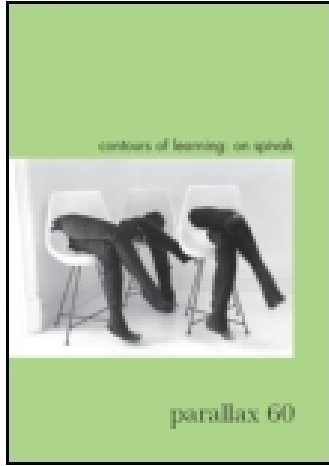


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We Are All Spectators; A Philosophical Cosmopolitanism That Is Yet To Come; Vanishing Points

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Book Reviews

We Are All Spectators

Jacques Rancière. *Le spectateur émancipé*. (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008)

Spectatorship constitutes the new focus in Jacques Rancière's continuous interrogation of the ground that supports our understanding of the efficacy of the arts 'to change something in the world we live in' (p.29). In *Le spectateur émancipé*¹ he calls into question the recurrent production of pitiable spectators in the Western critical tradition and its contemporary mutations. The book is particularly engaging in its fierce stance against practices of intellectual paternalism in art and philosophy. Rancière repeatedly portrays numerous authors as pathologists who presuppose that the spectacle 'weakens the heads of the children of the people' (p.52), or that too many images 'soften the brains of the multitude' (p.105). The emphasis on the pseudo-medical veneer of cultural expertise stresses that what is at stake in this book is not a mere affair of intellectual condescension but the complete incapacitation of the spectators. The five conference papers composing this volume effectively dismantle the all too often characterization of the spectator as a *malade* of passivity and ignorance in order to vehemently affirm that spectatorship is a capacity of all and anyone.

An heir of Foucault, Rancière builds an expeditious genealogy that associates the work of disparate authors whose common premise is the spectator's *idiocy*. The resonance of this genealogy of stultification is amplified by the re-activation of Rancière's investigation of pedagogical relations in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987). This pivotal book in Rancière's re-conceptualization of emancipation examined the practice of Joseph Jacotot, who at the beginning of the nineteenth century developed a pedagogy not aimed at the instruction of the people but their emancipation. Jacotot refused to accept the instruction model because it repeatedly produces a hierarchical distance between the teacher and the student; instead he developed a methodology based on the equality of all intelligences. The parallelism Rancière draws

between Jacotot's conclusions and the case of the spectator persistently galvanizes the anti-mastery brio of this book. But rather than a parallelism, Rancière recognizes the very same process of stultification at work in the ways various philosophers and cultural revolutionaries indoctrinated and continue to indoctrinate the spectator. Rancière, with undisciplined ardour, identifies the hierarchical distance between actors and spectators with a historical consensus produced by the work of stultifying pedagogues from Plato to Nicolas Bourriaud.

If the instruction of the spectator dates back to Plato, it seems reasonable for Rancière to declare it is high time to situate spectatorship on different grounds (p.54). However, Rancière is chiefly concerned here with the current version of the instructional consensus and with what he recognizes as its particularly powerful stultifying effects. Post-critical thought (chapter 2) and different practices calling for a re-politicization of the arts (chapters 3 and 4) continue to entertain today a paternalistic relation with spectatorship. Rancière regards this *malaise* as evidence of the persistence of the modernist model of critique and its determination to restore to health the 'fragile brains of the people' (p.54). But he also introduces a discontinuity between modernity and our present, and this difference is the key to understand the urgent pathos of these pages. Authors from the modern critical tradition such as Bertolt Brecht or Guy Debord *got it wrong*, and yet their horizon was the emancipation of the spectator. Since the winter, as Félix Guattari called the 1980s, the consensus to overturn the modernist paradigm disconnected the critique of capitalist spectatorship from any process of emancipation. Rancière is vociferous against the disenchanting and apocalyptic subtraction of capability operated by what he calls 'leftist melancholia' (p.43). Theories of notorious authors such as Jean Baudrillard or Peter Sloterdijk are disgraced without ceremony as 'tools against any process or even any dream of emancipation' (p.38). In this sense, post-critical consensus has redoubled the incapacity of the spectators: we are not only seduced into passivity and ignorance

by the capitalist spectacle but our experiments and desires are doomed to end up 'swallowed in the belly of the monster' (p.40).

