



Review: Joe McElhaney (2006) *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli*
 State University of New York Press: New York
 ISBN: 978-0791468883
 255 pp.

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The Death of Classical Cinema sets up an ambitious critical challenge: to address classical and modernist cinema in regard to the possibility of a dialogue between the two, whilst simultaneously revitalising an auteurist approach. McElhaney is primarily concerned with exploring the rich, yet critically underdeveloped, connections between these two eras in cinema - specifically in regard to the work of Lang, Hitchcock and Minnelli made during the decline of the studio period - combining a significant amount of close textual analysis with broader historical and formal discourses. As complex as his principal objectives are, he offers a strong case for his proposed interconnections and achieves much more. Weaving the argument through with a convincing reclamation of auteurism which demonstrates the power of this approach, nuanced close analysis, a deft command of film history and theory, as well as a genuinely engaging and engaged tone, the book marries a sharp and committed critical enquiry with an obvious personal passion for its subject. The extent of his careful consideration and inclusive perspective represents significant reappraisals of the three central films under inquiry: *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (Fritz Lang, 1960), *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962). He offers an intelligent analysis of each director's work and their wider relationships to both classical Hollywood and modernist film, adding further critical weight to an auteurist approach and close analysis.

At the outset McElhaney establishes a firm relationship to his objectives, carefully negotiating his critical relationship to the concept of the death of classical cinema. The course of how to address this apparent decline is articulated carefully, rejecting the idea of classical cinema as a homogenous and pervasive cultural form. He argues that the act of defining should be a complex, ongoing process, 'a mode of understanding' (7) rather than a textbook category, an approach which works in synthesis with his aims and methodology. McElhaney sets out other approaches clearly, presenting a solid foundation for his own inquiry as well as a useful roundup of critical response to the area through the filmmakers he is chiefly concerned with. This way of relating theory to specific examples offers a more productive overview engaged with its subject and presents an apt indication of what is to follow.

The first point of critical contact in exploring what is meant by classical and modernist is with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, whose books *Film Art: An Introduction* and *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production* are pervasive texts in this area, largely responsible – as McElhaney notes – for establishing classical Hollywood as a critical category. Although their definitions of both classical and modernist cinema have their uses, they remain too systematic for what this book is trying to achieve, placing Minnelli as the most firmly classical, whereas Hitchcock and Lang can neither be qualified as classical nor modernist. McElhaney finds a commonality with Miriam Bratu Hansen's article "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" (in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams edited collection *Reinventing Film Studies*) which, in resistance to the Bordwell/Thompson approach, allows for a wider range of possibilities (although neither can fully dispose with the term classical). Through Hansen's approach of connecting classical Hollywood to vernacular modernism – related more to modernity than a practise setting out to challenge tradition - all three directors can be shown to be more involved with negotiating their way through modernity, opening up their work productively. Her concern with nature of change and attempts to address modernity is an essential aspect of McElhaney's argument. Gilles Deleuze's writing from his two-volume study *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time Image* on the relationship between classical and modernist cinema is a key influence here, and his presence is felt throughout the text. Again, Deleuze's reluctance to define the classical in formalist terms suits McElhaney, particularly in relation to looking at its 'conception of movement, time and space, and signs' (11). Deleuze's denial that classicism and modernism are necessarily opposed is clearly a major influence on this

study: Lang, Hitchcock and Minnelli fit somewhere between Deleuze's definitions of Fife, Lucy (2007) Review: Joe McElhaney (2006) *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli*. *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp. 214-223. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/fife.pdf>>.

classical and modernist cinema. Whilst this book is not designed as a wholesale Deleuzian re-reading of the films under question, his influence remains throughout. One aspect of McElhaney's purpose is to suggest 'that Deleuze's work is available to be used in ways more productive than Bordwell's reading allows for' (12) whilst usefully synthesizing a wide range of primarily French post-war criticism, both of which can be, in critical terms, no bad thing. Most significantly and reassuringly, this guiding light operates as part of a 'sensitivity informed by cinephilia' (13). McElhaney rightly assesses this as a position marginalised in the past, but simultaneously recognises a gradual resurgence of this within contemporary academia.

