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Barry Nevin, *Cracking Gilles Deleuze's Crystal: Narrative Space-time in the Films of Jean Renoir*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. xiv + 236 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-1-4744-2629-9.

Review by Prakash Younger, Trinity College.

To set up its detailed readings of twelve films, Barry Nevin's *Cracking Gilles Deleuze's Crystal* builds on and balances the work of two prominent—and in a certain sense, opposed—tendencies in Renoir scholarship: philosophically-inflected auteurism (Gilles Deleuze) and politically-minded film history (pioneered by Christopher Faulkner), negotiating the differences with the help of relevant theorists of space, such as Gaston Bachelard, Michel de Certeau, and Doreen Massey. Guided by a clearly constructed theoretical question, and in dialogue with the historical legacy of critical writing on the auteur, Nevin's thoughtful readings of the films constitute a significant contribution to the body of work on the auteur.

As its title indicates, the book is a critical re-examination of Renoir's work in relation to the Deleuzian concept of the cracked crystal-image, a figurative image of *time* (time being understood here as somewhat synonymous with thought, thinking, or reflection). Given the crystal image's central importance to the book's argument, it is worth glossing the concept and also explaining the feature that Deleuze claims defines Renoir's crystals in particular: the fact that they are “cracked.” In a general sense, the crystal-image makes manifest the otherwise indiscernible “splitting of time,” whereby the present moment divides into two dissymmetrical jets, one oriented towards the future, openness, and freedom, and the other falling back into the past, where it is stored in memory, and exercises a determining and limiting role. [1] This behind-the-scenes process is often made manifest on film in mirrored relations between different individuals or sets of individuals, and these relations in turn create uncertainty about their ontological status and epistemological value, as they are in a state of unceasing kaleidoscopic mutation: “Distinct, but indiscernible, such are the actual and the virtual which are in continual exchange. When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, as in the mirror or the solidity of finished crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy, like a crystal barely dislodged from the earth. The actual-virtual couple thus immediately extends into the opaque-limpid, the expression of their exchange.” [2]

Speaking of the film that is often considered Renoir's masterpiece, Deleuze writes: “*La règle du jeu* produces a coexistence of the actual image of men and the virtual image of beasts, the actual image of living beings and the virtual image of beasts, the actual image of living beings and the virtual image of automata, the actual image of characters and the virtual image of their

roles during the party, the actual image of the masters and their virtual image in the servants, the actual image of the servants and their virtual image in the masters.”[3] Though we see the sets in mirrored relationships as distinct from one another, seeing the relationship implies a transference of qualities between them, and the possibilities of equivalence, transformation and reversal are always already in motion; for example, perhaps what we imagined to be possible (the virtual) has already come to pass (the actual), or what we believed to have happened (the actual) was only an illusion (the virtual). In a perfectly-constructed crystal the creative movement of time—its openness to the future—is, as it were, suspended or frozen or deadened, subject to a constant, inescapable sense of doubt. This is why a crystal being “cracked” is, in Renoir, a good thing, because it offers a line of flight as a means of escape to an open future: “In Renoir, the crystal is never pure and perfect: it has a failing, a point of flight, a ‘flaw’. It is always cracked. And this is what depth of field reveals: there is not simply a rolling up of a round in the crystal; something is going to slip away in the background, in depth, through the third side or third dimension, through the crack.”[4]

Deleuze goes on to state that Renoir's cracked version of the crystal-image derives from the director's taste for improvisation, spontaneity, departures from the script, and so on, all of which qualities he cites Bazin as being the first to recognize, and groups under the concept of the “theatrical”: “Everything happens as if the circuit served to try out roles, as if roles were being tried in it until the right one were found, the one with which we escape to enter a clarified reality. In short, the circuit, the round, are not closed because they are selective, and produce a winner each time. Renoir has sometimes been criticized for his taste for the makeshift and improvisation, both in his direction in general and in his directing of the actors. This is, in fact, a creative virtue, linked to the substitution of the scene for the shot. According to Renoir, theatre is inseparable—for both characters and actors—from the enterprise of experimenting with and selecting roles, until you find the one which goes beyond theatre and enters life.”[5] The traditional concept of the auteur assumed in Deleuze's account of the crystal image, that is, the recognition of recurring patterns of style and theme across the totality of a director's work, is one main aspect of Nevin's approach to his subject; by using Deleuze's condensed poetic formulations (totaling less than five pages in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*) as the bases for an extended analysis of twelve films, Nevin is in one sense carrying forward the auteurist tradition of French film-philosophy running from Bazin through the first generation of *Cahiers du cinéma* critics to Deleuze and Daney. That said, it is paramount to stress that, before beginning his analyses, Nevin subjects Deleuze's version of the crystal-image to several theoretical critiques, so as to produce a revised version which is more attentive to the role of two things: the details of Renoir's *mise-en-scène*; that is, the specifics of how the worlds of his films look and feel, and how these fictional worlds themselves reflect or resonate with the immediate real-world historical contexts of the films.

