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Authors	Odorico, Stefano;Power, Aidan
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Issue 4, Winter 2012: Open Theme

Editorial

Stefano Odorico and Aidan Power, University of Bremen

For this, the fourth issue of *Alphaville*, we have opted for an open theme. Previous issues—dealing with topics as diverse as noteworthy trends in European cinema; space and time in film; and sound, voice and music in cinema, respectively—stemmed from (admittedly fluid) pre-defined ideas; Issue 5 will apply a similar thematically focused approach to the figure and concept of the interstice. Here, however, the challenge was not to offer an issue-wide analysis of specific themes per se, but instead to present a thought-provoking engagement with cinematic matters deemed most pressing by the contributions of our authors.

Our mandate was broad, inviting through the call for papers “theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of modern and contemporary cinema, encompassing such aspects as: film text, context, production, representation, distribution and reception”. Aimed at encouraging distinctive voices and fresh modes of analysis with a particular focus on forms of discourse and on filmic contexts, such a strategy has allowed for the grouping together of articles that traverse political, temporal and spatial boundaries, with new approaches to established films complemented by in-depth analyses of filmic movements and theoretical frameworks.

Despite the open nature of the issue, thematic consistencies arise, with authors re-evaluating female roles and representations in filmic genres, engaging with issues developing from evolving modes of censorship, working through the complexities of filmic narrative and merging distinct analytic approaches with aesthetic readings of key films. A wide range of topics is covered, allowing for a discussion of a cross section of geographical spaces and historical eras. Articles included deal with issues originating from European art cinema of the 1960s, Classical Hollywood and contemporary Arab film, while the works of directors such as Chris Marker, Akira Kurosawa, Stanley Kubrick, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger are subjected to novel and rigorous analysis.

The issue opens with Melissa Seifert’s examination of sexual politics inherent in Blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s, a study that places specific emphasis on the performances of actresses Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson. Dissecting the sexual divides of a much discussed sub-genre, Seifert queries the isolation and objectification of strong female characters such as Grier’s Foxy Brown and argues for a more nuanced acknowledgment of a hostile form of sexual politics

that was often overshadowed by other issues of the day. Locating her thesis within the wider realms of the civil rights and Black Power movements, Seifert questions the implications for women in a filmic form that all too frequently denotes the morality of characters by dubious sexual coding.

Focusing on Arab cinema, Dina Mansour's article engages with film as a representation and manifestation of culture. Censorship in Arab countries, and in Egypt in particular, is here debated within a historical context that is very dynamic and in constant transformation, as a tool to control sociocultural realities in order to define and redefine existing cultural and religious norms. The article's discussion of specific recent case studies, including Jocelyn Saab's *Dunia* (2005), Marwan Hamed's *The Yacoubian Building* (*Imaret Yacoubian*, 2006) and Hessam Issawi's *Cairo Exit* (*Al-Khoroug*, 2009), leads the author to question whether the current rise of political Islam, particularly in Egypt, will have even more restrictive consequences on freedom of expression.

Egypt is not alone in displaying a historical concern for the morality of its people, as Emerson Richards's account of the difficulties inherent in adapting a notoriously licentious novel to the big screen shows. Emphasising a key meeting between Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty at the Enchanted Hunters Lodge in Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne's respective film versions of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Richards examines the encroachment of contemporary social and cultural concerns upon each film. Where Kubrick sought to downplay Humbert's (James Mason) otherness in a bid to heighten the sense of abnormality surrounding Peter Sellers's Quilty, a ploy that enabled him to deflect the censorial inclinations of the era while simultaneously critiquing them, Lyne attempted instead to create a more straightforward villain that would be more palatable to less rigid 1990s audiences, a venture that ultimately failed both critically and commercially.

In "Towards an Embodied Poetics of Cinema: The Metaphoric Construction of Abstract Meaning in Film", meanwhile, Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja utilise Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Bordwell's theories to analyse how abstract meaning is constructed in film, thus demonstrating the presence of some recurring cognitive patterns and schemas. To do so they investigate a corpus of films constituted by mainstream productions, including *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943). Embodied principles in the form of image schemas and conceptual metaphors to express abstract meaning are thus foregrounded and elucidated.

Reinterpreting classic films in a similar manner, Jimmy Billingham builds upon the work of Gerard Genette, Seymour Chatman and Daniel Frampton as he reconsiders the status of narrative events presented in the moving image of film and ponders the implications for conceptions of flashbacks, unreliable narration and voiceovers when exposed to shifting conceptualisations of narrative agency. Utilising a systemic two-pronged approach that brings the outcome of concerted scholarly consideration to bear on aesthetic analyses of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashômon* (1950) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950), Billingham

questions the indeterminacy of the ontological status of both narration and image within film-thinking.

Placing a timely focus on a key film by the recently deceased Chris Marker, Martina Witt-Jauch's article on *La Jetée* (1962) sheds new light on a much-debated work by re-examining it through the lens of concepts of memory and trauma (incorporating Cathy Caruth's tradition of trauma criticism). The author sets up a dialogue between Antonin Artaud's visionary theory of the "theatre of cruelty" and philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptions of human pain, horror, memory and trauma. *La Jetée* ultimately emerges from Witt-Jauch's discussion as a narrative of individual grief and vulnerability, but also of ethical resistance to horror, arising from a broad historical context of suffering and violence.

Just as the issue opens with a study of female actors, so too it closes with Ian Murphy's novel discussion of Jennifer Jason Leigh's performance in Uli Edel's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989). Where Blaxploitation's depiction of sexual transgression is frequently problematised by reductive attitudes toward its subjects, a point elucidated by Melissa Seifert, Murphy details how Jason Leigh channels iconic performances by Marlon Brando and James Dean to obfuscate the perceived parameters of sexuality in her portrayal of the tragic Tralala. Drawing upon the work of Joan Riviere and Steven Cohan, Murphy argues that Leigh successfully propagates a "bisexual performance" that informs, tweaks and embodies Tralala's attempts to subvert, puncture and fiercely rage against the phallogentric society she inhabits, even as it ultimately leads to her annihilation.

While the articles chart a diverse range of topics and subject matter, prevalent themes and issues emerge and, far from being disparate entities, they can be viewed as cohesive insofar as they share a commitment to engaging with and challenging conventional modes of relating to analytic discourses and filmic forms. In this regard, although the issue's focus may shift from art film to exploitation, auteur practices to method acting, to competing modes of censorship, we feel that its binding schema is the leitmotif of quality and concentrated critical effort that is consistently demonstrated in the articles within.

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Stefano Odorico and **Aidan Power** are Research Fellows at the University of Bremen. They are both members of the Editorial Board of *Alphaville*.