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Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image, by Nicolas Pillai. I.B. Tauris, 2017 (192 pages).

Anthony Ballas

Nicolas Pillai's study of jazz in film and television arrives at a time when jazz is making an impressive and perhaps unexpected comeback in popular culture; films like *Miles Ahead* (2016), Don Cheadle's genre-bending biopic on the life of Miles Davis, Robert Budreau's Chet Baker biopic *Born to Be Blue* (2016), Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2014) and *La La Land* (2016), both of which contended at the Oscars, as well as a handful of jazz documentaries such as *Jaco* (2014), *Chasing Trane* (2016) and *I Called Him Morgan* (2016) have been recently released and made available on Netflix. Although jazz fans and scholars alike might argue that jazz has never ebbed in its cultural and social influence, the current upstroke of jazz-infused and explicitly jazz-related visual media is undeniable. Such a resurgence of jazz film in particular makes Nicolas Pillai's *Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image* an especially pertinent and timely intervention into jazz scholarship and film theory simultaneously.

By asking the question "[w]here is the 'jazz' in the 'jazz film' or 'jazz television'", Pillai embarks on a transdisciplinary exploration of the dissonant image of jazz and its effect on televisual and cinematic ontology (3). Pillai deepens our understanding of jazz visuals through textual analysis, screen composition, mise en scène, historical and biographical analysis of jazz musicians, musical movements and filmmakers. According to Pillai, "jazz is a music in a state of constant reinvention yet its surrounding cultural myths fix and limit it" (4). *Jazz as Visual Language* unpacks the mythology ensconcing jazz culture, detailing the visual mechanisms by which jazz mythology is produced and upheld through visual media. By focusing on the ideological and ontological import of jazz images, Pillai demonstrates how film and jazz communicate with one another, crafting a well-rounded critique of American Modernism and visual culture, and modulating the static status jazz often maintains in American studies.

Although Pillai's book is chiefly concerned with mining from the rich visual history of jazz film and television from the mid 1930s–1960s, he opens his book with a brief examination of *Whiplash*, essentially interpreting it as though Hitchcock directed a jazz film, noting that, "[i]t may be more productive ... to think of *Whiplash* as a horror film than as a jazz film" (9). Pillai zeroes in on the "[t]radition of expressionistic cinema devoted to male obsession" within which the dissonant image of jazz has found a home (6). In the book's introduction, Pillai analyses how the "[m]ale performing body" functions as "the primary object of the gaze" in films like *Whiplash* and *Young Man with a Horn* (1950) (7). Drawing upon staples of film studies such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema", Pillai foregrounds the correspondences of film and jazz, "[d]rawing upon classical Hollywood just as jazz draws upon the Great American Songbook" (11).

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Jazz as Visual Language interprets jazz "as a force within the world", successfully navigating the terrain between music and film, mapping out some uncharted territory along the way as he explicates three non-narrative examples from film and television: Len Lye's avant-garde short *A Colour Box*, Gjon Mili's *Jammin' the Blues*, and the BBC2's *Jazz 625* (3). Pillai insists that by viewing these works "merely as records of performance, we diminish them", and perhaps miss how "these three moments of jazz on screen cohere around an imperative to reflect on the music's continuing social relevance" (12). In Chapter Two, Pillai examines New Zealand-born visual artist and sculpturist Len Lye, particularly his 1936 short film *A Colour Box* which was produced as an advertisement for the General Post Office (GPO). Pillai observes how Lye blends avant-garde visuals with Don Barreto's latin jazz tune "La Belle Creole", utilising the "polysemic" quality of jazz music, "embrac[ing] the culture industry" in response to the "crisis of Western identity" in British jazz (23, 25). According to Pillai, Lye implements art film as advertisement, producing a "spectacle [which] is dependent upon a social-democratic ideology and an address to an attentive spectator, alive to the particularities of the moment" (47). As Pillai writes, even "the word 'jazz' provoked discourses around race, cultural value, technological affect, and the relation of Britain to the rest of the world" (48). In this way, Lye's achievement, argues Pillai, is in the artist's contribution to the idea of nationhood through the radical combination of experimental visual elements and latin jazz, placing the film "firmly within popular discourse" (33), by creating "a cinematic space which posits hope in the idea of mixing, which values subjective experience and which finds the human in the machine" (47). Pillai concludes that "Lye's films disrupted the relationship of celluloid to the projector, using this ontological subversion as a metaphor for jazz, the music of cultural and racial mixing" (118).

