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Calum Watt, *Blanchot and the Moving Image: Fascination and Spectatorship*. Cambridge, UK: Legenda (Modern Humanities Research Association), 2017. xi + 185 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, filmography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-1-78-188537-6.

Review by Jeff Fort, University of California, Davis.

The conjunction of Blanchot and cinema may be somewhat surprising, but as Calum Watt makes abundantly clear, there are in fact numerous references to Blanchot in film studies. This is the first full length book in English to explore this conjunction in a systematic way. Watt refers in his introduction to a book in French that preceded his own, a commentary on the allusions to Blanchot in the work of video artist Gary Hill (who “adapted,” for lack of a better word, aspects of Blanchot’s texts and thought to his video work), a book which on its first page poses a question that any work on this topic must ask: “Comment l’utilisation même de la référence à Blanchot est-elle possible avec l’image, dans l’image, alors que la différence entre l’image et le mot a un statut privilégié chez Maurice Blanchot, celui-ci ayant tiré les conséquences les plus radicales d’une théorie de l’image dans l’écriture, que l’on pourrait presque dire contre l’image visuelle?”[1] Blanchot’s radical critique of what might be called scopic regimes of knowledge necessarily problematizes any direct links between cinema and the texts of this most writerly thinker, and indeed Watt refers to this as the “animating paradox” (p. 4) of his book. Added to this is the fact that Blanchot virtually never mentions cinema in his work, and appeared to be generally averse to visual media, refusing to sanction any adaptations of his texts and notoriously shying away from any public images (especially photographs) of his person. These aversions were not mere individual quirks but can be aligned with a more general critical *placement* of images and language, framed by an increasingly mass-mediated and technified postwar world. Blanchot did articulate a thinking of the image in his essays and fictions, especially in his writing from the 1950s and 1960s, and this articulation is situated at the border between images and their invisibility—a strange invisibility not external to images but constitutive of their haunting power, a disorienting and disoriented power that Blanchot called “fascination.” Blanchot himself evoked this border, or gap, in reference to Marguerite Duras’ text *Détruire dit-elle* (which she subsequently made into a film): “est-ce un ‘livre’? un ‘film’? l’intervalle des deux?”[2] It is this gaping and hesitant border, as it were, that Watt appropriately takes as his conceptual and discursive starting point.

The book’s introduction first carries out a more pragmatic task, which broadly speaking is to justify and situate the connections (and disconnections) between Blanchot and cinema, within Blanchot’s own work and in texts that draw on this work in discussions of visual media. Watt does admirable work in bringing together these textual references, while also referring briefly to Blanchot’s biography, which obtrudes into the early pages of the book in a remarkable, unsettling, and (I think) emblematic way: Watt relates a fascinating anecdote in which close friends of Blanchot, in Paris for the day, see him across the street about to enter a cinema “accompanied by a woman,” the same cinema they themselves were about to enter (to see Bergman’s *Silence*); but when they came face to face on the sidewalk, Blanchot entered the cinema with his companion without acknowledging them. They all watched the film separately in the same theater, and the next day Blanchot sent them a letter: “Vous fûtes pour moi comme deux figures amicales d’un rêve, et il était beau que je puisse vous saluer sans tout à fait pouvoir

vous atteindre et ainsi sans rompre l'inaccessible du rêve—cela, un instant, dans le grand jour anonyme de la rue” (31 July 1964).^[3] Much could be said about this small episode, encapsulating as it does the missed (and yet strangely actual) encounter between Blanchot and cinema, and the impossibility of “attaining” what is inaccessible in it, dream as we might of doing so. Watt remarks on it in passing, setting it aside as belonging to “the biography of this notoriously private individual” (p. 6), though one need not think that this diminishes its density and relevance for comment. Despite (or indeed because of) such a fastidious approach, we can in general be very grateful for the many indications this extremely well researched study provides.

