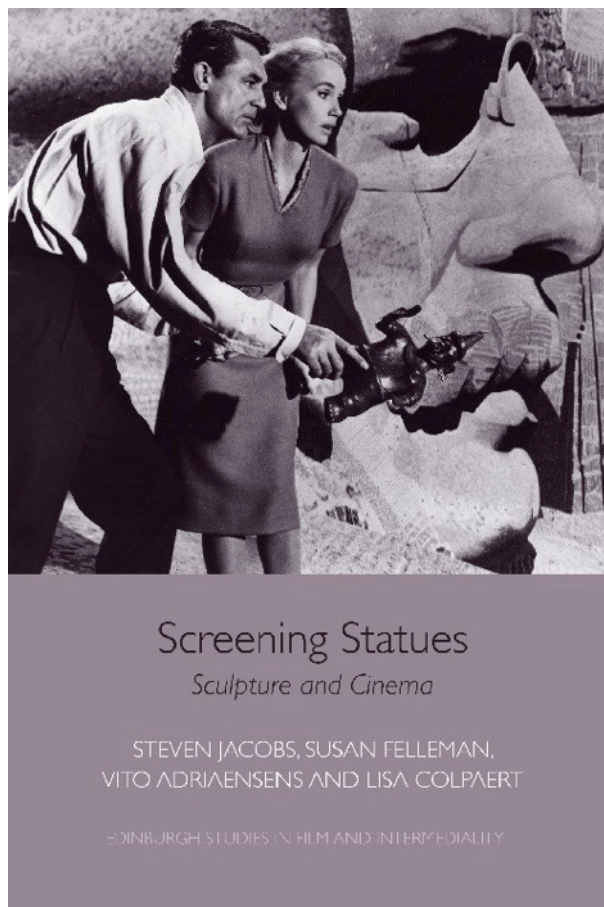


The Cinematic Quest for the Sculptural Fátima Chinita¹

Steven Jacobs, Susan Felleman, Vito Adriaenssens, Lisa Colpaert. 2017. *Screening Statues: Sculpture and Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 276 pages. ISBN: 978 1 4744 1089 2 (hardback).



Screening Statues: Sculpture and Cinema was written by four authors, who each contributed different content, but the fabric of the book is extremely organic and the whole feels voiced by a single subjectivity. *Screening Statues* is divided into two completely separate parts of two absolutely different natures: Part I is made up of eight articles dealing with selected topics, signed by their respective authors; Part II is an invaluable reference guide to films that contain statues and, rather than an appendix, should be

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considered a complement to the texts, although it can also be used separately. All the articles are equally well researched and scientifically expounded. Although the book's theme is sculpture, occasional commentaries on painting, architecture, photography, and theatre help to integrate this particular art form in a broader artistic context. *Screening Statues* is a major contribution for researchers working in the field of film and the other art forms. Yet this includes not only the most usual figurative art – especially of Greek classical or neo-classical making – but also *tableaux vivants*, wax figures, solid anthropomorphic entities such as mannequins and dolls, as well as kinetic, luminescent and almost weightless contemporary minimalist sculptures. The presence of the sculptural in the expanded cinema practices of the 1960s, and the contemporary post-cinematic practices in the gallery space, are also equated (in a chapter called Coda, authored by Susan Felleman).

Screening Statues is a book about 'the encounter between sculpture (an art of stillness in space, around which the viewer moves) and cinema (an art of motion in time, before which the viewer is still)' (page 52). Furthermore, 'on the one hand, film mobilizes sculptures, animates them, and brings them to life. On the other, many filmmakers are unmistakably fascinated by the dead and dumb nature of the sculptures, emphasizing their immobility' (page 15). A few sculptural tropes addressed throughout the book grapple precisely with the opposition between movement and stillness: agalmatophilia (a sexual attraction for statues, rare as a clinical condition but widely represented in the arts); Pygmalianism (a term derived from Ovid's description of a Cypriot sculptor who falls in love with his own statue and asks Venus to grant her life, thus entailing the animation of statues); Medusa effects (referring to the petrification of living humans); and dead automatons (in which all sorts of anthropomorphic creatures are animated). The authors grant that the engagement between film and sculpture is ambivalent, based on an attraction of opposites (page 1). Apart from stasis, sculpture is characterised by two other properties lacking in film: material solidity and three-dimensionality.

