The logic upon which Karla Oeler’s critical union of montage and the murder scene hinges is contained within the violence of the word ‘cut’ itself. *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* smoothly negotiates the terrain between murder, as a material site of critical interest, with the conceptual metaphor of death as it pertains to filmic representation more broadly. “Murder”, she argues, “is such a foundational scene in the history of cinema because the obliteration of life that it revolves around dramatizes the way that cinematic representation - which shows the photographic trace of a now absent object - always is poised between conveying the reality of the object and registering the loss of reality, or disembodiment, intrinsic to representation itself” (p. 4).

As demonstrated in books such as *Scene of the Crime* (Ralph Rugoff with Anthony Vidler and Peter Wollen, 1997) and Henry Bond’s *Lacan at the Scene* (2009), critical interest in the crime scene as a cultural artefact has proven fertile. There is also no lack of research into the relationship between death and film (both literally and metaphorically), as illustrated in a diverse range of texts including Catherine Russell’s *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas* (1995), David Kerekes and David Slater’s *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (1993), Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), and Paolo Cherchi Usai’s *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (2001). But as Oeler observes, the fusion of murder and montage in particular has precedence in its deployment by such key figures as Christian Metz, Hugo Münsterberg, Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and Lev Kuleshov, amongst others. *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* maps film history onto the phenomenon of murder, and Oeler does so with impressive results. Structurally, it is divided into two sections: ‘Murder and Montage’, and ‘Murder and Genre’. This division dominates the two textual areas of focus between Soviet and Hollywood cinemas. Her focus on Soviet film is strong, concise, and her claims are supported by both excellent research and insightful close analysis - considering the topic at hand, her deployment of Formalist reading strategies are both sound and appropriate. Her central focus is on montage, and she observes a synchronicity between Soviet montage and the murder scene, observing “Soviet montage stands out as a key historical moment in the development of a theory and practice of a cinematic signification, and this moment arises in close conjunction with murder, both as an object of representation and as a metaphor for representation” (p. 7). Consequently, the “history of montage in relation to the murder scene collapses into a history of montage itself - as well as formal and theoretical opposition to it” (p. 13).

Just as the first section emphasises the tensions between the murder scene and montage because they both “entail…a tension between individual and series” (p. 17), Oeler maintains that a similar tension governs Hollywood genre films. To demonstrate this, she offers a range of well-chosen case studies, the stand-out analyses stemming from her *Film Noir* examples of Michael Curtiz’ *Mildred Pierce* (USA 1945) and - in particular - Jules Dassin’s *Naked City* (USA 1948). Her final focus on Alfred Hitchcock’s use of overhead shots provides a powerful and confident conclusion to an insightful book that, aside from satisfyingly engaging with its eponymous areas of interest, also demonstrates the strengths of a Formalist approach: the author’s sharp critical insight is intensified by her keen eye for formal detail.

But it may be this keen ‘eye’ that paradoxically provides the source of one of the book’s rare minor blemishes. “If we’ve watched films,” Oeler writes, “we’ve watched bodies fall” (p. 17): but we’ve also heard them splat, split, and scream. She does talk about sound - and quite insightfully in places (particularly her analysis on aural montage in Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *Deserter* (Soviet Union 1933), *Naked City* and the section on Jean Renoir) - but it is difficult to deny the visual field is privileged throughout this book. By ‘murder scene’, she often means ‘murder seen’, but of course this privileging of the visual is reflective of a broader ocularcentrism that has marked Cinema Studies as a whole (particularly in relation to the all-important psychoanalytic gaze). So while the emphasis upon montage in the section on Soviet cinema is logical, the continued emphasis upon
the visual (mise-en-scene and cinematography as well as editing) in later examples is not wholly as satisfying. This does not only refer to comparatively underexamined formal aspects such as sound: perhaps even more notable in her analysis of horror film, for instance, is a lack of emphasis upon sensation and affect (features crucial to horror’s defining hyperactive intensity). Citing Frederic Jameson, she argues that *The Shining* (UK/USA 1980) is “horror-film pastiche par excellence,” (p. 204) and while this is true, I would contend this is far from its most immediate and striking feature: it is really scary in places. It is in this sense that to dismiss Meir Zarchi’s notorious *I Spit on Your Grave* (USA 1978) as “featur(ing)...elements of camp and self-paradoy” and as a ”hyperbolic revenge” film problematically denies the striking impact of the film (particularly that of its infamous castration scene and the grueling 25-minute gang rape sequence). While I do not disagree with the features she identifies, I would argue they pale in comparison next to its affective (as well as narrative and thematic) brutality.

These are, of course, merely niggling concerns in the face of a broadly astute investigation into an area that Oeler so compellingly demonstrates has profound literal and metaphorical significance. *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* provides a substantial and satisfying investigation into the crucial intersection of history, form, genre and murder, and this work will prove invaluable for further criticism in these fields.

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