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Review

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Review by: Catherine Russell

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In a sense, the aspects of *Masterworks* that will make it a success, including that jarringly hagiographic title, the appealing graphics and illustrations that accompany each of the films, and in general its very fine design as an actual book to hold and leaf through, also work against it as a work of criticism. It has, by necessity, to add to the aura of Paul Thomas Anderson such that nuance is almost an afterthought. Nice touches, like the short essays on “Paul Thomas Anderson’s Movie Collection” that appear throughout, work to reflect and consolidate what is ultimately an insular critical object. For the most part, the references Nayman draws from and outlines already come from within the Anderson universe, whose cast of lineages and influences everybody has long known. Only the rejigging of the order in which the movies are discussed creates something radically new: a way of looking at PTA’s films that shakes off a good deal of the mythology around them and refocuses us into the specificity of their historical research and the nuts and bolts of his filmmaking, like the mystery of that beautiful ellipsis in *There Will Be Blood* that seems to contain the entire film.—**Christopher Small**

Luchino Visconti and the Fabric of Cinema

by Joe McElhaney. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021. 240 pp. illus. Hardcover: \$94.99 and paperback: \$35.99.

A cinema of fabric is a cinema that flows, flutters, and drapes; and it is also one that tears, tatters, and shreds. In Joe McElhaney’s elegant book on the cinema of Luchino Visconti, fabric serves as a multithreaded methodology with which the author explores a very distinctive set of films made between 1943 and 1976. Fabric in this account refers to the fabulous costumes and sets of Visconti’s period films, and also to the details of laundry, fashion, and decor of his neorealist films and late melodramas. The contradictions within the auteurist persona of the famous Marxist aristocrat becomes a productive tension in McElhaney’s unraveling of Visconti’s lingering attachment to romanticism, and his veiled/unveiled identity as a gay man.

Visconti’s use of fabric in set design, costume, and as a kind of prop or fetish-object is revealed to be an erotics of cinema, tied to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. This may be particularly evident in a film such as *Death in Venice* (1971), where Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) nervously watches the boy Tadzio (Björn Andresen) among the maze of softly waving canopies, towels, and veils of the beach scenes. Aschen-

bach’s tight collar and all the young men’s tight bathing suits are no less critical uses of fabric in the visual pursuit that structures the film. The final fluttering black fabric of the photographer’s tripod camera points to “a persistence in looking that is beyond the frame.” Another critical example is the gorgeous boudoir scene in *Senso* (1954) in which Franz (Farley Granger) is feminized by his handling of fabrics (not to mention his amazing white cape), while Livia (Alida Valli) seems to assume theatrical poses in her coy resistance. McElhaney deftly unpacks this scene to show how camera movements, conjoined with the lush display of tapestries, drapes, clothing, and bedclothes “enact a push and pull...between two divas.”

McElhaney’s approach to the queer gaze in Visconti’s films is bolstered by parallel examples drawn from films by Eisenstein, Pasolini, and Cocteau. Eisenstein is a recurring figure in the book, because of imagery such as the beautiful bodies of young men sleeping in hammocks in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and also because he shares with Visconti a “commitment to both Marxism and aestheticism.” Often other directors serve as points of comparison, as with Pasolini’s allegorical adaptation of Sade in *Salò* (1975), as opposed to Visconti’s more literal adaptation of the protofascist author Gabriele d’Annunzio in *L’Innocente* (1976), an author who makes many references to fabric in his writing. Working through the two films in parallel—*Salò* and *L’Innocente*—McElhaney shows how Visconti uses the “all-consuming power” of fabric and costuming to mount a visceral critique of the decadence of fascist culture.