In connection with the resurgence of academic cinephilia the book is intent on offering a critical realignment of auteurism. The introduction offers a brief but clear critical assessment of the history of auteur theory and its usefulness, most prominently referencing Paul Willemen and Serge Daney, and helpfully tracing the backlash against it after the political upheavals of 1968. Significantly this evaluation brings to the fore the important connections between classical Hollywood and the French New Wave, which clearly informs the proposed connections between classical and modernist cinema. McElhaney updates Jean-Luc Godard's limiting and problematical solution to this issue of auteur politics - that emphasis is shifted from great authors to great works - by calling into question the decision making within this process: 'consequently, I insist on the importance of the auteur, regarding him not as fiction (film directing is, after all, a concrete act of labour and not something that exists within the realm of the imaginary, however elusive authorship to a film may often be) but as an active force within the films. This force is not static but subject to a variety of other factors, not all of them under the auteur's control' (18).

In the wake of this critical adjustment McElhaney articulates his decision-making process for the book's structure and content most convincingly. Firstly, Lang and Hitchcock's formative filmmaking origins render their relationship to Hollywood more complex, their more unorthodox status allowing the possibility of an unconventional reading of classical cinema. Secondly, Minnelli's status as a more minor artist in relation to the other two (although far more typical in practice) offers a provocation in his inclusion and allows the possibility to re-establish Minnelli's status as that of a major figure. The films are chosen for the way in which each implicitly relates to each director's wider body of work: 'each is a type of testament film, a summation of each director's body of work done during a period of great uncertainty and possible transition' (18). This last statement

offers a concise indication of what is to follow in the main body of the book, without the

suggested melancholia, as his reconsideration of the three films is a celebration of their relevance, both in the past and present. Through this discussion of the auteur McElhaney reveals his significant bias towards the critics of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which although could be perceived as a flaw – he mentions both *Movie* and *Sight and Sound* as the other significant proponents of auteurism but doesn't detail any writing – in the context of seeking a dialogue between these two apparently very different cinemas, seems to be an economic critical decision.

McElhaney ends the introduction by discussing a concept of cinematic space that claims both a wider relevance to the cinema in general as well as a significant link between the films he has chosen to discuss. The suggestion of the door as a metaphor for the cinematic frame – offering an addition to the metaphors of window, picture frame and mirror – operates as a potentially potent one in relation to both narrative play with knowledge and continuity editing patterns (as well as more literally the visual recurrence of the door image within cinema) helpfully signposting a visual and metaphoric relationship between the films and the dissolving boundaries between classical and modernist: 'the door in cinema, is both a metaphor and a concrete object, a barrier to be crossed as it marks the passage from one shot to another, from one space to another' (21). The evocation of a moment from Godard's *Contempt* (*Le Mépris* 1963) that utilises the door as a key element of narrative and construction of cinematic space rounds up the introduction in a way that befits the rest of the study, whilst operating as an indication of his aims. This example shrewdly foregrounds a concern, within the film as well as the book, with transition, the door a potent metaphor for starting a discussion of the relationship between classical and modern, not as closed off, but rather interconnected whilst equally emphasising a concern with the fascinations of space and movement that permeates all cinema.

All three chapters operate under a broadly similar structure which first addresses each film's critical reception, both recent and contemporaneous with its release, allowing McElhaney to establish his own position on the film within this context and how he is going to reappraise it. He then details the circumstances of production, generally emphasising the positioning of each film as being situated at the tail end of classical Hollywood and concurrent with the emergent modernism of the French New Wave and Italian Neorealists. The main body of each chapter is devoted to a mixture of close analysis and a wider critical perspective of both the director's body of work as a whole and relationship to other works of the time. He draws out themes which pervade each film, the

encompassed by the book. His particular concerns beyond that are the treatment of space, the framing motif of the door and use of editing.

