

REVIEW: ‘PLAY IT AGAIN’ OR THE FILM WORLD UNDER INSPECTION

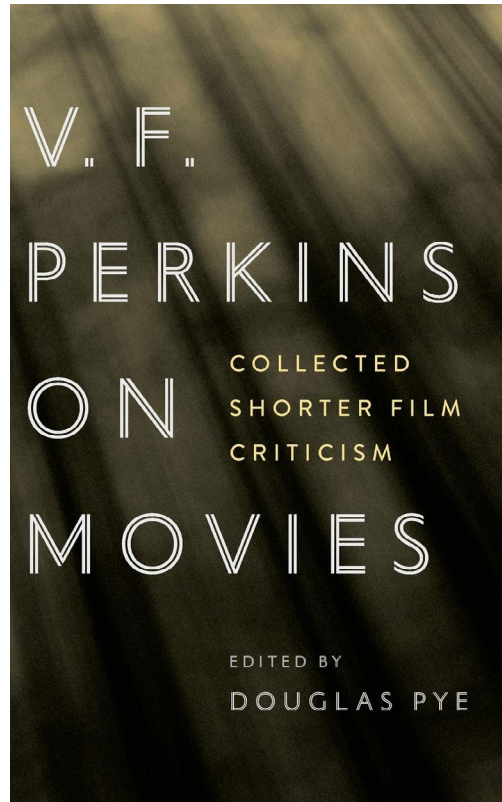
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ABSTRACT

In-depth review of posthumous publication *V.F. Perkins on Movies*, edited by Douglas Pye. It's a path through the British film critic's thoughts and main objects of desire, enhancing the importance of an almost invisible style, elegant *mise-en-scène* and a subtle rapport to material reality. The filmic worlds of namely Max Ophüls, Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and Frederick Wiseman are looked at with the analytical precision (the “dagger-gaze”) that this film critic's writing deserves. Bazinian realism, the auteur theory and cinema as a kind of “gestural vocabulary” are also highlighted in this reading of Perkins's critical art.

Keywords: Film criticism; Classicism; Modernity; *Mise-en-scène*; Film studies; Auteur theory; Realism.



Critic and lecturer Victor Francis Perkins died in 2016 at the age of 79. I will start from the end: curiosity killed the cat, not the master interpreter of the film image, so I will go straight to the last text, originally published in 2017 as part of *The Philosophy of Documentary Film*. Allow me to follow Perkins and attempt to do what he did throughout his career, starting in the 60s. He was an influential, perhaps even pioneering, figure who launched subjects in British academia that had cinema as their main focus. He worked for decades at the University of Warwick and, for him, film analysis was a process of careful decomposition, scene by scene, shot by shot, i.e. immersed *in* the scene, immersed *in* the shot... I was saying: allow me to follow Perkins and take a careful look at that last text, in an attempt to highlight, without further ado, some of the crucial aspects of the way in which he viewed and showed cinema, whether during his lectures or – nearly always discreetly – in the pages of magazines (such as *Movie*, which he co-founded), whether in collective books or, no less importantly, in his individual work, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972).

On the one hand, that last essay is an exception in *V. F. Perkins on Movies*, as it is the only time he analyses a documentary, specifically: the feature film by Frederick Wiseman, *High School* (1968). On the other hand, both his analysis and the very nature of that documentary object are “100% Perkins”: just like a scientist isolating the atom, a microscopic gaze identifies, at a very precise moment, Wiseman’s praxis and ethics. Wiseman is as careful observing the life of institutions as Perkins is in his studies about the fictional and stylistic worlds of great classic film-makers.

