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Review of Cinema/Politics/Philosophy

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Abstract

Review of Nico Baumbach, *Cinema/Politics/Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 248 pp. ISBN 9780231184236, \$28.00 (pbk)

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Nico Baumbach, *Cinema/Politics/Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 248 pp. ISBN 9780231184236, \$28.00 (pbk)

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In this audacious debut, Noah Baumbach simultaneously resuscitates the philosophical and the political project of film theory, reconsidering its precepts of the 1960s and 70s through the lenses of latter day continental thinkers. A fitting alternate title may well have been *What is Cinema?* given the predominating philosophical and ontological questions that Baumbach endeavors in this work. However — and what will be immediately noticeable to film scholars is — the reminiscent form his title takes conjuring up the tradition of other “triadic” titles from Jean-Luc Comolli’s and Paul Narboni’s “*Cinema/Ideology/Criticism*” to Philip Rosen’s *Cinema/Ideology/Apparatus*. Thus already in the title Baumbach shows us his hand: this book is neither a work of film criticism nor a method of applying philosophy to individual films, it is a work of reimagining the political and philosophical foundations of film theory.

The book presents three sets of juxtapositions between six continental thinkers of cinema, and art and aesthetics more generally; Althusser with Rancière, Deleuze with Badiou, and Benjamin with Agamben. Chapter One recounts Jacques Rancière’s break from his former teacher Althusser, whose legacy in film theory — often under the banner of “Althusserian-Lacanian” — is by now well known, having been suffused into film theory via a combination of Jean-Louis Baudry’s

apparatus theory, and Screen theory's (Mulvey, et. al) psychoanalytic, political project from the 70s (what Copjec would later call "the Foucauldianization of Lacan," 2015, p. 19). In contrast to Althusser's ideology/science split, Baumbach explains Rancière's proposal of the police/politics disjunction, and his assertion that no true politics can take place under the auspices of a hierarchical division of the aesthetic, or "le partage du sensible." Instead, Baumbach sums up what he terms Rancière's "two-part discovery": the definition of politics as "axiomatic equality," and the notion that "axiomatic equality is not a science but must be conceived of in a relation of aesthetics" (18). According to Baumbach, Rancière's conception of the aesthetic ground of political equality runs counter to Althusser's Marxist science, which, "not only failed to transform but rather collaborated with the university as an institution set on reproducing itself as the guardian of knowledge" (ibid). Whereas for Althusser, art leads to an ideological impasse (a feature which Baumbach rather brilliantly explicates from Althusser's unfinished essay "On Brecht and Marx"), Rancière "provides a way out of this impasse not through a new solution so much as a brilliant rethinking of the history of the relation between aesthetics and politics grounded in a commitment to emancipation" (19).

Chapter Two shifts focus to Deleuze and Badiou, both of whom treat the seventh art as a modality of thought capable of producing a kind of ontological truth — for Badiou, "an unprovable axiom affirming inconsistent multiplicity," and for Deleuze an actualization of his theory of perception

and affection (124/125). It is important to note that Baumbach does not collapse Deleuze's immanence with Badiou's eventalism, but rather finds in both a similarity in terms of the way they treat cinema "as a site of ambiguity in their larger philosophical projects" (125). Whereas "[f]or Badiou, Althusser's belief in science was not the problem," as it was for Rancière, "the challenge was rather how to think art, science, politics, and sexuality together without making all truth a matter of one of these four arenas" (124). For Rancière contra Badiou, it is precisely this kind of "militant fidelity" which risks reduplicating a form of policing, just as Althusser's Marxist science (125).

In Chapter Three, Baumbach explores his final philosophical coupling, Benjamin and Agamben, chiefly between the former's *Dialektik im Stillstand* and the latter's isolation of the function of gesture as a suspension of narrative. Although Agamben has written scarcely thirty pages dedicated to cinema (a point which Baumbach qualifies early on), Baumbach extrapolates from his theory of gesture as a kind of praxis of "pure means" (156) — a way of conceiving of suspension of meaning, unmoored or "wrested from causality" (159) as a potential way out of the hegemonic form spectacle cinema takes in the 20th and 21st centuries, "epitomized," as Baumbach notes, "by advertising and pornography" (157).

