

Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2001.

Even a partial listing of Philip Rosen's theoretical aims in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, will indicate the intellectual range and audacity of his book. Rosen here attempts no less than the following: to reconsider the ›realist‹ film theory of André Bazin, particularly from the standpoint of Bazin's attention to cinema's complex articulation of time; to reappraise the ›apparatus‹ film theory of the 1970s, doing so by thinking it alongside the Bazinian theory it expressly repudiated; to question the precepts of modern historiography, using its own epistemological framework to read it against itself; to challenge the claims of much postmodern theory that in the media-saturated contemporary lifeworld – the society of simulation and spectacle – history has been occluded, attenuated, or even jettisoned entirely; to problematize the utopian discourses characteristic both of academic theorists and corporate promoters of the digital technologies of the ›new media‹.

Moreover, this wide theoretical scope has as its correlative an equally wide field of concrete applications. In *Change Mummified*, Rosen directs patient and nuanced attention not just to the theories suggested in the list above (and to some the list may not have suggested, by authors such as Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, Barthes), but to such subjects as – and again the itinerary is

incomplete – infrastructural shifts in early cinema’s exhibition practices, the textual operations of preclassical film, the function of studio research departments in Hollywood’s classical period, the aesthetic assumptions shaping the documentary film tradition growing out of John Grierson, the truth claims of television news broadcasts, and the formal strategies – and their implications for historico-political representation – deployed by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene in his film *Ceddo*.

But how to speak synoptically about such an ambitious, Hydra-headed project, especially when it positions itself neither as a series of discrete critical interventions possessing at best some vague family resemblance to one other (i. e., the now-familiar collection of a scholar’s loosely related essays, often presented under a postmodern rubric of discontinuity or fragmentariness), nor as a ›unified field‹ theory, a totalizing integration of a set of complex and seemingly incommensurable theoretical issues? What is it, this is to ask, that gives Rosen’s dauntingly multiform investigations a conjoining coherence, a sense of focus and shared concern?

Of overarching importance for Rosen in this book is cinema’s indexicality, its ontological entanglement with that which it reproduces, so that, in Stanley Cavell’s words, »objects participate [...] in their re-creation of themselves on film« (*The World Viewed*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1979, p. xvi). This is an aspect of cinematic representation that has largely been dropped from film studies, first by the ’70s theorists who tended to dismiss such concerns as philosophically naïve and ideologically suspect, and then by the generation of ›revisionist‹ historians, whose focus shifted to such areas as economico-industrial structures, audience demographics, and particularities of consumption (Cavell, who curiously goes unmentioned in Rosen’s book, is one of the few major theorists still to pursue such representational considerations). It is on the topic of indexicality that Rosen finds Bazin so important and useful. Rosen notes that Bazin sees »cinema as a medium with an unprecedented vocation for the real«, identifying in it two »fundamental ›ontological‹ themes: the specific appeal of the indexical trace as possessing special referential force with respect to pastness, and the postulate of a subject radically anxious about the threat posed by the passage of time« (p. 351). This, of course, is what is indicated by the famous Bazinian metaphor from which Rosen takes the title of his book, the »mummy complex« through which photographic film at once registers the dynamic force of time embedded in the particularity of a recorded moment, and arrests that force through its preserving of that very moment, so that time is acknowledged even as it is contained, mobilized in the service of its own petrification.

Rosen hardly views this formulation as a final or unproblematic one, and consequently goes to great lengths to read – to refine and complexify – Bazin by way of the other theorists I’ve mentioned, seeing them as both complementary and importantly corrective. But the temporal (and thus *historical*)

paradox that Bazin locates in cinema's indexicality supplies Rosen with a conceptual gateway through which to approach the other areas with which *Change Mummified* is concerned. For example, in his chapter on historiography, a bravura discussion which encompasses such key figures as Leopold von Ranke, Frederick Jackson Turner, Fernand Braudel, and Hayden White, Rosen describes the indexical function of documentary source materials, which provide »more rigorous standards of accuracy«, but at the same time »disavow [...] a basic uncertainty implicit in modern historicity«, producing what he calls »the logical inevitability of an inferential gap between indexical fragments serving as evidence, and the form of a unified sequence that serves as a result« (p. 127).

Of particular interest to *KINtop*'s readership will be Rosen's focus on indexicality in his examination of cinema's shift from its preclassical mode to its classical one, and, more precisely, the eclipsing of early cinema's actuality genre by teleologically organized fictional narratives. Here Rosen takes as his starting point the well-known debate between Robert Allen and Charles Musser on the reasons for (and timing of) this shift, Allen locating it within the nickelodeon boom of 1905-1908 and seeing as its primary cause the desire of film producers to consolidate their industry power through the rationalization of production practices (and thus the standardization of the product itself), Musser placing it slightly earlier and attributing it to widespread audience satiation with the actuality form and concomitant desire for the novelty of film narrative. Rosen wants to problematize both of these positions, noting the way that the indexical force and documentary appeal associated with the actuality genre – its ability »to make visible what had heretofore been unseeable by the many« (p. 166) – persist within the new diegetic schema installed by the industry. The transition into fictional narrative is thus for Rosen a somewhat untidy one, suggesting less industrial (and cultural) stability than many historical accounts would have it, and indicating that, alongside the audience desire for narrative posited by Musser, was the continuing »desire to see actuality through the moving indexical image, [...] a mass desire for sights of the real« (p. 166). Accordingly, Rosen traces in the transition from preclassical to classical modes a complex process of negotiation, especially at the level of films' textual strategies, as the industry's emerging fictional protocols work to appropriate and reshape the actuality's documentary indexicality. As Rosen writes in a fascinating close reading of Pathé's 1906 *TOUR DU MONDE D'UN POLICIER* (which he calls »a remarkable example of certain textual pressures on preclassical cinema just a couple of years before its definitive transition to classicism«): »The document takes on some stylistic characteristics of the fictional diegesis; the diegetic borrows characteristics of the document; the document is integrated »into« the fiction to serve the latter« (p. 202).

Although Rosen seems to me to sometimes extend the concept of indexicality untenably far in *Change Mummified*, as when he claims that interactive

manipulation of a digital image »makes the image an indexical representation of the action of its spectator« (p. 343) – here I think the concept would be almost unrecognizable to Bazin or, for that matter, Charles Sanders Peirce – his book stands as a significant contribution to contemporary film and cultural studies. I can think of no recent work that so rigorously and provocatively interrogates such a wide range of important theoretical issues.

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