Le spectateur émancipé argues that to verify the capacity of art to resist the voracity of consensus it is crucial to re-conceptualize the political efficacy of spectatorship. Political art most often regulates the agency of the spectator according to the hierarchical opposition of doing and looking. The current will to re-politicize the arts is not an exception; its modus operandi is footed on the hierarchy between 'active intelligence' and 'material passivity' (p.69). Rancière perceives a 'strange schizophrenia' in contemporary art: artists denounce the impasses of critique and post-critique and yet they continue to massively validate their consensual rationale of political action (p.57). The two usual suspects are targeted in this book: the critique of representation and the ethical immediacy between art and life. Both models are genealogically reconstructed as pedagogies of efficacy presupposing that spectators are ignorant of what they are *really* looking at and/or they are passive because they are *only* looking at. For Rancière the current mobilization of concepts such as participation or community most often confirms the distribution of capacities and incapacities between actors and spectators. Different art practices, relational and other, seek to directly produce social relations in order to erase the distance between the spectator and the real world. Rancière rightly insists that there is no evil distance that needs to be abolished between the spectator and the reality of political action. Rancière, always ready to remove the act of looking an image from 'the trial atmosphere it is so often immersed in' (p.104), affirms spectatorship as an action that intervenes to confirm or modify the consensual order.

Pedagogies of action are not only fallacious; for Rancière to produce one model of efficacy is always a critical error. In *Le spectateur émancipé* political efficacy is constructed as an incalculable relation between the spectators and a political subjectivation. There is no model to be founded on the activation of spectatorship because, quite simply, we are all spectators. With unfussy statements such as 'spectatorship is our normal situation' (p.23), rather than through meticulous argumentation, Rancière displaces the omnipotent logic of instruction inherent to countless edifying pedagogies to postulate spectatorship as a condition of all. Following his usual production of vacant names, Rancière evacuates any specificity from the term spectatorship to problematize its

capacity to designate one identifiable audience. The name-without-a-specific-content *spectator* becomes an operator performing in different configurations the gap between an identification and anonymity. Thus spectators become in these pages alternatively readers, viewers or consumers, but also poets, authors, translators. From the film *La société du spectacle* to the photographs of Sophie Ristelhueber, from the documentary films of Rithy Panh to *Madame Bovary*, from the installation *The Sound of Silence* by Alfredo Jaar to media images, the book gathers contrasting voices across disciplinary boundaries to attest to the emancipation of the spectators. This *indisciplinarity* is not a virtuoso amplification of the scope of the book; it works to stage different theatrical manoeuvres to address different stakes of *our* spectatorship.

Each chapter is best understood as a singular intervention pursuing the implications of the axiom *we are all spectators* for a re-conceptualization of critical art and in particular for the relation actor/spectator. The emancipated spectator of the title is not celebrated in this book as an active creator. In contrast to an author like Michel de Certeau who rejoiced in productive everyday tactics ('the ways of operating of the weak'²), Rancière understands the transformation of the consumer into a producer as a validation of the dominant hierarchy between action and passivity. In the chapter entitled 'The Misadventures of Critical Thinking' Rancière points out that strategies of reversal like de Certeau's continue to thrive among the critical intelligentsia and continue to be useless. Thus he understands the photographs of Josephine Meckseper or the work of Bernard Stiegler as the futile propositions from an up-to-date 'inverted activism' (p.42).³ The emancipation at stake in this book is not about turning the passive spectator into an active participant. It is about constructing another ground of efficacy through the disarticulation of the order equating the actor with activity, living-reality, self-possession and the spectator with passivity, illusion and alienation. For Rancière this hierarchical order is untenable because actors are always and already immersed in spectatorship. Actors and spectators actively engage with images and words through a 'poetic work of translation' (p.16). The distance between the actor, the spectator and the spectacle is not the evidence of a process of alienation but 'the pathway that endlessly abolishes any fixation and hierarchy of positions' (p.17). With welcomed polemical impetus Rancière transforms the evil litany of interpretation, representation and mediation into

a series of crucial components in the process of our emancipation as spectators. Spectatorship is thus constructed as a common, active, anonymous distancing that allows different re-distributions of capacities and incapacities between proper and improper bodies.

