

The Face on Film

by Noa Steimatsky. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 296 pp., illus. Paperback: \$51.00.

This is, in so many ways, a remarkable book—and, sadly, one that has received little attention since its appearance in 2017. Beautifully produced and illustrated, it weaves film theory and critical analysis, cultural anthropology, art history, philosophy, and phenomenology into a gripping account of the passage of a particular motif throughout twentieth-century cinema: the face.

What we have before us, however, is no simple, linear “compare and contrast” history of the face in silent film vs. the “talkie” face, the luminous glamour face vs. the abject horror face, the hyperexpressive Hollywood face vs. the blankly inscrutable 1960s European face, or other similar staples of theoretically minded cinema histories. Noa Steimatsky (author of *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008) touches upon all those themes, but her goal is broader. She artfully keeps rephrasing this goal and turning it around from different angles throughout the book: what is the face *for*? What is the real *work* that images of the face do? What do faces allow us to *do*, feel, cope with, sort out? What is being brought together, or held apart, in our eternal engagement with faces, whether in a cinema, at the computer, inside our homes, or out on the street?

Perhaps this book did not “break out” in the context of the academic publishing market—so few do, nowadays!—because it is hard to summarize in a nutshell. Yes, it is about “the face on film”—many essential screen faces, from Falconetti and Humphrey Bogart to Henry Fonda and Edie Sedgwick. But it is also about something larger than the literal, human face as photographed. It is about the *idea* of the face—Steimatsky calls this a *dispositif*, or a figure—that is formed (always differently, according to its location and point in history) at the intersection of cultural myth, artistic tradition, lived experience, and ideology. So the face is not *just* the face: sometimes it stands in for the body, or the person, or the soul, or the mask, or “the image” itself. As Steimatsky richly demonstrates, there is always something appearing and something else disappearing in any strong image or story of the face—something being both revealed, and hidden. Her book takes the measure of that ever-shifting complexity.

The face on screen not only comes to “mean” a lot; it is also the basis for a thorough and elaborate process of metaphor making. That should be evident enough in a twenty-first-century context where most of us are on Facebook, and refer blithely to sharing some “face time”! But Steimatsky is also very sympathetic to those film critics

and theorists throughout the twentieth century who have, in their various ways, evoked cinemagoing as a “face to face” encounter—where the movie image itself, or the emotional experience it can ignite, becomes a kind of face that enraptures or disconcerts us. In the lingo that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari bequeathed to us, that’s all-pervasive “faciality” at work.

This book also resists being pigeonholed into any particular “school” or tendency. As Steimatsky gently lets us know, her project is not devoted to the application (and hence valorization) of any one theory, be it Marxist theory or the still currently fashionable “affect” theory. It refuses to reduce the films it discusses to mere “symptoms” of this or that sociopolitical trend or context. In one of its strongest passages, Steimatsky asserts:

The cinema offered then, as it can still do today, a privileged space in which to really feel and think through these tensions. For as it did since its earliest days, the cinema navigates in unique ways the forces of art and commerce, of the human and the technological, to work through both the duplicitous power of images, and their regenerative, reflective potential.

It is hard to say, ultimately, that this book even has a “thesis”—in the sense of a barrow to push, an argument to polemically stake over and above other, neighboring intellectual positions. The tone of *The Face on Film*—tone matters here, because it is such a finely written, *wrought* text—suggests that Steimatsky uses the *dispositif* of the face not as a battering ram, but rather as an extremely sensitive Geiger counter, one that allows her to navigate through and between different histories, tendencies, and special moments of artistic invention.



The Face on Film

Noa Steimatsky

The book has a particular historical focus: from the end of World War II through to, roughly, the mid-Sixties. Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Wrong Man* (1956), Andy Warhol’s *Screen Test* series, the work of Robert Bresson across the Fifties and Sixties, and a very rare oddity by Michelangelo Antonioni, *Il provino* (a thirty minute “preface” to the 1965 anthology *I tre volti*) are among the key examples, dazzlingly analyzed, drawn from this core period. To tell her full story, however, Steimatsky begins in the 1920s, with the on-fire theoretical writings of Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, as well as Carl Dreyer’s still unsettling classic, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).

