

## Mary Michaels, *My Life in Films* Gavin Selerie

Mary Michaels, *My Life in Films*. London: The Other Press, 2006.

*My Life in Films* is a series of 'Proustian' ruminations, triggered, as the title suggests, mainly by cinema. Personal experience and memory are mediated through images and situations from films, most of which are listed in an end-note (but not in a section-specific way). Whereas in Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* (1961) the protagonist's addiction to cinema suggests an inability to engage with reality, Michaels's de-centred consciousness charts the subtle interpenetration between art and life. Fluently shifting between (con)texts, these prose segments give a sense of lived moments across several decades, from, one assumes, the 1950s to the present. Films from earlier in the twentieth century, as well as those from a more literal biographical span, impinge as part of a collective cultural inheritance. There is a predominant urban emphasis, with vivid evocation of London, although this does not preclude a pastoral dimension. Dream combines with 'reality', cutting through fixities of time and place, so that identity includes its process of construction.

The films which feature in the book range from Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, through Powell's *Black Narcissus* and Ozu's *The End of Summer*, to Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* and Hartley's *Flirt*. At least in today's terms, the selection is arthouse/independent rather than mainstream/Hollywood. That said, there are references to more populist works such as *Some Like It Hot* and *Raging Bull*. Not all the movies are canonical or highly regarded: when Michaels draws on Chytilova's *Daisies* she—validly—reinforces our impression of quotidian, rather than specially sought or singled out, experience. There may be programmatic elements in the book's design, but its defining moments seem casually caught, as exposure to characters, scenes, stories lights up a web of association. I would guess that the film encounters were shaped partly by what happened to be playing or available on a particular night.

The sliding in and out of contexts, filmic and first hand, may be illustrated from the first piece, 'Love in the Afternoon'. Michaels starts with the assignation in a hired hotel room from *Hannah and Her Sisters*. A precise description of champagne flutes on the dressing table leads to a juxtaposition of the sensual encounter and its degraded environment: the blanket 'riddled with cigarette burns' and the single sheet (sign that 'People don't really sleep here'). This modulates into the bathroom scene from *Last Tango in Paris*, with phrases substituted for the actual dialogue. Brando, who could demand that his own lines were pasted on the other actor's body, would nevertheless correct departures from the script by that other, in a way that is emblematic of a masculine teacherly mode. Next we are in the London snow and psychoanalytical business, both—it would appear—more personal reference points. Another cinematic allusion, from Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem*, is intertwined: the mistress, Draifa, wanting father (and now son?) for a longer span than snatched moments, and locking the latter in a room. The piece concludes with Rohmer's film of the same title, in which famously the impulse is not consummated. An index of the author's probing of gender positions is the speculation that the hero's wife may have been having an affair ('or else why—in that closing scene—would she be so moved ...?'). This is one of a number of examples of reading against, across or beneath film texts, any feminist stance being subtly corrective of balance rather than simply oppositional.

Although discretely arranged, the sections have overlapping motifs and a cumulative resonance. For instance, 'Rowboat' involves a preoccupation with smoothness and cleanliness, as part of a desired or required image, which recalls the concerns of the previous text, 'Imperfect'. Again, 'Flare' develops the theme of ritual or random blood-letting, powerfully explored in the preceding piece, 'A Passion'. The main film sources here—in one piece and then the next—are Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and Bergman's *A Passion (The Passion of Anna)*. The repetition of the key word and equivalent fire references deepen the portrayal of commitment that entails anguish and sacrifice. A comment not directly accessed here is Anna's 'I didn't believe that life could be a daily martyrdom.' A third example of sub-surface continuity is the way that 'Theatreland' picks up the issue of alcoholism via the bomb expert who has to prove himself (Sammy in Powell and Pressburger's *The Small Back Room*) after 'Holiday', which draws extensively on Wilder's *The Lost Weekend*. Drink is a ghost element beneath other, more prominent, matter in 'Theatreland'.

