Reviewed by Seung-hoon Jeong

Contemporary Political Cinema

by Matthew Holtmeier.
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Every film is political or can be seen from a political angle. Still, not all films belong to the narrowly defined category of political cinema as oppositional to the political status quo and marked by an alternative ideology. Indeed, today there is no clear articulation of political cinema we might compare to the explicit doctrines of early Soviet revolutionary cinema, the post-1968 anti-representational politically inflected European modernism, or Latin American Third Cinema and its worldwide variations. In this post–Cold War age initiated with the so-called End of History, how could cinema be politicized more radically than its present engagement with the identity politics of the post-political, post-ideological system of triumphant global capitalism?[1] How would this politicization be significant, if indeed it still matters at all? Anybody interested in these questions will want to open Matthew Holtmeier's timely book *Contemporary Political Cinema*.

The book's lengthy introduction, which takes up almost a quarter of this relatively slim monograph, lays out the author's ambitious theoretical framework step by step. Holtmeier's core inspiration comes consistently and comprehensively from Gilles Deleuze's political philosophy and film theory. Interestingly, Holtmeier relates Deleuze's diagnosis of the sensory-motor collapse in the movement-image after World War II to Theodor Adorno's dialectical disillusionment with enlightenment rationalism after the Holocaust. Though Deleuze's political philosophy differs substantially from Adorno's dialectical thinking, Holtmeier reads the movement-image as a sort of dialectical practice driven by actions that change the situation and

1 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

constitute "the people" as "a unified subject" who could then be "co-opted in order to be exploited by individuals like Hitler and Stalin."[2] Adorno's condemnation of the Hollywood culture industry as fascistic and his championing of avant-garde music broadly resonate with Deleuze's evaluation of the value shift from classical to modern cinema in this postwar time frame. As Holtmeier explains, the decentered, disorienting time-image thus engages the project of the "counter-enlightenment," the loss of belief in the rational, causal, teleological progress of the world.[3] But this loss is political in that, Deleuze argues, it is necessary to nurture another belief, "a belief in the immanent or existential possibilities inherent in one's immediate experience."[4] That ambivalence is the political potential of apparently apolitical modern cinema. Since a new political program, once actualized, "carries the same repressive danger in constructing a homogeneous psychopolitical space under the banner of ideology," then the task of political cinema, according to Holtmeier, is to collapse any unifying system and identity into the non-signifying fabric of being.[5]

No wonder Holtmeier equates the classical production of political subjectivity, like the organization of revolutionary guerrillas in *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), with reducing this potential immanence to an individual subject. This process of "individuation" typically involves the subject's internalization of the state and market's biopower that works in the mode of modern "discipline" or postmodern "control."[6] Against this negative sense of biopower emerges a positive one that people themselves produce by becoming an amorphous, ununified, yet dynamic "multitude," as seen in the anti-globalization protest against the World Trade Organization summit in 1999 and the anti-capitalist movement of Occupy Wall Street in 2011.[7] Holtmeier intends to formulate a cinematic version of such multitudinous politics. It is a cinema that explores how repressive biopolitics becomes "intolerable" in individual lives; this intolerability could then rupture the hegemonic dialectic of resolving conflict only to reinstitute another norm, ideology, or identity.[8] It is a cinema that focuses on the daily existential lives under "intangible forces and flows of globalization" without depending on the extreme experiment of political modernism or the sweeping generalizations offered by grand narratives.[9] Holtmeier claims that solutions should be sought not in cinematic fiction but in spectators' reality.[10]

2 Matthew Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 8.

3 Holtmeier, 9.

4 Holtmeier, 9.

5 Holtmeier, 134.

6 See Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); and Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

8 Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema,* 7.

9 Holtmeier, 16–19.

10 Holtmeier, 16–19.

A model for this political cinema is the "minor literature" developed in Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975).[11] Just as minor literature deterritorializes the dominant discourse from within, Holtmeier argues, political cinema brings "a rupture in a commercial signifying system that has become so qualified and widespread that it has become majoritarian or cliché."[12] Holtmeier spotlights a set of "festival films" outside the mainstream market, minor films that depict fragmented subjects and multiple peoples who collectively articulate the intolerable in the manner of making visible "the people who are missing."[13] Instead of proposing or practicing any alternative political program, such films embody what he calls an "oblique ethics" that "explore[s] the limits over political realities . . . the limits of a bearable life, and the possibility of coexistence and co-operation."[14] What counts is "the [film's] potential to engender subjective change in its spectators, by revealing the internal ability of conflict and forced conformity to a political logic that differs on a biological, cultural, political, religious, and existential, that is to say, a biopolitical scale."[15]

