Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century (review)

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Film and Authorship

edited and with an introduction by Virginia Wright Wexman. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2003. 270 pp. ISBN: 0-8135-3193-4.

The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History

edited and with an introduction by Angela Dalle Vacche. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2003. 280 pp. ISBN: 0-8135-3173-X.

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Artists in any media find value in reading about that consummate 20th-century artform, the cinema. Its heroic, often obstreperous creative personalities offer lessons in accomplishing big works in the face of daunting odds. The medium's visual component finds cognates in narrative painting, photography and theories of the art object itself. These two volumes from the Rutgers University Press Depth of Field Series contain new and reprinted essays on these topics, and at the end of each book is a rich and useful Selected Bibliography.

Film and Authorship examines the concept of the *auteur* (the movie's "author"), in theoretical and historical essays, and then with profiles of several acclaimed figures to whom the designation is attached. Andrew Sarris's 1977 essay "The Auteur Theory Revisited" explores the conviction that every great movie has a single creative force behind it, usually the director. This idea began in the writing of Parisian *cineastes* around 1960, many of whom (Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer) were filmmakers themselves. After a decade and a half, Sarris concedes that auteurism has been "more a tendency than a theory, more a mystique than a methodology, more an editorial policy than an aesthetic procedure." Essays follow on narration in art cinema, on female and on specifically lesbian authorial voices. The following section, "Historical and Institutional Contexts," contains essays on issues of commerce and legality as encountered by authorial filmmakers, and on representative figures in Latin American and Chicano (Mexicans in North America) cinema.

The book's profiles (or "Case Studies") begin with an examination of D.W. Griffith and the unspecialized responsibilities that were demanded of a filmmaker in the medium's first 20 years. It is followed by an appreciation of Cecil DeMille, an interesting and unconventional choice. DeMille operated successfully within the Hollywood system, as did Alfred Hitchcock, rather than being ultimately frustrated by it, as were Orson Welles and Eric von Stroheim. An essay on Oscar Micheaux notes his three decades of achievements as screenwriter, producer, director and distributor of numerous films with African-American themes for that underserved and otherwise ill-represented audience in his time. Micheaux also wrote and published novels.

Film and Authorship then examines a fiercely independent filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, who died in the spring of 2003. Brakhage's flickering, fugitive manipulated film—and the flashing images in only a few frames—built movies with an improvisational technique comparable to an innovative jazz musician. He found his children's births—the moments of their bloody crownings in close-up—a worthy subject in autobiographical film, and he filmed exuberant and joyful lovemaking with his wife. This reviewer will never forget a lecture by the bear-like Old Testament prophet Brakhage, thundering at my college's film collection for lacking even Blackhawk 8mm prints of classics like Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, while being full of reels of the college's Annual Football Highlights.

The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History collects writings on film by art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky and Rudolf Arnheim. In many cases a mid-century film theorist is paired with a contemporary interlocutor—somewhat like the early silent cinema's on-site Film Explainers. A translation of Arnheim's 1933 German essay "Painting and Film" precedes one by Ara H. Merjian on the impact of Arnheim's writings that intersect film theory and the psychology of art, sporting the cruel title "Middlebrow Modernism." Erwin Panofsky's 1934 "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" precedes Thomas Y. Levin's examination of the iconology and search for emblematic imagery that runs through Panofsky's work. The eclectic and wide-ranging Walter Benjamin examined film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), which owes a debt to his professor Alöis Reigl. The Benjamin essay's relevant section is reprinted here, and then its central antithesis—the painter vs. the still or cinematic photographer—is further explicated in Patrice Rollet's "The Magician and the Surgeon."

Gilles Deleuze compares the use of montage in Hollywood and Soviet (especially Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein) films. The great Russian film director Eisenstein writes of the *Christ Cleansing the Temple* paintings by El Greco, which most frustrate him, for they do not fulfil the promise of an otherwise dynamic visual artist. This is followed by an essay by Pietro Montani that contextualizes Eisenstein's essay in his cinematic writings and moviemaking concerns. I question this latter essay's translation, for I am skeptical that the Russian director cited Saul Steinberg *New Yorker* magazine cartoons, though the Italian critic Montani certainly could have when writing his essay in 1993. In another jarring note, Richard Allen's "Representation, Illusion and the Cinema" is marred by an inaccurate drawing of the Müller-Lyer Illusion.

Béla Balázs and Jacques Aumont each study the effect of the close-up, human physiognomy filling the movie-house screen. These essays might have been grouped with another one that further explores the varieties of portraiture and its purposes in art history. In "Painting and Cinema," Andre Bazin is critical of movies based on paintings, giving examples of films that he finds compromised and lacking that were based on Picasso's *Guernica* and on paintings by Van Gogh and Monet. While considering his arguments, I find such movies nevertheless valuable in introducing college students to the totality of visual culture. To any students (or fellow artists) appreciative of both art history and its interface with film criticism, I would recommend this collection.

Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century

by Scott Bukatman. Duke Univ. Press, Durham, NC, U.S.A., 2003. 296 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-8223-3132-2; 0-8223-3119-5.

