Antonio Bisaccia. *Punctum fluens. Comunicazione estetica e movimento tra cinema e arte nelle avanguardie storiche*. Roma: Meltemi Editore, 2002. Pp. 188.

Italian film scholars are not particularly known for their commitment to the work of avant-garde filmmakers, in spite of the foundational status, for European avant-gardes at least, of the manifestos of Futurist filmmaking produced in Italy early in the twentieth century. This may have to do with the relative paucity of avant-garde film experimentation in Italy—when compared with film traditions in other European countries, at least—as well as the lack of incentives, generally speaking, for scholarship in non-commercial areas of film production in Italy. Fortunately, the research of a handful of scholars in Italy is beginning to fill in gaps in scholarly accounts of Italian and European avant-garde filmmaking, elaborating upon the important preliminary investigations of only a few film historians working in Italy, including Verdone, Berretto, and Rondolino. Antonio Bisaccia's most recent book, *Punctum fluens: Comunicazione estetica e movimento tra cinema e arte nelle avanguardie storiche*, makes an significant contribution to aesthetic considerations and on-going debates in Italy concerning experimental filmmaking and the visual arts of the European avant-gardes since the early twentieth century.

The title of the Bisaccia's book, *Punctum fluens*, communicates very well the philosophical core of his approach to avant-garde filmmaking. That is, what anchors this extended meditation on experimental film is the paradoxical fact that the motion in motion pictures depends on a technological capacity to stop and fix motion on celluloid, and then, in projection, to produce an impression of movement, an illusion of motion, in the mind of the spectator. Besides twenty-four frames worth of celluloid run through a projector each second, there is nothing actually moving in the movies. To the extent that avant-garde experiments with film tended to be motivated by a desire to arrive at the essential characteristics and expressive capacities of the medium, for Bisaccia, the work of experimental filmmakers appears to remain essentially engaged with the paradoxical nature of film, which reproduces movement and "vitality" only by capturing and fixing motion and, by that same token, draining whatever is filmed of its "vitality." As many will recall, this draining of life on the silver screen, this problem of mediated life, allegorizes modern existence in Pirandello's *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, a novel about film that also inspired Walter Benjamin to write his influential essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which his meditations on the loss of "aura" in mass-art and in mass-life led him to consider the paradoxical nature of motion pictures as *emblematic* of the existential dilemmas of modernity. My sense, after reading this book, is that Bisaccia would not disagree—and he clearly signals his intellectual debts to Benjamin throughout the book.

However, at least as central to Bisaccia's book as Benjamin is Roland Barthes, from whom, in fact, Bisaccia derives his title, while endowing it with a mathematical connotation less important to Barthes. As he clarifies in the opening theoretical excursus of his book, Bisaccia draws upon Barthes' distinction (which he elaborated first in his study of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and further developed in *La Chambre claire*) between the *studium* and the *punctum* of photographic images. For Barthes,

the *studium* of a photograph is whatever is of general "human interest" in the image, or whatever cultural information is being communicated. The *punctum* is an element that disturbs the *studium*, interrupts information, and represents an "infraction" of communication. The *punctum* is something that "stings" (*punge*), "wounds," or "stains" the image, and represents a challenge to comprehension:

Il *punctum* è davvero qualcosa che ci punge, attirando la nostra attenzione nell'area del particolare, nel corpo della percezione. Ed è da questo presupposto di fondo che si proverà a descrivere del cinema d'avanguardia solo ciò che ci ha punto, senza preoccupazioni sterilmente filologiche. (9)