Each of the five chapters in the book serves as a case study of contemporary political cinema in this framework. The first three center on the mobilization of Islamic identity for revolutionary purposes in Algerian, Malian, Iranian, and Iranian American cinema. While chapter 1 begins with *La battaglia di Algeri*, it contrasts the film's classical politicization of subjects based on clear boundaries of conflict with its modern retelling in *Hors-la-loi* (*Outside the Law*, Rachid Bouchareb, 2010), in which anti-colonial struggle by Algerians in France suggests that no coherent revolutionary subject identity exists. Chapter 2 examines prevalent global networks and impossible traditional revolutions through *Bab El-Oued City* (Merzak Allouache, 1994) and *Timbuktu* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014), which place even supposedly anti-globalization Islamic fundamentalists within the same global flows. In chapter 3, two films by Bahman Ghobadi showcase two modes of transnationality: *Niwemang* (*Half Moon*, 2006) stages the story of an overflowing Kurdish social web that fragments the Iranian national subject, and *Kasi az Gorbehaye Irani Khabar Nadareh* (*No One Knows About Persian Cats*, 2009) fragments that subject within Tehran in a music video style. The last two chapters pay attention to global capitalism via its two superpowers: China and the United States. Chapter 4 follows Jia Zhangke's early films, from *Xiao Wu* (*Pickpocket*, 1997) to *Rèn xiāo yáo* (*Unknown Pleasures*, 2002) and *Shìjiè* (*The World*, 2004), illuminating how this dissident auteur depicts banal events in post-socialist China to reveal its rapid embrace of capitalism and consequent social fractures. Finally, Iranian American filmmaker Ramin Bahrani's two films are spotlighted in chapter 5: *Man Push Cart* (2005), in which both narrative time and the diegetic time devoted to labor in the film become Sisyphean, and *Chop Shop* (2007), in which a street orphan's new subjectivity and relationship

11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

12 Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema*, 19.

13 Holtmeier, 81.

14 Holtmeier, 81.

15 Holtmeier, 81.

potentially restore the spectator's belief in the world without resorting to the American Dream pursued within the dominant capitalist system.

The book offers a rich platform for discussing the cinematic consequences of myriad political dilemmas, including today's globalization, capitalism, and imperialism. Avid readers will want to engage in a virtual conversation with the author, posing questions about his approach to further develop this crucial study. Above all, one may wonder if the historical dichotomy of Deleuze's two cinema books isn't applied a little too broadly and schematically. For instance, the movement-image is not limited to the American style action-image, whose narrative arc does not necessarily lead to a dialectically unified people. Rather, Hollywood's persistent de-politicizing mechanism almost always reduces systemic collective conflicts to individual heroes' dramas and fictionally sutures structural traumas back into normality through their singular triumph or sacrifice. Holtmeier contrasts collective, people-oriented (or populist) Third Cinema with contemporary political cinema that focuses on lives that are not collectivized. But doesn't this attention to individuals without unity also signal the dilution of politics that is and should be inherently collective?

By extension, let's note that Deleuze's concept of postwar modern cinema is several decades old and thus has historical limitations. Even his vision of minor literature is a post-1968 product that celebrates the schizophrenic molecularization of a "tyrannical unity" like the nation-state and the anarchic desire for rhizomatic "lines of flight" from any centralizing, fascistic power.[16] However, this anti-fascist deterritorialization is not too different from the borderless flux of capital and culture under globalization. Paradoxically, this very deterritorialization has even been reterritorialized into the global system of neoliberal desires, multiplying identities, permissive authorities, and postmodern simulacra. The multitude's resistance to this system thus often ends up being a flash mob–like ephemeral performance, just as the sensational Occupy movement had little impact on Wall Street. Such a sporadic spasm is not so much communal politics oriented toward fundamental change as a nudge in the ribs of the system, which then upgrades itself to be more inclusive at best, co-opting and commodifying critical voices into it. This flexible self-modulating status quo was best formulated by Deleuze as "control society" in the 1990s, when contemporary globalization began, that is, after his schizoanalysis wound down. Interestingly, isn't it Hollywood cinema that most palpably embodies and critically grasps this post-political age of flexible control?

Holtmeier's film selection seems somewhat mismatched with his theoretical framework in this sense. Without clear justification, his scope is limited to a handful of post-1990 Middle Eastern directors (and the Iranian American Bahrani) in the (Third World) transnational cinema context in which Jia, too, could be located. Yet there are also, of course, many other (Western) festival films that reveal "the intolerable" and promote "the potential mobilization of political subjectivity" without dialectic solutions,

16 Holtmeier, 19.

such as works of Ken Loach and the Dardenne brothers.[17] Those films have little to do with the time-image, productive rhizomes, the multitude with positive biopower, or control societies. But then, Holtmeier does not really elucidate his chosen films in these terms. Moreover, what is called "intolerable" sounds like a dominant unifying normality in general rather than an analytical frame that can be applied specifically to contemporary biopolitical contexts. Although Judith Butler's critique of "being-dispossessed" is mentioned and relevant to all the films at issue, Holtmeier's Foucauldian biopolitics does not develop into an Agambenian discussion about the global system's law and violence, sovereign power and bare life.[18] The intolerable Sharia's arbitrary dispossession of local lives in *Timbuktu*—not unlike the supralegal operation of global sovereignty—thus gets less attention than the Islamic militants' involvement in global networks. Likewise, Jia's later films are put aside after a brief note that their "political statement" is the same as before.[19] But doesn't *Tiān zhùdìng* (*A Touch of Sin*, Jia Zhangke, 2013), for instance, radically signal the political deadlock in which intolerable inequality in today's neoliberal regime provokes spasmodic explosions of terroristic violence that leads nowhere?

All these questions suggest that contemporary political cinema is not so much political but rather, as Holtmeier himself claims, ethical. Indeed, I contend that cinema most effectively engages in the world when shedding light on the dispossessed figures inevitably generated by and excluded from society, however politically utopian, thereby making us reflect on reality and humanity from the abject position of those existential lives. This ethical position is precious in itself and indicates the social role and significance of cinema as art. Only from here could we ask how to rethink politics. This book thus promotes political thinking by provoking such questions. And such questions may be directed not only to the author but to cinema itself, because asking what kind of political cinema is imaginable is as vital as asking what kind of politics is possible.

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17 Holtmeier, 35.
18 Holtmeier, 28.
19 Holtmeier, 135.