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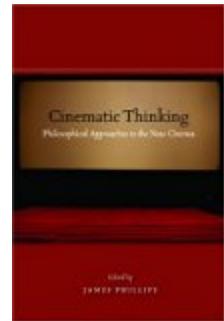


James Phillips, ed. *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. ix + 192 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5800-0; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5801-7.

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Introducing Old Philosophers to the New Cinema

The “New Cinema,” thriving in the 1940s through the 1980s in various guises such as Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, and the New German Cinema, is no longer particularly new. But its influence persists in contemporary filmmaking, and novel approaches to analyzing the old New Cinema continue to surface, as exemplified by James Phillips’s edited volume. With its coverage of a diverse, cross-cultural selection of filmmakers, this collection demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the New Cinema, or of what can be described as innovative international filmmaking of the extended postwar period.

In his short introduction, Phillips explains the New Cinema as “the resurgence of various national film industries after the devastation wrought by World War II and the commercial dominance of the American sound film” (p. 2). He seems to assume a familiarity with New Cinema’s manifestations in different cultures during the postwar era, as he merely names them without reviewing their characteristics or major players. While this is probably a safe assumption about his readership, a reader not well versed in film history may desire more details about the grouping of these particular directors and the traditions in which—or often against which—they worked. We are not introduced to the complex filmmaking of directors like Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Carlos Saura, or Glauber Rocha, and we are given no indication of how they fit in to the history of the New

Cinema. However, Phillips does offer an explanation for the inclusion of Alfred Hitchcock and Claire Denis, who might at first glance be considered the volume’s outliers in terms of the historical and geographical coordinates of their filmmaking, but who both reject the clichés and conventions of Hollywood in ways resembling those of the New Cinema.

Regardless of how the films and filmmakers covered in the ten essays might be classified, their appearance together in one volume makes sense. Common topics across essays include the filmic representation of temporality; ambiguity in regard to narrative structure, content, and authorial authority, and the ways in which this ambiguity often is reflected cinematographically; the role of soundtracks; and the filmmakers’ (and films’) relationship to both politics and aesthetics. Most of the authors comment on a director’s entire oeuvre, but with a specific focus on a representative film or multiple films. Because not every significant director and work can possibly be addressed in the span of ten fairly short essays, the result is less a panoramic view than an accumulation of microscopic views of the New Cinema. While these glimpses are each captivating in their own right, a concluding chapter (or an expanded introduction) tying the essays together might have helped point the reader toward the bigger picture and the book’s overall goals.

I was at first uncertain, even skeptical, about the

claim to “philosophical approaches” in this volume’s subtitle. The marketing blurb on the back cover asserts: “As the authors collected here are philosophers rather than film critics, the volume approaches its subjects with a different set of interests and commitments than the bulk of works in film theory.” But what exactly is a “philosophical approach,” I wondered, and how is it different from the thoughtful, theoretically informed analyses that one expects from film studies scholarship in general? By implication of the book’s title, are non-philosopher film scholars being excluded unduly from those who practice “cinematic thinking”? It struck me that perhaps the fact of the collection’s philosopher authors was incidental, rather than something to be emphasized; the mentions (often brief) of G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, or Gilles Deleuze, however intriguing and relevant to the discussions at hand, do not seem to constitute a “philosophical approach” in themselves. I gradually sensed, however, that many of the authors demonstrated a flair for pursuing certain avenues of cinematic inquiry that others might have given less concentrated, if any, attention. For example, Cecilia Sjöholm argues persuasively that Margarethe von Trotta’s films concern themselves not only with Germany’s terrorist history, but also more broadly with “the formation of the subject under the European tradition of the Enlightenment” (p. 117). Sjöholm substantiates her argument with illustrations from several of von Trotta’s films, and with a detailed consideration of Julia Kristeva’s understanding of terrorism as “an unavoidable outcome of certain structures of Enlightenment politics” (p. 121).

Some of the authors have a different take on the “philosophical approach,” relying less frequently than the others on applying tenets of the “old philosophers” to film analysis, taking the theorization primarily into their own hands instead. This tendency increases toward the end

of the volume, as the final three contributions consist largely of theoretical, often quite abstract, ruminations from their authors. In these essays on Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Claire Denis, the authors include fewer detailed analyses of specific film scenes, and more generalizations about the directors’ works as a whole. The former two essays incorporate considerable material from interviews with the directors (while paying homage to Arthur Schopenhauer, René Descartes, Hegel, Benjamin, and Marcel Proust), whereas Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay on Denis is intriguingly written but remains wrapped up within itself, with no reference to other sources and lacking any overview of the film it addresses, *Trouble Every Day* (2001).

Ultimately, though, it became clear to me that more often than not, the authors’ intimate knowledge of the “old philosophers” does indeed enrich their analyses of New Cinema films. Even so, to assert, as the book cover does, that the authors are not film critics, is perhaps to deny them enough credit up front. Most authors provide careful close readings of relevant scenes, and they display not only a deep appreciation for, but also an understanding of, technical aspects of filmmaking. As such, the volume as a whole is a successful product of interdisciplinary scholarship that avoids the traps of dilettantism.

A minor quibble with the volume is that not every essay includes exact dates of the films’ production, making it at times difficult to situate the works beyond the very broad category of New Cinema without further research. Otherwise, it is well edited, and the essays are by and large clearly written. The volume forges new interpretive paths, diverging from psychoanalytic and other previous interpretations while moving toward productive cinematic approaches that could be called—legitimately and not tritely—“philosophical.”

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