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Screen dynamics

Mapping the borders of cinema

Lavinia Brydon

As the title of Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothöhler's edited collection *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Border of Cinema* (Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2012) suggests, this volume provides an energetic, enthusiastic, and engaging journey through the particularities (and peculiarities) of cinema. Due attention is given to questions of cinematic spectatorship, the issue of cinema's specificity, the relationship between the cinematic image and other screen images, as well as the impact that new technologies have on these images. Appropriate to the 'volatile situation' (p. 6) under discussion is the lively approach adopted by each of the 12 contributors. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that this collection is largely based on talks given at a conference in 2010, with the vigour and value of that initial debate nicely evidenced through shared beliefs, overlapping concerns, and recurring points of reference (for example, the concept of cinema as a utopian or heterotopian space appears several times).¹

That said, the editors make clear in their preface that providing a coherent picture of cinema's current condition would be misleading (at best) and therefore they have chosen authors who offer a 'multiplicity of viewpoints that stem from different convictions and both biographical and intellectual trajectories' (p. 6). In this collection then, we begin with Raymond Bellour charting the inimitable experience afforded by the traditional institutional, intellectual, and aesthetic mechanisms that constitute 'cinema'; pass through Thomas Morsch highlighting the flexible narrative space afforded by the television series format; and conclude with Ekkehard Knörer promoting the various possibilities of the movie-going experience in an age of downloads, streaming, and online forums.

To aid the reader through the collection's widely varied terrain Koch, Pantenburg, and Rothöhler have wisely structured the essays under four headings: Past and Present, Theory Matters, Other Spaces/Other Media, and States of the Image. The framework ties the essays into the areas of focus already mentioned above and neatly signposts that the book's chief concern is a theoretical debate rather than a chronological ordering of the (technological and social) changes that have impacted our understanding of cinema in the last century. Bellour's early assertion 'I am not a historian' (p. 9) further alerts the reader to the editors' lack of concern for a strict historical account of cinema's physical properties, viewing spaces, and artistic status – which is not to say that they and the other contributors deny the relevance of the past in their discussions. Bellour states clearly that his essay on spectatorship retains 'those elements from the past that may illuminate

our present-day condition' (p. 9) while Tom Gunning considers the ontology of the cinematic image through 'a careful and historically informed discussion of cinema's uses and definitions of the impressions of reality' (p. 42). Gunning taps into the book's mission when he refers to his own essay as 'an investigation where theory and history intertwine' (p. 49). Here, then, is a collection which works to overcome the historical turn that occurred within the Anglo-Saxon debate during the last two decades of the 20th century.

In this sense, *Screen Dynamics* is a sophisticated collection that assumes the reader has a sound understanding of classical film theory, keeps abreast of the latest technological developments, and knows how these developments have prompted various new lines of theoretical inquiry in film scholarship. If this is not the case, Bellour's essay is well-positioned in the volume, offering as it does several key references including those texts which considered the disappearance of traditional cinematic practices and processes as the century ended and cinema's centenary passed. These millennial texts serve as a crucial marker for the volume's optimistic take on cinema's rapidly changing status.

Staying clear of the negative vocabulary that characterises some of its predecessors – for example, Paolo Cherchi Usai's *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*³ and Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*³ – *Screen Dynamics* opens up to reveal curiosity, excitement, and eagerness for the opportunities that are inevitably brought about by the changes in how we produce and receive screen images. This is particularly evident in the essays by Jonathan Rosenbaum, who praises the new film culture for providing a wider variety of film-viewing choices and the increasing availability of many formerly unavailable films; Ute Holl, who enthuses about the 'intricacies of virtual perception' (p. 150) resulting from online cinema which, importantly, centres on activity as opposed to passivity; and Knörer who, as mentioned above, champions the social purpose and power granted by new modes of spectatorship. In his words, the final words of the volume: 'there is much hope and reason to believe that the new communities, algorithmic friends, movable and copyable files of moveable images will produce a movie culture that is more variable, resourceful and richer than anything before' (p. 178).

Certainly Knörer provides a more positive concluding message than the opening one offered by Bellour, who cautions that the merits of television, computers, mobile phones, and so forth cannot reconcile the loss of a specific type of collective viewing experience offered by the 'silence, darkness, distance, projection' (p. 15) of the traditional theatre. In this way Bellour's measured argument regarding the 'uncertain spectator of our time' (p. 10) articulates a feeling that I first experienced in 2003 when, as a graduate student at Queens University Belfast, I spent hours watching films in the atmospheric (if somewhat draughty) screening room at Riddle

Hall (the Queens Film Theatre was undergoing renovations at the time) – only to buy DVDs online later in the week and, upon receipt, submit each film to a harsh regime of fast-forwards, pauses, and rewinds. Of course, I knew that these modern viewing experiences were not the ones anticipated by Jean-Luc Godard, Orson Welles, Maya Deren, Derek Jarman, and others. Still, my now fragmented attentiveness did not spoil or surpass my enjoyment of the films. By detailing theories of cinema spectatorship and hypothesising that a special memory occurs in the traditional arrangement of a darkened room and an illuminated screen, Bellour provides me with the reason: 'one can rewatch film in various situations, but only, if first time around it has been seen and received according to its own aura' (pp. 15-16).

