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*In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* by  
Ivone Margulies (review)

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dramaturgy—which recognizes the racial structures that produce race and the potential of the theatre processes to mirror and repair—can further this engagement. This book also suits courses on theatre, race, and performance, and on ethnographic methods. Crucially, this book expands necessary conversations on race and dramaturgy, and ways in which “dramaturgical critique”—conscious of racial logics and embodied meanings—might make and repair theatrical *and* racial worlds.

—Jasmine Mahmoud

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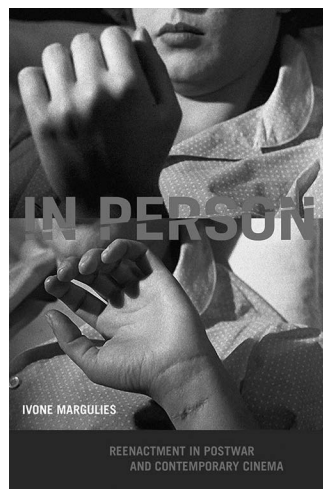
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***In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema.*** By Ivone Margulies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; 336 pp.; illustrations. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper, e-book available.

Ivone Margulies’s inventive new book *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* reframes the aesthetic, cultural, and ethical concerns of postwar realist cinema through the lens of a particular performative practice: in-person reenactment, wherein “a person replays her own past on camera” (4). Although reenactment, broadly construed, connotes an array of historical, biographical, and artistic practices of restaging events, in-person reenactment departs from these other forms due to its foundation in personal experience. If one’s re-performance of their past “always introduces a differential,” for Margulies the epistemological and ethical stakes of such replay reside in the possibility of redemptive transformation (5). Drawing on a Brechtian framework, wherein the theatrical citation of an act becomes a form of socially conscious pedagogy, she argues that first-person embodied replay allows subjects to critically revise their past (9–10). In doing so, individual lives “acquire a collective resonance” as exemplary narratives directed toward didactic, therapeutic, memorial, and historiographical ends (8).

While *In Person* establishes the reenactment film as a newly configured subcategory within realist cinema, it has much broader stakes for the study of modern and contemporary film at large. Attending to reenactment excavates the hitherto unacknowledged “activist impetus” (14) at the heart of postwar cinema, the desire for representation to not only record “contested social realities” (7), but also to effect real change within them (14). Additionally, Margulies observes that the “celebrated aesthetic aspects of modern and contemporary cinema—its hybridity, reflexivity, and performance ambiguity”—are the animating formal concerns of reenactment (15).



Consequently, reenactments form the very condition of possibility for postwar cinema's formal experimentation, becoming both "instruments and *signifiers* of late neorealism's and of New Wave cinema's existentialist concern with theatricality and authenticity" (15).

Margulies's analysis moves along both of these axes of reenactment: as "instrument" and as "signifier," the instrumental line of thought delineating reenactment's function within postwar realist narratives, and the signifying line of thought interrogating reenactment's formal conditions—its temporal and referential structure. The instrumental argument takes up the majority of the book and traces a historical genealogy of the mode in postwar realist cinema. Beginning with Cesare Zavattini's vision of cinema in which everyone "play[s] themselves" (37), Margulies elaborates neorealism's critical shift from an illustrative model of social types to a "performative" model, which enables the social actor to "reclaim [...] her experience" for moral instruction (47–48). In *Storia di Caterina* (The Story of Caterina, 1953), Caterina Rigoglioso, a mother who was publicly tried and acquitted for abandoning her child, reenacts the abandonment in order to explain the desperation that led her to take such drastic action and symbolically atone for it. This redemptive ethos is subsequently reinflected in Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's cinema vérité experiments, which shift from neorealism's emphasis on social type and on gesture to individual psychology and cathartic speech.

Cinema vérité's emphasis on individual speech amplifies the "testimonial" dimension of reenactment, setting the stage for the subsequent proximity between the reenactment narrative and the trial in post-Holocaust films. Marceline's monologue about her memories of concentration camps in *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961) serves as a hinge for Margulies's turn from reenactment as "self-enlightening pedagogy" (114) to reenactment as social forum for witnessing and accounting for historical trauma. While late vérité and activist films of the 1960s and '70s explore reenactment's ritual, phatic ability to conjure absence, Margulies argues that Claude Lanzmann's landmark Holocaust film *Shoah* (1985) occasions a historical shift away from a reparative model, engendering a more critical, unredemptive stance that continues to characterize contemporary cinema (172).

