in a time like ours of processed minds and predigested thoughts, the publication of Roy Clifton's wonderful book *The Figure In Film* is an act of extraordinary heroism. For it posits the leap of faith that there has to be more to film theory than the rigid codifications established by the university’s stranglehold on thinking about film. This is not as rash a gesture as it might seem: after all, the greatest of film theorists, Kraucauer, Baudry, Zinzer, Munsterberg, were able to speculate upon the meaning of cinema before film theory’s turn to an academic discipline, and it is perhaps in the light of the hope of a renewal with that unfettered tradition that Clifton’s compulsion of film figuration now appears.

Like Kraucauer before him, Clifton approaches the topic film as a solitary individual, as a man of letters reflecting upon a lifetime of film-viewing. A lawyer by training and educator until his retirement, after which *The Figure In Film* was written. Clifton has here attempted to expand upon an inquiry whether figures can be found in film, and what is their character there.

Such a passionate enterprise as Clifton’s is not without its ironies or problems. One is that this book which attempts to break through what the author terms “the sclerosis of critical style” and, it is hoped, reach an audience outside the university, had to be published by a university press (the University of Delaware Press) with the para-institutional support of the Ontario Institute for Studies in the Humanities.

In this sense, the problem of an alternative discourse on film, caught between the one hand and the moronic Charybdis of the moronic, is best approached as an individual, as a man of letters as a writer of *A Dictionary of Figuration*. Here, this from the section on in Clifton’s excellent chapter on montage:

> The orator links his units of discourse by the figure metaphor. It brings together in one sentence what you have done and what you propose to do. It implies a desire to make mention of his noble enter­prises in France, and now I will reduce his worthy acts done near to Rome.

The film dissolve does the same. There are two images on the screen at once, the older growing fainter and the new one stronger, and the new image seems to arise from the old. (p. 226)

What allows Clifton to range so readily from literary figures to film analogues is that he has a hunch that knowledge of literary figuration applied to an equally impressive quantity of film experimentation, is his belief, ultimately, that “Only a ranter can write significantly. Clifton concludes with a reference to the German mystical Jacob Boehme for whom the visible, tangible world was a figure for an even greater significance. In this mystical turn, however, Clifton is reunited with the hermeneutic tradition of contem­porary university film theory that is in the process of recognizing the limitations of semiotics and, reluctantly perhaps, shedding that hope of a science of the cinema for the transcendent heights of infinite interpretation.

What then to make of Clifton’s monu­ment? Except at classifying what is perhaps inessential about film? Does *The Figure In Film* free film figuration from the clutches of the word or only from certain organizations of words and not others? It would seem that Clifton’s erudite recovery of the wealth of literary figuration, he has only that much more firmly bonded film to the “prison house of language” from which he had hoped to free it.

And yet, though perhaps for all the wrong reasons, Clifton has achieved a dictionary of the valuable: he has provided a dictionary of figurative language, not a dictionary in the semiotic sense of a paradigmatic law, nonetheless tends towards a true reflection of the endless possibilities in film.

Thus one can say of *The Figure In Film* that it is, one of the leading American academic film theo­rists, has written of figuration in general: “... it helps right the topos-turvy world of film studies by restoring to the texts themselves an integrity worthy of discussion, and by fostering an inter­play of theory and interpretation rather than a dominance of theory.

Such a rectification is no slight achievement, even if it remains happily uncertain whether the texts in ques­tion of Moten &古人 (or even texts at all). For it opens up the hope that others will, like Clifton, have the courage as film theorists to a day ask themselves “What is cinema?” and discover the perennial beginnings of an ever-renewable film theory.

Michael Doerr

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*SAD TO REPORT, this book is a good deal less than the sum of its parts.

One discerned, however, is some good new work: James Leach on the Paul Almond trilogy, Lianne McLarty on Bruce Elder, and Elder’s latest foray into Jack Chambers, on The Love of London.

There are also some useful reprints: two out-of-the-way Peter Harcourt pieces from *Human Elements*, Elder’s study of “The Photographic Image in Canadian Avant-Garde Film,” originally written for the *Canadian Arts Exhibition* in Berlin, *Leach on Canadian Cinemas* in *Pueblo*, and *Feldman on the Far Sands* and the demise of docudrama. *Clandfield and Surfard on Perniaut, the* pertinent feminism of Brenda Long and Kay Armatage, *the book looks good*. Well produced, hefty, portable, it’s well edited with occasionally useful introductions to each article, and with minimal errors. For example, the usual “infers” for implies” and on p. 226.

