FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Martin Harries (2007) *Forgetting Lot's Wife*: *On Destructive Spectatorship*

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R.D. Crano
Ohio State University

A pious man plays host to visiting angels. They have come to find ten righteous men who could spare a morally bankrupt city from the wrath of God. After an unsuccessful search, the city is slated for destruction, the gracious host and his family granted deliverance on the condition that they never look back. So goes the tale of Genesis, chapter nineteen. The events that follow have been duly commemorated as art-world staples since at least the sixteenth century: the city of Sodom blanketed in brimstone; Lot's Wife transformed into a pillar of salt; Lot himself seduced by his own two daughters.

In his book *Forgetting Lot's Wife,* Martin Harries posits the eponymous figure as 'the nexus of a constellation of fantasies and fears about the potential for spectatorial damage' (8). In support of his theory that 'the twentieth century had a particular investment in a formal logic that placed the spectator in a spot where that spectator had to contemplate her own destruction' (9), the bulk of his text assesses explicit cultural references to the parable of Sodom and the place of Lot's Wife therein. Explicative chapters on Antonin Artaud, Anselm Kiefer, and American film noir ground a discussion of the major themes Harries takes from the Biblical myth—traumatic memory, urban corruption, and the masochistic desire to witness that which can damage us beyond repair.

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Harries begins between the two World Wars, with France as the ideological battleground for the competing grand-scale political theatrics of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. As an alternative to the great state-based spectacles of the time, Antonin Artaud theorised an anarchic spectacle—housed in his functionally reconfigured theatre of cruelty—so sensuously overwhelming that it might destabilise the ideological encasement of its spectator. Bourgeois theatre being symptomatic of a decadent culture inclined toward ever-increasing socio-political passivity, Artaud sought physiological stimuli capable of dislocating, and then restoring to life, such cultivated and compliant subjects. We can thus speak of a certain sort of destruction necessary to reverse the trend of spectatorial homogenisation—for Artaud, a 'great metaphysical fear' stoked by a violence able to upset customary modes of representation and force something entirely new into the communicative process.

For Harries, however, historical accounts of achieved and/or theorised 'destructive spectatorship' take a back seat to the metaphorical representations thereof. He hastily defers to the all-too-common assumption of Theatre of Cruelty's practical failures and is disproportionately interested less in Artaud the revolutionary tactician and more in Artaud the art critic, for it is in the latter field that Lot's Wife comes into play. Praising Lucas van Leyden's sixteenth-century canvas *Lot and His Daughters* for its 'mystical deductions' and 'profound but poetic sexuality,' Artaud curiously—and this is the point Harries jumps on—omits mention of Lot's Wife, who appears as a spectral human-cum-pillar in the painting's background. Like the painting itself, Artaud supplants the authoritarian imperative of obedience with the father-daughters incest that goes without reproach in the Genesis text. He thus forgets, as it were, her whose own mnemonic impulses proved fatal. As Harries concisely points out, 'Observation itself is part of the false culture Artaud attacks [...]. The look backwards is a partial solution to the crisis Artaud has identified: her looking is itself action [...] but this look is also, quite vividly, a corporeal loss or petrification of self' (28).

For Artaud, the problem of culture in general—and that of spectatorship specifically—lies in a crisis of representation. The passive, indestructible bourgeois spectator (in this case as theatre patron, but implicitly as politico-economical participant) will remain as such until the baggage of language (plots, narratives, etc.) is engulfed in the concrete materials of the sounds themselves; linguistic symbols must become

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overdetermined as shrieks and yells. Artaud's late (post-war) work in radio sought (and, for many 'spectators', achieved) such overdetermination, as did his directions of the Theatre Alfred Jarry decades earlier.

Along these lines, the spectator could be 'destroyed'—or at least momentarily deconstructed—through the cinematic communication of 'the physical sensation of pure life' (152). An actor, scriptwriter, and film theoretician, Artaud conceived of a 'true cinema' that would convey 'purely visual sensations whose drama would come from a shock designed for the eyes, a shock drawn [...] from the very substance of our vision' (Artaud SW 151). Expressing profound opposition to the incorporation of sound in film, he, with great foresight, believed that the spoken word would overtake the sheer presentative power of the image in ways that sub- and inter-titles were never capable of.

