



## The Orientation of Future Cinema: Technology, Aesthetics, Spectacle

Anthony James Ballas

tonyballas@gmail.com

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### Book Review

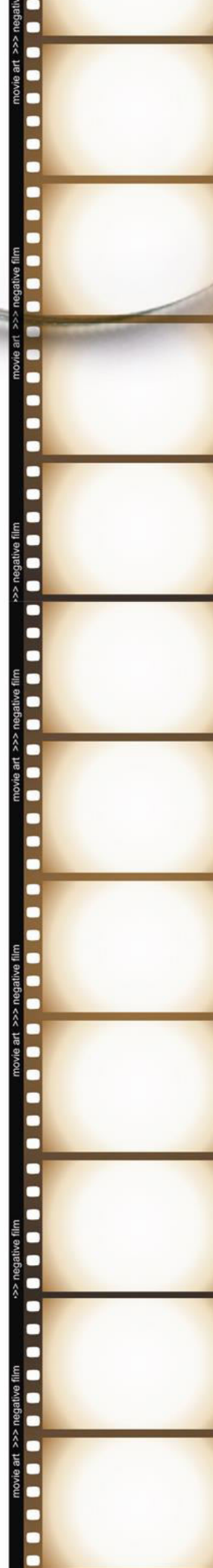
Bruce Isaacs, *The Orientation of Future Cinema: Technology, Aesthetics, Spectacle*. Bloomsbury, 2014. 320 pp. ISBN 9781628924312 (paperback)



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# The Orientation of Future Cinema: Technology, Aesthetics, Spectacle

Anthony James Ballas

In *The Orientation of Future Cinema* Bruce Isaacs argues for a reconsideration of spectacle cinema, utilizing numerous historical and contemporary examples in the attempt to reorient our view of the future of screen media. In the first part of the book, “The Age of Late Cinema,” Isaacs maps the transition from celluloid to digitalized images, arguing for a reevaluation of films that employ digital image-making technologies, which are so often as a result consigned to the sphere of ‘vulgar’ mass entertainment. Rather than shy away from films which are considered ‘low brow,’ Isaacs embraces mainstream cinema, interpreting their images as “itineraries” which offer unique pathways for the viewing spectator, as Isaacs writes, “like the quantum particle, the cinematic image materializes through perception; this is its meaning, its itinerary and its point of coming into being” (p. 11).

Through cinematic perception, Isaacs attempts to locate the autonomous image, or what he calls the “image-in-itself,” which Isaacs claims uniquely affects the spectator by exhibiting itself in a way similar to Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” model. For Isaacs, the Lumiere brothers’ *Train Entering the Station* (1895) is a prime example from cinematic history of an action image which provoked spectators. Isaacs turns the “modern phenomena” of action cinema, which he asserts, “partakes of this attraction of the image and its capacity to exhibit itself” (p. 74). Thus, for Isaacs there exists an intrinsic quality adhering in the image itself which has the capacity to introduce the viewer to the affect of cinematic experience — one in which digital cinema is uniquely capable of producing. Isaacs convincingly argues for a reconsideration of the action

image as separate from the action genre, claiming, “the action image is not narratively constituted; the action *genre* is” (p. 75).

Isaacs’ gesture of detaching the image from its genre proves to be a hugely successful strategy for his argument, as he continues to employ similar maneuvers throughout his work. Similarly, Isaacs’ attempts to isolate the affective qualities of the image-in-itself from the narrative context it is nested within. This distinction between the image and its narrative context proves crucial for Isaac’s argument, as, in large part, the book seeks to identify ways in which cinematic spectacles and High Concept cinemas such as those of Steven Spielberg, Michael Bay, James Cameron and others might offer beyond their formulaic narratives, as Isaacs says, “spectacle is also more than a capitalist ideology,” arguing instead that “spectacle describes a cinematic aesthetic in which the image manifests beyond the itinerary of narrative” (p. 181).