Watt brings together an impressive array of scholarship and theoretical reflection, while mobilizing a rich set of questions and textual-cinematic linkages. Beginning with Derrida’s very cinematic language in commenting on Blanchot’s late narrative *L’instant de ma mort* (which the latter refers to in terms of a script and ending credits), Watt lays out the few references to cinema in Blanchot’s work, including an extended passage in the first version of the novel *Thomas l’obscur*, which takes place in a movie theater, and draws in rich detail on film theorists who have discussed Blanchot at some length, such as Gilles Deleuze, Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, and Raymond Bellour, while also analyzing the use of direct citations of Blanchot in Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (a usage already remarked upon, Watt reminds us, by a number of readers and viewers, including one of Blanchot’s most prominent commentators in English, Leslie Hill).^[4] Watt’s purpose in the book, beyond amply demonstrating that the topic itself stands on solid ground, is thus to respond to these precursors and to elaborate their insights in more detail. He goes about this task in a highly circumspect and systematic manner.

Watt articulates in very fitting terms the basic difficulty of his project: “To attempt to think the relation between Blanchot’s writing and film in a theoretical sense would not be a case of reconstructing an approach to film from its latency in his writings, nor any kind of ‘application’ of his writings to fictional films. [...] It would rather be to try to understand how film fits in with Blanchot’s writing on the questions of art, the image, and fascination. It would be to try to think film at the same time as pursuing the thought of Blanchot” (p. 15). It is in the concept of fascination that Watt attempts to project a kind of vanishing point at which film and Blanchot would (invisibly) converge, “across an impossible distance” (p. 5). In the book’s lengthy and substantial first chapter, “Reading the Ontology of Film after Blanchot,” Watt approaches the problematic of the image in Blanchot, especially as presented in *L’Espace littéraire* and, less frontally, in the much later *L’Écriture du désastre*, as it recedes into an uncanny form of fascination that, quite cinematically, turns experience, language—the world itself—into an image. In a commentary that touches especially on Blanchot’s close engagement with Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Heidegger—two contrasting but interlinked references in a tense aesthetic-philosophical negotiation—Watt lays out Blanchot’s difficult and paradoxical discourse on the image and its impossible “ontology,” a discourse that in fact inverts and reconfigures the relationship between image and world and hollows out ontology (along with any phenomenological approach to it) from within, or rather from below. Blanchot’s “ontology,” if it is one, lays a foundation designed to collapse into itself, and endlessly so: a foundation of a world on its own de-substantiated possibility in an image that precedes and conditions it and therefore has nothing to copy. Fascination is the name for the experience, if one can say it this way, of such a world-precedent “image.” As Watt rightly emphasizes (pp. 25, 35), this experience is one that abandons the world, not for another world, but rather for an image of the world: it abandons the world to an image of itself. World becomes image, entirely. For Blanchot, this is no “life is but a dream” sort of thinking, but rather a radical uncovering of general conditions of possibility (the Kantian phrase is relevant to Watt’s analyses), not in a universalizing transcendental order, but in an interminable and infernal slippage opened by language and pursued in and as writing, a deathbound writing that passes through images and that has itself become image. It is from here that the leap to film—that world of images-as-world—must be made.

This leap passes through art, about which Blanchot had more than a little to say, despite his preponderate focus on literature. Some of Watt’s most interesting developments revolve around Blanchot’s relatively infrequent but significant remarks on visual art, notably the sculpture of Alberto

Giacometti, who once proposed to paint the author's portrait; Blanchot politely declined. In a very relevant discussion of Blanchot's "primal" or limit scenes, in *L'instant de ma mort* and in *L'Écriture du désastre*—scenes, which continually verge on disappearance and invisibility—Watt sums up his "discussion of the preconditions of the fascination of cinematic subjectivity" (p. 53) by referring again to a work by Giacometti: "The sculpture is a gift which opens up, in the space of the world, and draws us towards a point of absence or the void. This exposure opens to us and 'chaque fois s'abîme en un instant'" (p. 53).^[5] Despite the chasm apparently separating Blanchot from "the visual," and from film in particular, such linkages make it possible to project a distant and empty point, and an ungraspable "instant," from one into the other. The "becoming-cinema of Blanchot's text" can thus be located in a kind of "arrêt sur image," a disaster-struck fascination in which "an event [is] lived as image" (p. 55; author's emphasis). A more general "displacement" (p. 55) of this thinking and writing into the sphere of cinema, then, is in no way surprising, and there are numerous specifically cinematic threads that can be followed from this point. Watt chooses three films to explore and closely comment on, making each one the centerpiece of a substantial chapter of its own: Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Bela Tarr's *Satantango*, and Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*.

