

Chad Wellmon

Tom Gunning: The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity

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Tom Gunning: The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity

London: BFI 2000, 528 S., ISBN 0-85170-743-2, \$ 24.95

In his latest book *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, Tom Gunning returns to the question of auteurship to explore central issues of modernity such as space, time and vision. Film studies as a discipline, whose emergence coincides with Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault's declaration of the „death of the author“ in the 1960's, has often refused to concentrate on the author for fear of privileging the filmmaker over the semiotic power of the film text. Gunning wants to reconsider the question of auteurship, not by returning to a reverential regard for the director as ‚Creator‘, but through a more engaged consideration of the ways in which the subject (director) might be found in the traces left behind in the film. Gunning says about his project: „The possibility of a modern author dedicated not to self-expression but to the play of discourse particularly relevant in a medium like film where the ‚auteur‘ rarely speaks directly in his own voice, but rather indirectly through sounds and images assembled, performed and in some ways produced by collaborating, remains largely unexplored.“ (p.5)

Though not an overt return to the subject, Gunning's reading of film reconceives Fritz Lang the director as a site where modernity is staged. Lang then becomes a paragon of modernity around which luminous details and fragments of Weimar culture circulate as a highly intricate network of signs. Lang as director functions as a center of gravity and emblem of the mutual interlinking of art and history. Gunning's unparalleled ability to read a film closely enables him to guide the reader through a matrix of meanings, representations and images, which all, he argues, are traces of Fritz Lang, the author, who remains imprinted in the films. Using Lang as a placeholder for interrogating modernity, Gunning understands the Lang of his investigation as bound up in his films. He does not pursue a biographical person but an assembler of and commentator on images and motifs of modernity.

Every chapter begins with an epigram that situates the film and Gunning's reading of it. The chapter on *Spies* (1928) for instance, opens with an epigram from Bonaventura's *Nachtwachen*, a paradigmatic text of romantic irony, self-reflection and the fragility of the subject. Gunning proceeds to argue that Haghi, the leader of a band of spies, works through instrumentalized uses of fragmentation and abstraction to craft his own mosaic of manipulation. Mimicking Haghi's or Mabuse's methods of deception and manipulation, Lang's filmic style reveals the often subtle and beguiling agility of the author. Lang, Gunning argues, refuses to allow the spectator to fully escape the realm of cinematic illusion but all the while maintains an authorial presence. Gunning reassembles the disparate images and

peculiar strategies of Lang's rhetoric to offer, however indirectly, an encounter with Fritz Lang the author and analyst of modernity.

Gunning reads Lang's films, as the subtitle of the book states, as allegories of modernity. Lang's films, he argues, develop an imagery and vocabulary which aspires to „writing in pictures, willing to court the artificiality that foregrounds significance over depiction” (p.26). Especially in his readings of Lang's Weimar films, Gunning's articulate and relentless reading of the films from shot to shot shows how Lang constructs and questions modernity in his film making. Almost vanishing into his own creations, Lang leaves details of his authorship; but, more importantly for Gunning, he leaves traces of a modern world characterized by train schedules and telephone hook-ups which coordinate space and time. Lang brings into cinematic representation the interconnected system that is the modern world. Though an important and detailed addition to Lang scholarship, Gunning's book is more than anything else a thoroughly argued and incisive contribution to a theory of modernity.

Chad Wellmon (Berkeley)