



# CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL

ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

## Review of Towards A Political Aesthetics Of Cinema: The Outside Of Film

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Volume 9.1 (2021) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2021.371 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Book Review

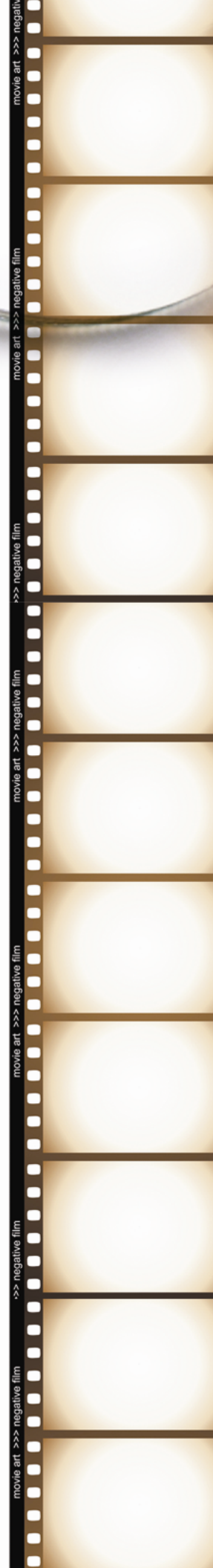
Lie, S. (2020). *Towards a Political Aesthetics of Cinema: The Outside of Film*. Amsterdam University Press.



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## Review of Towards a Political Aesthetics of Cinema: The Outside of Film Marco Poloni

Whenever we watch a movie, a fundamental question always arises: “Who is speaking?”

Who or what is behind the camera? If you ask Sulgi Lie, he will probably answer Jack Nicholson’s eyes. Although this might seem a bold and forward statement, the interesting thing about *Towards a political aesthetics of cinema. The outside of film* is that, by the end of the book, you will be pleasantly satisfied and generally convinced by this odd answer. *Towards a political aesthetics of cinema* is *de facto* a two-parts manual on the political significance of a phenomenological approach to the moving image. If, to quote Jean Luc Godard, «the cinema substitutes for our gaze a world more in harmony with our desires» (Godard, 1963), then who is «the dreamer[s] of the dreams» (Stuart, 1971)?

The book departs from a crucial intuition: that which gives rise to the image is that which can never be shown:

the film camera cannot film itself in the process of filming. The original site of capturing the image in every cinematic shot appears as a blind spot. The entity that gives rise to the visible world remains necessarily external to it. The plenitude of the visible is thus based on the existence of an invisible site, the Inside on an Outside, the on-screen world on the off-screen world, the effect on an absent cause (Lie, 2020, p. 14)

The camera – or rather, the *hors-champ* altogether – exemplifies a core Sartrean idea: it can either *be* or *exist*, but not both simultaneously. This is why «the film camera may be understood less in its empirical existence as a material, technical apparatus, and more as a phantom essence» (Lie, 2020, p. 15). Whenever it functions, we can't see it; when we see it, it's not working. This *absent cause* «necessarily evokes an imaginary space that is essentially filled by the active imagination of the spectator» (Lie, 2020, p. 17). How we mold this desire – this is the political element of movie aesthetics. The first part of the book presents a comprehensive theoretical exploration of the multiple theories and authors interpreting – from different perspectives and backgrounds – this *absent cause*. They mainly converge into three macro-areas: *apparatus theory*, *pragmatics* and *suture theory*. Whereas *apparatus theory* and *pragmatics* oppose a positivity – assuming different forms based on the specific line of thought – to the camera's negativity, *suture theory* rejects any kind of primary (immediate) identification. Specifically, for apparatus theory it's either the spectator (Metz) or the director (Bellour) who fills the void. For these authors, the camera is a «disappearing mediator» (Lie, 2020, p. 34): it vanishes for a real material subjectivity to take its place. This subjectivity represents the «discursive source» (Lie, 2020, p. 34) of primary identification. *The pragmatics of enunciation* provide, to some extent, an even clearer identification: the *absent cause* always interrogates a deictic, grammatical *I*. There is nothing outside the image: no place for subjectivity, no place for ideology. Cinema is thus spoiled of its

