

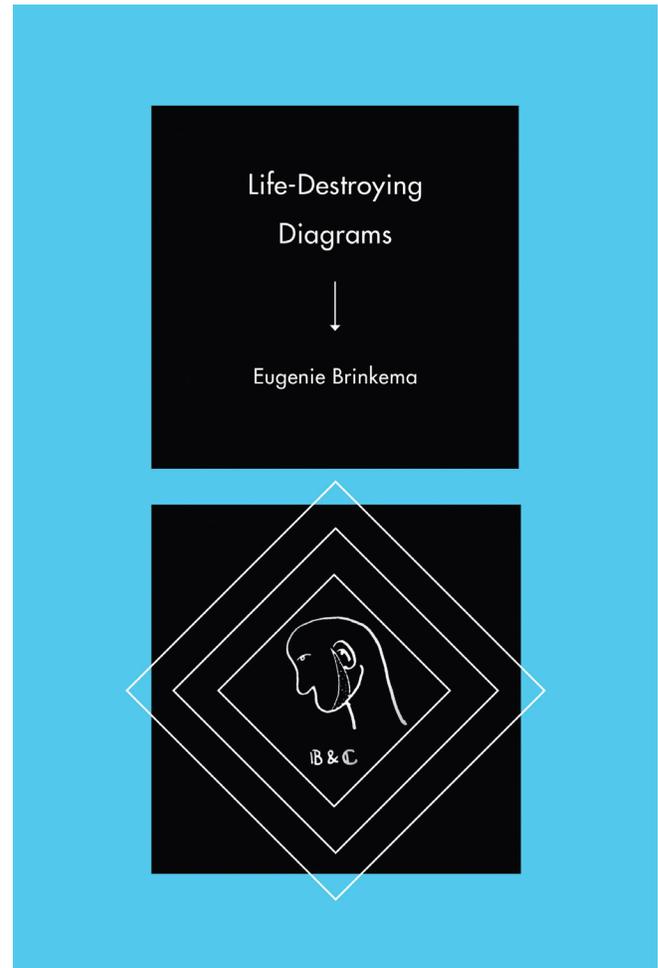
ROSALIND GALT

Life-Destroying Diagrams, by Eugenie Brinkema

Eugenie Brinkema's *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is at once breathtakingly expansive in its frame of reference and almost entirely sui generis. In making its case for radical formalism, the book develops an extended dialogue between cinema and continental philosophy. Whether Levinas and ethics, object-oriented ontology, Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the image, or Catherine Malabou's plasticity, Brinkema aims to think cinema in relation to major currents in philosophy. Her demand for a more rigorous accounting of affect resonates with the work of Lauren Berlant, whose thinking on love she cites approvingly. And to the extent that the book is a polemic—against affect, against phenomenology, against political aesthetics, and against most of the ways that horror film has been theorized—it must also be understood in relation to a wide range of scholarship that it does not always cite directly, but that forms the terrain of its critique. Horror scholars from Robin Wood to Noël Carroll to Adam Lowenstein and Tarja Laine name an intellectual trajectory against which Brinkema marshals her argument. And yet, to locate Brinkema's work within a field is a challenging task, because nobody in film studies thinks or writes like her: *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is spectacularly original and entirely unique.

This is not a book about horror, Brinkema makes sure to warn her readers, but it does depart from the provocative claim that the problem with horror is affect. Brinkema complains that horror is treated solely as a bodily affect, not as a concept. Across disparate theoretical approaches, she finds that horror scholars turn constantly to sensation, the question of what frightens them. To this, she splendidly retorts, "Who cares what you like? Who cares what you fear?" (14), insisting that the focus on sensation leads to superficial and instrumentalized formal analysis. Instead, Brinkema proposes to think deeply about horror as form, about the aesthetic qualities of horror that do not lead directly to fear and that might therefore do other things. As with her earlier *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema argues that theoretical constructions of affect work to foreclose meaningful systems of form.

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Sharpening the previous book's polemic, she extends her method of radical formalism, such that reading for form not only becomes a rebuttal to affect theory, but functions as "the root of all reading, and as what grounds theoretical work on every one of the figures—violence, cruelty, finitude, relation, ethics, care, and debt—that will carry across this book" (21).