The first chapter deals with Lang's *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, succeeding in placing it and its central themes more forcefully as contiguous with Lang's body of work. Significantly McElhaney suggests the film is one in which 'Lang's desire to connect with his past and with the culture that had once formed his filmmaking practice – while simultaneously updating and revising those strategies for the immediate historical moment – is strongly apparent throughout' (34), an assertion that informs the rest of the chapter. Emerging from his detailed analysis of the opening scene, McElhaney argues that the duplications within this film from previous ones create the sense of Lang's past and present intertwining. The film represents not a return to pre-Hollywood form, but rather the sum of his filmmaking past becoming 'an extreme instance of Lang's tendency not simply to repeat but constantly write over his earlier films, modifying and revising the implications of the issues with which his work had always concerned itself.' (41). This preoccupation is signposted as a central aspect of Lang's modernity, as well as a crucial aspect of his authorship – which consolidates the relevance of an auteurist approach – for it resonates with the idea that a modern artist must acknowledge the inherent emptiness of their own work, the possibility of its meaninglessness or meaning changing in relation to changes in culture or spectator.

The notion of Lang's cinema as palimpsest fits well with the trajectory of the argument as it evokes what the new generation as embodied by the French New Wave and others were doing in relation to directors like Lang. The example of how Lang's presence is used in Godard's *Contempt* foregrounds his influence on the emergent filmmaking of the 1960s and with it demonstrates the anxiety of Lang's attempts to remain relevant, as innovative as he had always been. Although Lang's cinema had always traded in the stereotypical, the generic, this is now intensified in this incarnation of the character of Dr. Mabuse, read as a metaphorical parallel for Lang. Mabuse demonstrates Lang's recognition of the clichés present in his own work (the chapter is entitled Dr. Mabuse, The Cliché), the character and director modifying and rewriting in relation to the modern context.

McElhaney weighs Lang's relationship to classicism and modernism up carefully, specifically through consideration of his treatment of narrative and filmic space, managing a convincing argument for the film to be regarded as both. In the wider context of Lang's films, alongside the classical homogeneity and continuity, lies a desire to complicate

space, leaving the spectator to work hard in order to piece together spaces out of

problematic and incomplete information. In *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* this is manifested in his impulse – which McElhaney describes as ‘modernist in its implications’ (55) – towards parallelism and contrast, the deployment of parallel editing demonstrating a complication of cinematic space. By utilising Deleuzian terms related to both classical and modernist cinema - parallel editing (what he terms *large form* in classical cinema) and the “irrational” cut - the film is shown through close analysis to be part of both, apparently contradictory movements. Parallel editing creates continuity between narrative action and refers back to the crime genre typical of Lang. It also undercuts the usual sense of suspense, creating a more ambiguous and academic tone which denies the classical impulse towards resolution. Using analysis of another film – *Muriel* (Alain Resnais, 1963) McElhaney demonstrates the “irrational” cut, to show that although Lang does not go to these extremes the editing structure of his film resists conventional paralleling and resolution. Thus Lang’s film is engaged in a dialogue between his past and present, the classical and the modernist, manifested in an anxiety over his own position as an auteur. The ideas of restricted space, the role of genre, use of cliché and regenerated narratives pushing the methods and motifs of classical cinema to their limit as well as connecting them to more centrally modernist concerns.

The chapter focusing on Hitchcock’s *Marnie*, seeks to reevaluate the film by proposing that it demonstrates a specific line of development from Hitchcock’s previous films. Indeed his acknowledgement of its flaws are overshadowed by the suggestions of its ambition, conceived as part of a deliberate plan by Hitchcock to push his work in new directions, demonstrated by ‘its self-conscious incorporation of certain formal aspects of 1960s European art cinema’ (86). The notion of Hitchcock’s awareness of this emerging cinema and his attempts to employ their developments and meet the challenges set by various modernist strategies is a convincing one. Despite an apparent slip of Hitchcock’s control - indicated by the rumours surrounding the relationship between Tippi Hedren and Hitchcock - within the dynamic of spectatorship and interpretation, the prominent indicators of this are to be found in the film’s ambiguity and the film’s status as a character study, bearing relationship to both European art cinema as well as the psychological realism of American post-war cinema.