His obsessive relationship with some films – particularly by Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, Alfred Hitchcock, Otto Preminger or Max Ophüls – reflects a system of thought resulting from the intensive act of carefully viewing or reviewing, time and again, attempting, sentence after sentence (textual for Perkins, visual for Wiseman), to refine a certain treatment of reality. Wiseman, master of the “fly-on-the-wall” approach, is, at least to a certain extent, a film-maker of the “direct”, a documentary film-maker who does not seek spectacle or glamour, who enters reality – that stage of the world – without preconceptions, editing goals or the desire to aestheticise. His writing channels the most of what he observed at a given moment, an absolutely unplanned block of time with minimum participation. To attain this effect, of utmost realism, Wiseman becomes an eminent (*d*) *écrivain*, making his descriptive text flow in a similar way to some of the classic names in Perkins’s pantheon: this is where Wiseman appears as the epitome of the aesthetics of transparency, of nuance or of a certain minimal or reduced style that really fascinated Perkins (“the effort of seeming effortless is the most demanding of all” (Perkins, 1993, pp. 113 – 114), he wrote in *Film as Film* referring to Alfred Hitchcock). He was both one of the most lucid film critics and, as some of his students recall him (Gilbey, 2018), an inveterate “fanboy” able to get tears in his eyes while showing *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) for the umpteenth time during a lecture.

After having watched *High School* countless times – a film which, as Perkins describes in the text closing this edition, was “choice teaching material” in the “early days of film studies” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 477) – and having read everything he could about the film, Perkins – it is tempting to say ‘saw’ but the correct verb is actually another – “eluded” the most perfect illustration of his critical view and, in it, of Wiseman’s praxis, at a very precise moment, found in the film’s final cut. That Wiseman decided to remove the sound of the audience clapping at the end of the speech of the high school director shows one of many revealing moments that he “isolated” or “cut out” throughout his career as a critic and academic. Perkins deemed that to have the soundtrack include the applause for a speech where the high school director glorified that institution would condition viewers in their social, political and moral appreciation of the content of that speech, possibly giving rise to all kinds of extrapolations regarding the policies and purpose of the school system in a society like the United States. Perkins (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 486) criticises academics such as David Bordwell who tend to impose their view of the film as the only possible analysis, for whom *High School* is the unambiguous translation of Wiseman’s opinion about the school system, seen as “oppressive”, and of students, seen as “cannon fodder” in that system. Perkins inhabits the nuance of “but”, as if stating: “*but* is not Wiseman’s (moral and political) philosophical system far more generous, nuanced and complex than that?”

In fact, through that careful dissection of “what we do not hear”, a labour more focused on reducing the editing with the aim of granting viewers utmost freedom to form their opinion, Perkins comes to an

important conclusion regarding Wiseman's world view: "Wiseman's approach leaves open to scrutiny the terms in which success [the success of that high school, a branch of an entire school system] is defined and pursued." (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 487) This text is an exemplary piece of film analysis, turning theory into something alive and demonstrable or, it is almost tempting to say, "making film analysis a form of study with a truly scientific nature". However, when reading all of Perkins today, that scientific nature seems to be closer to a critical exercise of "understanding and judgement", based on films (from films to ideas) than the proverbial imposition of academic theories or post-theories on films (from ideas to films). The most important feature found here is: Perkins never stopped interpreting – doing science – based on his highly critical and emotional experience of cinema. If he chose Bordwell as his "punchbag", it was to distance himself from a branch of film studies that grew over the years and gradually lost its critical and cinephilic references. His aim is not to interpret films to confirm new theories to the detriment of old ones issuing from semiology, psychoanalysis or political science. On the contrary, Perkins suggests that we interpret films to better understand the fascination they hold for us and how their visual phraseology contains the seed that makes cinema an art involved in our existence, shaping us, as "imagined" beings, in our sensitivity and perception of the world.

