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A Critical Companion to James Cameron, edited by Adam Barkman and Antonio Sanna. Lexington, 2019, 220 pp.

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Over a span of forty years, James Cameron has become synonymous with the box-office blockbuster. Bigger stars, budgets, and technological innovations have led the director to transcend spectacle-centric contemporaries like Roland Emmerich and Michael Bay, reframing him in the words of Thomas Elsaesser, as "the embodiment of the post-*auteur* author" (248). For Elsaesser, the post-auteur author is distinguished in part by their ability to synergise art and business into a single entity. As is the case with Cameron, this often culminates in the formation of a production studio or visual effects company, but Cameron's desire to create universally appealing films while exercising total control over their production seems to transcend even this tradition. Cameron's autocratic approach to filmmaking is well documented and may well serve as an explanation for his less than copious output. The sparsity of his filmography has also resulted in academic considerations being limited to what are arguably his four most commercially and critically lauded releases: *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *Titanic* (1997), and *Avatar* (2009). In *A Critical Companion to James Cameron*, Adam Barkman and Antonio Sanna seek to redress this bias by presenting a selection of essays which focus on Cameron's lesser known documentary and television work.

There are several existing collections devoted to the study of Cameron's work, although most, including Christopher Heard's *Dreaming Aloud: The Life and Films of James Cameron*, are primarily biographical or, in the case of Paula Parisi's *Titanic and the Making of James Cameron*, focus on chronicling the production. Less abundant are academic considerations of Cameron's work, with perhaps the most comprehensive being Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Stephen McVeigh's *The Films of James Cameron: Critical Essays*. Other volumes like James Clarke's *The Cinema of James Cameron: Bodies in Motion* focus on specific elements of Cameron's filmic style. Perhaps as a result of their respective backgrounds in Philosophy and English Literature, Barkman and Sanna resist the temptation to structure this collection in the same manner and while the opening section of the book does primarily focus on his filmic style, subsequent sections position Cameron as both philosopher and futurist. Structuring the book in this way proves to be a wise decision, as it prevents the broad range of approaches from becoming overwhelming while it doesn't distract from the core purpose of the book: to provide an extensive academic consideration of one of the twentieth century's most visionary filmmakers.

The opening section of the book closely follows the development of Cameron's aesthetic vision, combining a varied selection of films and appropriate theoretical perspectives. While arguably the lightest in terms of theory, Ian Thomas Malone and Antonio Sanna's initial assessment of the chaotic production of *Piranha II: The Spawning* (1981), cleverly introduces

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the reader to Cameron's pre-Hollywood career, a period which proves to be incredibly important as it establishes both Cameron's persistence of vision and uncompromising approach to filmmaking. Building upon this are chapters which deal with a variety of subjects, such as Fran Pheasant-Kelly's chapter on the concept of arresting images in *Titanic*, Carol Donelan's on Cameron's approaches to melodrama, and Paul Johnson's on the effects of technology and visual effects on the audience. Of note in this opening section are Alissa Burger's discussion of Cameron's aquatic documentaries and Marizia Natali's dissection of Avatar as representative of the Anthropocene and contemporary ecological concerns.

