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## Ben Brewster, Lea Jacobs: Theatre to Cinema. Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film

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**Ben Brewster, Lea Jacobs: Theatre to Cinema.  
Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film**

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In order for film to attain the status of art, Carl Hauptmann argued in 1919, it would have to make a radical break from theatre: „So als bloße Kopie des Kunsttheaters ist der Film von vornherein in eine enge Sackgasse gebracht“ (in: Anton Kaes [Ed.]: *Kino-Debatte. Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, München 1978, p.124). Yet Hauptmann also acknowledged the crucial role of the stage picture in forming the nexus between theatre and cinema: „In beiden handelt es sich [...] um aufeinanderfolgende Bühnenbilder“ (ebd., p.127). Concentrating on issues of stage pictorialism in both media, *Theatre to Cinema* offers nuanced readings of 1910s features that prove cinema's relationship to theatre was anything but a dead end. Recent examples of interdisciplinary film scholarship, such as Angela Dalle Vacche's book, *Cinema and Painting* (1996), and the volume edited by François Penz and Maureen Thomas, *Cinema and Architecture* (1997), have demonstrated what film studies have to gain from expanding its archival base to include a wide range of cultural productions. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs likewise make a compelling case for interdisciplinarity and its potential to unsettle traditional accounts of film history. Their book is important not only because it uncovers the rich and mostly forgotten interconnections between theatre and cinema, but also because it questions the self-evidence of many film-historical conventions, like the practice of treating the shot as the grammatical unit of film. Brewster and Jacobs contend that the 1910s feature did not think of itself in terms of shots, but rather in terms of pictures, organized around dramatic situations and articulated both within the shot and in units larger than the shot. *Theatre to Cinema* thus contests the idea that films from the 1910s are best characterized by the emergence of continuity editing. It analyzes the conflicting and often contradictory ways in which film's emphasis on pictures and situations carried over, as it were, from the theatre.

In order to explain how film conceived of itself in a pictorial fashion, Brewster and Jacobs have to deal with the tendency in film analysis to employ Aristotelian concepts of dramaturgy. By historicizing the question of cinema's relationship to theatre, the authors reconstruct an alternative dramaturgy that operated in 1910s features according to a logic of pictures and situations.

By picture Brewster and Jacobs understand an „anti-absorptive“ view or image that openly solicited the audience's attention and primarily fulfilled descriptive rather than narrative functions (p.12). Here the authors take issue with Michael Fried's important study, *Absorption and Theatricality*, engaging recent debates in painting and theatre as well as in film. They reconstruct the historical notion of the stage picture through close readings of nineteenth century playbooks, acting manuals, and theoretical treatises on dramaturgy. Brewster and Jacobs trace the ways in which

cinema adopted, modified, and refunctionalized theatrical techniques of representation. Nineteenth century stage practices resurfaced in the 1910s feature, only the crossover from theatre to cinema was complex and never straightforward.

*Theatre to Cinema* deals with three particular aspects of this crossover: the tableau, acting, and staging. Each aspect is derived from theatre and reworked by cinema. (One could have turned the axis around to ask how cinema challenged the status or the repertoire of theatre at the time. But the authors are concerned with a one-way transfer, as indicated by the title of their book.) Brewster and Jacobs approach each aspect of the argument by first discussing the theatre and then examining the feature.

The case study of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* examines a two-step transfer, from novel to theatre to film. However various the stage productions may be, they commonly select from the novel a set of key moments to represent pictorially as tableaux. Such instances of suspended action create problems especially for one-reel films (namely, Edison's 1903 version) but also for multiple-reel features (like the Vitagraph and World versions of 1910 and 1914, respectively). Brewster and Jacobs maintain that, even though cinema handled the novel differently than theatre, cinema preserved the pictorial integrity of the stage tableau without resorting to stasis. The chapter on „The Fate of the Tableau in Cinema“ elaborates the point for a wider range of features (overall, the book deals with more than one hundred films). It demonstrates how in the 1910s a specifically cinematic language developed (namely, editing and framing techniques) that did not serve to propel or streamline the narrative, but rather to achieve the effects of the tableau. The case of the tableau establishes the paradigm of appropriation and modification that runs throughout the book.

Pictorialism also governed conventions of acting, from posing and gesturing to striking attitudes on the stage. This section of the book deals with the slippery notion of realism; it demonstrates that pictorial acting could indeed survive in plays and films that thought of themselves as 'real'. The chapters on pictorial acting in cinema distinguish between stylistic alternatives in American and European films according to their different editing practices. Highly-edited American films (such as Griffith's) more or less dissolved the stage picture into the edited sequence. European films, in contrast, gave actors more ample opportunities to display their talents. The authors are cognizant of the limits of this model, as evidenced by their discussion of *Ingmarssönerna* (1919); Sjöström's film represents a third alternative, the elimination of expressive gesture for psychological effect. *Theatre to Cinema* attempts to redress the bias of editing-based accounts, which privilege early American movies (for their innovative uses of cutting and alternating) at the expense of European cinema.

The section on staging is perhaps the most impressive part of this study, with its detailed analyses of stage diagrams and studio sets, curtain devices and lens optics. Brewster and Jacobs examine theatre and cinema as „optical machines“

(p.143), emphasizing the ways in which technology placed restrictions on each medium. They show how theatre and cinema organized and rendered space for performers as well as for spectators in opposite ways. For instance, the fan-shaped performance space of theatre, which pushed the action to the foreground in order to deliver a picture to the entire audience, gets inverted by the camera's monocular field of view. While lens optics required a greater measure of distance between the camera and the performers (relative to the distance between stage actor and audience), they also created new possibilities for magnification and deep staging, which cinema alone could exploit. Thus film turned to theatre for a „storehouse of devices“ (p.214) whenever those devices were appropriate, and abandoned it as soon as they proved inflexible; in either case, theatre provided cinema with a point of reference. Studies keyed to editing typically overlook this remarkable continuity. For this reason, the chapter on „Staging and Editing“ challenges the argument that editing in the 1910s primarily established a cinematic approach to narration. On the contrary, the authors propose that editing enabled cinema to explore the stage picture in ways that were unique to that medium. *Theatre to Cinema* argues that, insofar as the early feature enlisted new means to fulfill the function of the stage picture, it continued to pursue the goals of nineteenth century theatre. As Brewster and Jacobs suggest, this argument reveals the limits of film's modernity in the 1910s.

The authors could have paid more attention to the cultural debates about the status of film as art, like the „Kino-Debatte“ that raged in Germany at the time. Here, liberal and conservative critics alike sometimes felt threatened by what they saw as cinema's modernity; for them, film's persistent relationship to theatre provided little if any consolation. When these debates inform *Theatre to Cinema*, they do so mainly as 'anthropological' evidence of the troubles that historical audiences had with understanding the differences between film and theatre. Yet Brewster and Jacobs engage a number of major discussions in film studies today, and seek to ask new questions, rather than merely recapitulate old ones. „If [...] editing does not play such a part in the films of the 1910s, are the films of the next decades essentially different?“ (p.216). Brewster and Jacobs open the debate, and the stakes are potentially high. *Theatre to Cinema* provides a model of stage pictorialism that must also be reckoned with by scholars concerned with national cinemas. In the case of Germany, for instance, to what extent did early (international) features create a laboratory for Expressionist cinema? If pictorial acting and staging were crucial to films in Europe and America during the 1910s, our notions of theatricality in Expressionist cinema may have to be expanded and recontextualized.

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