

The Cinematic Body REDUX

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I wrote *The Cinematic Body* more than fifteen years ago. It is hard for me today even to remember or reconstruct the mindset, and the wider intellectual climate, that went into the writing of that book. I think that I was trying to negotiate between my rampant cinephilia – something that I still wallow in, unapologetically, today – and an equally compulsive intellectualizing drive: a need to theorize, to abstract, and at the limit to reduce the messy particulars of experience to their ultimate metaphysical roots. The way that I found to reconcile these two imperatives was to theorize the inadequacy of theory, to transform the resistance of the cinematic object to its metaphysical reduction into something that in its own right became a basic metaphysical principle. In this sense, I ‘proved’ my thesis only, and precisely, to the extent that I showed, inadvertently, how a drive towards metaphysical speculation is itself as irreducible, as unavoidable, as the demands of what Cronenberg calls the ‘uncontrollable flesh’.

Perhaps this is just a roundabout way of saying that the thing that embarrasses me the most today about *The Cinematic Body* is its aggressively polemical thrust (to use an unavoidably phallic metaphor). Writing in the early 1990s, I denounced 1970s and 1980s psychoanalytic/Lacanian film theory for its iconoclasm or image phobia, or for what I called ‘the psychoanalytic theorist’s need for control, his or her fear of giving way to the insidious blandishments of visual fascination, and his or her consequent construction of a theoretical edifice as a defense against a threatening pleasure.’¹ What I failed to see, in writing lines like this – which is, of course, the exact same thing that nearly every polemicist nearly always fails to see – is that almost precisely the same polemic could be launched, with as much justice, against my own theoretical edifice. For wasn’t my complexly theorized defense of primary visual pleasure itself a defense against the threatening pleasure of destructive theoretical analysis? In effect, I was whining: ‘how dare you take away my cinephiliac enjoyment?’ And the superego of psychoanalytic theory, that was thus threatening to take away my enjoyment, was something that I experienced as threatening only because it was something inside me, that I myself could not help caring about and worrying about. Cinephilia and destructive analysis are woven into each other, so that each of them necessarily implicates the other.

I think that I was aware of this in *The Cinematic Body* when I wrote, for instance, that ‘any sort of rational argumentation, theoretical generalization, or political legitimation necessarily deviates into “perverse” gratification and special pleading.’² But I wasn’t consistent enough in applying this logic, reflexively and recursively, to my own

theoretical construct. If I had done this, my own pleas for ‘abjection’ (the word with which, rather pretentiously, I fear, I ended every chapter of the book) could not have taken on so aggressively polemical a cast. I tried, in *The Cinematic Body*, to write about my own embarrassment, and even to suggest the possibility of an aesthetics of embarrassment; but I wish I had been a bit more embarrassed about how the book’s anti-phallogocentrism itself took on so phallic (and even, implicitly, anti-feminist) a cast.

For instance, consider my critique, in *The Cinematic Body*, of Laura Mulvey’s famous and influential 1975 article, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. I argued that Mulvey’s analyses of Hollywood film ‘end up constructing an Oedipal, phallic paradigm of vision that is much more totalizing and monolithic than anything the films she discusses are themselves able to articulate... Mulvey cannot avoid imparting into her own theoretical model the very norms she wishes to destroy.’³ In a certain sense, I still think that this is an accurate criticism, as far as it goes. But contextually speaking, there are a number of things that are very much wrong about it. In the first place, it ignores the fact that this sort of ultimately self-discrediting maneuver is intrinsic to the very nature of violent polemics; and that it is something that my own polemic against psychoanalytic reductionism is every bit as guilty of as is Mulvey’s polemic against Hollywood gender reductionism. In the second place, it ignores the evident fact of Mulvey’s own virulent cinephilia. Nobody could have written an article like ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ unless she was deeply moved by, and deeply invested in, the pleasures offered by Hitchcock and Sternberg and other Hollywood auteurs. It is only from the position of deep enjoyment and deep investment that Mulvey’s call for the ‘destruction’ of traditional cinephiliac pleasure is in the least bit intelligible. So, when I denounced this call as ‘phobic’ I may have been formally correct, but I got the emotional logic entirely backwards. What I had the presumption to denounce as Puritanical panic, was in fact the expression of a deep love that was deeply, and horribly, and heart-rendingly, betrayed. And ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ is both the record, and the clinical dissection, of that betrayal. Which brings me to my third point: which is that Mulvey’s essay offers an analysis that is sharp and observant and *empirically* quite on target as regards a very large number of classic Hollywood films, however much one distrusts (as I continue to do) its overall theoretical grounding.

