



# The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle (Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture)

By Jonathan Beller

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“Cinema brings the industrial revolution to the eye,” writes Jonathan Beller, “and engages spectators in increasingly dematerialized processes of social production.” In his groundbreaking critical study, cinema is the paradigmatic example of how the act of looking has been construed by capital as “productive labor.” Through an examination of cinema over the course of the twentieth century, Beller establishes on both theoretical and historical grounds the process of the emergent capitalization of perception. This process, he says, underpins the current global economy.

By exploring a set of films made since the late 1920s, Beller argues that, through cinema, capital first posits and then presupposes looking as a value-productive activity. He argues that cinema, as the first crystallization of a new order of media, is itself an abstraction of assembly-line processes, and that the contemporary image is a politico-economic interface between the body and capitalized social machinery. Where factory workers first performed sequenced physical operations on moving objects in order to produce a commodity, in the cinema, spectators perform sequenced visual operations on moving montage fragments to produce an image.

Beller develops his argument by highlighting various innovations and film texts of the past century. These innovations include concepts and practices from the revolutionary Soviet cinema, behaviorism, Taylorism, psychoanalysis, and contemporary Hollywood film. He thus develops an analysis of what amounts to the global industrialization of perception that today informs not only the specific social functions of new media, but also sustains a violent and hierarchical global society.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"By critically studying films made since the late 1920s, the author argues that, through cinema, perception and looking has been construed by capital as a value-productive activity." —*Columbia College Today*

"Beller's overall thesis . . . is groundbreaking . . . His use of classic and contemporary film theory is ingenious . . . and this volume will inspire scholars to reconsider their approach to perception and the new media." —*CHOICE*

"The Cinematic Mode of Production suggests something important about the relation of theory to history. Despite their conceptual familiarity, the dire conclusions that Beller draws are compelling because the book effectively offers a detailed historical elaboration, through a more material engagement with cinema. That is, a great part of its value lies precisely in the ways in which it works to historicize cultural transitions whose visibility is equally dependent upon broader theories of social change . . . Beller's reliance on a single film also makes a very important intervention for film theory around the status of the example. As his discussion of Soviet cinema should make clear, Beller explicitly argues that the image and its mode of organization is both philosophical and practically oriented. It speaks to and about the very work it happens to be performing. As such, it makes clear how works of mass art make figural depictions of the things they will actually effect, whether cognitively or analogically. That is, it emphasizes how important the image has in fact become to the reorganization of the world as we know it." —*New Review of Film and Television Studies*

"The engaging epilogue is attractive and I find myself returning to passages and ideas from the book . . . Beller is interesting enough that this reviewer will be seeking out any further publications and development on his premise." —*Learning, Media and Technology*

#### About the Author

JONATHAN BELLER is Associate Professor of English and Humanities at the Pratt Institute.

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