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Life-Destroying Diagrams, by Eugenie Brinkema. Duke University Press, 2022, 470 pp.

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Introduction

What forms can be formed? Faced with the self-evidence of form as what presents itself immediately, Eugenie Brinkema works through form to demarcate the possible configurations it can assume. In doing so, Brinkema rejects the Spinozist *potentia* of what form can do, in favour of the Leibnizian "*ars formularia*" or formalisation of forms (xviii).

Life-Destroying Diagrams builds on Brinkema's previous polemical work *The Forms of the Affect*. There, she proposed a formal investigation of affect, arguing against Laura Marks's *The Skin of the Film* that affect is not to be found in the way the spectator's body encounters and responds to film but directly in the film's own shapes, lines, and diagrams. This argument opens Brinkema's *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, which finalises the rupture between affect and body by launching an assault on horror's neck, fracturing it in half. For Brinkema, horror's only relation to the body is in its formalization of the body in so far as horror considers all possible bodily configurations. Returning to Spinoza and Leibniz, Brinkema's question is not what can a body do but in what ways can a body be assembled.

To explore this question, Brinkema exposes the reader in Chapters One and Two to the importance of form in horror. Brinkema is "done with the neck" as the body part the spectator uses to feel horror, one's neck hairs raising to brush against the horror film's skin (1). Moving away from the neck, Brinkema proposes to look at horror, and in particular the *Final Destination* films (James Wong et al., 2000–2011), through their formalisation of death as the inescapable ending of the sequence of life. She then pauses her formalist argumentation in favour of three interludes exploring different aspects of sequentiality: order, rhythm and shape.

This allows Brinkema in Chapters Three to Four (split by the bijective text "Two Violences") to elaborate on other types of ordering shapes. She leaves the line of the sequence and moves towards the plane of the grid as found in *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2011). Brinkema's exploration of a second dimension is echoed in the prolific use of nested and cross-referencing notes, presented as the second (or third?) axis of the reading plane. The nesting of notes is interrupted by the text "Two Violences" which follows it. This text designates the violence of the infinite plane to be one of consumption and introduces the violence of the following Chapter Four as one of digestion. Chapter Four thus interrogates the *digestive* labour of each element of a sequence through *The Human Centipede* trilogy (Tom Six, 2009, 2011 and 2015). This is the end of Brinkema's chapter sequence. It is not however the end of *Life-Destroying Diagrams*.

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What follows is a "Postscript" named after the work *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is undergoing, its formalising labour, the formalisation of forms. It is titled using Leibniz's formulation, "*Ars Formularia*". Now that the main sequence is over, this postscript aims to think about the process of form, to explore what a reader might anticipate to come from the form they are being presented with. Brinkema thus puts the reader in parallel with the cult in *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), which in formalising torture, anticipates the advent of a martyr.

Finally comes the most extensive part of Brinkema's book, sectioned off by pages of plates followed by numerous blank pages. This final part is immediately identifiable from the side of the book as each page is marked with special insignia. It makes the book stand out, makes its entirety more noticeable, while being fully separated from the rest of the book's sequence. This part is titled "Love and Measurement" and expands on a formalisation of love as measurement and geometry, conversing with the previously laid out formal shapes of horror.

Infinite Totalising Formalism

Moving away from an analysis of horror that attempts to locate what is horrific about horror film—what raises the hairs at the back of the neck—Brinkema attempts to map the shapes horror takes. She looks at *Final Destination*'s finite sequences, *The Cabin in the Woods*'s unescapable grid and *The Human Centipede*'s digestive order. At the heart of her analysis lie two fundamental notions: the ineluctable horizontal finitude of sequence and the unescapable verticality of reordering. Brinkema's formalism is reminiscent of Barthes' *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, which explores the horizontality of the word sequence and the verticality of language—a word may be replaced by another. However, while Barthes argues for the semiotic neutrality of a writing with no dimensions (a "degree zero"), Brinkema argues that for a radically formalist approach that both emphasises the finitude of a filmic sequence of images and events and works to produce a prolific permutative reading. A radical formalism, Brinkema suggests, must engage with the absolute totality of a sequence: one term is only relevant in relation to the one which precedes it and the one that follows, leaving no space for excess or failure. It is in the next step that Brinkema mentions and argues for failure, by producing monstrous readings and the capacity for reading to engage with its own faults. Brinkema chooses to study the aforementioned films not because they are specific in their formalism—all films produce forms—but because they produce a reading of their own form. The teenagers of *Final Destination 3* realise the sequence they are part of, the scientists of *The Cabin in the Woods* work through different sequences to bring about an end—of the world or of the characters—and the surgeons of *The Human Centipede* produce experimental variations on one digestive diagram. A film needs to be closed in order for Brinkema's reading to open.