Already cinema in the Twenties, through its diverse avenues, had presented us with the extremes of faciality: ecstatic redemption on the one side; pitiless, even sadistic interrogation on the other side. At stake, always, is a fugitive human fullness that is either glimpsed in a revelatory flash of *photogénie*, or slips out somewhere between the frames, beyond anything the camera-machine can capture, hold, or grasp. This seesawing motion sums up the type of hard, terse pathos to which much of *The Face on Film* is devoted, and which it expresses magnificently.

Arriving at the 1950s, Steimatsky picks up the thread of essayistic criticism in its unfolding history with Roland Barthes. Many of us are familiar with his famous essay “The Face of Garbo,” but here we spend more time with several, suggestive pieces that never found their way into his *Mythologies* collection of 1957. Barthes is more than a mere case study for this book; he also provides an inspiration, a careful method of musing approach, even a model of writing. Although Steimatsky draws on a good deal of French criticism, from André Bazin in the Forties to Jacques Aumont today (his still untranslated 1992 book *Du visage au cinéma* is the closest cousin to this one), she is also immersed in a rich tradition of Italian work, something too little reflected in English-language film scholarship beyond a small circle of “Italianists.”

In an odd and not particularly sensitive review of *The Face on Film* in *Senses of Cinema* online, Tyson Stewart remarked that “the cinematic face as radical other, which we encounter in an ethical yet violent spectral face-to-face, is not grappled with.” But this is exactly, in my mind, what it *does* grapple with! Stewart—who takes the whole thing a bit too literally as a supposedly comprehensive history of cinematic faces (which, of course, it is not)—regrets the absence of more “popular” mugs, such as those from the horror genre. Naturally, every reader of *The Face on Film* will “spin off” from its pages, in their own musing, to their own favorite or most intriguing faces: I had everything from Anna Faris and her “smiley face” (as immortalized in Gregg Araki’s wonderful 2007 comedy film of that title), to the radical philosopher Alphonso

Lingis's stark tales of the "defacing" of ancient tribal tombstones, whirling around in my head. Of more recent vintage, the "uncanny valleys" created on the actors' faces by digital de-aging in Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman*, or Lucrecia Martel's disquieting riff on "facial recognition" technology in her short *AI* (a trailer made for the 2019 Viennale), may well leap to mind.

But, as that Deleuze chap once put it, books are not significant for what they "solve," and still less for what they summarize; they matter for what they invent and provoke, for the paths they open up. By that criterion, *The Face on Film* is a stunning success, and easily among the very best cinema books of the past decade.—**Adrian Martin**

Werner Schroeter

Edited by Roy Grundmann. Vienna: Austrian Film Museum (Distributed in the U.S. by Columbia University Press), 2018. 256 pp., illus. Paperback: \$29.00.

Thomas Elsaesser described Werner Schroeter as "German cinema's greatest marginal filmmaker" and none other than Rainer Werner Fassbinder once celebrated him as Germany's "best kept secret"—perhaps not a surprise given their friendship and the clear influence on Fassbinder's much better-known work. Roy Grundmann, via the Austrian Filmmuseum and its partner press Synema Verlag in Vienna, have done cinephiles everywhere a great service with this handsomely bound anthology of ten essays and other materials on the five decades (1960s–2000s) of Schroeter's wide-ranging films and generally breathtaking creativity.