Margulies's historical genealogy is deeply researched, elegantly argued, and highly persuasive in its bold reevaluation of canonical postwar films. However, I find her book to be at its most generative and compelling in her ancillary articulation of the signifying dimensions of reenactment, and of the challenges it poses for cinematic form. While the first and third chapters examine the structuring tensions of reenactment—the relationship between "actor or person, past or present, representation or presentation, theatricality or authenticity" (14)—within a broader arena of realist performance, her claims are more clearly expressed in her close readings of contemporary films in the book's final chapters.

Margulies proposes two new terms to encapsulate the unredemptive ethos of contemporary reenactment—"para-judicial" and "a-filiation." "Para-judicial" cinema emerges in dialogue with post-Holocaust discourses of traumatic memory, witnessing, and survivor testimony. While the term connotes an adjacency to legal testimony, particularly within human rights investigations, this work displaces the reparative aims of such institutional frameworks to explore the (non)potential of redress (205–06). Cambodian director Rithy Panh's oeuvre, which interrogates the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, is Margulies's case study for this model. His para-judicial practice utilizes highly theatricalized tableaux and ascetic staging in order to confront the inscrutability of mass violence, displacing the cathartic potential of reenactment onto a spectatorial address that positions viewers as critical, ethical witnesses.

"A-filiation" foregrounds a dislocated temporality that intervenes in discourses of presence and kinship, amplifying the disruptive potential of reenactment in order to challenge its central assumptions—that the past may be conjured or integrated within a performative continuity. Margulies elaborates on this idea through Andrea Tonacci's film *Serras da Desordem* (Hills of Disorder, 2006), wherein Carapiru, a member of the Awá-Gujá tribe, reenacts events of his life, including his first contact with nonindigenous Brazilians. Reenactment's dimensions of

“displacement and relocation” (221) magnify Carapiru’s own violent history of dispossession, persistently “uprooting” and “exiling” him within the film, and as such “challenges the social-activist film’s most tempting conceit: the equation of self-performance with social agency” (249).

The displacement of the fundamental assumption of “agency,” which underwrites the exemplary model, and the refusal to move beyond the impasse that this engenders, ultimately constitutes the unredemptive model’s critical challenge. Margulies argues that both the para-judicial and the a-filial modes participate in what she terms “senseless mimesis,” deploying the structure of reenactment—its repetition and referentiality—against itself (255). By stripping away reenactment’s implicit forward momentum toward revision, senseless mimesis suspends the performer within an ambivalent, static present. Contemporary films not only subvert reenactment’s instrumental function, but also its signifying function, upsetting the circuits of meaning-making by which the “public reframing of an act’s significance” in the present adheres to its past (260).

However, in attempting to theorize the critical stakes of this modality, Margulies finds herself at a theoretical impasse. She writes, “given the instrumental purpose of reenactment films—their ritual, juridical, memorial, or pedagogic functions—the import of an unredemptive reenactment is difficult to define,” although she acknowledges that it is “far from a neutral strategy” (261). This generic statement is a jarring one following her stunning and rigorous analyses of these contemporary films, and points to a limitation of Margulies’s privileging of the instrumental mode. For if reenactment’s performative value within film has hitherto been defined by its instrumental moral function as opposed to its signifying structure, a mode that ostensibly has no “function”—a “senseless” mode—indeed appears to have no value.

Margulies resists this claim, emphasizing the contemporary mode’s critical, deconstructive force, and concludes her book with a call to find an alternative system of values within which to situate unredemptive reenactment. In the final lines of the book she raises a provocative possibility—that of moving beyond reenactment understood as an instrumental *practice*, to viewing reenactment as constitutive of a new filmic *form*: “an alternate form of realist re-presentation, an aesthetics of pressured co-presence, with the power to spark continued questioning” (261).

Unfortunately, Margulies leaves the contours of this alternate aesthetic form largely undefined, again a function of her primary focus on the instrumental mode. Yet in gesturing toward these possibilities, Margulies’s ambitious and deeply insightful study makes clear that reenactment is indeed a fertile field with the “power to spark continued questioning” (261). As the first full-length treatment of in-person reenactment as a cinematic genre, *In Person*, with its astonishing scope and robust yet focused bibliography, will serve as an indispensable resource for scholars wishing to take up its spark.

—Katie Kirkland

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