It might be fitting to think of these chapters as montages; as dialectical engagements between thinkers, which compound and lead the reader into the next philosophical coupling as they progress. In this way, at least to this reviewer, Baumbach accomplishes something special in this volume, revitalizing the politico-philosophical stakes of cinema via its continental varieties, and thereby opening up a new horizon of theory premised (once again) on film as a form of image production which speaks to the ontological relationship between being and appearing without getting lost in the web of cultural critique, identity studies and alike. In other words, the book, and the kind of theory espoused therein, have universal import.

The book is filled with details from the annals of film theory, some often overlooked today given the ebb of this particular brand of theory: he recounts with nuance the racist origins of Bela Balazs's physiognomy for instance, and offers a quite ruthless critique of Daniel Frampton's *Filmosophy*, in particular his notion of "filmind," (86) as well as the "quotability" (145) of GIF images and the condition of repetition built into the texture of the medium of viral videos, among other things.

As successful as the book's main chapters are, and although the book does cover the Althusserian-Lacanian vein, its counterpart in Bordwell and Carroll's *Post-Theory*, as well as (albeit briefly) the continuation of the psychoanalytic tradition of film theory and Žižek's rejoinder to Post Theory in his book *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and*

Post-Theory, there are a few omissions worth mention, in particular Baumbach's handling of the political features of psychoanalytic film theory today: no mention of Todd McGowan, scant mention of Žižek's Hegelian-Marxist inspired readings of film, and, perhaps most scandalous of all, no mention of Joan Copjec and her well-known though scarcely cited intervention against Screen theory in her classic "The Orthopsychic Subject" — a point which is still met with contention by figures such as McGowan and Flisfeder (see: McGowan, T. (2007). *The real gaze: Film theory after lacan*. NY: SUNY; McGowan, T. (2015). *Psychoanalytic film theory and 'The Rules of the Game'*. NY: Bloomsbury; and Flisfeder, M. (2012). *The symbolic, the sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's theory of film*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan).

There are two ways to read this omission within the contemporary constellation of film studies and theory more generally as far as I am concerned. First, we can interpret it charitably and direct all attention to the masterful unpacking of the latter day giants of the continental tradition (again, the triad): Rancière, Badiou, Agamben. This reading is for anyone fatigued by the tradition (either read as an onslaught or a renaissance, depending on one's view) of Lacanian theory, chiefly by the "Slovene Three," Žižek, Zupančič, and Dolar, and the Americans McGowan, Copjec and Johnston among others. Alternatively, our sympathies may lie with the Hegelian-Lacanian themselves, in which case an additional chapter perhaps dedicated to Žižek himself would've been

warranted between the book's covers. The choice depends on where we might land on Baumbach's claim from his concluding chapter: "The concepts that Žižek finds in films are not the concepts cinema gives rise to, as they are for Deleuze, but mere repetitions of the same Lacanian apparatus" (p. 171). For Baumbach, although Žižek adds something crucial to the study of film (namely his privileging of the impasse of the symbolic), he ultimately treats film as an artform which can be put into service toward exemplifying something about Lacanian thought, whereas for Deleuze, Badiou and Agamben, film is a form of thought which changes the way conceptual thought itself operates.

Baumbach ends *Cinema/Politics/Philosophy* in a similar way to the opening pages of Rancière's *The Intervals of Cinema*, with a kind of recap of five ways of approaching film (for Rancière, as a form of spectacle, an ideological apparatus, a utopia, or a philosophical concept (Rancière, 2019, pp. 5-6), and for Baumbach romantic, utilitarian, didactic, sociological, or philosophical (pp. 175-177)). Although Baumbach and Rancière vary slightly on these forms, the final category resonates between the two, a resonance which perhaps foreshadows and (at least for this reviewer) drums up excitement for Baumbach's next book (yet to be announced, though rumored to be in the works), *The Anonymous Image*. With this title, Baumbach has set up a promising trajectory for a revitalized return to the political and philosophical roots of film theory.

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