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***Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions*, Warren Buckland. New York: Routledge, 2012 (193 pages). ISBN 978-0-415-59098-3**

A Review by Kevin McDonald, Cal State Northridge

There was a time when film theory was at the centre of intense debate and cutting-edge intellectual innovation. Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, in particular, this scholarship helped to establish the broader discipline of film studies while also adding a dimension of relevance and vitality to the critical investigation of culture and media. Today, in contrast, film theory inhabits a far murkier place within a discipline that is more heterogeneous than ever before. As film theory attempts to move beyond the exuberance and rancorous debates of its infancy, the angst and intermittent ennui of its adolescence and the cynical self-flagellation of a mid-life identity crisis, there is a clear need both for an understanding of what has been accomplished and a renewed vigour capable of propelling it past the grip of inertia. With a skilful combination of prudence and scrutiny, Warren Buckland's *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* accepts this formidable challenge and, in response, provides an impressive reassessment of some of the discipline's most seminal theoretical texts. Displaying a masterful grasp of this wide-ranging body of knowledge, Buckland's fair and balanced account not only serves as an exceptionally useful introduction to film theory's many merits but his perceptive insights should help to reinvigorate some of the overarching debates about its current state. While his efforts are largely successful, there are also some lingering questions about his rational reconstruction framework. As a vehicle for revisiting and elucidating earlier theoretical debates it comes across as incredibly effective; its status as a full-fledged methodology or guide to future theoretical endeavours, however, is open to further consideration.

As the central premise and framework of the book, Buckland begins with a detailed introduction to what the rational reconstruction entails. In its general sense, it is precisely what it sounds like: an explanation or reformulation that privileges sound reasoning and logical analysis. And as Buckland puts it into practice, the chief benefit of this approach is its overarching commitment to clarity, precision and rigorous exegesis. Throughout the remaining chapters, Buckland deploys these attributes with admirable skill, astutely parsing theoretical concepts often dismissed as excessively abstract or opaque, and distilling the key debates that shaped the discipline in its formative years. In so doing, he variously reclaims and rediscovers the merit of theoretical inquiry for a field that has to some extent conceded its viability. Buckland is highly successful in this regard and his dedication to meticulous detail and comprehensiveness should provide undergraduate and graduate students alike with an indispensible introduction to what can be a treacherous field of scholarship. Another benefit of Buckland's rational reconstruction is

that it coincides with a number of broader intellectual virtues. These include, as he enumerates them much later, "charity (reading a text with respect); open-mindedness (reserving judgment on difficult passages); patience and perseverance (reading difficult passages on the assumption that the text does make sense at some level); humility (reading all the text carefully, rather than skipping, skimming, or speed reading); and self-control (setting aside negative reactions a difficult text may evoke, in an effort to understand)" (179–80). In advocating these principles, Buckland makes it clear that he is not merely interested in elaborating the tools required to critically engage film theory, but also in cultivating the academic integrity that is necessary to sustain any given field over the long haul.

In addition to introducing rational reconstruction as his basic premise, Buckland explains that the term is attached to a larger theoretical project. In this regard, he combines the classical notion of "commentary"—both as defined by Gérard Genette and as used to explicate "difficult and obscure passages in ancient Greek or Latin texts"—with his commitment to excavating implicit assumptions and underlying problems that circulate within film theory (1). As derived from analytical philosophy, the purpose of this approach is to reduce theoretical concepts to "their basic components" and impose some form of empirical evaluation (6). While Buckland carefully outlines a multi-faceted schema to meet these demands, it is also here that the book appears to hedge on its commitment to the rational reconstruction. Buckland allows that film theory falls into the category of "general theories which are not empirically based", meaning that "they do not emerge from observation and are not, therefore, reducible to verifiability or falsifiability" (5). As a result, he replaces verification in its strict sense with the understanding that film theory involves formulating a set of answers to what is perceived as a problematic state of affairs. In lieu of empirical data, Buckland examines the rationale for these answers and considers how well they respond to their immediate circumstances. Based on these factors, Buckland suggestively reframes theory as a problem-driven, contextually grounded discourse—one that is measured neither by its core principles or its aptitude for logical empiricism. This marks one of the book's most significant insights and fulfils Buckland's pledge to confront his object of inquiry in a way that fundamentally transforms it. At the same time, the move would seem to be a departure from the two driving principles of his foray into analytical philosophy—that film theory can, in fact, be distilled into a set of basic concepts and that it can be subjected to empirical analysis.