For Perkins, to think cinema implies – in the pages that seem especially relevant today – understanding what a viewer should do in the face of a film; where he should cast his gaze, his attention, where he should invest his spirit. How can that viewer then organise the elements that were kept in his mind's eye? By persisting in that gaze – that "seeing anew", as if trying to extract from the experience of the film a confession that clarifies and solidifies into a thread of thought what was only intuited – Perkins appears as a kind of "Cézanne of film criticism". There are several *Monts Sainte-Victoire* in this book: Max Ophüls, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray or Otto Preminger. Perhaps the most present is Ophüls's masterpiece, the above-cited *Letter From an Unknown Woman*. Though not the entire film: in two long texts, Perkins analyses that sequence of the film taking place not in Vienna, but in Linz. In the first article, «Letter From an Unknown Woman (On the Linz Sequence)», published in *Movie* in 1982, Perkins focuses on what he terms "the film's gestural vocabulary" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 324), replicating something he had done with films by Nicholas Ray: paying particular attention to the opening scene of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), in which James Dean "interacts" restlessly with a toy monkey, ending up lying by his side (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 87); and the first minutes of *In a Lonely Place* (1950), in which, more than once, three different characters grasp the shoulders of other characters]with both hands, a gesture that takes on different meanings throughout that period (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 215).

His attention, which had focused on the movement of the actors, i.e. on the tiniest tic or touch in the Linz sequence, turns, years later, to an understanding of music as historical text: the second essay published here about Ophüls's melodrama is «Ophüls Contra Wagner and Others».

In 2000, he writes the following in *Movie*: “Like Hitler, the film plays off Linz against Vienna; it constructs an intricate system of contrasts and reversals (traced in my article in *Movie* 39/40), through which Linz becomes defined as the non-Vienna” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 395). This updated gaze on a film, arrested in a single sequence, did not end here, having almost become a self-parody in the article he published in *CineAction*, also in 2000: «‘Same Tune Again!’: Repetition and Framing in Letter from an Unknown Woman». This constant “return to the same” stems from those tears that persist, viewing after viewing, as witnessed by his students. There is no doubt: feeling was the main tool in his analytical endeavour, in the various analyses and interpretations mirrored in the 41 essays forming this book organised by Douglas Pye, a retired lecturer from the University of Reading, and published in the United States by Wayne State University Press.

In the last pages of his short treatise on the life and art of Cézanne, art historian and writer Élie Faure (2012, p. 52) concluded: “If there was ever someone whose instinct commanded reason and forced reason to organise the revelations of the instinct, it was this extraordinary painter”. The revelation of instinct in Perkins may be no more than a tear or smile. For example, in another text he begins by describing two barely noticeable “swift gestures” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 240) in a scene of *Caught* (1949) by Max Ophüls (former employee Leonora Eames uses her hands to describe to millionaire Smith Ohrig something she learnt in her posture and social usage classes). Perkins uses his gaze on this visual “word” to criticise the “intratextual” reading of cinema, the same that aspires to an impossible completeness, and proposes another reading based on a more phenomenological or *direct* – to again use a word that could land in Wiseman’s universe – relationship with images. He starts by warning: “The meanings I have discussed in the *Caught*’s fragment are neither stated nor in any special sense implied. They are filmed” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 249). Perkins’s emphasis is important as it serves to gain distance vis-à-vis a school of thought that makes films – the cinema of films, so to speak – instruments of a set of theoretical precepts that are completely alien to them or that subject them to a single possible view, as if each scene had one and one only correct interpretation. He then adds: “I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 248). Here, regarding this universal meaning in the access to films, which Perkins seeks to highlight in his analytical digressions, a verse by Alberto Caeiro comes to mind: “Things are the only hidden meaning of things”. It is at this level of visible reality that Perkins’s critical art is situated. He then observes: “The starting point for my *inspection* of the *Caught* fragment was a desire to figure out what it was in the moment that *made me smile*. The evidence of feeling demands an acknowledged place in the process of interpretation” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 255). Here, the emphasis on “inspection” and “made me smile” is mine. What motivated the anatomy – I was about to write “of the crime”... – of the scene was the smile it brought to the always-virgin-viewer, who smiles or cries every time he returns to a film he loves.

