

The fragmented body of contemporary cinema

O corpo fragmentado do cinema contemporâneo

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ABSTRACT

In *The cinematic body*, Steven Shaviro explores the relationship between the cinematic apparatus and the life of the body, suggesting that both are not alien or extrinsic to each other, since their symbolic and parasitic interpretation is part of the postmodern culture of social and technological relations of capitalist society. Understanding the cinema as a living medium that causes bodily reactions of desire and fear, pleasure and disgust, fascination and shame, the author seeks relations with postmodernity, the politics of human bodies, the construction of masculinity and the masochistic aesthetic, present in films.

Keywords: Cinema, cinematic body, aesthetics, image

RESUMO

Em *O corpo cinemático*, Steven Shaviro procura explorar as relações entre o aparelho cinemático e a vida do corpo, sugerindo que os dois não são alheios ou extrínsecos um ao outro, uma vez que sua interpretação simbólica e parasitária faz parte da cultura pós-moderna das relações sociais e tecnológicas da sociedade capitalista. Compreendendo o cinema como um *medium* vívido que provoca reações corpóreas de desejo e medo, prazer e nojo, fascínio e vergonha, o autor busca as relações com a pós-modernidade, a política dos corpos humanos, a construção da masculinidade e a estética masoquista, presentes nos filmes.

Palavras-chave: Cinema, corpo cinemático, estética, imagem

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IN THIS BOOK, *O corpo cinemático* [The cinematic body], Steven Shaviro explores the relationships between the cinematic apparatus and the life of the body, suggesting that these two concepts are not extraneous or extrinsic, once their symbolic and parasite interpretation is part of a postmodern culture of social and technological relations of late capitalism. Using a theoretical framework from Deleuze and Guattari to Blanchot and Bataille, the author performs a cross and exploratory analysis of movies by George Romero, Jerry Lewis, David Cronenberg, Andy Warhol, Kathryn Bigelow, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Robert Bresson and their representations of the cinematic body and possible implications with the politics of human bodies, the construction of masculinity and the masochist aesthetic in postmodernity.

Shaviro explains that he begins the book with the revisionist production by Bigelow because, in its own way, *Blue Steel* (USA, 1989) includes most of the topics discussed in the book, such as: the delusional excess of the post-modern perspective, the excitement and passivity of the spectator, the frenzy and the fragility of the image, the desire that informs the social constructions of subjectivity, the pornographic seduction of violence and sexuality, and the policies of the subjugated body. “*Blue Steel* is at once an ostentatiously artificial construct and a passionate exploration of the dense materiality of perception and desire” (Shaviro, 2015: 19).

For him, film theory is torn between the desire to play and the desire to keep at a distance the voyeuristic excitations, which are the objective of the theory. According to the author, the problem with the paradigmatic theory of the contemporary cinema is that it was totally taken by the desire to keep at a distance the voyeuristic excitations, besides tending to equate passion, fascination and pleasure with mystification, opposing a knowledge disconnected from the affection and relentless to the images.

Beneath its claims to methodological rigor and political correctness, it manifests a barely contained panic at the prospect (or is it the memory?) of being affected and moved by visual forms. It is as if there were something degrading and dangerous about giving way to images, and so easily falling under their power. Theory thus seeks to ward off the cinema’s dangerous allure, to refuse the suspect pleasures that it offers, to dissipate its effects by articulating its hidden but intelligible structure. (Ibid.: 25)

Shaviro wonders, behind these materialistic attacks to the ideological illusions constructed within the cinematic apparatus, if we should not see the opposite, the fear of the idealist before the image’s ontological instability and

of the materiality of affection and sensation, knowing that fear and distrust of images is a tradition of Western thought since Plato.

Images are condemned because they are bodies without souls, or forms without bodies. They are flat and insubstantial, devoid of interiority and substance, unable to express anything beyond themselves. They are – frustratingly – static and evanescent at once, too massively present in their impalpability. The fundamental characteristic of the cinematic image is therefore said to be one of lack. (Ibid.: 27)

Shaviro proposes a new approach to see movies: masochist, mimetic, tactile and corporal, in contrast to the emphasis on sadism and separation, promoted by the psychoanalytic paradigm. “The masochist does not wish to arrive at a final consummation, but postpone it to extend the frenzy, as much as possible” (Ibid.: 72).

