

Volker Pantenburg: *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP 2015, 285 S., ISBN 9789048527557, EUR 99,-

Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory offers a discussion of film as a medium of theory by comparing the writings and the filmmaking of Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard. In particular, the book focusses on these two European avant-garde filmmakers' contributions to the theory of montage, including their reflections on its reception by the film viewer. Remarkably, *Film as Theory* shows – in line with 20th century theory, in particular poststructuralism – how the spectator becomes the agent of reference in avant-garde film to such an extent that the film auteur starts to emulate that role.

The book's central question is whether „film, despite its inherent necessity of concretion, could be considered a medium in which theorizing were possible“ (S.255). Pantenburg, who believes Farocki and Godard pursue this enquiry in an exemplary fashion, discusses their work both within the context of film theory and within that of a larger intellectual tradition, reaching back to German Romanticism. By placing Farocki and Godard within the history of ideas, Pantenburg affirms film as the privileged medium of thought and theory of the 20th century.

In the first of six chapters, „Le film qui pense“, Pantenburg contrasts Siegfried Kracauer's influential view of film as inherently ‚concrete‘ with André Bazin's belief in the research potential

of film. While Farocki and Godard share Bazin's understanding of film, Pantenburg tells us that their approach is characterised by a healthy scepticism of the cinematic image. With reference to the Russian formalist cinema of the 1920s as well as to French theory of the 1960s, both Farocki and Godard expose the filmmaking process within their films and through the montage and thus point to the artificiality of image and text.

Crucially, Pantenburg reminds us that Godard associates the innovative potential of cinematic montage not just with the filmmaker, but with the viewer: The „collision of different segments of the world leads to a new kind of seeing that could be described as relational or comparative“ (S.71) seeing. According to Pantenburg, this form of seeing is the premise for the „act of theorization“ (S.255) in which film serves as a medium of theory, and the latter can be carried out by both the filmmaker and the viewer. Pantenburg shows in reference to Kaja Silverman's concept of the ‚author-as-receiver‘ that in their self-reflexive films, Farocki and Godard repeatedly slip into the role of the viewer. Theory understood as an ‚act‘ is a combination of intellectual and practical work: „working at the editing table, writing and thinking about film, analysing images in circulation“ (S.255). In this context, Pantenburg refers to the aesthetic theory of early

Romanticism which asked for a unity of art and theory.

To support the arguments developed in the initial theory chapter, Pantenburg dedicates two chapters to two recurrent motifs in the *œuvres* of Farocki and Godard: the editing table and the hands – according to Pantenburg, both serve as metaphors for filmmaking- and film-viewing-as-theory. The next two chapters focus on painting and photography, which are incorporated and theorised in the work of Farocki and Godard to reflect on the medium of film. One further chapter problematizes the term ‚essay film‘, a genre definition that is frequently employed by scholars and critics alike with reference to the films of Farocki and Godard. Pantenburg suggests that the term ‚auteur film‘ might be better suited to describe films that are defined by montage.

In an analogy to his subject matter, Pantenburg carries out his own intellectual montage in *Film as Theory* by discussing the two film makers alongside each other. Out of the two

images placed side by side, a ‚third image‘ appears – that of 20th century European avant-garde film as a medium of theory that still depends strongly on the human agent. Pantenburg’s recent edited volume *Cinematographic Objects: Things and Operations* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2015 [rezensiert von M. Kappes, S.198f.]) suggests though that the author has moved on to a more materialist, object-oriented enquiry, in which human agency is pushed aside to a large extent. However, *Film as Theory* is by no means outdated – despite the fact that it has been ten years since the German version of the book was published (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006) and a shift has taken place in art theory as well as in film theory towards a non-human-centric approach. The book is still an important contribution to the history and theory of 20th century European avant-garde cinema, in which film as a medium of theory served a decidedly humanist purpose.

Chiara Marchini (*Marburg*)