Le spectateur émancipé re-formulates the critical capacity of numerous films, photographs and texts to verify that they produce effects inasmuch as they do not tell us what to do. Rancière performs himself this anti-authoritarian stance with a conflictive equilibrium between a doctrinal style of writing and the declaration that the equalitarian ground of his *oeuvre* is a 'foolish assumption' (p.54). But the engagement against postures of mastery in these pages does not simply resonate in an anarchist vacuum that negates the hierarchy between authors and moronic spectators, readers or consumers. Very differently the cinema of Pedro Costa or a photograph by Walker Evans are interpreted as the 'work of a spectator addressed to other spectators' (p.91). Rancière advocates a critical art that disqualifies its instructional authority and confirms an anonymous capacity of all to re-organize the set of distances and proximities of a consensual order. Spectatorship is re-worked as the cultural counterpart of the *empty name* people, i.e. an anonymous *we* that ruins any definitive formula to regulate cause and effects between art and political efficacy. The insistence on the un-decidability of the relation between

spectators and a specific political subjectivation is not a sophisticated allegory of the state of the world or a cunning strategy of suspension. It works as an affirmative call to the readers of these pages to re-distribute again the grounds from where we read, write or look.

Notes

¹ The English version of this book will be published as *The Emancipated Spectator* in August 2009 by Verso. The five conference papers composing this book have been modified for this publication. Early English versions of two papers have been published: 'The Emancipated Spectator' in *Art Forum*, XLV:7 (2007) and 'The Misadventures of Critical Thinking' in *Aporia. Undergraduate Journal of Philosophy* (autumn 2007). I have used these English versions in my quotations and translated myself the French versions of the remaining papers.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [1980], trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp.34-39.

³ The reference to Bernard Stiegler is a new addition to the text for this publication (together with references to Paolo Virno and Brian Holmes).

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A Philosophical Cosmopolitanism That Is Yet To Come

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. *Films and Dreams. Tarkovsky, Bergman, Sokurov, Kubrick, and Wong Kar-Wai*.

(Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007)

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's approach and accomplishment in *Films and Dreams* is of such a nature that a few words about his academic background and scholarly profile would be the best way to start this review. Botz-Bornstein studied Russian philology and Continental philosophy in Germany, France and England. After completing a PhD at Oxford (with a dissertation on play and style in hermeneutics, structuralism and Wittgenstein), he embarked on a number of international post-doctoral research projects dedicated to such varied topics and authors as: Russian structuralism (a project he pursued in Russia, Finland and

Estonia), Vasily Sesemann (in Lithuania and Sweden), Kuki Shuzo, Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto-School (in France and Japan), cognition and culture (in China), as well as virtual reality and various aspects of the relationship between dreams, space and time in Western and Eastern cultures. The outcome of this unusually diverse research program has been a number of books – *Place and Dream: Japan and the Virtual* (Rodopi, 2004), *Vasily Sesemann: Experience, Formalism and the Question of Being* (Rodopi 2006), *Virtual Reality: The Last Human Narrative?* (Rodopi, forthcoming), *Space in Russia and Japan: A Comparative Philosophical Study* (Lexington Books, forthcoming) – as well as a handful of edited collections and numerous journal articles. Currently Thorsten Botz-Bornstein is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tuskegee University (in Alabama) and in the fall of 2009 he will take up an academic position at the Gulf University of Science and Technology in Kuwait.