In looking back at *The Cinematic Body* – or at least at its polemical aspects, which were what got the book noticed, and what gave it whatever small measure of fame or notoriety that it may still possess today – I am therefore impelled to say the same thing that T. S. Eliot, looking back at his poetic career, said about *The Waste Land*: that, in retrospect, he found it to be little more than ‘the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life.’ Of course, the problem with this statement is that Eliot said it when he had become a Christian, and when he was much prouder of the turgid, overly mannered banalities of his ‘Four Quartets’ than he was of the genuine excitement and originality of *The Waste Land*. So I am bringing up a dangerous analogy here. Nonetheless, I do fear that *The Cinematic Body* is far more an expression of how I felt oppressed by the orthodox, mainstream film theory prevalent at the time that I was writing it, than it is any sort of valuable contribution, in its own right, to the theory of film. From the viewpoint of the twenty-first century, this pretty much relegates *The Cinematic Body* to the status of a quaint antique. All good criticism is ‘personal’, but I

hope that at least some of the essays and books that I have written in the past fifteen years are not as ‘wholly insignificant’ in their grousing as *The Cinematic Body* has turned out to be.

Among other things, I now feel that it was trivializing to the extreme – not to mention more than a bit offensive – for me to have felt ‘oppressed’ by orthodox film theory, in light of the far more concrete, and more destructive, sorts of oppression that were going on in the world around me (and that continue to go on, throughout the world, today). The result of my approaching film theory with this attitude was that the political valencies of *The Cinematic Body* were a bit confused. On the one hand, I am happy with whatever small contribution I may have made to the development of queer theory with my discussions of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-heteronormative theory of sexuality, and of male bodies, masochism, abjection and desire in Fassbinder’s transformation of Genet’s *Querelle*. On the other hand, I am no longer satisfied that what I termed, in that Fassbinder discussion, ‘a nonutopian politics of resistance’ has any meaningful sense or actual political traction. Also, *The Cinematic Body* fails its own standards for performing any sort of valid political analysis. It fails to even reflect upon the question of why Lacan’s seemingly hyper-patriarchal theories held so much appeal for feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. Such a reflection ought to have at least come up in my hostile consideration of psychoanalytic film theory. But the consideration of gender is evidently not the strong point of *The Cinematic Body* (even if the consideration of queer male sexuality is). In addition, my book fails to give so much as even passing consideration to how filmmaking today inevitably involves questions of money and capital, and of economies of production, circulation and consumption (for this latter, I can only recommend Jonathan Beller’s well-nigh definitive discussion in *The Cinematic Mode of Production*).

In any case, and even putting these broader political considerations aside, my grudge match against psychoanalysis, throughout the length of *The Cinematic Body*, was pretty clearly the wrong fight to pick. (This is even leaving aside the fact that contemporary psychoanalytic theorists, most notably Slavoj Žižek, offer an entirely different account of Lacan, and of how he might be relevant for thinking about film, than did the psychoanalytic theorists of the 1970s and 1980s). However correct my particular arguments may have been – and I still mostly stand by them – it is evident today that the anti-theory backlash, extending through all the humanities in the last decade or so, is far more pernicious than psychoanalysis ever was. In particular – and to restrict myself to film theory – I think that the recent cognitive turn in film studies, or what has been disingenuously called *Post-Theory* – is altogether deplorable. Cognitive theory, as David Bordwell (one of its main proponents within film studies) puts it, is ‘more concerned with normal and successful action than is the Freudian framework’, which Bordwell sees as mostly based on ‘paradigm cases’ like ‘the neurotic symptom... the bizarre dream, the bungled action, the slip of the tongue.’ Cognitivists ‘focus on the intentional act’ (understanding ‘intentional’ in both the common-sense and the phenomenological meanings of the word), and hence exclude anything that might be described as *unconscious*. Cognitivism ‘searches for causal, functional, or teleological explanations’ of what it finds in films, rather than for interpretations or hermeneutic unfoldings. It relies mostly on ‘computational’ models of the mind, and ‘hypothesizes that mental representations play a determinate role in organizing and executing

action.’ And finally, cognitivism endorses ‘rational-agent social theory’, or the neoliberal assumption of an entirely atomized society in which individual ‘actors’, with no connection to one another, are motivated only by the striving to maximize, amidst constraints, their own pleasure and utility.⁴

I lack the space here for a detailed critique of cognitive film theory’s overall assumptions, much less for a look at how it approaches particular films. I only wish to note that its founding assumptions are constructed so as to rule out, *a priori*, any sort of metaphysical speculation, critical questioning or interpretive engagement whatsoever. ‘Normal’ activity is privileged over any form of deviation, mutation or invention. A narrow functionalism is privileged over any sort of dysfunction or even extravagance. Images and sounds are reduced to the instrumental role of ‘representations’ that provide knowledge, allow for logical deduction and inference, and allow a presumed already-existing subject to solve problems it encounters in its environment. These premises make it impossible – I am inclined to say, they are *designed* to make it impossible – to ask any questions about desire, fantasy, passion and emotion, or about how subjectivity might be an ongoing process rather than an already-formed structure, or about how larger social and political contexts and coordinates impact upon any individual or group of individuals, or upon any film or anything that happens in a film. They also make illegitimate, from the outset, any sort of aestheticism or cinephilia, or any reason anybody may have ever had to be moved by a film, or to regard it as ‘great’.

