



Desires for reality: radicalism and revolution in Western European film

by Benjamin Halligan, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2016, 262 pp., £99.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78533-110-7 (also available as paperback: ISBN 978-1-78920-086-7, £23.95).

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BOOK REVIEW

Desires for reality: radicalism and revolution in Western European film, by Benjamin Halligan, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2016, 262 pp., £99.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78533-110-7 (also available as paperback: ISBN 978-1-78920-086-7, £23.95).

According to Benjamin Halligan's *Desires for Reality: Radicalism and Revolution in Western European Film*, critical and academic histories of the 1960s' progressive Western European cinema have consistently failed to define its structural, cinematic commonalities. Instead of mapping a shared 'essential terrain' (3), they have directed most attention to national cinemas (often neglecting trans-European crosscurrents), and have focused excessively on the early New Waves instead of their later manifestations. Given the centrality of the entire era for film studies and film-philosophy, such an assertion is certainly unexpected – bold even – and yet it is well-argued.

For, as Halligan succinctly summarises, if some histories have attempted to consider the totality of such progressive cinemas across Western Europe, they have outlined little more than 'clusters of similarity (shared concerns, shared methodological approaches to film, a commonality of preoccupations)' (3), often jumbling together aesthetically disparate films and filmmakers under an over-used New Wave moniker. In Halligan's words, the 'history [of the 1960s' progressive cinema] comes to rest on a discussion of aesthetic innovations – the visible surface of the wave, not the currents beneath it' (8). By contrast, then, *Desires for Reality* argues (even if Halligan's writing is not always as clear as one would hope for) that such a 'grid of connections upon which the expansion of the idea of cinema is built' (3) can be located in the shared application of post-Bazinian realism.

'Post' here denotes a variety of sometimes contradictory approaches to film that all utilise, or at the very least take as their starting point, Bazin's straightforward, quasi-religious notion of a transference of reality on to its cinematic representation. This leaves Halligan ample leeway for interpretation, as '[t]he points of connection between Bazin and the films of this period remain loose, without adherence to an orthodoxy, and with Bazin's writing demoted to a mythical rather than prescriptive or programmatic theory of film realism' (18). Consequently, many of Halligan's readings over the course of his book problematise filmmakers' structural reliance on various configurations of 'the real' – ontological, phenomenological, or through a cinematic language that functions as a 'receptacle for "the real"' (33) – even when the films themselves confront, somewhat paradoxically, the limitations of Bazin's teleological conception of realism.

With regard to the films under scrutiny, Halligan's history rests on a definition of two distinct pre-1968 strands of progressive cinema: on the one hand the naturalist-cum-New-Wave-adorned alienation films – in Halligan's coinage "'Late Modernist" film' (35) – and on the other hand the New Waves proper. Always attentive to the porosity of such delineations, Halligan meticulously charts how films of both strands negotiate the relation between cinema and the real, and, perhaps more importantly, between cinema and its pliable languages of the real. This parallel inquisition of Late Modernist film and the New Waves begins with Michelangelo Antonioni's simultaneous reliance on and skepticism towards the cinematic language of materiality. Halligan makes visible how *Blow Up* (1966) exhausts the cinematic

means of Late Modernist psychological realism to comment on the genre as a 'rationalisation of the alienation and apathy of the modern man rather than a rendition of his true nature' (76). Antonioni's development of cinematic form up to its conclusion (or, rather, the self-destructive fulfillment of its potential) emerges as an ideological-discursive impasse, shared by Late Modernist film *and* the stagnant bourgeoisie: how to transcend, to borrow from Halligan (cf. 81), the wreckage of the bourgeoisie and its appendant film form without reproducing either? This impasse, Halligan argues, came at a time when the New Wave's radical 'newness' had abated with the codification of its overt self-reflexivity, prompting filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard to reconsider their own approaches to film. As a result, self-reflexivity shifted from text to context, as in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), *Masculin Féminin* (1966) and *Caméra-Oeil* (1967). Godard's mid-1960s oeuvre thus explores and foregrounds not merely the machinations of the film-text but the entire process of filmmaking instead (and in the course, accords the viewer an interventionist role). What draws Halligan's comparative, multilayered readings together time and again is his convincing attention to Godard's (and others') ultimate unwillingness to confront – let alone overcome – 'the final norm of bourgeois film: the ontological-real of a reality transferred' (99); in other words, Halligan constantly exposes the New Wave's (unacknowledged) post-Bazinian conception of cinema.

This synthesisation of the era's disparate cinematic poles, previously held together by little more than a vague attribution of progressiveness, forms the core of Halligan's critical cinematic history, and it is from here that his other thematic concerns emanate. In particular, Halligan's critique of post-Bazinian film provides a theoretical framework to anchor 1960s progressive cinema in its socio-cultural as well as discursive environments in the run-up to the failed revolutions of '68, and it later allows for the re-evaluation of a number of uncanonised films as being *of* the era. All of these aspects are dealt with in a monolithic chapter ('Film and Revolutionism') of more than 100 pages, which traces what Halligan earlier terms 'the "hardwiring" between the artefact and its era' (6). The would-be revolutionaries' lack of theoretical and historical scrutiny (which allowed for a misreading of the situation in '68 as pre-revolutionary in the first place), emerges from an essentially post-Bazinian interpretation of the relation between cinema and the real. Halligan innovatively implies that cinematic-philosophical debates about the nature of reality and film as well as revolution and radicalism were more than a mere expression, or indeed a representation, of the revolutionism of the 1960s; rather, they provided a framework for theorising said revolutionism and were part and parcel of the revolutionist apparatus and its imagined relation to the real. Not least because of this radical re-evaluation of the cinematic *as* revolution, Halligan's further readings of canonised as well as critically neglected films are always infused with a sense of political urgency. Despite their fundamental aesthetic and conceptual differences, experientialist happening films, like Otto Muehl's confrontational, corporeal Commune cinema, classics such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Partner* (1968), and a wealth of other Antonin Artaud-inspired radical films from different European countries, ultimately rely on a shared belief in an ontological realism.

Halligan's findings are beyond reproach, his readings inspired, and, in the best sense of the term, his *total* approach to the progressive cinema of the 1960s is genuinely novel – and yet, as indicated above, *Desires for Reality* does not always make for a compelling read. The book's writing can be obstructive (particularly throughout the first two chapters), and its overall reluctance to provide guidance or a clear framing for its otherwise convincing arguments is certain to frustrate at times. Nonetheless – and provided one is willing to engage with the book and its multi-layered arguments on its own terms – *Desires for Reality* is an overdue and

highly rewarding conceptualisation of Western European progressive cinema, providing a thoughtful and detailed history of the unexplored interconnections between its different strands and phases.

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