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REVIEW OF

EUGENIE BRINKEMA: THE FORMS OF THE AFFECTS
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How feelings can “inhere” in lifeless objects is a challenge to analytic thinking.
—Susanne K. Langer (*Feeling and Form*)

I.

This is a remarkable book.

Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* is remarkable for its virtuoso style: always ambitiously crafted, often elegantly written, at times bordering on the literary. It has been a long time since a film theoretical text has put so much emphasis on language and played so ostensibly with words. The last one may have been Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* (1992).

It is remarkable for the immensity of its sophistication and the erudition put on display: with countless passages in French, German, Latin and Greek, with numerous quotes from Mallarmé, Shakespeare, *Finnegan’s Wake*, and other works of high canonical literature, with a myriad of quotations from philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Derrida, woven into a quirky quote quilt. Here is a young scholar with a fascinating and intimidating grasp on continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, cultural theory, literary theory, and film theory.

The book is remarkable also for the enjoyable audacity of its attack on contemporary film studies and the cunningness with which Brinkema reprimands famous scholars like Slavoj Žižek and Noël Carroll (and lesser known ones like Sianne Ngai, Walter Metz, and Marco Abel). According to Brinkema, Žižek “vomits” up previously used examples in his later texts (293); and she claims that one can easily imagine a whole chorus of continental philosophers “retching” at Carroll’s claims about disgust (136). Not since the appearance of Daniel Frapton’s *Filmosophy* (2006) have I encountered a book that is so explicit and grandiose in its attempt to repudiate others and start from scratch. Much like D.N. Rodowick in his recent *Elegy for Theory* (2014), she wants to revalidate “ever-speculative theory” (39) but much more than the polite Rodowick she engages in a number of polemical brawls.

Finally, and most important, the oeuvre (let’s not call it a study) is remarkable for how much intellectual energy Brinkema has put into it—and how little film scholars, to whom this book is first and foremost addressed, will ultimately be able to do with it. We are dealing here, in other words, with a remarkably frustrating work of remarkably frustrating brilliance.

II.

Brinkema, currently associate professor at MIT, divides her book into a preface (“Ten Points to Begin”), nine chapters and two intervals. She focuses on the affects of nostalgia, grief,

disgust, anxiety, and joy as well as the expressive and communicative response of crying. It is difficult—maybe outright impossible—to summarize these chapters, as they are both extremely densely argued and sometimes clouded by opaque formulations. The films she discusses in more detail are Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *Six Figures Getting Sick* (1967), Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, the Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), Chris Kentis's *Open Water* (2003), and Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970).

Brinkema sets out to chastise contemporary film studies (and the humanities more generally) for not having paid enough attention to form. She “demands the total redefining of formalism in and for film studies” and orders the discipline to “dethrone the subject and the spectator” (36). Insisting on the metaphor of the film-as-text, she asks for more close readings of the textual forms of films. But, and this is one of her central moves, she connects film formalism tightly with the notion of affect, hence the title *The Forms of the Affects*. While in its insistence on the two plurals this title might look strange or mannerist at first sight, it is here that we find one of the profound provocations of the book. Brinkema wants to break with the generalizing tendencies that she finds, for instance, in cognitivism or film-phenomenology. Instead, she aims to zoom in on detailed readings of specific forms and specific affects.

However, and here we encounter yet another provocation, affects are not something to be experienced by a viewing subject, as cognitivists and film-phenomenologists would insist. They are to be found exteriorized *in* a text and *as* this text. Initially drawing on Deleuze's notion of affect, Brinkema ultimately aims to go beyond the French philosopher and his followers in film and media theory like Steven Shaviro, Brian Massumi, or Lisa Cartwright. She believes that these scholars still cling too much to *bodies* affected by affects: “Affect, as I theorize it here, has fully shed the subject, but my argument goes a step further and also loses for affects the body and bodies. This book regards any individual affect as a self-folding exteriority that manifests in, as, and with textual form” (25). Affects do not need an experiencing subject—there are forms and there are affects, and the affects *have* forms just as much as they *inhere* in forms.

