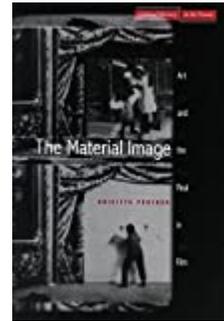




Brigitte Peucker. *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 251 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5431-6.



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An Aesthetic and Sensory Spectrum of Cinematic Experience

Brigitte Peucker's book offers readers interested in film and perception theory a well-written and insightful analysis. While perhaps less useful to historians, readers who know well the broad spectrum of films that Peucker analyzes—from Martin Scorsese to Rainer Werner Fassbinder to Jonathan Demme—will benefit from her interpretation of how various artistic modalities (such as dance, sculpture, literature, photography, and painting) function within the filmic text and beyond to mediate the real.

Peucker presents an impressive array of philosophical and theoretical insights to sustain her analysis of the interplay between aesthetics and sensory experience in and of film. She bypasses the idea that the real is inherently unrepresentable in art and, supported by cognitive and phenomenological approaches to perception, bases much of her study on the idea that “spectatorial affect is 'real' even when it is film and not reality that produces it” (p. 1). While focus on the body is one way to understand Peucker's approach to the real as materialist, just as important to the author is a postmodern tension between the real and illusion. Peucker is inter-

ested in visual games such as the *trompe l'oeil*, but she returns most frequently to investigate the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of the *tableau vivant* as a node of intersecting modalities (painting, theater, sculpture) in film. In addition to contributing to the discussion of more popular and widely discussed filmmakers, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Scorsese, Peucker offers challenging interpretations of more complex and disturbing filmmakers such as Fassbinder, Peter Greenaway, and Michael Haneke.

After the introduction, Peucker's book is divided into three sections. Part 1 focuses on the intertextuality of sculpture, painting, literature, and film within film. At times the section reads like a defense of film in face of the “higher” arts, but perhaps only because Peucker begins the first chapter with an analysis of Scorsese's filmic interpretation of cinemaphobe Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Peucker demonstrates Scorsese's careful intertextual “homage” to Wharton's own technique of layering representational modes. Like Wharton's “painterly writing,” Scorsese creates a film suffused with literary moments. Peucker argues that the real in film is sus-

tained through its intersection with visual play and bases her analysis on a scene of the film in which Ellen appears to her fiancé, Archer, to be a sculpture come to life. The “still” scene is read by Peucker as a filmic *tableau vivant*, existing “at the nodal point that joins painting, sculpture, and theater” and presenting “a moment of intensified intermediality” (p. 26). It is here, because Archer is able to *imagine* that Ellen turns around that “Scorsese’s film has triumphed over painting’s entombment of the human figure by its capacity for rendering movement” (p. 29). While well argued, Peucker’s conclusion may leave more skeptical readers dissatisfied (those unwilling to follow Archer’s mind’s eye).

Peucker’s fascination with *tableau vivant* continues in her (chapter 2) discussion of Peter Greenaway’s *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) and Wim Wenders’s *Until the End of the World* (1991). These films build on pictorial references to Jan Vermeer’s seventeenth-century Dutch realism and Peucker relies heavily on Svetlana Alpers’s study, *The Art of Describing* (1983). Building on Alpers’s claim that Dutch art shows that “the ‘realistic’ image can serve as a lure for the eye” (p. 33), Peucker offers a compelling analysis of how the image of the body of woman is appropriated by and for representation. In Wenders’s story, a sci-fi camera records the brain waves of the camera’s user, thus enabling a blind woman to see images. Peucker connects Wenders to Vermeer’s *tableau vivant* in an over-the-shoulder glimpse of Claire, the one character (coincidentally also a woman) best able to record and transmit images to the woman, thereby “undo[ing] the damage done by representation” (p. 46). According to Peucker, by inserting the *tableau vivant*, Greenaway and Wenders make “real” the image (rather than freezing it) by introducing the body of the actor into issues of representation.

In chapter 3, Peucker offers an interesting analysis of the films of Leni Riefenstahl in connection with the theories of photography of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag’s views on fascism, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s, and Friedrich Nietzsche’s reflections on Greek sculpture, poetry, and baroque tragic drama. Peucker argues that Riefenstahl’s use of sculpture, dance, photography, and film demonstrates a continuity (or “thick description”) with other German aesthetic traditions. Again the focus revolves around the *tableau vivant*, here explained in historical terms going back to the Italian Renaissance. The political function of the *tableau* is brought to light, but the perhaps too obvious connection with fascist aesthetics raises the question about whether *tableaux* as

an ideological tool could be highlighted in other chapters as well. Peucker sees Hitler’s mythologized figure during the Nuremberg rally in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) as a *tableau* icon that “signifies politically—and propagandistically—just as the statuary and tableaux of Venetian trionfi did” (p. 53). Later, she convincingly argues that Riefenstahl’s editing of “Olympia: Part 1” (1938) counters Benjamin’s claim about the necessarily fragmentary nature of film. Its overlapping sequences bring together a once lost culture through repetitious focus on the Olympic athletic body.