Perkins's raw material, to use an anti-interpretation precept famously defended by Susan Sontag (2004, pp. 19-32), is rooted in the feeling or emotion – it can be a physical reaction triggered by a scene or image, a tear or the hint of a smile – that films arouse in him. From that feeling or emotion, Perkins carefully and patiently weaves his ideas together. In fact, there are many examples of this praxis where, as Giorgio Agamben (2000, pp. 48-59) philosophically laid out, the gesture follows as the primordial instance of cinema, its *quid* or homeland.

In any case, I do not want to skip over the most “hallucinated” case, to employ a term used by Élie Faure (2012, p. 52) for Cézanne's “vision”. In «Acting on Objects», published in *Cine-Files: A Scholarly Journal of Cinema Studies*, in 2013, Perkins does not return to the same film, although his gaze persists in the same method of analysis, drawing attention to Stella's gesture in *Stella Dallas* (1937) by King Vidor. The character played by Barbara Stanwyck unties her husband's bow tie when their marriage in the film is about to collapse. Perkins “photographs” the moment as if it were the point of no return for that relationship, suggesting a (falsely) psychoanalytical reading that does not require much digging to be verified, because it “was filmed”, it is there, on screen, waiting to be spotted by the “inspecting gaze” of the most attentive viewer: “He has no response at all to Stella's touch, and seems not to notice the invitation that her gesture implies” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 302). In short, Stella's husband did not see the plain gesture, though the critic did see that Stella's husband did not see the plain gesture. As he wrote about Wiseman and, in a way, summing up how he saw cinema, examining his own practice as a critic: “I came to see what was hidden in plain sight” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 491).

In another text, published years before the one on *Stella Dallas*, we are again in very, very familiar territory: Nicholas Ray and his leaden, acid film noir *In a Lonely Place*. The failed screenwriter Humphrey Bogart is in love with his neighbour, played by Gloria Grahame (Nicholas Ray's partner at the time). They have a toxic relationship, mortally wounded from the start by the suspicion that Bogart might be a murderer of helpless women. In a seemingly insignificant scene (are they not, after all, those that Perkins most enjoys?), Bogart appears clumsily handling a kitchen knife to cut a grapefruit. The fruit seems to “resist” the protagonist's intention of offering his sweetheart a more or less romantic breakfast – in fact, as Perkins notes, it is either the grapefruit or the character's lack of skill for household chores that actually “resists”. Perkins allows his sharp eye to come in and “peels” the scene through the gaze he casts upon that gesture uniting Bogart's hand with the mundane object: “he turns the tool into a weapon, the knife into something more like a dagger. In its reconciliation of clarity with depth of suggestion, in its extraordinary mixture of charm, humor, and violence, this moment is representative of the film's achievement” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, pp. 347-348). It is impossible here to not recall the seminal text by Jacques Rivette, «L'essentiel», which starts off as a critique of *Angel Face* (1952), a somewhat hidden film noir by Otto Preminger, considered a minor

1 "What is cinema, if not the game of the actor and the actrice, of the hero and the *décor*, of the verb and the face, of the hand and the object?"

production, but that ends up proving to be a treatise on the importance – aimed at a not absolutely clear definition or aspiring to a metaphysics – of *mise-en-scène*. The question that rounds off this essay communicates closely with Perkins's critical gesture: "[Q]u'est-ce que le cinéma, sinon le *jeu* de l'acteur et de l'actrice, du héros et du décor, du verbe et du visage, de la main et de l'objet ?" (Rivette, 2018b, 94)¹. After Jean-Luc Godard but before Mark Rappaport – to mention two major exponents of a certain "aesthetic of the object" in the more or less textual, more or less audio/visual critiques they produced over the years – Perkins made that union, between hand and object, a locus of his critical attention before the *déroulement* of films. It is tempting to add: of "his" films – the gaze sees so much and so often that it actually resembles a very subtle thief or pickpocket (not of Robert Bresson, to be clear, but of Samuel Fuller, another "virile hero" in Perkins's pantheon of auteurs).