However, the authors also posit that 'sculpture and film were made for each other, so to speak' (page 1). Indeed, sculptures abound in films in ways far more than decorative, and film itself has the ability to enhance the properties of statuary, and even to overcome them, presenting sculptures to the filmic beholders in a new and better way. This is particularly noticeable in the documentary films on art made during the 1940s and 50s (the subject of chapter three, authored by Steven Jacobs). The author considers these works true essay films, since they are essentially 'a means to explore cinema itself' (page 66). In *Thørvaldsen* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1949) and *L'Enfer de Rodin* (Henri Alekan, 1957), the directors exploit the use of light and motion to reinforce the

relief, textures and tactility contained in both Thørvaldsen's and Rodin's statues. The movements of the camera combined with the motion of rotating pedestals on which the statues are displayed transform the sculptures into 'a cinematic experience' (page 77). Thus, Dreyer overrides the 'cool character' that Thørvaldsen's statues are occasionally accused of possessing; and Alekan does justice to the penetrating emotions of Rodin's statues, as well as to their congenital impression of movement and fragmentary nature. Either way, the use of three-dimensionality in these films on art exemplifies the excellency of statuary as an object of representation in film. In fact, as the authors posit, 'sculpture of its nature, is object, in the world, in a way in which painting, music, poetry are not' (page 10). Sculpture's materiality has to do with the monopolisation of the human figure even in non-figurative art, since there is always a hidden anthropomorphism, meaning that everything in the world is equated with or judged according to the human form. This materiality also entails a physical relationship with the beholder, who can be captivated, baffled, unnerved, or physically aroused. Some of these responses are more prevalent in certain artistic periods than in others.

According to the book's authors, sculpture is also uncanny and sensual, sometimes at once, because sculpture is a liminal art form. Susan Felleman claims it has a 'potential for troubling boundaries', being forever placed 'between that which is alive and that which is not, between subject and object, art and life' (page 47). In early cinema (the subject of chapter one, by Steven Jacobs and Vito Adriaenssens), fascination with the fresh medium's ability to reproduce movement paved the way for many comical trick films, based on the duality motion/stillness. Characters were made to interact with statues and statues were made to live, not unlike the professional stage practice of *tableaux vivants*, whose success as a form of entertainment was contemporary with the advent of cinema. 'In this tradition, sculpture is easily equated with magic, witchcraft, or alchemy', like cinema itself (page 43). Among the film magicians of the day was the French illusionist Georges Méliès, whose activity in this field did much to promote and advance the newly born medium. Less known is the output of the Viennese Saturn company, the leading production company in Austria at the beginning of the 20th century. The company's three extant films exhibit women posing as statues in the (full frontal) nude, which led to the closing of Saturn in the wake of governmental anti-pornography laws, although the films in question are rather innocent. Susan Felleman, in chapter two, focuses on three Surrealist or surrealistically influenced films of the 1930s that were financed by the Vicomte Charles de Noailles and his wife: *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* (Man Ray, 1929); *Le Sang dun poète* (Jean Cocteau, 1930); and *L'Âge d'or* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1930). In Man Ray's film, human figures – their heads covered by a hood, thus made completely

anonymous – compete for the viewer’s attention with a statue whose point of view the film occasionally seems to adopt. In Cocteau’s oneiric account of the transposition into an artist’s psyche statues are everywhere, being in part a representation of the poet’s creative dilemma, wavering between mortal desires and posthumous glory. In Buñuel and Dalí’s highly sexualised collaboration, the most important statue of the film is essentially an object of fetish, highlighting the fetishistic nature of all statuary.

