BOOK REVIEW
AMBIGUITY AND FILM CRITICISM: REASONABLE DOUBT

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There's a moment in Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) in which Dana Andrews glances at the camera. It's the film's only instance of a fourth-wall break, and it's brief enough that you could easily miss it. In fact, there's no mention of it in the critical literature on the film. Surely, it could be a mistake—an oversight by the film's editor or a misstep in Andrews' performance, or both. But it *is* there, verifiable by a freeze-frame. What would it mean to take the moment seriously, not as a private encounter with the captured excesses of photography, but as a meaningful part of the film's textual whole? After all, in the shocking final turn of the film, Andrews's character will reveal himself to be somebody we were sure he wasn't. What if his glance at the camera, at *us,* is a furtive signaling of this secret long before we could understand it as such?

One word for the moment's puzzlement, its invitation to curious speculation, and its denial of interpretative certainty, is *ambiguity.* In *Ambiguity and Film Criticism: Reasonable Doubt,* Hoi Lun Law provides a rich critical assessment of this moment—and others like it—as part of this first book-length treatment of "ambiguity" in film studies. Given the widespread currency of the term in critical discussions of films, it may be surprising that "ambiguity" has been so understudied in the discipline. But as Law points out, part of the reason for this may be the term's "ironically unambiguous standard definition:" the "characteristic of what bears multiple meanings" (1). Surely, there's more to ambiguity than the mere fact of polysemy. In Law's account, what makes something ambiguous is not the fact of having multiple meanings, but a *tension* between those meanings that yields a sense of intrigue, puzzlement, uncertainty, or doubt.

The book's central claim is that ambiguity's sense of uncertainty triggers an inquisitive impulse; in Law's words, ambiguity in a film "is an invitation to inquire into 'why is it as it is'" (9). Indeed, as Law acknowledges, asking "why" of an artwork—why paint the human figure this way? why place the camera there?—is central to the vocation of all art criticism. But ambiguity "heightens the urgency of this inquiry, insistently soliciting our answers." (9). Ambiguity is what prods us into such questioning even as it thwarts a single definitive answer. Given the nature of this claim, the general aim of the book is not only to pinpoint the specificity of ambiguity as an aesthetic category, but also to defend an account of the mutually constitutive relation between ambiguity and the practice of *film criticism*, hence the book's title. Ambiguity is enhanced and deepened, rather than explained away, through criticism.

The body of the book consists of five main chapters, each revolving around a single film that, in various respects, exhibits an ambiguity. The chapter entitled "Difficulty of Reading" examines a particularly well-known example of ambiguity in film studies: the "vase shot" in Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949), a mysteriously unmotivated cut to a vase at a pivotal emotional moment between the film's protagonist and her father. What makes the shot ambiguous for Law is the "vase's uncertainty of suggestion" (26). The static shot of the vase interrupts the flow of heightened narrative interest by cutting away from the smiling face of the protagonist, thus announcing itself as an authorial gesture. But it's unclear what we are to make of the meaning of this gesture. It's for this very reason, it seems, that the shot has garnered many interpretations, and much of the work of the chapter scrutinizes and responds to these interpretations in order to arrive at a clearer sense of what a critical reading of ambiguity might entail.

One of the most forceful and significant of these responses concerns Law's evaluation of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's respective readings of the vase shot. Bordwell and Thompson each attempt to pinpoint the source of the shot's formal strangeness but make no attempt at a meaningful interpretation of it within the film as a whole; they make a case for *what it is,* but not *why it is as it is*. Such an approach is symptomatic of a broader critical tendency to identify an ambiguity rather than critically explore it. Ambiguity, for Law, is importantly neither a confusion to be explained nor a puzzle to be solved. Ambiguity is not synonymous with "analytical difficulty" (a meaning it has attained from its association with art cinema) nor is it primarily a hallmark of cinematic realism (as is suggested in the work of André Bazin). Instead,

ambiguity for Law is an invitation to dwell upon the multiple resonances of an intriguing aesthetic choice; ambiguity, in Law's words, "is something to be clarified and illuminated by reading; it calls for our critical effort, requiring to be accounted for" (9).

