



ROLAND



BARTHES'



CINEMA

PHILIP WATTS

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Philip Watts

MANUSCRIPT EDITED FROM THE AUTHOR'S  
UNFINISHED CHAPTERS

Dudley Andrew

Yves Citton

Vincent Debaene

Sam Di Iorio

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## CONTENTS

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<i>Editors' Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
1. A Degraded Spectacle	9
The Interpreter and the Sensualist	10
Roman Hair	12
A Cold War Cinema	14
Demystification, 1957	17
"The Face of Garbo"	20
2. Refresh the Perception of the World	25
"On CinemaScope"	26
Barthes and the New Wave	28
3. Barthes and Bazin	35
Lost Continent	36
From Ontology to Rhetoric and Back	40
Camera Lucida	45

## CONTENTS

4. Another Revolution	49
The Fetishist	50
Eisenstein, 1970	55
Coda: From Leftocracy to Affect and Intimacy	58
5. Leaving the Movie Theater	61
The Science of Filmology	62
Apparatus Theory	65
The Aestheticization of the World	69
A Long Conversation with Christian Metz	71
Leaving Theory	75
6. The Melodramatic Imagination	77
The Brontë Sisters	77
The New Wave's Melodramatic Turn	80
Michel Foucault's Melodramatic Imagination	85
Barthes and Foucault	89
Barthes and Truffaut: Melodramatic Photography	91
Conclusion: From Barthes to Rancière?	96
Interview With Jacques Rancière	100
Nine Texts on the Cinema by Roland Barthes	113
<i>Angels of Sin (Les Anges du péché, 1943)</i>	113
On CinemaScope	116
Versailles and its Accounts	117
Cinema Right and Left	121
On Left-Wing Criticism	124
"Traumatic Units" in Cinema: Research Principles	127

## CONTENTS

Preface to <i>Les Inconnus de la terre</i> ( <i>Strangers of the Earth</i> , Mario Ruspoli, 1961)	137
Answer to a Question about James Bond	137
Sade—Pasolini	138
<i>Notes</i>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	163
<i>Index</i>	179





## EDITORS' PREFACE

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*For Sophie, Madeleine, and Louise*

The life of Roland Barthes, last century's cleverest cultural critic and one of its most nimble and influential literary theorists, coincided with that century's most powerful artistic medium. Born the year of *Birth of a Nation*, he achieved adolescence at the coming of sound, and died in 1980 before videotape and digital technology decisively altered the viewing and making of films. This was the year Global Hollywood showed it could exercise its power, as *The Empire Strikes Back* blanketed the world in a new mystique, if not a new mythology. But it was also the year something as cerebral and poetic as Tarkovsky's *Stalker* managed to claim the higher ground that art cinema had struggled to gain for three decades, the decades corresponding in fact to Barthes' illustrious career, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. There simply must have been a connection between Roland Barthes and cinema; and indeed there was one—more than one, as we shall see—but it is not simple to identify or track. For cinema troubled Barthes; his relations with it were intermittent, ambivalent, and variable.

Just as his criticism can be parsed into phases (mythologies, structuralist semiotics, poststructuralism, and autobiography), so the cinema meant different things to Barthes at different times. Not to mention the

fact that cinema was simultaneously going through its own evolution. Hence, the myriad potential connections linking this mercurial critic to this multilayered medium. No wonder Barthes shows up so regularly in the bibliographies of film theorists. No wonder so many audacious works of film criticism take him as a model. No wonder he is taught in film curricula, even though he never addressed the medium at length, and even exhibited a certain allergy to it.

## THE FIRST SYNTHETIC ESSAY ON BARTHES AND CINEMA

Since several articles have been devoted to this topic,<sup>1</sup> we all assumed that someone would dare to write a book probing Barthes' cool affair with the moving image. This did not happen, however . . . not until a few years ago, when some of us began to hear about Philip Watts' research and realized he was the perfect scholar for the task. As a PhD student at Columbia in the 1980s, he studied with Antoine Compagnon, who studied with Roland Barthes. As a professor of twentieth-century French Literature and soon chair of the department of French and Italian at the University of Pittsburgh (from 1992 until 2006), and then as a chair of the French Department back at Columbia, he taught inspiring classes on Céline, Francophone literature, and—more and more—on cinema. Throughout his career he was appreciated by his students and colleagues for his devotion, generosity, collegiality, and inexhaustible kindness.