One of the (sometimes annoying) peculiarities of collected essays works surprisingly well for Schroeter's work and in Grundmann's volume: the assembled scholars are able to engage very different aspects of the director's astoundingly eclectic oeuvre, work that sustained very different, even divergent phases. Well supported by color images, a detailed filmography, and two interviews—one a new interview with longtime Schroeter collaborator Elfi Mikesch and, the other, a previously published, much-cited exchange with Michel Foucault—Grundmann's collection offers both broad and deep background on this influential but neglected filmmaker. Paired with the Edition Filmmuseum's recent restoration and release of much of Schroeter's work on DVD—made in sundry languages but now with English subtitles—Grundmann's volume offers a long-overdue re-evaluation of the director, who died in 2010.

In his nearly fifty-page introduction, Grundmann sets the opulent stage with the widely accepted periodization of Schroeter's work as well as leitmotifs of his oeuvre. Scholars have tended to divide Schroeter's many films into an early phase of avant-

garde films of varying lengths, a more narratively oriented phase that resulted in major awards at film festivals, and then the later part of his career—after the death of his early muse Magdalena Montezuma (née Erika Kluge)—of intermittent film work amid varied theatrical and opera productions. Grundmann's introduction also offers an overview of the major Anglophone study of Schroeter by Michelle Langford (who has a compelling contribution in the volume) and points to many of the volume's subsequent essays, including discussions of Schroeter's interest in music and opera, his personal and professional travels far and wide, and his celebration of the amateur underground against the professional-looking culture industry.

A key figure in some of these movements herself, Gertrud Koch explores Schroeter's work under the sign of the amateur in late 1960s and 1970s Germany—not an amateur in any derogatory sense, but rather as someone working eclectically, blithely ignoring and openly contravening conventions and rules. A passionate embrace of expressive modes outside a medium or form's conventional artistic means, Koch suggests, opened Schroeter's early work, as in *Eika Katappa* (1969), to peculiar modes of gesture that evoked not conventional visual representations but raw expression. Using Wittgenstein's aesthetics in intriguing directions, Koch suggests that Schroeter as amateur works more mimetically because he is less encumbered by traditional modes of representation.

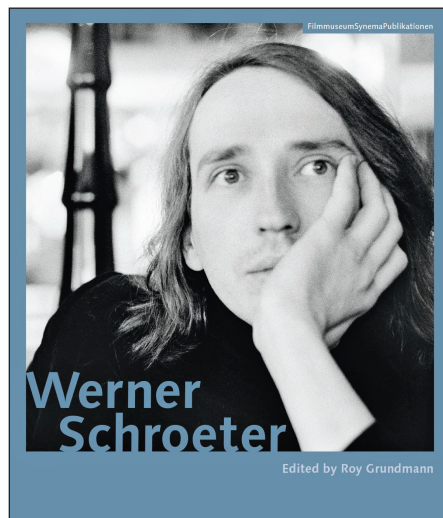
As he likewise considers a number of Schroeter's early films, Marc Siegel persuasively explores perhaps the key notion in that early work, namely, that of the underground. Unlike some scholars on Schroeter, however, Siegel sees this underground element operating throughout Schroeter's work, not only in the earlier shorter films. In what he terms the "diva aesthetic" of films like *Maria Callas Porträt* (1968) and *The Death of Maria Malibran* (1972), Siegel argues that Schroeter's

disjunctively memorable images of female emotional excess change the character of filmic imagery itself. For Siegel, these much-cited instances of female performance by actors such as Montezuma, Candy Darling, and Fassbinder regular Ingrid Caven concern not only excessive passion but also their relationship to fandom itself.

Michelle Langford's essay on *Salome* (1971) builds on her aforementioned 2005 study, one of the few substantive overviews of Schroeter's work. Grundmann's timely collection allows Langford to take up a film she had not foregrounded earlier, with her unearthing elements ranging from Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde to Richard Strauss and Max Reinhardt (such was Schroeter's erudite range). His 1971 *Salome* seems in many ways the perfect production for Langford to elaborate on her earlier analysis, since the allegorical mode in which Schroeter often worked seems in conspicuous operation. Shot among the Roman ruins of Baalbek (now in Lebanon) and foregrounding fin-de-siècle and early 1900s "Salomania," Schroeter's production deploys these many cultural fragments even as he worked, as he himself noted, with a "proper script, a plot and story" for the first time. Such an allegorical register intersecting this initial script/plot/story suggests a career watershed, not least for the way that it cemented support from German public television (especially with ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*) that would be important for his more narrative work later in the 1970s.

