

ACINEMAS: LYOTARD'S PHILOSOPHY OF FILM

Brian Thomas Walker (The State University of New York at Buffalo)

Ed. Graham Jones and Ashley Woodward. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 224 pp. ISBN: 9781474418942.

Throughout its short history, much of film theory has been concerned with the *interpretation* of films, whether through its ideological subtexts or as a model of the psychoanalytic subject, to the point that a great deal of what makes film such an immersive, sensorial experience has been overlooked. In four short essays written throughout the course of his career, Jean-Francois Lyotard, perhaps best known for his works on the postmodern and on art and aesthetics, managed to lay the groundwork (intentional or not) for a new sort of film theory to combat this stranglehold of interpretation. Until recently, only two of those essays have been available in English. *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film*, presents them in their entirety for the first time.

In this collection, editors Graham Jones and Ashley Woodward set out to provide the reader with "a collection of resources for working on Lyotard and film" (p. 3), and to that end, the book is largely successful. Along with Lyotard's four essays on film, the book includes a brief section containing two introductory essays (along with the editor's own introduction), a section entitled, "Applications and Interpretations", which contain three essays that serve to orient the reader on Lyotard's film essays in relation to his other works, a section named "Applications and Extensions", which aim to show some of the ways Lyotard's theories might be practically applied, and a final section of appendices that includes short descriptions of his existing experiments with the medium itself as well as a transcript of a proposal for a film that was never produced. Exhaustive to say the least.

Following the editor's introduction, a chapter on "Why Lyotard and Film?" starts off the collection. As authors Susana Viegas and James Williams themselves admit, Lyotard's writing on cinema is scant, as only four short essays were written over the course of his career, essays that, "show neither particularly acute interpretations of film, nor great conceptual invention" (p. 10). Still, they claim that his ideas have reverberated throughout film study, perhaps due to their tendency to go against the more prevalent ideological and

psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Žižek. Lyotard, the authors write, “always resisted investment in a combination of interpretation and judgement”, calling his notion of *acinema* “the last ethical call to resist capitalist exchange and surplus value” (p. 13) in its focus on the sensorial affects of experimental cinema over the representationalism inherent in commercial, narrative film.

In the second introductory essay, “Cinema Lyotard: An Introduction”, Jean-Michel Durafour identifies some key themes of Lyotard’s that appear in his writings on film, most notably “how we can express that which, in art and in particular in visual art (painting, literature) escapes the readable and the sayable” (p. 19). Durafour focuses mainly on Lyotard’s first essay on cinema, *Acinemas* and his interest in experimental film as a way to eschew the “deterministic and reductive constructions of the well-formed” (p. 21). As well, Durafour addresses and defends Lyotard’s sporadic output when it comes to his writings on film, rejecting the notion that “they lack cohesion or unity, or that they remain minor or imperfect thoughts.” According to Durafour, “Lyotard simply never felt the necessity or desire to collect them or develop them into a book.... We just have to live with it” (p. 22).

The core of the book is, of course, the four essays that Lyotard wrote specifically on the medium of film itself. The first, and perhaps the one most widely cited throughout the collection is *Acinema*. In it, Lyotard describes cinema as an “inscription of movements” (p. 33) wherein individual movements are only valued as they pertain to the whole, or *totality*, of the narrative itself. To achieve this unity, there must necessarily be movements that are cast aside, edited out, so that this whole is not detracted from. For Lyotard, this constitutes an oppression of *mise-en-scène* rooted in a capitalist form of production. Thus, to the viewer, this sacrifice to the narrative is merely the reinforcement of cultural norms through a negative form of representation, sublimating libidinal energy for the sake of a systematic whole. What is lost is the possibility of any true sensorial experience, independent of the system. He posits a different kind of a cinema, an “*acinema*”, in which the subjective is decentered and movements exist purely for their affective qualities. He relates this to the image of a child striking a match and watching it burn, simply to enjoy its burning. Any productive value the match once held is destroyed and the child’s pleasure is a “sterile difference leading nowhere” (p. 35), a perversion in libidinal terms perhaps, but a truly artistic one that might have the power to break the chain of narrative oppression that exists not only in the cinema, but in social and political life as well.

