Formalism expanded

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What sense remains today of mounting a defense of formalism in film and media theory? In fact, two recent books provide compelling accounts of how a taxonomy of 'forms' can – exactly in constituting such a taxonomy – capture those singular features of our experiences of works that have usually been thought to militate against formalism. Their titles immediately suggest something of their complementary approaches. Whereas The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement by Jordan Schonig (Oxford University Press, 2022) reaches for different 'forms' as ways of classifying seemingly ineffable ways of moving on film, Disformations: Affects, Media, Literature by Tomáš Jirsa (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) develops categories of ways in which 'forms fall apart' across a variety of media, thus embracing the concept of 'disformation' as a kind of concrete negation of 'form' that retains the latter's potential for ordering experience. Schonig's book is wide-ranging and important. Nevertheless, the fact that it operates with the very opposition (of form vs. Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois' concept of the informe, or formless) to which Jirsa aims to provide an alternative does raise the question of how they

might be read together, as well as how they might be extended to encompass those media – such as expanded cinema or film as performance – for which their considerations appear to be significant, and yet go ignored by both books.

Schonig begins his book with concerns about the intelligibility of invoking cinematic motion in film theory and criticism that resonates strongly with the thought of the later Wittgenstein: 'it is difficult to do more than point to the screen and exclaim the power of movement in general', and so what is needed is an account of motion that avoids 'the dead end of generality' (p. 2). The author's solution is in effect, like many others who have embraced those Wittgensteinian resonances, to opt for Aristotle over Plato: his topic is not movement as such but rather different categories of movement. Thus, 'each chapter conceptualizes a single motion form' (p. 4). Indeed, the six categories Schonig discusses ('Contingent Motion', 'Habitual Gestures', 'Durational Metamorphosis', 'Spatial Unfurling', 'Trajective Locomotion', and 'Bleeding Pixels') can almost amount to a rethinking of the idea of cinematic genre based not in narrative forms but rather in motion forms. This bracing introduction is nevertheless characterised by an ambiguity that runs throughout the entire book: is Schonig categorising different sources of fascination or awe in film spectatorship, or is he re-conceiving such fascination as consisting exactly in this kind of act of generating categories? In other words, just how deep does Schonig's formalist cinephilia run?

The first of these categories, 'Contingent Motion', emerges from Schonig's sense of the aesthetic character of the 'unplannable' 'across pre-cinematic experience, early cinema, and CGI', including the

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proverbial ‘wind in the trees’ of the Lumières’ Le répas du bébé (1895), early cinema’s ‘water-effects films’, as well as varieties of filmic fire and smoke, and even the algorithms for generating an effect of the unplannable in the falling snow of Disney’s Frozen (2013) (p. 22). This discussion sets the terms that organise the rest of the book: because ‘contingent motion’ is a ‘framed’ perception (unlike pre-cinematic contingent motion), it becomes a ‘potentially shareable’ screen object ‘for the first time’ (pp. 26, 27).

And yet Schonig immediately limits this compelling proposal by conflating the ‘framing’ of the unplannable at a screening with its repeatability across screenings: ‘Temporal framing miraculously

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subordinates the contingent movements of such phenomena – movements once too rapid and unpredictable to affirm stable reference – to a permanent and repeatable temporal object' (p. 27). His assumptions would thus exclude the possible significance to filmic 'Contingent Motion' of expanded cinema performances that are framed and shareable and yet in principle unrepeatable, such as Spanish artist Luis Macías' performance The Eyes Empty and the Pupils Burning of Rage and Desire (2018), which uses modified 16mm projectors to allow audiences to experience on screen the live burning of film. This conflation of 'framing' and 'repeatability' throughout the book occasions some awkward acknowledgments of its limitations, as when in the final chapter Schonig comes to discuss the non-repeatability of compression glitches as its own source of cinematic fascination. In addition, a question faces Schonig's account of an aesthetics of the 'unplannable' that need not be 'unplanned', particularly the algorithms behind the falling snow in Frozen: are such mechanisms used to generate nothing but a look of the unplannable, or do we now have no resources left for exposing illusions of contingent motion?

Schonig's treatment of 'Habitual Gestures' focuses on the 'micromovements of bodies engaged in habitual movements' (p. 45). It fulfills a longstanding potential in Stanley Cavell's writing regarding film's capacity to capture fields of passive or involuntary expressiveness, and especially Richard Moran's Cavellian proposal that 'there is no "zero-degree" of bodily posture or movement' (quoted on p. 62) – that these Cavellian ideas have natural application in experimental film, and particularly in the exploration of gesture in Martin Arnold's found footage work.