Outside the book's introduction Buckland avoids explicit discussion of the rational reconstruction and whatever concerns may have surfaced shift to the background as he instead focuses his attention on individual scholars and their landmark contributions. Comprised of nine, largely self-contained chapters, Buckland singles out some of the most canonical texts published between 1969 and 2006. Though he doesn't fully elaborate his reasons for primarily limiting the study to the discipline's formative years, it seems clear that he considers these to be film theory's most decisive and influential texts. Implicitly, these texts are also amongst the most polemical and difficult, the material that even now requires clarification and, by extension, the material that continues to haunt or overshadow current debates. With the benefit of hindsight, Buckland incisively returns to each author's specific argument, both elucidating the contextual framework of their position and decoding the distinctive features that gave them their conceptual and rhetorical force. What stands out over the course of this analysis is Buckland's ability to

highlight the "big picture" significance of each piece, while also drawing out a genuine appreciation for the innovation and accomplishment of individual scholars.

For example, in his account of Peter Wollen's "The Auteur Theory"—a chapter from *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*—Buckland focuses on the broader methodological turning point within the study of film. As imported from art and literature, authorship had provided a proven and durable criterion for legitimising film both as a medium of artistic expression and as an object of critical study. But simply anointing a pantheon of great directors had its limitations. In a move that drew considerable scrutiny, Wollen maintained authorship as a distinctive category only to then erase it by combining it with a structuralist perspective that subordinated individual agency to larger cultural factors. In effect, Wollen "relocated auteur theory's focus to [an] underlying level"—to the latent structures, the binary oppositions, the unobservable yet ever-present system of codes that Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist framework was designed to confront (33). With this new approach, Wollen shifted film analysis away from the medium's immediate properties—its stylistic and thematic characteristics—to an abstract conceptual level that ultimately allowed scholars to engage a broader array of social and ideological considerations. With the introduction of the "highly technical and specialized concepts from linguistics and structural anthropology", Wollen's approach further shifted the focus to a new wave of French intellectuals who became central figures for the ensuing generation of film scholars (40).

Whereas Buckland highlights the overarching implications in Wollen's auteur-structuralism, his analysis of Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" draws renewed attention to an essay whose specific merits have been overlooked in the course of subsequent debate. While Elsaesser essentially begins with a traditional auteur analysis focused on Douglas Sirk, his approach is ultimately transformed into "a historically informed and psychoanalytically based genre theory" that enables critics to further "speculate on the relation between films and their context" (61). In terms of the essay's historical dimension, Elsaesser outlines a broad comparative genealogy in which he shows that melodrama has a particular affinity for dramatising cultural and political conflicts. The essay is equally noteworthy for its introduction of Freudian psychoanalysis. It specifically introduces the concept of the unconscious to "explain how inexpressible internal contradictions become sublimated into the melodrama's setting and décor", and in so doing suggests that Freud may be a valuable asset in the analysis of textual structure and underlying themes (67). In conclusion to the chapter, Buckland praises Elsaesser's essay as both sophisticated and largely successful. As a densely layered analysis involving several interlocking theoretical components, it certainly warrants careful study and may still provide a model for future research.

Though Buckland diligently structures each chapter around an individual theorist, he occasionally includes brief asides that allow him to expand his inquiry and consider a range of related texts or debates. These comprise some of Buckland's most interesting and refreshing insights particularly as he revisits the work of Christian Metz, Stephen Heath and Laura Mulvey. In the chapter on Metz, for example, Buckland begins with a brief account of the French "institutional context of semiotics" (74). In the years following the Second World War, as he explains it, there was a rapid expansion in France's educational system that allowed for new university departments, which, in turn, "distinguished themselves from other departments by

teaching novel subjects such as semiotics" (74). The larger point in this observation is that for every step within a given theoretical discourse there is a corresponding step in the broader social, intellectual or institutional context and that within the larger dance that is academic scholarship one is nearly always a reaction to or comment on the other. Buckland goes on to nicely bookend the chapter by entertaining both the outright rejection of semiotics and its continuation under the guise of cognitive film semiotics. In so doing, he implies that whereas there was once a delicate balance that allowed theory to progress within an institutional setting, that same environment has given way to fragmentation and division. It is now possible for various departments, or even individual scholars, to work in complete isolation or simply refuse to engage broader intellectual trends. In raising such issues, Buckland interjects an interesting and, at times, provocative subtext. In raising these issues as something of an aside, however, Buckland may frustrate his readers with his reluctance to spotlight these questions and how they might guide future inquiry.

