without something that must be best described as theory; surely it is reasonable to see something theoretical at work in 'disentangling confusions', 'the exploration of conceptual connections', or 'the provision of perspicuous presentations and surveyable overviews', which are three of the 'methodological priorities and principles relevant to the pursuit of **philosophy** *without theory*' that are proposed (p. 4; emphasis in original). But as my previous paragraph indicated, I am not sure that, at heart, this collection really aims to challenge such a view. There is something polemical about the title, which can therefore be taken with a judicious sprinkling of salt. The point might be that, if there is a spectrum between patient and detailed attention to individual films and bold, broad generalizations, then film studies has spent far too much time on the latter. My second thought is whether removing or de-emphasizing the role of theory means that any reflection bringing film and philosophy together under such restrictions will end up 'merely' as film criticism. I think that this may possibly be the case; but it is not so obvious that this is to be regretted. The strongest response to both of these thoughts is, surely, to make one's claims simultaneously as firm and as interesting as possible.

The book is divided into five sections: 'Doing Without Theory Yet Still Doing Philosophy'; 'The Appeal of—and to—Wittgenstein'; 'Revisiting—and Reconsidering— Cavell'; 'Seeing Faces, Finding Others'; and 'Cinematic Investigations'. The division is sensible and helpful enough, although in practice there is something a little motley about the collection as a whole and the connections between the various chapters. But given its premises, this might not be such a bad thing—it could even be a positive virtue. After the editors'

introduction, the book begins with an interview with Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey conducted by the editors, who credit the former's 2001 collection *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts* as inspiring their own project. The interview is a helpful survey of the territory that both does and does not set the terms of the collection as a whole, given that (as is entirely appropriate) not all the authors included in the collection agree with the stances taken here. Most—though not all—of the chapters that follow are dedicated to specific works of film or, occasionally, television.

In their interview, Allen and Turvey take a strong stance against Stanley Cavell's work, some of whose books, such as *Pursuits of Happiness*, might perhaps have been expected to represent cardinal examples of philosophy of film without theory, but this is because they view Cavell as a theorist (or even a Theorist) whose claim to take inspiration from Wittgenstein's methods rings hollow. I myself think that this is a serious misreading, but it would be a distraction to go into the details here. For readers interested, in a footnote to a longer version of his contribution to this volume, James Conant goes into detail about the shortcomings of Allen's interpretation of Cavell on scepticism, whose work is 'concerned to challenge the conventional understanding of skepticism with which Allen himself operates' (Conant, 'Cinematic Genre and Viewer Engagement' [2018], p. 301). I do not know if it is more than critical bias, given that my reading of Cavell chimes so much more with Conant's than with Allen's, but to me Conant's chapter—a detailed examination of the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)—is the single strongest contribution to the volume, and the one that most clearly demonstrates both the possibility and the value of the kind of writing on film that it seeks to encourage.

Conant's chapter is unashamedly interested in aesthetics, and also in aesthetic intention, which does not involve any naive form of auteurism because, as Conant explains, he 'take[s] aesthetic intention to be something a critic discerns *in* a work of art, not something postulated through psychological speculation about what was "in" the mind(s) of its creator(s) at the time of its making'; he points out that '[t]he real confusion on the contrary view is not one about art, but one about intention' (p. 251, n. 3). Making an interesting distinction between 'patent' and 'latent' virtuosity, and arguing that the former has taken up too much space in responses to Hitchcock, the task Conant sets himself in this chapter is to ask: 'in order for the movie to realize its ends, why *must* Marion be disposed of is such a cinematically dazzling, temporally dilated, and eidetically arresting a manner?' (p. 241). Conant's answer involves the way that the scene has to accomplish (at least) five different functions, which—to complicate matters—must be imperceptible on first viewing. These functions are: 'the

transition from one organizing center of narrative subjectivity to another', 'the dilation of the temporality of the scene', 'the aestheticization of the horror', 'the concealment of identity', and 'the insinuation of a "false bottom" in the movie's generic structure' (pp. 246–47). Conant's account is rich in textual detail and, as the five functions just enumerated demonstrate, its critical claims are clear and concrete (though also, of course, contestable; more on this below). He is firm in his dismissal of theoretical approaches to film that work at an 'absolutely hopeless level of generality', resulting in 'poor criticism, born of bad theory' (pp. 247, 242), but nowhere does he seek to 'theory-proof' his chapter; on the contrary, any future theories of cinematic transparency that do not pay heed to Conant's arguments here will be much the poorer for it.

