Words & Moving Images: Essays on Verbal and Visual Expression in Film and Television
Edited by William C. Wees and Michael Doralnd
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Words and Moving Images is a widely varied collection of essays, related in time and space, most of the work was presented at the 1983 Film Studies Association of Canada Conference, and in general theme and words images in the cinema. Through this theme, Canadian scholars address the primary concerns - the ontology of the photographic image, feminist discourse in film, modernism, film styles and genres. In short, the primary concerns of film scholars everywhere.

The book is a great deal of fun to read. It reminds me of a collection of mystery or science-fiction stories: while more or less related, they are clearly different. Rolph focuses on the "metaphysics of images," but a study of Bazin's metaphysics is suspect, of course, but that will surprise no one anymore. Bazin was an aortal, a mortal, the fact of the photographic image is evident in this essay. You don't have to believe in the fundamental truth of God or the eternal essence, spiritual or otherwise, of man and things, to believe in the "metaphysics of presence." (p. 40)

This is a collection of writings on and by Canadian filmmakers, is a virtual sampler of approaches to contemporary film studies: and what makes this book truly unique - and a pleasure to read - is that it is not almost invariably Canadian films and filmmakers. There is a lot to wrestle with here, to argue with, and a lot to learn.

Do words pose a threat to theatre? Actors speak and audiences listen hard to hear what the actors have to say. Theater is a spectacle defined first by its orality. The use of language is inescapable. It is a virtual index of the filmic experience. While more or less related, they are clearly different. Rolph focuses on the "metaphysics of images," but a study of Bazin's metaphysics is suspect, of course, but that will surprise no one anymore. Bazin was an aortal, a mortal, the fact of the photographic image is evident in this essay. You don't have to believe in the fundamental truth of God or the eternal essence, spiritual or otherwise, of man and things, to believe in the "metaphysics of presence." (p. 40)

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The first two chapters (a discussion and an essay) confront problems posed by one of Canada's most interesting filmmakers, Michael Snow. Snow is an aortal. He works in a world, watching, deciphering. The text of the film is not then primarily verbal, but visual - manipulations of images of concrete time - is the way to the world, to the world of everyday life, the word subordinate to the image. So goes the common argument, and it is this popular aesthetic canon which justifies, loosely, this collection of essays, reposing the question (as well as many others) from a variety of historical, critical and theoretical perspectives.

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From impassioned and intricate argumentation, one jumps next into a much less supercharged discourse. (The effect is almost shocking.) Michael Snow's films are characterized by a use of words in a variety of ways in which words are used in contemporary experimental film. He takes us from the devaluation of the photographic image to the hervypersonality of the word within the narrative tradition (Duras), and finally to "postmodernist" attempts to break all realist/narrative links. Here the verbal and visual are inextricably connected by a textual perceptual play. Michael Snow's Rameau's Nephew is a virtual encyclopedia of image-sound relationships. Duras, of course, is a common touchstone for the modernist aesthetic and metaphysical position: the ontological realism of the photographic image. According to Eldon, Snow's Present is nailing down the coin on the "metaphysics of presence." The image is not categorically and ultimately an index, a sign existentially linked to the object it represents (as a death mask is linked to a face, or a footprint to the boot which made it). Without words, for example, the idea that distorting a photographic image can cause us to lose our faith in that it is bound to reality by a primordial ontological bond. The modernist is the question whether any photographic or cinematographic images are truly indexical. (p. 40)

If this argument isn't just flogging a dead horse, this is the age of electronic image processing, of creating colors for black/white films, of creating buildings for skylines, of taking people out of photographs, and putting others in - of "photographing" things which don't exist and never will. Bazin's metaphysics are suspect, of course, but that will surprise no one anymore. Bazin was an aortal, a mortal, the fact of the photographic image is evident in this essay. You don't have to believe in the fundamental truth of God or the eternal essence, spiritual or otherwise, of man and things, to believe in the "metaphysics of presence." (p. 40)

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From genre the book moves to two auteur-oriented critiques: in Carlos Saura's Elisa, Vida Mia, and Francois Truffaut and the Language of Romanticism. Wendy Wolfen provides a minute, convincing analysis of the ambiguously shifting and destabilizing voice-over-image relationship in Elisa, as well as a brief critical and critical overview of Saura's work. In general, in his analysis of Strass Berland's essay on the description of image-sound discontinuity were its quite specific parallels with the earlier critiques of Armatage and Longfellow, this essay demonstrates the gulf which existed between Bazin and his adherents, even the most romantic, Truffaut. Unfortunately, in this beautifully written essay: tests, through no fault of his own, falls victim to the anthropological process.

