

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2019

Volume 45 Issue 2

- 155 Ian Dagg Natural Religion in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*
- 179 David N. Levy Aristotle's "Reply" to Machiavelli on Morality
- 199 Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo "Deceived by the Glory of Caesar": Humility and Machiavelli's Founder
- 223 Marco Andreacchio **Reviews Essays:**
Mastery of Nature, edited by Svetozar Y. Minkov and Bernhardt L. Trout
- 249 Alex Priou *The Eccentric Core*, edited by Ronna Burger and Patrick Goodin
- 269 David Lewis Schaefer *The Banality of Heidegger* by Jean-Luc Nancy
- 291 Victor Bruno **Book Reviews:**
The Techne of Giving by Timothy C. Campbell
- 297 Jonathan Culp *Orwell Your Orwell* by David Ramsay Steele
- 303 Fred Erdman *Becoming Socrates* by Alex Priou
- 307 David Fott *Roman Political Thought* by Jed W. Atkins
- 313 Steven H. Frankel *The Idol of Our Age* by Daniel J. Mahoney
- 323 Michael Harding *Leo Strauss on Nietzsche's Thrasymachean-Dionysian Socrates* by Angel Jaramillo Torres
- 335 Marjorie Jeffrey *Aristocratic Souls in Democratic Times*, edited by Richard Avramenko and Ethan Alexander-Davey
- 341 Peter Minowitz *The Bleak Political Implications of Socratic Religion* by Shadia B. Drury
- 347 Charles T. Rubin *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child* by Eileen Hunt Botting
- 353 Thomas Schneider *From Oligarchy to Republicanism* by Forrest A. Nabors
- 357 Stephen Sims *The Legitimacy of the Human* by Rémi Brague

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth
W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

Timothy C. Campbell, *The Techne of Giving: Cinema and the Generous Form of Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 240 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

VICTOR BRUNO
 UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO PIAUÍ, BRAZIL
victorbruno@outlook.com

Timothy C. Campbell's *The Techne of Giving* proposes a very interesting form to make film criticism and film philosophy. As with Slavoj Žižek's, Professor Campbell's work avoids "formalist" or "neoformalist" film criticism—the kind of scholarship David Bordwell employs, for instance, where what one might call "film grammar" (that is, accounts of depth of focus, camera movement, mise en scène, color grading, etc.) is understood to give "meaning" to what is presented on the screen.¹ Rather, as happens with Žižek, Campbell filters the art of cinema through the veil of materialism. For this reason, what would be a laudable approach to film art from a different direction—one that bypasses the canons of film studies—becomes a problematic enterprise.

The book offers film criticism using as an epistemological basis Michel Foucault's "biopolitics" and how the act of "giving" happens in cinema in the context of capitalism *without* something material being given; that is, when someone *gives* something, this giving happens without the exchange of material, of capital, thus circumventing the money- or materially-centered "logic" of capitalism. The act of giving, in Campbell's reading, happens on a purely intrahumane level. But Campbell does not restrict his search to what is on the screen: his is an all-encompassing cosmology, in which film and film viewer are one. The author thus tries, on one hand, to imagine a "techne" in which the film

¹ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); David Bordwell answers Žižek in *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 238–69.

does not posit itself as an “idolatrous” (56) object that tries to grab the viewer’s attention to itself as a detached object. Rather, Professor Campbell strives for a kind of “ethical viewing,” in which cinema allows “us to see what cannot be seen, to imagine what is not shown,” thus developing a form of film making and film viewing that “allows for a practice of generous attraction” (53).

To this end, Professor Campbell analyses three films: Luchino Visconti’s *La terra trema* (1948), Roberto Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero* (1948), and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (1962). It is not hard to see why Campbell chose these films and these directors—especially the first two. They belong, *grosso modo*, to what is commonly called the “Italian neorealist” tradition, a school of filmmaking that emerged just after World War II and that has the three directors among its brightest exponents (in addition to Vittorio De Sica, the director of *Bicycle Thieves* [1948]);² nor, in addition, is it hard to see why he chose Italian neorealism as the focal point of his discussion: Campbell follows the conventional understanding according to which neorealism is somehow a style of filmmaking that tries to reproduce on the screen an almost-perfect reproduction of common life, of the anxieties of the Italian postwar moment and, after that, the midcentury ennui of the 1960s.³ Therefore, he picks films in which the human body and human choices transcend and transform the material world, trying to escape the fate imposed by their conditions and social classes (*La terra trema*), or where the characters are outcasts victimized by the makers of this world and its wars (*Germany Year Zero*), or move aimlessly, desiring to impart meaning to their actions and relationships, tired of the “brutal” state of things of the Western world (*L’eclisse*).

Since Campbell, from the start, has sided with materialism and socialism, his reading of these films and of the neorealist tradition is in hazard. For if Eric Voegelin is right and socialism is the construction of a Second Reality, then Campbell’s *Weltanschauung* and, consequently, his appreciation of works of art are not ones that try to see the truth in itself; rather, these works are forced to fit the tenets of ideology. Needless to say, the possibilities of art and its interpretations are ossified and mutilated. The films that Professor

² In a certain sense, Antonioni is not a neorealist director, nor might *L’eclisse* count as a neorealist picture, being of a later date. However, Campbell’s choice fits perfectly in his nonmaterial way of *giving*, as a character in search of meaningful relations in the modern, capital-centered world. Furthermore, he quotes Antonioni in his attempt to create a generous kind of attention to cinema—a “creative spectatorship” (53).

³ However, the question of *what* Italian neorealism consists of is not a closed one—neither in Rossellini’s and Visconti’s time, nor in ours. For a discussion of definitions, see Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini: His Life and His Films* (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 266–80.