For a book on spectatorship (one third of which is concerned with the cinematic specifically), it is puzzling that Harries would choose to ignore all of Artaud's writing on film, much of which comes out of his desire for the physiological dislocation of the viewing subject. In the 'excessive humor' of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and especially the Marx Brothers (to name of few of Artaud's favourite cinematic artists), we find a 'sense of essential liberation, of destruction of all reality in the mind' (142). The collective catharsis of comedy, not unlike 'supremely material and anarchic' *Lot and His Daughters*, demonstrates the 'impotence' and 'uselessness' of a [transcendent] language confined to merely represent a concrete reality that its pre-semantic sounds and rhythms help to comprise.

As an example of 'the objective unforeseen' (43), Artaud cites a Marx Brothers' episode wherein a man thinks he will take a woman and ends up with a cow in his arms. Perhaps it is precisely here that we ought to locate the parable of Lot's Wife—the visual of a woman transformed, not into a cow, but into a pillar of salt. Artaud 'forgets' her in his discussion of the painting because hers is another story bookended by scenes of sodomy and incest. Simultaneously a figure of admonition and of great humour, able to incite 'the destruction of all reality in the mind', Lot's Wife interrupts the otherwise 'profound but poetic sexuality' of Genesis chapter nineteen.

Artaud is anomalous in *Forgetting Lot's Wife* in that he is the only one of Harries's major subjects situated prior to the mass atrocities of WWII. With prophetic obsession, he

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had conceived of a staged and/or filmed violence that might have the power to pre-empt the state-induced horrors to come. Remote from the war's major theatres of conflict, Americans found themselves in a unique spectatorial position vis-à-vis the mass-destruction of Europe and Japan. The revulsion, uncertainty, and shame that accompanied this position were, in part, embodied by the stark visual austerity and moral ambiguity of 40s and 50s Hollywood noir. 'These films,' for Harries, 'elicit the anxieties that surround Lot's wife; beneath these anxieties, they invoke a desire to escape being Lot's wife, indeed to look back at Lot's wife, to recall the place of a spectator that is no longer one's own. They invoke, that is, the pleasure of a total disaster one can somehow escape' (42).

Certain films in the noir genre, by referring explicitly to the Genesis allegory of spectatorship, indicate a culture still coming to grips with what and how its constituents have seen. With *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946*)*, *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), and, a decade later, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (Aldrich, 1963), 'film provided a figure for thinking about th[e] imagination of disaster and, more particularly, about the fate and impossible place of the spectator in the face of such catastrophe' (45). Lot's Wife becomes synecdoche for the fraught spectator position Americans find themselves in after the mass atrocities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

The Strange Love of Martha Ivers tells the story of three adults who had, as teens, been party to the accidental (sic) murder of a wealthy woman. In the title role, Barbara Stanwyck has inherited her aunt's fortune and subsequently found success autocratically molding Iverstown in her own image. Kirk Douglas makes his film debut as her husband and hand-picked District Attorney, driven to alcoholism by guilt or fear or some combination thereof. The product of their machinations is a city whose political and economic corruption figures the fabled moral bankruptcy of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sam (Van Heflin), the film's unlikely protagonist, returns to Iverstown, to discover the backroom gambling, fraudulent bureaucracy, and industrial exploitation that were fast becoming staples of the urban noir landscape.

Harries finds the spectator implicated from the very start. Sam hides behind the stairs. Martha, with Walter at her side, assails her scolding aunt. As the old woman tumbles to her death, the camera cuts to a point of view that we assume to be Sam's. Martha and Walter follow the spectator in believing Sam to have witnessed their crime before fleeing

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the scene. Only later do we learn that he was already gone and, thus, that the most damning witness to is in fact no witness at all. Ironically, the passions of the characters and plot of the film are fuelled by the mistaken assumption of having been watched. We observe the murder scene, then, 'from the point of view of someone who cannot have been present. The spectator's position is one that the diegesis tells us no one has occupied or *can* occupy,' and so we become 'witnesses who identify with a witnessing that never happened' (57-8).