Psychoanalytic theory, and the sort of affect/body theory that I was trying to work out in *The Cinematic Body*, have much more in common with one another than either of them does with cognitive theory. And they are both targeted by cognitive theory, whose actual aim (even if its advocates are not directly conscious of this being the case) is basically to normalize critical discourse by a sort of intellectual cleansing, or (as Herbert Marcuse put it more than forty years ago) to effect ‘a sweeping redefinition of thought itself, of its function and content’, by translating everything into the most reductive ‘operational terms’.⁵ The point of cognitive theory is not to censor opposing thought, but to make such thought unthinkable in the first place.

It’s rare for academics who work in the realm of critical theory, or poststructuralist theory, or other such things in the humanities, even to polemicize against cognitivism: either because they are naively unaware of its institutional power, or because they (rightly) feel that it is too intellectually flimsy even to be worth arguing against. I think that this sort of attitude – in which *The Cinematic Body* shares – points up, both our failure to pay attention to the broader social, political and institutional coordinates of our debates, and to the futility of polemics *per se* when confronted with the exercise of power and authority in ways that are not matters of, and that indeed are not even subject to, polemic and debate.

For all these reasons, it now seems to me that the polemics which play so prominent a role in *The Cinematic Body* lack pertinence. This is a matter, not just of particular arguments or assertions, but more crucially of the book’s tone or style. *The Cinematic Body* has a certain air of self-congratulatory celebration, a smug pride at being so (supposedly) radical and transgressive and subversive, that I now find exceedingly unpleasant. Today I would not presume to enthuse over ‘ecstatic complicity at the

convulsive point of danger and violence',⁶ as I do in a discussion of Dario Argento's *Terror at the Opera*. And I certainly would not dare to assert that this particular film, or film in general, has a 'radical potential to subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations of power.'⁷ Lines such as these can only have been the result of a lamentable confusion between aesthetics and politics; and also between action and passion, and between labour and *jouissance*. For films quite evidently don't have this sort of 'revolutionary' or 'subversive' potential at all. To claim that they do diminishes them aesthetically, even as it trivializes politics. Today I love Dario Argento's films as much as I ever did, and certainly as much as I did when I was writing *The Cinematic Body*. But I would not claim that Argento's beautiful, terrifying violence has any political efficacy whatsoever.

Argento's films – like most films, including even most films that are made with an explicitly propagandistic political intent – do not incite the viewer to action. Rather, they paralyze him or her. They leave the viewer suspended in what Deleuze calls 'a pure optical and sound situation', one that 'does not extend into action, any more than it is induced by an action.'⁸ That is to say, they interrupt the sensori-motor circuit that is the basis of the 'normal' situation of perception and action privileged by cognitivism. This interruption – which is as good a description as any of what it means for a state of mind, or a work that provokes that state, to be called 'aesthetic' – involves both a heightening of affect, and the sort of detachment from immediate concerns that Kant called 'disinterest'. To have an aesthetic experience is many things; but at the limit, it is *to feel* – and perhaps thereby to cry, to laugh, or to scream. As Deleuze says, 'it makes us grasp, it is supposed to make us grasp, something intolerable and unbearable.'⁹ But the intolerable and unbearable is also the unactable and the untenable: that which we cannot affect or act upon. This is why the scene of horror, in a film by Argento or anybody else, cannot be called political, but only aesthetic – even if, much later, in a totally different time and place, reflection upon that disinterested and inescapable aesthetic sensation might indirectly lead one towards considering something like political action.

