

# BOOK REVIEW

## Resistance

Michael Wood

Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes' Cinema*, ed. by Dudley Andrew, Yves Citton, Vincent Debaene, and Sam Di Iorio (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Cinema, for Roland Barthes, was a matter not simply of moving images, but of images caught up in a system, and all systems for him were overbearing, too much in control. Cinema in this sense was rather like Mao's China: it left no time for lingering, for surprises, for escape from someone else's meaning. Barthes knew he was over-simplifying when he suggested this,<sup>1</sup> but that was part of the game, and he lightly mocked the result in the words he later chose to describe it: 'I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nevertheless failed to separate it.'<sup>2</sup> The capital letters flag the supposed grandiosity, and Barthes actually called his decision a decree: 'je décrétai'. 'Liked' here means 'liked to think about'. He liked the cinema too, and went to the movies several times a week for much of his life, but he didn't much enjoy thinking about them except when they could be stopped, as in the stills he analysed in the essay 'The Third Meaning', or turned into metaphors, as in his idea of *S/Z* as a 'filming' of a reading.<sup>3</sup>

This intricate situation is the subject of Philip Watts' thoughtful book, put together after his death in 2013 by his friends and colleagues Dudley Andrew, Yves Citton, Vincent Debaene and Sam Di Iorio. 'Cinema troubled Barthes', the editors say (p. ix). Jacques Rancière, in an interview included in the book, is more emphatic: 'he is never talking about cinema when he's talking about cinema' (pp. 104-05). Watts himself prefers to track Barthes' own word: 'resistance'. 'Resistance is [...] the alternation of critique

and fascination' (p. 1). Watts' approach uncovers unexpected riches in what have seemed to be minor moments in Barthes' work. The book has chapters on film and myth, on film and perception, on Barthes and Bazin, on film and utopian politics, on film theory, on melodrama – only the last of these sections feels rather wandering and lost, partly because Barthes' appearance in André Téchiné's film *The Brontë Sisters* seems a poor peg to hang an argument on, and partly because the notion of melodrama won't do the work Watts needs it to do. 'Was Barthes thinking of Truffaut when he wrote his book on photography?' (p. 93). Almost certainly not, and what difference would it make if he was? But then even here Watts has a fine phrase about both men seeking 'to tie the image to a form of grief that spills into madness' (p. 95).

The image is the question throughout the book, even if Barthes said the cinema doesn't 'figure', that is, allow us to concentrate on images. Rancière speaks of 'the weight of the phantasmagoria of the image' (p. 109), and wonders whether Barthes might have shed some of the weight had he lived longer. The chapter on Barthes and Bazin is especially effective in this light. 'A generation ago everything seemed to separate Bazin from Barthes; today, everything seems to bring them together' (p. 35). Barthes can't quite decide whether what he calls the 'naturalness' of the photograph is a myth or a mysterious phenomenological fact; and Bazin always had more sophisticated ideas than is usually supposed about the 'reality' of what is photographed. More important, when Barthes quotes Bazin in *Camera Lucida* he is on the way to seeing a photograph as part of a film that continues beyond the frame, rather than insisting that movies must be stopped in order to be seen. 'Thus, at the very moment he seems to be claiming that cinematic spectatorship is necessarily unthinking, he also arrives at the opposite conclusion' (p. 47). This is a remarkable insight, one of many that show how Barthes' 'resistance' can become for us an invitation to further inquiry. It's good to be reminded that 'there is a playfulness' in Barthes, even in the 'overblown technicality' of his early work, and that he was always 'a reluctant demystifier', albeit one who didn't always sound reluctant (pp. 24, 20).

*Roland Barthes' Cinema* also includes new translations (by Deborah Glassman) of nine of Barthes' less well-known articles on film. The sample shows him in many moods. He enjoys Bresson's *Angels of Sin* because it foils 'the two worst enemies of art: an absence of talent and good intentions' (pp.

114-15). The grammar is ambiguous but the meaning is clear: Barthes is deploring good intentions, not their absence. He rides his high horse over Guitry's *Royal Affairs in Versailles*, in part because it resorts to 'the star, cinema's most degrading tool' (p. 117). And in Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* he finds a 'microrealism' at odds with a 'story': 'I would have given a lot to strip *Le Beau Serge* of its plot [...] a story's naivete quickly spoils the form's modernity' (p. 121). It's refreshing to think that the phrase 'wasteland of a realism without signification' (p. 123) names an ideal rather than a complaint, and we remember Barthes' recurring dream of an exemption from meaning, 'as one is exempt from military service'.<sup>4</sup>

It is a dream, and not a plan or an active wish, and as a dream it helps us think about what is wrong with meaning. In this sense, Barthes sees that even the movie system allows for interior alternatives to its plot and pace. Antonioni's films, for example, as Watts very lucidly says, 'are constructed around a sustained gaze on the world which undoes fixed meaning precisely because the shot or sequence lasts too long' (p. 48). In Antonioni Barthes saw someone who consistently opposed 'the triumph of one meaning'. 'Your art', Barthes said, addressing the director in a public letter, 'consists in always leaving the path of meaning open'.<sup>5</sup> Not quite an exemption, but a chance of interpretative freedom all the same, which devotees of functional meaning will not even see. In film as in photography, we may get a strong sense of people 'having been there', and we can cling to it even as story and meaning make their inevitable return, always threatening to replace the evidence with what Barthes calls our inertia, 'which then leads to describing results without ever asking... about their functions' (p. 123). Barthes helped to make this hard for us, and his failure to separate photography from film was just as important as his liking one more than the other.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 3 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1993-5), vol. II, p. 961.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 87. Translation modified.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, p. 1209.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Wood is the author of many works, including *The Magician's Doubts*, *Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, *Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction*, *America in the Movies*, and *Alfred Hitchcock: The Man Who Knew Too Much*. He is a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books* and is a professor emeritus of comparative literature at Princeton University.

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