This argument is slightly reminiscent of a similar one put forth by philosopher Susanne K. Langer in *Feeling and Form* (1953), a book Brinkema does not mention. For Langer there is a *similarity* between the dynamics of an art form and the dynamics of emotional life. The way a piece of music is structured, for example, is *analogous* or *isomorphic* to the feeling of transience—that is the experience of the passage of time. But Langer never goes as far as identifying a specific emotion like sadness; she rather refers to general patterns of affective experiences: to feelings and not concrete emotions. Brinkema ventures further. She does not only maintain that filmic structures resemble the structures of affects—she maintains that *specific* filmic structures resemble *specific* affects like joy or disgust. And even this formulation does not exhaust her intervention. She even claims that certain filmic structures *are* these affects. Or, to put it differently, the way a certain film is structured *is* an affect itself.

For instance, she states that in Haneke's *Funny Games* “form itself takes up the peculiarly painful suffering” of grief (99). She intends to analyze grief not in terms of narrative content, but as a matter of form, composition and structure—and the structure “that *is* the affect of grief” is the tableau (99). In her detailed analysis she comes to the conclusion that “it is the form of Haneke's film above all that grieves” (100). Now, it is one thing to say that a film is “expressive of” grief, as the philosopher of music Peter Kivy might claim for a piece of music; and it is quite another thing to assert that a filmic form is able to grieve. Or is this just a play on words?

III.

In order to answer this question let us come back to the use of language. In her book on form Brinkema lights a veritable formal firework herself. It would be an understatement to claim that her rhetoric is excessive. Even in her many elegant ekphrastic descriptions of filmic scenes language imposes itself with mighty force, and in her more opaque passages the medium fully obliterates and obscures. Just to pick a random example, here is how she summarizes Nietzsche's take on joy: "The ethical stance of joy involves an avowal that one will will [*sic*] that which one will will [*sic*] might return, that one will refuse to affirm a weakly willing of the just-once—this ambitious jubilation deriving from what Deleuze calls Nietzsche's loathing of 'little compensations, the little pleasures, the little joys'" (244).

Like so many deconstructivists she is feverishly fond of the history of words, performing at various places, and with dizzying speed, "an etymological dance" (243), as she calls it, never afraid of the specter of etymological fallacy. And just like Derrida she has a knack for defamiliarizing neologisms. What for the French philosopher was *différance*, for Brinkema is *mise-n'en-scène*: "Mise-n'en-scène suggests that in addition to reading for what is put into the scene, one must also read for all of its permutations: what is *not* put into the scene; what is put into the *non-scene*, and what is *not enough* put into the scene" (46). Never shy of showing us how to juggle with words, she goes particularly wild on the homonymy of the words *palate/palette/pallet* in a chapter on Greenaway.

This might be tolerated as mere playfulness. More problematic is Brinkema's fondness for sentence structures in which some kind of agency is ascribed to form or time or the image, as if these were active and sentient beings. Just consider the sentence in which she reproaches Thomas Elsaesser for not asking "how form might imbue itself with intensities" in his discussion of melodrama (43). Or when she claims that the loss of a person or a thing in the filmic diegesis is not only a trauma to a character in the film, but it is also "a formal trauma to film and its endlessly recuperative ability to make absent things present" (94). Hence much like recent scholars who have argued that images live, act, and desire—think of W.J.T. Mitchell or Horst Bredekamp—Brinkema does indeed claim that films have affects (for a recent critique of such claims, see Wiesing 2013).

Apart from such questionable metaphysical assumptions her readings also display a problematic methodological use of language. This becomes particularly evident when looking at one of her stylistic darlings: the hyperbole. Her verbal exaggerations often *create* what Brinkema sets out to *describe*. For instance, when she talks about a light beam at the compositional center of the famous long-take scene that follows the shooting of the son in *Funny Games*, she characterizes it as "violently pure," with a "sharp" and "forceful" shape. What other viewers might consider a neutral light source becomes strongly affect-laden through hyperbolic language. In other words, Brinkema writes the affect into the scene.

