THE TECHNE OF GIVING: CINEMA AND THE GENEROUS FORM OF LIFE

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Timothy C. Campbell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 240 pp. ISBN: 9780823273256

The growing interest in the discourses of vitalism and biopolitics over the past decade or so—themes elaborated primarily in the works of such philosophers as Deleuze, Derrida, Agamben, and more recently Branka Arsić and Byung-Chul Han—have brought about new lines of thought for film studies and media theory writ large. Perhaps we have moved a little further from André Bazin's ontological inquiry concerning the vitality of photography, presented in the opening essay of his seminal work *What Is Cinema?*, when he writes, "For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man."[1] In articulating the connection between the form of modern life and the art of film, the latest film scholarship, especially in the thoughtful writings of Deborah Levitt and Inga Pollmann, has made clear the enhanced interdependence between the spectator and the moving image. On the one hand, in addition to aesthetic pleasure and abstract reflection, the spectator demands practical, if not therapeutic, guidance from film that can help them prevail in the ever-complex status quo of society, be it labelled as late capitalism or accelerationism. On the other hand, philosophical filmmakers have consciously attempted experimentations on the visual apparatuses and narrative strategies that would, to use Jacques Rancière's term, "emancipate" the viewers from sensory and mental controls.

Film, therefore, wants the audience to hone an intricate perception and to recognize the efforts it has made to liberate them from visual manipulation and subjection. The audience, in turn, demands more extensive and pragmatic knowledge from the arts to better live in the age of psychic exploitation and radical consumerism. It is precisely within such symbiotic tension that Timothy C. Campbell situates his monograph *The Techne of Giving: Cinema and the Generous Form of Life*, in which he seeks to formulate a theory of holding through a series of curious readings of post-war Italian auteurist films by Visconti, Rossellini, and Antonioni. At the center of his project is not merely an offer of another national film analysis; quite to the contrary, he rarely provides the historical or contextual details that would suffice for a comprehensive case study. What interests Campbell are perhaps the visual or affective antidotes these filmic masterpieces offer to counter biopolitical dominance and violence. The drifting away of the political, away from Carl Schmitt's formulation of the binary between friend and foe, signifies for Agamben and Campbell a redirection

of focus on more concrete objects like biology and psychology; a desire for possession that only becomes catalyzed and intensified with the help of capitalism.

Italian neo-realist cinema—and perhaps we can extend the category to European art film in general—can teach us an ethical lesson about how to let go of objects at an individual level and how to practice generosity by giving gifts without pushing for a circulatory return of favor in our communal life. *The Techne of Giving*, therefore, can be read as the author's rigorous search for a philosophical formula that would reduce the tension between ourselves and the objects to which we are attached. He does this by way of interpreting the playful or even comic dexterity the selected Italian directors have exemplified in their decentered frameworks, shot compositions, mise-en-scène designs, and the performances of nonactors. We can eventually free ourselves from the fateful forms of life shaped and grounded by the biopolitical regime once we learn—while holding things tightly and becoming overly obsessed with them—to activate our pragmatic capacity and distance our minds from the reciprocal logic of giving and receiving.

The first chapter of *The Techne of Giving* lays out the philosophical foundation for the subsequent film analysis and shows the lines of thought in the expanding discourse of biopolitics. Deeming the incitation and administration of fear a core biopolitical strategy, Campbell goes on to unpack the dialectic model of mythic and divine violence to law through a series of readings of Benjamin, Agamben, Foucault, and Adorno. According to this view, a normalizing power reinforced by mythic violence is always at work to implement the function of law upon the living, framing tragic and invariable fate as a given form of life for the subjects of a government. Adorno and Benveniste's accounts of parataxis and gift reciprocity, Campbell continues to argue, could serve as a counterforce against the overwhelming tendency of such mythic violence, precisely because it allows the "arrange[ment of] forms of life next to one another without regard to rank" (10). Thus, the question is how to situate non-hierarchical rhetoric devices within the zone of biopolitics, which is an art we can observe in neo-realist film.

The scope of Campbell's text, in addition, does not only center on the perspective of the individual; he moves on to theorize about the concept of generosity. He does so by combining Benveniste's claim about the "second circuit" of gift giving, achieved when one is "without the thought of return" (11), with Winnicott's theory of "transitional objects," in which he observes the non-possessive holding of material things in how children play. Perhaps implicit in such a chain of illustrative demonstrations is Campbell's disposition that the ideal form of communal life depends chiefly upon such a dexterous mindset. Near the end of the chapter, he builds on Lyotard's discussion of *manceps*—the man that holds—to *mancus*—the man with one hand missing—to

justify his further investigation: what we want from cinema is the twofold effort to show both what a generous form of life would look like and the specific approach for achieving that.