Campbell has selected are those in which his biopolitics reading is easier to apply. For instance, when dealing with *La terra trema*, he focuses on the rural, natural setting of the film, the island of Aci Trezza (spelled “Acitrezza” in the book), and on the use Visconti makes of non-actors. “For Visconti, the motivation for using non-actors is clear enough,” says Campbell. “What counts... is the weight their presence provides in the frame, namely in highlighting the anthropomorphic features of...the techne of cinema” (70). To corroborate this—and one of the great successes of the book is that the author provides many quotes from his subjects—Campbell quotes a text by Visconti himself, where the great Italian director says that he wants “to tell stories of living men.” “The cinema I am interested in is anthropometric cinema” (71). But then we might ask: For Campbell, is Visconti good because his work fits within the parameters of biopolitics? If biopolitics is right, and the kind of cinema that Visconti elaborates is one where the human being is woven “generously” owing to the weight and power that the human faces provide for the screen, what should we make of his later career, where we see faces of a more aristocratic kind? what should we make of *The Leopard* (1963), an international, star-studded production with lavish settings and lavish camera movements? or of *Death in Venice* (1971), a film soaked in aristocracy and high culture? or of *Senso* (1954)? Perhaps conveniently, none of these pictures are mentioned in Campbell’s book. Likewise, films such as Rossellini’s *Europa ’51* (1952), or *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950), not to mention Rossellini’s TV productions, are absent. But then, what would a materialist make of a film about St. Francis, where the actions that the characters perform—themselves representations of individuals that *lived* and were *saints*—aim to *please and gratify God*? What kind of biopolitical revolutionary praxis would emerge from a film like *Europa ’51*, where we see none other than Ingrid Bergman slowly transitioning from a bored bourgeoisie woman married to a capitalist businessman into a twentieth-century saint? This would make no sense within a biopolitical socialist standpoint: in Professor Campbell’s ethical viewing, if the film, the characters, and the spectator work in generosity and accept what is on the screen, then they would be in agreement to Bergman’s saintly actions (and one would wonder if a saint does not “weigh” more on the screen than unsanctified humans); in consequence, this means to acquiesce to the Catholic canon and orthodoxy, and this means to acquiesce to those who are the keepers of what in their view is obscurantism and mystification—that is, *religion*. How would the revolution proceed while acknowledging the reality of transcendence and divinity, especially in the pre-Second Vatican Council context? And, finally, to return to *The Leopard*, why would Burt Lancaster’s

bewildered face witnessing the collapse of his world be less “anthropomorphic” than the faces of the fishermen of Sicily witnessing their revolutionary failure? Are some humans less humans than other humans?

But as noted above, *The Techne of Giving* is an interesting book—but less for what it gets right than for what it gets wrong. If it has anything to teach, it is about the dangers of analyzing film, or any other kind of art, through ideological filters, lest one succumb to the ossification and distortion of the inherent characteristics of a work of art. Most of the time—but less so during his analysis of Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (chap. 5)—Professor Campbell reads meaning into the pictures he is analyzing because of the propositional nature of the ideology he betroths. Perhaps for this reason he simply ignores the fact that his appraisal of the long take as a means of graciously embracing the viewer while avoiding editing that, in Campbell’s reasoning, “sutures” the viewer into the film (65–68) could be given of American directors like John Ford, who is responsible for a five-minute two-shot in *Two Rode Together* (1961), that is, of a perfectly Hollywood, commercial picture.

But then we might ask: How can a scholar, in a book with an average of fifty-four footnotes per chapter do such a thing? (There are 380 notes in the whole book, and the book divided in seven parts: five major chapters plus an Introduction and Conclusion.) How can he ignore a major and influential tradition such as American cinema? The reason is clear: dwelling in ideology, in the socialist Second Reality, Campbell is unable to read things as they are, objectively and critically. In his vision, the documents, the artifacts, the “texts,” so to speak, that report human experiences and anxieties, the triumphs and tragedies of man, must conform to an a priori set of possibilities. Campbell’s hermeneutics differs from the traditional hermeneutics of criticism, which can be defined as “the hermeneutical principles for interpreting literature that is understood to include any written document that articulates or expresses human experience symbolically and that relies upon the imaginative capacities of individual human beings to create and understand.”⁴ The materialistic and socialistic principles to which Professor Campbell subscribes, on the other hand, are of a perverted religion. His description of “collective individuation” (187n23), that is, the individual manifestation and self-understanding under a guiding scope of a principle, the kind of reasoning that the free man must have in the revolutionary praxis, is akin to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s description of individuality within primitive

⁴ Charles R. Embry, *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 30.

societies, where the individual moves within a certain “magic circle” determined by the metaphysical Divine Principle and rendered in human form through traditions.⁵

This is the whole reason Campbell insists on a new “ethics” of film viewing, even if there is a traditional ethics of art appreciation—one where the interpretation of art must respect, in the first place, the intention of the artist. But that is problematic, since it requires Campbell to step outside the dwellings of his Second Reality back into the zone of confusion of Immanence, which might or might not reflect the revolutionary wishes of his ideology, but would reflect a deeper comprehension of truth and of the human experience. In this case, Foucauldian biopolitics would reveal itself as just one more tool of interpretation—but a tool that might not be appropriate for every film or work of art. This would of course be too much; perhaps the truth of the adventure of human experience would prove to be not “generous” enough. But this lack of generosity would fall on the nature of the Real, and not for want of revolutionary praxis. Better, it seems, simply to ignore works of art that do not fit into the prescribed, imperial pattern of interpretation.

⁵ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Primitive Mentality,” in *Coomaraswamy, vol. 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 286–307.