It was more than two decades ago that Joan Copjec put forward her compelling argument about the misappropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis by film theorists. At that time the problem concerned the tendency among film theorists to conflate Foucault's theory of gaze and apparatus (dispositif) with Lacan's theory of the gaze and mirror stage. She wrote: “[This is] [w]hat I take to be the central misconception of film theory: believing itself to be following Lacan, it conceives the [cinematic] screen as mirror; in doing so, however, it operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan’s more radical insight, whereby mirror is conceived as screen” (Copjec, 1994, pp. 15–17). To be sure, the problem was not that true believers somehow misunderstood Lacanian psychoanalysis, but rather that their premature understanding of Lacan’s early theories, compounded by an overzealous use of bricolage as writing strategy (which strikes me as the scholarly equivalent of “dabbling”), ruled out the possible discovery of his more relevant insight about the necessity of the screen. More to the point, it seemed to Copjec that the valuable psychoanalytic concept of the subject was eclipsed by an overemphasis on the Foucauldian notion of apparatus, so Copjec urged film theorists to put the subject back into the picture.

Today there remain two commitments worth reaffirming for film theory: the necessity of mirror conceived as screen, and the necessity of reaffirming a commitment to a theory of the subject through psychoanalysis and political philosophy. As it happens, there has been a growing exclusion and distaste toward psychoanalytic insights by recent film theorists. This has been best exemplified by the turn toward “post-theory” by David Bordwell (1996) and others. Matthew Flisfeder’s book situates itself somewhere at the end of the debate that occurred between David Bordwell and Slavoj Žižek. His book insists on the need for a sophisticated and politically aware psychoanalytic film theory, and he makes an effort to answer the question about the relevance of Lacanian film theory today. The question is answered through a number of crucial displacements, of which I will note two: first, readers are provided with an accessible introduction to Žižekian film analysis (including rapid discussions of the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Lacan), and second, readers quickly pass through descriptions of dozens of Hollywood films. With respect to the former displacement, one could claim that the first half of the book establishes the necessary groundwork for understanding everything written within the last few chapters. With respect to the latter displacement, one could claim that none of the films lure us away from understanding Žižek’s methodological framework.

It seems as if the cinema itself works through displacement. The screen effectively seduces us to “look over there” so that it might transmit its ideological content. But here things are not so simple. What Flisfeder reminds us is that we cannot do otherwise but look at the screen. Put differently, it is not that the screen obscures reality but rather that reality is only made possible through the screen. Flisfeder writes:
The fact that there is more truth in the appearance than in that which is supposedly concealed by it is one that decisively speaks to the connection between film theory and ideology critique. The essence, supposedly hidden behind the appearance, is already contained within the logic of the appearance itself. (p. 135)

This point is decisive for Flisfeder’s argument, and, more generally, for Žižekian film studies. It is not as if the screen obscures reality, but rather that its function is the arrangement of reality itself. Among the manifold arguments that Flisfeder presents is one about the necessity of incorporating the Lacanian notion of subjectivity into film analyses, and about the political consequences of making the excessive content of the film (e.g., minor details, slips) the measure of the film’s ideological importance. Flisfeder writes: “[O]ur concern here is with a particular ‘content’ that is elevated to the structuring detail of the form” (p. 106).

I would recommend this book to undergraduates, graduate students, and professors alike. The reader is eased into the material and quickly absorbed into the world of Žižekian film theory. Dozens of techniques are employed, many difficult concepts are explained, and examples abound. The book is an adaptation of Flisfeder’s doctoral dissertation and yet reads like a comprehensive overview of the field written for a general audience. Each chapter is composed of manageable chunks, and this makes reading it a pleasure rather than a burden. This book may help to ignite an exciting new trend in film theory, and I welcome it.

References

Duane Rousselle, Trent University