

BOOK REVIEWS

THE FIGURE IN FILM

by N. Roy Clifton
An Ontario Film Institute Book
Associated University Presses
(Mississauga, Ontario),
1983, pp. 394,
ISBN 0-87413-189-8, \$63.50

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, Bazin, Munsterberg, were able to speculate upon the meaning of cinema before film's reduction to an academic discipline, and it is perhaps in the light of the hope of a renewal with that unfettered tradition that Clifton's compilation of film figures is best approached.

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," based upon almost 50 years of film-going in a variety of countries.

Such a passionate enterprise as Clifton's is not without its ironies or problems. One of the ironies 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 (at the University of Delaware) with the para-institutional support of the Ontario Film Institute.

In this sense, the problem of an alternative discourse on film, caught between the one hand and the moronic Charybdis of mass-publication on the other, remains entire. A related irony is that the price of *The Figure In Film* does nothing to make access any easier: at \$60-plus for the volume, this virtually confines the book to the institutional circuit or restricts it to the most dedicated of general readers. One can only hope that a paperback edition will eventually make the work more affordable to the ordinary pocketbook.

For *The Figure In Film* contains an enormous implicit challenge to a certain, largely semiological, theoretization of film, if not to film theory as a whole, that is reminiscent of turn-of-the-century phenomenology's gauntlet thrown at the reigning abstractions of Kantianism. Echoing phenomenology's war-cry, "To the things themselves!", Clifton discretely questions "theories (that)... risk using the films to justify notions held beforehand, rather than let the films form the notions." For Clifton there is a primary "thereness" of figuration in film ("I... write of what I see on the screen") because "We live in figures, and breach our bounds of space-time by

the tool of metonymy."

An image or picture is vivid, cogent, and memorable. Writers and orators have always known this; common speech concedes it; it would be strange if directors ignored it.

The Figure In Film thus sets out to retrieve and demonstrate the intentionality of figuration in film, a demonstration that significantly remains grounded in displaying figuration's use-value (as opposed to the semiological significance of exchange-value), for, as Clifton puts it, "Film figures must free themselves from the word."

The Figure In Film groups figures into eight categories: association, likeness, contrast, omission, sequence, the aural and inward, and the fantastic. Culling examples from hundreds of films from Antonioni to Zinnemann, as well as from the body of world literature, Clifton has woven an extraordinarily rich tapestry, a kind of Borgesian bestiary of figurative creatures such as hyrmos, anadiplosis, metabasis, hypophora, prolepsis, anastrophe, or hypallage. Only one example must suffice here, this from the section on dissolve in Clifton's excellent chapter on montage:

The orator links his units of discourse by the figure *metabasis*. It brings together in one sentence what you have done and what you propose to do: *I have hitherto made mention of his noble enterprises in France, and now I will rehearse 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. 228)

What allows Clifton to range so readily from literary figures to their film analogue, aside from a staggering knowledge of literary figuration applied to an equally impressive quantity of film exemplification, is his belief, ultimately, that "Only metaphor can describe us." Significantly, Clifton concludes with a reference to the German mystic Jacob Boehme for whom the visible, tangible world was a figure for an inner one of greater significance. In this mystical turn, however, Clifton is reunited with the hermeneutical tradition in contemporary university film theory that is in the process of recognizing the limitations of semiology 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 monumental attempt at classifying what is perhaps ineffable 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, in 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 something invaluable: he has provided a dictionary of figuration that, if it is not a dictionary in the semiological 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* what Dudley Andrew, one of the leading American academic film theorists, has written of figuration in general: "... it helps right the topsy-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 the former."

Such a rectification is no slight achievement, even if it still remains happily uncertain whether the texts in questions are literary or filmic (or even texts at all). For it keeps open the hope that others will, like Clifton, have the courage as filmviewers to one day ask themselves "What is cinema?" and so discover the perennial beginnings of an ever-renewable film theory.

Michael Dorland ●

TAKE TWO: A TRIBUTE TO FILM IN CANADA,

edited by Seth Feldman,
Irwin Publishing in conjunction with
the Festival of Festivals,
1984, pp. 320,
ISBN 0-7725-1506-9, \$14.95.

