

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The End: An Electric Sheep Anthology* by Virginie Sélavy

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Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (WINTER 2011), pp. 77-78

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41691111>

Accessed: 17-09-2016 01:46 UTC

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meaning and nuances. The way the portrait shifts back and forth in time and focus, juggling references and comparisons, is more Altmanesque than Hustonian, perhaps, but when it works, it really works.

Huston the man comes alive in this book. Meyers is wonderful with physical depictions, scene settings, descriptions of Huston's practiced speech patterns and flamboyant garb and the director's endearing when they weren't maddening quirks and habits. There was an overflow of women in the director's love life, and the ladies get their share of empathy and individual treatment, although the sex is full-bore; to be fair this was also a strongpoint of Grobel's book. The author pokes into too many corners of Huston's story to cover in a review, stuffing the book with colorful detail and discoveries. Meyers is nothing if not idiosyncratic in his selection of material, though his asides can be jarring. (Writing about Huston's futile attempt to adapt Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees*, with all its "repetitive scenes and boring dialogue," Meyers sympathizes with the director, adding parenthetically, "I've tried to write the script myself; it can't be done.")

Meyers is smart about the films: his plot summaries are clever and amusing, and while he doesn't venture analysis of every individual film, he's not shy about throwing off big blanket pronouncements. ("His wild, freewheeling films had more hauteur than auteur, and his great theme was the tremendous struggle to achieve the impossible and the loss of the goal at the moment of triumph.") He rises to the occasion when chronicling the breakthrough (*The Maltese Falcon*) and consensus (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) "Masterpieces," and straight through to *The Dead*—Huston's haunting last testament—his commentary remains insightful.

Huston's reputation as Hollywood's foremost adaptor of great works—Melville, Kipling, Joyce, Stephen Crane, B. Traven, Dashiell Hammett, etc.—is what has hurt his reputation with some auteurists who, historically at least, dating from the French, prized *mise-en-scène* over script. This is up Meyers's alley as a *litterateur*. But although he did "extensive research" into Huston's papers at the Margaret Herrick Library, I found myself disappointed by the degree to which he focused on the differences between the published fiction and Huston's faithful adaptations, that is, what Huston brought of himself, as distinct from the novels, to the scripts, or what his collaborators brought to Huston. Neither Grobel nor Meyers, for example, pay sufficient attention to Anthony Veiller, who notably cowrote at least five strong films with Huston. Huston gets the credit (in Meyers's view) for the courageous anti-McCarthyist implications of *Key Largo*, never mind that cowriter Richard Brooks was (in my opinion) braver politically.

Curiously, Meyers skips rather quickly if not lightly over Huston's World War II

experience, and I was disturbed by what seemed to be an equally quick, light treatment of Huston's brief tenure as a leader of the Committee for the First Amendment protesting the House Committee on Un-American Activities' attack on Hollywood in 1947. His leadership was brief (perhaps he was dragged along by close friend William Wyler), and he turned tail after the Washington, D.C., hearings, condemning the Ten he had once supported. Meyers sees Huston as a basically apolitical man who was outraged initially by the injustice of the situation but then grew alienated by the Hollywood Ten's "belligerent" (a point-of-view cliché that should really be banished from any intelligent account of the blacklist) resistance in Washington. After the blacklist picked up steam, he settled in Ireland, ostensibly for tax reasons.

I had the opportunity once to ask Huston if his exile to Ireland had anything to do with the blacklist, and his mood turned ugly; he very angrily replied something to the effect that the Ten were all communists and they got what they deserved. What? Was he the only person in Hollywood who didn't know John Howard Lawson, et al., were communists? And they got what they deserved? What Huston eventually got was the grand estate St. Clerans in Galway as his base of operations; it can be argued that he had cunningly managed to escape not only the blacklist but also censorious Hollywood, while, free of all inhibition, he entered into a rich period of filmmaking in the 1950s.

