

**JULIAN HANICH**  
**REVIEW OF**  
**EYAL PERETZ**  
**THE OFF-SCREEN**  
**AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CINEMATIC FRAME**  
**STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017.**

[A slightly revised version of this pre-print has been published in  
*Screen*. Vol. 59, No. 1, Spring 2018. Please refer to the printed version.]

“What’s in a frame?” Eyal Peretz asks at the very beginning of his new book *The Off-Screen*. It’s an excellent question not only because of the pun, but also because it draws attention, right from the start, to that fascinating territory the frame simultaneously opens up and relegates beyond its borders: the virtual space film scholars call “the off.” Although it has a firm place in the history in of film theory – from Bazin and Burch via Bonitzer to Deleuze and Chion – the off remains largely terra incognita ripe for further exploration. A study that promises to undertake “an investigation of the cinematic frame” – as does the book in its subtitle – therefore elicits exhilarated anticipation. Does Peretz’s complex and complicated film-philosophical work live up to it?

Peretz, professor of comparative literature at Indiana University Bloomington, considers the cinema as the culminating point of a new logic of framing that preoccupies the work of art since the onset of modernity (which for him coincides with the Renaissance and painters like Peter Bruegel the Elder). Beginning with an intricate allegorical reading of Rembrandt’s *The Sacrifice of Isaac* Peretz shows how the modern painting with its new form of framing stages an upheaval of an old cultural logic: the paternal system of the monotheistic religions gets unraveled and transformed. The angel who intervenes from the outside and stops Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac stands allegorically for the new off-screen force that replaces the old powerful center. A new indeterminacy, even emptiness is introduced – “a ghostly, invisible outside” (9). The work of art in modernity thus visualizes – and is the most adequate expression of – a post-metaphysical age of transcendental homelessness: Images fall apart, the center cannot hold, we might summarize, paraphrasing W.B. Yeats.

But the “frame that unframes” (12), in Peretz’ felicitous paradoxical formulation, also makes room for new possibilities: for openness, new orienta-

tions, less hierarchies, new identities. It can allow a propagandistic filmmaker like Leni Riefenstahl to suggest that Hitler's army extends endlessly. Yet it can also provide Charlie Chaplin the means to satirize the capitalistic mode of production, when the assembly line in *Modern Times*, stretching into off-screen space, produces ever more of the same in an accelerated fashion. According to Peretz, the off-screen is a gift and a curse at the same time.

Looking closely at the beginning of *Hamlet*, the Bruegel painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Andrej Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, Peretz moves on to show that there is a continuity between the off-stage in theater, the off-frame in painting and the off-screen in film: "art in modernity articulates itself according to the same logic across media" (23). Yet he also claims that something new happens with the advent of cinema: Because what's visible on the screen is simultaneously continuous and discontinuous "with the actual world," the cinema creates "a more mysterious communication" between on-screen and off-screen (37). The book does not contain analytic clarifications of the concepts of off-screen space or the frame, nor does it explore the film historical mutations of the *hors-champ*. In the ensuing chapters Peretz rather mobilizes the off-screen as a tool that enables him close, mostly allegorical, philosophical-political readings of canonical films that support his thesis about the "loss of the center" (149). His interpretations focus on D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, Fritz Lang's *M*, Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, but he also discusses lesser enshrined films like Howard Hawks' *Monkey Business* and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*. These chapters are as dense as they are difficult to summarize, but they provide thought-provoking, illuminating, at times brilliant observations: on the close-up, on the difference between "Hitlerism" and "Chaplinism," on how films can reactivate various stages of human life down to infancy etc. (Leaving again through my copy of the book, I realize how often I have scribbled "Interesting!" at the margins.)

And yet I have reservations about this book. These reservations come from four sources: rhetorical, film scholarly, formal and conceptual. Let me begin with the rhetorical concerns. Peretz has a penchant for grandiose proclamations and provocative generalizations worthy of being called Žižekian: "Facing the modern work [of art], we no longer know by whom or from where or for what reason we are addressed or called. We no longer know who we are" (18), he writes. Really? The screen, according to Peretz, "always seems to be haunted by a deprivation, a loss" (37). This might or might not be the case, but aren't there differences between films? Surely the cinema knows differing degrees of how *centrifugal* its images appear, to use a term by Bazin, and thus how strongly off-screen space comes into play. What is more, Peretz's hyperbolic language often has a melodramatic haut

gout, as when he claims that the off-screen takes the world away from us and therefore opens “a dimension of mourning” (39), while at the same the world is also “welcomed joyfully as a gift” (40). Nor is he alien to the gothic language of “ghosts” and “hauntings” and the apocalyptic vocabulary of “complete disruption” and “the burning of time” (205).

