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Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, by Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 221 pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4744-3167-5

Some time ago, psychoanalytic film theory fell out of favour in the field of film and media studies, relegated to the margins, accused of having ‘little to say,’ focusing ‘on desires and pleasures, rather than emotions’ (Plantinga 2008: 86). These claims, of course, speak to previous applications of psychoanalysis as a method or model within the discipline of film theory rather than showcasing any expertise on the multiple models within psychoanalysis itself. The homogenisation of psychoanalysis as a critical approach reveals the limitations of such criticisms, for there is no single psychoanalytic approach to film or indeed any discipline. Such claims, that psychoanalysis is no longer useful for the study of cinematic experience, that it has passed its use-by date, particularly with specific respect to affect, emotion and trauma, have become indicators of ignorance. It is not possible to continue to dismiss psychoanalysis as a productive, useful or illuminating model for the study of aesthetic experience in film theory precisely because there are a number of significant works, such as Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla’s *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*, which offer exhaustive and rigorous analyses of affect and emotion within cinematic ‘contingent viewing experience’ (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2017: 10).

Gutiérrez-Albilla focuses on what he sees as the ‘neglected aspect of Almodóvar’s cinema’ (1), namely the interrelationship between trauma and memory and the subsequent affective resonances and trans-subjectivities that result from negotiating and repeating fragments of traumatic traces. The main claim of the book, via close textual analyses of four films – *Volver* (2006), *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999), *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) and *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (2011) – is that Almodóvar’s cinema permits a working-through of trauma and its traces as his films ‘transmit and com-passionately share, respond to or *wit(h)ness* individual and collective traumatic experience through the film medium’ (175). Cinema, then, makes possible the affective encounter that facilitates the ‘potential transformation of our ethical and political relation to personal and historical traumatic experiences’ (175). Gutiérrez-Albilla sees this potential of transformation within Almodóvar’s cinema as exemplary of the

medium's overall capacity to engender reflexive thought and lived experience, and to his credit he highlights transformation in and of itself as neither good nor bad. Like the trace, it is instead ambivalent, or, as Christopher Bollas states, '[t]ransformation does not mean gratification' (2011: 12). Cinema's *response-ability* (to use a key term from Gutiérrez-Albilla's book) is, like the mother's, to frustrate so that growth is possible. What I found highly significant, as well as exciting and innovative in Gutiérrez-Albilla's argument, is the introduction and sustained exploration of Israeli-French feminist artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger's work.

The centering of contemporary psychoanalytic scholars such as Ettinger (and others, like Brazilian Suely Rolnik) demonstrates how much work remains in terms of application and exploration of contemporary psychoanalysis for film and media theory, especially within the domain of affect and emotion studies. Ettinger's work (predominantly) structures Gutiérrez-Albilla's analysis of 'the aesthetic and psychic economy of the trace' (1) within the frame of traumatic pasts, collective memory and 'ethical and political meaning' (1) throughout the book, bringing new perspective to questions on affect and emotion in psychoanalytic film theory. While many of Ettinger's core concepts such as 'matrixial borderspace,' 'matrixial gaze,' 'compassion,' and 'response-ability' are likely to be new to film scholars, they are placed in clear and relevant conversation with a range of more familiar critical theorists and their concepts (such as Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Griselda Pollock and Jacques Rancière). This helps to situate Ettinger's work as highly relevant and necessary for the study of cinematic aesthetics, ethics and trauma, particularly with respect to the study of affect and emotion.

Over four chapters, Gutiérrez-Albilla sustains his primary concern with the 'aspect of the trace' (2), working with and through a series of im-possibilities: of not-returning, of not-sharing, of not-writing otherwise, and of not-succumbing. The hyphenation of 'im-possibility' echoes the Deleuzian concept of repetition and difference, where repetition affirms difference as much as it attests to the irreducibility of the Other. Even though Gutiérrez-Albilla does not specify the reason for the hyphenation directly (hyphenation in general seems so crucial throughout the book), to my mind, it highlights the critical function of encounter – for the reader of the book, the viewer, and the role of encounters within Almodóvar's films. In various places, Gutiérrez-Albilla writes of the encounter as a moment of cinematic witness,

where 'traces of the traumatic past' are mediated via the individual and collective encounter-experience of cinema (12); elsewhere, he writes of it as a moment of interpellation, argued as the 'condition of possibility to open up an intersubjective or inter-subjective transmission of experiences' (30). Both qualities – repetition and interpellation – are critical to Ettinger's matrixial borderspace – outlined in Chapter 2 - as an affective 'subjectivity as encounter' (92). These concepts are used to explore how the trace(s) of trauma, via intersubjective experience such as memory, are repeated to effect, and are 'inscribed precariously in subjectivity and leaving its (invisible) mark on the body' (8).