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The title, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, belies the contents of Scott Bukatman's collection of essays, for it suggests, at

first glance, a critique of the kinds of techniques used in cinema to render the superhero weightless and barrelling missile-like through space. The book, however, is a compilation of articles previously published by the author, some as far back as 1991, that "concentrates on the experience of technological spectacle popular in American culture" (p. 2), and a continuation of Bukatman's earlier work *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in PostModern Science Fiction,* published in 1993 by the same press. The scope of Bukatman's examination this go-around is more vast and eclectic than the previous outing: Disney theme parks, science fiction literature and film, New York musicals, panoramas, superhero comics, the typewriter, mutant superheroes, mass transportation, the sublime, urban landscapes, bodybuilding and cyberspace are but a few of the subjects he prods and probes. In the end the reader finds the information reeling about the brain like the kaleidoscope he writes about—an experience that can be called heady, with an effect no less than dizzying.

The eight essays are organized around three sections. The first section, "Remembering Cyberspace," pertains to articles written in the early 1990s that somehow relate, sometimes rather loosely, to computer environments. For the first and second essays, the placement in the section makes sense. In "There's Always Tomorrowland," Bukatman parallels Disneyland and Disney World with science fiction literature and film, particularly with the genre of cyberpunk, to make a point about the human desire to control the chaos of the real world, and in "Gibson's Typewriter," he argues that the "disembodied informational cyberspaces" found in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* are anticipated by the " 'obsolescent' rhetorics and technologies of . . . 'machine culture' " (p. 34). The third essay, however, seems less obvious a match. A discussion about mutant superheroes and the way they "embody . . . ambivalent and shifting attitudes toward flesh, self, and society" (p. 51) seems far off the topic of cyberspace.

As one would expect from essays written so far apart and originally for such different venues—some academic, some not—the language is inconsistent. Essay one is written in dense, postmodern prose, while essay two possesses a more approachable style. Essay three reads like it is intended for the adolescent boys whose comics he critiques—peppered with slang, like "dick" and "big-titted," and idioms like "jack in" (p. 48).

But the fact remains, Bukatman can, indeed, write, and he can turn a phrase like no one else. We see these talents readily in section two, "Kaleidoscopic Perceptions," which contains one of the most elegant of his eight essays—"The Artificial Infinite." There he explores the relationship between technology and the sublime, specifically in the way they play out in the special effects found in science fiction films. He writes: "The genre of science fiction often exhibits its spectatorial excess in the form of the special effect, which is especially effective at bringing the narrative to a spectacular halt" (p. 90). Such classical schemes of construction as this use of antimetabole can be found throughout the book. It is particularly effective, however, in an essay about the sublime.

The final section contains more recent essays, written beginning in 1998. Of these, the third, "The Boys in the Hoods," satisfies the most because it is the one that best addresses the book's premise: "Superhero comics present something other than . . . aggressive fantasies of authority and control; something more closely aligned with fantasy and color but at the same time specific to the urban settings that pervade the genre" (p. 186). In fact, it is the essay the reader has been waiting for.

To weave these disparate essays and styles more closely together, Bukatman could have provided some sort of commentary at the end of the book, but he concludes rather with a *dis*conclusion—a "To be continued . . ." notation. One would not expect anything less from a postmodern critique of popular culture except that at the start of the book he heralds his rationale and methodology in a traditional "Introduction." It would not have been any less hip to provide some encapsulating analysis for his audience at the end of the book.

All in all, Bukatman's work remains compelling and heady, despite the dizzying array of subject matter—and the few inconsistencies—outlined here.

COGNITION ET CRÉATION, EXPLORATIONS COGNITIVES DES PROCESSUS DE CONCEPTION

edited by Mario Borillo and Jean-Pierre Goulette. Mardaga, Sprimont, Belgium, 2002. 400 pp., illus. ISBN: 2-87009-803-0.

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The title of this book translates as "Cognition and Creation, Cognitivist Explorations of Design Processes." I must admit that I am in doubt whether it should be "design processes" or "processes of conceptual design" because of the content of the book. Most of the 15 articles or chapters deal with the first stages of architectural design, the phases between the first formulation of the problem and the formal and final plans. There is no reason why the architect's work in this stage should not be seen as an artistic enterprise within a more or less restrictive context, so it is exemplary for design processes at large. On the other hand, some of the later chapters discuss the creative processes of choreographers and composers when they are still working at the conceptual level, designing larger-scale structures and selecting key transitions, materials and contents, something I would rather call conceptual design. Either way, the authors try to model and understand the cognitive processes at work in an act of creation. This is not an easy task, and the editors are well aware of the difficulties. Part of the discussion is about what it actually means "to design" and fortunately, no one tries to give a definitive answer. It slows down the pace of the book as a whole, but it also opens the doors to a wider variety of approaches, and that is what makes this volume worthwhile.

Part 1, "Models and Processes of Design," is mostly a discussion of the field itself. Part 2, "Computation and Creation," contains some very interesting contributions on the use of computers in the design process, both as an aid in designing and as a tool for simulation of the act of creation. Some of the book's most provocative essays are included in this part. Philippe Dehayes discusses the use of technology in building operational models of design (in this case again, architectural design), and Guy Théraulaz has contributed a wild but brilliant essay—"How Could Social Insects Help Us Solve Complex Problems?"—which of course discusses issues of parallel distributed computation, emergent behavior and self-organization.