Sad to report, this book is a good deal less than the sum of its parts.

On the credit side, the book has 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 Hart 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 OKanada exhibition in Berlin, Leach on Canadian cinema(s) in the '70s, Seth Feldman on *The Tar Sands* and the demise of docudrama, David Clandfield and Harcourt on Perrault, the pertinent feminism of Brenda Longfellow and Kay Armatage. The book looks good. Well produced, hefty but portable, it's well edited with occasionally useful introductions to each article, and with minimal errors in usage (e.g., the usual "infern" for "implies" on p. 226).

But the book fails to prove that ours is "a cinema culture that has learned from its struggles and that may, finally, free itself from the shuttle between centre stage and oblivion" (preface, p. ix). Though it promises "the depth that the best of our filmmakers and film critics have been able to achieve," the book opens by resurrecting seven film reviews by the coy "Marshall Delaney" and four by Martin Knelman. As film reviews go - and they do - these are not bad, but they have no place in a serious film anthology. The writing slides. The plots are detailed for those who have not seen the movie, with that gee-whiz tone of first-response writing on a film. Now, a review column may get away with referring to "a lovely television version of Mordecai Richler's *The Street*" (p. 21), but of a book of critical writing

we should expect more precision: the play was called "The Wordsmith" and it was a version of one episode, not the whole of *The Street*. So too Jay Scott's breezy introduction of the Canadian film-scene to *American Film* is nice journalism, but not to be immortalized in an anthology. One might infer (though no one would imply it) that Canadian film and Canadian film criticism are still so new that reviews are all we can expect. Intended to disprove that nonsense, the book would have been stronger without the first thirty-five pages, with the introduction left to Sandra Gathercole's updating of her 1978 *Cinema Canada* piece, "The Best Film Policy This Country Never Had."

But there's an even greater fault in the book's selections. Feldman tells us that when he co-edited the 1977 *Canadian Film Reader*, "it was difficult to find lengthy, detailed studies of Canadian work." But no longer: "This volume is meant to assert the possibility of studying Canadian film with an intensity and seriousness usually reserved for foreign cinemas" (p. ix). Well and good. Yet if there is now so much serious writing on Canadian film, why is the book mainly made up of reprints?

For example, why rerun a chapter from Peter Harcourt's book on Jean-Pierre Lefebvre instead of, say, commissioning a full explication of *Les Fleurs Sauvages* or *Le Jour S...*? Why rerun Piers Handling's piece on "A Canadian Cronenberg" when the ink has barely clotted in the year since that book first appeared? Why pillage *Cinema Canada* for four pieces, *The Journal of Canadian Studies* for three, the *Canadian Film Studies Annual* (just published) for two and the defunct *Cine Tracts* for five when readers serious enough for these pieces have probably already read them? Most of the authors have appended brief updates but they only underline the book's outdatedness. Handling fails to report on Derek May's 1981 project, and does a slapdash update on Michael Rubbo. Al Razutis notes after his 1980 article on David Rimmer's films that his present thinking is better represented by what he wrote for the Vancouver Art Gallery retrospective in 1983. So why was that not run instead (or as well)? Or 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 dribble 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 were as healthy as the *Meatballs* gravy train. But it's not. There's a limit to how many Canadian film anthologies the market will be thought able to bear. So however well-intentioned, this anthology may end up doing more harm than good.

In this context one might also raise a question of form: fully one-third of the papers (9 of 27) come from editor Feldman and his two "co-conspirators" (his term on p.x), the dynamic duo of Handling and Harcourt. Solid critics all, but some of their space might have been more widely invested. Except for Razu-

tis' 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 there was any self-serving on this project. Everyone involved is well above that. Obviously 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 so should have been this book. It should have been an anthology of new work, not a recycling of the (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-viewing films retrieved for the Festival. Or 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, Mankiewicz, Arcand, the aesthetics of the miniseries, the Plouffe mythology, the regional independents – the possibilities for new work were endless. Micheline 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 reprinting 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 ingenious 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 intercession 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 caressing; 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.

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