Chapter five focuses on the ‘trance films’, thus called because of their dream-like atmosphere and their slight narrative thread. According to Susan Felleman, who writes this chapter, ‘critic Parker Tyler was probably the first to note how central sculpture and statuary were to avant-garde cinema (in particular, it is implied, to that of gay filmmakers [...])’ in the wake of Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un poète* (page 111). James Broughton’s role is emphasised as four of his films are dealt with, particularly *The Pleasure Garden* (1953) where several solitary characters are ‘shown engaged in more or less silly, sensual, imaginative, whimsical, and almost always kinetic escapades with and among statuary’ (page 109). Maya Deren’s role in playing with ritualistic movement (in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945) or stasis (in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, 1946) is also given prominence. The European modernist movement, contemporary to the American trance films, is approached in chapter six, authored by Steven Jacobs and Lisa Colpaert. The films *Viaggio in Italia* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953) and *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) are analysed as evidence of the prevalent stasis that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze considers to be the brand image of cinematic modernity, and which he calls ‘time-image’. In both films this immobility has dramaturgical substantiation. The unhappily married female protagonist of Rossellini’s film is captivated by the huge Farnese statues that she sees in the Naples Archeological Museum, and in whose vicinity she is deliberately framed. The fluid camera movements from the body of the male statue to the eye of his beholder signal the bond established between object and subject, and the sexual innuendo it contains. In Resnais’s film, the large neo-classical statue that appears in several places throughout the opus, reproducing its fragmentation and narrative bipolarity, is never seen from all angles; in fact, it is only shown either from the front or from the back. In both films there is a pervasive feeling of mystery and some uncertainty, quite natural in films whose meaning is deliberately blurred.

Chapter four, signed by Vito Adriaenssens, deals specifically with the uncanny effects provoked by wax figures in horror films. In this type of fare, which generates a mix of ‘entertainment’ and ‘fascination’, there is a symbolic relationship with death. The trope of the mad artist, who immortalises his female models in wax in order to forever preserve them and keep them in his so-called

control, are a staple of the genre. The unnerving effect upon the viewer derives from the ‘excellent verisimilitudinous’ between these figures and the human body (page 85). Wax mannequins, like statues, are posed between life and death, but, unlike statues, are hyper-realistic, and the beholder is never quite sure of their nature. Their ‘awakening’ in horror films is a perverse version of the myth of Pygmalion. Besides, they are highly perishable, and a customary fire scene usually wipes them out. Yet, their waxen substance also grants them an organic tactility and causes these figures to be immensely haptic. As Adriaenssens puts it: ‘there’s poetry in wax’ (page 84). Classical cinema is less prone to statues and its uncanny effects, except in two genres: the *film noir* style of the 1940s and 50s, where ‘sculpture appears as overestimated object of desire and as enigma’ (page 102) and the *peplum*, a low-brow form of historical films usually shot with a low budget in Italy in the 1950s and 60s. Both genres are addressed in chapter seven (authored by Vito Adriaenssens) and chapter five (already mentioned).

In Part II, the Sculpture Gallery, as the authors call the aforementioned reference guide, lists 150 statues that are prominently featured in films. Its appeal is twofold: it can be consulted either by art researchers or film scholars, for different, but related, purposes. Films are listed in chronological order, which is quite convenient for film history, since it allows for the perception of sculptural (and filmic) trends over time. It features all types of films: high-brow and low-brow, genre films and arthouse works, films thematically centred on sculpture and those in which sculpture is merely ornamental. For each film (indicated by its original title only), there is an image containing the sculpture, and a synopsis and brief commentary welded together in a short text. Although this section certainly forms the basis of the authors’ well-documented and thorough research, its availability in this volume speaks of the selfless nature of the authors’ agenda, which is entirely aligned with the development of the field. This Gallery is more than just an added benefit; it guarantees the reader access to a real textbook on sculpture and film, appealing to art lovers and film fans alike. *Screening Statues: Sculpture and Cinema* is a book that has long been due in that it fills a major gap in the field of statuary in film.

Financially supported by FCT - Foundation for Arts and Technologies (Portugal), under the Post-Doctoral fellowship programme SFRH/BDP/113196/2015