Phil Watts' first book, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France*, analyzed the caustic debates over the political and ethical responsibility of writers in the aftermath of the Second World War, paying particular attention to the work of Sartre, Eluard, Blanchot, and Céline. In the wake of its publication, Watts began work on a manuscript that dealt with the resuscitation of aesthetic classicism among French writers and intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century. Aspects of this project were sketched in a series of articles on figures like Genet, Camus, Bazin, and Straub and Huillet. Another part was published in a special issue of *Yale French Studies*, which he coedited with Richard J. Golsan and was titled

*Literature and History: Around Suite Française and Les Bienveillantes.* As the son of a French mother and an American father, and equally at ease in both languages and cultures, Phil Watts also devoted much of his time to translating and introducing French and Maghrebian writers to US audiences. He was instrumental to the American discovery of the work of Jacques Rancière, organizing a series of invitations and conferences which culminated in 2009 with *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, the collection of essays he coedited with Gabriel Rockhill for Duke University Press.

As his humorous introduction to this book recounts, Phil Watts' familiarity with Roland Barthes' writing began during his student days in New York, when the author of *Mythologies* offered an ideal example of how a literary sensibility can be translated into sociopolitical critique. This interest continued through his years in Pittsburgh, when his work on the self-styling of French intellectuals found in Barthes' elusive political positioning rich material for reflection. Watts' increasing focus on film studies during his last years at Columbia led him to address the vexing issue of Barthes' mixed feelings and mixed signals toward cinema. He spent three years accumulating material, stealing time from his administrative duties as chairperson to write several talks on the topic. A brief sabbatical enabled him to organize and complete his research and to prepare the first draft of a book manuscript by the beginning of 2013.

Tragically, however, Phil Watts would not be given quite enough time to finish the task. Diagnosed with cancer in Spring 2013, he passed away that summer while organizing drafts of chapters that he felt sure he could complete as his crowning book. At the request of his wife, Sophie Queuniet, we four, who cared for him and knew his work quite well, read those drafts, consulted each other at length, and determined that the book could and must be published. We revised and polished his manuscript, limiting our interventions to the minimum—completing footnotes, occasionally rearranging the order of an argument or adding a sentence to ensure a better flow. We had to come to terms with the fact that this collectively edited text would never match the book Phil Watts would have published.<sup>2</sup> In the most ambitious version of his prospective table of contents, for example, he had planned an introductory chapter titled "Prehistory" that would have covered Camus, Sartre,

and Merleau-Ponty's writing on cinema. Unfortunately, this promising beginning was too unfinished to include here.<sup>3</sup> He also intended to write a final section to explore the filiation between Barthes' reflections on cinema and later writing by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière. We have compiled his notes for this section in what is now the book's conclusion, but it would be more accurate to cast these pages as an invitation to *poursuivre la réflexion*. Nevertheless, while these frustrating absences prevent this text from being exactly the one that Phil Watts envisioned, we can safely say that the reader is holding his exceptional book in its entirety, as it was actually written.

This book, *Roland Barthes' Cinema*, has four centers of gravity. First it explores Barthes' relation to certain postwar intellectual currents adjacent to film (such as philosophy and sociology) especially as these help fund his breakout *Mythologies*. Second, it takes on Barthes' more direct relations to classical film theory through his responses to André Bazin and Sergei Eisenstein. Third, it examines the particularly complex period, his semiotic and then poststructural phase from 1965 to 1975, during which he responded to two distinct ideological concerns: on one side, the potentially insidious effects of any apparatus of representation, particularly so potent a one as cinema; and on the other side, the attraction of popular forms of representation that flow into apparatuses of all sorts. As a prime carrier of the melodramatic imagination of our age, cinema both thrilled and troubled Barthes. Fourth, in his final years, Barthes reflected increasingly on broad topics that could clearly include cinema, such as forms of solitude and social life; he also composed *Camera Lucida*, his brilliant meditation on photography, published the year he died. One can only imagine what might have become of Barthes' relation to cinema had he accompanied it as the century moved toward its close.