While his discussion of Bazin establishes a background against which he can expose Truffaut's own conception of and use of Romantic language, it is simply too much for the reader, who has already been treated to Bazin and the various arguments. While these two films clearly share some modernist and feminist impulses, they are, as he admits, very different from Bazin and his adherents. Unfortunately, while these two films clearly share some modernist and feminist impulses, they are, as he admits, very different from Bazin and his adherents.

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In this "personal statement," Hancox describes a growing dependence on poetry film which, he says, is a "beating heart to a very broad type of generalized, obscuring the nature of the specificity of an ecriture feminine." The next pair of essays form a nice couplet, complementing each other so well that they almost seem to rhyme. The subject here is poetry and film, first through the working experience of an essay by Strass Berland. Juxtaposing poetry and film is a task which has been part of Bazin's and his adherents (in particular, specifying both the powers and limits of the genre).

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comics failures" (p. 138).

Testa's analysis of the limits of Romanticism reads nicely against the theory developed for the "poetry-film" by Wees. Again, these couplings provide one of the great pleasures of Words and Moving Images. The next three essays, however, simply do not feel at home here: a description of how Wyndham Lewis uses film as a metaphor in his writings; a philosophical argument for censorship based on social utility rather than on morality; and an analysis of how a film on that great Canadian Ronnie Hawkins, does everything it can to suppress the fact that Hawkins is neither great nor Canadian. I guess the best way to look at the inclusion of these three essays is simply to say that we are provided a surplus of riches. Each has its charm. The essay on censorship might even be seen as relevant to the concerns of the volume (one of the issues discussed - the question of verbal vs. visual censorship in the cinema - is a fascinating one). But generally speaking, my momentum ground to halt as I moved through this section of the book. Even if, as Maurice Yacowar puts it in his essay on Hawkins, "the price of cultural nationalism is eternal belligerence" - I could only wonder if this was truly the appropriate arena.

These feelings were strengthened by the last two chapters of the book, essays which do complement each other and fulfill the original aspirations of the volume. Denyse Therrien provides a capsule history of the use of language in Quebec cinema between 1960 and 1980. She describes an early period of intellectualizing "On reflechit, on discute. On verbalise plutot que d'agir" [p. 195], a later period of radical male belligerence "J'il dit n'importe quoi, il dit tout, il le dit comme ça vient, souvent n'importe comment" [p. 197], and finally, a more realistic and self-confident linguistic coming-to-terms with everyday social and human realities. Therrien interprets the significance of these linguistic changes in the context of the political evolution of Quebec society. Although Therrien ends this useful study with the cinema of the late 1970's, she makes a wonderfully provocative statement at the beginning of her essay, suggesting parallels between the economics, politics, and cinemas of the 1980's (Les Plouffe, Maria Chapdelaine) and 1940's and '50s! (Le Fox, Maria Chapdelaine)....

In the last chapter, Seth Feldman describes - in contrast to the linguistic fecundity analyzed by Therrien in Le cinéma québécois - a lack, an atrophy of language in the English Canadian cinema. According to Feldman, this absence reflects the fact that the English Canadian has no linguistic identity. "Within the flux of Canadian multi-lingualism the language of any conversation is understood to be nothing more than a lingua franca, a temporary agreement entirely dependent upon the immediate situation... the national identity exists as nothing more or less than the compromises needed to contain it" [p. 206]. The cinematic response to this abundance of identity generally takes one of two forms: a "pantheistic silence" (The Grey Fox), or submission in the voice of the all-knowing (the voice of Grierson). And thus we come full circle, back not only to the voice of the father, but back as well to Michael Snow and So Is This: "Perhaps this is the solution: the reduction of language to a level compatible with the linguistic chaos of the Canadian milieu... Snow's playful bat-tering of this landscape of signification is, finally, a native's answer to the native silence" (p. 212). A delightful ending for this book.

Like the English Canadian, dumb-struck before the vast landscape, so Words and Moving Images leaves us gazing over the immense panorama of Canadian film scholarship. Around this central theme are represented most of the mainstream approaches to academic film theory and criticism. Not only can the reader investigate the specific theme of words and images, from a variety of critical, historical and theoretical perspectives, but the volume's great value makes it indispensable for anyone wanting to "have a look around" the world of film scholarship in Canada.

(An final note - while the book has a nice format and is beautifully printed, now much worked over, it has, alas, fallen into a pile of pages at my feet!)

Brian Lewis