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The Cinema of Disorientation: Inviting Confusions, by Dominic Lash. University of Edinburgh Press, 2020, 198 pp.

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The feeling of being utterly lost that is cultivated by David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006), one of a handful of films central to Dominic Lash's *The Cinema of Disorientation: Inviting Confusions*, might be the paradigmatic effect of the body of work that Lash refers to as the "cinema of disorientation". These films insistently problematise the viewer's relation to the unfolding diegesis, leaving them without the stability of interpretive points of reference that audiences have come to expect and rely upon, or shifting these points of reference as soon as they have been established. In *The Cinema of Disorientation*, Lash takes these films as case studies, using their disorientations to flesh out a humble but profoundly robust methodology of filmic analysis centered around his idea of orientation and the means by which a film construes it. As he puts it, "[u]nderstanding is always operative and always under negotiation, continually shifting and developing; examining disorientating films can help bring this process clearly into view" (5).

Lash designates the cinema of disorientation as "those films concerning which no interpretation can be adequate that fails to address their disorienting aspects" (18). Rather than seeking to advance a comprehensive theory of this body of work, Lash's book uses this oeuvre as a privileged site for thinking through hermeneutics common to all filmic analysis, if more directly operative in those films which seek to directly engage them. Lash uses films in which the viewer's orientation is substantially problematised—Lynch's *Inland Empire* and *Lost Highway* (1997), Pedro Costa's *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em marcha*, 2006), Léos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012), and Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language* (*Adieu au langage*, 2014)—precisely in order to highlight the processes of orientation that are always-already at play in the interpretation of films, regardless of whether they explicitly seek to problematise them. A valuable and timely contribution to the field, *The Cinema of Disorientation* proffers a quietly radical hermeneutic of filmic analysis, and supplies the reader with an effective vocabulary to aid in its application.

In elaborating his analytical approach, Lash calls two theoretical terms to the fore. While neither is novel to film studies, both might be said to have been hand-picked from the margins of the field. The first of these is metalepsis. Drawing largely from original translations of the writings of Gérard Genette, Lash defines metalepsis as "any situation where *ontologically distinct levels* (whether properly so, or merely fictionally so, from within the diegesis) encounter one another" (28), citing as an illustrative example Egghead's hailing and eventual shooting of a member of the theatrical audience in Tex Avery's *Daffy Duck & Egghead* (1937). Metalepsis is closely interrelated with the idea of confusion, which for the purposes of Lash's book primarily follows

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Alexander Baumgarten's definition, explicated by Terry Eagleton: "[c]onfusion here means not 'muddle' but 'fusion': in their organic interpenetration, the elements of aesthetic representation resist that discrimination into discrete units which is characteristic of conceptual thought.'" (qtd. in Lash 14). Metalepsis thus frequently entails a confusion of the ostensibly separate levels of the diegesis across which it functions, as in Egghead's ability to shoot the audience. Metalepsis can exist in varying intensities: in spite of the forms of implausible connection across five centuries (not least of which is the recurrence of actors), *Cloud Atlas* (Tom Twyker and the Wachowskis, 2012) is "still only on the threshold of metalepsis proper" in that it ultimately provides diegetic explanation for these connections (unlike the case of Egghead's bullet) (34). The meeting between two versions of Laura Dern's character on the soundstage in *Inland Empire*, on the other hand, is highly metaleptical in that no diegetic explanation is given for her dual presence.

The second of these terms, one central to Lash's analysis, is Lash's compelling approach to the idea of figuration (of which metalepsis is an example) as a device by which films negotiate their meaning. Following Paul de Man, Lash defines figuration as "*signification that is significantly aligned with articulation*" (95), where articulation roughly mirrors de Man's deployment of the term as having to do with shape. This definition thus dovetails nicely with confusion in Baumgarten's sense; as with metalepsis, it entails a point of overlap between two otherwise separate registers. In turn, figuration is related to disorientation; citing Dudley Andrew's claim that figures "'have the power to disrupt the relation of context to sign and reorient not only the discursive event but the system itself […]'", Lash continues, "[i]f figures can 'reorient […] the system' this process must, I think, also involve at least a degree of disorientation" (101).

To elucidate the utility of this definition of figuration, Lash turns to *Lost Highway*, arguing that the film mobilises figuration in order to represent the unrepresentable—here, Fred's murder of his wife. Lash reads the film as aligning signification and articulation in order to figure—without clearly representing—the traumatic kernel of its narrative. Here I take issue with Lash's argument, not in terms of the point at which it arrives (I am in full agreement that Fred's murder of his wife serves as something of the film's repressed, and that it deploys a complex array of narrative and aesthetic devices to circle around but avoid legibly showing the event), but in terms of the path his argument takes to get there. His reading relies largely upon the suspension of analytical disbelief that enables one to approach the film as simply the hallucinations of a man condemned to death reimagining his life in his final moments, whereby "the 'real' diegesis of *Lost Highway* is presented exactly *nowhere*—all we see are events that are, diegetically, disorienting hallucinations or traumatised fantasies" (112). In asserting that this interpretation is *diegetically* corroborated, Lash overlooks the temporal structure of the film itself. Certainly the film does not go so far as to decisively corroborate the true reality of Fred over the false reality of Pete; but, as even the language Lash uses testifies, the site of transformation halfway through the film relies upon the murder that takes place unequivocally within Fred's diegetic world, for which no analogue exists on Pete's side.