Christine N. Brinckmann takes up one of the transitional films of Schroeter's career, *Willow Springs* (1973), often considered among the most accessible of Schroeter's early films and a portent of more conventionally narrative things to come. Schroeter had been commissioned by ZDF to make a collage film about Marilyn Monroe, but, having landed in LA with his modest entourage, Schroeter quickly abandoned the project in favor of this seventy-eight-minute (loosely) narrative film shot and set in the eponymous town in the Mojave Desert (as Brinckmann notes, ZDF's flexibility in this pivot seems charmingly antiquated). Brinckmann explores how *Willow Springs*'s subdued plot relies on the peculiar atmosphere the film conjures: made in the almost literal shadow of Hollywood, the film proceeds by alternating between inscrutable "leaping and lingering" or, as she paraphrases Maya Deren, by "horizontal" cause-and-effect plotting and "vertical" flights of poetic feelings from any given moment. Therein Brinckmann suggests an intriguing intertextual engagement, namely with Yasujiro Ozu's "pillow shots," that similarly deepens unusual narratives in mysterious ways.

Carol Flinn's essay is fittingly one of the collection's longest because it engages one of the most conspicuous—or, rather, audible—aspects of Schroeter's unusual style, namely, the pronounced presence of music



1990. His work has been performed and discussed frequently in the past few years. Eshun critiques white institutions for seizing on Eastman pieces like “Evil Nigger” and “Gay Guerrilla” for the shock value or radical chic potential of their titles without explaining the full context of Eastman’s intentions. He writes about staging an “audiovisual composition” of Eastman’s work as a member of The Otolith Group, but the essay would be just as powerful without that direct connection. Eshun’s idea of an international black avant-garde is much more urgent.

Aurand’s essay is part of a series devoted to the American desert. The films covered are quite varied—Peter Watkins’s *Punishment Park*, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point*, Babette Mangolte’s *The Sky on Location*, Guillaume Nicloux’s *Valley of Love*—but the writers look at the desert both as a physical space and a location in American mythology. Mangolte drew inspiration from John Ford’s visual style, but her film abandoned narrative for a meditative portrait more akin to landscape painting. *Punishment Park* and *Zabriskie Point* are very upfront about treating the desert as a site of political struggle.

If Antonioni also veered into sexual fantasy, *Punishment Park* showed the reality of political prisoners being forced to survive for days walking through its brutal heat. If that exact situation wasn’t played out in life in the early Seventies, immigrants crossing the border from Mexico illegally are going through it now. Leo Goldsmith and Rachael Rakes’s essay documents the ways the film was rejected upon its original release in the early Seventies, all of which testify to the fact that it hit too close to home.

In 1994, the Australian band Dead Can Dance sang “We’ve been too long American dreaming/I think we’ve all lost the way.” The trajectory from JFK to Trump spells out a loss of glamour, as well as a departure from concealing the self-serving nature of American foreign policy by framing it as a benign promotion of democracy. The hollow nature of the American Dream is readily evident, replaced by the undeniable stain of income inequality and a government that won’t take responsibility for its citizens’ health care. Hollywood films now typically make half their profits in China.