There is no shortage of discussions about Barthes' relation to the ideas of his times, but what has been the consequence of his thought on those aspects of aesthetics and philosophy that edge close to cinema? While Watts pursued this question intermittently in this study, we have nothing like his full response. Rather than attempting to surmise what he would have written had he lived—doing so with the fragmentary notes and quotations he collected for this concluding chapter—we

decided instead to complete his book with an interview with Jacques Rancière, who knew Phil Watts and his agenda. Rancière fills out the picture from today's perspective, wryly addressing his own long-lasting and complex relation to Barthes' writings.

A generation younger than Barthes, Rancière has had a similarly illustrious career; he has contributed substantially to many domains (philosophical, sociological, and aesthetic) and hence has always appealed to an international readership the way Barthes did. Moreover, cinema has accompanied Rancière from his days as a philosophy student in the 1960s. His public engagement with film dates back to a 1976 interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s prescient special issue on Brand Image ("Images de Marque"), and since 1995 he has been a prominent figure in the vibrant interdisciplinary conversation that goes under the rubric "film and philosophy." He benefits, like Barthes, from a reputation for being able to drive aesthetic insights into the heart of the most profound discussions of our age, whether in philosophy or politics. His remarks provide a fitting and exciting end point for *Roland Barthes' Cinema*.

## A SELECTION OF BARTHES' WRITINGS ON CINEMA

The final words in this volume, however, have been given to Barthes himself. The articles on film that are cited by Phil Watts and Jacques Rancière form an elusive part of the Barthes corpus: some are only available in Les Éditions du Seuil's multivolume *Oeuvres complètes*, which is organized chronologically. Others are reprinted in smaller collections of Barthes' writing, but here as well they are rarely, if ever, set side by side. The situation is similar outside of France: though Richard Seaver and Stephen Heath have translated key pieces like "Garbo's Face," "Leaving the Movie Theater," and "The Third Meaning" for Anglophone readers, other significant texts have remained frustratingly inaccessible. To remedy this situation, we conclude this volume with nine new translations meant to complement the material that is already in circulation. In addition to the essays that feature prominently in Watts' manuscript,

we have included a handful of other pieces from different stages in Barthes' career: a 1943 review of Robert Bresson's *Les Anges du Péché* written for a student journal at the sanatorium where he was treated for tuberculosis; an answer to a 1960 questionnaire from *Positif* contributor Michèle Firk regarding left-wing criticism; a text for *Le Monde* about Pasolini's "irrecoverable" final film *Salò*, whose French release took place six months after the director's murder. We also append an article that remains absent from many Barthes bibliographies as well as the *Oeuvres complètes*, a two-paragraph note written to accompany the 1961 release of Mario Ruspoli's rural portrait *Les Inconnus de la terre*. Originally published in Raymond Bellour's journal *Artsept*, this forgotten piece reinforces the underacknowledged proximity between Barthes and cinéma-vérité at the outset of the 1960s. A concluding bibliography lists additional references in English and French so that interested readers can locate all of this book's primary source material. Unable to publish Barthes' complete writings on film here, we want the texts we have included, as well as the bibliography, to open paths for future research.

Phil Watts indicates many of those paths in his work, some of which Jacques Rancière starts exploring in the interview. For instance, Watts convincingly explains how André Bazin and *Cahiers du Cinéma* intersect Barthes' career, but we hope others will reverse the dynamic and explore how Barthes' writing might have affected Bazin during the 1950s, or investigate the more definite relationship he maintained with the 1970s *Cahiers*, where articles by Sylvie Pierre, Pascal Bonitzer, and Jean-Pierre Oudart testify to the tonic impact of his essays. On a practical level, chapter 2's discussion of Barthes and the New Wave invites further study of the films Barthes was personally involved in during this period: his punctual impact on *Wrestling*, the collective film Michel Brault, Claude Jutra, and friends made for Canada's National Film Board in 1961;<sup>4</sup> his direct involvement with Hubert Aquin's *Of Sport and Men* the same year;<sup>5</sup> his invisible "appearance" in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* in 1965.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we hope the future sees more developed accounts of the connections traced in the final chapters between André Téchiné and melodrama, or how Barthes' understanding of cinema relates to the conceptions of the medium that are associated with Foucault and Deleuze.

It was only once we had started editing the manuscript that we began to appreciate the full scope of the material Phil Watts had left us.