Burger's chapter centres on *Expedition: Bismarck* (2002), *Ghosts of the Abyss* (2003), and *Aliens of the Deep* (2005), three documentaries which were directed by Cameron and released in the intervening years between *Titanic* and *Avatar*. This trilogy represents an important milestone in Cameron's filmography, as it symbolises his transformation into a director able to blend technologically and ecologically ambitious narratives. At their core, Cameron's documentaries retain the deeply humanistic narratives with which he has become associated, and interweave stories of human and machine, evincing a symbiotic relationship between the two. This symbiosis is evident in *Expedition: Bismarck*, a film that focuses concurrently on the experiences of Karl Kuhn and Walter Weintz and the sinking of the German vessel. Ultimately, uncovering the cause of the sinking becomes less relevant, with the true intent being the reconciliation of a tragic event that has come to define both man and machine in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Symbiosis is also explored in *Avatar*, most clearly through the Na'vi's mutually beneficial relationship with the planet Pandora. Upon release of the film critical consensus was largely positive and, unconventionally for a Hollywood film, *Avatar* was co-opted by several groups as reflecting their collective socio-political struggles. Praise was far from universal though and the film was equally criticised for the ambiguity of its message. This ambiguity is discussed by Maurizia Natali, who posits aesthetic similarities between *Avatar* and Mannerist art. The idealised physicality of the Na'vi and the vibrant imagery of Pandora allude to the popular art of a period in which colonial practices were established, a practice which is paralleled via the covert attempts of the Resource Development Administration to plunder the planet of its precious natural resources. It seems ironic that such an overtly anti-capitalist and anti-establishment narrative should emanate from within Hollywood cinema, though Natali concludes that the strength of Cameron's pro-environmental convictions separates *Avatar* from other ecologically focused films. This seems logical considering that the strength of these convictions motivated Cameron to demand an exclusively plant-based menu during the production of *Avatar*.

After surveying his ability to weave contemporary eco-political concerns into visually arresting yet simplistic narratives, the book shifts towards a philosophical consideration of Cameron's films. Of particular merit in this section is the abundance of chapters devoted to exploring some of Cameron's lesser celebrated works, as evidenced in Jonathan Fischer and Adam Barkman's opening chapter which examines the historical inconsistencies of *The Exodus Decoded* (Simcha Jacobovici, 2006), and *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (Simcha Jacobovici, 2007), two Cameron-produced documentaries. While the chapter is an incisive examination of the fallibility of documentary film, its presence emphasises the absence of *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), an omission made more surprising as the Cameron-penned story features many of the techno-dystopian trademarks he has come to be associated with. The theme of religion continues in the subsequent chapter, in which Racheal Harris expands on the messianic overtones in the first two entries in *The Terminator* (1984–2019) franchise. Harris equates

Cameron with the biblical figure of god, overseeing the creation of a world replete with prophets, messengers, and unconventional, though not immaculate, conceptions. Cameron's extended role in realising the technology required to create his vision only adds further weight to this contention.

Returning to the ambiguity of *Avatar's* ecocritical message, Siobhan Lyons employs Slavoj Žižek's concept of Hollywood Marxism to problematise the film's pro-environmental message. Using accounts of post-Avatar syndrome, a phenomenon where the unnatural beauty of Pandora left viewers in a state of depression, Lyons argues that for Cameron, preservation is dependant on environmental beauty. While harvesting Pandora of its natural resources may be deplorable, exploiting its spiritually restorative properties is not.

Like many other directors, Cameron has forged enduring professional and personal relationships with several high-profile actors, the most famous of whom is Arnold Schwarzenegger. The duo enjoyed a sustained period of box-office success, which culminated in the release of *True Lies* (1994). Although at the time of release the film represented Cameron's largest budget to date, academic discussion of the film has been limited, which makes it incredibly refreshing to see two articles devoted to it. The first, authored by Michael Versteeg and Adam Barkman, takes the unconventional route of using *True Lies* to evaluate the field of virtue epistemology, utilising the complicated relationship between Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger), Helen Tasker (Jamie Lee Curtis), and fraudster Simon (Bill Paxton) to engage with the concept of justified true belief. By exploring how knowledge is distributed to each character, Versteeg and Barkman pose a common-sense, combinative solution to divisions within virtue epistemology, citing Harry Tasker's cognitive and intellectual excellence as evidence of what constitutes an excellent knowing agent. Maintaining focus on *True Lies*, Russell P. Johnson and Naaman K. Wood use the film to explore the limits of parody. Citing Linda Hutcheon, who posits that a successful parody is dependent on both a balance of reverence and subversion and a shared knowledge between director and audience (146–47), Johnson and Wood argue that the film's lack of moral ambiguity prevents audiences from recognising its parodic moments. The unsophisticated, Manichean division between American and Muslim characters which is intended to parody spy-film tropes led to outrage from non-white audiences and, according to Johnson and Wood, created a fantasy which appealed primarily to white-American audiences (154).