Pillai turns to Albanian-American photographer Gjon Mili's *Jammin' the Blues* in the book's third chapter, offering an extended analysis of his short masterpiece and other cinematic works. Pillai focuses on Mili's artifice, elucidating his use of abstraction and postproduction effects to "provide an elliptical version" of the trope of representing the jazz "jam session" within a "dream space which nevertheless provided a commentary upon the role of jazz musicians in the wider society", while describing how "[t]he documentary elements of *Jammin' the Blues* ... are complicated by the temporal distance between music and image" (127). Mili's film "minimises the competitive and alienating aspects of jam session culture," claims Pillai, producing a space in which to "dramatise the complexities of a music in the process of change" (64). Pillai's analysis of *Jammin' the Blues* supports his thesis that film and television, like jazz, can be dissonant, or as he writes how "[o]n screen, jazz is in constant dialogic exchange with its framing medium … so that the emphasis placed on jazz, of tone and cultural position, are ever in flux" (13). According to Pillai, Mili's visual abstraction generates a "striking tension between expressionistic visual flourishes and documentary footage of musicians performing and interacting" (53). *Jammin' the Blues* as well as Mili's other films "mobilise associations created within other popular art forms (radio, dance, theatre) to explore the contributions of jazz to culture in the modern age" (56), producing a lasting visual image of the jam session which went on to influence other depictions of jazz performance such as the opening credit sequence of Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990).

The last work that Pillai examines is the BBC2's television series entitled *Jazz 625*, which ran from 1964 to 1966. So named for the Ultra High Fidelity (UHF) 625-lines rather than the Very High Fidelity (VHF) 405-lines implemented by other television shows, Pillai analyses the braid of technological innovation and ideology serving as the cultural backdrop to the series as one of the major "cultural commitments from Britain's major public service broadcaster" (83). According to

Pillai, the achievements of *Jazz 625* often become fragmented when the series is interpreted archivally, writing that "[q]uestions of institutional social context are largely lost when moments from *Jazz 625* are disinterred" (83). Unlike film, Pillai remarks on the way in which television produces an image of jazz which "does not break apart the continuity of sound", but, rather, "sound ensures the continuity across the fragmentation of successive images" (102). Citing Richard Dyer's notion of "non-representational signs", Pillai interprets how through transitional techniques, camera work and other televisual devices, "exchanges between instruments are visualised", highlighting how television uniquely contributes to the production of jazz images (109). By observing how *Jazz 625*'s "modernity, and its conception of jazz, have been subtly altered to suit the changing priorities in the BBC's development and institutional history", Pillai seeks to rethink the history and importance of *Jazz 625* in particular, and jazz in Britain more generally (122).

Jazz as Visual Language is addressed to both jazz scholars and film and television scholars alike, a point which Pillai makes special note of early on in the book, emphasising his intention to avoid some of the more common pitfalls of jazz scholarship and film theory. In this respect, he attempts to split the difference between jazz theory, which so often expresses little or no knowledge of film theory, and film theory with little or no knowledge of jazz. Pillai's book is among a select few recent publications which focus on the confluence of jazz music and visual media, including Jans B. Wager's *Jazz and Cocktails*: *Rethinking Race and the Sound of Film Noir, Watching Jazz: Encounters with Jazz Performance on Screen* by Björn Heile, Peter Elsdon, and Jennifer Ruth Doctor, and *Improvising Cinema* by Gilles Mouëllic. Like these other works, Pillai's seeks to centre both film and television as discursive media, trying to forge a much-needed liaison between jazz music and cultural studies and continue a similar style of scholarship as the one inaugurated by Krin Gabbard in his classic work *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*. In this way, Pillai stays true to his original premise, in which he seeks to elide the oft-mistaken "precedence for jazz over the media which portray it", by instead "identif[ing] cultural moments in which interactions between jazz, animation, film and television have proven mutually transformative" (3). Pillai's written account of jazz and visual media proves transformative in its own right, contributing much to the study of jazz, television and film music studies.

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Anthony Ballas is a graduate of the University of Colorado at Denver. His work has been featured in multiple collections on racism and sexism in film. Anthony has recently contributed to a volume on *Twin Peaks: The Return* which is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan. He is currently editing a volume entitled *Cinema Liberation Theology*.