## WHY ROLAND BARTHES' CINEMA MATTERS

Finding such a wealth of possibilities was all the more surprising given Barthes' well-established antipathy toward movies. In the most remarkably synthetic and well-informed article to date, Charlotte Garson states that "cinema was the object of no particular interest" for Barthes and that he used it mostly as a "methodological foil" in haphazard articles written with "nonchalance."<sup>7</sup> She finds two main reasons for what Barthes himself characterized as his "resistance to cinema," explaining why, in his own words, "he did not go to the movies very often."<sup>8</sup> First, "he expressed his repugnance towards a mode of representation in which 'everything is given.'"<sup>9</sup> The written text, because it relies on the symbolic, lets the reader imagine what is to be seen and heard in a narrative, whereas movies tend to provide images and sounds already made for us, forcing themselves upon us with an overbearing impression of naturalness. Second, the cinematic experience frustrates Barthes because of the relentless rhythm it imposes on the viewer: "The moving pictures leave no choice to the spectator, he can neither slow down what he sees, nor (since he is carried by the flow) can he imagine other potential developments of the action."<sup>10</sup>

In the interview included in this volume, Jacques Rancière fundamentally agrees with Charlotte Garson (and with the general perception of Barthes' resistance to film). He stresses that Barthes never really writes about moving pictures at all, even when he discusses his cinematic experiences. In *Mythologies* Barthes effectively freezes Greta Garbo's face as if it were a mask, or fixates on the rigid hairstyle of actors playing Roman soldiers. Later, his analysis reduces Eisenstein's cinematic art to a few instants, and these are discussed not as scenes but simply as individual stills.<sup>11</sup> In his 1975 essay, tellingly titled "Leaving the Movie Theater," Barthes takes into account only what happens to the bodies of the spectators, not even mentioning what is actually projected on the screen! The point seems irrefutable: Barthes did not like the movies, did



not see many of them, and even when he happened to find himself in a theater, he paid attention to his fellow-spectators and couldn't wait to exit and at most transform the moving picture into isolated images that could be handled more comfortably.<sup>12</sup>

Phil Watts never denies Barthes' resistance to the experience of motion pictures: he made it the starting point of this book. But he invites us to inquire more deeply into this resistance, and to register how a discreet but insistent "cinophilic" voice accompanies Barthes' ostentatiously "cinophobic" postures. Charlotte Garson herself tantalizingly suggested, toward the end of her article, that Barthes may have (reluctantly) returned so often to an art toward which he felt so suspicious precisely because it provided him with a corrective to theory, which otherwise ran rampant and unbridled across every domain:

The resistance that cinema opposed to the analytic instruments Barthes found in his [structuralist] toolbox played a privileged role in the upsetting of literary theory: because cinema could not be analyzed in purely linguistic terms, it pushed Barthes to take more distance from semiology and narratology.<sup>13</sup>

Phil Watts patiently and meticulously accumulates evidence to demonstrate the pivotal role played by Barthes' apparently minor articles on movies during his dramatic "turn away" from the structural analysis of narratives and images. Watts brings out more than the (well-known) resistance that Barthes felt toward the cinematic experience, by documenting the irresistible urge Barthes felt toward a form of art that resisted in turn what he himself very keenly identified as the shortcomings of "scientific discourse" and its belief in a "superior code."<sup>14</sup> In other words: Roland Barthes' cinema matters because it functioned as a crucial site of self-questioning, until it helped unravel, and eventually demote, Theory for this major theorist of the twentieth century.

At the outset of the 1970s, quite unexpectedly, film even provided Barthes with a model for thinking through what the remembrance of a past life could be. He imagines silent cinema as an idealized form of remembering, one that could offer more than a mere collection of fragments, photographs, or still images, but one which could also retain

its independence from the forward motion of narrative. For Barthes, it becomes an ideal medium that would destabilize narrative coherence through a plurality of codes, and preserve movement without reducing it to progression:

Were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to “biographemes” whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion; a marked life, in sum, as Proust succeeded in writing in his work, or even a film, in the old style, in which there is no dialogue and the flow of images (that *flumen orationis* which perhaps is what makes up the “obscurities” of writing) is intercut, like the relief of hiccoughs, by the barely written darkness of the intertitles, the casual eruption of *another signifier*.<sup>15</sup>

