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Must We Kill the Thing We Love? Emersonian Perfectionism and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock by William Rothman

Near the beginning of his intriguingly titled new study, William Rothman accurately observes that scholarship on Alfred Hitchcock can almost be called “an academic field of its own” (27), producing an ever-growing body of historical research, theoretical investigation, and critical commentary. No book did more to fuel the boom than Rothman’s own Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze, published in 1982 and widely praised for its painstakingly detailed, boldly personal readings of five key movies, starting with The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog (1927) and ending with Psycho (1960).

No one esteems that contribution more staunchly than Rothman himself. In the thirty-two years since it was published, he says in Must We Kill the Thing We Love? Emersonian Perfectionism and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock, “nothing scholars and critics have . . . discovered about Hitchcock’s work seriously calls into question the significance and relevance of The Murderous Gaze, much less invalidates the practice of reading it exemplifies. . . . How could it?” (27)

In one respect, though, Rothman now believes he botched the project. When he wrote The Murderous Gaze, he meant to show that two contrasting Weltanschauungen or moral outlooks—one emphasizing darkness and destruction, the other stressing hope and redemption—had roughly equal weight for Hitchcock, whose artistic identity was forever suspended between them. The original edition of The Murderous Gaze culminated with Psycho, however; writing a chapter on Marnie (1964) for the revised 2012 edition helped Rothman realize that the earlier book unwittingly favored the darker shades of the interpretive picture. He aims to rectify the situation in Must We Kill the Thing We Love? by paying more rigorous heed to Emersonian perfectionism, a mode of thinking derived from Ralph Waldo Emerson by Rothman’s philosophical mentor, Stanley Cavell.

Rothman describes Emersonian perfectionism as an “outlook or register of thought . . . that takes it to be our primary task as human beings . . . to become more fully human, to realize our humanity in our lives in the world, which always requires the simultaneous acknowledgment of the humanity of others.” This entails the conscientious pursuit of “self-knowledge” and a steady awareness of “the self’s awakening to its own condition, the reality that it is in the process of becoming, that it stands in need of creation.” We approach the Emersonian ideal by thinking and expressing our own unique ideas, always recognizing their moral dimensions and their capacity for inspiring purposeful actions. “The thought that we must walk in the direction of the unattained but attainable self,” Rothman writes, “that this is the path toward freedom, is the heart and soul of Emersonian perfectionism.” A film becomes “an Emersonian perfectionist text” if in beholding it readers perceive that “its author, in creating it, took a step on that uncharted path,” and that the film calls for them to do the same (4–5).

The exhortatory tone prevailing here reflects the extent to which Rothman has modified his Hitchcockian bottom line. His new book argues that Hitchcock’s sanguine complicity with villains and abiding fondness for a famous Oscar Wilde line—“each man kills the thing he loves,” from the 1897 poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”—bear out the filmmaker’s conviction that “artistic creation [is] the metaphorical equivalent of murder”; this belief undergirds all the major films through Vertigo (1958), which Rothman deems the most “devastating illustration” of the principle (7–8). Hitchcock then challenged the equivalency he had long assumed—between creation of art on one hand, destruction of life and love on the other—with Psycho, perhaps hoping he could obviate the audience’s (and his) appetite for deadly violence by symbolically killing “the thing he loved most in the world: the art of pure cinema itself” (198); he projects this “murder” most graphically in the slashing apart of the film strip (through assaultive editing) in the shower-murder montage.

This momentous gesture freed Hitchcock to make The Birds (1963) and the crowning achievement of Marnie, wherein the protagonist ultimately frees herself from the lifelong fear that she is “fated always to kill the thing she loves.” In allowing Marnie to find compassion for herself and step out of her private trap, Rothman writes, it’s possible that Hitchcock too “found compassion for himself [and] freed himself from his own private trap—his belief that his art of pure cinema was murderous” (254). By so doing, Hitchcock overcame and transcended his long-standing inability to embrace what can now be called Emersonian perfectionism. Sadly, however, the victory was Pyrrhic; the
critical and commercial failure of this “last masterpiece” fatally wounded his subsequent career.

