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John Orr. *Contemporary Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. xi + 243 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-0836-2.

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Cinema of Poetry

The jacket copy for this book claims it is “the most comprehensive study of major developments in the cinema during the last thirty years,” which seems a bit hyperbolic. John Orr has written an interesting analysis of some specific, formal, and thematic trends in the cinema of the past three decades, but *Contemporary Cinema* is hardly the sort of “comprehensive study” the publisher’s ballyhoo might lead one to expect. To get all of the minor complaints out of the way at once, the ten glossy photographs in the middle of the book are wholly dispensable: it is as if someone said, “well this is a book about film so we have to have some pictures,” but these bland publicity stills add nothing to Orr’s work.

In 1965, director Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke at a conference and outlined his theory of a “cinema of poetry.” One aspect of the form Pasolini paid particular attention to was “free indirect subjectivity,” defined by Orr as “immersion of the filmmaker in the experience of the subject who possesses some clear affinity with the auteur.” In other words, an auteur makes his/her film express the sensibility, feeling, and world-view of the picture’s protagonist(s), as he (or she) perceives it. Rather than simply expressing a character’s feelings through subjective point-of-view shots, impressionistic dream sequences or voiceover narration (although all of these techniques may be used), the entire frame–subject included–takes on significance.

There are other facets of the “cinema of poetry” (which is something of a misnomer, although I can’t think of an especially apt substitute), and Orr explores

these in chapters entitled “The Sacrificial Unconscious,” “The Screen as Split Subject,” “The Camera as Double Vision,” “American Reveries,” “Anxieties of the Masculine Sublime,” and “The Road to Nowhere.” In each chapter he analyses a number of films whose form and technique, combined with narrative, create a tension between the protagonist’s subjectivity and the director’s manipulation of screen content, the so-called “double register.” In contemporary cinema, form and content cannot be separated, and—to cite one example—Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* uses formal techniques to help make its point about society and politics in China.

Contemporary Cinema is quite cosmopolitan in its outlook: Orr uses many European and Asian films, in addition to a fair number of independent U.S. and Canadian productions, as examples. These “new” filmmakers are the ones who are constantly experimenting with form and the way in which camera placement and movement, editing, production design, sound and music can be used—along with the script—to convey a message in a more complex yet subtle manner than the traditional “zero-degree” mainstream commercial cinema.

Orr’s book is rather densely written: he packs a lot of information and opinion into each chapter and while it is quite readable and interesting it is not an “easy” title that can be skimmed or perused in a casual manner. His discussions demand the same degree of critical concentration as the photodramas he writes about do.

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