Interestingly, Nevin's revised version of the crystal leans heavily on concepts drawn from Deleuze's work with Felix Guattari (the distinction between molar/static and molecular/fluid) to correct what he takes to be the overly-optimistic conception of the theatres in the crystal-image formulations, which will be, in his readings, “by-products of the stultifying force of social regimes that pre-exist them,” governed by the “resistant molar lines” that structure Renoir's “rigorously hierarchized (albeit inherently porous) societies” (p.19). The bleaker view of the social world(s) in Renoir's films that results from these assumptions is also reflected in Nevin's more skeptical evaluation of the “crack” and the escape it enables: “*the ligne de fuite* that brings characters beyond the *point de fuite* potentially represents little more than a pyrrhic victory” (p.

19). This prospective recognition of a greater social pessimism in the films—which is then taken to reflect Renoir's pessimistic assessment of the times he lived through—will become a unifying theme of the book as a whole. For this reader, there was also a form of suspense involved in following Nevin's analyses; by reading the diegetic worlds of the films as darker in the first place, Nevin raises the bar for signs of hope and optimism, which often dwindle to the faintest glimmers of light at the end of the tunnel, thus cracking (the hopeful crack of) Deleuze's crystal: we *don't* get a winner each time. The Renoir that emerges from Nevin's analyses is perhaps more realistic about the times he lived through than Deleuze imagined him to be, and perhaps also less contradictory or confused than his politically-minded critics have taken him to be.

Qualifying the ahistorical idealism of the Deleuzian hypothesis with greater attention to the historical contexts and contemporary social implications of the films reflects the influence of the politically-minded historicism that has been a prominent strain of Renoir scholarship ever since the 1986 publication of Christopher Faulkner's seminal *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*.<sup>[6]</sup> According to this view there are, in both principle and practice, as many different Renoirs as there are distinct ideological phases or moments in the director's work; with this in mind, Nevin follows Faulkner and others in organizing the films he examines, and the chapters of the book, in terms of groups understood to be distinctly different.

Having laid out the terms on which he proposes to test Deleuze's hypotheses against the textual evidence, Nevin organizes his analysis of the twelve films into four chapters, each of which treats three films presumed to have a defining feature in common: an urban setting (*La Chienne*, 1931; *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, 1932; *La Règle du jeu*, 1939), a rural setting (*Le Bled*, 1929; *The Southerner*, 1945; *The River*, 1951), a historical connection with the Popular Front (*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, 1936; *Les Bas-fonds*, 1936; *La Grande Illusion*, 1937), and an “anti-realist” (that is, more theatrical) style (*Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1946; *The Golden Coach*, 1952; *Elena et les hommes*, 1956). To anyone familiar with the films, the strengths and weaknesses of these critical categories may already be visible at a distance, insofar as the films in the second two groups cohere in the mind's eye fairly well, meshing with both the assigned category and each other, while the films in the first two do not. As it turns out, Nevin does not spend much time arguing that, for example, *Le Bled* (dealing explicitly with hierarchical colonial relations in Algeria), *The Southerner* (dealing with an American farmer's struggles with both nature and economic issues) and *The River* (a coming of age story set in India that generally elides the issue of colonialism) are significantly linked by the rurality of their locations, but instead assumes that, in one way or another, each film depicts an oppressive theatrical society that both blocks and motivates a project of flight or escape by characters. With this broader hypothesis in mind, he is then relatively free to work each film in relation to the assigned category *or* develop other themes of analysis. Thus, the analysis of *The Southerner* is, in fact, built around a detailed analysis of spatial and social relations, whereas the equally strong and illuminating reading of *The River* focuses almost exclusively on the concepts outlined in Deleuze's original formulations—theatrical role-playing, mirrored relations, the actual and virtual, and so on, insofar as these help make the best sense of the film's intricate narrative structure and articulation of time. In the final analysis, the liberties Nevin allows himself in departing from strict adherence to his own critical premises are all to the book's advantage. Once again, Renoir's films emerge as richer, more productive of thought and enjoyment, because they consistently elude our auteurist expectations.

## NOTES

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Caleta. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 81.

[2] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 70.

[3] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 85.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Deleuze, *Cinema 2* p. 86.

[6] Christopher Faulkner, *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). The long-term influence of Faulkner's book is evident throughout the round-up of contemporary scholarship in Ginette Vincendeau and Alastair Phillips, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Jean Renoir* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

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