What this short presentation shows is, first of all, Botz-Bornstein's rare ability to cross traditional boundaries and move freely between very different cultural spaces (Russia, Japan, Western Europe, etc.). More importantly, however, this cosmopolitanism is not just a matter of research agenda and academic affiliations, but is what might be called a 'philosophical cosmopolitanism': a cultivated taste for foreign spaces, places, languages and flavours, a trained habit of engaging with and decode other cultures, as well as an ability to articulate complex narratives in relation to this engagement. On the other hand, Botz-Bornstein's books display a superior capacity to engage – with rigour, application and insightfulness – in research projects dedicated to customarily neglected philosophical topics such as the aesthetics of dreams, the relationships between dreams, space and time, between films and dreams, between style and play, the philosophy of virtual reality, the cultural construction of space, and so on. Rather than in any way undermining his project, this constant preoccupation with 'minor' or 'marginal' topics – outside of the academic mainstream as defined by the Western canon – gives it its unique flavour and, in fact, confers upon it a paradoxical strength.

Films and Dreams fully exhibits these features. The book pivots around the notion of 'dreams as aesthetic expressions', and considers cinema as a medium through which this notion can be tested, elaborated, and given the scholarly attention it deserves. Doubtlessly, there is something philosophically fascinating about dreams and dreaming. As Robert Curry has put it, they display 'a vividness, originality, and insightfulness that quite escapes us in our waking life.' Compared to our dreams, the fantasies of our waking life, originating as they do in our 'desires and fears' (p.x), prove to be pale, stereotypical and inferior. There has been a long tradition, in the West at least, according to which dreams and dreaming can be the source of a privileged form of knowledge, the occasion for numerous revelations, whether religious, philosophical, literary, artistic or political. Dreams can thus offer us access to a body of knowledge unattainable through the ordinary proceedings of our waking life. From a philosophical standpoint, if we only could place ourselves in a position from where to see reality as a dream, then we are on the right track: as Botz-Bornstein puts it, knowledge is 'most likely to come to us when we manage to see reality as a dream, that is, when we know, during a flash of a moment, *that* it is a dream (and perhaps even stay aware of that fact), but still *continue* dreaming because no doctor can cure us from this disease' (p.61).

Studying dreams from an aesthetic standpoint presupposes, however, a move 'from the original, clinical context within which dream theory was initially developed, to an environment established primarily by aesthetic concerns' (p.ix). This is exactly what Botz-Bornstein does in his book: he focuses on dreams not as events of our psychological life, but as "self-sufficient" phenomena that are interesting not because of their contents but because of a certain "dreamtense" through which they deploy their being' (p.x). To make his point even more clearly, he draws a parallel with the notion of 'language', which thus becomes a convenient metaphor for illustrating the structural autonomy of dreams: 'the language of dream is an object of interest as just "another language", in the same way as one can be fascinated by language from another culture without having a particularly linguistic interest in it' (pp.ix-x). In other words, dreams exhibit an internal coherence, cohesion and harmonious structures – a beauty of sorts – that make them worth studying from an aesthetic, purely formal point of view.

To put it differently, in Botz-Bornstein's reading, dreams do not necessarily need (references to) the outside world in order to make sense. Their self-sufficiency is what renders them not only 'beautiful', but also perfectly 'intelligible'. Henri Bergson once said that *c'est la veille, bien plus que le rêve, qui réclame une explication* (it is the waking life, rather than the dream, that needs an explanation) and Botz-Bornstein in a way takes this Bergsonian insight as one of his working hypotheses: 'Strictly speaking, dream is not even "strange". [...] Compared to the chaotic everyday life of the waking, dreams are not strange but rather clear and candid' (p.10). In a certain way, then, it is the 'clarity' – the formal purity – of our dreams that continually attracts us, however different their 'language' may be from the language(s) of our waking life. For Botz-Bornstein what happens in our dreams is perfectly 'logical', even though we would have to redefine the term 'logic': 'We accept the entire logical structure of the dream just because this structure appears as not having been "invented" through rational (aesthetic) calculation' (pp.106-7). Last but not least, what makes dreams aesthetically interesting is the fact that they occur outside the field of our desires, and this is something that makes Botz-Bornstein's approach differ significantly from a Freudian interpretation of the dreams: 'dream scenes or dream films are fascinating because they take place in a sphere which seems to exist beyond any desire! We can derive a desire from a surrealist symbol; from

a dream scene of Bergman or Tarkovsky we won't' (pp.118-9).