Chapters 4 and 5 concern the films of Hitchcock, and also oddly serve as the division between parts 1 and 2 of the book. Here Peucker departs somewhat from her focus on the *tableau vivant*. Chapter 6 offers analysis of Stanley Kubrick’s films vis-à-vis the uncanny in Franz Kafka, and also draws on the *punctum* (or disturbing, distressing detail) of photography as discussed by Barthes. The focus here is on *The Shining* and *Eyes Wide Shut* suggests that “the Kafkaesque overtones of various scenes in Schnitzler’s novella constitute what Barthes’s *punctum* is to the photograph: that which ‘pricks me, bruises me, is poignant to me’” (p. 106). Her analysis of *The Shining*’s Overlook Hotel as representation of the womb and intestines is interesting if not entirely original and somewhat clichéd (which Peucker herself claims), but here she connects Kubrick with Kafka’s uncanny. The analysis becomes less convincing when it begins to hinge on a psychoanalysis of the filmmaker. Peucker reads the intellectual heritage of Kubrick’s films—primarily of Jews of the Hapsburg monarchy—Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, and Stefan Zweig—and ultimately Kubrick’s refusal to engage with issues of his own Jewishness (and thus paternal and maternal body) as the distressing moment or *punctum* in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Chapter 7 discusses the butchered and “flayed” text of Fassbinder’s *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978), a text that “severs itself from the contaminated aesthetic of fascism” (p. 126). In highlighting sound and voice in relation to Julia Kristeva’s idea of “abjection” (p. 117), Peucker moves deeper into her interpretation with the real in film as connected to the body, although in Fassbinder’s film, it is actually a disconnect that critics like Peucker (Tim Corrigan, Kaja Silverman) describe: the disembodied voice, non-diegetic sound, atonal music. Building on Kristeva, Peucker claims that Fassbinder’s focus on metaphors and mutations of flesh (transsexuality, slaughterhouse, trauma of castration, cannibalism, suicide) is ultimately “governed by materialism, by abjection or ... the realm of the mother. It is here that ‘subject and ob-

ject push each other away, confront each other, collapse and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject’” (p. 125). Finally, Peucker’s search for “realism” in Fassbinder “remains suspended as the eroding distinction between self and other” (p. 117).

Part 3 encompasses chapters 8 and 9, and shifts to even more dramatic engagement with the material body in film, introducing Peucker’s focus on the gruesome, which continues until the end of the book. Chapter 8 discusses Austrian filmmaker Haneke’s films *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny’s Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), as well as his filmic adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek’s novel *The Piano Teacher* (2000). The primary premise in the chapter is that Haneke’s films work both within and against the traditions of bourgeois melodrama. In contrast to the aesthetic tradition as set up by Denis Diderot and Lessing, Haneke allows the walls and bodies of the bourgeois interior to become covered with blood. In his critique of the bourgeois drama’s self-containment within the personal, Haneke pries open the private sphere with modernist techniques, but also with techniques that critique the postmodern mediatization of the public sphere. Peucker relies here on perceptual and cognitive theory to explain the impact of Haneke’s violence on the spectator. Here the sensory focus is again sound, as music becomes a primary tool for manipulation in Peucker’s comparison of Haneke’s film *Funny Games* (1997) with Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Given the focus on vision and the body, what is missing in the analysis is a discussion of Alex’s punishment in *A Clockwork Orange* once he is caught—beginning with a disturbing forced rehabilitation through the ocular cavity.

As a measure of the success of Peucker’s ability to explain what for some reflect merely a repulsive use of violence in film, chapter 8 encourages an appreciation for if not a (re)viewing of some horror films. Except for die-hard horror fans, the same cannot be said of chapter 9, which culminates in a detailed reading of several American films of this genre, which connects to the author’s interest in Hitchcock. Indeed, in holding true to the promised focus in her book’s analysis one might guess that her progression from sight, to sound, to touch, to taste might land us here, as disturbing as that may be. After all, as Peucker explains, “If the real is at hand, the body cannot be far behind” (p. 15). For readers who understand the viewer’s perception of disgust while watch-

ing horror films as an aesthetic experience, this chapter will be of interest.

Peucker reads visual texts closely and offers interesting insights, and for this reason, her text will best serve those readers who know well the films that she discusses. The strength of Peucker’s analysis lies in her ability to draw on the ideas of diverse thinkers from classical antiquity to postmodernity to answer the numerous questions posed in her introduction relating to the real and art. And while Peucker seems to build on the “tool box” (Foucauldian) method of applying theory to readings, her interpretations seem at times too tightly wound around the text, leaving open questions about the broader context or historical significance of various films.

The readings in the first half of the book that pertain more closely to the *tableau vivant*—the way that film scenes serve as the nexus for painting, sculpture, and theater—help contextualize the merger between representation and reality and its connection to illusion. The idea of the real as it relates to the spectator is most obvious in the second half of the book, when she addresses emotional and bodily responses more poignantly. What does not flow as well is the text taken as a whole, or for that matter, how the different sections work individually. Because of the diversity and number of texts, filmmakers, and genres Peucker covers, the reader will find this study most useful by considering each chapter separately. While Peucker does follow the plan she lays out in her introduction, taken in its entirety, the book moves into too many diverse and detailed directions to be enjoyed at once. The reasoning behind the division of the book into three parts could be better clarified in the introduction, as well as the specific objectives of each of the different parts. The interesting thread of the *tableau vivant* that Peucker pursues and develops in the first half of the book becomes less apparent in the actual textual analyses of the films in the final chapters. Offering a more thorough introduction to the tradition of the *tableaux* at once (in the introduction, rather than developing—and repeating—information on the *tableaux* in each of the first few chapters) would situate the *tableaux* more centrally to the overall development of the book.

In sum, using theoretically savvy, yet accessible language, this book provides complex interpretations of films that are either widely appreciated or widely condemned. For those readers interested in how aesthetic theory can help us understand how visual texts function, Peucker’s book provides a useful example.

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