In the book’s second part, “The Spectacle Image” — Isaacs’ most successful and audacious section — the author focuses on High Concept and spectacle cinemas, which he considers “a profound contribution to the evolution of cinematic art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (p. 107). Isaacs draws a distinction between the narrative-centered films of New American Cinema such as *The Conversation* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Godfather Part II* (1974) and High Concept films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars Episode IV* (p. 1977). Isaacs diagnoses what he sees as the “existential condition of America’s cinematic modernity” as the “stasis, journeying without end” that plagues protagonists such as Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver* and Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) in *The Conversation* (p. 124). Against this stasis of New American Cinema, Isaacs locates how “the animation of High Concept cinema through action effaces the image of inaction intrinsic to the preceding New American Cinema” (p. 136).

Isaacs considers the innovations of High Concept and spectacle cinema on two main fronts, namely the technological and cinematographic. For Isaacs, “technology produces... the impossible image that springs up unexpectedly in so much spectacle cinema,” calling the spectacle image “not a transmission, but a coming-into-being of a unique object infused with the presence of its technological brushstroke” (p. 139). *Star Wars Episode IV* stands out for the way in which the film “laid the groundwork for the embrace of a technology that would evolve effects production from an illusion to an image modality” (p. 168). In one particularly poignant section, Isaacs offers a striking analysis of the second shark attack sequence from *Jaws*, describing it cinematographically as a “neo-baroque set piece” in lieu of Spielberg's shot structure and compositional techniques. Spielberg detaches the image of the attack from its narrative context according to Isaacs, offering it up as a “discrete signifying and affecting unit,” comparing Spielberg's camera movement to “the register of the cartoon and its graphic excesses,” citing “Bugs Bunny, or Daffy Duck, or Roger Rabbit,” as similar examples (pp. 183, 189). Isaacs radical reading of *Jaws* is, at least for this reviewer, certainly the high point of the book.

In the book's final section, “On the Characteristics of Future Cinema,” Isaacs forecasts the possible trajectories of future cinema via a detailed analysis of both historical and contemporary films, juxtaposing films that would perhaps not normally be considered together, such as Jean Renoir's *Le regle de jeu* (1939) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) (p. 249). This feature of Isaac's text is laudable, given that he successfully abstains from getting trapped in the historicist web of image production, and thus focuses on the images themselves rather than the cultural context in which they are produced. However, it would be easy to criticize Isaacs analysis for this very reason, as his text does not offer much in the way of critique of spectacle images or blockbuster cinema more generally. Although Isaacs may not be quick to critique spectacle cinema in terms of ideology or capitalism, it is nonetheless a radical and provocative stance to valorize

films like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Avatar* for their “embrace [of] the digital imperative beneath a classical High Concept narrative system” (p. 256). It is often quite easy to cynically dismiss technology and digitalization, especially in the cinema. However, for Isaacs, “cinema is less a projection that a communication, less a gaze *upon* the world than a mode of perceptual exchange engaged *in* the world,” emphasizing how spectatorship is never truly at a distance, but always materially embedded in the texture of images (p. 257).

Isaacs asks his reader to trust his insights, offering anecdotal details and analyses from his personal experiences as a viewer of cinema. Although for some this feature of the book may often come across as less than scholarly, Isaacs is certainly not lacking in his level of depth and breadth of knowledge. In an implicit way, Isaacs asks us to consider our own experiences with the cinema, thus making his anecdotal and personal style of argumentation an illuminating force in the book. Toward the end of the book, Isaacs asks a particularly relevant question, “can one locate an organic unity on the screen, when cinema increasingly manifests *off-screen*, in the domestic spaces of homes, or the virtual environments of contemporary gaming and avatar experiences?” (p. 183). Although the presence and integration of screen media in our daily lives might tend to dilute the strength of images, Isaacs work successfully provokes the reader to rethink the aesthetic paradigm of late cinema, bridging the gap between film studies and media theory by centering films that are so often absorbed by popular culture, and therefore largely overlooked in film studies. For these reasons and others, *The Orientation of Future Cinema* marks an important contribution to the continuing scholarship in both film and media studies, and as well contains multiple points of possible correspondence between aesthetics, phenomenology and philosophy more generally.

Anthony J. Ballas

University of Colorado at Denver

1848 Gaylord Street

Denver, Colorado 80206 USA

+1 (303) 847 9038