Nevertheless, it can be confusing to see Arnold's mechanical repetitions of Gregory Peck's gestures in To Kill a Mockingbird (1967, in his Passage à l'Acte, 1993) discussed as though they shared the same 'form' as Mouchette's natural rhythms in making coffee in Bresson's titular film (1967). Also, for all Schonig's attention to manual gestures, one hand goes conspicuously missing in this account: that of Arnold himself, employing his optical printer to repeat these gestures, and the differences between those movements and, say, Raphael Montañez Ortiz's operations on a laser disk via joystick in works that also explore habitual gestures via staggered repetition like The Kiss (1985) and The Conversation (1996). Also, in the depths of these discussions of the contingent and involuntary, we can be left wondering what role the specifically found character of found footage plays in communicating these epiphanic aspects of Arnold's image.

If Schonig's discussion of 'Habitual Gestures' elaborates on Moran's idea that there is no escaping expression on film, the chapter on 'Durational Metamorphosis' elaborates on Henri Bergson's idea that there is no escaping movement, even in processes of slow duration. This is something that Schonig thinks goes missing on Deleuze's treatment of the 'time image' as standing in contrast with the 'movement image', and which he analyses via moments of duration as movement in works by Carlos Reygadas, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, James Benning, Larry Gottheim, and Bill Viola. An exciting and unexpected proposal offered in this kind of return to Bergson is to extend the 'aesthetics of metamorphosis' heretofore associated in animation studies with rapid and plasmatic

character transformations to contemporary slow cinema. And yet in reading Schonig's quotation of Reygadas describing the use of cross-fades to create flow in the sped-up (but still very slow) opening shot of dawn in Silent Light (2007), a missed opportunity presents itself: all of Schonig's examples of a 'world in constant motion' appear to involve forward motion, but is it at all significant that Reygadas' techniques involve an undetectable overlapping between times (p. 94)? In other words, is there such a thing as multi-directional 'durational metamorphosis'?

The important chapter on 'Spatial Unfurling' takes a cue from Daniel Morgan's recent book The Lure of the Image (2021) to argue that phenomenological film theorists have long built their discussions of bodily identification with the camera around models of movement into the z-axis (such as Welles' movement into Susan Alexander's El Rancho nightclub in Citizen Kane) while ignoring the peculiarities of lateral movement along the x-axis, which precisely break with those models while evoking vehicular movement, especially that of trains. For Schonig, attention to 'Spatial Unfurling' in films by Léos Carax, Mikhail Kalatozov, Bruce Baillie, Ken Jacobs, and Michael Snow has major theoretical consequences. In the case of Jacobs' mirroring and kaleidoscopic effects in his 'phantom ride' found footage train films like The Georgetown Loop (1996) and Disorient Express (1996), 'Spatial Unfurling' can make explicit what David Bordwell calls that 'series of expanding, contracting, and labile configurations' that is 'virtually impossible' to see under 'normal circumstances' even in films consisting of movement into the z-axis (quoted on p. 120). It also supposedly

allows for an appreciation of the screen as a surface that Schonig associates with Richard Wollheim's concepts of 'twofoldness' and 'seeing-in' in painting.

Schonig acknowledges the core differences between Wollheim on 'seeing-in' and Wittgenstein's predecessor concept of 'seeing-as' (such as that the paradigms of the latter, like the famous duck-rabbit, do not allow one to see both aspects simultaneously), but he also somewhat confusingly draws on readings of Wittgenstein on aspect-seeing (particularly Stephen Mulhall's) without explaining exactly where one concept's features carry over to the other. Additionally, as with Schonig's discussion of Martin Arnold's found footage work, we do not always have a clear orientation about what significance finding versus imposing has for the capacity of 'Spatial Unfurling' to make visible Bordwell's normally invisible 'labile configurations'. For example, what difference does it make for this effect that Jacobs imposes those kaleidoscopic, mirroring features on found footage, whereas artist Janie Geiser finds them as an accidental feature of a mirror on a boat in Venice in her recent short Vaporetto (2022)?

