



When Curating Meets Film Theory: Philippe-Alain Michaud's *Sur le film*

Philippe-Alain Michaud. *Sur le film*. Paris: Editions Macula, 2016. 464 pages.

Reviewed by Lola Remy

Philippe-Alain Michaud's latest book, *Sur le film (On Film)*, is the culmination of a decade of reflection on film and its properties. This richly illustrated tome provides a fascinating account of a history of film taken "from its edges," its "experimental margins" (Michaud 7).¹ In the foreword, Michaud explains his choice of the word "film" over "cinema." Cinema, he points out, refers to the "apparatus of public projection" that took shape in the nineteenth century. Film, on the other hand, does not refer to this spectacular aspect, but to "a way of thinking images" through the prism of movement and reproducibility (Ibid). Following Hollis Frampton, Michaud conceives of film as a set of properties that can be disjointed from the apparatus of projection:

Cinema is a Greek word that means 'movie.' The illusion of movement is certainly an accustomed adjunct of the film image, but that illusion rests upon the assumption that the rate of change between successive frames may vary only within rather narrow limits. There is nothing in the structural logic of the filmstrip that can justify such an assumption. Therefore we reject it. From now on we will call our art simply: film. (Frampton, quoted in Michaud 105)

This expanded vision allows Michaud to open the concept of film to various contemporary artistic practices, from experimental cinema to photography (Laurent Montaron, John Baldessari), sculpture (Constantin Brancusi, Susanna Fritscher) and performance (Robert Whitman). The author's background as an art historian is manifest here, and it is as such that he intends to blur the boundaries of artistic media and create a new history of film, one that is "despecified" (*despécifiée*).² Michaud's second and best known publication to date, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (2004), had already crystalized this desire to open art history to film and vice versa. In it, Michaud analyzes the oeuvre of art historian Aby Warburg as a pre-cinematic conception of images, reading Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a cinematographic montage of images set in motion by the eye of the reader.³ *Sur le film*'s "despecified" approach

¹ All translations are those of the author.

² In the second chapter, Michaud attributes the challenge to medium specificity to Noël Carroll's *Theorizing the Moving Image* (see Carroll 1-74), but does not engage with the history of the concept, perhaps to his disadvantage.

³ See Warburg, 2000.

formulates a conception of film as “a widespread apparatus of transfers, generating phenomena of appearance” (58), emancipating film from representation towards presence and embodiment.

However, in *Sur le film* Michaud provides spare theoretical framing and dives straight into the argument, relying on the reader to re-construct an introduction and a conclusion. Divided into six parts, the book first recounts the birth of film from the “deconstruction of space and of categories from which cinema as a form was instituted” (9). Part One, “The Origin of Film,” historicizes three facets of cinema and calls for an expanded conception of the moving image. The author rejects a conception of moving images that are “framed” by the legacy of a theatrical conception of space, by recalling experimental filmmakers’ attempts to break away from this spatial constraint and from an art of representation. He then traces a history of pre-cinematic exhibition, from natural history museums that used framing, lighting, dramatization and a compression of actions in “life groups,”⁴ to art exhibitions of the 1940s such as Frederic Kiesler’s *Art of this Century*, that developed a scenography of montage and mechanical movements. Creating a “static equivalent” to film’s properties (49), these exhibitions externalized film’s movements, while enabling a greater agency of the spectator.⁵ The last chapter of this section releases film from representation, by recalling structural filmmakers’ reflection on the materiality of the filmstrip.

Part Two reflects on “The Construction of the Visible” through light and space. Structural and expanded cinema help to begin perceiving film as free from representation, continuous movement, and the screen itself. This, in turn, opens film to painting (such as Kubelka’s exhibition of his filmstrips) and sculpture (as with Anthony McCall’s projected light volumes). Part Three, “The Apparatus of the Real,” returns to the birth of cinema, with the photographic experiments of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey as well as Georges Méliès’ debt to magic spectacles, and questions our conception of film as a simple recorder of the world. He suggests that what pre-cinematographic forms reveal is that “spatiality and figurability do not precede movement: they are deduced from it” (179). By dissecting the object of cinema, Michaud separates it from representation and uncovers its revelatory capacities, making the world manifest.