The second chapter begins with a neat analogy between political administration and the cinematic apparatus, both exemplifying a power of control and capture. As Deleuze and Guattari write in the plateau titled "Apparatus of Capture," the imperial or despotic State operates primarily through "captures, bonds, knots, and nets,"[2] such that it "overcodes them [primitive communities], submitting them to the power of a despotic emperor, the sole and transcendent public-property owner."[3] In a similar pattern, the visual apparatus that film relies on could potentially numb the senses and intellect of the audience. Per Jacques Rancière, "Viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals."[4] Not all films, as Campbell claims, place an emphasis on capturing the human figure and transform them into objects for holding; rather, directors in the European art cinema tradition would consciously challenge this function of the camera and craft images so idiosyncratic that they would lessen the spectators' attraction to the image and eventually liberate them from the capture of cinema. This
functions as the principal criterion for his choice of films for analysis. Campbell writes, "The three directors under consideration shortly—Visconti, Rossellini, and Antonioni—work against precisely the idolatrous nature of the cinematic apparatus by forcing the spectator to pay attention and not to move immediately to what is visible" (56). For him, these directors demonstrate a masterful embodiment of the ideal form of generous giving that would, in turn, teach us how to adjust our own life. "A cinema of techne would feature that living quality of things that emerge in the moment of joined attentiveness when events, things, animals take form precisely because they no longer grip as they did before" (56).

The next three chapters offer a detailed and often insightful analysis of five Italian neo-realist films by the three directors, but the scarce historical concern or comprehensive discussions of the auterist style in the book hardly qualify it as a study of national cinema. The author quite strictly follows his initial theoretical framework to fathom practical advice for cultivating a generous form of life in both an individual and communal sense. Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* rejects the conventional pattern of framing as capturing the target and subsequently transforming it into an imprisoned hostage on screen, but it also offers a counterexample of the generous form of life by allowing the spectator to observe the communal life of the villagers that render embodying the cinematic *mancus* an impossible task. Campbell is especially appreciative of the comic elements in the film, exemplified in the presentation of the protagonist Mara, comic, because the nonactor displays a gesture of "holding less tightly, touching what we do not possess" (83). The film is

therefore pedagogic in that it both raises our awareness of the potential violence in the cinematic apparatus and shows us, through the nonactor, how to explore the comic as a means to resist. The following chapter on Rossellini's *German, Year Zero* (1948) sets out to demonstrate a similar theme. However, what the film shows, as Campbell points out, is the exact opposite: the impossibility of practicing the generosity of gift-giving in a community where the mythic violence prevails. Campbell notes, "For us, generosity as a response to mythic violence requires a communal milieu to support more generous forms of life, especially more generous when it comes to oneself" (108). The function of such narrative design, however, does not entail any negativity. For Campbell, Rossellini uses the cinematic apparatus to demonstrate that the impossibility of generosity is mostly to effect a helpful feeling of frustration, such that it initiates a process of thoughtful reflection upon reality and the meaning of holding (113). The last chapter applies a similar set of narratives to the examination of Antonioni's trilogy composed of *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962). Antonioni's skepticism of the subjugating power of cinematic and photographic equipment is well demonstrated in *Blow-up* (1966). In an interview after its release, he shares an intriguing view about the camera: "Photographic enlargement modifies some effects, changes certain relationships with the object, gives colors a different tonality. It's a bit like putting a piece of pottery into a kiln: you never know what's going to come out of it. . . . But there's never any lack of surprises!"[5] Following this line of thought, Campbell curiously and rightly builds his view around how Antonioni imbeds strong contrasts between characters by navigating shot composition and camerawork. *The Techne of Giving* presents thoughtful experimentation in testing the compatibility between classical art films and the relatively new discourse of biopolitics, and attending to both the theoretical and practical knowledge we can absorb and reabsorb from the masterpieces of neorealist cinema. We must wonder, still, if the art of dexterous holding needs to be strictly confined to Italian national cinema, especially because the cinematic aspects that Campbell bases his analysis on—gestures, shots of hand, and the wandering camera, to recall a few—are also commonly found in the works of Godard, Fassbinder, Sirk, or such contemporary filmmakers as Todd Haynes and Jim Jarmusch. Does the rampant planetary tendency of biopolitics not demand and deserve a perhaps more comprehensive and complex cinematic antidote? With that hope in mind, we await a few more stimulating volumes to come.

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[1] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1,* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 13.

[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 424.

[3] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 427–428.

[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 2.

[5] Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings & Interviews on Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 231.