Equally unnerving is Peretz’s hedging quirk: The book is rife with formulations like “as it were”, “to an extent”, “in a way”, “so to speak”, “almost always”... Typically, he combines a “perhaps” with a superlative: “‘Who’s there?’ is perhaps the most fundamental question of what we can call the modern condition” (17). Or: “More than any other art, perhaps, film is dedicated to [a] complex fusion between continuity and discontinuity” (37). This two-steps-forward-one-step-back rhetoric finds reflection in his style of argumentation that often begins with a extravagant thesis and then retreats, via a hedging, to a less provocative position.

Now, it’s the fate of those who work with wide-ranging claims that nitpickers like myself will inevitably ask nagging “But what about...?” questions (my copy of the book is also littered with question marks at the margins). Here we enter the territory of lacking film scholarly comprehensiveness and accuracy. For Peretz, the frame opens up a “fictional realm.” But is this always the case, also for documentary films? For Peretz, the cinema is a photography-based medium. But does this not radically exclude animation film? For Peretz, the off-screen is predominantly a matter of invisibility. Knowing full well that it’s one of the most hackneyed reprovals in film studies, I still want to know: What’s the role of sound? Even more intriguingly, what about contemporary virtual-reality films: Do they have a frame at all? If so: What kind of frame is it?

A bit like Deleuze in his cinema books, Peretz relies on the canon of great filmmakers. Griffith’s *Intolerance* announces nothing less than the birth “perhaps [sic!] of the cinema in general – indeed, our own birth as cinematic spectators” (61). Peretz is interested in Griffith because his work probes what the new medium is capable of. Griffith apparently did something his precursors were not yet able to grasp. But what is qualitatively different in his engagement of off-screen space *in comparison to* what came before? Thomas Elsaesser has shown how the Lumière brothers investigated the borders of the frame and hence probed off-screen space.<sup>1</sup> Since Peretz discusses a scene from *Intolerance* with workers going into a factory, it would have been a close step to compare it to *Workers Leaving the Lumière Fac-*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Eine Erfindung ohne Zukunft: Thomas A. Edison und die Gebrüder Lumière’, in *Filmgeschichte und frühes Kino: Archäologie eines Medienwandels* (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2002), pp. 58ff.

*tory in Lyon*. Peretz's interest lies predominantly in close readings, not in close analyses.

Already his starting premise leaves some doubts: Working with a wide notion of modernity, Peretz's claim about the *newness* of the frame in modern painting remains vague, because he hardly ever points out what is *old* about pre-Renaissance frames. Isn't Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* – arguably not a Renaissance work of art – one of the most intriguing paintings of the space beyond the frame ever? And are not some of Giotto's paintings also invoking an off-screen space? Peretz might answer that Giotto's stable frescoes are unlike the movable frames of the modern painting and that they refer to a transcendental elsewhere, while cinema merely points to a lack of transcendence. However, not everyone might agree that the cinema is “the art of an ‘immanent outside’” (74). His selection of filmmakers supports his position, but what if he had to deal with the use of off-screen space in Bresson and Ozu, Malick and Tarr, Reygadas and Apichatpong? It would have been interesting to hear how Peretz positions himself to the claims made, for instance, in Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*.<sup>2</sup>

This brings me to my formal concerns. Peretz exempts himself – in a disputable hierarchical move – from discussing his precursors. In a single footnote he collects the main studies on off-screen space – and hardly ever comes back to them. This nonchalance makes it difficult to determine the exact surplus of his intervention. Moreover, Peretz tends to forget bibliographical references. Here, more accurateness would have been called for.

This also goes for more conceptual clarity. The term “screen” is a shape-shifting signifier able to cause dizziness – even the sky, a flag and laundry are treated as screens. The contours of the word “frame” become even blurrier over the course of the book: from the physical pictorial frame to the edges of the screen to the “paternal frame” and the “metaphysical frame.” The industrialist in *Modern Times* can be come “a new type of frame” (142); genres are called a frame; and castration can be “understood as a framing operation” (53), too. It would need a scholar like Edward Branigan – who once distinguished 15 meanings of the term – to disambiguate Peretz's usages.<sup>3</sup>

I wish Peretz had been a more sensitive *cicerone* who takes his readers by the hand and guides them through the complex labyrinth of his ideas. Instead, I often found myself lost in thoughts.

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 102-115.