However, some objects "in cinema" are not close at hand and still lend themselves to being "peeled" by Perkins's piercing gaze, by his "dagger-gaze". Among these is the large chandelier found in one of the rooms in Vienna's saloon, the protagonist of *Johnny Guitar* (1954). It is a kind of symbol of power under the threat of the protagonist, a tough woman embodied by Joan Crawford playing herself, at a time when her own stardom – the deferred light of the star of a bygone Hollywood – was besieged by a devouring monster called television. But it is the chandelier – that "devotional object", to use a term by Nathaniel Dorsky (2005, pp. 35-36) – that it is important to isolate, to cut out and carefully analyse in the prose of the British critic: "an art object particularly cherished as a token of Vienna's achievement and her aspiration" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 305). The idea, here, is not to take the object in itself but the way *in which* it is highlighted, *en scène*, as the object of a larger (more serious) crime that might have "cinema" as its middle name. Take the last minutes of *Citizen Kane* (1941) and how Perkins sees them, to conclude that "the material entities of a fictional world are also objects subjectively perceived – as talismanic, say, or intriguing, or negligible" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 276). The keyword, then, can be translated in the representation of an object lost among objects, piled up in (lost amid) a series of boxes with countless treasures left to the living by Kane. However, in the film that key is reserved for the viewer, it is not shared with the characters in their fictional world. Welles decides that it be this way, i.e. that this object is shown in that way, bringing to the fore but not really solving or establishing a definite meaning for the enigmatic word whispered at the beginning of the film – "Rosebud" – which motivates the research that *is*, more than *is found*, in the film. After all, the possible interpretations for what the sledge from Kane's childhood means exactly, within the film and beyond it, are as many as the piles of boxes shown by the camera in a dizzying and unforgettable "god's eye view".

Do not be fooled by what surfaces bring to the fore: it is not insignificant that Perkins often uses terms in French, or that the few fellow critics he mentions favourably come from the "school" of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. For example: Jean Douchet, Jean Domarchi, Éric Rohmer,

François Truffaut and, mainly, André Bazin. Also, Jean-Luc Godard, who is somewhat tentatively defended in the pages of this book, in a text published in the 60s, on *Vivre sa vie* (1962). In it we sense that Perkins's gaze is moved not so much by the cinema project (tending towards pure cinema, which he really "aims at" in his *Film as Film*) but by "the movement of ideas" underlying it: "Instead he plays with film as he plays with ideas, very personally. Both games are conducted with passion, curiosity and elegant skill" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 195).

Therefore, it is undeniable: Perkins's thought is largely based on the school of French criticism, rooted to a large extent in the critical texts of André Bazin. Perkins seeks to refine aspects of the so-called "auteur theory" put forth by Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen, carrying out an "epistemic" refinement that emphasises Bazin's own scepticism (his avowed suspicion) towards the auteur theory, put forth but not systematised by his "pupils" from the *Cahiers du cinéma*, starting with Truffaut. Perkins criticises Peter Wollen for, in his appreciation of auteur theory, excluding what is most important in the experience of a film: "Actors, landscapes, settings, gestures, intonations, movements, qualities of light, faces, dress, and props were excluded from consideration" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 232). Furthermore, he finds among the champions of auteurism an "exaggerated concern with the continuities and coherence across the body of a director's work (...). Auteurism does not just observe or welcome continuity from film to film; it insists on continuity" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 221). In cinema, the term "auteur" usually has a positive, almost dogmatic, value: "Wanting a value-free auteurism is like wanting one's ice a bit warmer" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 230). According to Perkins, there are auteurs and auteurs, and the most refined – or elegant, as he says – among them are those who make best use of the "power of suggestion" (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 376) of the language of film, "hiding in plain sight" the deep meanings of their art. What does that "art" convey? Perhaps a kind of dance between the director's hand and reality – inside or outside the studio – recorded by the camera and, in the end, appearing as "writing" to be read on screen, "in plain sight". Or then, as he summed up in *Film as Film*, good criticism is achieved through the "ability to create the most telling relationships within the given material" (Perkins, 1993, p. 132). In any case, it is important that cinema does not suffocate that small piece of reality; quite on the contrary, it should enhance it, since the biggest temptation is to make use of the wide range of stylistic tools that are available to distort and manipulate, to impose meaning, with pretence and uncertainty, on the given material. In that respect, Perkins proves to be an advocate of Hollywood's classic, clear and unpretentious, grammar; he knows how to appreciate films governed by narrative transparency and the formal invisibility of the camera. At the same time, as modern as "the genius" of Hawks just as extolled by Jacques Rivette (2018a), he defends a type of cinema that achieves the "synthesis between photographic realism and dramatic illusion" (Perkins, 1993, p. 61) or that finally establishes itself as "impure" – or yet, as he also describes in negative terms, not purely "cinematic" (Perkins in Pye,