Other chapters that can serve to highlight the strengths of the collection include those by Andrew Klevan and by John Gibson. Klevan attempts something like a metacritical investigation of some analytic film theorizing (using a chapter by Berys Gaut as its case study), drawing on aspects of ordinary language philosophy in order to do so. He demonstrates how Gaut's chapter confuses, in places, 'an expressive quality of the film' with 'an emotional feeling of the viewer' (p. 39), and makes some trenchant remarks about the vague overuse of the word 'power' (p. 42). I do wonder whether the most philosophically interesting (and controversial) aspects of ordinary language philosophy have rather gone missing—we do not need ordinary language philosophy to recognize that film criticism should aim 'accurately and meaningfully' to 'account for [film's] fecundity' (p. 49)—but the chapter's claims are important, and deserve to stimulate further debate about the kind of activity that writers working philosophically with film take themselves to be doing. Gibson's chapter investigates Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957) and the question of what is conveyed by the smile that Cabiria (Giulietta Masina) presents directly to the camera in the film's final scene, focusing the discussion on the notion of the ordinary and its relation to cinema's artifice and 'often fantastic departures from actual human conditions of speech and action' (p. 106). As with Conant's chapter, orienting the chapter around not merely a single film but a single aspect of it, and the interpretational questions it raises, proves very fruitful, particularly in suggesting, by implication, that there is something lacking in many standard accounts about the relationship between transparency and evident artifice in classical film.

Some other chapters in the book, I find, raise interesting and pertinent questions but do not entirely satisfy in their execution. Katheryn Doran's take on the 1996 film *Lone Star*, for instance, explores the film's use of ambiguity 'at both the object level of the narrative and the meta-level of

the audience response to it' (p. 54), but while her discussion is careful and attentive, I found myself wanting a punchier conclusion than that a film can show you that 'you should think again' (p. 66). I had a similar reaction to Constantine Sandis's chapter on *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The chapter is fluent and sparkily written, but the conclusion that the film is, in the final analysis, entirely hermetic—'we find no Easter eggs; no clues to hidden meanings *or* their negation; no anti-message message or anti-theory' (p. 78)—is a little too neat and comfortable, interpretatively speaking. Such a reading suggests the existence of a resting point which my experience of watching the film does not permit. Furthermore, Cavell makes another appearance here in an interesting footnote quoting Morris Weitz's claim that there are parallels between *Marienbad* and Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* that I would have loved to see explored in more detail (p. 79, n. 16). Carla Carmona's chapter makes the fascinating proposal that there are methodological resonances between Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988) and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Some suggestive ideas crop up along the way, but the chapter is hamstrung by its unquestioning reliance on the (controversial) idea that Wittgenstein believed that there were ineffable truths, 'connections, which cannot be reduced to specific statements'; 'There is a kind of ineffability regarding aspect seeing' (pp. 132, 141).

Shortage of space has prevented me from mentioning most of the chapters in this collection, all of which have their virtues. The occasional chapter, such as Maximilian de Gaynesford's 'Film and the Space-Time Continuum', comes surprisingly close to the kind of theory-building that the collection sets itself against. But the methodological issues raised by the collection as a whole are serious and even, I would argue, urgent. One could perhaps use attitudes towards the issue of ineffability that I raised in the previous paragraph to organize the contributions therein. Lucy Bolton, in arguing for 'film phenomenology' as a philosophical but non-theoretical approach to film, argues that such an approach has run through the history of film, 'from Epstein to Woolf, Balázs to Bazin, Munsterberg to Marks, and Sobchack to Cooper' (p. 221), that collectively 'reveal[s] the way in which the ineffable is integral to the experience of film' (p. 222). V. F. Perkins did not belong to this tradition; he wrote that his criticism discussed 'things that [he believed] to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of' (*V. F. Perkins on Movies* [2020], p. 248). Non-theoretical film philosophy (which may ultimately be a name for a kind of film criticism but is no worse for that) can be seen as poised between these two extremes. If something is truly ineffable, one cannot say it (which will, of course, not prevent people from attempting

it); if something is there 'for all to see', there needs to be a specific reason for the critic to articulate it.

The strongest contributions here are clear about both the difficulties, limits, and stakes involved in writing about film. They are precise, concrete, and ambitious and, while not proposing theories (nor being 'clever' for the sake of it), do not try to *avoid* being open to theoretical extension or development. As a few contributions here occasionally demonstrate, the desire to avoid theory by finding an alternative to rigour turns, all too easily, into undercooked theory. The strongest essays in this book make detailed claims grounded in textual detail (whether of films or of other authors discussed) which are open to rebuttal. The possibility of rebuttal is, of course, one definition of what it is that makes theory theory. Non-theoretical film philosophy needs to keep in mind this dialectical twist, lest theory ends up with the last laugh.

