

Review

Myer, Clive (ed.) (2011) *Critical Cinema: Beyond the Theory of Practice*, Wallflower Press: London and New York.

“Yes but you know, what’s your bug? What are you trying to say? What do you want? What are you visioning about? What are you prosthelytising?” In a devastating exchange that lasts some thirty pages, Peter Greenaway throws the questions back at his conversationalist Clive Myer, editor of *Critical Cinema: Beyond the Theory of Practice*. Myer insists that “cinema is a different experience to watching a film at home or in an art gallery” (231), one of many small claims that augment the larger polemic of the collection, that an understanding of cinema demands critical and philosophical ideas separate from media studies or pop culture analysis, and that students (in particular, future directors and screenplay writers) require film-making methods distinct from those of television, advertising, music videos, video-art or other screen cultures. The foregrounding of cinema *qua* cinema has its merits: while differing greatly in choice of examples and clarity of expression, contributions from Noel Burch, Peter Wollen, Laura Mulvey, Patrick Fuery, Nico Baumbach, Coral Houtman, and Myer collectively refuse the clichés of genre hybridity and national allegory that still pervade much Hollywood film studies, instead exploring critical questions around diagesis, montage, the facticity of fiction, temporality, mediation, and most often, the relation between theory and practice. Unfortunately, the reworking of ideas from Lacanian and post-Althusserian film criticism is not often extended to include discussion of how cinema “theory” may be useful to readers who do not make films (in a liberal arts education, for example), while “practice” is rarely expanded to include overlaps between film-making and other audio-visual or theatrical competencies. Highly readable commentaries on screenplay writing (Ian Macdonald) and teaching environments (Brian Winston) do provide welcome counter-balances, and Baumbach’s incisive survey of contemporary film theory is the most sober, concise, and pedagogical of the collection. Less convincing are the persistently “political” justifications for cinema *qua* cinema, found in Myer and Burch especially. With the exception of Aparna Sharma’s dynamic study of documentary aesthetics in India, the “political” is employed as a second-order signifier, not signalling any particular set of social concerns but rather an (allegedly) evacuated space of oppositionality that cinema should be

cultivating through experimental methods. Yet fleeting references to Marxism or to feminism (often treated in the singular, as if “feminism” could be reduced to its presence in late 1970s cinema journals) are absorbed like vaccines, immunising the numerous laments for the lost heroism of cinema against potential accusations of middle-class elitism. In conversation Myer and Burch target the “absolutely ghastly” study of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and “popular television” as clear evidence of where cinema studies is going wrong (258), making the authors’ subsequent opinions about de Beauvoir, Kristeva, and Irigaray (in the 1970s, of course) feel out of touch with what feminist media studies is currently doing and why. Greenaway is the first to express discomfort with cinephilia as a rarefied aesthetic enterprise, and asks the question that *Critical Cinema* elsewhere takes cautions not to answer: “Are you sufficiently happy with cinema as a thinking medium if you are only talking to one person?” The broad attachment to cinema as a special object *for* cinema goers *by* cinema makers precludes exactly the sorts of criticism that *Critical Cinema* promises, but only ever delivers by accident. For these accidents, at least, the editor must be given due credit: Greenaway’s outbursts really are fantastic.

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