

THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Introduction

The idea for this dossier, ‘The politics of Close Analysis, and its Object’, came about in 2020. The late 2010s has a special significance for being a moment when public reflection on the relationship of cultural representation to historical and current power structures that oppress particular peoples and communities gathered pace and prominence. In 2018 the film industry started to acknowledge systemic abuse and misogyny brought to prominence by the ‘Times Up!’ campaign, in 2019 many declared climate change an emergency, and in 2020 we reckoned with the onset of a global pandemic, alongside protests over the continued brutal killings of black people by police, and historical attachments to slavery and colonialism. Public demand for cinema, television and news media to openly address these issues of social and climate justice have grown over the same period. Interest has grown, too, in the politics of film curation and programming, and in film festivals’ responsibility to better curate and present existing and emerging filmmaking that can speak to or reflect these questions, as examined in the recent *JCMS In Focus* ‘Curators Speak: Film Programming as Social Justice Work in the Wake of COVID-19’ (Francis 2022).

While it has a much wider reach, this activist moment re-poses pressing questions for film criticism and its ability to reflect on the power dynamics of how we choose our object of attention. The questions are urgent: who gets to make films and television, who gets to write and platform criticism, and which films, television shows and their makers should be examined and celebrated as the object of analysis? What *should* be the object of writing on film and television aesthetics at this contemporary moment?

Noting that questions of style ‘cannot be separated from questions of politics’, Racquel Gates reminds us of the political analysis that close attention to film and television form facilitates (2017: 44); a form of rigorous analysis often present in the pages of *Movie* in its original and online forms, in the journal’s attentiveness to style not as natural or neutral, but meaningful and engaging with questions of representation, for example of class, gender and race.

For this dossier, we wanted to encourage contributions which give voice to and reasoned evaluation of figures, communities, and films or television that have traditionally been marginalised in critical analysis and screen culture, and in wider cultural discourse. We sought to reject what So Mayer and Ania Ostrowska (2015) have called ‘the perception of scarcity’ that has so often framed and perpetuated marginalisation, and embrace the prompt to ‘celebrate and participate in [the] plenitude’ of marginalised films and filmmakers instead. Yet this is not to seek to reduce film criticism to a narrow account of ‘representational progress on-screen’ (Mayer & Ostrowska 2015), nor to lay the burden of examining marginalised perspectives onto particular critics. As Bilal Qureshi argues, ‘It is a disservice to “diverse” critics of whatever race, class, or sexual identity to expect only a problematization or championship of work to be rendered through the narrow confines of a single or singular identity’ (2022), just as it is a disservice to the films being examined.

So, this dossier is a starting point and intervention into what we acknowledge is an ongoing conversation – taking place across sites of public, press and academic debate – about the politics of film criticism and its object, and about screen representations and how they are framed, understood and celebrated. It is a dossier that invites ongoing contributions,

and a starting point that takes up Girish Shambu’s challenge, that ‘Each cinephilic act of speaking, writing, citing, and curating must also be an act that intervenes in an unequal world’ (2019: 33).

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Works cited

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