These are not just any films, whether in terms of subject, form, or even simply length and proportions (for the first two). Chapter two, "Appropriations of Blanchot in Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and Deleuze's *Cinéma* volumes," builds on work by Hill and texts by Jacques Rancière to address questions of the sacred (or lack thereof) and the redemption or resurrection of the past, partly through Godard's references to Orpheus and Eurydice—Blanchot's matricial myth—while also offering an evocative development on the figurations of writing and hands in the film. The Deleuze section of this chapter fruitfully expands on Ropars-Wuilleumier's analysis of Deleuze's use of Blanchot, and engages with Bellour's discussion of Godard's literariness (in an essay by Bellour subtitled "Godard l'écrivain"). Chapter 3, "Experiencing the Absence of Time: *Satantango*," situates the Blanchotian elements of Tarr's film in relation to Levinas's evocations of immobility and fatigue, before returning to Deleuze who, alongside Rancière, helps to frame an analysis of waiting in the film, by way of its concomitant use of the long take. The aesthetics of the long take have a particularly important, and unsettling, place in chapter four, "*Irréversible*, Disidentification, and Disastrous Responsibility," which treats in detail Noé's controversial film. This film includes a notorious (and excruciatingly long) rape scene that ends with the victim's face being smashed repeatedly on the ground. Whatever one thinks of Noé's film, readers may well balk at this association, whereby the viewer's undergoing (no better word) of such a scene is linked with Blanchotian passivity and thus with an extreme form of fascination that is violently depersonalized, but supposedly not spectacularized (the latter point is highly debatable, with respect to this film). Indeed, some readers may find this completely unacceptable, and if anything a confirmation of certain of the reasons behind Blanchot's reluctance or refusal to transpose his writing and thinking directly into images: for example, the need to resist the violence of a representational reduction. Watt takes this risk. While never complacent or insensitive, the discourse in this chapter edges into problematic linkages, both conceptual and figural. Can a bashed-in face, whatever its indexical or digital status, stand in for Blanchot's "On indéterminé, l'immense Quelqu'un sans figure," which is placed at the heart of the experience of fascination in *L'espace littéraire* (p. 30; cited in Watt, p. 144)? Perhaps, but this too is highly debatable. Watt's careful analysis could serve to give a cogent shape to such a debate.

There are certainly other possible paths through the strange zone of "Blanchot and Cinema." Watt's study is exemplary in the impressive range of texts and references that it draws on, and in the intensive seriousness of its discussions. It will be an inevitable reference for anyone venturing into this uncanny territory.

NOTES

[1] Paul-Emmanuel Odin, *L'absence de livre: Gary Hill et Maurice Blanchot. Écriture, vidéo* (Marseille: La Compagnie, 2007), p. 304. Note that the pagination of Odin's book goes backwards, making this first

page of its text numerically the last, an interesting reversal in light of Watt's analyses in his fourth chapter, on Gaspar Noé's film *Irréversible*.

[2] Blanchot, "Détruire," in *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 132.

[3] This anecdote is drawn from an interview with Jacqueline Laporte included under the title "Le meilleur des amis" in the *Cahiers de L'Herne* edition devoted to Blanchot, edited by Eric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté (Paris: Editions de L'Herne, 2014), p. 102. It is interesting to note that this publication also contains a number of previously unpublished photographs of Blanchot.

[4] Hill, "'A Form that Thinks': Godard, Blanchot, Citation" in Michael Temple, James S. Williams, and Michael Witt eds., *For Ever Godard* (London: Black Dog, 2004), pp. 396-415. Regarding Blanchot's own references to cinema, there is a small one that Watt does not mention: In *L'arrêt de mort*, Blanchot's narrator speaks of how he wants nothing more than to share everyday experiences with the woman he is drawn to, which includes going into this or that café or even into "l'ennui de ce cinéma" (p. 115)--a boredom he is willing to endure, and even desires, if he is there with his companion. A telling moment. I mention this in part to point out that, by Watt's own admission (p. 22), the book does not draw much on Blanchot's fiction (aside from a few comments on lengthy citations of the passage from *Thomas l'obscur* in the Introduction). While of course no study of Blanchot and cinema could be exhaustive--and this is already a fairly long treatment--I find this omission to be unfortunate, in that Blanchot's reflections on "the image" in literary writing are in a way *operated*, however inoperatively, in those texts.

[5] The French quotation is from Blanchot, *L'Amitié*, 248.

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