Life-Destroying Diagrams regards popular horror films in terms of sets—geometric, grammatical, arithmetic—and Brinkema has selected films that respond well to this analysis. Her second chapter takes on the *Final Destination* series (James Wong, 2000; David R. Ellis, 2003; James Wong, 2006; David R. Ellis, 2009; Steven Quale, 2011) as films organized by sequence, rather than by any psychoanalytic vision of horror as repression. The structuring principle of the films is the list, the order in which its victims were destined to die; and death manifests itself in relation to their position on this list. Thus, Brinkema argues that the real topic of the films is not death but the problem of form itself.

In a way, this discussion of *Final Destination* as an apparatus, an ordered process, evokes Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky's *The Process Genre*. Skvirsky, too, promised that a reading organized by cinematic form can produce radically new understandings of genre, but whereas her corpus attended to labor and the processes of production, Brinkema's ur-structure is the wholly arbitrary sequence of the abecedarium. The alphabet seems to be a meaningless sequence, whereas death seems to be meaningful: holding these ideas of form in tension is for her what the work of horror clarifies.

How can one think about such abstract forms in a way that creates meaning? This Brinkema's book does beautifully and compellingly. Her reading of *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2011) renders the film in relation to the grid, suggesting unexpected affinities with media scholarship on database aesthetics, information, and modernity (e.g., Lev Manovich and Alex Galloway). The grid, she points out, has no negative space, no complexity—unlike, say, the network. It is a repeat pattern, a simple form. Thinking about this form allows Brinkema to range across histories of aesthetics (Kant, Le Corbusier, De Stijl, Krauss) and thus reach the relationship of textuality to arrangements of power. Brinkema pushes the reader to think with her formalism, to understand all the places it can go. She finds a discourse of accelerationism at work in the film, as well as a radical antifuturity that makes Lee Edelman, for one, seem positively optimistic. She reads *The Cabin in the Woods* as an exploration of the grid as a form of totality: —there is no end and no escape. As with the hexagonal grid of the force field that surrounds the cabin, so with the diegetic system from which the teenagers (and—spoiler alert—everyone else in the world) cannot escape. The visual pattern of the grid recapitulates the narrative pattern of the film, and for Brinkema, this nested form is what enables the film to speak about totalizing violence.

The apotheosis of this argument comes in chapter 4, in which Brinkema reads *The Human Centipede* (Tom Six, 2009) in terms of the diagram. This film is probably the hardest sell in a book that proposes that horror is not about bodily affect, and this reader will readily admit that she loves the sheer nerve of it. Brinkema starts from a diagram drawn by the evil doctor, showing how the centipede is to be surgically constructed. In a bravura comparison, she links this image to Hogarth's line of beauty, an aesthetic principle in which an object is imaginatively "hollowed out" in favor of its exterior lines—a figure of speech that provides Brinkema the opportunity to compare Hogarth's aesthetics to *Centipede's* violent redistribution of insides. The film's

unfortunate bodies are diagrammed as undulating lines, and thus Brinkema proposes that the film is best understood not affectively but aesthetically.

You might think that form is merely the stepping-stone to body horror, but in fact, Brinkema insists, the form *is* the horror that all the repulsive details of the film's violent spectacle merely recapitulate. This horror is the ordering of A, B, C that locks person B inextricably in place within a sequence that ends in death. The force of line is worse than the squishy matter of content. Content—all that blood and shit and pain—may seem like the bad thing, but really it is the form that gets you, every time.

The final section of *Life-Destroying Diagrams* takes a turn from horror to love, and here the book adds to literatures on European art cinema, film philosophy, and affect. It speaks to work by Catherine Wheatley and Brian Price, for instance, at the intersection of these terms. The argument is a continuation of what has come before. As with horror, so with love: Brinkema refuses to read in terms of sentiment, metaphor, history, and so forth that which should be read in terms of diagrammatic form. Love, Brinkema argues, is open and thus best served by a geometrical (formal) rather than a scenographic (contextual) reading.

In this section, she reads a series of European art films, from Jessica Hausner's *Amour Fou* (2014) to Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012). Perhaps strongest is her account of *Stranger by the Lake* (Alain Guiraudie, 2013), in which, she asserts, "something simultaneously horrific *and* on the order of love enters [the film] through an impersonal form of measurement." (308) If this is a film that seems destined to allegorical interpretations, Brinkema flips that script to focus on the impasse in meaning generated by its measurements of fish and space and sex and death. Where *Stranger by the Lake* centers on the subtraction of a murder, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) maps the withdrawal of love. *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) is surely a film designed for Brinkema's attention, structured as it is by the cold geometry of a hotel in which it is compulsory to be in a couple and a forest in which it is compulsory to be single. Like the book as a whole, *The Lobster* is determined to imagine the forms of love without sentiment. Notable also is *Life-Destroying Diagrams's* own formalism, through which the forms of academic writing are extended with virtuosic style, varying by chapter. For example the *Cabin in the Woods* chapter, which is about a vertical structure, includes a vertiginous proliferation of footnotes of footnotes of footnotes. Brinkema's style responds to its argument, form leading meaning in playful and experimental ways.