As this statement makes clear, the provocative or even heretical power of the *punctum* in photography and film will also enable Bisaccia to break with the historicist and philological tradition that has largely constrained Italian film scholarship for decades. In its place, Bisaccia proposes an examination of the aesthetic dimension of experimental films, "a volo di colomba kantiana" (15). And while he's at it, he will couch his discussion in a style of prose that oscillates between academic commentary and description, on the one hand, and another voice that is clearly infected or irradiated by the aesthetic force of the films he discusses, on the other. This will result in a book that combines a synthetic survey of the European avant-gardes and the cinema (the book's *studium*) with moments of poetic departure and tangential meditation that at times verge on a sort of Kantian stream of consciousness (the book's *punctum*). This hybridization of Bisaccia's book, torn between the scientific "responsibility" of the scholar and the poetic "reverie" of spectator, leads the author to concentrate on the formal, alliterative and rhythmic aspects of his own writing, and this seems not only entirely acceptable, in a sort of Barthesian mode, but often most pleasurable. That is, the book is informative and theoretically coherent, but also often great fun to read:

Anche *A propos de Nice* (1930) di Jean Vigo, si può fregiare del riferimento al cinema puro con i suoi giochi d'artificio mirabolanti, le sue riprese dall'alto, le sue geometrie in movimento, i suoi uomini come statue mobili, presenze casuali, escrescenze terrestri della *ville*: queste marionette di carne abitano e proliferano in un territorio cementizio, dove tutto è forma che raccoglie forme, e ritmo che suscita quasi per eccesso di realtà. (56-57)

It seems to me that there is as much Manganelli here as there is Kant.

Preliminary to his survey of film and the visual arts, Bisaccia clarifies his preference for the term "experimental film" (*film sperimentale*) over the more commonly used term "avant-garde film" (*film d'avanguardia*). Drawing upon pronouncements on the matter by theorists and historians such as Brunius, Poggioli, Noguez, Costa, Verdone, Mitry, Weiss, and Jakobson, the author suggests that "experimental film" better communicates the attempt by film artists to create new forms of aesthetic elaboration, through films that give priority, as Jakobson would say, to the poetic function of the work: "Film sperimentale è allora quel film in cui il messaggio è in qualche modo autoriflessivo, richiamando l'attenzione sulla sua stessa struttura. Ovvero quando è costruito in maniera ambigua" (21).

Furthermore, Bisaccia resists the martial rhetoric of "avant-gardism" and insists, not without humour, that we might better refer to experimental films as films of "desertion":

Già in altra occasione abbiamo proposto di sostituire la vecchia metafora militare dell'avanguardia con un'altra (altrettanto conosciuta) metafora: quella della diserzione. Diserzione come violazione della legge della visione. (23)

Thus, experimental films are those in which transparent audio-visual communication and narrative legibility are absent without leave.

In the chapters that follow, Bisaccia charts a fascinating course through the films of "desertion" by "outlaw" filmmakers associated with the principle avant-garde movements of the European twentieth century, from Futurism to Impressionism, German Expressionism, Dadaism, and finally Surrealism. In a manner that is quite unusual in surveys of the filmic avant-gardes—especially those studies that would argue that avant-garde filmmakers were principally involved in "deconstructing" the classical narrative style—Bisaccia demonstrates the interaction between filmmakers and artists working in the other media, including music, painting, dance, poetry, photography. Indeed, the Futurists, he suggests, arrive at film through music. That is, it was after Corra and Ginna had experimented with the chromatic piano (whose twenty-eight keys were wired to twenty-eight coloured light bulbs) that they turned to film in order to make *Vita futurista* in 1916. Like Schönberg, these avant-garde musicians hoped that film might allow them the opportunity to visualize their compositions (35). In what will be news to many film scholars who knew only of Corra and Ginna's *Vita futurista*—which has at any rate been lost—Bisaccia describes the work of the Corradini brothers, in which they experimented with colour and rhythm, though always with an eye to expressing the chromatic effects and aesthetic excesses found in paintings, music, and poetry, by artists such as Segantini, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Malarmé. The result of their efforts is a series of hand-painted abstract films bearing such titles as *Accordo di colore* and *Studio di effetti tra colori* that were made between 1911 and 1912, films that appear to anticipate later work in Italy by Luigi Veronesi (though the latter's work is not mentioned, since it falls outside the scope of Bisaccia's book). The attention to these other films by the Corradini brothers opens the way for an entirely new chapter in the history of Italian experimental film in the 1910s.