Most authors have blind spots or areas of weakness, and I think Meyers is insensitive to the possible political differences between Huston and onetime collaborator Howard Koch, one of the Hollywood Nineteen, leading to the breach between them; he writes astoundingly, for example, that Lillian Hellman "betrayed her friends by naming names during the witch hunts") and says the rest of the Ten, after Lawson, followed his example "like sheep rushing off a cliff." (They had an unhappy agreement to act in common in front of the committee, and sheep would veer from a cliff, except in movies like *Far From the Madding Crowd*.) Meyers reports, from a 1953 legal surrender signed by Huston—"forced to bend the knee, to repent and confess"—that he defended the CFA, disassociated himself from the Ten, "who refused to admit they were communists and exploited the CFA," apologized for his connection to communist front organizations that "secretly followed the party line" and categorically rejected Communism. OK—but perhaps not courageous. My guess is there is more to be found out in the future and it might not be in Huston's papers.

Huston's friend Bogart (when listing comparisons between the two, Meyers neglects to mention this) was another staunch liberal who bailed on the Hollywood Ten and on everyone who came after. The late, sharp-minded Arthur Laurents

pegged Huston nastily in *The Way We Were*, the 1972 novel even more than the compromised 1973 film. (Complaining about the Ten, Bissinger, the Huston character, calls them "boring, masochistic assholes," continuing: "I am for the right of any and all fools to make fools of themselves. Be they heads of studios, fatheaded congressmen, or hotheaded parlor pinks. I also believe if you put your head in the noose, be prepared to hang. And don't expect tears from me." Barbra Streisand didn't get to say in the film what Katie—her character—says next in the book. "I'll bet you're not even liberal in the bedroom, little George," Katie retorts coldly before walking off.) The cowardice of Hollywood liberals, crucial to implementing the blacklist, was demonstrated in various ways, sometimes explicitly, sometimes just by bailing out—with lower taxes making it a win-win.

But I don't want to pick at the faults or fixate on my disagreements with this engaging, provocative book. Publishing is so frail and what we used to call film culture continues to shrink, with what we used to take for granted as a constant stream of film books dwindling. After reading Grobel's book and Huston's own, after spending several days at a Directors Guild event on the *Queen Mary*, back in the early 1980s, with Huston answering questions about his films, and after attending a Huston centenary conference in Ireland back in 2009, I turned to this book skeptically. But the author has worked hard and won me over with consistent invention in structure and writing and with his sincere admiration for Huston's ability to carve the magnificent career he did, being the man he was.—Patrick McGilligan

## The End:

### *An Electric Sheep Anthology*

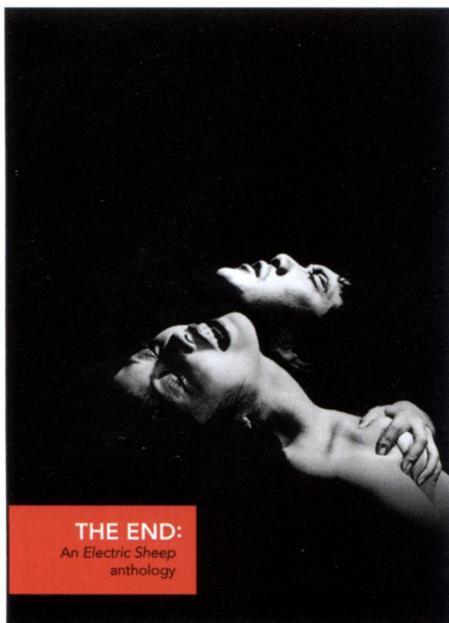
Edited by Virginie Sélavy. London:

Strange Attractor Press, 2011.

260 pp., illus. Paperback: £13.99.

*Electric Sheep*, which describes itself as offering "a deviant view of cinema," began life as a print magazine, published by Wallflower Press, in September 2007. Within two years, it had transformed into a Web-based publication and, since then, has gone from strength to strength ([www.electricsheep-magazine.com](http://www.electricsheep-magazine.com)). *The End* is a book of eclectic and innovative essays on film compiled and anthologized by *Electric Sheep's* founder, editor, and guiding muse, Virginie Sélavy. This lively and appealing collection features work by writers and filmmakers, a few well-known but mostly younger and/or more obscure, who've come together to celebrate the fringes of cinematic art.