In *Acinema*, Lyotard's view of mise-en-scene is primarily attached to his ideas of libidinal economy, its function being the addition or subtraction of movements to the unity of the whole, a "political activity *par excellence*" (p. 39). However, in the collection's second essay, "*The Unconscious as Mise-en-scene*", the concept of mise-en-scene is used differently, this time in order to illustrate Lyotard's critique of Freud's psychoanalytic theories of desire as something that can be represented and interpreted as a sort of language. For Lyotard, it is an action closer to transcription; as a play that is transcribed through the process of mise-en-scene; first as a text, then by the director to the actors, and finally as a production to the audience, a kind of "somotography" or body-writing capable of affect and intensities that belie mere representation. In this way, both theater and cinema may be more than just "machines of illusion and memory, but apparati for experimentation which permit us to quarter sensibility and draw it out beyond this old body" (p. 54).

This goal of displacing representation and disrupting narrative is again the focus of the third essay, the brief "Two Metamorphoses of the Seductive". Here, Lyotard describes representational narrative in linguistic terms, as "the pragmatic efficacy of the seductive discourse" (p. 56), wherein the spectator receives "implicitly given prescriptions to act: *Do this, think that*" (p. 59). This seduction demands a sort of *obligation* of the viewer, that again, is essentially one of oppression. The question of the essay is whether it is possible to escape this seduction. To this end, he offers hyperrealism as a possible technique and cites Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* famous helicopter attack scene as an example. It is Lyotard's contention that this scene is so "saturated by sonorous and visual elements" (p. 59) that the viewer has no choice but to be aware of the seduction, which effectively cancels it out. Most notably, this essay is one of the few times Lyotard directly addresses mainstream cinema, although little else is said about the film outside of this one scene. This curious omission is perhaps the most striking things about Lyotard's early essays, as is the way both mainstream and narrative cinema slowly find their way into them.

This slow acceptance of narrative film comes to fruition in the section's final essay, "*The Idea of a Sovereign Film*", where Lyotard's focus turns to neo-realist cinema. While he still remains averse to cinema in which movement is subordinate to realism's narrative order, here he allows for films which communicate "intense instants" and "temporal spasms" that are capable of remaining outside of the film's narrative order; "sovereign" moments that exist beyond structure. For Lyotard, these moments are not *transcendent*, but *immanent*, coming not from a rejection of the film's reality, but from inside reality itself. As

with all of the previous essays, it is the sensorial affects of pure experience that is at stake, although in the end, Lyotard concludes an entire film made up of such sovereign moments would be impossible, as it would become a totality within itself and therefore have nothing to be sovereign *to*.

Herein lies the difficulty with the book's basic premise. Throughout his essays, Lyotard comes to essentially disprove the working possibility of any kind of real application of the acinematic ideal. Lyotard's film essays tend to feel like footnotes to his larger works which contain many of the same ideas applied to painting and aesthetics, but are fleshed out to a far greater degree. This seems evident in the book's final section, "Applications and Extensions"; out of five essays intended to show how Lyotard's concepts may be applied to film, only the last two "*How Desire Works, the Lyotardian Lynch*", and "*Aberrant Movement and Somotography in the Hysterical Comedies of Romeo Bosetti*", significantly reference Lyotard's essays on film.

Most reference Lyotard's work on figure and aesthetics, which have been applied to cinema as well as other forms of visual art numerous times, which tends to put into question whether Lyotard may be the basis for a "more radical direction for film theory and practice" (p. 14), as Viegas and Williams suggest, or even if there exists a Lyotardian "*Philosophy of Film*" at all. This kind of assertion only serves to highlight the weaknesses inherent in trying to force Lyotard into the role of film philosopher, a role he himself didn't seem particularly interested in playing.

Which isn't to say that Lyotard brings nothing new or interesting to film theory, on the contrary, many of his ideas are unique for their focus on the sensorial and film as an art to be *experienced* rather than *interpreted*, and it will be exciting to see how these ideas are fleshed out in the future by others. To that end, *Acinemas: Lyotard's Philosophy of Film* does indeed represent a valuable resource, and one which anyone serious about the philosophy of film aesthetics will be interested in reading.