China itself has taken lessons in soft power from Hollywood, as shown by blockbusters such as *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth*. America: *Films from Elsewhere* describes a country that has mythologized itself to death, but is open to outsiders’ critical takes on that mythology, from directors working in Hollywood like Woo and Verhoeven to avant-garde video art projects. If future world events wind down America’s imperial power and allow other nations to rise as superpowers, what cinema will come from the changing perceptions of the country, both inside and outside it?—**Steve Erickson**

Contributors

Christopher Bray is a critic and cultural historian who writes regularly for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *The Observer*, *Mail on Sunday*, and *The Times Literary Supplement* ... **Robert Cashill** is a member of the *Cineaste* editorial board ... **Larry Ceplair** is co-author (with Steven Englund) of *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* and author of the forthcoming *Revolutionary Pairs* ... **Mary F. Corey** is a senior lecturer in history at UCLA, specializing in U.S. intellectual history, popular culture, and black nationalism ... **Steve Erickson** writes about film and music for *Gay City News*, *The Nashville Scene*, and *Fandor* ... **Megan Feeney** has a PhD in American studies from the University of Minnesota and is author of *Hollywood in Havana: U.S. Cinema and Revolutionary Nationalism in Cuba before 1959* ... **Jaimey Fisher** teaches cinema, digital media, and German at the University of California, Davis ... **Nicholas Forster** is a lecturer in African American studies and film & media studies at Yale University and is currently working on a biography of writer/director Bill Gunn ... **Graham Fuller** is a freelance film critic based in New York City ... **Maria Garcia** is a New York City-based film critic and author of *Cinematic Quests for Identity: The Hero's Encounter with the Beast* ... **Rahul Hamid**, a *Cineaste* editor, teaches film at New York University ... **Glenn Heath Jr.** is Managing Director of the San Diego Asian Film Festival and a freelance film critic whose work appears at *Little White Lies*, *Mubi's Notebook*, and *The Film Stage* ... **Valerie Kaufman** is a freelance writer who also teaches film and writing ... **Jonathan Kirshner**, a professor in the Political Science Department at Boston College, is author of *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* ... **Robert Koehler** contributes criticism and film writing for *Cinema Scope*, *Variety*, *DGA Quarterly*, and *Sight & Sound* ... **Gary M. Kramer** is a film critic for *Salon*, *Gay City News*, *Philadelphia Gay News*, and *The San Francisco Bay Times* ... **Page R. Laws**, who writes about film, theater, African studies, and cultural studies, recently retired as Professor of English and Dean of the Robert C. Nisbaum Honors College at Norfolk State University in Virginia ... **Stuart Liebman** is professor emeritus of film studies at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center ... **Phillip Lopate** is a professor at Columbia University and author, most recently, of *A Mother's Tale* and *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* ... **Charles Maland** teaches cinema studies and American culture at the University of Tennessee and is editor of *Complete Film Criticism: Essays and Manuscripts*, a comprehensive collection of James Agee's movie criticism ... **Adrian Martin** is a film critic and audiovisual essayist living in Vilassar de Mar, Spain ... **Declan McGrath** is a filmmaker who has written two books on the craft of cinema ... **Jonathan Murray** teaches film and visual culture at the Edinburgh College of Art ... **Sean Nam** is a Brooklyn-based freelance film writer and covers professional boxing for *USA Today* ... **David Neary** is a writer, editor, archivist, and curator from Ireland, now living in Brooklyn ... **Darragh O'Donoghue** works as an archivist at Tate Britain in London ... **Richard Porton** is author of *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*, due in a second edition this year ... **Leonard Quart** is author or co-author of several books on film ... **Catherine Russell** is Distinguished Professor of Film Studies at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University in Montreal and author of several books, most recently *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* ... **Jonathan Rosenbaum** is author of numerous books, most recently *Cinematic Encounters 2: Portraits and Polemics* (2019) ... **J. E. Smyth** is author of several books on film, most recently *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood*, winner of the Theatre Library Association's 2019 Special Jury Prize ... **Christopher Sharrett** recently retired from thirty years of teaching film at Seton Hall University ... **David Sterritt** is editor-in-chief of *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and author or editor of fifteen books on film. ■

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