That Lash should dispense with sequence here seems contrary to his method on display in *Holy Motors*: in the subsection pointedly titled "Reading *Holy Motors* in Sequence", a number of the keen insights Lash draws from the film hinge on its temporal logic, his precise attention to how the rules of the film's diegesis are consistently upset and rewritten (73). I fail to see by what logic this temporality should be foreclosed on in the approach to *Lost Highway*. While this reading does

not ultimately disprove or challenge the theories of interpretation at large that Lash seeks to advance by way of *Lost Highway*—it merely runs parallel to them—it does weaken the contribution that this chapter seeks to make to his larger argument.

As I stated earlier, Lash's book is less concerned with offering definitive interpretations of the films under discussion than it is with identifying avenues of interpretive approach invited by each of the films in order to demonstrate *how* that invitation comes to pass. In so doing, however, Lash nonetheless offers a number of compelling and unique interpretations of his own, even in well-travelled critical ground. Of particular note is his discussion of *Holy Motors*. Following an extremely attentive close reading of the subtle (or, sometimes, rather overt) differences among the appointments that structure the film's narrative and the inferred diegetic rules that govern M. Oscar's relationship to the world of the film, Lash arrives at the claim that *Holy Motors* demonstrates and dramatises the independence of connection and disorientation by populating its diegesis with inconsistent and paradoxical connections. By way of counterexample, then, this reading is also exemplary of how Lash seeks to communicate the ramifications of his theory in a context larger than the discussion of the film at hand:

> *Holy Motors* demonstrates that cohesion and consistency—connections in general—do not automatically reduce disorientation; in fact, if we are led specifically *not* to expect them, they can lead to profound bewilderment. The film also demonstrates how near to paradox are many features we often take for granted in narrative films […] performances are only absorbing because we are aware that they are performances and thus not wholly absorbed by them. (84)

While in this passage Lash risks coming across as more than a little precious towards a relatively basic claim, it is in basic claims such as this that Lash displays his critical thoroughness and acumen. Lash's critical strengths lie precisely in articulating what is generally understood; the idea that connections can be disorienting may seem obvious, but only by providing the vocabulary for this obvious phenomenon can Lash perform his extraordinarily attentive reading of these disorienting connections.

Elsewhere, Lash rebukes established approaches to the films under study, carefully hedging these disagreements in the context of his attentive readings. In one short but powerful example, Lash's study of *Goodbye to Language* challenges a rather fundamental tenet of Daniel Morgan's approach to post-70's Godard taken in his book *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*. While it is worth underscoring that Lash elsewhere cites Morgan's writing on Godard with praise, Lash takes what we might call a good-faith punch upward at Morgan's approach to the specific question of whether Godard's films can be said to meaningfully pose arguments, countering:

> Are we really dealing with arguments or merely things that look or feel like arguments […]? Morgan does recognise this problem, but he swiftly elides the notion of making an argument […]. [T]he various versions of the claim that 'films think' are, to me, more obviously various and able to be understood variously than the specific claim that a film argues. (139)

The somewhat unsatisfying conclusion at which Lash arrives might be said to elude the question of argumentation, if not eliding it: "Argument can be a component of Godard's cinema in a multitude of ways; making a firm decision as to whether the films themselves agree with their own arguments is not always a necessary or even a helpful thing to do" (141).

If not entirely compelling as a rebuttal to Morgan's reading, what this conclusion does indicate is that Lash's interest in the film lies elsewhere, and approaching this elsewhere necessitates leaving this question of argumentation in a state of suspended ambivalence. If we take argumentation to necessitate the imposition of judgment from a restricted perspective, as Lash seems to here, this reading returns us finally to his idea of disorientation by calling attention to the subjectivity inherent in anchoring one's reading to a given orientation or argument when the film contains multiple, contradictory lines of argumentation and judgment from multiple and contradictory perspectives. Lash writes:

> By immersing us in its complex and frequently disorientating images and sounds […] *Adieu au langage* indicates that all acts of judgement have to take place from within some medium, somehow in the midst of things, rather than from without, from a securely distanced vantage point […]. The indeterminacy that results does not simply undermine coherence or orientation, however; it is also—like language, and indeed like consciousness itself—a condition of possibility for orientation itself. (146)

The final point at which Lash's argument arrives is the insufficiency of a predetermined hermeneutic of filmic interpretation. Through his concept of orientation, Lash continually emphasises the fluctuating nature of our interpretation of films by pointing to the ways in which our understanding—our orientation—necessarily evolves over the course of viewing them, rendering whatever preconceived notions of how they demand we read them wholly insufficient as often as not. This approach to theorising the work of interpreting film is certainly broad. Lash himself acknowledges "that the book does not construct a unified theory of disorientation […] because I have strived to avoid the kind of theoretical clarification that considers its business to be the policing of firm distinctions, thereby obscuring the fact that much of what is of theoretical interest blurs distinctions" (22–23). While this wilful open-endedness at times makes Lash's writing difficult to follow, the commitment to maintaining ambiguity where theory would so often like to disavow it is ultimately a strength of Lash's thought, not a weakness. Finally, the gravity of Lash's ideas resides precisely in their breadth and their intimate proximity to established hermeneutics of film studies. To attend to (dis)orientation is to attend more closely—which might in fact be to attend at all—to the means by which a given film fundamentally positions its viewer and guides them to its own interpretation, inviting or forbidding a given interpretive approach in doing so. Therein lies, perhaps above all else, the strength of *The Cinema of Disorientation*. It emphatically refuses to align itself with an approach without itself presuming to advance one of its own. Its acumen and timeliness, in other words, are in its simplicity. Ultimately, all Lash asks us to do is attend to how a given film positions its reader, to acknowledge our naiveté before its constantly unfolding text.

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