performative, historical power. By explaining the shortfalls of those two theories, Lie advances to *suture* – the *humus* where he grounds his work. *Suture* presents itself as the only viable perspective from which to interpret movies without an *enunciator*. For the sake of explanation, *Psycho* – the book’s selected case – escapes immediate identification because it puts forth both *acousmatics* and an empty gaze: that is to say, body and voice are separated (Lie, 2020, p. 81). *Suture* also comes in handy when analyzing the fourth wall break, a technique which – especially in, and since, Godard – interrupts the movie’s narrativity. By this point, any form of first identification is rendered redundant. Godard, maybe the most openly political director of all times, clearly represents a watershed: it is also because of its own grammar that we can dare to analyze movies in both a Marxian and a post-Marxian light. Marxian, because if we – like Lie – use the introduction of *Le mépris* as an example, we turn directly to the material ideology of movie production. But, at the same time, this same look towards the camera (a camera which, again, is only a fetish for the *absent cause*) opens a *psychoanalytic* wound. The *absent cause* is Lacan’s *objet petit a*: it is a desire which is *ours* and yet it is an irreconcilable *otherness*. The camera is:

a separable organ[,] which can no longer be incorporated by the subject, but which also does not function in a manner completely detached from all subjectivity (Lie, 2020, p. 124)

By assuming a Lacanian point of view, the author is able to surmount some phenomenological limits inscribed in Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's work. Lacan «detaches the gaze entirely from its anchoring in an organic body (Merleau-Ponty) as well as from the alterity of an alien subjectivity (Sartre)» (Lie, 2020, p. 120). This *objet petit a* is a lost object, but nevertheless it's *real*. It is «an object of desire, but also as the “object-cause” of desire» (Lie, 2020, p. 129). Lacan would call this twoness *extimité* («The designation of a stranger in the midst of my intimacy» (Lie, 2020, p. 135).). What *suture theory* suggests is that we can only «guarantee the internalization of the outside at the cost of an internal externalization» (Lie, 2020, p. 135). This is something almost self-evident in Rossellini and Antonioni: the eerie atmospheres of a movie like *L'avventura* generate (or maybe *come from*) a *hors-lieu*, a space which is *outside* but cannot be *internalized* subjectively. As we reach Jameson (and the second part of the book), we have to deal with this *post-modern condition*: due to its *liminal* nature, the *hors-space* veers towards symbolism – towards *spectacle* in a Debordian sense. It is exactly in this shift that we can fully appreciate the post-Marxist reading of the author. On this view, the *camera* is another name for the *spirit of capitalism* – what other authors may just call *modernity*. As a matter of fact, as Jameson suggests, the camera fully realizes itself only in its self-abolition. This is nothing but the illusion of *ideology*: its formal disappearance is the apex of its domination. The rise of the symbolical is the end of the historical: thus, *nostalgia* («A series of pure and unrelated presents in time» (Lie, 2020, p. 215).

On a certain sense, Lie is suggesting – via Jameson – that the reality of the *objet petit a* can only be represented ideologically (that is to say, in *mediated* form. The real only remains representable and visible through the Imaginary» (Lie, 2020)). Thus, being cinema an irreducibly capitalist creation, the politics of its *aesthetics* will always reflect capitalist idiosyncrasies. On a certain sense, almost counterintuitively, a (post-) Marxist movie critic is a conspiracy theorist: he tries to merge *knowledge* and *intuition* in order to make sense of a universe of empty *symbols*. *Suture theory*'s mission is the photographer's obsession in Antonioni's *Blow-up*. Whereas *neorealism* aimed at extracting the real from the images, *postmodernism* allegorizes the *real* from their *absence*. Eventually, the photographer surrenders to the reality of the mimes. The ball is real, if you want it to be real. On the *hors-champ*, a double *absence* finds its home: the *absence* of the real meets the *absence* of the symbolic, of the dead, of the spectacle. Thus, *The Shining*. When Kubrick zooms inside the framed picture by the end of the movie, the postmodern circle is closed:

the inside of an eternally immobilized visibility coincides with the invisibility of its Outside. When a frontally framed Jack smiles into the camera from the eternity of the photograph, the undead gaze encounters its perfect double (Lie, 2020, pp. 310–311)

This is the core idea of the book: *suture theory* is the history of its own failures. Nevertheless, this is great news, because the cancellation of these failures would mean the cancellation of the future.

All in all, *Towards a political aesthetics of cinema. The outside of film* functions both as a useful manual of the phenomenology of the moving image and as a *postmodern* investigation into Hollywood. That said, I believe that the same concepts might have been expressed in a shorter number of pages. In particular, it seems like there is a slight glitch between the first and the second part: while the former inspects the *hors-champ* as what's hidden behind the camera, Jameson's analysis of *hidden cause* comes from a position which is closer to the image itself. Ideology proceeds from the apparatus, rather than identifying with it.

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