The shot-for-shot analysis is illuminating, to be sure. But despite the precision of his focus and the depth of his reading, Harries devotes scant attention to a pair of *Strange Love*'s most crucial scenes. The first involves the revelation that Martha, in a ruthless act of self-preservation, gave a deposition that sent an innocent man to the gallows. Such false witness proves her gaze destructive to others rather than specifically self-destructive, belying the Lot's wife metaphor that, at times, seems more a crutch than a constructive critical tool. With the second scene, Harries's gloss acknowledges that 'the city's mogul and chief representative of the law die together' (66) but overlooks the import of Sam's having witnessed the murder-suicide sequence. Here it is Sam—more so than Martha or Toni (Lizabeth Scott, Sam's well-intentioned, hard-luck sidekick who elicits the film's closing Genesis reference)—who most resembles Lot's wife. Where Martha and Toni each 'look back,' as it were, on a city corrupted, Sam looks back from the house he had just left to see the city in its purest form of self-destruction. The film's exemplary figures of law and economy, utterly inseparable, suffer a collaborative death, with Sam watching every step of the process. In his survival—bound up with his perpetual refusal to forget Lot's wife—Sam shatters the myth and validates the importance of historical memory.

From his discussion of *Strange Love*, Harries turns to two films made by Robert Aldrich, who, notably, worked as an assistant director on the *Strange Love* set. Where *Strange Love* hints at the obsolescence of Lot's wife's tale, both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Sodom and Gomorrah* are explicit in 'pointing to this structure while undoing it' and finally demonstrating that 'the spectator *can* look at burning Sodom without turning into a pillar of salt' (66, 75). Harries's project is perhaps most effective here, as he articulates these cultural tendencies in light of contemporary Hollywood's penchant for destruction. The 'atomic tourism' of the Cold War era has exploded into unlimited variants of 'pleasurable

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sadistic viewing.' Supply-side marketing (much more than box-office demand) has engendered a perpetual regeneration of cities and populations whose sole collective purpose is to collapse in flames before our eyes.

Sodom and Gomorrah embellishes the Genesis story with a strange and visionary back story detailing Lot's pivotal role in opening up Sodom's economic autonomy—dependent primarily on its salt monopoly—to free trade with the Hebrews. Delightfully infusing his argument with a lucid dose of heart-on-sleeve Marxism, Harries explicates this move vis-à-vis Lot's wife (here portrayed by Pier Angelli): 'Sodom's economy has its base in salt; the superstructure built on the wages of salt is a series of increasingly sadistic entertainments that culminate in the roasting alive of rebel slaves. The transformation of Lot's wife, then, encapsulates one of the sins of Sodom—looking at suffering—in the form of Sodom's principle commodity, salt' (68). The climax of the film occurs with the fatal look back; the camera cuts from Lot's wife's face to the scene of Sodom ablaze and then back again. We share her sceptical gaze, but where the film follows the Genesis moral and punishes her with death, we come out entirely unscathed, indeed, taking pleasure in the sight of such spectacular destruction.

Oft cited as one of Hollywood's paradigmatic noir films, *Kiss Me Deadly* presents similar proclivities toward issues of spectatorship. Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) happens upon a covert plot centred around the construction, exportation, and untimely detonation of a mysterious object referred to only as 'the great whatsit.' The whole of the film seems something of a biblical allegory, with Mike playing the Lot's wife role, dubious and constantly curious despite having nothing personally invested in the outcome of events. After having capitalised on the horrors of WWII, the film industry demonstrated great success tapping into widespread societal anxieties over the potential for nuclear war with the U.S.S.R.—of what degree of damage are we and our devices capable? Who, if any, will witness and survive to tell about it? As it turns out, 'the great whatsit' is indeed an exploding Pandora's box, exposure to which means certain ruin. Largely as a result of Mike's own meddlesome need to see it for himself, 'the great whatsit' is eventually unveiled through climactic destruction. Mike and his partner stumble to safety only to look back at a mushrooming cloud of smoke.

