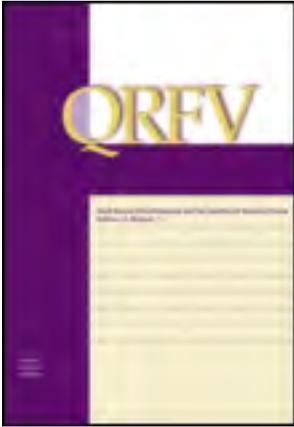


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A Review of "The DVD and the Study of Film: The Attainable Text"

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***The DVD and the Study of Film: The Attainable Text*
by Mark Parker and Deborah Parker. New York,
Palgrave Macmillan, 2011**

LEO ENTICKNAP

This book takes as its starting point an essay by Raymond Bellour in 1976, in which he argued that the mainstream technologies of distribution and exhibition then available made cinema what he called “the unattainable text”.¹ By this Bellour meant that the viewing experience in theatres and on broadcast television was strictly linear and unable to be manipulated by the viewer. With the exception of a minority of wealthy enthusiasts who viewed small gauge reduction prints of theatrical features on film using projectors marketed for consumer use in the home, the spectator was unable to watch a film repeatedly, to view specific scenes or sequences in isolation from the rest of a film, to manipulate the technical presentation (e.g., aspect ratio reformatting or the audio mix) or to see individual frames as still images. Writers of film history and criticism, therefore, had to rely primarily on their memory of a particular viewing experience in formulating their thoughts and arguments, a condition Bellour believed had a profound impact on the origins and initial development of formal film study.

1976, of course, also marked the commercial introduction of one of the more prominent technologies that changed all that, namely the Vertical Helican Scan (VHS) consumer videotape system. Two decades later, its successor as the principal means for viewing theatrical feature films in a domestic space, the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD), was launched, and it is this medium which Mark and Deborah Parker argue has exerted a profound expansion in the nature and scope of “the study of film”, in the broadest sense of the term. Their approach to this technology is avowedly enthusiastic, characterising the DVD as “a new technology to address a perceived weakness in film criticism” (162), specifically the inability to carry out close textual analysis from a theatrical screening or broadcast alone. The authors place repeated emphasis on the description by a leading producer of special edition arthouse DVDs of his work as “a film school in a box” (22), and analogies between the DVD and the book in enabling non-linear access to its contents. Their exploration of the technical specificity of the medium itself covers two aspects: the way in which access to the film itself is mediated, and the additional content provided alongside it, notably deleted footage, publicity material, the “making-of documentary” (MOD) and audio commentary tracks that can be played in sync with the picture to replace the final mix soundtrack of the film itself.

It is this latter feature that accounts for the bulk of the book’s argument and conclusion. The text is effectively split into two halves, the former offering a narrative account of the emergence and growth of the DVD medium and the latter discussing the practice of critical commentaries. The opening chapter, “The DVD and New Media”, traces the development of interactive front ends to curated collections of offline digital multimedia content, beginning with the Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) in the late 1980s (a technology which at that time could integrate audio, still photographs, basic computer generated imagery and written text, but, due to limitations of processor speed and storage capacity then in use, not full motion video), before covering its antecedents: the laserdisc, the DVD and more recently, the Blu-Ray Disc (BD). Using the case study of an art history

CD-ROM published in 1994 (10–12), the authors emphasise the unique function of the medium as being to organise structured and thematic access to what is essentially static content, principally through the use of hard-coded menu screens. In conclusion, they note that the software capabilities of the DVD video format combine that framework with the reproduction of full motion video.

