



Daniel Morgan

The Lure of the Image: Epistemic Fantasies of the Moving Camera

Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, pp. 244

DOI [10.54103/2036-461X/17978](https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/17978)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

If film is an inherently ephemeral object, the mobile camera is perhaps its most elusive aspect. Accordingly, Daniel Morgan's theorization of camera movement in *The Lure of the Image* explores a topic film theory has hitherto largely ignored in favor of Ontology and Montage. The book sets out to articulate a systematic account of camera movement, venturing beyond Film Studies' disciplinary boundaries while keeping a close eye on film itself. It comprises seven chapters and is divided into two parts. Morgan engages with an impressive number of scholars and (both high-brow and low-brow) films, drawing from a wide range of sources, including filmmaking manuals. His prose is devoid of jargon and illustrates theoretical concepts with analytical precision. In addition, Morgan builds his arguments through the close study of film, interweaving careful descriptions of the way the camera articulates spatial arrangements and interpretations tying aesthetic operations to narrative meaning.

While the first three chapters raise the book's film-theoretical stakes, the second section mobilizes its newly minted conceptual tools to authorial case studies centered on canonical directors such as Fritz Lang (examined comparatively alongside Guru Dutt), Max Ophüls (a privileged site in discussions about virtuosic

film style), and Terence Malick. In contrast, the final chapter returns to theory, shifting its focus to the proliferation of camera movement and cameras themselves in digital cinema. Rather than taking the most obvious route, Morgan aptly downplays the rhetorical calls for a paradigmatic shift by gesturing towards the use of animation techniques throughout the pre-digital 20th century — "this long history matters [...] New technologies of the moving camera do not necessarily produce new conceptual problems" (pp. 221-222) — from *Star Wars* (1977) to early phantom rides. The chapter's unexpected turns encapsulate the book's conceptual richness, as Morgan jumps (swish-pans?) from discussions on New Media and military drones to stereoscopy, Late Godard's 3D films, Orson Welles and cinéma vérité.

The author begins his discussion by offering a survey of the existing scholarship on the subject, situating himself in relation to Patrick Keating's examination of camera movement and the ideas about it in classical Hollywood.¹ Morgan's key insight is that "not all the ideas are good ones" (p. 4) and the all-pervasive notion of the camera-eye is a particularly bad — or "deeply flawed" (p. 5) — one. The book's opening movement endeavors to erode this fatal misconception from its dominant position by unraveling the

conflation of theories of camera movement and point of view. The chief target of his critique here is phenomenologically-inflected film theory, which Morgan characterizes as reductively built around a specific formal operation: subjective shots in which the camera moves forward. As he rightly puts it, while certain narrative films operate according to the conventions of point of view, this is not always the case. Rather than uphold film as an embodied experience, Morgan puts our ability to identify with the camera into doubt and gestures towards many instances in which we sympathize with the characters on screen — Morgan mentions mirror neurons in passing but the topic warrants a deeper engagement with neuroimaging. In addition, he upholds shots in which characters presumably 'doing' the looking emerge in the frame — but fails to mention Roberto Rossellini's fascist war film *Un Pilota Ritorna's* (1942) mobilization of this aesthetic operation notwithstanding the implications that its panning shot of a Prison-of-war camp would have in relation to Neorealism and, as a consequence, to Bazinian and Deleuzian film theory — or are revealed to have not been 'with' the camera, as in Horror films tricking us into believing 'subjective' shot approaching an oblivious victim belongs to a serial killer.

According to Morgan, rather than identify with the camera, we merely desire to be with the camera while knowing full well that this is impossible, a process he describes as an epistemic fantasy. This immediately raises the stakes as it questions much that has been written about film. Morgan takes the work of various film scholars to task for relying all too heavily (explicitly or implicitly) on the assumption that the camera's position corresponds to that of the spectator. He makes a persuasive claim and reiterates it across various paragraphs. At the same time, this repetition slows down the flow of his argument. We remain bogged down in the *pars destruens* long after recognizing the need for an alternative model, gripped by a sense of totalizing skepticism. Indeed, Morgan

develops this model only after a lengthy meta-analysis of the reception of an 'infamous' shot in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1960) in French film criticism. This allows him to dispel Brechtian, Platonic, and Barthesian anxieties underpinning politicized cinophobia (p. 40). It is interesting that Morgan's discussion of the aestheticization of the dead body does not consider Pontecorvo's framing of tortured bodies accompanied by a liturgical tune in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and thus its possible links to Catholic iconography, an intertext corroborating his relativization of bad taste as context-specific.

In place of identification, the book invites us to think about our relation to the worlds films construct in terms of imagination, "buttressing" Richard Wolheim's conceptualization of the "internal spectator" (p. 76) who is attuned to diegetic characters without being aligned to their optical perspective, with Christopher McCarroll's Sartrean work on "observer memories... in which we see ourselves from the outside" (pp. 80-81).² This Frankensteinian "path around" the impasse of identification (p. 81) may initially appear convoluted but is immediately clarified through the analysis of two film moments featuring camera movement which "attune" us to the characters' experience (p. 82). At the same time, by resorting to Wollheim and especially McCarroll's work, Morgan undermines his self-professed attempt to produce an organic theory stemming from the critical analysis of films (an approach advocated by Dudley Andrew) in opposition to the reductive imposition of frameworks from above. In fact, Morgan too ultimately relies parasitically on exterior conceptualizations — in this case developed in Art History and cognitive science via the Philosophy of Mind. The fantasy of an unmediated approach to film remains liable to the same critique Hegel moved against empiricism for (unconsciously) reading the subject into the object rather than the unmediated object itself.

With regards to empiricism, the book would benefit from a deeper engagement with the science of vision and the phenomenon of motion

sickness. If we genuinely identified with the moving camera, would we not feel sick? This is not unusual in first-person and third-person videogames, and while Morgan mentions videogames in passing, he does not consider this distinction. In addition, moments of cinephilic appreciation — such as the description of a crane shot as “gorgeous” (p. 236) — feel unnecessary, and Morgan could have dedicated a few words to dispel Lacan’s theorization of the mirror stage rather than bypass him via Ovid. Further research could be developed in dialogue with work emerging outside the boundaries of Anglophone film scholarship, such as Masaki Kondo’s Derridean analysis of the Cartesian logic of Samuel Becket’s film about eyes and non-being *FILM* (1965).³

Nonetheless, the book is quite brilliant. It is both innovative and rooted in tradition, remaining deeply committed to film as film. Accordingly, it should be required reading for any film theory course which aims to (re)think “seriously” (p. 244) about camera movement and, more generally, film aesthetics.

Antonio Patrick D’Amico
[Yale University]

Notes

¹ Patrick Keating, *The Dynamic Frame. Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

² Christopher McCarrol (*Remembering from the Outside: Personal Memory and the Perspectival Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Masaki Kondo, ‘The Eye and the Gaze: Peering into Samuel Beckett’s Film’, *Screen*, 61.3 (2020), 423–435 (427).