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As in *Strange Love* and, ultimately, in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the spectator once again remembers, witnesses, and survives. Harries explicates this theme with great attentiveness to complexity and a keen eye to shot-for-shot details. Too often, though, he misses opportunities to bring his argument into contact with pertinent theoretical work concerning history, spectatorship, and subjectivity. Where is Levinas, for example, when he talks about 'the body's absolute responsiveness to historical catastrophe'? Where is Kristeva in his thoughts on 'disrupt[ing] the spectator and the codes—especially the linguistic codes—upon which the viewer depends'? Perhaps most conspicuously (unforgivably, to my mind) absent is Jean Baudrillard; consider the following: 'Representations may sometimes shield the spectator from that they represent' (75); or 'The only true historical knowledge would be traumatic repetition of traumatic experience' (19); or 'The logic of destructive spectatorship presumes a self susceptible to instantaneous transformation by spectacle' (114).

While narrative representations of Lot's Wife are undoubtedly indicative of a culture masochistically infatuated with the sight of its own destruction, the avant-garde—geared as it is toward formal innovation and ideological critique—serves as the site for a more direct deconstruction of the spectatorial subject. James Watson and Melville Weber's 1933 short *Lot in Sodom* seems intent on achieving this aim. Employing surrealist montage techniques and experimental narrative structures diametrically opposed to the Hollywood norm, Watson and Weber undermine the standardised process of spectatorial interpellation and insist that the viewer come to the film unburdened by preconceived notions of how cinematic meaning is produced. Harries reads in the transformation sequence the novel idea that retrospection is less self-destruction and more self-multiplication—an important point that carries implications far beyond the scope of the current book.

A scrupulous reading of two late-Eighties Anselm Kiefer paintings rounds out the body of *Forgetting Lot's Wife*. Harries foregrounds perspectival order and its interpellative force in his exposition of Kiefer's move to destabilise spectatorial stability. Anomalous appendages and extra-representational materials seem to intrude upon the self-contained worlds of Kiefer's work, and Harries brilliantly argues that such elements 'at once identify the spectator as the endangered subject of perspectival representation and provide a

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precarious formal space outside of perspective and its designs on the spectator' (89). Both *Lot's Frau* and *Lillith* posit a viewing subject formed in the historical tensions presented—but, crucially, not re-presented—by the works.

Harries's book closes with a 'coda' assessing the events of and reactions to 11 September 2001 in light of the problems he has been working out through the metaphor of Lot's wife. He teases out a demand 'for a new ethical encounter with the other' (113) and stresses 'the difficulty of finding a language for the destruction that does not bear some trace of the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah' (110). While the general thrust of this coda lends welcome relevance to the foregoing discussion, Harries (who himself witnessed from Grenwich Village the collapsing towers) grounds his argument on the odd—if not entirely incorrect—insistence that the media, government, and citizens who had witnessed the towers fall were all adamant on not looking back. His suggestions seem entirely contrary to the evidence: the endless news loop of the planes hitting the towers, the nearly one thousand monuments and memorials in Manhattan alone, and the dominant trend in socio-political discourse to label everything since as 'post-9/11.' While the story of Lot's wife shares many of the themes present in the aftermath of September 11, Harries's transposition ultimately adds little to the collective reconstruction of the event.

At its worst, *Forgetting Lot's Wife* can be accused of the occasional overestimation of an endangered allegory, but at its best the book delivers acute, historically attuned analyses of oft-ignored cultural artifacts and a fresh perspective on spectatorial representations in postwar film. 'The contemporary theater,' Artaud argued in the Thirties, 'is decadent because it has broken away from Danger' (42); we would be hard-pressed to say otherwise of cinema today, especially in its Hollywood-dominated commercial capacity. In cultural industries perpetuated by passive consumption, the normative values and viewing position of the spectator remain completely intact, entirely unaffected by theatrical and cinematic products content merely to meet their box office quotas and vanish into the ashbin of 'art' history. Martin Harries's is one well-argued attempt to come to terms with the full-blown import of this current phase in the symbiotic histories of cinema and art.

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