Parts Four to Six present a compendium of the variety of ways in which experimental filmmakers and artists work to “disjoint film’s properties” (light, time, movement) and “separate its constitutive elements” (photogram, light beam, screen) to reorganize them into new configurations (9). These chapters focus on phenomena of interaction between art forms and call for an expanded definition of film. Part Four, “Transfers,” traces the intersection of film with architecture (“The Invention of Modular Film,” 223-263), sculpture (“*Per via di levare*: Brancusi Films,” 264-277), painting and landscape (“Paintings of Film (or Cinema Turned Inside Out),” 291-306). It therefore offers a “despecified” and expanded vision of film as a set of properties that can be disjointed and reformulated through different media. Part Five, “Remaking, Remaking Oneself, Being Remade,” explores found footage and remakes as reflexive forms that enable a conception of the history of film as self-referential, circular and non-linear (365): film “does not reproduce the world, it reproduces itself through the images that it retains from it”

⁴ See Allison Griffiths’ article ““Journeys for Those Who Cannot Travel” Promenade Cinema and the Museum Life Group” (1996).

⁵ See Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography*: “In the cinema and television, the image is revealed at a pace set by the director. In the exhibition gallery, the visitor establishes his own pace” (Steichen 227; quoted in Michaud 49).

(424). For Michaud, it is through rewriting and reusing that film is brought back to the phenomena of pictoriality (as with Ken Jacobs's use of found footage and close-ups in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), or Jack Smith's figure of the transvestite in *Flaming Creatures* (1963)). Finally, Michaud concludes the book on the oeuvre of John Baldessari in part six, the "Failure in Representation." In this section, he analyses Baldessari's cinematographic conception of painting, where canvas becomes frame, script becomes image, and collage becomes montage. However, Baldessari's playful cinema is deceitful, and relies on failed effects. The absence of a concluding note following this chapter leaves the reader wondering why Michaud has chosen to settle on a conception of cinema as a series of failed tricks. Like Baldessari, the author formulates questions without suggesting answers, and without providing a definition of what film really is.

The majority of the chapters in this book are reworkings of previous articles and publications, which produce a sense of *déjà-vu* in a reader already familiar with Michaud's work.⁶ However, contrary to his previous collection of essays *Sketches. Histoire de l'art, cinéma* (2006), which provided only a sparse structure for the chapters, *Sur le film* succeeds in creating a fluid succession of themes and concepts. Despite its fragmented structure, the book is constructed as a dissection, layer by layer, of the concept of the "moving image." Each chapter provides an inquiry into a different facet of film. This method is indebted to Michaud's curatorial approach of film.

Indeed, besides teaching and writing, Philippe-Alain Michaud curates for the Department of Film of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In this capacity, he directed an exhibition entitled *The Movement of Images* in 2006-2007, where he applied his expanded definition of film to the scenography of the entire museum's collections.⁷ The exhibition offered the possibility to rethink the collection of the Parisian Museum of Modern Art through the prism of cinema, "the movement of images." Artworks were therefore organized along four main axes: "unwinding," "montage," "projection" and "narrative," offering a redefinition of the cinematographic experience expanded to all fine arts. In the same manner as the present book, Michaud dissects the object of "film," guiding spectators through its various facets. In some ways, *Sur le film* functions as a promenade through the history and theory of film itself. Like the exhibition, it is richly illustrated and emphasizes textual analysis, leading the reader through the fluid use of visual cues. Indeed, Michaud's work as a curator and researcher is marked by his reliance on visual material and his gesture towards unlocking cinema to other artistic forms of expression.

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⁶ Among others, the chapters concerning Etienne-Jules Marey, and the figure of the transvestite, are reworkings of similar chapters in *Sketches. History of Art, Cinema*. His analysis of Mark Lewis's films was also published in the catalog of the Liverpool exhibition of the filmmaker in 2006. (See "Note on Chapter Sources," 458-459.)

⁷ "The Movement of Images," Centre Pompidou, Paris, April 9 2006 – January 29 2007.

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