

FILM AND AUTHORSHIP

edited and with an introduction by Virginia Wright Wexman. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2003. 270 pp. ISBN: 0-8135-3193-4.

THE VISUAL TURN: CLASSICAL FILM THEORY AND ART HISTORY

edited and with an introduction by Angela Dalle Vacche. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2003. 280 pp. ISBN: 0-8135-3173-X.

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Artists in any media find value in reading about that consummate 20th-century artform, the cinema. Its heroic, often obstreperous creative personalities offer lessons in accomplishing big works in the face of daunting odds. The medium's visual component finds cognates in narrative painting, photography and theories of the art object itself. These two volumes from the Rutgers University Press Depth of Field Series contain new and reprinted essays on these topics, and at the end of each book is a rich and useful Selected Bibliography.

Film and Authorship examines the concept of the *auteur* (the movie's "author"), in theoretical and historical essays, and then with profiles of several acclaimed figures to whom the designation is attached. Andrew Sarris's 1977 essay "The Auteur Theory Revisited" explores the conviction that every great movie has a single creative force behind it, usually the director. This idea began in the writing of Parisian *cinéastes* around 1960, many of whom (Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer) were filmmakers themselves. After a decade and a half, Sarris concedes that auteurism has been "more a tendency than a theory, more a mystique than a methodology, more an editorial policy than an aesthetic procedure." Essays follow on narration in art cinema, on female and on specifically lesbian authorial voices. The following section, "Historical and Institutional Contexts," contains essays on issues of commerce and legality as encountered by authorial filmmakers, and on representative figures in Latin American and Chicano (Mexicans in North America) cinema.

The book's profiles (or "Case Studies") begin with an examination of

D.W. Griffith and the unspecialized responsibilities that were demanded of a filmmaker in the medium's first 20 years. It is followed by an appreciation of Cecil DeMille, an interesting and unconventional choice. DeMille operated successfully within the Hollywood system, as did Alfred Hitchcock, rather than being ultimately frustrated by it, as were Orson Welles and Eric von Stroheim. An essay on Oscar Micheaux notes his three decades of achievements as screenwriter, producer, director and distributor of numerous films with African-American themes for that underserved and otherwise ill-represented audience in his time. Micheaux also wrote and published novels.

Film and Authorship then examines a fiercely independent filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, who died in the spring of 2003. Brakhage's flickering, fugitive manipulated film—and the flashing images in only a few frames—built movies with an improvisational technique comparable to an innovative jazz musician. He found his children's births—the moments of their bloody crownings in close-up—a worthy subject in autobiographical film, and he filmed exuberant and joyful lovemaking with his wife. This reviewer will never forget a lecture by the bear-like Old Testament prophet Brakhage, thundering at my college's film collection for lacking even Blackhawk 8mm prints of classics like Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, while being full of reels of the college's Annual Football Highlights.

The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History collects writings on film by art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky and Rudolf Arnheim. In many cases a mid-century film theorist is paired with a contemporary interlocutor—somewhat like the early silent cinema's on-site Film Explainers. A translation of Arnheim's 1933 German essay "Painting and Film" precedes one by Ara H. Merjian on the impact of Arnheim's writings that intersect film theory and the psychology of art, sporting the cruel title "Middlebrow Modernism." Erwin Panofsky's 1934 "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" precedes Thomas Y. Levin's examination of the iconology and search for emblematic imagery that runs through Panofsky's work. The eclectic and wide-ranging Walter Benjamin examined film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), which owes a debt to his professor Alôis Reigl. The Benjamin essay's relevant section is reprinted

here, and then its central antithesis—the painter vs. the still or cinematic photographer—is further explicated in Patrice Rollet's "The Magician and the Surgeon."

Gilles Deleuze compares the use of montage in Hollywood and Soviet (especially Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein) films. The great Russian film director Eisenstein writes of the *Christ Cleansing the Temple* paintings by El Greco, which most frustrate him, for they do not fulfil the promise of an otherwise dynamic visual artist. This is followed by an essay by Pietro Montani that contextualizes Eisenstein's essay in his cinematic writings and moviemaking concerns. I question this latter essay's translation, for I am skeptical that the Russian director cited Saul Steinberg *New Yorker* magazine cartoons, though the Italian critic Montani certainly could have when writing his essay in 1993. In another jarring note, Richard Allen's "Representation, Illusion and the Cinema" is marred by an inaccurate drawing of the Müller-Lyer Illusion.

Béla Balázs and Jacques Aumont each study the effect of the close-up, human physiognomy filling the movie-house screen. These essays might have been grouped with another one that further explores the varieties of portraiture and its purposes in art history. In "Painting and Cinema," Andre Bazin is critical of movies based on paintings, giving examples of films that he finds compromised and lacking that were based on Picasso's *Guernica* and on paintings by Van Gogh and Monet. While considering his arguments, I find such movies nevertheless valuable in introducing college students to the totality of visual culture. To any students (or fellow artists) appreciative of both art history and its interface with film criticism, I would recommend this collection.

MATTERS OF GRAVITY: SPECIAL EFFECTS AND SUPERMEN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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The title, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, belies the contents of Scott Bukatman's collection of essays, for it suggests, at