2020, p. 147). As he observes in relation to Howard Hawks, the idea, in the end, is to let “the action dictate to the camera rather than vice versa” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 147).

It is important to cite a passage about one of the few British film-makers Perkins praises over the course of these essays: Alfred Hitchcock. Perkins even criticises the new generation of British cinema, which includes Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger, for not knowing how to fit the characters into the background (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 40). Quoting Jean Domarchi from the *Cahiers du cinéma* (the magazine is known for being anti-anglophone, at least during its golden years), he also states that “what the British cinema needs is not new subjects but new ideas about direction” (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 45). Therefore, Alfred Hitchcock is an exception that confirms the rule within the context of cinema made in Great Britain. Perkins became famous for having been one of the first – and, for a long time, one of the few – critics to enthusiastically defend *Psycho* (1960). In this particular case, his analysis of the shower sequence, included in *Film as Film* (Perkins, 1993, p. 108-115), is well-known. However, it is about *I Confess* (1953) that Perkins (Perkins in Pye, 2020, p. 379) writes: “Direction, we have been shown, has the power to lead us. Of necessity it also has the power to mislead us – to make us jump to conclusions.” Once again, the director should not be a moralist (again, “the controversy” surrounding *High School*), he should not dictate meanings; on the contrary, he should seek to open them up, envisaging/inventing a viewer that, now emancipated, already knows how to make his own synthesis between the various non-unambiguous elements that compose the world of the film – taking that jump, leaning on André Bazin (1992) and, of course, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1982), I would add that, outside the cinema, the viewer-turned-into-critic will, in the same way, know how to decode the images of our continuous “film of the world”.

Faithful to an analytical matrix, which he updated but never gave up over more than forty years of work as a lecturer and critic, Perkins is suspicious of those who enter territory he has covered. Therefore, the reader should not be surprised: Perkins rarely cites a fellow critic to agree with him. I have described a certain love for cinema and a minute exercise of criticism, but it is important to add that nearly all the texts gathered here engage in fearless debate – sometimes an implacable one, but always lucid – that never gives up that slow, rigorous labour of constructing arguments around various themes, namely: cinema as art, the tension between form and content, the predominance of image over script, the primacy of realism, the convergence between style, the (relativised) auteur theory and the overarching, complex concept of *mise-en-scène*.

For all these reasons, this posthumous work, with more than 500 pages, should be mainly received as a reference book and can be read out of order. This compilation is a must – not to get to know Perkin’s view of cinema – his praxis is very well laid out in his much read and cited *Film as Film* – but to understand the reach or variety of its practical application to a rich, even if circumscribed, universe of films and auteurs. The love

for cinema appears in these pages as the art of viewing and reviewing. And reviewing once again, with renewed attention. A critical asceticism that urges us to be clear and lucid, without giving up that harmony with the passion for cinema, sensitive to the discreet tear or smile that the gesture of an actor or actress on screen can trigger in us.

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