The close textual analysis of Almodóvar's films directs Gutiérrez-Albilla's discussion of the encounter to a study of contingent experience, emphasising the body as a lived experience that generates 'a process of thinking that retrospectively evokes the past and opens onto the future, thereby evoking an endless becoming' (10). He stresses that the 'im-possibility' within each cinematic encounter is 'the contradictory relationship between perception and cognition on the one hand, and affect and sensation on the other' (27). When reading through these analyses of Almodóvar's films, which I have taught and watched many times over, I found the anachronistic structure of the chapters highly effective. The points of connection between each chapter were my own 'im-possibilities' to encounter, to 'not-return,' 'not-share,' and 'not-succumb' to.

In Chapter 1, the analysis of *Volver* establishes Almodóvar's cinema as a haunting encounter, where trauma is witnessed as historical and transmissive. Gutiérrez-Albilla discusses *Volver*'s potential disruptive becoming of a feminine community, one that highlights potential parallel space of divergent relationships with time (cinematic, traumatic or otherwise). Through familiar theoretical terrain (via Deleuze, Derrida and Hamid Naficy), Gutiérrez-Albilla's analysis moves toward a stronger integration of Ettinger's concepts, which are more prominently discussed in Chapter 2. However, there are moments in this first chapter that suffer from too brief a discussion. For example, Gutiérrez-Albilla associates Madrid's built environment with 'a rupture or injury on the "skin" of late modernity' (48). His analysis appears forced here, drawing on Briony Fer's reading of the Lacanian Real to argue that the texture and peeling paint of Madrid's barrios act as scars: 'the graffiti or the apartment blocks' peeling walls can be associated with the Lacanian Real' (48). Even though Lacan's notion of the Real has become something of a shorthand term, it is

not a stable concept. First developed in the 1930s, developed further in the 1950s and then with differing iterations in the 1970s, the idea of the Real is an evolving concept, so that by the time we encounter it in the later Lacan (that of the 1970s), it is aligned with the symptom – an interpretative gesture not seen in his early work. On this basis, the graffiti, as a border between inside and outside, links more effectively with Ettinger's conceptualisation of matrixial borderspace (subjectivity-as-encounter) as an experience that evolves.

Chapter 3 turns to the question of corporeality as containment of memory and Spain's traumatic past, where embodied viewing is argued to be exemplary of compassionate encounters; our witnessing of another's trauma (as impact and as memory) might 'provide the occasion for a trans-formation of the remnants of trauma, without necessarily leading to a complete working through of the traumatic, un-cognised void' (127). Chapter 4 furthers Ettinger's notion of borderspaces, thinking through its value within ethical and political contexts in *The Skin I Live In*. This is one of Gutiérrez-Albilla's strongest chapters, centering the body, specifically skin, as the site for individual and collective traumas, past and present. Trauma, as psychic and somatic, is discussed as a wound caused by historical events shaped by what Gutiérrez-Albilla refers to as 'concentrationary logic' (141). As an extension of Agamben's theory of biopolitics and Arendt's analysis of techniques of power, concentrationary logic is a term Gutiérrez-Albilla uses to identify the political epistemologies and state-sanctioned violence that sustain de-subjectification and disposability of bodies; the most extreme version of this seen in Francoist concentration camps and those of the Holocaust. Here, Gutiérrez-Albilla's arrives at one of his clearest points concerning Almodóvar's films, stating that they invoke awareness, both felt and thought, of the impact of traumatic experience and its capacity to infect the present, 'or how the present reiterates... the underlying structures of totalitarian logic' (164).

As I read through the book, I could not help but make associations with the writing of Wilfred Bion (1961; 1962; 1965) and psychoanalytic field theory (Baranger and Baranger, 2008; Ferro and Civitarese, 2015; Katz, 2013) more broadly, particularly given Gutiérrez-Albilla's emphasis on the interrelationship between aesthetics, ethics and trauma. On the themes of becoming, of haunting and intersubjective aesthetic experience, there are many connections to be made between Bion *et al.* and Ettinger's matrixial space. This is one of the benefits of

psychoanalysis, indeed what has always been a benefit: that the pluralism of psychoanalysis, with all its differing models, allows us to link ideas, relating one area of thought with another, rather than forcefully applying a paternalistic solution or answer. Gutiérrez-Albilla's emphasis on the matrixial as a paradigm of thought to think with Almodóvar's films is revolutionary. His book advances the study of trauma not only within the specific study of Spanish cinema, but his frames of impossibilities further the work being done at the borderlinked spaces of aesthetic experience, trauma theory and cinema more broadly. One comes away from reading *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* with a fresh perspective on intersubjective and trans-subjective affective encounters with cinema and of learning a reformulation of Almodóvar's relationship to Spain's traumatic past.

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