

## BOOK REVIEW

### A Consistent Theory of Film

Michael Wood

Patrick ffrench, *Roland Barthes and Film: Myth, Eroticism and Poetics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* we learn the reasons for the writer's 'resistance to the cinema'. He thinks the signifier is too smooth there (or too sleek or too slick: *lisse*). The film just goes on, 'like a garrulous ribbon' enforcing the 'statutory impossibility of the fragment, of the haiku'.<sup>1</sup> This is what Patrick ffrench astutely calls 'the satisfaction of the sign' (p. 47), the sense of complacent meaning having won another day. Barthes often said something like this about moving pictures, and it was a bold move on Philip Watts' part to suggest (and persuasively show) that this resistance was 'a sort of compromise between [...] critique and fascination'.<sup>2</sup> The working result of this deal, ffrench says, was 'a consistent theory of film', and 'one of the main aims' of ffrench's book is 'to enter into the internal logic of this theory and to bring it to light' (p. 4), a goal achieved with extraordinary success.

The book does other things too. It tracks Barthes' comments on film throughout his career, situating them in subtly shifting historical contexts before and after 1968, and displaying in detail how they interacted with what was happening at the Institut de filmologie and the Ecole pratique des hautes études, as well as around the *Cahiers du cinema* and *Tel Quel*. And in a way that complements rather than contradicts Watts' thesis, it explores not only what Barthes' writings have to say about the cinema, but also 'the role the cinema plays in his thinking' (p. 5), and how this role alters our sense of the shape and direction of Barthes' work. Watts' word 'compromise' takes a little pressure here, but it finds some good friends: tension (pp. 2, 209) and paradox (pp. 96, 185), especially.

All this fits well with the words Barthes himself wrote just after his paragraph about resistance. No sooner had he finished it, he says, than it began to seem to him ‘an avowal of the imaginary: I should have uttered it as a dreamy speech which seeks to know why I resist or desire; unfortunately I am condemned to assertion’. He goes on to regret the lack ‘in French (and perhaps in all languages)’ of ‘a grammatical mode that would express *lightly* [...] not intellectual doubt but value trying to convert itself into theory’.<sup>3</sup> What we often see in Barthes, I think, is value trying to discover its identity through theory. Through theory and/or through a certain stylish exaggeration.

The famous sentence in *Camera Lucida* – ‘I decided I liked Photography *in opposition to* the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it’ – is a good lexical example of the lightness that Barthes says has no grammatical mode.<sup>4</sup> The assertion itself reports on a failure as well as a liking, the italics hint at something arbitrary in the choice of the relational term, and Barthes didn’t say ‘I decided’. He said ‘I decreed’, achieving considerable lightness through blatant mock heaviness.

Barthes returns again and again to the ‘radical difference’ between photography and cinema (ffrench, pp. 7, 83), and often seems to want to talk about movies only when they have stopped moving. If we believe that cinema is all about motion, then Jacques Rancière’s remark about Barthes – ‘he is never talking about cinema when he’s talking about cinema’ – will ring true. ffrench has a good answer to Rancière. Barthes is indeed not talking about cinema as it is: ‘he is talking about an *other* cinema, the other film’ (p. 273). This is what Barthes himself says when he claims, at the end of his essay ‘The Third Meaning’, that ‘film has still to be born theoretically’.<sup>5</sup>

But Barthes clearly knows that in many ways photography *is* cinema, and vice-versa. Movement needs stasis the way music needs silence. It’s not that we can’t tell the difference between them, just that, in Barthes’ word, we cannot separate them in any final way. The relevant difference between photography and cinema, as ffrench shows, depends on what we want from these media, and on what ffrench calls ‘wholly distinct modes of consciousness’ (p. 215), represented by a focus on the pausing or passing of time. ‘What the *punctum* adds to the otherwise immobile and dead image is the dimension of life and intensity rather than that of continuity or visual persistence’ (p. 231).

The *real* which Barthes pursues, and which he finds the photograph to embody, is a temporalized real of a certain order; it is the past *thereness* of the referent which is captured, and which the viewing subject sees as alive; the *this has been* of the photograph thus involves the resurrection of that which the subject knows to be dead. (pp. 212-13)

Barthes often seems to take the truth-claims of photography too literally – after all he did write that ‘in every photograph there is always the stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*’ – but that is not what he is doing in *Camera Lucida*.<sup>6</sup> He is exploring the longing for this evidence, and inviting us to think about the comparative abilities of photography and film to assuage it. They both can, but film makes it hard, even if we are more likely to pause frames and dream about them than we used to be. ‘In looking at a photograph’, Barthes writes, ‘I inevitably include in my scrutiny the thought of that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye.’<sup>7</sup> Before I read French I had not understood the delicacy of this proposition. Barthes is looking at a photograph and scrutinizing a present thought, not a moment in the past – just as he is in the book’s opening sentences, where he recounts his ‘happening on’ a photograph of Jerome Bonaparte, amazed that he could find himself ‘looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor’.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 54-55.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes' Cinema*, ed. by Dudley Andrew, Yves Citton, Vincent Debaene, and Sam Di Iorio (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1. (*Editor's note*: Michael Wood's review of Watts's book was published in *Barthes Studies* in 2016: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/article/book-review-resistance/>.)

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp. 54-55. Translation slightly modified.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 78; quoted in French p. 215.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 3.

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