Leaving aside this aesthetic and political confusion, *The Cinematic Body* was at least groping towards an approach to film that focused on bodies and their affects, instead of upon ideologies and representations. (Here I am deliberately saying 'bodies' rather than 'body'; today I am mortified by the arrogance that led me to title the book in the singular rather than the plural). I think that everything *The Cinematic Body* had to say is epitomized in Deleuze and Guattari's maxim that *sentio* precedes *cogito*: 'the basic phenomenon of hallucination (*I see, I hear*) and the basic phenomenon of delirium (*I think*) presuppose an *I feel* at an even deeper level, which gives hallucinations their object and thought delirium its content.'¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari are writing in particular about the experiences of those people who are classified as mad; but their principle applies all the more to the collective hallucination and delirium that is cinema. It applies as well, I think, to the newer media that have displaced film in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Perhaps the clumsiness of my efforts to work out a body/affect theory in *The Cinematic Body* is less important than the fact that I made such an effort at all, well before it became fashionable to do so. Still, I think I did a better job of explaining what

cinematic perception is *not*, than of positively articulating what it *is*, and how it works. The most important thing that the book did was to reject ‘the idealist assumption that human experience is originally and fundamentally cognitive’.¹¹ I argued that a lot of psychoanalytic, deconstructionist and poststructuralist theory was hobbled by a binarism that was the result of not getting rid of underlying cognitivist assumptions. Where so many critics from the 1970s through the 1990s, both Lacanian and Derridian, were obsessed with mounting an ever-vigilant struggle against any metaphysical assertions of ‘presence’, I pointed out that ‘the alternative between presence and mediation, or phenomenological immediacy and linguistic deferral is a false one... Signification and presence are two coexistent dimensions of perceptual “truth”’, and cinematic experience undoes both of them simultaneously.¹² Such a point may seem obvious now; but it wasn’t obvious in 1993. It was something that needed to be said, and *The Cinematic Body* said it.

On the other hand, there are places in *The Cinematic Body* where I seem to have forgotten my own argument. The result is passages like the following: ‘Film is inescapably literal. Images confront the viewer directly, without mediation... We respond viscerally to visual forms, before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols.’¹³ Such a statement is exactly wrong, because it simply sides with the literal against the figurative, or with presence against mediation, instead of rejecting the binary altogether. In this context, too, a word like ‘viscerally’ will tend to be read binaristically, in opposition to ‘mentally’ or ‘interpretatively’ or ‘hermeneutically’ or ‘cognitively’; even though my placing of the visceral ‘before’ the cognitive could have been taken, more properly, to imply a temporal priority in what remains a unified (both physical and mental, or both affective and cognitive) process. What I was groping towards, but unable to express fully, was the idea that the cognitive – far from being opposed to the visceral or bodily – grows out of the visceral, and is an elaboration of it (though a relatively rare and insignificant elaboration, as Alfred North Whitehead always reminds us). Here I should have cited William James’s argument that cognized emotions are the effects of bodily states, so that I am afraid because I tremble, rather than trembling because I am afraid. But I hadn’t yet read James at the time that I was writing this book.

When I wrote *The Cinematic Body*, I was also entirely ignorant of recent developments in neurobiology: developments that have only been confirmed and strengthened by research in the fifteen years since my book came out. The procedures by which the brain processes images and sounds are exceedingly convoluted and complex; there is no way that any sort of seeing or hearing could be described as direct and unmediated. Light waves refracted through the lens of the retina, and sound waves that set the inner ear vibrating, are transformed into electrochemical signals, then diverted through multiple neuronal pathways, broken apart according to many different criteria, and only subsequently correlated and recomposed so that they can finally be recognized as particular images or sounds. Neurobiologists like Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux have shown how this process is primarily emotional, rather than cognitive; and Gerald Edelman has cogently argued that neural processing is irreducible to, and entirely unlike, digital computation. In this way, neuroscience undoes the binary in which I was trapped, as much as my psychoanalytic adversaries were. Contemporary neuroscience also shows that the abstractions favored by the cognitivists are

scientifically baseless, despite the cognitivists' frequent rhetorical appeal to the authority of physical science.

In summary, I think that, despite its numerous flaws, *The Cinematic Body* did help open the way to the theorizations of affect and of embodiment that have a much broader presence in film studies now than they did at the time when the book was written. But in terms of what it actually has to say, I fear that *The Cinematic Body* is of little more than vague historical interest. As far as I am concerned, that is just as well. As one grows older, one is ever more oppressively aware of the truth of Marx's famous comment that 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'¹⁴ It is only by pushing my old books out of the way that I can ever hope to write new ones. And it's only because thought is embodied, because it is grounded in feeling, that it makes sense to think abstractly, or theoretically, at all.

Notes

- ¹ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.13.
- ² Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.10–11.
- ³ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.12.
- ⁴ David Bordwell, 'A Case for Cognitivism', <http://www.geocities.com/david_bordwell/caseforcog1.htm> [20/11/07].
- ⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), p.104.
- ⁶ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.61.
- ⁷ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p. 65.
- ⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.18.
- ⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p.18.
- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.18.
- ¹¹ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.26–27.
- ¹² Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.27–28.
- ¹³ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.26.
- ¹⁴ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p.97.

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