It would be wrong to imply that the reader needs an in-depth knowledge of cinema in order to engage with Michaels's book. There is pleasure in recognizing and letting roll the specific sources of this strongly referential work. However, the film sequences, images, and speech become something else in their new context: part of an extended meditation in which vicarious blends with directly lived experience. Quotations and allusions are absorbed into a language texture that is both attendant to division and expressive of congruity. When two scenes from Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* are recalled, with an interleaved reference to Chukhrai's *The Thief*, in 'Sundew' (paragraphs two and three) the description emerges without evident shift of authority from more personal reminiscence (also in the third person and past tense). The opening paragraph has already mentioned 'shoulder-high spears of white blooms they'd walked through in Italy, the previous year'. Elsewhere there are zanier and jerkier manoeuvres, suggesting a clash of perspective. Yet we are never returned simply to a script situation or offered a critical postface; movies provide coordinates for memory and reflection and operate in a fresh imaginative landscape.

When a section of text appears to be simply autobiographical, as with the story of a woman 'at fifty years old, and what she's had to forgo to get there' ('Duct', paragraph three) the account is qualified by a built-in awareness of distortion and projection. 'Now she checked proofs' may be taken at an analytical as well as a factual level. Fantasy, nevertheless, retains its value in the overall picture. Integrity of self-description is achieved through a play of fictional possibilities, even through parody. The document subverts the telling eye/mouth, or vice versa: wayward things seep in, while a frame is ostensibly directed. As Brice Parain remarks in Godard's *Vivre sa Vie*, 'Error is necessary to truth.'

Among the themes that appear, interlaced, across the span of the book, cinema, naturally, is prominent, both in the sense of enacted and watched behaviour. In addition to its literal occurrence as entertainment, film serves as a paradigm for layered states of reality:

She re-enacted this meeting for a film which was not the film that he claimed he would put her in. Instead, a reconstruction. Such trust to deliver themselves over again to a man with a camera (or men) after the first had caused so much doubt! ('Ladies' Night')

This links up with scattered reference to forms of impersonation; for instance, 'Angel' brings in cross-dressing. A cluster of texts in the middle of the book ('A Passion', 'Flare')

and 'Bushes') highlight aspects of war, from nerve gas experiments at Porton Down to the bombing of Iraq in 2003 and the hounding of Dr David Kelly. To unpack these items could be misleading since they form part of a mosaic of continuous events. The assault on the Twin Towers ('Bushes') is seen in relation to the demolition of highrise blocks in London ('Rowboat' and 'River') and absent landmarks ('Theatreland'). Religious faith and attendant dilemmas or conflicts intersect with political business: a crisis in *Black Narcissus*, Powell's film about nuns, is juxtaposed with a Vietcong suspect shot on TV in 'Flare'. History circles back to the present when nail scissors and a tiny screwdriver are found in a bag at the airport in 'Desert Rose'. An ordinary detail encapsulates the restriction of freedom in a world of (perceived) mass terror.

As already indicated, *My Life in Films* includes self-referential features. The last section of 'Flare', for instance, deals with the difficulty of accessing and then reading stories/images:

He says, 'I can't get the video this morning,' but keeps on trying, pressing with his thumb on the key pad, eyes fixed on a tiny silver screen.... [A] flare ... expands and diminishes as the vehicle lurches.... Is it an advert projected on the glass? Or merely a magnifying panel for the driver?

Other texts examine conventions of representation in life and art. 'Turf' confronts the unavoidable falsification of the real, at least in an era before reality TV, when people are faced with a camera and the possibility of a durable, if not permanent, record:

The women in the village put on their Sunday best, every day for weeks, while making cups of tea for the ever-thirsty crew ... [but] not many locals appeared in the finished [work].