Must We Kill the Thing We Love? argues that a nuanced grasp of Emersonian perfectionism is an invaluable tool for understanding, interpreting, and properly appreciating Hitchcock’s cinema. The book’s virtues are considerable. Rothman is a hugely creative scholar, combining orderly theoretical reasoning with strikingly original, sometimes bravely idiosyncratic insights that open fresh ways of seeing and thinking even when they don’t quite accomplish their intended tasks. He has a sense of humor and isn’t shy about using it. He is also admirably committed to close cinematic analysis; unlike too many critics, he explores movies as movies, not as illustrated screenplays or showcases for performers. In this study he casts robust light on selected aspects of Nesbitt and Rothman never tires of acknowledging it.

One does eventually tire of reading about it, though, and constant repetitions of Rothman’s gratitude are a less-endearing idiosyncrasy of the book, as are the mantra-like repetitions of certain Emersonian formulations, of which “the unattained but attainable self” is perhaps the most overused. A more fundamental difficulty with Must We Kill the Thing We Love? in particular is profound, and Rothman never tires of acknowledging it.

In the course of his analysis, Rothman states that “the camera was in Henry Fonda’s presence but not in the presence of the ‘real’ Emanuel [sic] Balestrero is not in the presence of the film’s Manny, either,” and furthermore, “the God who is a reality to [Manny] is an absence-that-is-also-a-presence with powers comparable to the camera’s in films Hitchcock unambiguously authors—the power to make miracles happen, to make his world go ’round, to split him in two, to answer his prayers” (131–32). This serves the needs of Rothman’s argument, but isn’t it true of every camera-character combo in every film, whether or not the subject or style calls such powerful attention to it? The problem here isn’t so much Rothman’s basic reasoning as the diffuse, impressionistic terms in which he couches it.

Here and elsewhere, as in discussions of the killing of Willi in Lifeboat (1944) and the tableau at the end of Rope (1948), Rothman also fuzzes distinctions between moral reasoning vis-à-vis reality and moral reasoning vis-à-vis fiction, writing in some places as if the two were almost interchangeable, in other places as if they were quite separate. Then too, a writer who often adduces fine details should be more careful about getting them right. At one point Rothman quotes Jean-Luc Godard as saying that cinema is “truth 24 times a second” (283), taking this to mean that the camera and projector are mere “machines,” which is true enough, but represents an ancient point of view that Godard never actually held—that’s a line of dialogue in Le petit soldat (1963), not something Godard himself said—and is fundamentally incompatible with the positions Godard has held for the past several decades.

Inaccuracy arises in close analyses as well. “Revenge,” for instance, the first episode in the TV series Alfred Hitchcock Presents (1955–61), centers on a horrifically traumatized woman who’s just been raped; she points out the evildoer to her husband, who kills the rapist, and shortly afterward she points out a second man in exactly the same manner. I am flummoxed by Rothman’s repeated suggestion (108, 221) that the woman might be deliberately deceiving her husband as revenge against him. Revenge for what? He’s a caring and devoted husband, doing his utmost for a wife almost paralyzed with shock. But even if I found the suggestion plausible, small errors in the discussion would make me think twice (there is no monkey wrench, they are not “driving home” at the end).

The analysis of Hitchcock’s intros and outros on the show also seems off base to me—surely Hitch was having fun with these brief appearances, not expressing “real vitriol” and “palpable cruelty” toward TV’s commercialism and conventionality. And if it’s legitimate to probe the language of these whimsical little speeches for deep meaning, should one do the same with, say, the coming-attractions trailer for Marnie in which Hitchcock comically confesses that he doesn’t understand the things he’s showing? Of course not.