The following two chapters are the most problematic. They consist of a journalistic account, based primarily on oral history interviews of the main protagonists, of the rise of the laserdisc in the 1990s, arguing that this set both the technological and cultural precedents that inform the “special edition” DVD (by which they mean one with a substantial volume of extra content in addition to the digitised film itself) of the last decade. The material presented in chapter 2 offers the first comprehensive overview of the emergence of this production sector, and for that reason alone this book is likely to become established as essential reading for economic and technological historians. The problem is that it is totally lacking in objectivity. The prose in these chapters is more what one would expect to find in a sales brochure than an academic monograph. The authors’ account includes references to a “lavish” account of a 1999 MOD (22), the “exceptional knowledge” of a leading DVD producer (23), a “palpable enthusiasm” and a “keener sense of the medium” offered by further examples (24), and so on and so forth. The sequential page numbers of these quotes are not coincidental.

Chapter 3, indicatively titled “Setting the Standard”, is an advertisement for Criterion DVDs, purely and simply. Elements of the same mythological narrative evident in many of the recent obituaries of Steve Jobs can be discerned in this account of the case study publisher featured in this chapter: its humble origins in the family home of its mom-and-pop founder, a passionate and enthusiastic, but inexperienced workforce, a fearsome work ethic, visionary improvisation with cutting edge technologies (initially the laserdisc) and an iconic end product that attracted a dedicated (and wealthy!) audience. Once again, much of the factual information presented here will prove useful to future historians, but the unwillingness of the authors to apply any critical detachment from their subjects compromises their conclusions and assertions. An indicative example of this is the reproduction of the account by Criterion’s telecine operator, Maria Palazzola, of her work on the laserdisc of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1992).

Palazzola is quoted as opining that telecine transfers are “an interpretative art form” (55), and of securing the involvement of the film’s director of photography in timing the video master, followed by a panegyric about how other DoPs were queuing up to work with her throughout the 1990s. Nowhere is it even acknowledged that many in the film archive community would take issue with the position that the process of making analogue videotape and digital surrogates from moving images originated on film should be in any way interpretative, but instead would seek to use objective measures (e.g. density measurements for individual shots in the source film elements compared with vectorscope readings of the transfers) to reproduce the contrast, gamma and colour values embodied in the source as closely as possible. Indeed, there is a rapidly burgeoning professional and academic literature on the ethics of film restoration, which seems to have passed these authors by totally in their desire to eulogise their subjects.

Another problematic aspect of this chapter is that Criterion’s competitors in their target market, notably Kino and Milestone in the United States and the British Film Institute and Artificial Eye in Britain, are simply not mentioned. A reader not familiar with this industry sector would be given to believe that Criterion was and is the only publisher serving it. The following two chapters cover the production and technique of spoken commentaries on feature film DVDs and the laserdiscs that preceded them, dividing the commentaries into

those recorded by film directors and those by celebrity academics. They repeat the format of an overview chapter followed by a detailed case study, in this case DVD commentaries recorded by Atom Egoyan. Without substantive exception, directorial commentaries are praised uncritically for communicating “a wealth of detail”, “suggestive discussions of intention” and “force” (75). Here we go again.

As an exemplar of the academic commentary, the authors provide an extensive description of the now iconic lecture recorded by Laura Mulvey for the 1994 Criterion laserdisc of *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), which has since been republished on DVD and BD. The laserdisc was considered a watershed project in demonstrating the possibilities of multimedia technology for film study, and with significant justification. As a master’s student at the University of East Anglia in the autumn of 1995 I attended a research seminar given by Mulvey to publicise the launch of the disc, and the atmosphere of excitement among the assembled students and academics was memorable. This is in part because the source material was polemical and thus ideally suited to the format, with the commentary and mute video footage together offering a multimedia demonstration of the “male gaze” thesis with which Mulvey made her name.²

Predictably, Parker and Parker offer a eulogistic account of this viewing experience, asserting that “the advantages are many” (133), that “a print account cannot match the force of Mulvey’s simple prompt” (134) and so on and so forth. Once again, these chapters are valuable in providing a factual account of the ways in which commentary tracks are produced and the motivations of their authors, but the absence of objectivity, or any preparedness to contemplate the possibility of drawbacks as well as potentialities, gets in the way of any meaningful critical evaluation of their cultural significance. The overall impression one gets of this material from the authors’ account of it is more of a madrassah in a box than a film school.

