

introduction, namely Shaviro, Casetti and Denson) show enthusiasm for the transformation of cinematic techniques into new constellations.

Of particular interest and importance is *The State of Post-Cinema*'s expansion of the frame of postcinema beyond Western European and North American references to include Arab and Iranian film cultures. It also takes into account new questions of circulation and forms of digital criticism that emerge in our age of postcinema. For example, in her essay 'Arab storytelling in the digital age', Alexandra Buccianti discusses the rise of satirical videos and vlogs on *YouTube* in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring in terms of a new generation of digital Arab youth. In 'Why stories matter', Strohmaier investigates, among other works, Jafar Panahi's *This is Not a Film* (2011), which was famously smuggled out of Iran on a USB stick to evade censorship. These and other essays make this volume distinct in the transcultural awareness it brings to bear on the question of postcinema.

The last section of the book offers a far-reaching analysis of filmic cultures of circulation, distribution and filmmaking. In 'Distributing moving image art after digitization', Erika Balsom discusses forms of distribution of the moving image in contemporary art in regard to the tension between rarity and reproducibility that arises with digital media. Questioning the reconcilability of these two opposing tensions, she focuses on Matthew Barney's *Cremaster 3* (2002), Amie Siegel's *Provenance* (2013) and Christian Boltanski's *Storage Memory* (2012). 'In de-coding or re-coding', Kevin B. Lee reflects on his desktop documentary *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) in the context of the videographic scholarship that has emerged in recent years. The editors' stated focus on the 'low end' of today's circulation of moving images aligns the volume with some of the most exciting and political work in media studies today, such as Hito Steyerl's account of the 'poor image'. The very expansiveness of the approach to postcinema – which facilitates such promising connections – does at times make for an unwieldy expansive definition of the phenomenon. But judging by the other two edited volumes, such unwieldiness is constitutive of postcinema, as a point of differentiation and of new configurations, and of the discourse of postcinema, whose generativity resides in no small part within its capacious ambiguities.

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Eyal Peretz, *The Off-Screen: An Investigation of the Cinematic Frame*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017, 256 pp.

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'What's in a frame?', Eyal Peretz asks at the very beginning of his new book *The Off-Screen*. It is an excellent question, not only because of the

pun but also because it draws attention, right from the start, to that fascinating territory that the frame simultaneously opens up and relegates beyond its borders: the virtual space that film scholars call ‘the off’. Although it has a firm place in the history in of film theory – from André Bazin and Noël Burch, via Pascal Bonitzer, to Gilles Deleuze and Michel 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 this 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 has preoccupied the work of art since the onset of modernity (which for him coincides with the Renaissance and painters like Pieter 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 becomes unravelled 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 centre. A new indeterminacy, even emptiness, is introduced – ‘a ghostly, invisible outside’ (p. 9). The work of art in modernity thus visualizes – and is the most adequate expression of – a postmetaphysical age of transcendental homelessness: images fall apart, the centre cannot hold, we might summarize, paraphrasing W.B. Yeats.

But the ‘frame that unframes’ (p. 12), in Peretz’s felicitous paradoxical formulation, also makes room for new possibilities: for openness, new orientations, fewer hierarchies, new identities. It can allow the propagandist filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl to suggest that Hitler’s army extends endlessly; yet it can also provide Charlie Chaplin with the means to satirize the capitalistic mode of production, when the assembly line in *Modern Times* (1936), 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* (1972), Peretz proceeds to show that there is a continuity between the off-stage in theatre, the off-frame in painting and the off-screen in film: ‘art in modernity articulates itself according to the same logic across media’ (p. 23). Yet he also claims that something new happens with the advent of cinema; because what is 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 (p. 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 instead

mobilizes the off-screen as a tool that enables him to make close, mostly allegorical, philosophical-political readings of canonical films that support his thesis about the ‘loss of the center’ (p. 149). His interpretations focus on D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), but he also discusses lesser enshrined films such as Howard Hawks’s *Monkey Business* (1952) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). These chapters are as dense as they are difficult to summarize, but they provide thought-provoking, illuminating and at times brilliant observations: on the closeup, on the difference between ‘Hitlerism’ and ‘Chaplinism’, on how films can reactivate various stages of human life down to infancy, and so on. (Leafing again through my copy of the book, I realize how often I have scribbled ‘Interesting!’ in the margins.)

And yet I have reservations about this book. These 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’ (p. 18), he writes. Really? The screen, according to Peretz, ‘always seems to be haunted by a deprivation, a loss’ (p. 37). This might or might not be the case, but are there no differences between films? Surely the cinema knows differing degrees of how *centrifugal* its images appear, to use Bazin’s term, and thus how strongly off-screen space comes into play. What is more, Peretz’s hyperbolic language often has a melodramatic *haut goût* – as, for instance, when he claims that the off-screen takes the world away from us and therefore opens ‘a dimension of mourning’ (p. 39), while at the same time the world is also ‘welcomed joyfully as a gift’ (p. 40). Nor is he alien to the gothic language of ‘ghosts’ and ‘hauntings’, and the apocalyptic vocabulary of ‘complete disruption’ (p. 40) and ‘the burning of time’ (p. 205).

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

Of course it is the inevitable fate of those who work with wide-ranging claims to be asked nagging ‘But what about ...?’ questions by nitpickers like myself (my copy of the book is also littered with question marks in its margins). Here we enter a territory suffering from its lack of film scholarly comprehensiveness and accuracy. For Peretz the frame opens

up a ‘fictional realm’; but is this always also the case 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; but I want to ask, knowing full well that it is one of the most hackneyed reprovals in film studies, what then is 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’ (p. 61). Peretz is interested in Griffith because his work investigated the potential capabilities of the new medium. 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.¹ Since Peretz discusses a scene from *Intolerance* in which workers go into a factory, it would have been a small step to compare it to *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*; but Peretz’s interest lies predominantly in close readings, not in close analyses.

Already his starting premise leaves room for 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. Is Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* – arguably not a Renaissance work of art – not 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. Not everyone, however, might agree that the cinema is ‘the art of an “immanent outside”’ (p. 74). His selection of filmmakers supports his position, but what if he had to deal with the use of off-screen space in Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu, Terrence Malick and Béla Tarr, Carlos Reygadas and Apichatpong Weerasethakul? 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*.²

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 then hardly ever comes back to them. This nonchalance makes it difficult to determine the exact surplus of his intervention; moreover he tends to forget biographical references, and here more accuracy should be 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

1 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. 58 ff.

2 Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

- 3 Edward Branigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 102–15.

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 become ‘a new type of frame’ (p. 142); genres are called a frame; and castration can be ‘understood as a framing operation’ (p. 53), too. It would need a scholar like Edward Branigan – who once distinguished fifteen meanings of the term – to disambiguate Peretz’s usages.³

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

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