The premise behind this attractive anthology is that cinema as we know it is coming to an end—and what time is more fascinating to live in than a time of ruin and collapse? This joyfully apocalyptic tone is set



by the collection's opening essay, "A Feast of Skeletons," a haunting meditation by film curator and writer Ian Francis on cinema's love affair with its own demise. The theme of decay is picked up again in "Cusp," Canadian film critic Greg Klymkiv's memoir of movie distribution and production in the 1970s and '80s, and again in a section of the book called "Closing Shots," in which directors including the Brothers Quay, Peter Whitehead, Debra Granik, and Michael Almereyda briefly discuss the final shots of films as different as Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977), and Wojciech Has's *The Hour-Glass Sanatorium* (1973).

Lest it be thought, however, that *The End* is all about endings, in another way, this interdisciplinary anthology also suggests that the end is also the beginning, and just as one kind of cinema is dying out, another kind of cinema—or, at least, another way of thinking about cinema—is being born. This theme emerges in Nicola Woodham's compelling essay on Nigerian evangelist/witchcraft movies, Alex Fitch and Tom Humberstone's illustrated essay on post-Romero zombie films, journalist Toby Weidmann's chapter on video games as "interactive films," and German experimental animator Max Hattler's recursive meditation on continuous digital loops. Other high points include Frances Morgan's essay on sub-bass, tape decay, and noise in the films of David Lynch, Pamela Jahn's piece on Kōji Wakamatsu's Japanese nihilists, Jack Sargeant's smart appreciation of *The Human Centipede* (Tom Six, 2009), and Virginie Sélavy's engaging meditation on Henri-Georges Clouzot's ill-fated *Inferno*.

What do these subjects have in common? Not much, that's for sure, and fastidious readers might be put off by the anthology's looseness; most readers, however, should

have no problem with the volume's lack of tight focus. Some of the essays are on particular films, others deal with genres, and still others consider movie theaters, distribution, and the state of cinema in general. The work of marginal and neglected directors is brought to the forefront, yet other chapters deal with more mainstream topics—the volume contains essays on Bergman, Clouzot, and Lynch—which begs the question: what gives *Electric Sheep* its "deviant" sensibility? It's not the films, for sure, since many of those discussed are relatively canonical; plus, there's nothing deviant about simply discussing a weird or far-out film, as countless plodding academic essays have testified for many years. No, the deviant element here is the unexpected angles from which these cinematic gems are explored. What these essays all share is a certain sensibility—an informed, intelligent, playful, and slightly offbeat tone that is characteristic of *Electric Sheep*'s articles, reviews, podcasts, and blog.

This unity of tone is perhaps more remarkable than it sounds. Unfortunately, a great deal of writing on so-called "fringe" and "deviant" cinema is second rate: either gushy, overwrought and indiscriminating, or else staidly dry and academic, strained and defensive, as if the author were embarrassed by an interest in what others might consider juvenile material. Thankfully, *The End* is not like this. The writing is clear and intelligent, and the authors feel no obligation to defend their wanderings off the beaten track of cinema. One gets the sense that these contributors care deeply about the films they've chosen to discuss. Ironically, this clarity and intelligence is probably due to the fact that very few of these authors are academics. They are, for the most part, authors involved, however peripherally, in the world of cinema. They are free-lancers, curators, critics, programmers, animators, reviewers, artists, and musicians.