This is an important book, and Brinkema is working at the highest level of film scholarship. Yet, it will surely draw criticism for a choice that many will see as a weakness, a choice that Brinkema makes with full intentionality. Right at the beginning of the book, she rewrites a passage by Fredric Jameson thus: “This book will argue the priority of the political formal interpretation of literary texts” (xvi). Yes, she says, *I am erasing politics and replacing it with form; that is what I am doing*. She argues consistently that feminist, queer, postcolonial, and historical studies of cinema are asking the wrong questions—that they are, even, on the side of violence.

Brinkema’s provocation is to strike through politics exactly in the moment that the field of film studies has been galvanized anew by political thought. The impetus to think about political categories is everywhere, from the influence of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter on industry discourse to the vast array of scholarship and criticism drawing on black, queer, trans, feminist, Indigenous, and other pathways of political critique, not to mention the vividly political qualities of some of the most significant horror films of recent years, from *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016) to *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021). And yet it is in this moment that Brinkema crosses out politics, insisting that her reading will take place elsewhere. It is a brave move to make in 2021.

When politics does emerge in her writing, it is often as a question of race. From the Arab prisoner in *Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007), whose formal position as an outsider cannot be extrapolated without presupposing his marginalized political position, to the framework of racialized violence that she concedes is necessary to understanding *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), to Derrida’s account of “racism’s fascination with form” (267), racism asserts a trace of politics that she cannot entirely excise. Brinkema could be contrasted with scholars in black film aesthetics such as Michael Boyce Gillespie or Kara Keeling, for whom race is not merely an unavoidable trace of violence but instead offers a formally rich and conceptually sophisticated imaginary. Gillespie locates blackness as on the side of cinematic form. Keeling’s black, queer heuristic is radically at odds with Brinkema’s method, yet both are closely engaged with ethics and speculative thought. Such disparate conceptions of film form, theory, and philosophy reveal something of the current shape and stakes of the field.

At the heart of Brinkema’s text is the claim that radical formalism is not merely one reading practice among many, but rather the only way to avoid what could be called the violence of partial formalisms. Only a radical formalism can grapple with what is not yet thought, and for her the

diagram stages a truth of human relationality that is anterior to any cultural meaning that might subsequently be drawn. Crucial to this argument is a claim on the priority of philosophical modes of inquiry over historical ones. “These forms,” she writes, “are not metaphors—for society, or information, or power, biopower, the necropolitical, &c.—; they are the structures themselves” (161).

Those invested in both form and politics will argue that films are, after all, about these things, and that such questions are not merely epiphenomenal. This reader remains unconvinced that films (these films, any films) are legible *only* through radical formalism. This book will surely inspire debate on what it means to think with form. But that is the point of a polemic, after all. You must follow the path of rejecting all other practices of thought in order to reach the clearing of radical formalism. For all that it can frustrate, this process also attends to that which is immeasurable: to horror and also to love. *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is very much its own totalizing system, a diagram of how to think cinematic form.

BOOK DATA Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. \$114.95 cloth, \$31.95 paper. 496 pages.

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MARKUS NORNE

The Japanese Cinema Book, edited by Hideaki Fujiki and Alastair Phillips

Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema, edited by Joanne Bernardi and Shota T. Ogawa

A Companion to Japanese Cinema, edited by David Desser

Thirty-five years ago I was browsing through the stacks of a used bookstore in Boulder, Colorado, when I stumbled on a cache of Japanese cinema books. Having just discovered Mizoguchi and Kurosawa, I impulsively bought the lot. In an instant, I had acquired most of the English-language literature on this national cinema that had been published over various years, which now sit at the corner of a shelf in my office.

Today I am amazed by the fact that a slew of newly released Japanese cinema anthologies take up roughly the same amount of space. These are not thematic collections, but rather national cinema “handbooks” or “companions.”