In the pages that follow, Bisaccia demonstrates the profound importance of Survae's materialist theory of colour and rhythm (found in *Le Rythme Coloré* and Survae's drawings for abstract films), perhaps indicating Survae's experiments as an under-appreciated current in abstract filmmaking—based on a sort of psychology of colour derived from his study of contemporary painting—that runs parallel to the "pure abstraction" or "absolute films" of Eggeling and Richter (whose work is also treated in this book). Thereafter, Bisaccia offers a panorama of the most significant film artists working in Europe before the arrival of sound, including the "first wave" (predominantly Impressionist) avant-gardists, such as Delluc, Epstein, L'Herbier, Gance, Dulac, who experiment with the "lyrosophic" autonomy of the new medium, divorced from the logic of commodity exchange.

He examines how Surrealist and Cubist filmmakers such as Clair, Picabia, Richter, Léger, and Soviet FEK artists Kozincev and Trauberg, carried out a type of anti-aesthetic, Formalist and "eccentric" film practice designed to release objects from sense by estranging them from usual contexts—allowing objects to "rebel" from meaning and attain a renovating autonomy. He suggests that Clair and Picabia, in *Entr'acte*, were influenced by the avant-garde chance operations of Appollinaire and Tzara. Delluc's "simplicity" is explained as the "sottrazione del cinema al dominio indiscreto della letteratura e del teatro, in modo da restituirlo al vigore visuale che gli è proprio Delluc sognava di un film dove non succedesse niente" (68-69). For Delluc and Riccioto Canudo, film deserves to be considered the 7th art because "può esprimere senza dire nulla" (71). He suggests that "L'Herbier cerca di teorizzare, visto l'inevitabile interconnessione tra cinema e industria, un sodalizio compromissorio in cui la mediazione della moneta non decreti l'estinzione dell'estetica" (80). Bisaccia plots Léger's course from the "mechanical period" in his painting to his decision to make films, arguing that "Léger trova nel cinema un alleato ideale per le sue sperimentazioni pittoriche" (106). He concludes his book with an account of how Dadaists and Surrealists—such as Clair, Picabia, Ray, Duchamp, Birot, and Buñuel—experimented with optical devices and distortion techniques, resulting in films that emulate the chronotope of dreams and challenge the cultural domestication of vision and thought. In so doing, "l'immagine non è più asservita alla relatività del rappresentare, alla gogna che soffoca la vitalità delle cose, alle concatenazioni del senso, e alla rassicurante 'imagerie' borghese" (147). In the process, Bisaccia makes clear how experimental films sought to act as energetic antidotes to cultural and intellectual anaesthesia: As Barthes would say, they were designed to sting.

Bisaccia has written an admirable and well-documented book that challenges standard historical approaches to avant-garde film, and he makes a strong argument that experimental filmmaking should not be seen merely as a response to the stylistic and narrative tyranny of Hollywood and the classical style associated with American fiction films. Rather, the work of the artists he describes is better served, his book suggests, by inserting it within the context of avant-garde experimentation and theorization in all the arts during the first thirty years that followed the birth of motion pictures. Elaborating a method of analysis beholden to Barthes' notion of the "third sense" of a work of art that does not offer the "spasm of the signified"—but also clearly influenced by a very thorough knowledge of experimental filmmaking from the silent period in Europe to the work of more contemporary work by artists such as Stan Brakhage and, especially, Michael Snow—Bisaccia has written an excellent book that will be useful to scholars and film aficionados alike. In the process, he has helped to fill the scholarly gap in aesthetic considerations of the historical avant-gardes in Italy and Europe, and does so in an intellectually and stylistically challenging manner, teetering "back and forth" between responsibility and reverie. Punctum.

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