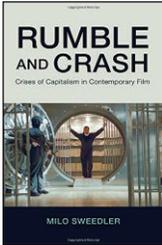


Review



Rumble and Crash: Crises of Capitalism in Contemporary Film.

By Milo Sweedler. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019. 222 pp. ISBN: 9781438472799.

Rumble and Crash: Crises of Capitalism in Contemporary Film was generated out of the tumult of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the period in American culture delimited by 9/11, on the one hand, and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, on the other. One senses the author's barely controlled rage, productively distilled into these illuminating and insightful pages. Pulling no punches, Sweedler makes his political affiliations clear in a cultural-ideological landscape whose increasingly Manichean nature makes it dangerously easy for an intelligent and thoughtful person to choose sides. This is where Sweedler's healthily leftist and highly ethical approach to his subject reveals its critical value. The introduction explains what is not apparent in the book's title: that the six American films, individually analyzed in separate chapters, are all read as allegorical expressions of what Sweedler calls the crises of contemporary capitalism. Substituting the optical metaphor of *refraction* for mimetic reflection, Sweedler convincingly elucidates the complex allegorical message conveyed by each film: Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005), Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005), Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2006), Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), and Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013). The first four films predate 2008. Of these, all but one refract "the vicissitudes of capital" (p. xv) in stories that are explicitly political, but not in the sense Sweedler highlights. Hence the call for his type of allegorical reading. *Inside Man*, as a bank-heist thriller, more clearly lends itself to a kind of allegorical reading. The last two films, both from 2013, "allegorize the [2008] financial meltdown itself" (p. xv), with *Blue Jasmine*, again (like Lee's film), more readily offering itself to a conventional allegorical approach if only because of its story's evident lack of overt political engagement (p. xv). In juxtaposing Lee's and Allen's films alongside *Children of Men* or *Syriana* as allegories of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, Sweedler is implicitly claiming for all six works a categorical likeness that is not immediately evident on the surface. This is the beauty of allegory as an aesthetic and narrative-didactic category. These diverse films are united, argues Sweedler, by "their refraction of a common problem ... one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century" (p. xvi)—i.e., late capitalism and the vast social and structural inequities, and the economic and environmental crises, to which it has given rise. In Sweedler's words, to date, "no book-length study has analyzed the role of film as the platform and allegory as the narrative device used to express the increasingly pervasive sense that the economic system that we have known and accepted as inevitable and ubiquitous is riddled with self-destructive flaws"

(p. xvi). *Rumble and Crash* admirably fills this gap. As he puts it, following Walter Benjamin, “there is something about the early twenty-first century that calls forth the allegorical mode of representation” (p. 1).

But what exactly does Sweedler mean by “allegorical refraction,” or allegory per se? Why disembalm this seemingly hoary category, marshalling it in the service of such a pressingly current set of concerns? Sweedler grounds his approach in Angus Fletcher’s *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, reissued in 2012. In his classic 1964 text, Fletcher defines allegory as a rhetorical trope that is itself defined, like irony, as saying one thing and meaning another (2012, p. 2). Etymologically, allegory derives from the Greek verb *agoreuein*, to speak openly (in the marketplace: *agora*), + *allos*, other. Allegory, therefore, literally means to openly speak *otherwise* in public (in the marketplace), at one or more removes, as many cultural producers do when they make their work public. This is why Fletcher remarks that allegory “destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words”—or, in this case, our audiovisual messages—“mean what they say” (2012, p. 2). Allegory is, therefore, ideally situated to facilitate the speaking about, or representation of, things that are otherwise very difficult or impossible to say or show. The difference between and among pre-modern, modern, and twenty-first century cinematic allegory inheres in the quality of this unrepresentable quantity, insofar as we have gone from union with the divine, for instance, to Love, or Justice, or Evil; to specific political situations that resist representation or critique either because they are too complex or too close to home, or simply because it is forbidden to discuss or represent them publicly. Moreover, we live in an era in which the very idea of something that cannot be represented in the form of an image is inconceivable. In Sweedler’s words, “[r]ather than ‘saying what it means,’ allegory means something that it does not say. It offers an image of something—a person, an idea, a quality or characteristic, a process, or an event—that does not or cannot appear as such” (p. xvii). As tropes that say one thing and mean another, allegory shares a fundamental doubleness with irony. This is a notoriously risky assertion, however, as it always ultimately depends on interpretive rather than compositional knowledge; on something imported from outside into the text rather than simply what is manifest there.

It is necessary to consider the question of interpreting an ironic or allegorical text in its historical context. Individual interpreters feel a sense of entitlement, claiming the right to affirm, and the obligation to accept, the superiority of latent over manifest sense—a preference of great antiquity, yet never as rampant as in this socially mediated, conspiracy theory-obsessed, contemporary moment of 24/7 consumption. Sweedler emphasizes the distinction “between a work’s manifest narrative content and its latent or implicit meaning” (p. xvi). This is the distinction upon which allegory depends. Alongside the persistence of allegory as mode of expression or narration, *allegoresis*—the allegorical mode of interpretation—generally defines the dominant and largely unreflective approach to consuming later twentieth and early twenty-first century popular culture. The average consumer or viewer is not likely to describe their approach to popular cultural narrative as a form of *allegoresis*, whose origins reside in biblical exegesis, and whose practice reached a height of refinement in Dante’s four-

teenth century, fourfold model of reading the *Commedia*. Contemporary allegoresis is both more banal and superficially secular in form than the latter, concealing a desire for the type of under- or overlying order or meaning that is latent in pre-modern allegory. I am speaking here of the tendency to read pop cultural texts—especially commercial films—according to received universals or absolutes; what Fletcher calls “the idolatry of unexamined ideas” (p. 374). To its immense credit, *Rumble and Crash* does not succumb to this interpretive tendency.