Following the wide-ranging claims that Schonig makes for 'Spatial Unfurling', it can be disappointing to then turn to a more conventional movement into the z-axis in his chapter on 'Trajective Locomotion', which adopts Paul Virilio's term 'trajective' 'to mark out an aspect of human agency that is nothing more than the projective force pushing an agent forward, from here to there' (p. 127), and where Schonig's main examples are Alan Clarke's Elephant (1989) and Gus Van Sant's Elephant (2003). Nevertheless,

the chapter contains an incisive argument against dichotomies between aimed and aimless character movement, for which Bordwell and Deleuze serve as representatives. Thus, the characters in Van Sant's Elephant

> are neither goal-oriented actors nor psychologically opaque drifters in pursuit of self-knowledge. They are neither Deleuze's wanderers nor Bordwell's art-cinema protagonists, 'psychological effects in search of their causes.' Instead, they are mere trajective agents whose psychologies are hidden from view. (p. 140)

Frustratingly, though, Schonig appears to end the chapter pinned to the same dualism that he had charged against Bordwell and Deleuze: trajective locomotion 'denies access to character interiority' and in following 'behind subjects, we are in no position to evaluate the contents of their mental states' (p. 147). The natural response to these passages is that the camera's following behind characters in Clarke's and Van Sant's films does not deny access to interiority, but rather yields a peculiar picture of how interiority infuses gait and bodily movement.

The brilliant final chapter on 'Bleeding Pixels' uses a close analysis of the compression glitch and datamoshing (including a compelling presentation of Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin's Lossless series [2008]) to steer a middle course between D. N. Rodowick's digital ontological approach to film and what Schonig considers to be Noël Carroll and Tom Gunning's 'phenomenological' approaches. Whereas one side emphasises differences in the constitution of digital and analog formats and the

other emphasises continuities in experience across them, Schonig locates in compression glitches a way of rendering our experience sensitive to motion forms that is genuinely impossible in analog projection. 'In contradistinction to the indifferent and mechanical rhythm of the film projector, agnostic to the forms of movement on screen, the codec is wholly bound up with the specificity of individual movements that we see' (p. 151). With this major intervention in digital aesthetics, Schonig's closing attempt to rethink cinephilia in terms of the 'icon' instead of the 'index' (that is, motion forms instead of connection with reality) might strike readers as a minor issue, though it provides a helpful sense of how the book's stress on shared, intersubjective experience via forms goes beyond the subjective, singular experience supposedly emphasised by previous cinephilic writers.

Whereas The Shape of Motion is often sprawling in its presentation, Disformations by Tomáš Jirsa is austere and tightly argued. And whereas Schonig's book undertakes a rethinking of the film studies canon via motion forms, Jirsa's is a work of media philosophy that makes the case for the significance of literature ('as the plastic work of writing') to the latter while remaining rooted in European avant-gardes (p. 115). Their point of connection is that they present taxonomies of forms that take differing but complementary attitudes to Krauss and Bois' Bataille-inspired concept of the informe (formless): an 'operation' that functions as 'a negation of both the form and the content' (p. 8). Schonig, for example, sees little use for Krauss and Bois' concept in understanding datamoshing's 'Bleeding Pixels': 'Datamoshing's forms simply operate at a smaller

scale than their general formlessness; their emergence is a function of close attention' (p. 164).

Jirsa, in contrast, is self-assured about how to create a taxonomy of kinds of formlessness without reducing them to difficult-to-detect forms: he expresses his preference for Georges Didi-Huberman's 'iconographic' conception of the formless over Krauss and Bois' 'iconoclastic' conception precisely because the former stands 'for a dialectic process that engenders images through the labor of deformation' (p. 8) – we might add, just like how the loss of form when healthy organic matter suffers damage then generates new organic forms. While likewise expressing sympathy with Eugenie Brinkema's treatment of the 'forms' of affects, Jirsa insists that his book's starting point is,

in contrast, 'not particular forms of affects – such as disgust, joy, grief, or horror – and their cinematic structures but rather the encounters with the disturbances to form, collisions that drive and are, in turn, driven by affective operations' (p. 12). These 'disformations' include the 'The Faceless Face', 'Wallpaper', the 'Garbage Dump', and the 'Empty Chair'. Jirsa understands each of these categories as 'performative' (as performing rather than representing the affects engaged in them). Some obscurities and missed opportunities arise from Jirsa's never linking the performativity of disformations to J. L. Austin's source concept of performative utterances, or (when it comes to affects) to Cavell's later treatment of 'passionate utterances'.