Despite the headlining theme of fabric, this book is also an excellent analysis of the role of literary adaptation and music in Visconti, not to mention a concise account of the paintings hung strategically in the sets, such as a Van Gogh in *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) hanging in the apartment of Morini the boxing manager. The analysis of the painting serves as a clue to the analysis of Rocco’s close-fitting clothes that he begins to pull loose while making an ill-conceived deal with his brother. The painting serves less as art than as a “dandified figure” and sexualized object, absorbed into the “parade of beautiful male bodies” in this particular scene, and in the film overall. McElhaney’s analysis is extraordinarily detailed, describing sets, costumes, and framing with a careful eye, pausing on figures and scenes transformed from their literary sources, or reconceived. He is equally attentive to cutting and story construction, and argues also that the weaving of intertexts and the weaving of temporalities constitutes yet another dimension of the fabric of cinema.

From the adaptation of James M. Cain in *Ossessione* (1943), Dostoevsky in *White Nights* (1957), through Camus in *The Stranger* (1967), McElhaney digs deep into Visconti’s development of motifs in the writing that become critical visual elements of the films, such as a woman’s bandaged face or a mother and daughter repairing rugs. Likewise, with music, McElhaney’s erudition includes an insightful analysis of the soundtrack: for example, on the Venice beach, when Mahler’s “Midnight Song” plays over the play of looks between Aschenbach and Tadzio. It features a woman’s voice singing text from Nietzsche, providing a transcendent counterpoint—enhanced by fluttering awnings—to Aschenbach’s silent suffering. Likewise, in *The Damned* (1969), music helps to set the stage for a struggle for the soul of Germany, including the decadent bacchanalia staged to the Nazi theme song “Horst Wessel Song.” My favorite chapter of this book is the one entitled “Decadent Threads,” moving backward from the decadent romanticism of *Ludwig* (1973), to the anxieties of *Death in Venice*, to the corruptions of *The Damned*. As McElhaney notes, these three films foreground the homosexual themes that had been hitherto veiled in Visconti’s films, and they also track a sensual, melancholy, and violent reckoning with European history.

The fabric of Visconti’s cinema is not only an expressive aesthetic, but is equally a materialist trope, registering economic and historical detail in the drooping racks of kitchen towels in *Ossessione*, and the tattered sweaters of *La Terra Trema* (1948), just as much as the luxurious silks swishing about in *Senso*, *The Leopard* (1963), and *Ludwig*. Visconti, like Eisen-



stein, was a stylist, but was no less a historian, weaving the temporalities of Italian and German cultures and class warfare into his adaptations of significant novels. At the same time, his queer eye, while somewhat more hooded than Pasolini's, enabled him to see his world and his history from the oblique angle of other desires and other views. He was in every way a modern man, living through the ups and downs of post-war Italy, while living in a past that could be continually reimagined and restaged with appropriate curtains, rugs, and costumes.

Visconti's cinema is a cinema of melancholy, decadence, and decay in which desires are expressed through visual opulence and destroyed in sweaty handkerchiefs. And yet loss is never without its promise of aesthetic utopias. The drama of dressing and undressing rehearsed in so many ways through these films is a particularly cinematic gesture, often choreographed for the gaze of other characters, just as truths are veiled and unveiled for the viewer. McElhaney attends closely to Visconti's collaboration with actors, including Alain Delon, Romy Schneider, Marcello Mastroianni, Silvia Magnano, Burt Lancaster, and many others. Each actor carries their clothes differently, and each one comes with a certain star image that is already semidressed.

The assets of this auteur study extend well beyond the role of fabric, and include a uniquely comprehensive approach to film authorship. With voluble reference to several generations of film scholarship, McElhaney remarks on how often critics, from André Bazin and Guido Aristarco, to Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart, to D. A. Miller, have used the metaphor of fabric in discussions of Visconti's cinema. While there may be few directors with Visconti's particular passion for fabric (he began his career as a set dresser), McElhaney convincingly argues for its expressive, symbolic, aesthetic, and materialist role in cinematic *mise en scène* and montage.

