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Abstract

Review of Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber. *Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema*. Northwestern UP, 2020. 197 pp.

Keywords

precarious intimacies, Maria Stehle, Beverly Weber, affect, postcolonialism, Western European film

Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber. *Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema*. Northwestern UP, 2020. 197 pp.

With *Precarious Intimacies*, their study of touch in recent French, German, and other Western European films, Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber consciously enter the lineage of work in feminism, postcolonialism, and affect theory by figures like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Lisa Lowe. In this way, their examination of a specific set of films is useful to a much broader array of scholars studying subjects like migration, commodified bodies, white fragility, theories of narrative (and resistance to it), and especially affect—its false leads, its tempting emotional pulls and charges, and its genuine potential for generating orientation toward new and better futures.

Stehle and Weber frame all of this through the lens of precarious intimacy: a direct touch (kissing, embracing, holding hands, braiding hair) or a mediated touch (through an article of clothing, a gift of jewelry) that might signal either oppressive violence or potential escape from it, authentic or inauthentic hospitality, exploitation or liberation. If we attend closely to the role of touch and other intimacies in these films and beyond, argue the co-authors, we have a new tool for close reading, allowing us to locate or even open up productive spaces for resistance. The lessons of the book take readers through both the optimistic touch that resists or defies horrific political situations and the oppressive touch that enacts or evidences them.

The authors examine these intimacies at work in a number of recent films, convincingly weaving together such seemingly disparate foci as the sex tourism of *Paradise: Love* (2012), the politicized religion of *The Wedding Song* (2008), and the deadly migration journey of *Welcome* (2009). The thematic through lines are the exploitative horrors of neoliberal capitalism, the disingenuous narratives of Europe's humaneness, the invisibility and hypervisibility of the migrant—all convincingly made perceptible anew through attention to moments of touch and intimacy. The theoretical through lines include the alternative futures Berlant places up against neoliberalism's horrors and the sticky emotions Ahmed sees impressed upon bodies. The book also takes up Ahmed's exhortation to reorient affects like happiness and affective figures like the killjoy.

Stehle and Weber effectively lay out the familiar political and affective problems, but their lens also highlights far less familiar problems and convinces us of their importance. Loosely, these are problems of narrative, broadly conceived. The Eurocentric thrust of many filmic narratives, for example, aligns our focus and feelings on white characters rather than on the characters of color that they exploit. "Europe" itself both is a narrative (and a narrative failure) and writes Saidian narratives about self and other, producing precarity for some while telling a story about all it promises and selling a multicultural, tolerant, postracial fantasy that

obscures and causes real harms. (It seems to me that one obvious lurker in the background here is Jacques Derrida on hospitality.) Europe writes itself a narrative of secular tolerance regarding sexuality, for example, as a way of also projecting a narrative of intolerance and repression onto racialized others.

One implied way to combat the uncomplicated, singular story is embedded in the very co-authorship of *Precarious Intimacies*, which Stehle and Weber pitch as involving and intensifying a grappling with self and a challenging of one's own thoughts by continually touching each other's writing. The book itself is a convincing artifact in defense of those values we so frequently (and vaguely) lionize in the humanities: collaboration and critical thought.

Stehle and Weber pitch reading for precarious intimacies as the book's explicit tool. So, add "critical reading" to the list above. And they deliver: critical reading here often means reading past a filmmaker's likely positive political intentions to critique remaining Eurocentric shortcomings, for example. So, too, do the authors frequently read against the feeling of the films. The result is a kind of illumination we do not frequently find in academic readings of films that so obviously aim to be, and largely succeed at being, politically aware and active. That is, the readings Stehle and Weber put forth disrupt even positive political recipes, and in doing so, they create another model of what it means to offer continual challenge to even the friendliest narratives we encounter.

This all means one might leave a reading of this book with much more than just a new understanding of the films it surveys or the theories it deploys. In addition to attention to precarious intimacy as itself a tool of critical reading, we get a new, more precise language for understanding what it means to read critically: challenge, disruption, interruption, thwarting. Critical reading and critical thought are not smooth, easy activities. Collaboration can be messy and challenging. Stehle and Weber remind us that critical thought means valuing that which challenges and even implicates us, rather than making us feel comfortable.

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