Deleuze’s conception of Hitchcock’s introduction of relations-through-thirdness (evolving out of Charles Peirce’s concept of thirdness) represents an interesting forcefield for a reevaluation of *Marnie*. The cinematic world and the relationships within it are all tripled, creating a space that is entirely interpretation, serving to redefine the role of the spectator as fully implicated in the film’s unfolding: ‘the task of implicating the spectator in Fife, Lucy (2007) Review: Joe McElhaney (2006) *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli*. *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp. 214-223. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/fife.pdf>>. ISSN: 1466-4615 online

the sets of relations at the same time that the characters metaphorically become spectators results in a conception of the image that repeatedly seems to be examining its own operations' (101). The role of interpretation is thus one that links the film to both classical – through melodrama and thirdness – and modernist cinema – through the ambiguity of the heroine and the film's resolution, resulting in a lack of unity within the act of interpretation, for both protagonist and spectator. In relation to *Marnie*, as well as *Psycho* and *The Birds*, McElhaney posits a modernist development of this relationship – as epitomized by films like Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) – whereby interpretation, both for protagonists and spectator, is complicated and blocked.

The construction of ambiguity, and the modernist impulse that it represents, relates specifically to the central protagonist. McElhaney claims that Marnie can be seen as the 'ultimate Hitchcock protagonist in that she collapses so many of the tendencies of both male and female character in his work' (116). The mixed signals embodied by the character are then played out in the conclusion, which although it performs certain aspects of the happy ending still remains unresolved. Whereas in the previous chapter Lang was paired with Godard and Resnais, Hitchcock's modernist partner is identified as Antonioni, the connection again characterised by admiration and anxiety. Using the extended example of *Red Desert* (Antonioni, 1964) the argument seeks to ensure the film's relationship to modernism, which works through a process of ambiguity mixed with tentative optimism. McElhaney finds further parallels between *Marnie* and Antonioni's films – specifically Pascal Bonitzer's description of Antonioni's world as in pieces, never to be fully unified – in its fragmentation, specifically in relation to the female protagonist, her identity and her body. In this way the film follows post-war tendency to depict women in relation to violence, as presented by Molly Haskell's "from reverence to rape" trajectory, which is shown quite literally in this film.

The book also offers a significant reappraisal of the film in the context of melodrama through the aftermath of its critical historicization in the 1970s. McElhaney claims the film as a variation on female centred melodramas of the 1940s, specifically the cycles of the Medical discourse film, as named by Mary Ann Doane, and the persecuted-wife film. Through this connection he demonstrates the film's (and Hitchcock's) relationship to the informing structures and techniques of classicism, whilst illuminating the way in which it

actively seeks a connection to modernism in its significant reappraisal and reimagining of this form¹.

The chapter on Vincente Minnelli's *Two Weeks in Another Town* addresses an important question, particularly within the book's overall agenda, of whether or not Minnelli can be regarded as an auteur when many critics see him more as part of the collaborative process. Thus a large part of the chapter's achievement is to reposition Minnelli as an auteur, just as forcefully in this regard as both Lang and Hitchcock: 'As with Lang and Hitchcock, Minnelli is more profitably understood in relation to obsessional filmmakers. Repeatedly to the point of obsession, Minnelli's films do not simply represent a mise-en-scène-based cinema of décor, but they dramatize its very conflicts' (151). This acts as compelling reasoning for the inclusion of Minnelli in the study, who at first glance could be regarded as the outsider. McElhaney considers Minnelli's style as consistently polished and fluid, even more classical in some ways than that of Lang and Hitchcock, his highly decorated frame seeming to pointedly refuse the functionality and ergonomics of modernist design. In relation to this McElhaney proposes that Godard's proclamation of the non-existence of mise-en-scène in 1965 had specific ramifications on Minnelli, his reputation suffering in this period and the artificiality of his film spaces becoming seriously outmoded. However, in respect to his wider project there is an important distinction that McElhaney makes regarding Minnelli, that he belongs to a later group of filmmakers emerging during the 1940s (including Ray, Mann and Preminger) whose work does not completely belong to earlier paradigms of classical Hollywood nor does it seek to shatter them. In this way Minnelli seems to be part of what Deleuze termed the "final agony" Hollywood, demonstrating a predisposition to the changes and developments between the classical and modernist cinemas.