More than – say – painting, literature or music, cinema is for Botz-Bornstein the art form that is most fitting when it comes to studying dreams aesthetically. The reason for this is, first, the insight that, in several important respects, the film viewer is not unlike the dreamer. Seeing a film and dreaming a dream are not very different psychological experiences, and one of the major points of Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's book is to show that they are not different *aesthetic* experiences either. But there are also more philosophical reasons, and here he cites Susanne Langer for whom film 'is not any poetic art we have known before; it makes the primary illusion – virtual history – in its own mode. This is, essentially, the *dream mode*' (p.118).

To illustrate his argument, Botz-Bornstein explores how the aesthetics of dreams and dreaming have been treated in the *oeuvre* of several major film directors: Andrei Tarkovsky, to whom he dedicates several chapters, making this book very much a book about Tarkovsky (Chapter 1: 'From Formalist *Ostranenie* to Tarkovsky's "Logic of Dreams"; Chapter 2: 'Space and Dream: Heidegger's, Tarkovsky's, and Caspar David Friedrich's "Landscapes"; Chapter 3: "Aesthetics and Mysticism: Plotinus, Tarkovsky and the Question of 'Grace"; Chapter 4: 'Image and Allegory: Tarkovsky and Benjamin'), Alexandr Sokurov, to whom Botz-Bornstein dedicates one chapter (Chapter 3: 'On the Blurring of Lines: Alexandr Sokurov'), Ingmar Bergman, with two chapters (Chapter 4: 'Ingmar Bergman and Dream after Freud'; Chapter 5: 'A Short Note on Nordic Culture and Dreams'), Stanley Kubrick, with one chapter (Chapter 6: 'From "Ethno-Dream" to Hollywood: Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle*, Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, and the Problem of "Deterritorialization") and Wong Kar-wai (Chapter 7: 'Wong Kar-wai and the Culture of the *Kawaii*'). These chapters serve for the most part as 'case studies'. The final chapter ('Ten Keywords Concerning Filmdream') is a substantial theoretical chapter that maps out the ample thematic territory that a philosophical-aesthetic discussion of the relationship films – dreams delineates.

What Thorsten Botz-Bornstein does in this book might be best described as a philosophically-informed 'cultural hermeneutics'. *Films and Dreams* is not the work of a philosopher in any narrow sense, nor that of a film theorist or aesthetician

similarly narrowly defined, but is more – and other – than that. It is the type of interpretative approach where imagination, personal insightfulness and intellectual risk-taking are as important as textual or visual analysis, traditionally defined. The work that the practitioner of such an approach does is not unlike that of the novelist: it requires insight, improvisation, and poetic vision. It is thanks precisely to the employment of this type of cultural hermeneutics that Botz-Bornstein can bring forth, for example, a series of fascinating considerations about the mainstream and its discontents, about the relationship between centre and margins and the marginal cultures as 'dream cultures'. He thus comes to talk about a propensity among authors coming from marginal places to create works dominated by an aesthetics of dreaming. Kafka's work would be such an example – and, for that matter, any '*minor literature is dream literature* by nature' he says (p.66). Botz-Bornstein also talks about 'a particular spatial quality that lets Viennese culture appear as a dream culture' (p.66). The cinema that did most to transfer 'dream and the fantastic onto the screen' (p.55) was the Nordic cinema (represented in the book mostly by Danish and Swedish directors). Carl Theodor Dreyer, for example, 'produced an art of dream which is seen by many as one of the first expressions of dream in film' (p.55). Botz-Bornstein finds that Nordic directors 'developed a kind of "dream art" or a special cinema of dream', which is something that 'has been elaborated more in the North than elsewhere in Europe where it has always had a far more marginal position' (p.55).