In his new Afterword, written some fifty years after his book’s first publication, Fletcher (2012) asserts that allegory remains as widespread and as significant as ever:

electronic technology has molded an apparently (if not actually) shrinking yet simultaneously in some ways expanding sphere of human communication. ... [A] shrinking communicative sphere has central relevance to the whole question of allegory. When many years ago I began this study, the seeds of the present were in the ground or at least ready to plant, and for decades it seemed to me a foregone conclusion that not only in the West, but everywhere in the world, the allegorical mode would recapture the prominence it possessed during the Middle Ages, which in fact has transpired, as predicted. (pp. 370–371)

In Sweedler’s view, Fletcher’s observation about allegory’s ongoing ubiquity and significance is entirely symptomatic of the current moment: allegory, Sweedler argues, “is the representational mode endemic to multinational capitalism in its advanced stage” (p. 158). This is precisely the “enigma” (p. xvii) of the present era that allegory serves to (indirectly) reveal, and, “[a]s long as global capitalism is allowed to continue on its current trajectory of limitless expansion ... allegory—the mode of representation that corresponds to this monstrous system—will be in fashion” (p. xix). In effect, what Fredric Jameson calls the “vast and properly unrepresentable totality” of capitalist globalization” is a kind of “sublime object” whose only proper mode of representation is allegory, because allegory, since Kant, at least, is the narrative mode corresponding to the aesthetic effect of the sublime. Extending this point into a contemporary posthumanist discourse, global capitalism is an instance of what Timothy Morton calls a “hyperobject” (2013, p. 1), an object, like the internet, or climate change, so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization and comprehension; in other words, not really an object at all. Allegory is the only aesthetic-narrative modality equal to the task of “representing” (by refracting) the sublime in this highly specific sense.

Sweedler acknowledges that what he is “doing” in his book is “cinematic allegoresis”: “‘Allegoresis’ designates what people *read into* a text, rather than what a given cultural producer meant to communicate in creating the work” (p. xx). This is to acknowledge, in effect, that all critical interpretation is allegoresis, and therefore, on a fundamental level, all cultural text are allegories. This is salutary, if only because it emancipates the critic from any reading beholden to the author’s supposed intentions—to the myth, in this case, of the filmmaker as auteur, which short-circuits any political-ideological critique (p. xx). The claim that all cultural text are allegories also is dangerous

if only because it threatens to empty the category of allegory of all meaning. However, it also is strategic in that such an approach to “cultural interpretation ... resolves the apparent paradox of using a particularly capital-intensive and commodified art form to shed light on the prospective self-destruction of capitalism” (p. xxi). Sweedler is unapologetic about his neo-Marxist/Frankfurt School approach to reading these films. The attention he gives to the insidious ideological effects of Hollywood movies is tonic, as this particular aspect of contemporary mass culture is as significant today as in 1947, when Adorno and Horkheimer published their culture industry essay—if not more so. This said, the movies themselves, like the surrounding social/political/economic/cultural terrain, have changed substantially.

The binary model of latent-manifest meaning on which a conventional understanding of allegory depends also maps onto a psychological theory of film production: “Recurrent cinematic themes, motifs, and figures condense a society’s anxieties and wishes at a moment in time into visual and narrative form” (p. xxiv). In sum, for Sweedler, “whether or not they mean to and whether or not they want to, filmmakers—even the ones most beholden to the industry—allegorize to some degree the political content of daily life” (p. xxv). In this, Sweedler elaborates the other major avenue of genuinely political filmmaking, apart from the legacy of the self-reflexive Brechtianisms one sees in Godard’s mid-1960s films, for instance—a radically formalist tendency that by the 1990s had been thoroughly defanged, domesticated, inevitably influencing the audiovisual style of everything from music video to TV commercial, losing all political efficacy in the process. Sweedler’s allegorical approach, by contrast, locates counterhegemonic political content in films whose form adheres to generally realist parameters, and whose content, as noted above, may lack any overt political subject matter. Neither Godard nor Brecht require “refraction” as their works are already refracted enough; there is a comparable challenge in locating the genuinely political critique in the more prosaic forms of commercial genre filmmaking. Finally, what Sweedler’s book effectively reveals in its very methodology is the vast gap between premodern and contemporary pop cultural allegory that is defined by the evolution from a print-based culture to one constructed around an audiovisual—emphasis on *visual*—interface. This development is too long and complex to analyze here, but suffice it to say that Sweedler’s allegorical approach in *Rumble and Crash* is entirely justified by this larger cultural-technical shift in reading and viewing habits, dating at least from the invention of cinema as a photographically based medium in the 1890s and continuing—with certain interesting alterations—into the digitally determined twenty-first century.

References

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