Focusing on assumptions about appearance and class status, the piece also invites consideration of gender patterns—in particular how violence toward women is portrayed on screen. The issue is evoked largely via Anderson's *This Sporting Life*: 'The forward's punch brought blood from the nose of his male opponent but left the woman without a mark. Not a flinch or a bruise.' Some critique of the habitual gaze is implied. Indeed, Rachel Roberts's repression and passivity, which intensifies the footballer's brutality, can be seen as a reduction of identity for dramatic effect. Beyond the specific film context, Michaels seems to indicate how terror can be normalized or erased through a way of seeing. (Jacqueline Rose speaks of the 'seamless image' of woman which 'depends on a particular economy of vision'.)

Cinema as a type of unreality cuts both ways in the book. Delusion is seen to have woeful or tragic consequences, yet fantasy and psychological adventure are also celebrated. Ignorance and mistakes have their humorous side, and the author includes some psychotherapy jokes, related to the shifts of filmic structure and perception ('*There is no "no" in the unconscious*. This he tells her from a translation'). 'Holiday', which deals with the ugly consequences of addiction, includes the amusing remark: 'What he needed was a woman who wouldn't interfere, who'd play organ for the church and wear white gloves on Sunday.' Often the humour involves bizarre or unexpected transition:

Later she developed the ability to eat through accounts of any atrocity. What made the others in the restaurant sick was the consumption of the gateau before the chicken.' ('Czech Slapstick')

Elsewhere, the interface between one life and the fictional many is ironically evoked by substitution. 'Bushes' begins by replacing the sink estate in Rome at which Nanni Moretti ends up on his lambretta (in *Caro Diario*) with its London equivalent, Beckton. A cruder but resonant humour may be illustrated from the same piece:

'I've got pubic hair like a Brillo pad,' the smart businesswoman was reputed to have told the insurance salesman, and he repeated it because it turned him on.

Here a lightly treated masochism (personal/sexual) provides a prelude to Bush clashes (public/military).

*My Life in Films* is divided into two parts, the second being slightly longer. The headed pieces are themselves arranged as sections, within which are paragraph breaks. This separation allows the reader breathing space without imposing too definite a pause. The structure allows discovery and surprise, while also encouraging a steadier mode of concentration. Like cinema itself the medium is both still and revolving. There is a nice balance between abstract thought, dialogue and physical description. Exact portrayal of objects and people within landscape makes the final text, 'River', particularly strong. Yet such detail tends to function within a mental field that registers its provisional reality. Michaels's prose is shaped with a degree of obliqueness so as to resist 'complete thought'. Eschewing the wilder possibilities of experiment, it departs sufficiently from normative practice to resist an easy coherence. Whether by a shift of pronouns (as at the start of 'Andalus'), a suppression of verb forms or inconsistency of tense, the syntax and grammar draw attention to language as process. Images which glide, merge and splinter are textured through sentences that work by half-recognition, patterned and still open. Colloquial expression jostles with drier rational statement and highly wrought lyricism. The effect of overlapping planes is well conveyed in the cover illustration, a detail from Eric Rimmington's *Paraboxes*, apparently a hinged construction.

Dorothy Richardson's column for *Close Up*, the modernist film journal, was called 'Continuous Performance', a phrase which suggests multiple rather than single modes of seeing/experience. Wandering through London, in *Pilgrimage*, Richardson's protagonist Miriam holds 'in imagination wordless converse with a stranger whose whole experience [has] melted and vanished like her own, into the flow of light down the streets'. The buildings (and her involved presence) are 'a maze of shapes, flowing, tilting into each other, in endless patterns'. *My Life in Films*, punning on other senses of 'film' (layer, coating, haze etc), has an equivalent fluidity. The reader who thinks he or she is being denied explanation or logical linkage should go with the sway of language, letting sense emerge gradually. The book is a significant exploration of self and identity, its network of stories and events allowing—or demanding—continuous revision. Handsomely typeset by Five Seasons in a way that brings out the force of the texts, this work deserves sustained attention.

## References:

- Dorothy Richardson, *Deadlock* [*Pilgrimage*, vol. 3] (London, 1921)  
Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London, 1986)

***My Life In Films* is available from; The Other Press, 19 Marriott Road, London N4 3QN. Email: frances@presley.ndo.co.uk**

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