Brinkema might respond that she does indeed experience this light beam as violent and sharp and forceful. But then she would resort to her *own* experience as the fundament of her description—a viewer response that she otherwise wants to desperately get rid of. Brinkema often displays an admirably ambitious will to be entirely anticommonsensical, but this sometimes comes at the price of making sense. As a phenomenologist, I have a hard time accepting the harsh separation of affects from someone experiencing these affects. And Brinkema

does not seem consistent here either. Or how would she explain the use of the qualifiers ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ when talking about affects, as when she calls disgust the “strongest negative affect” (178)? An affect is usually qualified as positive or negative because of the pleasure or displeasure it evokes, precisely for someone experiencing it.

This is not the only time when her arguments strain logic. At one point she notes that the more rigorously structured a film and hence the more formalist it is, the more affective it is (178). Only two pages later she claims that even seemingly antiformalist genre films—like *Open Water*—are “governed by a rigorous formalism” (180). But if everything is rigorously structured and rigorously formalist, then every film is extremely affective and the whole point is lost. Moreover, since she insists on decoupling form from narrative thematics, one would expect a specific affect to reoccur in every instance of the form that Brinkema has ascribed to it. For instance, grief must ‘inhere’ in every filmic tableau. But this is certainly not the case. While in Haneke’s *Funny Games* grief might be related to the stasis of the tableau, the static tableaux in Fassbinder’s *Katzelmacher* (1969) more readily refer to boredom and weariness.

IV.

For all her acute polemics against contemporary film and affect studies (and affect studies within film studies), it is also astonishing how little she engages with current approaches to film form and style: from David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s neoformalism to Barry Salt’s statistical style analysis or the work of V.F. Perkins and the journal *Movie*, to name but a few. If film studies should entirely think over its understanding of form, it would have been illuminating to hear what these existing approaches do wrong. Moreover, one might have expected her to take a look at formalism in musicology and the philosophy of music, to which I have hinted above and in which the debate about the expression of emotions and feelings in musical structure and style has a long tradition (for a helpful overview, see Alpers 2004). In general, Brinkema is rather generous with her omissions of seminal scholarly literature. In her discussion of crying there is no word of Helmuth Plessner; when she goes into detail about the importance of the body in humanities discourses she does not mention Vivian Sobchack; when dealing with the relation of affect and film Raymond Bellour’s idea of the unfolding of emotions and the notion of “vitality affect,” which he derives from Daniel Stern, do not occur.

Considering her goal of reclaiming form for film studies, she reserves an astonishing amount of space to anything but films. Whole chapters are devoted to exegeses of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* or Freud’s “Inhibition, Symptom, Anxiety.” I do not dispute that these readings are in and of themselves intriguing or even brilliant. But there is a marked disproportion: I often found myself wondering whether the time and space dedicated to these texts should not have spent on further readings of films. This is all the more true once we take into account that some of her analyses are highly illuminating, as when she treats *Open Water* as a kind of temporalized abstract painting à la Rothko.

One could also question her use of willfully one-sided arguments, as when in her chapter on crying she erects a straw man—the claim that tears are nothing but an expression of emotion—only to fight it with all her rhetoric power. One could bemoan that she often merely rehearses a number of familiar moves in the gymnastics of contemporary film and visual studies: away from narrative, away from representation, away from the senses of vision towards touch. Finally, one may criticize her fondness of the deconstructivist sleight of hand that is always able to magically turn a seemingly contingent and insignificant detail into

something important. Just take her lengthy interrogation of whether the drop of water on the face of Marion Crane, lying dead on the bathroom floor in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, is a teardrop or a splash of water from the shower.

Taking into consideration that Brinkema's long essay is also a book about taste, one might claim that, in the end, it is a matter of taste what we expect from a book in film studies: playfulness or insightfulness, cleverness or a gain in knowledge? Depending on one's taste, the affects this book on *The Forms of the Affects* produces may take many forms: admiration or frustration, wonder or anger, surprise or puzzlement. While I have a high regard for Brinkema's frightening breadth of reading, her clever way of associating, and her dazzling stylistics, I see little immediate gain to be taken from this remarkable book. But for all its shortcomings, it may indeed have an important merit, albeit in the long run and only indirectly. At one point in the future we may recognize that our resistance to Brinkema's polemics has made us more aware of the way filmic forms and affects resemble one another, how form informs the viewers' affects, how affect is more than a matter of characters and narration. Time will tell.

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