The final section of Barkman and Sanna's book centres on the future as envisaged by Cameron, which provides an often-apocalyptic backdrop for many of his films. Despite the best efforts of his protagonists, this future holds a certain inevitability, which is also true of Cameron's sole televisual excursion, *Dark Angel* (2000–2002). Whilst having only served as director for its final episode, *Dark Angel* bears many of the hallmarks of Cameron's oeuvre, in particular powerful female characters and hybridity between human and machine. These facets are explored by Sabine Planka, who discusses the personal development of *Dark Angel*'s artificially produced, human characters. Planka begins with an overview of the classic promethean figure before focusing on the development of the series protagonist, Max (Jessica Alba). Planka's considerations of Max's social and personal development throughout the series are supported with relevant theoretical insights, although, while briefly mentioned, a more sustained engagement with Lacanian perspectives would have been beneficial. Also surprising is the lack of reference to *Bladerunner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), as the parallels between replicants and "transgenos" would have made for an appropriate discussion.

Much of the dramatic tension in *Dark Angel* centres on Max's attempts to find and protect her fellow "transgenos", in the process unifying a divided family unit. This theme of familial unity is present in many of Cameron's films, particularly the first two entries in *The Terminator* franchise. Patrick Zwosta envisions the Connor family as a perpetually evolving unit, as evidenced through Sarah Connor's (Linda Hamilton) metamorphosis from carefree waitress to vigilant warrior, sacrificing freedom and motherhood in order to fulfil her mission. Along with Sarah, the role of The Terminator alters from ruthless killer to protector; Zwosta contends that this shift from conflict to uneasy coexistence is illustrative of the tenuous post–cold-war relationship between the Soviet Union and the US. According to Zwosta, this second revision of *The Terminator* also establishes the template for the post–cold-war action hero, one who requires equal measures of both superhuman strength and compassion.

Undoubtedly, one of the defining characteristics of Cameron's films is his association with strong female characters; Christian Jimenez addresses this through the lens of the traditionally male sacrificial hero, arguing that while Cameron's heroines may not be accurately described as feminist, they still evidence a fascinating shift in gendered genre roles. The physical sacrifices of male protagonists like Harry Stamper in *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) are contrasted by the figurative sacrifices of heroines including Sarah Connor and Rose Dewitt Bukater (Kate Winslet). Jimenez acknowledges that, while there is a lack of uniformity in the types of sacrifices made, the shift in traditional gender roles can still be interpreted as progressive.

Prior to the release of *Avatar*, Cameron revealed that production was unable to commence until visual effects technology had reached a sufficient standard. This was by no means the first occasion where special effects had been key to Cameron's vision, as evidenced by the liquid imagery associated with *The Abyss* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*. Despite their visual flair, Cameron's narratives are much less complex, making for globally marketable products. Elsa Colombani argues that this is partially due to similarities between Cameron's films and classic fairy-tales, identifying a variety of shared features, including the coffin-like, glass-fronted cryochambers of *Aliens*, and the resurrective kiss of *The Abyss*. Coupled with an abundance of children in peril and, in the case of *Aliens*, an evil queen, these elements are abundantly clear, however Colombani notes that many of them are also intentionally subverted, with the inert forms of Hicks (Michael Biehn) and Bishop (Lance Henriksen) encased in glass, and with the resurrective power of Lindsay Brigman's kiss requiring verbal reinforcement of her character in order to be effective.

While academic discourse surrounding the films of James Cameron undoubtedly exists, a collected volume seems long overdue. Cameron's immeasurable impact on cinematic history and popular culture makes his films ripe for discussion and dissection, and while *A Critical Companion to James Cameron* delves into largely uncharted waters, there are some glaring omissions. However, the book offers a diverse selection of consistently enlightening and intellectually stimulating chapters that closely engage with the aesthetic style and themes of one of Hollywood's most inventive and ambitious directors.

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