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Book Review

Review of Peretz, Eyal. 2017. *The Off-Screen: An Investigation of the Cinematic Frame*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 272 pp. \$65.00 Cloth ISBN: 9781503600720.

In *The Off-Screen: An Investigation of the Cinematic Frame*, Eyal Peretz revisits the radical break that marked the Reformation in Europe and argues that modern forms of art are “profound reflections” on how this break has altered the cultural systems that govern human affairs. For Peretz, it seems modernity is a period of uncertainty, and we moderns use art as a means to anchor ourselves again. Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1974) take on the cause of this uncertainty is, of course, quite famous. “God is dead!” he wrote. “And we have killed him...Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?” Unlike Nietzsche, Peretz is less concerned with the ultimate causes of this historical break. Instead, his focus is devoted to understanding how humanity has attempted to comprehend and cope with what modernity means. If we are endeavoring to become gods to prove ourselves worthy of the uncertainty we have created, then as gods we seek to anchor ourselves again through modern art.

Peretz begins his book by submitting that the frames of modern paintings and the edges of cinematic screens are not decorative or somehow incidental. Rather, frames delimit images, so that there is a visible dimension inside the frame, and a second dimension outside the frame that Peretz dubs the “off,” where images are invisible and implied. Peretz argues that frames paradoxically offer modern artists the means to “unframe” images. That is, frames bring into existence a mechanism that is capable of organizing and disturbing the elements of the scene they are said to merely showcase. Categorical separations introduce thresholds, and thresholds introduce the possibility of a parley between the two dimensions—a visible and invisible, a before and after, us and them. Like a distant sound on the horizon, the off-screen, then, has the capacity to *haunt* that which is included in the frame. Thus the stories we find in modern paintings, and especially in cinema, depend on their frames. By extension, one

could even say that the stories told by framed modern art are in fact driven by what is off-screen just as much as by what is onscreen.

But to what end does the “off” organize what is onscreen? What are the successful works of art Peretz analyzes doing? Consider his analysis of Rembrandt’s painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635), which ostensibly depicts a scene from the biblical story of Abraham complying with God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac, only to be interrupted at the last moment by an angel from God. The interrupting angel is indeed a messenger sent to stop Abraham from thrusting his dagger into his son, but as Peretz explains, by appearing to arrive from the off-screen, the angel also activates a relationship between the visible elements of the frame and the “haunting invisible outside” (p. 5). In doing this, Rembrandt succeeds in disturbing the premodern logics associated with what he calls the Abrahamic system, which encapsulates premodern ideas pertaining to status, morality, and identity, among others.

The “frame that unframes” (p. 3) does not work by simply substituting one system for another, but by first rendering controlling systems, or logics, unrecognizable and indistinct. For instance, Rembrandt’s angel arrives from the off-screen and displaces Abraham as the centre of the frame, thereby interrupting the centrality of the paternal system that Abraham embodies. In another example, Peretz turns his attention to film, which he sees as an art form that constitutes a new and radical embrace of the “off.” Here he shows how Andrei Tarkovsky utilizes the relationship between the onscreen and off-screen in his film *Solaris* (1972) in order to create an ambiguity for viewers: are the images in the water reflections of something real that stands just off-screen, or is the reflection a haunting trace of something else? We cannot know.

In his analysis of Fritz Lang’s cinematic masterpiece *M*, Peretz writes that the onscreen/off-screen interplay is about more than creating uncertainty; it is a means of opening us to the “nongiveness that precedes orientation and organization of the world,” and in doing

this, it reopens “the settled decisions responsible for the forms of our meaningful existence” (p. 89). Later, in an analysis of *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *The Great Dictator* (1940), he argues that Adolf Hitler and Charlie Chaplin are engaged in a struggle, with each figure using the unframing mechanism to wrest possession of the screen from the other. In *Triumph*, Peretz sees Hitler as a figure who is shown descending from the off-screen, who therefore embodies the off and appears as the one who is able to restore certainty and security for the German people. Chaplin responds to Hitler’s pageantry by drawing on the unframing mechanism to expose the dictator as nothing more than an angry, babbling infant.

Thus, for Peretz, modern art, and especially cinema, has the capacity to undo the orientating logics that shape the actual world. It can cultivate new logics, and it can be drawn on to help subjugate a public, or even to expose madness. The mechanism Peretz explores is powerful, and make no mistake, *The Off-Screen* is fundamentally a book about power. I genuinely enjoyed Peretz’s thought-provoking theory, but my quibble is that he does not go far enough. That is, he details how the frame “unframes,” but he offers few details about how successful cinema has been as a tool for igniting cultural change and resisting power. Have there been moments since the Reformation when the unframing mechanism has successfully moved publics to take up new logics and move in new directions? Questions like these, which connect cultural theory to human agency, are of course difficult to answer, and in Peretz’s defense, I think such answers are beyond the scope of his book. Nonetheless, given that the logics associated with Nazism and other white supremacist groups appear to be surfacing again in places like Charlottesville and Ferguson, *The Off-Screen* seems timely. Perhaps in his next book, Peretz could evaluate not just how unframing works, but how well it works.

References

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