Pro Forma Contra Cinema

It may then seem confusing to see Brinkema conjure formalism as the best way to understand what film forms film produces. When discussing *Rubber* (Quentin Dupieux, 2010) and the way it produces violent forms she argues: "[i]n order to grapple with violence, the torus must be thought before the tire" (141). Brinkema claims that radical formalism is the approach most able to understand a film's unfolding because it is interested in its sequence and the relations between its elements (characters, places, objects…). Unfortunately, this does not translate in her work. Despite her language, Brinkema's approach is entirely based on pulling reading out of film. The unfolding she names is the unfolding of reading outside of the film.

With Brinkema, one does not read through film but from film. This is why her analysis focuses on self-reflexive horror films, commenting on their own unfolding: their self-reflexion aligns with Brinkema's external reading. This is particularly noticeable when she explores the inescapable finality of *Final Destination 3*'s sequence and comments on the characters identifying the order of their deaths. Brinkema stops her reading there, pointing out the moment as an example of the film's formalisation of death. She immediately moves on to show how this concurs with her exploration of death as finitude and leaves the film behind. She does not engage with the actions the teenagers undertake once they have produced their reading. Brinkema engages with these films as they interrogate their own formal aspects but never stays to look at what they do with this interrogation. For Brinkema these films formalise death, horror and digestion in general, but never for themselves. The form *Final Destination* gives to death is interpreted as the form of the concept "death" and never as the form that performs a certain unfolding in this particular filmic sequence. In her "Postscript: *Ars Formularia*", Brinkema spends an extensive amount of time defending and arguing for radical formalist approach against a materialist attack: "Hatreds of formalism are all alike. [The formalist is] [a]ccused of abandoning the world" (251). She argues for the necessity to formalise completely, to be unafraid to look at an object or concept through its shapes, sequences, lengths and colours as a way to fundamentally engage with the world. When some would argue that that process necessitates a sectioning off of the object or concept from the world, Brinkema counters that that object's or concept's form is already part of the world and that to read it formally is to already read its place in the world. Fundamentally, Brinkema responds to criticisms of formalism by arguing that it is the reading process that best engages with its object for itself. However, while that may be a convincing argument for radical formalism, that is not how she engages with the films she approaches formally. Perhaps the more appropriate but more damning critique I would level against her approach in *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is that it doesn't formalise the films it analyses enough. The book proclaims the necessity to completely enter film while sustaining the separation between its philosophising and the films it focuses on.

A Book with Two Lives

The unfortunate consequence of Brinkema's emphasis on reading is the evacuation of film's ability to produce its own form. All readings of film through form revert back to non-filmic forms or concepts. One expects, after her attack on horror's neck, to find a reimagining of what horror means. But Brinkema leaves the category intact, in fact referencing it unscathed in the "Postscript". Instead of dismantling the question of horror as that which produces horrific affect, she simply displaces the issue. She argues that what produces the horrific is not the gory dismemberment of bodies but simply that "horror regards the body as nothing but formal material, treating it as a compositional aspect", that horror formalises the body (22). The horrific then stems from form and not affect. But what does that change about our understanding of form? This issue of what exactly Brinkema finds to be particular about horror from a formal standpoint would be an innocuous issue if not for the ravaging consequences this question entails for her formalism. If all films produce forms, then all films that contain bodies (most films) formalise the body. In which case, how can horror and love remain pertinent categories? I do not mean to say that they should, but simply that Brinkema's whole work aims to produce a formal understanding of these categories as somewhat stable in order to incorporate their forms in the body of the text.

This problem illustrates the two lives of *Life-Destroying* diagrams. One life pushes towards a radical formalism of horror film, its life-destroying diagrams. Radical formalist

reading must destroy the unfolding, the life of the films it attends to. Radical formalist reading thus produces another life, its own, itself producing forms and formalisms of horror and love. *Life-Destroying Diagrams* produces its own forms by mowing and harvesting formal fragments of the films it engages with. It is a body of text that organises film-images: a body that assembles its own organs.

Conclusion

In the end, despite the shortcomings of this book, Brinkema is wholly successful in what she sets out to do, not because she manages to establish a strong case for radical formalism or for a formalism of horror and love (or even film and form), but simply because the only real goal of these repeated film readings, analyses, wordplays and repetitions is proliferation. Brinkema's monster *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is a machine of proliferation. One encounters it and cannot stop the action of radical formalism. One becomes a mathematician, a geometer, one measures, counts and lists and breaks one's own neck doing so. Brinkema's *Life-Destroying Diagrams* is a neck-breaking opus in all forms of the expression.

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