One of the films screened in the course of my studies was Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962), and given an early sequence analysis assignment on the film's third tableau it was perhaps subjected to a more brutal dissection than the other films. This film and assignment were at the forefront of my mind as I progressed through the various essays in *Screen Dynamics*. The content of the third tableau is a highly effective portrait of the traditional spectator that interests Bellour, with the taciturn protagonist Nana (Anna Karina) seated in a darkened theatre captivated by the projected image of Maria Falconetti in Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). To paraphrase Bellour, Nana is immersed in the deep emotional experience of cinema (p. 12). Or, to borrow Sontag's more emotive language from her 1996 polemic on the decay of cinema, she has been 'kidnapped by the movie...overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image'.⁴ Whatever phrasing is used the central issue of a submissive spectator yielding to screen images remains and it is one that increasingly does not fit our times, as the book is keen to explore. Indeed, the carefully worded title of this collection suggests the extent to which this notion of a spectator's passivity will be challenged by its constituent essays. While 'dynamics' serves to uphold the now well-established notion of a spectator's emotive and cognitive activity, it also signals a shift in the debate where questions of the spectator's physical interactions with the apparatus(es) are found to be of equal, if not greater, interest.

Screen Dynamics delves deeper into the changing role of the spectator, as articulated by Atom Egoyan's *Artaud Double Bill* (2007), which shows a 21st century spectator attending a screening of *Vivre sa vie* – only to record key sequences on her mobile phone for her absent friend. As Francesco Casetti's analysis of *Artaud Double Bill* explains, here we are presented with Godard's traditional spectator who 'directs her interest completely towards the film' and Egoyan's modern spectator who 'follows the film, but in the meantime concerns herself with finding out where her friend has ended up; she writes what she feels as she watches *Vivre sa vie*; she isolates a detail of the film; she captures it on her mobile phone; she displays her passion for the cinema, and so on'.⁵ In essence, this is a new breed of spectator who displays the agency her predecessor lacked.

Throughout *Screen Dynamics* this issue of an audience's agency repeatedly surfaces and often grants (some) certainty to Bellour's 'uncertain spectator'. However, the volume is careful to note that audience agency manifests itself in various ways depending on the viewing environment, device, companion, and so forth. The passion for cinema displayed through the interactive, mobile phone-wielding spectator of Egoyan's film is certainly included; it fits with Rosenbaum's description of a new cinephile that can share knowledge and enthuse about films without geographical restrictions. Taken from this angle instant messaging, chat rooms, and blogs do not spoil our experience of cinema and do not suggest a dying cine-culture but rather a reinforcement and revival, where there is a quick and, importantly, international exchange of information and viewing suggestions. In short, films are now more accessible and we have more choice in how our film education develops.

This positive spin on cinema's current situation is difficult to resist not least because similar positions are adopted across the volume's essays. Knörer, for example, identifies exciting opportunities in the new mobility of audiences from crowd funding to fluid distribution networks. As he observes, audiences are 'dispersed over the globe, but finding and reconfiguring themselves as passionate interest groups communing on the net' (p. 174). Holl is also interested in the latest incarnation of the film audience as 'users' (p. 150) who do not adhere to the traditional power structures of the apparatus and its compliant subject. As she convincingly argues: '[o]nline cinema is an activity rather than a passive state of perceiving. Simultaneously, these activities alter and transform the material they visualise and the perception of viewers as users' (pp. 151-152). However, rather than consider the new ways these 'users' store and distribute screen images and, in a related fashion, how these new practices have changed our understanding of cinema, Holl instead turns her attention to the resulting changes in behaviour. Taking Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological considerations of film as her starting point, she proposes a 'newer psychology' that is better equipped to articulate the multiple, shifting '[b]onds between "subject and world," "subject and other"' (p. 154) inherent to online cinema practice. As Holl argues, it is imperative that we address and assess our evolving perception processes which shape our understanding of the world.

Whereas Holl's interest in a new media theory pertains to the psycho-physical impact of online cinema on the spectator, other essays in the volume continue the search for the ever-elusive media theory that defines cinema's specificity. This includes Gunning's essay, which presents reproduced movement as one possible answer given its consistency across the numerous images that populate the 21st century world and its compatibility with classical film theory, namely film's indexical nature. Indeed, Gunning makes a convincing argument that this indexical quality needs to be thought of in broader terms – ones which do not exclusively reside in photographic realism. He is persuasive because he highlights

how rethinking these terms allows animation to be included in discussions on cinema rather than relegated to a mere footnote.