4. Julian Hanich and Martin P. Rossouw, eds., *What Film Is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship*

A number of contributors (the range of which is excellent and imaginative) were troubled by the framing of this collection, as expressed in its title: *What Film Is Good For.* Tom Gunning, for example, writes that '[w]hen first faced with this topic' he 'bristled' (p. 368). Gunning was reacting against what seemed, at first glance, to be yet another contemporary attempt to marshal everything so as 'to make things better' (p. 368). The editors acknowledge this resistance in their introduction, distinguishing the notion of a 'good film' from the question of what film is good for (p. 3), although they do not acknowledge that the latter question is not obviously synonymous with the notion of 'the good of film'. But this slight confusion about subject matter, far from obscuring matters, brings to the fore what is important about this collection, and enables the contributors to take things in provocatively differentiated directions. Gunning, for example, proposes that films are 'good to think with' (p. 374), while Michel Chion understands the preposition 'for' a bit less instrumentally than do some of the contributors, intriguingly reading it as a little more akin to 'through'—for him film is, for example, good for 'storytelling' and 'travel', things which could be said to happen through film (p. 363). There is refreshingly little in this volume of the kind of overblown claim we see in Tiago de Luca's proposal that '[l]etting the credits roll […] constitutes an ethical act of resistance' (p. 335), and there is some salutary realism such as we find in Mark Cousins's suggestion that '[c]inema hasn't created any radically new psychological experiences', but 'has just been

extremely good at upgrading old ones' (p. 380). In the final analysis, the fact that the collection does not paper over the cracks of the different ways that its topic can be taken helps it demonstrate the truth of the editors' claim—one that resonates with aspects of the project of *Philosophy of Film Without Theory*—that 'film ethics is far better considered as a basic *aspect* of film studies than a mere subfield within it' (p. 5).

The contributions are short (mostly around ten pages each), which works very effectively. Not only does it maximize the number of contributions included (thirty-two chapters, plus the editors' introduction, a foreword by Mike Figgis, and an afterword by Radu Jude), but it means that in the most successful cases the chapters are both concentrated and suggestive. Some chapters are almost epigrammatic, such as Catherine Wheatley's elegant reflections on wonder. The book is divided into five sections—'Adaptive Goods', 'Empathic Goods', 'Sensitive Goods', 'Reviving Goods', and 'Communal Goods'—which are helpful, if not exactly essential. One of the other advantages of the short contribution length is that, with no sacrifice of focus or rigour, the book lends itself very well to dipping into and out of, tracing the serendipitous connections that crop up as one tackles whichever chapter happens to grab the attention. With thirty-two contributions it would take too much space even to name them all, so as with the previous collection I have had to be highly selective. I want to make it clear that I mean to imply absolutely no criticism of the chapters not mentioned; I have simply drawn on those that seemed to me most clearly and easily to bring out the range and nature of the collection.

One obvious way of engaging with the question of what film is good for is precisely not by thinking about 'film as film', but by considering the contexts and consequences of films and filmmaking. Some solid contributions do just that, such as Laura Marks on the unsustainability of streaming, which contains the quite extraordinary information that streaming media 'is calculated to contribute [. . .] 1% and rising quickly of global greenhouse gases' (p. 24); Litheko Modisane on postcolonial African cinema, who notes that 'it is in their catalyzing of public engagements that the good of film is realized' (p. 69); and Maryann Erigha Lawer's examination of social justice cinema in the context of Black Lives Matter. Other chapters, perhaps a little more traditionally, reflect on the critical value of particular films. These include Seung-Hoon Jeong's investigation of 'global cinema as ethical art' by means of the Dardenne brothers' *La Promesse* (1996) and Sono Sion's *Himizu* (2011) (pp. 80–90).

The philosophical backgrounds of the collection are broad. There is a fairly strong dose of analytic and cognitive approaches, including Malcolm Turvey's exploration of empathy (which I found sensible, although it would

have benefited from more concrete attention to specific films) and Carl Plantinga and Garrett Strpko on the 'reflective afterlife' of films (which reasonably enough calls for more empirical investigation of whether film-watching can be demonstrated to have concrete ethical consequences; I have to say that my inclinations are sceptical). But other traditions are also represented: Daniel Yacavone's study of 'the many worlds and world values of cinema' is philosophically wide-ranging (pp. 138–49), and Nicholas Baer interestingly brings together Hegel and Adorno.