But there are other, more important reasons why Roland Barthes' cinema matters to us today. In the first place, when he was not eyeing his neighbors or walking out on the movie, the literary critic did at least occasionally take a look at what was being projected on the screen. Quite often, especially during the *Mythologies* era and under the rather judgmental spell of his Brechtianism, Barthes condemned what he saw—mostly in mainstream Hollywood (Kazan, Mankiewicz) or in French movies (Guitry)—in the name of a demystifying attitude prone to denounce the culture industry for luring the masses via its stultifying apparatus of representation. But the most important merit of Phil Watts' study is to trace a much more subdued and humble voice with which Barthes uttered his appreciation for the work of a few directors, to whom he clearly paid abiding attention. The first article he devoted to cinema lauded Robert Bresson's *Les Anges du Péché* (*Angels of Sin*, 1943) for its ascetic simplicity, and his last—the very rich and vibrant essay “Dear Antonioni” (1980)—elevated its subject to the status of model artist. In between (i.e., in the 1970s), one finds him discovering the “sens obtus” in Eisenstein and admiring the work of filmmakers like André Téchiné.

Indeed, his frequent affecting encounters with moving pictures were opportunities to develop multifarious fragments of a "lover's discourse."

His piece on Antonioni, in particular, deserves a closer look, since it patently reverses the second indictment Barthes levels against cinema. This second point of resistance starts from the idea that film saturates the imagination by imposing ready-made images and sounds which resist structural analysis and numb symbolic interpretation. Even more importantly, perhaps, it uses calculated montage to bind and glue our attention to the alienating cadence of a generally unrelenting pace. A late statement about radio broadcasts expresses quite accurately this rhythmic resistance that generated a great deal of Barthes' discomfort with mainstream movies: "the announcers spoke at dizzying speed: faster, faster, always faster . . . The media are so desperate to 'bring messages to life,' that we'd be justified in thinking that they consider the messages themselves dead—even deadly."<sup>16</sup> However, the directors praised by Barthes find ways to circumvent this stultifying effect. While certain "cinematographers" like Robert Bresson use techniques of "fragmentation" in order to create images that invite the spectator to imagine what she or he is not given to hear or see,<sup>17</sup> other directors, like Antonioni, use "filmic techniques" which generate a "syncopation of meaning" capable of emancipating the viewers from those alienating rhythms of attention.<sup>18</sup> If Barthes watches his neighbor in the theater, it is because he feels that many films put little to see on the screen. Sketching an argument that would soon be reconfigured by Gilles Deleuze, he suggests that most mainstream movies prevent us from *seeing* anything, because they merely relay "clichés" (which Barthes would have analyzed as "myths" a few decades earlier). Bresson, Godard, and Antonioni "break" such clichés by means of a particular deployment of time (Deleuze's *image-temps*) or of rhythm (Barthes' *idiorrhythmie*).<sup>19</sup> In "Dear Antonioni," emancipation begins as soon as one is led to "look at something one minute too many," to "look longer than needed," thus interrupting the informational flows constitutive of "power":

Power of any kind, because it is violence, never looks; if it looked one minute longer (one minute too much) it would lose its essence as power. The artist, for his part, stops and looks lengthily, and

I would imagine you became a film-maker because the camera is an eye, constrained by its technical properties to look. What you, like all film-makers, add to these properties is to look at things radically, until you have exhausted them. On the one side you look lengthily at what you were not expected to look at either by political convention (the Chinese peasants) or by narrative convention (the dead times of an adventure). On the other your preferred hero is someone who looks (a photographer, a reporter). This is dangerous, because to look longer than expected (I insist on this added intensity) disturbs established orders of every kind, to the extent that normally the time of the look is controlled by society; hence the scandalous nature of certain photographs and certain films, not the most indecent or the most combative, but just the most "posed."<sup>20</sup>

Like Vilém Flusser, who began calling for "contemplative images" at around the same time,<sup>21</sup> Barthes identifies artistic work with a certain freezing of the stream of images—hence his constant tendency to extract photographic stills from the flow of moving pictures. But, as his love letter to Antonioni demonstrates, he also appreciated the possibility offered by cinematic montage to intensify our gaze, through its artistic instrumentation to allow our look to "pause" and remain longer than warranted on certain portions of reality. Hence a second reason why Roland Barthes' cinema matters: three decades after his death, his resistance to film remains more relevant than ever, since it calls for cinematographic creations to be sites of emergence for much needed counter-rhythmic gestures. This amounts to a deeply political claim, very much in sync with today's "slow" movements (slow food, slow travel, and of course slow cinema).<sup>22</sup>