This 'cinema of dream' belongs to what may be called a 'stylistic of marginality', a phenomenon to which – even though he does not use this term – Botz-Bornstein dedicates several insightful pages. At the margins one can always find the resources of non-conformism and defiance necessary for creating something new: 'it is the *distance* which Swedish cinema maintained towards mainstream European culture which has made possible the elaboration of an original language that has never been *completely* dependent on certain modern European movements' (p.56). Being at the margins is not necessarily being 'marginal'. On the contrary, sometimes it is precisely this experience of the margins that places you in an intellectually interesting position: 'To be Swedish meant to live in the periphery and in isolationism which is most likely to become a drawback, but could also become an advantage. [...] It is [...] the tension which arises from a pressure-loaded contact between the province and the centre

which appears as fascinating' (p.56). To live at the centre very often makes you oblivious of the rest. To live at the margins instead can give you, apart from a host of troubles and misfortunes, a certain sense of perspective and a depth of understanding: it does not always make you smarter, but in general it helps you avoid making stupid mistakes.

The chapter on Wong Kar-wai is probably the most representative for the type of cultural hermeneutics that Botz-Bornstein practises as he blends in it his expertise in a number of humanistic fields with a sophisticated, philosophically-grounded cosmopolitanism. Noticing Wong's singular ability to create 'films that appear to be equally Chinese and Western' (p.71), he proceeds to locate Wong's world on the complex cultural map of East Asia: 'Wong's world is neither the traditional Chinese one nor the "globalized" or international one, but that of lower middle class inhabitants of "modern" Asia who profit from the effects of globalization only in an indirect way' (pp.71-2). Wong Kar-wai, as well as the world he has created, does not belong to any specific place in particular, but to an entire subtle constellation of places and spaces, languages and cultures. These (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea) are places that 'have not simply been "Westernized" but have created a cultural style driven by a dynamics of its own that is able to exist, as an autonomous unit, next to "Western" and "Asian" cultures' (p.72). What unifies these places into one 'culture' is the phenomenon of *Kawaii* through which Botz-Bornstein reads Wong Kar-wai's *oeuvre*. *Kawaii* (which in Japanese means 'cute') denotes a 'common popular culture closely linked to aesthetic expressions of kitsch which

developed remarkably distinct features in all modernized East Asian countries' (p.72). This culture has been borne out of a sense of 'disillusionment with society' and of 'psychological helplessness' and manifests itself through 'unspirited consumption and the creation of a commodified dreamworld' (p.72). In a hermeneutic move that some may consider risky, Botz-Bornstein portrays this culture as overtly 'dandyish'. For him, what Wong does in his films, is a depiction, 'in his particularly nihilistic and detached "dandyist" manner', of a set of 'emotive lifestyles without substance determined by a non-productive existential emptiness' (p.72). The logic one comes across in Wong's films is the 'logic of dandyist Pan-Asianism', which Botz-Bornstein defines as a culture marked by parody and even a certain sense of self-irony, a culture where capitalism is continually mocked, 'good and bad guys appear as dreamy clones of themselves, and Asia is only evoked after having gone through *mneme*, that is, through the director's personal memory of "Asia"' (p.73).

To conclude, in an English-speaking academic world dominated by over-specialization and institutionalized narrow-mindedness, where the rule is disciplinary provincialism and monologism, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's *Films and Dreams* brings a breath of fresh air. I heartily salute it as a genuine sample of a cosmopolitanism that is yet to come.

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Vanishing Points

Mandy Merck, ed. *America First. Naming the Nation in US Film*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007)

In the introduction to her collection of essays examining the 'cinematic refractions of American identity', Mandy Merck notes that 'at a time when the expanded projection of US political, military, economic and cultural power draws intensified global concern, to understand the ways in which that country understands itself seems, more than ever, an essential project'. To grasp America, though, is trying; the tricks of light and 'cinematic refractions' that the nation dispels outwards –

'multifarious, amorphous and [...] grandiose' – are fleeting images, not impressions fixed in stone, or even meaning, and disappear quickly into darkness. The objective of the papers assembled here, so states Merck, is an effort to '[concretize]' (p.1) something ephemeral, the identity of a nation-state already imagined, and invented, as a beacon.

