

Nonstick Cinema: On Leaving Out the Theatre

The crisis of cinephiles leaving the theatre with their bodies covered in thick layers of filth could have been avoided if the defiant and subversive beginnings of theatrical film projection had been indulged. By engaging in various desperate acts of self-annihilation, early cinema resisted demonstrations of *Actualities*, the recording of everyday events onto film, and protested its domestication as an emerging technology of distraction for bourgeois urbanites looking for new spectacles to combat the unbearable drift of everyday life. Wrapping its nitrate limbs around the flickering lantern of the projector, Cinema condemned itself and its audience to a demonic inferno. But rather than indulging it, Cinema's early handlers were determined to tame it: they designed fireproof projection booths and manufactured less temperamental film stock, and a safe architecture of projection was developed, allowing audience members to glue their eyes to the screen, and to develop the filthy habit of coating themselves with the gooey illusion of Cinema.

How can we develop a nonstick Cinema, one that will provide a spectacle *sans* adhesive? In "Leaving the Movie Theatre," Roland Barthes argues that the stickiness of Cinema is produced by processes of reflection and transfixion. Offered an unholy combination of the elements of *mise en scène*, cinephiles fling themselves upon Cinema's coalescent images "like an animal upon the scrap of 'lifelike' rag held out to him."¹ Mistaking on-screen images for real ones, the cinephile begins to identify with the plot of the film. As the film progresses, this emotional and cathartic engagement is transformed into narcissistic reflection and the screen becomes a mirror. Yet mere reflection is insufficient. A successful cinematic event is one in which the gaze of the spectator is perpetually fixed to the mirror-screen. To this end, the images secrete a glue like substance into the theatre, temporarily affixing the cinephile's eyeballs to the screen: "the image captivates me, captures me: I am glued to the representation and it is this glue which established the *naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene. . ."² This glue is the necessary by-product of the application of Aristotelian principles of the poetics of drama by the mechanism and architecture of Cinema. Exiting the theatre into the undirected light of the world outside, the spectator's face is slowly cleansed of the cinematic glue: it is scraped away as our bodies are scoured by the incoherence and disappointments of everyday life.

Barthes offers a potential solution to this sticky Cinema, one that emphasizes heightened awareness of these gluey effects, rather than their eradication. He asks us to accept the inevitable hypnotic effects of the "engulfing mirror" of the screen, yet during this seduction, encourages us to make a blissful distinction between sticky on-screen images and the architecture of the cinema experience (sound, the space of projection, the mass of other bodies, etc.)—making possible a new "bliss of discretion."³ This is accomplished through a sort of double vision in the theatre. Barthes calls this double vision the "twice over" fascination of the Cinema.⁴ It requires us to have two bodies: a narcissistic body lost in the barrage of images, and a perverse body, one that is conscious of the mechanism of projection and the construction of the image. This self-conscious strategy to minimize the glue-effects of Cinema distances us from the screen, as Brechtian alienation-effects are used to distance us in the theatre. Having long ago recognized the malaise of sticky Cinema, directors such as Godard and Antonioni used

mise en scène in their films to produce similar alienating and distancing effects, nurturing this double vision in their audiences. Disjointed narratives and playful uses of on-screen duration demolished Cinema's third wall and engendered an awkward self-consciousness among film spectators. The work of these modernist filmmakers yields much less goo, and as a result leaving the theatre is less traumatic.

But is there a way to create and present work that does not necessitate the use of any cine-adhesives, one that circumvents narcissistic identification (acknowledged or otherwise) entirely? Modernist filmmakers whose disruptive mise en scène nurtures a *perverse* awareness of the mechanisms of projection remain restricted by cinematic realism (life-like representation). It is not enough to play with the mirror of Cinema, to cast light momentarily on the bodies of inactive spectators caught in the act of narcissistic identification: a truly nonstick cinema depends on films that break through the cocoon of voyeurism by expanding ideas of representation, reception and catharsis. The dominance of seductive narratives must be superseded by synaesthetic, abstract textures and aberrant camera gestures; perceiving, active bodies, engaged in and transformed by the Cinema's projected light sculptures, must replace those that are inactive and stuck.

Filmmakers who explore experimental, abstract approaches attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of being either transfixed by the mirror screen or perversely aware of the mechanisms of projection. They use the theatre to sculpt light, moving beyond the indexical, representational constraints imposed by the machinations of the camera. Projected in the theatre, these images are a form of transference, textural interpretations of emotional, spiritual reactions to natural phenomena rather than representations of them. Rather than gluing spectators' eyeballs to the screen, experimental cinema encourages an embodied sense of perception within the theatre. Yet a truly glueless cinema cannot remain within the walls of the theatre: it longs to leave the theatre entirely. Can we substitute the synaesthetic cocoon of the black box with that of the dark embrace of a twilight landscape? Can a sculpted light cone be enhanced by other subtle forms of natural nocturnal light? An authentically nonstick cinema necessitates the complete disposal of the theatre. It must, in fact, be cinema-less. Projected in a dark field, stared at by the stars, glueless images enable nocturnal spectators to engage in a supreme form of Barthes' blissful discretion, to participate in a Cinema of the Senses, and to better experience the dark mysteries that surround them.

1 Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 348.

5 Ibid.

8 Ibid. 349

9 Ibid. 349