Two Weeks in Another Town specifically lends itself to this analysis, as it not only focuses on the process of filmmaking, but under circumstances where Hollywood is shown as being in decline and the creativity of the filmmakers is blocked. Thus it not only fits in with Minnelli's body of work and supports his auteur status but also demonstrates continuity with post-war films that depict Hollywood filmmaking as dominated by violence and chaos. The film can be seen to function as an embodiment of the point between classical and modernist cinema - particularly aware of its own context, its very

¹ Whilst there are elements of the persecuted-wife melodrama in particular that remain overly schematic, and thus not as convincing as they could be in regard to the connecting of *Marnie* to this cycle, this is a relatively slight criticism, very much overshadowed by the significance of McElhaney's overall approach, specifically in relation to issues of close-analysis and auteurism.

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subject matter embodies both the look to the past and to the future: 'the film attempts to maintain the formal system at work in Hollywood cinema, systems that the film knows on some level to be no longer valid (a situation that it indirectly dramatizes), but that it feels compelled to perpetuate in some ways. At the same time, it cites and incorporates those cinemas that at the moment of the film's appearance are documenting the increased irrelevance of Hollywood' (146). McElhaney uses Minnelli's modernizing impulse of drawing on both low and high art, specifically drawing in influence from European modernist movements - a specific indication of one of the perceived flaws of *Two Weeks in Another Town* - of the way it sits between the two movements.

One of the key aspects of modernism that Minnelli draws on, throughout his work and in this film particularly is the use of space. As many have noted, Minnelli's use of décor is an important part of his mise-en-scène, rooms become expressive of characters emotional life as well as the often public expression of their inhabitant's sensibility and taste. McElhaney offers a connection between this tendency and Walter Benjamin's thoughts regarding the increasing split between work and home in modern life, leading to just such spaces. In *Two Weeks in Another Town* he sees Minnelli as progressing his ideas about décor in a specifically modernist manner, both creating alienation between the characters and their space, whilst its very public quality reflects the post-war predisposition towards openness. The chapter goes on to reveal the gestures to modernism made by Minnelli's film, making instructive comparisons to a comparative modernist director, Fellini (particularly his films about filmmaking and life in Rome: *8 ½* and *La Dolce Vita*). Through this McElhaney notes Minnelli's inclusion of other modern themes and motifs, such as the importance of family, a more open treatment of sexuality, as well as the more open and unresolved ending. The latter motif, already recognised by Thomas Elsaesser in an article on the director, is pushed further by McElhaney's reading of the final shot – the closed door of an aeroplane – as both a gesture of finality and of renewal. He also reads the film as a whole in this way, on the one hand demonstrating the destruction of classical cinema (literally in the narrative as well as metaphorically in the film's own failures to escape from outmoded techniques) and its renewal as something else, a passage into a new kind of cinema.

The conclusion is brief, due to the fact so much of his argument is bound up in analysis of the films and discourses surrounding the directors. Thus the experience of reading is less formulaic and more engaging, prompting the reader to enter into a dialogue with the text itself. It contains an ardent proposal for the importance of the

auteurist cinephile, who can respond to the films as part of a wider picture, restoring their
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place with a director's work and piecing together their import (flaws and all). The final analysis of his achievements offers an accurate perception of these, particularly in its embracing of auteurism and the simultaneous objective to not be limited by this critical position. Along with his significant and detailed revaluations of each of the films chosen McElhaney successfully imparts a more complete sense of the shifting natures of both classical and modernist cinemas, beyond the various critical definitions offered in his introduction, by demonstrating this vividly from within the films themselves. The book should offer interest for those already persuaded by auteur theory and close analysis, as well as acting as a powerful example of the usefulness of such critical perspectives for those as yet unsure of its contemporary relevance.

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