As an endeavour, this project – which, despite the attempt to catch and form a definite, is less about fixing than it is about analyzing impermanence – focuses on movies, exposed areas, that declare themselves to be American. The study begins with Kristen Whissel's essay on Cecil B. DeMille's *The Little American*, released in 1917, in which the

heroine, Angela Moore, a stand-in for the country, ‘loan[ing] [it] her innocence’ (p.38), and captured by the German army, announces that ‘I was neutral, until I saw your soldiers destroying innocent women and shooting old men!’ (p.26) A vehicle to mobilize the United States for World War I, the moving picture, so argues Whissel, casts the USA into the role of a movie goer ‘who gradually perceives with increasing astonishment and anguish the true moral stakes of the drama’ (p.32), the spectacle that is the war and whose atrocities, for a while, remained unnoticed. It is the eye, evidently, that is privileged and finally opens up to what lies hidden; blindness and subjects vanishing into America’s historical and cultural interpretations that, through their brightness, eclipse unwanted sights, constitute a recurring concern of this collection. Such matters, relating to partial vision and obscured views, frequently emerge across this assembly, in, for example, William R. Handley’s investigation of *The Vanishing American* (1925), a movie that reanimates the apparent dead – the titular ‘vanishing’ Native American – as icons of a mythic land. Handley comments on how the ‘image of the vanishing American resembled the new technology of the film it so often appeared in: the individual frames of motion-picture film become “moving” pictures only by their continual vanishing, reappearance and vanishing’ (p.48). Though this book does not address the technology of cinema, nor of artificial light, such glimpses into the medium and production, as well as reception, of images, themselves as fleeting as their subject matter, nonetheless add degrees of haunting to the body of a nation that establishes itself as much through absence, as a virgin territory and through mythologies formed in light, as it does through the presence of hard, cold matter.

Rembert Hüser’s study on *An American Romance* (1944) ‘starts as a fable of creation’, a fantasy developed through raw materials, ‘iron and men, our nation’s treasures’. Out of the soil, the depths of America, the substance of a super-state arises: victory through steel, the muscular definition of migrant, white, male bodies and ‘cutting-edge technology’ also processing images – ‘the mineral is [...] enclosed in a metal frame’, as a ‘meta(l)filmic construction’ (p.84) during the film’s title sequence. Hüser argues that iron ore and immigrant, the latter arriving on a ship through night and fog and moving towards a ‘glowing spot’, a rainbow as a ‘pledge against death and destruction’ (p.85), function as ‘embodiments of the essence of America’, of the ‘idea of ‘refinement’, a version of the utopian

concept of perfectibility updated for the industrial age’ (p.88). As darkness turns to colour, and immigrant becomes American citizen, through ‘production and reproduction’ (p.95) and the oath of allegiance, industry and family yield a mighty nation whose V-formations deliver messages of power.

At the receiving end of such distributions, airborne carriers spreading strategies of interference, lies Vietnam, amongst many others; in his chapter on both the 1958 and 2002 versions of *The Quiet American*, Peter Williams Evans argues that the film ‘addresses indirectly but firmly the implications of US involvement in the modern history of Vietnam, deconstructing the bases of both private and public structures of the USA’. Although he specifically refers to Philip Noyce’s 2002 interpretation here – which ‘remembers the horrors of the entire war in Vietnam, not just its start’ (p.128) and is not hampered by either studio politics or recent investigations of activities that are termed un-American – awkwardness and self-reflection nonetheless come to light in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s adaptation, so laced with ambiguity. In relation to the 2002 release, Evans observes Pyle, for one, an American medical-aid worker, and CIA agent in Graham Greene’s novel, and notes the character’s glasses, his ‘pretence at being interested in eye disease’, an ‘ironic reminder of American short-sightedness’ (pp.132–33) and a reference, yet again, to the peculiar angles affecting the country’s perspectives.

