

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

English Faculty Research and Scholarship

English

2022

Review of 'The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera by Daniel Morgan.'

Pardis Dabashi

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/engl_pubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/engl_pubs/35

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

PARDIS DABASHI

The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera by Daniel Morgan



When the camera moves, the spectator moves with it. The camera-eye is an extension of the spectator's vision, allowing them to see and move through the world of the film, isn't it?

Not quite, Daniel Morgan insists. The aim of Morgan's excellent new book, *The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera*, is

to interrogate “one of the most persistent and intuitive ways of thinking about the moving camera: that spectators identify with the position and movement of the camera within the world of the film, that it serves as a surrogate for the spectator” (4). In directing sustained attention to camera movement, Morgan shows how this oft-noticed but undertheorized facet of film style accomplishes far more in terms of mood, characterization, storytelling, and ethics than has thus far been acknowledged. *The Lure of the Image* has profound consequences, therefore, for how scholars think and talk about the viewer's relation to the images on-screen and, by extension, the political and ethical stakes of style.

Central to Morgan's argument is the idea that while camera movement facilitates a relation of vicariousness between the spectator and the camera, that relation remains spectral. “To put it bluntly, we are not in the world of the film, seeing it from the perspective of the camera; that is an illusion” (5). Morgan's observations rest on the premise that this illusion is an “*epistemic fantasy*, one of being granted access to the film world in a way that is in fact impossible to achieve” (5). Indeed, the camera's identificatory burden is predicated not on the position it actually grants, but on the viewer's desire for such epistemic access—sometimes against their better judgment.

Following this introductory theoretical provocation, Morgan examines the debate in 1960s French film theory about the tracking shot in *Kapo* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1960) that reframes the corpse of a concentration-camp inmate, Teresa, after she throws herself against an electrified fence. Jacques Rivette's moral condemnation of this shot and Serge Daney's support of Rivette's take exemplify *Cahiers du Cinéma's* concern with the political failures of the moving camera. Underpinning Rivette's and Daney's critiques is an understanding of aesthetic flourish—in this case, the forward-moving camera—as ethically dubious because it suggests a sensationalist curiosity incompatible with the gravity of the subject matter. But through readings of camera movements in *Kapo*, *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1956), and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Morgan demonstrates that this tendency to conflate tracking shots with ethical irresponsibility overgeneralizes about what style can do politically and assumes a relation of surrogacy between the viewer and the image that, while it may be a danger the moving camera poses, is nevertheless simply untrue. Morgan insists, pace Roland Barthes, that the image is a “lure”—nothing less, but nothing more. Access to the images via the moving camera is a function of aesthetic expression, not an ontological—or epistemic—reality (41).

The third chapter reads key camera movements in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and *Amator* (Krzysztof Kiesłowski, 1978), among others, as exemplary of the epistemic fantasy on which camera movements often rely. The Steadicam tracking shots that follow Danny through the halls of the Overlook, for instance, generate “uncertainty” because they are “never quite in sync” with the little boy's movements. Morgan argues that this “absence of perfect following,” which persists despite the film's fictional status, “suggests the presence of some kind of agency” that “implicitly promis[es] malevolent actions” (58, 57). Similarly, the scene in *Amator* in which Kiesłowski's camera tracks forward and over a desk to show the interior of the hospital (the object of the gaze of the camera that a doctor has taken from Filip) banks on a perspectival impossibility. In both cases, the viewer is made to know that what they are seeing is not the actual perspective suggested in the diegetic world. Theories of point of view are inadequate in accounting for such “perceptual games,” Morgan argues, where camera movements “work by expressing a perspective on the film world” while keeping the viewer at a remove (59). Theories of surrogacy struggle to account for camera movements' constitutive expressiveness.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 76, No. 1, pp. 101-114. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.1.101

The following chapter deepens this observation by studying shots driven by “the character who is the object of the gaze” rather than the one who is “aligned with the camera” (99). Morgan finds “object-defined” (103) camera movements in the work of Fritz Lang and Guru Dutt that generate a tension between the perspectives afforded by the position of the shot and those expressed by the way the shot “unfolds” (95). In such instances of camera movement, as Morgan argues, the camera abandons its characterological proxy and evokes intensities associated with what the proxy sees. (Morgan’s reading of Von Wenck’s encounter with Dr. Mabuse is especially illustrative of this effect.)

