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Fotografie und Film

Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener: *Filmtheorie. Zur Einführung*

Hamburg: Junius 2007, 247 S., ISBN 978-3-88506-621-7, € 14,90

One of the challenges of writing an introduction to film theory is that people have been trying to theorize the cinema since the moment of its invention. Since Maxim Gorky famously visited the ‘kingdom of the shadows’ in 1896, a corpus has evolved that is as heterogeneous and internationally influenced as the subject it hopes to understand. Faced with this plentitude, introductions to film theory often utilize a simplifying approach. They present a series of seminal theorists chronologically, sometimes grouping them loosely according to locations or ‘schools’. The result is often an anthology that represents an engagement with historiography more than theory. The student may conveniently read Balázs before Bazin, Baudry, or Burch, but the implicit dialogue between the theorists is not always apparent. This problem is not helped by the fact that many of these books refuse to discuss theory alongside actual films. The exposure to the new texts is therefore often tempered by a style that leaves them isolated and unapproachable. This may be intimidating for the beginning film student, for whom introductory textbooks are often composed.

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener’s *Filmtheorie* re-evaluates this common method of introducing film theory through three different innovations. First, the book eschews a chronological organization for one that conceives of its topic as a series of interactions between cinema and spectator. Second, it illuminates theorists in dialogue with one another. The authors never isolate theories, choosing instead to present each argument with either a complimentary or oppositional perspective. Third, each chapter contains at least one film sequence analysis. These films are rarely from the same time period as the theories discussed, but they always serve to enrich the stances that each chapter contains.

Of particular interest is the book’s organization. Each chapter demarcates a physical space or part of the body in order to highlight film’s complex relationship to its audience. The book’s seven chapters mimic the path that the image takes as it moves from the screen to the eye and into the mind. It begins with the chapter “Fenster und Rahmen” and culminates with the chapter “Geist und Gehirn”. Although it lacks the overt chronology of many film theory anthologies, this model for apprehending the topic nonetheless follows a logic that touches upon many of the same key points in a somewhat traditional order. The first chapter partially evokes the tension of the early *Uncle Josh* (1900, 1902) films, in which the pre-narrative spectator struggled to discern where the film began and reality ended. “Spiegel und Gesicht”, as well as “Auge im Blick” represent the Lacanian and Feminist turn of the 60s and 70s by describing how the body is projected back

onto the screen and whether this cultivates scopophilic desire. The final chapter, meanwhile, cites the rise in phenomenological and cognitive theories of the 80s and how the mind makes meaning of what the eye sees on the screen. The book therefore reduplicates the trajectory of film theory over the course of the twentieth century. However, it simultaneously builds upon the chronological narrative by emphasizing the dynamic between the screened image and spectator. This very dynamic is the foundation for almost every development in film theory since 1945, and is therefore at the core of understanding many rather complicated texts.

The reliance on cinematic and physical spaces as organizational principles does more than create a *feng shui* of film theory. Each of the seven chapters frames a dialogue about multiple concepts that are integral to studying film. This discursive approach to theory is particularly useful because it creates a context that facilitates easier understanding of a large body of material. "Fenster und Rahmen" for example, examines the oft-opposing standpoints of André Bazin and Sergej Eisenstein according to their respective positions about Realism or Constructivism. However, instead of reducing the chapter to a mere description of two fundamentally different approaches to film, the authors expand upon the overlaps between the two schools. This allows them to constellate both theories into David Bordwell's concept of 'staging depth', or even into the role of consumer desire and the *Schaufenster*. This dueling model of contrasts and compliments is repeated throughout the text to usefully unfold everything from suture theory and the male gaze to the soundtrack's ability to deconstruct the diegesis and transcend the visual frame. Thus, the student receives a resource that is far more engaging than the anthology or lexicon because the book continually highlights the productive synthesis that occurs as "new" theories re-engage older ones.

Finally, the authors are not afraid to read films as a part of their dialogue with film theory. The film selections vary from canonical texts like Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) to more recent fare like Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2002). Each chapter begins with a succinct sequence analysis that provides a foundation for the theoretical discussion that follows. Instead of foregrounding the theory and then 'applying' it to the film, the authors invite the student to refer back to the film as the chapter progresses, critically considering how the practical enunciation of key theoretical concepts might (or might not) occur. The authors argue that this act of reflection should not terminate with the film that prefaces each chapter, but rather should inspire the student to draw connections between the theory and other films they have previously seen. This productively encourages the student to familiarize itself with theory by connecting it to his or her own larger framework of experiences with cinema.

This reviewer recommends *Filmtheorie* to instructors looking for supplementary material to an introductory seminar in Film Studies or to students who are searching for strong context-based secondary sources to help decipher the

complexities of film theory. Of course, the book only contains summaries and explanations of theory, and as such cannot replace the primary texts that it cites. Nonetheless, it certainly would compliment most collections of film theory. The largest detriment to the book is that it is only available in German. This should not be construed as Anglo-American arrogance. Rather, it merely reflects the opinion that the text is so approachable and well designed for the beginning film scholar that it would be great if non-German film students might also be able to utilize it. It deserves exposure to the widest possible audience.

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