The chapter devoted to Heath's "On Screen, In Frame: Film and Ideology" is likely Buckland's most impressive. He handily navigates apparatus theory, subject positioning and the specific concept of suture while forcefully recounting cinema's ideological operations. The chapter, nevertheless, may be most memorable for its microanalysis of the prepositions in Heath's title and for Buckland's persistent reminder that the piece was largely an "agenda-setting" introduction to these theoretical concepts rather than a full-scale elaboration of them. The return to Mulvey's paradigmatic "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is similarly impressive with respect to Buckland's ability to once again reframe the essay within a larger shift in terms of methodology. Mulvey is understood as groundbreaking precisely because of the way she expedited this shift from a "reflectionist" model that advocates an increase in "positive-correct-accurate images" to one that focused on the "unconscious-ideological-patriarchal nature of the cinematic apparatus" (117, 119). As Buckland moves from scholar to scholar, there is an implicit illustration of the progression that takes place between Metz's general application of semiotics (as part of an effort to solidify film's status as an autonomous discipline) and Heath and Mulvey's use of highly specialised theoretical discourses (i.e. Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism) to interrogate bourgeois ideology in general and patriarchy more specifically. In this regard, he helps to articulate the way in which film theory became an increasingly performative discourse that went hand-in-hand with staking out a political position. In other words, a discourse that, while dovetailing with the radicalism of the period, instilled the entire discipline with a dynamism and vitality that launched it to the forefront of the intellectual landscape. Unfortunately, even as Buckland clearly evokes a larger historical understanding of these developments, his devotion to rational reconstruction prevents him from pursuing the broader implications of these undercurrents and how they are often as important in shaping an academic field as the theoretical concepts themselves.

Along the same lines, Buckland's decision to focus exclusively on individual authors leaves a great deal unsaid both in between and across chapters. At times, the gaps between individual chapters appear to be deliberately exacerbated and are perhaps even part of Buckland's aim to remedy the way in which different schools of thought "become locked into their own self-imposed conceptual boundaries, and talk past, rather than with, one another" (166). For instance, while his inclusion of Barry Salt primarily highlights the alterity between a statistical account of authorship and the work of such authors as Wollen and Elsaesser, Buckland indirectly suggests that their juxtaposition will bring into focus the common ground that runs

throughout the discipline, and at the same time illustrate the ways in which divergent approaches might be used to ascertain or redress the shortcomings in prevailing methodologies. Though this may very well be the case, the details of this strategy are never fully developed and, consequently, it is up to the reader to either ignore such matters entirely or to draw their own inexact conclusions. It seems odd that Buckland would leave some of these larger questions underdeveloped considering the premium he places on clarity and precision throughout the rest of the book.

Some of these same issues return in the final three chapters of the book as Buckland turns his attention away from canonical texts to a more unlikely trio of scholars. With chapters devoted to Tom Gunning, Slavoj Zîzêk and Edward Branigan, the rational reconstruction changes from a primarily retrospective pursuit to one that aims to engage current debates and ongoing developments. In many regards, these selections are quite interesting and, as always, Buckland demonstrates a remarkable command while navigating their work. On the other hand, these choices and the underlying shift in orientation raise a number of questions that beg for a more extended discussion. These three scholars in particular are associated with certain bifurcations within film studies (i.e. between theory and history, and between a revival of continental philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis as opposed to analytical philosophy and cognitive psychology). Without sufficiently elaborating on these dynamics (and their relationship to the previous generation of theorists), it would seem that Buckland runs the risk of replicating rather than ameliorating the problems that he implies have compromised the practice of film theory. In a certain sense, these issues stem from the fact that the book privileges brevity and accessibility as part of its rational reconstruction framework. As admirable as such attributes may be there is an overwhelming sense that much more could—and must—be said. This is especially frustrating in that Buckland, by every indication, is an ideal candidate to be the one saying it.

That the reader may be left wanting more from Buckland is of course a testament to the skill and integrity that he demonstrates throughout *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions*. Despite some questions about the overall efficacy of the rational reconstruction framework and Buckland's foray into analytic philosophy, the book will provide a tremendous resource for future generations of scholars precisely because of its commitment to clarity, diligence and genuine understanding. More importantly, his return to the foundations of post-classical film theory marks a compelling case for theory as a vital enterprise both within the discipline of film studies and as part of a broader intellectual field of inquiry. At a time when film theory has lost the pride of place it once enjoyed and film studies more broadly has found itself subject to endless reconfigurations, it seems that a rational reconstruction is certainly in order. Buckland has made a significant contribution by initiating this process and by stressing the centrality of theory both for the past and future of film studies. The rigour and discretion that he demonstrates in his return to film theory's foremost debates and innovations certainly sets a high standard for continuing this critical scholarship and Buckland's overall project is a forceful reminder that the challenge of moving forward lies with a painstaking and comprehensive understanding of the past.

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