CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video, by Akira Mizuta Lippit |
| Authors | Flynn, Niall |
| Publication date | 2013-11-01 |
| Original Citation | Flynn, N. (2013) Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video, by Akira Mizuta Lippit. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 6. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.6.09 |
| Type of publication | Review |
| Link to publisher's version | 10.33178/alpha.6.09 |
| Rights | © 2013, The Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ |
| Download date | 2026-11-04 08:54:45 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5807 |



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

***Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*. Akira Mizuta Lippit. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 (189 pages). ISBN: 978-0-520-27414-3.**

A Review by Niall Flynn, Independent Scholar

Experimental and avant-garde aesthetics are one of the more demanding areas to grasp in film and media studies; one that challenges notions of subjectivity, spectatorship and medium that seem sound in the contemplation of a wider cinema. It often shares much with other disciplines, as the objects of study themselves look outward to philosophy, art history and cultural theory.[1] Furthermore, it pushes against prescriptive critical attempts to historicise and delineate.[2] But Akira Mizuta Lippit's recent *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* does not seek to provide another history of experimental cinema. It proposes a concept, "ex-cinema", and examines a wide range of film and video that is defined by this term. In doing so, the book turns on explorations of the "ex" prefix: it is concerned with questions outside cinema—media, dreams, politics—that nevertheless have a bearing on it. In fact, the whole concept of ex-cinema presumes these exterior elements. Lines can be drawn, as Lippit realises, between ex-cinema and previous considerations of "minor" cinema, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the term: both terms stress its existence at the limit of cinema as a form of "alternative global media" (155–6). That is not the only connection to the French theorists, whose performative mode of writing greatly informs Lippit's own style. This open style, full of reference, invention and play, gives the book much dynamism, and sets it apart from previous work on the subject. The author, who is Professor of Cinematic Arts, Comparative Literature, and East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Southern California, has published previous versions of chapters in journals as early as 1997, including one particularly incisive essay in the 2007 edited collection *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. This long gestation period is reflected in the detailed and considered descriptions of the works discussed. Furthermore, there is first-hand engagement with the filmmakers and artists discussed through interviews and criticisms they provided to Lippit.

An overview of two of the book's exemplary concepts is helpful in understanding what Lippit means by ex-cinema. Firstly, the introductory chapter is a poetic contemplation on the exergue: "An exergue, from the Greek *ex* (outside) and *ergon* (work), refers to a space outside the work, outside the essential body of the work, and yet part of, even essentially—a part and apart" (1). This frames what follows in the book, and Lippit locates the exergue across diverse sources: the city of Los Angeles, the space between Stan Brakhage's film frames, the subject of life in Jacques Derrida's thought. The introduction sets out a trajectory of experimental cinema in relation to a wider cinema, though Lippit does not speak in these terms, preferring to consider the exergue as creating the possibility of an ex-cinema that takes place "between, beside, and outside" other works of cinema (4). Experimental aesthetics, in any form, assume an intermediate discourse, and the difficulties defining experimental cinema come from its position both inside and outside other cinematic frameworks. Lippit contemplates the exergue through various theoretical touchstones, including Jean-François

Lyotard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida, and, indeed, it is the latter's work that informs much of Lippit's usage of the term. Derrida is a spectre throughout the book, and Lippit puts his thought to use in novel and unexpected ways. Invoking Derrida's work on the ear, Lippit posits the exergue not as a materiality, presence or moment, but as a limit:

> This vanishing limit of life, of a time that begins in the instant of its end, born at the instant of its death, and signed always by an engraver that addresses itself elsewhere, returning from the outside to itself, operates according to a logic and work of the outside: because the exergue is not only outside the work, a work outside the work, but also a work of the outside. (3)

Thus the exergue is an inscription with a complex temporality that performs the "work of the outside". Such long, poetic sentences are scattered throughout the book; they play with signification and work by deferring the object of the sentence, of its theme, in a style that befits its Derridean influence. Secondly, the other exemplary concept is paracinema, which Lippit finds in the work of Jonathan Walley. This describes cinematic phenomena that do not use the materials of film in a traditional manner—something that often occurs in experimental cinema. Here, we get a rejection of essentialist notions of medium specificity, and instead the suggestion that the essence of cinema lies elsewhere. By invoking paracinema, Lippit poses cinema as a concept, rather than as simply a form: "cinema is virtual and its actualization in specific forms, iterations, and instances represents only a temporary and provisional realization of a cinema that remains ultimately elsewhere" (4–5). This argument reshapes how we think about medium, and sustains Lippit's focus on ex-cinema. It situates cinema within a broader, and more abstract, historical framework, one attendant to aesthetics as much as to sociocultural developments. Though not mentioned again, this idea is one that stays with the reader throughout the book, especially as cinema's ontological and indexical character is thrown into relief by the decline of film. It is a pity that Lippit does not develop it further, as we can only speculate what shape the concept of paracinema would take beyond nineteenth-century, pre-cinematic technologies.