The limitations of the volume tend to be specific, and thus the mileage of other readers with different backgrounds and expectations is likely to vary, perhaps even more than is usually the case with a collection such as this. Although the Baer chapter just mentioned is very carefully put together, it is problematic that there is no mention of the role of the material from Hegel's *Phenomenology* that it draws on has in that book's development; more than with any other philosopher, to extract claims without showing how they are part of a constantly shifting argument is to risk distortion. Thus, it is a little unfair to reach the conclusion that 'simple empiricism always confronts problems of indexicality and of the nondescriptive, indifferent referentiality of its terms' (p. 308) simply on the basis of the beginning of the *Phenomenology*; no empiricism thinks that the only concepts it needs are 'this', 'here', and 'now'. To write of Hegel as having declared the nature of 'the true multiplicity and universality of the "Now"' (pp. 307–08) risks obscuring the fact that the material that Baer draws on here is itself immediately 'sublated'—to use the jargon—in the next section of the book, which moves on from sheer immediacy to discuss perception.

While I am talking about Hegel, I may as well mention that despite the care with which it is put together, I find Julian Hanich's chapter on beauty to be hamstrung by what seems to be the entirely undialectical notion of beauty with which it operates. I find little in it that would allow space for comprehension of the fact that, as Julian Barnes puts it, 'a critic of the first Impressionist Exhibition described the whole movement as "a war on beauty", yet now, if asked to define or exemplify beauty, we might well start with Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* of 1872 and continue through his oeuvre' (Barnes, 'Painting is terribly difficult' [2023]). I think it is also unduly skewed by its visual focus, which is what enables claims such as that 'in the contemplative mode, interpretations are temporarily suspended' (p. 168). What about a beautiful scene which is so because of what we know about the characters and their situation? Think, to take a random example, of the famous sex scene in *Don't Look Now* (1973) between Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie, which expresses the reclamation of their erotic life together for

the first time after the horror of their daughter's drowning. It is in this narrative- and character-based expression that its beauty lies, and similarly with much that is most beautiful in narrative cinema.

But, as I say, these are local quibbles. Any broad complaint such as to ask for longer pieces with more elaborately developed arguments would mistake the nature of the project, although I do feel that with the length restrictions the most successful pieces are those that manage to be both specific and suggestive, rather than trying to compress too much into a short span. Films can be both useful and useless; good and bad; good for some things and terrible for others, and—as mentioned earlier—reflecting on these and many other facets of cinema and their implications (in ways such as those that are impeccably exemplified in this collection) demonstrates how central the ethical (in all its various manifestations) is to films and film-viewing.

5. Conclusion

None of the books reviewed here propose grand unified theories of film, or even of specific aspects of film. Indeed, each of them demonstrates at least occasional scepticism, in one form or another, towards theoretical reflection on film, in one form or another. But what this seems to me to demonstrate is not any contemporary marginalization of film theory (except on the most unhelpfully restrictive understanding of that term), but rather its robustness. This is not to mention the fact that film theory in more obviously recognizable forms is indeed alive and well, as indicated by the 2022 publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, reviewed in these pages last year. If the purpose of film theory is to help us understand what films are, what happens when they are made and we watch them, and how we are best to understand them, then the books discussed above collectively demonstrate that we don't need to choose between criticism and theory, detailed close analysis and sweeping theoretical generalization. Yes, there can be non-theoretical forms of detailed reflection on films. And yes, some forms of theory lose sight of their objects. But making both these claims need not leave us vulnerable to the theorist's rejoinder that getting too close to the object risks losing one's grasp on the broader picture, thereby leaving behind what is most powerful about theory. Such 'non-theoretical' work can, instead, rejuvenate and refocus the theoretical impetus, while also achieving other, perhaps more immediate, aims, such as the critical illumination of individual films. Achieving all this at once is certainly a difficult task, but at their best the four books discussed here demonstrate its possibility by achieving it with excellence.

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Fox, Craig, and Britt Harrison, eds., *Philosophy of Film Without Theory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). ISBN 9 7830 3113 6535.

Hanich, Julian, and Martin P. Rossouw, eds., *What Film Is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023). ISBN 9 8005 2038 6808.

Hasumi, Shiguéhiko, *Directed by Yasujirō Ozu*, trans. by Ryan Cook (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024). ISBN 9 7805 2039 6722.

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