Beyond issues of rhythm, Phil Watts' essay recovers throughout Barthes' career a constant attraction for cinema as a *site of sensory excess*, serving as a reserve of meaning always ready to undermine the shortcomings of the cinematic mode of representation.<sup>23</sup> In the 1950s, this sensory excess pushed him to measure and sometimes overcome his Brechtian positions, as in the case of the much neglected *Mythologie* article dedicated to Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (1958), a film

condemned for its right-wing politics but vindicated for its attention to the sensual world. In the 1970s, sensory excess is the engine that makes the theorist diffident toward the arrogant poverty of Theory, when confronted with the mute wealth of our sense perceptions. In the few months Barthes enjoyed of the 1980s, we can detect the insistence of this sensual attention underneath his praise for Antonioni's *vigilance* and his claim that "the meaning of a thing is not its truth."<sup>24</sup> Of course, first and foremost one should understand this phrase to mean that "the *meaning* of a thing is not its truth." But after reading Watts' essay, it is hard not to hear that the *sensory* dimension of any "thing" receives its independence from the theoretical truth one can project upon it. And it is hard not to envisage the cinematographic art as one important site for this declaration of independence.

As early as chapter 1, Phil Watts announces what will become a guiding principle in his study:

Barthes approaches film in two ways. On the one hand as an "interpreter," who applies a hermeneutic model to films (one closely resembling what Paul Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion"). On the other hand as a sensualist, who looks to describe the surface of films, the effects they produce on spectators and his own emotional response to the sounds and images of movies. This is one of the key tensions in the field of film studies—summarized as the "hermeneutic" versus the "poetic" approach—and while Barthes has most often been placed in the hermeneutics' camp, it is the tension at the heart of his writing that makes *Mythologies* a book for our modern times.

By unfolding the consequences of this tension generated by a constant sensory excess in Barthes' writings on cinema, Phil Watts has been led to compose an exemplary book situated at the crossroads of three disciplinary currents which have played a major role in fertilizing film studies. In the first place, *Roland Barthes' Cinema* is closely allied with queer studies: without ever deserting the respectable hermeneutics' camp of mainstream French academia, Barthes laced his writings with subtle allusions and cryptic references to his sexual

orientation, which Watts' essay unfolds with delicate care and loving humor. The background of "camp poetics" certainly sheds a new light on what Barthes wrote about film in the 1950s, anticipating a concern with queerness which would find a fuller definition for the generation after Barthes' death, yet which already underpins his readings of films like Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) and Mamoulian's *Queen Christina* (1933).

Secondly, *Roland Barthes' Cinema* also sets out a template for literary reading. Without ever misinterpreting Barthes' writing, Phil Watts tirelessly exploits the sensual excess of the textual grain in order to elaborate the wealth of its multifarious meanings. He may have been one of our finest, most subtle, and most Barthesian literary critics, maintaining a fine balance between an awareness of historical context and a fascination with the rejuvenating power of meaning in the present. For him too, literary studies are driven by a somewhat paradoxical urge to work as "a science of nuances"—which Barthes labeled *diaphorology* at the time of his courses at the Collège de France. As sharp and playful in its use of *punctum* as it is well-researched in terms of *studium*, Phil Watts' method of reading relies on pointing our attention to apparently minor details in the texts, making their recurrence surprisingly significant under the light of his clever interpretations. Look again at the insistent focus on hairstyles in chapter 1.<sup>25</sup> Like Barthes, he also revels in suspending the flow of discourse, isolating motifs as if they were film stills and "fetishizing" their endlessly polysemic potential. The clear-eyed focus of Watts' prose exemplifies a critical tenet Barthes had sketched as early as his 1944 essay "*Plaisir aux classiques*": it is disciplined attention to detail that best reveals a text's propensity to take on diverse meanings in light of constantly renewed contexts of reception. Watts mines this insight: more than a philosopher, more than a film theorist, more than a cultural critic, he is first and foremost a *literary* scholar, insofar as he fetishizes *the letter* of the texts, trusting it to carry more important meanings (more *sens*) than any truth that can be read into them.

Finally, and more surprisingly, *Roland Barthes' Cinema* matters as an oblique lesson in media archaeology. Barthes' fetishism—which Phil Watts allows us to trace all the way back to the period of the *Mythologies*—leads him to invest the images, moving or not, with a