From such an understanding of the exergue and of cinema as an abstract concept, the book's chapters proceed through examinations of individual films (such as *Blue*, Derek Jarman, 1993), filmmakers (Martin Arnold) and video artists (Diana Thater), but also through ideas such as hyperrealism, kinematics and revisionary cinema, until the final chapter, entitled "xxxxMA", which offers a lexicon of ex-cinema, with reference to Lyotard and to Martin Arnold's found-footage cinematography. The chapter dedicated to *Blue* offers an acute analysis both of the film and its components—philosophies and modalities of the colour blue, the distinction between an image and its colour, and the voiceover's relation to the image. Lippit brings together references to Goethe, Nietzsche, and Wassily Kandinsky's thought on the colour blue with brio in this chapter, and by threading through these points of reference Lippit is able to conclude that blue has a complex visibility: "The first and last image, the color of everything with or without light" (32). Another notable chapter focuses on documentarian Caveh Zahedi, and builds a description of his heady short film, *The World Is a Classroom*. After Lippit synopsises the film, he jumps off into contemplations on allegory, the rhetoric of visuality, and media images, building an argument that shows how Zahedi's documentaries share a peculiar relation to reality. *The World Is a Classroom* shows how the events of 9/11, and their media depictions, which were taking place as Zahedi made the film, collapsed the distinction between representation and reality, as the exterior events imposed a pedagogical crisis on the classroom. Questions of authority and politics figure in the dialectic between representation and reality, and Lippit poses Zahedi's work as an

allegory that meditates on the possibility of allegory itself. "Paradoxically, the impossible allegory leaves only one possibility—allegory. An allegory, perhaps, of the total destruction of allegory" (77). In the film, the classroom begins to act as an allegory of events in the outside world and Zahedi's logic is likened to the political rhetoric of the time. But Lippit is slow to equate what happens in this film, and in cinema in general, to the outer world. Thus, the allegory collapses before it can complete its rhetorical function. In this chapter, the author shows the high stakes of documentary; documentary that exists between the image and the unimaginable: "What is unimaginable there is rendered here in your experience" (85). Each chapter in the book contributes something to the ex-cinema theory, and Lippit's passion for his subject matter is clear.

Throughout the book, the interrelation of films and their explication suggests an idea previously posited by Laura U. Marks in a kindred book, *The Skin of the Film*. The works discussed in both cannot be separated from their explication; they are not waiting to have theory "done to" them. For Marks, one reason for her book is to catch up verbally with arguments that the works she discusses have developed (xiv–xv). This is most pertinent to the types of cinema under consideration in Lippit and Marks's books—experimental and intercultural works, respectively—where practice and theory are more closely allied than in mainstream or narrative cinema, and their impulses are often similar, although their forms and effects differ. This approach underlies Lippit's analysis: "Ex-cinema is cinema, the thought and practice of a cinema outside" (13). His introduction is able to dispense with monolithic concepts by setting out the issues of ex-cinema, and allowing the rest of the book to work on them directly. Lippit favours a personal, performative mode of inquiry. His vocabulary plays an important part in this style, as terms like "extensities", "exscriptions", "animagination" and "*de*scription" subvert traditional notions of inside and outside, and what properly constitutes the object of study. He makes surprising semantic connections too, showing that the homophonic ph- and f- sounds at work in fantasy and phantasy are the same in film—a nice touch in his discussion of psychoanalysis. These elements play an apt role in his investigations, and the performative style lends itself to passages that seem at odds with the tenor of much scholarship, which favours seriousness in its pursuit of objectivity. This is where much of the book's charm lies, though, and it does not sacrifice any of the rigour or meticulousness we expect from academic writing. The style never borders on being long-winded, nor digressive. It is part of its technique: the reader is slowed down, and made to engage with the issues raised. It is balanced, with the expected critical distance from the objects of study. Lippit's wager pays off in the book's fusion of theme and technique, where his style comes to illuminate what is at stake in his line of questioning. The effect of this style is a blurring of the distinction between theory and praxis, as implied also in Marks's work, so much that its potential in film and media scholarship is something one is compelled to think about after reading this book.

I would have liked Lippit to apply the ex-cinema concept to digital media, and the issues therein, as there are links to be made between the two, and concerns shared by both. A teasing out of the paracinema concept would have been satisfying, though that may be a much longer project. After finishing with a book that delivers its promises, this is the only thing I felt it was short of; however, there is no denying the power of the book's insights. While careful at discussing its material, it is also successful in fulfilling its objectives. Its path—from the Introduction, through the illustrative body of the book, and finishing with the vocabulary drawn from Lyotard—delivers a convincing theory of ex-cinema that has implications not only for ways we think about experimental works of cinema, but about works of cinema in general. The reader will have come to a greater understanding of the

individual films and artists discussed, as well as taking away greater insights into experimental cinema and ideas about it. Questions about the subject as well as how to address it are left open for future work to continue. It is a provocative study in a vital field.

**Notes**

[1] See the edited collection by David Curtis et al. on its dialogue outside cinema.

[2] Two recent studies, by David E. James and Jeffrey Skoller respectively, rebut claims that historicisation of experimental cinema is unequivocally negative, and argue in fact that it productively historicises.

**Works Cited**

Curtis, David, A. L. Rees, Duncan White and Steven Ball, eds. *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*. London: Tate, 2011. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Fwd. by Réda Bensmaïa. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1986. Print.

---. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press, 1989. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Ed. Christie McDonald. Trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell. Lincoln: U. of Nebraska P., 1988. Print.

James, David E. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U. of California P., 2005. Print.

Jarman, Derek. *Blue*. Artificial Eye, 1993. Film.

Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

Schwab, Gabriele, ed. *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia U.P., 2007. Print.

Skoller, Jeffrey. *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 2005. Print.

Walley, Jonathan. "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film". *October* 103 (2003): 15–30. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Feb 2013.

Zahedi, Caveh. "The World Is a Classroom". *Underground Zero*. Facets, 2003. DVD.

**Suggested Citation**

Flynn, Niall. "*Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* by Akira Mizuta Lippit". Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 6 (Winter 2013). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

**Niall Flynn** completed an MA in Film Studies at University College Cork in 2012. His thesis explored the theoretical implications of subtitling in the cinematic experience.