Thus, in 'Facing the Faceless: Modernism, War, and the Work of Disfiguration', Jirsa asks: 'If the face is no longer a guarantee of identity or a reliable sign of interiority but instead an unrecognizable, nameless, and disturbing object, what kind of affects do these shattered faces trigger and how do such affects operate?' (p. 24). His answer is that 'rather than simply represented the hardly thinkable faceless faces are performed through the formal work of affects that structure their discursive forms', and develops examples that include the faceless faces in Rilke's The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, Gaston Leroux's Phantom of the Opera, Francis Bacon's paintings, Richard Weiner's short story 'The Erased Face', and the gueules cassées wounded soldiers of the First World War. Jirsa's observations are familiar and convincing while remaining deep, including his connecting the faceless face to the Lacanian Real as well as how it exposes the 'fairly disturbing aporia: within our form, we are at the

same time ultimately formless' (p. 24). Though it is clear why Jirsa understands how texts can perform disfiguration or disformation, it is not clear why his analysis ends where it does (what space is there for other experiences of the faceless, like the single eyes of Philip Guston's paintings or cartoons with only eyes in the dark?) or how exactly he relates the performative to the mimetic: occasionally the terms are treated as opposed, and yet he later discusses 'performance through imitation' (p. 81).

Parallel interrogations about media's performance of the loss of self in an all-absorbing space seem to structure both 'Curves that Break the Frame: On the Relentless Absorption of the Wallpaper Pattern' and 'How Text Becomes Diatext: Gemini and Performativity of the Garbage Dump'. Thus, in the former Jirsa asks, 'If the aesthetic force of the ornament is to shape its surrounding, what happens when someone gets too close to it, will the subject also become one of its curves?' (p. 44). His unexpected answer is that mediatic presentations of wallpaper (including in Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin, Ingmar Bergman's Through a Glass Darkly [1961], and that film's distant source text, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story 'The Yellow Wall-Paper') can perform history itself, particularly the 'transhistorical survival of the rococo ornamental curves and the reiteration of a radical event they brought about, one of the broken frame' (p. 45).

In the latter chapter, the all-absorbing space in question is the garbage dump, particularly that in 'Michel Tournier's 1975 novel Gemini (Les Météores), a text that can be read as a love letter to the once useful and then rejected forms that now strike back' (p. 72). Jirsa embraces the instability of texts that take on the disformation of the garbage

dump, asking ‘how to read something that trashes itself?’ (p. 89). The key to this answer is to reconceive of Gemini not as a self-referential ‘metatext’ but rather as a ‘diatext’ that performatively becomes wasted or ‘disformed’ in the course of unfolding. A natural extension of these considerations would be to punk aesthetics, such as the performance of the loss of self via shots of the Mierdas Punk gang absorbed in garbage dumps in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl in Nadie es inocente (1987) and Sábado de mierda (1988) by the Mexican filmmakers Sarah Minter and Gregorio Rocha, respectively. Nevertheless, apart from an endnote reference to Brazilian filmmaker Jorge Furtado’s ‘anti-anthropocentric’ Ilha das Flores, Jirsa gives little direct attention to ecological dimensions of ‘trashing’ (p. 126). This problem even seems to flow from the book’s overly cursory treatment of the formlessness of the Kantian sublime: Jirsa’s own fascination with the wasteful sublime goes acknowledged.

With ‘The Portrait of Absence, Or When the Empty Chairs Get Crowded’, Jirsa discusses those representations of empty chairs like Richard Weiner’s short story ‘The Empty Chair’ and Joseph Kosuth’s mixed media piece One and Three Chairs (1965) as enacting a paradox. They put ‘on head the structuralist founding claim about the necessary erasure of a real thing once this thing is named’, and thus instead of an absence as a result of naming, we have naming (the evocation of a missing person) as a result of absence (p. 98). It is pleasurable to read Jirsa’s engagement with this paradox, though it is somewhat mysterious what makes the empty chair (as opposed, say, to the empty bed or the empty shirt) especially suitable to this effect. Also, in the

closing ‘Coda: Affective Compounds Make a Media Excess’, Jirsa argues for ‘the inextricable entanglement between the formal work of affects and the affective work of media’ via the idea that each ‘disformation’ enacts ‘the tendency of affects to accumulate’, a phenomenon linked to ‘media excess’ (p. 117). But while accumulation and excess arguably characterise most of the categories Jirsa discusses, in the case of the empty chair the proposal only takes hold via the somewhat arbitrary example of the accumulation of empty chairs in Eugène Ionesco’s play The Chairs.

Schonig’s treatment of ‘framing’ motion and Jirsa’s treatment of framelessness in the bleeding outwards of rococo ornament toward wallpaper are ultimately complementary, but for a reason that goes beyond both books’ explicit concerns. Fifty-four years after the publication of Gene Youngblood’s Expanded Cinema (1970) and following the publication of Jonathan Walley’s Cinema Expanded (2020), we are more than ever in need of deepening conceptions of ‘form’ apt for those moments when the moving image migrates from the conventional screen and takes on the shape of the wall itself.

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