These problems noted, Must We Kill the Thing We Love? is impressive in its depth and breadth even when it’s
disappointing in its particulars. Rothman remains a model of the humanistic film-philosophical scholar, and I find his arguments stimulating even though I can’t concur with some of his observations and conclusions. “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth,” Emerson wrote in his essay “Circles” in 1841, “that around every circle another can be drawn” (quoted on 29). In his new book Rothman sets out to draw new circles—of thought, of meaning, of emotion, of possibility—around those he has drawn before, and everyone who loves film, philosophy, and Hitchcock will profit from tracing the sometimes inexact but frequently elegant ideas limned within their borders.

VIKA PARANYUK

Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema edited by Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina

An impatiently awaited collection—at least among those engaged with Soviet and Russian film—Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema delivers on the promise suggested by its title: it covers an impressive diversity of sonic modes across a wide chronological span, although it tilts heavily toward the Soviet period. Among the themes explored in this exhilarating anthology: the curious art of simultaneous translation of foreign films in stagnation-era Soviet Union; experiments with drawn sound; the role of multilingualism in early 1930s Soviet cinema; and the composer Alfred Schnittke’s notion of polystylistic, as applied to Tengiz Abuladze’s 1984 groundbreaking film Repentance.

The editors, Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina, gathered fourteen essays, most of them previously unpublished, by international scholars of musicology, history, and cultural and film studies. Organized in three parts—“From Silence to Sound,” “Speech and Voice,” and “Music in Film; or, The Sound Track”—the collection’s ambitious scope can be seen as an exciting springboard for future interdisciplinary examination of a field that has suffered considerable neglect. Despite several critically important forays of English-language scholarship into Soviet film sound, most notably by Richard Taylor, Ian Christie, and Kristin Thompson, it has been “limited for the most part to rehearsals of the arguments put forth by the film theorists of the 1920s” (3). While building upon that literature, Sound, Speech, Music takes a crucial step in moving past these arguments and opening up the playing field.

The section concerned with the extended period of conversion to sound in the USSR offers several enlightening accounts that go beyond the proverbial technological backwardness and thus reveal a far more nuanced context in which Soviet sound cinema emerged. The role of the Association of Workers in Revolutionary Cinematography, or ARRK, in the transitional moment is the subject of Natalie Ryabchikova’s punctiliously researched essay. In 1929, ARRK formed a Sound Group, which consisted of twenty-five members, mostly directors, from different studios. Its mission was to “collect and systematize all the information pertaining to sound technology and methodology, and to promote further development of sound cinema in the Soviet Union” (89). Generating local expertise was the foremost aim of the group. The problem was that “there were very few people in the Soviet Union who had firsthand experience with sound film” (90). Radio engineers and music specialists became the first teachers of the film professionals participating in the ARRK project, which lasted for six months. But internal strife threatened to undermine this community-building effort. Organizational chaos and disagreement, compounded by a number of profound coinciding shifts—institutional, economic, and aesthetic—impeded the domestic transition from silent to sound cinema.

Socialist feelings might seem like an alien subject for 1930s Soviet cinema, but it is precisely what Abram Room’s Strogii iunosha (A Severe Youth, 1936) is concerned with. One of the most striking and problematic films to be made under the banner of socialist realism—its censorship history deserves an essay of its own—it serves as the focal object of Emma Widdis’s insightful inquiry into the role of sound technology in the search for and construction of the filmic hero and Soviet subjectivity more generally. Room’s film has sparse dialogue, and its play on the relationship between silence, sound, and image reaches an affective tonality that undermines the primacy of words and accentuates the sensory. In contrast to the “loud,” early 1930s pictures proclaiming the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan and showcasing industrial soundtracks, the mid-decade political culture produced a number of key films featuring protagonists who cannot speak, or speak very little or too much, with the last clearly marked as a negative trait. Surprisingly, as Soviet sound film was coming into its own in technological