Sayad, Cecilia. *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema*. London: Tauris, 2013. xxvi + 181 pp. £16.99 (pb) / £56.00 (hb).

Entering the debate over whether, in these (post)postmodern days talk about authors and authorship continues to be legitimate scholarly turf, Cecilia Sayad clearly answers this question in the affirmative. Inspired by research in performance studies and in particular by Judith Butler's influential writing on performativity in the context of gendered identities, this study introduces the idea of performing authorship in the cinema, taking as its testing ground a wide range of cinematic texts from across a variety of cultural backgrounds, historical contexts, and generic flavours.

Sayad's approach to studying how film authors (or auteurs) establish their authority over their filmic texts rests on a nexus of presence and corporeality that somehow manages to re-present the filmmaker in her work. The body of the author becomes the site, in this study, from where meaningful gestures originate. While some authors visibly appear in their films, either as some version of themselves (for instance, in documentary films) or as actors playing a particular role, others perform their authorship in a more subtle manner, for instance through the spectral presence of voice-over narration. All these features of presence (if that is what we can call such mediated and utterly insubstantial corporeality) Sayad reads as signs that substantiate the author and reveal to the audience elements of performativity that, simultaneously, create and belittle presence. As her survey of film theory about the auteur shows, for Sayad a film as such can consist of an almost bodily gesture. Her take on performance study, which in other contexts – also addressed here – rests extensively on deconstructive processes of deferment and supplementation of an original and stable site of expression, returns to the author a tangible sense of fleshiness. The concept of performing authorship is thus situated against the deconstructivist understanding of the process of signification; yet the differentiation made here is attached to a somewhat loose understanding of how the epistemological claim that signification is always already at a remove from the *hors-texte* translates into a denial of the physical reality (and thus ultimately, presence) of actual authors, or filmmakers. It is very much on this analytical level that Sayad's concept of performing authorship reasserts the existence of authors.

The kind of presence that Sayad, as a consequence, traces through her fascinating film readings remains elusive, hovering between a (Romantic) sense of creative genius and what Žižek and psychoanalytic critics would see as the site of individual desires and needs. The matter of individuation, which haunts this study also in a number of the chosen stills and the manners in which they aim to represent iconic images of individual authors at the very moment when their visible representations are fading or moving out of the frame, uncannily intersects with the concept of performing authorship, yet does so through psychoanalytic tropes. Avoiding this disciplinary leap, the introductory

sections insist on the reality of authors, as if having to save them from poststructuralist proclamations of their non-existence. At the same time, however, the study remains aware of the fact that the very concept of performativity puts in play any strong claims about essential identities. And, as the films studied throughout the book demonstrate, many (postmodern) films indeed openly challenge the notion that filmmakers have total or final control over the cinematic text or the audience's reception.

In her chapters, Sayad engages with films by Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Orson Welles, Sarah Turner, Jean Rouch, Eduardo Coutinho, and Woody Allen. She frequently picks aspects from the films that reveal how deeply authors have thought about the artistic profile of their films, and how committed they are to situating themselves vis-à-vis their filmic texts, in particular when cinematic self-portraits, for instance by Varda and Godard, require a direct engagement with the filmmaker within the cinematic frame. Throughout, the readings of the chosen films are nuanced and balanced, closely following individual scenes and contextualizing them within the individual auteur's oeuvre. Sayad draws on the critical tradition of *cinéma vérité*, relates ethnographic films to questions about trance and presence, and takes from Bakhtin's writing about the carnivalesque an interest in the figure of the fool as a person who allows heteroglossia to oppose monologic discourse. Some passages also highlight film scenes where particular plot elements, names, or other details run parallel to the author's life, suggesting that through such mimetic confluences the author, almost physically, enters the filmic text. However, the different historical and generic affiliations of the films discussed, which range from experimental art films to documentaries and fake documentaries as well as to fiction films, are not always fully evoked. For instance, the manner in which mockumentary films have been used to undermine the role of the on-screen director, and indeed to challenge any trust in directorial control, remains unmentioned. The extended focus on individual films, such as Coutinho's impressive *Playing* (2007), leaves little room for broader surveys, and where mention is made of other filmmakers, such as Werner Herzog or Michael Moore, their work is only treated in passing. The study thus invites follow-up research in numerous directions, in particular with regards to the differences that attach to authorship in different filmic genres or from within particular aesthetic programmes.

While the broad coverage of films from diverse traditions, cultures, and historical moments demonstrates that questions of authorship have accompanied cinema from its very beginning, the book is nevertheless marked by a somewhat unresolved fluttering between discussions of authorship on the level of psychology or personal identity and by the corporeality of bodily presence that the presented concept signals through its use of performativity. The theatricality of performance, relying as it does on the physical co-presence of speaker and listener or actor and audience, is not fully translated into a discussion of filmic representations of directors as their bodies appear before their audiences. To complicate things even further, the discussion frequently returns to filmic texts that play extensively with the notion of absence, spectrality, and multiple framing, making it excessively difficult to locate the precise diegetic layer at which the actual author intersects, metaleptically or otherwise, with her own artwork. This productive

tension, frequently addressed in the theory of avant-garde art, is revealed most openly in the book's discussion of an art performance by Guy Sherwin in which the artist simultaneously produces a painting on a translucent canvas and projects filmed images of himself creating another artwork. While this performance indeed raises productive questions about authorial creativity, originality, and the uniqueness of an art object once it has been commodified (or simply viewed) by its onlookers, the discussion in the present book does not address the major difference between attending such a live performance and watching a filmed version of it, in which the different layers of actual art and filmic representation are effaced by the co-mediality of these layers. What Sayad's very readable monograph puts into motion is the question of how authorial presence, conceived as corporeality, can emanate from filmic material. This issue, which could be related to postmodern discussions about virtuality or indeed to concerns raised by Guy Debord and others, confirms the timeliness of *Performing Authorship* and the welcome input which it offers to the productive debate about post-poststructuralist authorship.

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