
doi:10.1017/S0034670520000923

In *Cinema Pessimism: A Political Theory of Representation and Reciprocity*, Joshua Foa Dienstag investigates “the general limits of representation’s ability to forward democratic aims.” Using a variety of films as case studies for his analysis, Dienstag demonstrates that “representation may have a place in our democratic system but it is not an end in itself, and its benefits, whatever they are, come along with a set of costs that need to be carefully considered” (5). *Cinema Pessimism* consists of seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. Each of the five substantive chapters is devoted to a single film or filmmaker. By approaching this important political question through the lens of film, Dienstag offers an accessible, intriguing, and occasionally frustrating examination of our collective striving to see ourselves reflected in the art we consume and the governors we elect.

The first two films examined by Dienstag are Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), which concern the use of technological artifacts to represent human bodies, in the case of *Blade Runner*, and human personality, in the case of *Her*. According to Dienstag’s astute analysis, these films highlight the dangers inherent in the unequal relationship between representative and represented. *Her* tells the story of a man’s romantic relationship with an Alexa-like artificial intelligence program named Samantha. Samantha is as perfect a representation of Theodore’s desires as is possible, and he quickly comes to prefer her company to that of his fellow human beings. By the end of the film, however, Samantha’s intelligence and capabilities far outstrip that of her human companion, and she leaves Theodore in favor of the company of other AIs like herself.

As Dienstag argues, the film showcases “our willingness to immerse ourselves in a pleasing but unequal relationship at the expense of equal, reciprocal, but often difficult and painful relationships with other humans” (22). In other words, as technology progresses to the point that our preferences and desires are perfectly mirrored back to us, we become increasingly intolerant of any form of representation that deviates from this mirror in any way. We come to believe that political representatives who do not perfectly mirror our preferences do not truly reflect us. Instead of engaging in political discourse or persuasion, we turn from the political world altogether, preferring instead the company of our curated echo chambers. As Dienstag articulates the danger, “We are familiar with narcissism as a character flaw; we are less familiar with it as a structural problem of representative democracy” (37).

*Blade Runner* portrays a world where androids, indistinguishable from human beings and known as “replicants,” have been designed to fulfill a variety of roles considered undesirable by humans, ranging from dangerous mining work to prostitution. But the injustice of the replicants’ position is not
the primary concern of the chapter. Instead, Dienstag explores the relationship between human and replicant to discuss Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s teaching on the dangers of the theater, which produces an unequal relationship between actor and audience, subject and object, that is “inimical to freedom, which inequality inhibits” (46). The audience uses the actor to experience emotion, without having to reciprocate as one would in a genuine relationship. The actor, on the other hand, is endowed with the great power to manipulate the emotions of the audience, a power that is only safe when confined to the theater. In the context of the film, the replicant mimics human behavior, allowing the human to experience, for example, a simulacrum of a sexual relationship without actually considering another person’s emotions or desires. Once the relationship of actor and audience transitions into representative politics, however, the power of the representative to manipulate and control their audience becomes much more dangerous. These two chapters are excellent, offering an insightful argument that I would be eager to see developed further.

Dienstag next turns his attention to John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), a classic western following the struggle of a frontier settlement’s attempt to achieve political legitimacy. At the heart of his analysis is what Dienstag calls the “democratic paradox” (60), the reality that any formation of a political society, even a democratic one, necessarily rests on the exclusion of those outside arbitrarily defined borders. This paradox raises questions: Who decides how the borders will be drawn? Who votes on the initial decision to transition from frontier to township? And what happens to residents who oppose the majority on these questions? Though the people of Liberty Valance successfully find a way to end the violence plaguing their society and form a township, they can do so only through perpetuating a lie. As a result, Dienstag finds in the film “a pessimism that views representation as a necessary burden that allows us to carry on with democracy while exacting a high price to our happiness for doing so” (60).

Dienstag’s discussion in chapter 4 of filmmaker Lars von Trier’s evolving attempt to represent evil on screen is the least successful. While his analysis of the films Europa (1991) and Melancholia (2011) is insightful (his explanation of the “werewolf perspective” is particularly delightful), the lesson from these films about political representation is less clear. Dienstag posits that “representation can improve on direct democracy not by filtering evil out of a population but, paradoxically, by accentuating it” (106). While this is an interesting idea, and one worth discussing, I ultimately find Deinstag’s argument unpersuasive.

Finally, Dienstag examines the Up films, a series of documentaries following a group of young British children from a variety of backgrounds. A new film is produced every seven years, collectively tracking the lives of their subjects over the past forty-nine years. Initially conceived as a project that would prove that class determines the lives of the children, the Up films are, in Dienstag’s words, “a magnificent disaster” (109). They are a disaster
because the films failed to prove the filmmaker’s initial argument—class did not determine the trajectory of the children’s lives to nearly the degree predicted. They are magnificent because they provide an extraordinary representation of fourteen individual lives. Each subject has a permanent record of the various stages of their own life; yet all are dissatisfied with their portrayal, believing that the films do not adequately capture the nuances of their decisions and experiences. As Dienstag argues, the subjects’ situation “parallels that of the modern democratic citizen: extraordinarily well-represented in one sense but, at the same time, thoroughly alienated from the scheme of representation as it stands” (110).

As Dienstag posits, we are living in a golden age of representation. Our entertainment is tailored to our preferences to an astonishing degree; direct interaction with our political representatives (or their representatives) is just a few clicks away on social media; and mainstream culture is more concerned than ever with both substantive and descriptive representation in all areas of public life. Yet modern citizens of representative democracies are increasingly dissatisfied with their political representation, both in terms of the individual representatives elected to office and the ability of representative politics to adequately reflect the concerns of the populace. Dienstag’s book, by focusing on film, offers an intriguing approach to this problem. While the book suffers somewhat from a lack of cohesion in its philosophical grounding, as there is no common thinker or school of thought linking the various chapters’ film analysis, there is enough heft to each individual part of the book to justify its inclusion in the ranks of valuable studies of the challenges and dangers of political representation.

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doi:10.1017/978034670520000935

Jeremy Arnold’s Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory is an intelligent and innovative analysis of two traditions of thought typically deemed incommensurable to one another. It is a unique addition to recent works that explore the development of Anglo-American political theory in the postwar period; neither wholly polemical nor simply