Finally, a word or two must be said about the book's format. This appealing, 250-page volume is beautifully designed. The essays are illustrated not only with stills from various films, but also with fabulous black-and-white illustrations, most of them by comic-book illustrator Pearlyn Quan. Like *Electric Sheep* itself, the book's publishing house, Strange Attractor, has transformed itself through a number of incarnations. It began as a series of live events at the Horse Hospital in London's Bloomsbury, then became an annual publication, then an online forum for the discussion of outlandish and mysterious happenings; it has now transformed itself into a publishing house. "Strange Attractor celebrates unpopular culture," runs its mission statement. "We declare war on mediocrity and a pox on the foot soldiers of stupidity. Join us." If *The End* is anything to go by, we should not ignore this stirring call to arms.—**Mikita Brottman**

## Contributors

**Nana Asfour** is a writer on film and art based in New York and has contributed several essays on Middle Eastern cinema to *Cineaste* ... **Michael Atkinson** is the author of seven books and writes regularly for *The Village Voice*, *Sight & Sound*, *In These Times*, *IFC.com*, *TCM.com*, and *LA Weekly* ... **Mikita Brottman** is the author of three books on the horror film and teaches at the Maryland Institute College of Art ... **George Carstoea** is an MFA candidate in the Film Studies program at Boston University ... **Robert Cashill**, a *Cineaste* Associate, is the Film Editor of *Popdose.com* and a member of the Online Film Critics Society ... **Ciara Chambers** is a Lecturer in Film Studies in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, and author of *Ireland in the Newsreels* (Irish Academic Press, 2012) ... **Borah Chung** studied film and Asian studies at Rutgers University and her writing focuses on Korean culture and feminism in film ... **Gary Crowds** is the Editor-in-Chief of *Cineaste* ... **Christian Delage**, a historian and filmmaker, is also a professor at the University Paris 8 and Sciences Po Paris ... **Thomas Doherty** is a professor of American Studies at Brandeis University and the author of numerous books ... **Monica Filimon** has earned a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University and is now an assistant professor in the English Department at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY ... **Maria Garcia** is a New York City based writer ... **Rahul Hamid** teaches film at New York University and is completing a study in postrevolutionary Iranian cinema ... **Julie Jones** is a professor of Spanish at the University of New Orleans and has written extensively on Luis Buñuel ... **Robert Koehler** also writes film criticism for *Variety* and *Cinema Scope* ... **Stuart Liebman** continues to write a book about the representation of the Holocaust in world cinema, 1944–1956 ... **Cynthia Lucia** is Film and Media Studies Program Director at Rider University and coeditor of *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film* ... **Catherine Martin** is pursuing a graduate degree in radio and television at Boston University ... **Patrick Z. McGavin** is a Chicago writer and film critic whose writing appears in *Time Out Chicago*, *The Boston Phoenix*, and *Stop Smiling* ... **Patrick McGilligan** is the author of numerous biographies including, most recently, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director* ... **Louis Menashe** is Professor Emeritus at Polytechnic Institute of New York University and author of *Moscow Believes in Tears* ... **Adam Nayman**, a film critic working in Toronto, writes for *Cinema Scope*, *Montage*, *Elle Canada*, *LA Weekly*, and *Eye Weekly* ... **Martha P. Nochimson** is the author of five books, most recently *Dying to Belong: Gangster Movies in Hollywood and Hong Kong* ... **Darragh O'Donoghue** works as an archivist in Dublin and has published in *The Irish Journal of French Studies* and *Senses of Cinema* ... **Joseph Pisano** grew up on the South Side of Chicago rooting for the White Sox, 2005 World Series champions, and his criticism has also appeared in *The Village Voice* ... **Richard Porton** is a *Cineaste* Editor as well as an occasional contributor to *Cinema Scope*, *The Daily Beast* and *Moving Image Source* ... **Leonard Quart** is the coauthor of the revised fourth edition of *American Film and Society Since 1945* ... **Harlow Robinson** is Professor of History and Cinema Studies at Northeastern University and the author of *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood's Russians* ... **David Sterritt** is Chair of the National Society of Film Critics and film professor at Columbia University and the Maryland Institute College of Art ... **Dennis West**, on behalf of Amnesty International, investigated cases of "desaparecidos" in Guatemala during the presidency of Vinicio Cerezo (1986–1991) ... **Theo Wulff** is a graduate student in Boston University's Film Studies program. ■