Morgan elaborates on this tension between subjective and objective perception in the next chapter when he discusses Max Ophüls’s signature tracking shots as instances of “dual attunement” to the perspective of key characters as well as a moral perspective on those characters and the world they inhabit (137). Ophüls’s camera gestures toward alternative possibilities and affective resources to those currently available in the characters’ world. In *The Earrings of Madame de . . .* (1953), Morgan shows, the virtuosic, creative, and responsive movements of Ophüls’s camera acknowledge the demand that Louise and the Baron’s “claim to happiness” (149) places on a world hostile to its flourishing, while also forging a perspective—floating out- and alongside the lovers—from which to grasp the stakes of that failure.

Continuing to move away from the notion of camera movement as subjective access, Morgan shows how Terrence Mallick presses camera movement in service of an “antiperspectival” approach to filmmaking in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), and *The Tree of Life* (2011). Mallick’s camera never rests with any one perspective for too long, instead wandering among positions including but not limited to those of persons. But this feature of Mallick’s filmmaking, Morgan argues, does not express an empty fetishization of new technologies, as is often assumed. Rather, in decentering human orders of space and time, Mallick contributes to the “long-standing philosophical (and literary)” examination of irony as the “dispersal of authority within a text” (178). He thus creates a “cinema without a final position,” in which the viewer is “never allowed to settle, even into disorientation” (218).

In his final chapter, Morgan examines digital film’s contributions to camera movement, particularly when multiple cameras are involved. He examines *Adieu au langage* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2014), whose manipulation of standard protocols for producing 3D images generates a distinctive “perceptual unsettling” (234) aimed at exposing the ocular operations of three-dimensional visualization. Whether

bringing the two cameras needed to produce a 3D image “too close together” or pushing them too close to objects in the profilmic space, Godard and cinematographer Fabrice Arago “transform our perception of the world” by “mak[ing] us newly aware of it” (234).

The most destabilizing technique that Godard and Arago deploy—and the most consequential, for Morgan’s argument—is the “radical separation of the two cameras” (235). In such moments, “the ‘right eye camera’ separates from the ‘left eye camera.’ . . . [O]ur vision, literally comes apart for a period of time—only to return . . . at which point the two images coalesce again into a single one” (235). In a stunning argumentative turn, Morgan claims that such ostensibly static moments function as camera movement. The “entire camera array” may not be moving, he writes, “but *a* camera is,” opening up “new aspects of space” and suggesting that sight itself is a “*montage between the eyes.*” Indeed, Morgan concludes that movement is at play in the very act of seeing: “each eye always takes in a different view, however slight, of the world” (238). Deeply informative, vast in scope, and beautifully written, *The Lure of the Image* is essential for those interested in the very concept of movement in and on film.

BOOK DATA Daniel Morgan, *The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper. 306 pages.

PARDIS DABASHI is an assistant professor of literatures in English and film studies at Bryn Mawr College; her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such venues as *Modernism/modernity*, *PMLA*, *Textual Practice*, and *Early Popular Visual Culture*. Her first book, *Losing the Plot: Film and Feeling in the Modern Novel* (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press), studies plot, ambivalence, and the image of the star in the classical Hollywood cinema and the modernist novel.

AMIR KHAN

Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China by Chenshu Zhou



Chenshu Zhou has written an extremely reader-friendly account of moviegoing in socialist China. Though she attempts to anchor her discussion in empirical data (taken from the testimony and film remembrances of sixty participants), this is an attempt to put forward a type of film history that