BOOK REVIEW

Critical Encounters

Thomas Gould

Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani, eds, *Seeing Degree Zero: Barthes/Burgin and Political Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani's edited volume serves as a kind of sequel to their book *Barthes/Burgin: Notes Towards an Exhibition,* which accompanied the exhibition *Barthes/Burgin,* held at the John Hansard Gallery at the University of Southampton in 2016. Whereas that volume orbited locally around the theoretical questions arising from curating and exhibiting Barthes' drawings alongside Victor Burgin's projection pieces, this book proceeds into a rather more ambitious project. Through a collection of essays, interviews, and images, it mounts several approaches to finding a visual equivalent to the Barthesian zero degree, which in turn might inform critical debates around political aesthetics. The zero degree, ever evanescent, is sighted from historical, aesthetic, and practice-based perspectives, with Burgin himself seeking to delineate a 'zero degree practice' which aims 'not to "make art" […] but to represent something' (p. 179) – a practice purged of narcissistic mediation. As an edited volume whose genesis was an exhibition, the book retains a creative and distinctively curatorial spirit, represented by Bishop and Manghani's co-authored essay 'Painting, Photography, Projection', which serves as the theoretical centrepiece and showpiece of the book. Like much of the rest of the volume, that essay is kaleidoscopically, demandingly interdisciplinary, shifting between neuroscience, psychoanalysis, classical philosophy, and quantum physics, among other perspectives.

'Painting, Photography, Projection' follows loosely the trajectory of Barthes' 'From Work to Text' to arrive at a theory of 'Image', and therefore serves as an example of how the encounter between its two authorships plays out throughout the book. On the whole, it is perhaps less a study *of*

Barthes' work than it is a study *from* it, insofar as the majority of the essays are animated by Barthesian postures, gestures and concerns. In other words, Barthes haunts the book, much as he does Burgin's elegiac projection work *Belledone* – one of two pieces reproduced in print in this volume – which evokes the sanatorium in which a young Barthes lived when he was suffering from tuberculosis. To give perhaps the most obvious example of how Barthes' theoretical and formal strategies are adopted, note the orthography of the title, the slash that Bishop and Manghani equate with the montage cut (p. 223). The book as a whole is therefore less an attempt to show how *Writing Degree Zero* or *The Neutral* might open onto the study of visual and filmic arts than it is to explore how analogous operations might be theorised and practised through them. Burgin's experimentations with CGI environments are cited as a successful example, where seeing takes place 'in a panoramic virtual space from an incorporeal position' (p. 5). Similarly, in another essay, Bishop considers how Burgin's and Alvin Lucier's experimentations with feedback loops offer a timely 'true zero degree for the technics of perspectival formulation of the sensing subject' (p. 156).

What results is an eclectic project united by a shared interest in reinvigorating, and being reinvigorated by, the utopic spirit of much of Barthes' thought. There is a sense of returning to this side of Barthes for solace, as well as for serious political impetus: in 'Reading Barthes, Again', a correspondence between Burgin and Manghani which sets the tone of the book, Burgin considers his own, psychoanalytically inflected, utopianism: 'I know very well that the real stands outside representations, nevertheless I decide to proceed "as if" it may be represented' (p. 39). It follows then that if there is an occasional lack of nuance in considering the evolution from the zero degree to figures of the neutral in Barthes' work, this is rather beside the point. On a related note, as a result of this approach, Barthes' own visual practice, so prominent in the John Hansard exhibition, has become incidental; unlike in *Barthes/Burgin: Notes Towards an Exhibition,* there is only brief discussion of his drawings here.

Burgin meanwhile – as is no doubt already obvious – is an active interlocutor in, as well as principal subject of, the study. He authored or co-authored four of the chapters, contributions which reaffirm his status as a formidable thinker in his own right, combining theoretical rigour with a practitioner's empirical insights. The third and final part of the book, titled 'Writerly Readings', collects four creative/critical approaches to Burgin's projection work from Barthesian stances. Essays by Christine Berthin, Domietta Torlasco, and Gordon Hon tend to draw in particular

from Barthes' later work. *How To Live Together* and the concept of *idiorrhythmy* attain a late prominence here. Kristen Kreider's and James O'Leary's 'performative enactment' (p. 355) of Burgin's projection piece *Prairie* is perhaps the most novel, whereby Barthes provides the inspiration for a kind of critical ekphrasis, throwing into relief the contribution this book as a whole makes to the study of word and image relations through its central encounter.

In summary: this is a dense, rich volume; and yet, overall, one is left with the sense that, two books in, there is no sign that the critical encounter between Barthes and Burgin, and the questions and lines of inquiry that have developed rhizomatically from it, are anywhere near being exhausted.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Gould is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of East Anglia, working on a project on drawing, philosophy and poetry. His first book, *Silence in Modern Philosophy: Beckett, Barthes, Nancy, Stevens* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018.

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