Barry Langford’s contribution, on *American Graffiti* (1973), opens with a discussion of Alan J. Pakula’s *Parallax View* (1974), a movie organized around a ‘preoccupation with vision’, with the “refunctions” [of] traditional American iconography’ (p.159), such as fatherhood, community, individuality that, effortlessly, twist into pathology. He thus inserts George Lucas’ film into a context of New Hollywood’s ‘gestures of disaffection’ (p.160) that – whatever their effects or even points of departure, origins referring to a lack, an America lost, a nation as ‘mourned object’ (p.163) – *American Graffiti* ignores, passes over in its ‘strategic forgetting’ (p.168) that anticipates the cultural politics and general amnesia of the 1980s. The absence of historical circumstance, according to Paul Smith, similarly defines *American History X* (1998), ‘shearing away’ (p.245) history for a moment and story of personal tragedy and redemption: the lesson, here, is ‘delimited, specialized’ as well as whitewashed (p.250), and removes racism ‘from its political context [by]

locating it instead in the private realm of the family' (p.252) and consequently offering 'narrative without analysis' (p.253). The 'drama', then, of movie and nation-state, is one of 'eliding, withholding, and otherwise forgetting history' (p.257); America, as H. N. Lukes notes in his paper on *American Gigolo* (1980), is '[cleansed] [...] of its troubling parts' (p.197), comprising its contributions to, and responsibilities in, events of death and mass-murder, while also encompassing the unassimilable figures that exist on, and disturb, the peripheries of American identity.

The delimitations of subjecthood, imposed by the 'disciplinary logic of the American state', by its institutions and mechanisms, become the centre of attention in Ana María Dopico's enquiry of *American Me* (1992). Dopico – remarking on the spectator's implication in a panoptic order that 'isolates, watches and identifies' Santana, the film's main, Hispanic protagonist, as 'delinquent and pathological' (p.220) – states that 'American identity relies on devastating foreclosures and exclusions' (p.222):

Chicanos are represented within the ghettos of prison and *barrio* [...] as figures that are socially dead and excluded from enfranchisement and civil rights. They never really exist in the eyes of the law, except in the moment of their exclusion to prison, where they literally disappear from sight and as subjects of American identity (p.231).

As a result, a negative being is produced, an inversion of 'everything that is apparently positive' (p.222) in American culture, its productivity, entrepreneurship and market capitalism, whose violence creates both individual ruin and widespread catastrophe. A 'place of constant disasters', so notes Esther Leslie in her essay on *American Splendor* (2003) – a movie approached by way of New York or a 'similar skyscraped place [...] wielding a monstrous power to crush, oppress, damage' (p.277), and, for a time, rescued by supermen – the United States, after 9/11, is also a site where, as the mythology of secret superpower disintegrates, the 'comic form has failed' (p.281). *American Splendor*, then, a story of 'cramped living

in Cleveland, boring administrative work, compromised love [and] a non-heroic struggle against illness' (p.284), is an indication of this failure, of the inability to maintain a stance of resistance against infinite wars: the 'social context of the comics has changed', and manifestations of anger seem no longer political in nature but surface because of individual misery, detached from any serious or sustained interrogation of agenda and cause. As such, the film, a 'faint echo' (p.293) of a subculture's opposition, exists as the ghost of potential, as the spectre of a transformative possibility vanishing before it fully materialized.

In a nation, and study, teeming with phantoms, it is strange that the only engagement with horror and haunting derives from an analysis of *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), a satire set elsewhere, and looking at the vulnerability of 'American families [...] to 'outside' terrors' (p.207). Although *An American Haunting* (2005) is mentioned in the introduction, there is, unfortunately, no investigation of inside terrors, of uncanny disturbances set on American soil, nor is there – beyond Barry Langford's brief indication of extraterrestrial encounters 'underpinned by an *American Graffiti*-like desire for (here otherworldly) redemption from the disenchanting present' (p.172) – any inclusion of science fiction film. Cory McAbee's *The American Astronaut* (2001) might have provided the means for a more extensive, prolonged inspection of space age fantasy and enclosures, the symptoms of, and motivations for, America's space efforts, and the encapsulation of subjects, embodying the nation-state, inside controlled environments. Such dreams of removal, momentarily approximated, though ultimately still not realized, on the journey to a dead planet reflecting the light emitted from a distant 'glowing spot', surely should figure in a study on 'cinematic refractions', considering how these visions flicker at the heart of American projections.

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