The rest of the chapters set out to do just this, examining a single film in very close detail all the while introducing new conceptual terrain of cinematic ambiguity. "Perplexity of Style" examines the sole point-of-view shot in Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002)*,* a film that consists entirely of a shot-reverse shot pattern of ten conversations in a moving vehicle; for Law, this formal aberration not only reflects the film's thematic tensions between discipline and deviance, but also raises questions about the film's uncertain status between fiction and documentary. "Depth of Suggestion" examines Humphrey Bogart's "ambiguous gestures"—simultaneously affectionate and threatening— throughout *In a Lonely Place* (Ray, 1950)*,* which invite a close investigation of his character's self-knowledge. And "Threat of Insignificance" examines the brief glance at the camera in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt,* which leads to a reflection on the nature of overreading and the necessary "risk" endemic to the practice of criticism.

A stand-out analysis is the fifth chapter on *Force Majeure* (Ostlund, 2014)*,* a Swedish arthouse drama that follows a bourgeois family on vacation after a near disaster. During an outdoor meal at a ski lodge, a controlled avalanche momentarily seems to engulf the family of four, prompting the father to flee the table without his wife and children. His actions reveal an instinctual cowardice moments before the avalanche reveals itself to be a false alarm. The majority of the film concerns the fallout of this incident—the mother's mounting resentment, the father's consistent denial, the family's apparent reconciliation that feels more like a resignation. For readers who've seen this film, its inclusion in the book may be surprising. Unlike the other films discussed in the book, each of whose noted ambiguities are either difficult to detect or difficult to parse, *Force Majeure* seems a film that wears its ambiguities on its sleeve as an intellectual aspiration. In its very premise, the film clearly stages a philosophical thought experiment about the blurred lines between agency and instinct, conscious and non-conscious action: can the father be judged for his instincts? Were his actions truly his own? Under Law's sensitive reading, though, the film's perfunctory ambiguities give way to deeper ones that require close attention to formal patterns and nuances of performance, especially in the film's final three sequences. What some critics have dismissed as "superficial ironies" become, under Law's eye, moments of puzzlement that invite close reading and reasoned speculation but thwart critical

certainty (135). Even when a film strives for ambiguity A film's ambiguities, we learn, are never superficially known before the act of reading.

While Law's skill as an interpreter of texts is easily the book's strongest attribute, what's equally impressive is how the book weaves together criticism and meta-criticism—a theoretical reflection upon and conceptual development of the act of criticism as a philosophical enterprise. It's a style of scholarly film writing that explicitly draws from the work of figures like Stanley Cavell, George Wilson, and Robert Pippin, each of whom pairs an attention to the details of a film with the construction of aesthetic concepts. Law's book borrows freely from aesthetic concepts coined by these thinkers—e.g. Cavell on "acknowledgment," Pippin on agency and action—in a manner that is both accessible and provocative. Law also develops concepts of his own and contributes original interventions to longstanding debates in aesthetics surrounding "surface" versus "deep" readings (106-107), the anxiety about "over-interpretation" (166-167), the inadequacy of "motivation" as an aesthetic concept in film analysis (32), and the appropriateness of "speculation" as part of the enterprise of criticism (56-60). The concept of ambiguity thus necessarily opens up broader questions about the process and product of criticism—when does interpretation go too far? what are the risks of not going far enough?—that benefit from Law's rigorous and lucid thinking.

But make no mistake, *Ambiguity and Film Criticism* is not a clinical theorization of ambiguity and other related concepts in philosophical aesthetics. Its mission is less to define (and thus delimit) ambiguity as a concept—devising criteria for its proper identification—than it is to assess and evaluate significant achievements of ambiguity in individual films; these assessments are the basis of the book's theoretical claims. Just as, for Cavell, there is no "theory" of film separate from critical engagements with particular films, for Law there is no theory of ambiguity without critical engagements with ambiguity—especially engagements inspired by cinematic achievement. Law's close analyses and theoretical claims are so rich partly because they are driven by aesthetic conviction, a desire to share the achievement he's able to see in a single shot, a gesture, a glance.

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