The book fails to prove that ours is a cinema culture that has learned from its mistakes and that film itself from the shuttle between centre stage and oblivion” (preface, p. ix). Though it promises “the death of the cinema as we know it,” it seems Clifton has achieved to achieve the book opens by resetting seven film reviews by the cloy “Marshall Delaney” will win the film prize. As film reviews go and they do — they’re bad, but they have no place in a serious film anthology. The writing reviews. The plots are detailed for those who have not seen the movie, with that gee-whiz, “Why shouldn’t Piers Handling’s piece on “A Canadian Cronenberg” when the ink has barely clotted in the year since that book first published. Razzia notes after his 1980 article on David Rimmer’s films that his present thinking is better represented by what he wrote for the Van­cover Art Gallery, “It’s all well. So why was that not run instead (as well)? Or is the 27 pieces in the book, only three are wholly new works. This suggests that our film study is not vital but running on the spot. And worse: that nothing significant has happened in Canadian film since these studies were first published. The opening driblet of reviews does not do the new films or the old art justice. Who needs a new run of yesterday’s papers?

This would just be irksome if the Canadian film publishing scene was as healthy as the Meatballs gravy train. But it’s not. There’s a limit to how many Canadian film anthologies the market will accept, and it’s hard to see. However well-intentioned, this anthology will end up doing more harm than good.

In this context one might also raise a question: does one-third of the papers (9 of 27) come from Clifton and his two “co-conspirators” (his term on p.x), the dynamic duo of Hand­ling and Hardt, with the rest all, but some of their space might have been more widely invested. Except for Razu
it's lone call from the West, all the contributors are in the Toronto-Ottawa hub. Granted this is a Toronto festival publication, but surely a book on our national cinema deserves a wider representation of voices.

Now, I certainly don’t wish to imply that we were any self-serving on this project. Everyone involved is well aware that the problem was too little time being available for a project that in the present state of things was far too important to be treated so hastily.

If the big Canadian film retrospective at this year’s festival has been two years in the planning, then should have been this book. It should have been an anthology of new work, not a recycling of (however good) old. It might even have exploited this opportunity to see rare Canadian films. Writers might have been commissioned to work out of pre-existing films retrieved for the Festival.

The book might have been announced and prepared during this festival for publication at next year’s. What a chance for new overviews of Larry Kent, Labrecque, Beaudin, Marlewicz, Arcand, the aesthetics of the miniseries, the Plouffe mythology, the regional independent possibilities for new work were endless. Micheleine Lanctot’s new feature, Sonatine, cries out for the kind of close reading we have lavished upon Antonioni. This book done, where is the outlet for new writing? The haste may have wasted a rare opportunity in Canadian film publishing. If Canadian film and film scholarship are as solid as the preface claims, then this book should have been developed, not compiled.

Probably the most questionable re-printing is Bruce Elder’s diatribe against Not A Love Story, from The Journal of Canadian Studies. Its lack of critical weight becomes a glaring problem when it’s an anthology’s only perspective upon an important film. Elder’s ingenuous assumption that the Canadian documentary has pretended “to impart knowledge rather than mere opinion,” was precluded in Grierson’s definition of the form as the creative treatment of reality. Bonnie Sherr Klein’s candor in declaring her quest and her intersection throughout the film clearly preempt Elder’s objection. Nor is there an inconsistency in Ms. Klein and her lead, Linda Lee Tracy, claiming unconcern about the issue before they made the film, and yet structuring the film as a deeply felt attack. It takes a willful suspension of film savvy for Elder so to confuse filming time with film time.

Then Elder imposes on the film a variety of claims that is does not make. For example, that sexually explicit imagery cannot be life-affirming and joyously erotic, or that an image inevitably directs behavior. He has fun knocking down these straw persons, but he – not the film – raised them. He similarly imputes a theological evangelism to the film, again unrestrained by what’s actually in it. Thus one man’s complaint that “Everything is images. We’re a victim of fantasy” becomes for Elder an allusion to Satanism, “for in the traditional view, Satan is the conjurer of illusions” (p. 241). Elder twists the film’s ideas and emotions into terms that he can bash. That’s not film criticism.

Finally, what on earth does this statement have to do with a discussion of images of sexual violence against women? There is, of course, much to be said for the view that a tender sexuality has a divine aspect. This notwithstanding, one should not be misled into believing that it is the whole story about sexuality: even the most basic consideration of sexuality’s functional aspects reveals the importance of a harder and tougher sexuality. After all, intercourse is not just caring; the act by which we propagate the species involves, for the male, a thrust that must not be simply tender but must also be forceful to a degree – sometimes even forceful enough to thrust against his partner’s pain. (p. 239)

This may be a useful annotation to one’s worn copy of The Orangutanga, but as a response to Not A Love Story, it’s outrageous nonsense. The hardness occasionally useful in making love hardly justifies the imagery of violent misogyny.

As the inclusion of this “review” suggests, Take Two seems to be a collection of convenience, not an advance upon or sequel to The Canadian Film Reader. Although most of the contents is useful, almost all is already available to film scholars. This important opportunity should have been devoted to new work.

Maurice Yacower

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