It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge a major achievement of this book, which is to articulate the cultural importance of this technology to our understanding of the film medium, and hopefully to inspire future scholars to explore its implications more critically and more systematically. Perhaps the biggest frustration in reading it is being struck by the wider implications the authors implicitly raise, and then leave untouched. The “reading” of films intended (and before television became mainstream in the 1950s, intended exclusively) for communal viewing but in a domestic environment is something that has gone on, albeit on an embryonic scale, ever since Kodak and Pathe offered small gauge film prints, often substantially abridged, of feature films for mail order rental in the 1930s.

The curation of consumer viewing by the provision of scholarly essays to accompany VHS releases goes back at least as far as the early 1980s. The laserdisc and the DVD, therefore, did not emerge from a total void, and systematic engagement with the limited but significant work that has already taken place in this area, notably the books by Frederick Wasser, Alan Kattelle and Barbara Klinger, would have strengthened this one immeasurably. The absence of such engagement here is especially ironic, given the image of a small gauge film projector on the book’s front cover! Another, though admittedly minor issue is that the standard of proofing and technical presentation falls significantly below what one would expect from an academic monograph bearing the imprint of a major publisher. There are frequent spelling errors in proper nouns, e.g. Gollom (34), and “Carroll” Reed (58). Style conventions in the punctuation are notably inconsistent: for example, some enumerative clauses include the Oxford comma, while others omit it. Parker and Parker certainly begin to make a case that the DVD has rendered the text attainable. But the technical and economic specificities of the medium attach significant strings to it, ones that I hope that writers who follow them will seek to understand.

Leo Enticknap is a lecturer in cinema at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds and a former film archivist, projectionist and theatre tech. His research focuses on the history, practice and ethics of moving image archival preservation, the history of media technologies and non-fiction film in Britain before 1950s; in particular newsreels and sponsored films.

Notes

1. Originally published in *Screen*, 16.3 (Autumn 1975), 19–28.
2. And which, coincidentally or not, was originally published in the same issue of *Screen* as, and immediately preceding, Bellour's "Unattainable Text" essay: 16.3 (Autumn 1975), 6–18.

***The Philosophy of David Lynch*, edited by William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2011**

JON KRASZEWSKI

With a self-proclaimed interest in Eastern philosophy and a penchant for making movies with abstract plots and dream-like logic, David Lynch is a filmmaker whose work makes more sense on a philosophical level than on a literal one. With this in mind, an anthology of essays titled *The Philosophy of David Lynch* seems to promise an appropriate lens to view the deeper meanings of a filmmaker with a distinctive voice. This collection of essays edited by William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman is part of The University of Kentucky Press's "The Philosophy of Popular Culture" book series. As the press states, "The goal of this series is to demonstrate how philosophical inquiry has been reinvigorated by increased scholarly interest in the intersection of popular culture and philosophy Philosophical concepts will be made accessible to the general reader through examples in popular culture."

This book does a good job meeting the goals of the series. Here the collection is a success in delivering tough, philosophical concepts to a general reader through the works of a filmmaker. At the same time, some essays in this collection might frustrate film and media studies readers interested in authorship. The title of the anthology suggests a book about a philosophical worldview created through the vision and works of David Lynch, a book that places the director at the center of the study. The introduction written by the editors supports the titling of the book. The editors argue, "The Lynchian world is a confusing labyrinth in which one can easily become lost. However, there is a thread viewers can follow to help guide them through Lynch's maze and come to understand Lynch's cinematic collection: namely, the human psyche" (2).

But several essays in the book addressed philosophy *through* David Lynch, as Lynch's films were not explored to reveal their own inner philosophy or philosophical influences so much as to prove how a philosophy works. Although *The Philosophy of David Lynch* successfully fits in the press's series, it isn't always a good fit with the ways film and media studies consider the authorship and artistry of directors. To be clear, the book never tries to pass as a film and media studies book and should not be negatively critiqued for not meeting