

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela Dalle Vacche. *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. xi + 303 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-71583-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-71582-0.

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Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1996)



Not unlike the statement that usually accompanies an artist's show, the introductory paragraph of *Cinema and Painting* firmly prepares the reader for the exhibition that follows. Professor Vacche's position that "the advent of cinema has forever changed the meaning of the word art and the meaning of the word history," is literally the rock from which she sculpts her manifesto encouraging colleagues to join her in a new field of "comparative arts." For practitioners of American and Popular Culture Studies, this may not be considered a "new" approach, but when considered against the traditional divisions—curricular, administrative, aesthetic, or otherwise—academia usually imposes on fine versus commercial or popular artforms, a text that insists upon breaking down barriers that impede knowledge is worthy of attention. Her belief that "art history as a discipline cannot afford any longer to ignore film studies," should be the epigram that governs any and all department meetings on the value interdisciplinary work. All this in the first paragraph!

Dalle Vacche's analytical chapters offer fresh readings of films ranging from Vincente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951), Mizoguchi's *Utamaro* (1946), to Alain Cavalier's *Therese* (1986). Her argument that cinema is a worthy lens for reexamining art history offers a critical method that reveals new textual and contextual layers of meaning within the selected films. Dalle Vacche's method refuses to fall prey to what David Bordwell decries in *Post-Theory*—the single film analysis used to substantiate a grand theory—but seeks, rather, to use cinema as a catalyst for generating revisionist ideas on basic approaches to art history. Simultaneously, by showing how "high art" painting is inextricably linked to mainstream film-making, she demonstrates that because cin-

ema straddles the worlds of high/low, male/female, domestic/foreign, and elite/popular perceptions, it is a proficient filter for reevaluating those labels and categories. Thus, her comparative readings breath new life into films like Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1963) or Rohmer's *The Marquise of O* (1975) and concurrently offers cinema as a tool for breathing new life into readings of painters and their paintings.

As popular cinema—whether produced in the U.S., Europe, Asia or elsewhere—is deeply ingrained in American culture within and outside of the academy, Vacche's book provides persuasive evidence that the Byzantine distinctions between fine and commercial art limit the ways in which an artform might be examined. *Cinema and Painting* does far more than its subtitle indicates: it convincingly argues—through films as diverse as Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Godard's *Pierre le Fou* (1965), or Tarkovsky's *Andri Rublev* (1966)—that comparative art studies is a far more beneficial platform from which to launch critiques of art works which are currently—and needlessly—segregated. Only the lack of a strong concluding chapter—the book ends abruptly with an analysis of *Therese* by Cavalier. A final chapter should reconnect Dalle Vacche's insightful analyses to her method, somehow creating a synthesis between her general method and her specific findings. Still, this is a small flaw in an otherwise stimulating work of interdisciplinary studies, a work which draws important lines between the elite and the popular in our culture.

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**Citation:** Kevin O'Brien. Review of Vacche, Angela Dalle, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=592>

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