The focus on movement also makes an important distinction between moving pictures and still photography, thus recognising the value of kinaesthesia to cinematic spectatorship: '[w]e experience motion on the screen in a different way than we look at still images, and this difference explains our participation in the film image, a sense of perceptual richness or immediate involvement in the image' (p. 54). As mentioned above Gunning does not deny the importance of classical theory (including that of Bazin and Kracauer) in his essay but he does redirect the reader's attention from those points which emphasise the photographic element of film to those which focus on movement. This re-routing of film theory anticipates the concerns of the following essay, where Vinzenz Hediger examines the 'inherent spatiality' of film theory (p. 62). Here, Hediger charts the growing suspicion of clearly defined borders and divisions in discussions of cinema but suggests any misgivings are eased once they are reconsidered as 'folds': 'the boundary that delimits the specificity of the medium is, in fact, a *fold*' (p. 72). Certainly, recognising the continuous and flexible process of film theory is necessary if film scholarship seeks to incorporate the past but acknowledge the present and prepare for the future. In this way, Hediger's essay again evidences the book's fresh and inclusive approach to cinema's (now) various configurations.

There is an emphasis throughout the collection that any consideration of an end must include the consideration of a beginning – or, as the title to Hediger's essay suggests, a loss will result in a find.⁶ Of course, the latter can pertain to new ways of thinking about cinema as the 'Theory Matters' section of *Screen Dynamics* details but it can also pertain to the (re)discovery of cinematic images in sites such as theatres, museums, and galleries. The use of moving images in theatrical performances has increased significantly in the last two decades, leading Koch to rightly extend the question of various arts' specificities from '[w]hat is film (theater, music, etc)?' to '[w]hen and where and how is film (theater, music, etc)?' (p. 126). Examining several case studies, Koch seeks to illustrate how the interweaving of film and theatre presents an interesting development in the dynamics of aesthetic perception given that the 'new constellations' necessarily restructure the spatio-temporal relations of both (p. 129). As she argues, the established illusions of film and theatre must renegotiate their terms once the past of recorded footage invades the present of a live performance.

Whereas Koch examines the presence of moving images in theatre, Pantenburg focuses his discussion on museums and galleries and his unease regarding how these spaces suggest a lineage between experimental cinema and art installation – one which denies the importance of duration to many experimental works including the structural films of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton. This essay

sits appropriately alongside the essay by Victor Burgin, which also looks at issues of temporality, proposing that his own gallery work is 'uncinematic' given the 'non-coincidence of the duration of the audiovisual material and the time of viewing' (p. 103). Both these essays also consider the problematic assumptions and alignments regarding an active or participatory spectatorship. Burgin finds a way to ease some of the difficulties by considering a 'contemplative' viewer (pp. 105-106), further fulfilling the volume's intention to navigate a different path and to push previously established boundaries.

Finally, it needs noting that the editors have published a posthumous essay by Miriam Hansen, which connects with the book's central concerns by exploring the shift as regards cinema's 'sensory-perceptual, aesthetic dimensions of experience and configurations of intimacy and publicness' (p. 23). With close textual analysis of Max Ophuls' *Liebelei* (1933), Hansen demonstrates that questions about the requirements of technology, spectacle, and the public sphere through the cinematic experience stretch across the decades. This prompts her to suggest that any doubts and anxieties regarding current developments to cinema's future are premature. The final words to her essay are thus an instruction, one that the editors of *Screen Dynamics* have also placed on the inside of the book's cover. It states that 'we should defer cultural pessimism about the digital transformation of experience for a while...and, along the way, rediscover and reinvent cinema' (p.29). *Screen Dynamics* is a book which nudges us in this direction, privileging hope, productivity, and progression above a 'narrative of decline' (p. 6).

Notes

1. For this reason an index would have proved useful.
2. Paolo Cherchi Usai. *The death of cinema: History, cultural memory and the digital dark age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).
3. Laura Mulvey. *Death 24x a second: Stillness and the moving image* (London: Reaktion, 2006).
4. Susan Sontag. 'The Decay of Cinema', *New York Times*, 25 February 1996.
5. Francesco Casetti. 'Back to the motherland: The film theatre in the postmedia age', *Screen*, 52, 1 (2011): 1-12.
6. This sentiment is also expressed in Francesco Casetti's recent essay for *NECSUS*, where he states that 'only by contemplating its own death can cinema now find new reasons to live'. See Francesco Casetti, 'The relocation of cinema', *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*, #2, Autumn 2012 (<http://www.necsus-ejms.org/the-relocation-of-cinema/>).

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