McElhaney establishes that Visconti's cinema is a cinema of fabric, but what is "the fabric of cinema?" While no single answer is provided here, the book opens up several avenues of thought. For example, fabric serves at times as a screen, as in the theatrical opening of *The Damned*. A tablecloth spread out for a picnic in *The Leopard* evokes a sheet hung for a shadow dance in Fellini's *Intervista* (1987). These sheets, for McElhaney, like the fluttering curtains in the opening of *The Leopard*, evoke the transportive, transcendent, precious, and fragile magic of cinema—the screen as its primal source. Fabric may become a metaphor, but it is a richly productive one, opening up to fresh insights into the deep weave of cinema, history, and desire. The fabric of cinema in this book refers to the interplay between movies, and the weave of scenes and images, materials, and colors, that texture the active gaze of the cinephile.—Catherine Russell

Paris in the Dark:

Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930–1950

by Eric Smoodin. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 203 pp. illus. Paperback \$25.95

In this season of enforced imaginary excursions to Paris, where we must ponder old photographs and notebook entries to substitute for visits, Eric Smoodin's *Paris in the Dark* offers a promising meander through this film capital's movie houses, ciné-clubs, and exhibition spaces, both past and present. But this is much more than the random route of a casual *flâneur*. Smoodin has a dazzling grasp of French film history and its political underpinnings, and thus he gives us an astute social and historical analysis of the formation of cultural identity through film and its audiences, and he does it in a disarmingly casual style. Through mountains of research, encyclopedic knowledge of films and their distribution contexts, perceptive and comprehensive political analyses, and several decades of travel, he explores the filmgoing experience in two of France's most complicated decades—the turmoil and triumph of the Popular Front of the Thirties and the devastating "dark years" of the German Occupation of WWII and the subsequent return to some idea of normality in postwar France.

The focus is always on the construction of the film-viewing audience and its histories, both in the assumed priority of Paris and the often-overlooked provinces. This is an unusual method; the collection of mounds of otherwise dry material on audiences, social movements, and exhibition practices is made engaging by Smoodin's easy style and his original approach. More important, his perceptive grasp of the

sociopolitical struggles that crystallized around the cinema and extended far into the surrounding social complex emphasizes the relation between film culture and political action in a very material way.

Taking the form of a decades-long memoir combined with scrupulous documentation, he rejects formalist and theoretical approaches to the cinematic text (though his background with scholars in the film theory firmament is substantial) in favor of the ever-present question: Who was going to the movies, what did they want, and how did this contribute to a sense of national identity? He searches studio questionnaires, audience surveys, popular film journals, and newspaper accounts as well as secondary sources; he explores highly detailed empirical studies of exhibition and distribution practices; he attentively enumerates the multiple venues of cinema screenings and practical commentaries; he examines the public controversies and private machinations behind this most popular form of entertainment. Yet—and this is the unique characteristic of this study—Smoodin conveys it all with the abiding enthusiasm of the receptive cinephile whose decades of wandering through this rich cultural landscape is anchored in a scholar's desire to get to the social truths of this most pervasive cultural form in its acknowledged capital. In his own words:

[T]his book will move through space and time, going from the late silent and early sound era," to the decisive social movements of the 30s and 40s and after, "concentrating on Paris but extending to other parts of France, Europe, France's colonies, and occasionally the United States...Some of the great stars of French as well as international cinemas...will come in and out of this narrative....[And you will find that] German control of Parisian—and French—cinema has a central role here, helping us make sense of some of the occurrences at Parisian cinemas in the decade before the war and those that took place just after...So let's begin. Let's start our walk through Paris.

A quick glance at the headings Smoodin has chosen for his six chapters gives some idea of how he views this trajectory. It also demonstrates the clarity with which he conveys his subject and the political acumen that grounds it. A scholarly book that reads like a friendly conversation, *Paris in the Dark* illuminates the political, social, and historical implications of that most innocent of pastimes, going to the movies. He calls his Introduction "A Walking Tour 1930–1981" and, citing Michel de Certeau's concept of the "rhetoric of walking," poses the question: What can audience studies tell us about film culture? And what are the historical and political contexts of these formations? Already we learn that Smoodin's cultural geography of Paris is infused with a pervasive sense of the political, but this sneaks up on us gradually.