The author says that the masochism of the cinematic body is a passion for imbalance and expropriation and cannot remain as property of a fixed self, because the busy body multiplies its affections and excitations until a point of overload by pushing to its limits: “it [the body] wants his own edge, its own transmutation” (Ibid.: 77).

However, Shaviro believes that it is from passivity and preferences that both a materialist aesthetic and a radical policy of cinema should be constructed, affirming, in particular, the primacy of involuntary fascination and floating anxiety, above the relative movements where the ego seeks to dominate the gender politics in cinema. And that even movies with characters and stereotypical narratives and more reactionary views of gender and sexuality have also potential for change and reversal, but warns:

Obviously, that does not mean all movies are somehow automatically progressive or libertarians in their political effects. I am stating, however, that we must abandon the notions of representation, identification, lack and so on, if we want to map the political force lines, the games of power and resistance, which inhabit and enliven the cinematic image. (Ibid.: 82)

For him, cinema should not be exalted as a mean of collective fantasy nor condemned as a mechanism of ideological mystification, but lauded as a technology that boosts and renews the experiences of passivity and abjection.

Cinemas greatest power may be its ability to evacuate meanings and identities, to proliferate resemblances without sense or origin. When I watch a film I suffer

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from a sort of “similarity disorder.” [...] But in any case, I do not actively interpret or seek to control; I just sit back and blissfully consume. I passively enjoy or endure certain rhythms of duration: the passage of time, with its play of retention and anticipation, and with its relentless accumulation, transformation, and destruction of sound and images. (Ibid.: 293)

For Shaviro, the image cannot be opposed to the body, as representation is opposed to its unattainable referent, for a fugitive, supplemental materiality haunts the (allegedly) idealizing processes of mechanical reproduction. If the filmed body seems distant and untouchable, this is because it withdraws into its likeness, its literal appearance. This “body wholly body” exhibits an inertia, a torpid persistence and resistance, a dull opacity that refuses transcendence or illumination. Featureless, anonymous, and forever inauthentic, this body lacks self-identity, but it thereby also manifests an alarming capacity for metamorphosis, which is only the other side of its inertia. And concludes:

The cinematic apparatus is a new mode of embodiment; it is a technology for containing and controlling bodies, but also for affirming, perpetuating, and multiplying them, by grasping them in the terrible, uncanny immediacy of their images. The cinematic body is then neither phenomenologically given nor phantasmatically constructed. It stands at the limits of both these categories, and it undoes them. (Ibid.: 295)

Shaviro explains that movies put us compulsive and convulsively face to face with an otherness that cannot embed nor expel. It stimulates and affects our body, even while abolishing distances between our bodies and other ones. Thus, borders and contours dissolve and the representation encourages a contact affectively violent, more-than-immediate and not conceptualizable. That way, cinema allows and forces us to see what we cannot assimilate or understand. It assails our eyes and ears, it moves and hurts. It puts the body in the foreground, outside the comfortable representations we use to keep it distant. “There is no clear distinction between internal and external. I am disgusted, afraid. But I need, I want this closeness and this vertigo” (Ibid.: 299).

Shaviro argues that, with postmodernity, we are facing a major paradigm shift. That way, we need a new policy and aesthetic culture, new kinetics and an economy of power and resistance, of pleasure and pain, an economy guided to multiple perceptions, affection and effects of subjectivity intrinsic to cyborgs and drills, with our bodies disorganized, hypersexualized and technologized.

For Shaviro, the cinematic body is ambivalent, not an object of representation, but a zone of emotional intensity, an anchor point for the articulation of passions and desires, an area of continuous political struggle. In this book, he seeks to articulate an aesthetic of body intensity, masochism and abjection, introducing both as a symptomatic effect of the postmodern power and as a possible form of resistance to that power.

According to Shaviro, the book seeks to mobilize, within its own speech, the baffling combination of pleasure and anxiety that characterizes the experience of cinematic fascination. Thus, the author rejects the academic trend to separate meaning from pleasure and pain, to put in the foreground the meaning at the expense of the affection and concludes:

I tried to write a participatory and pornographic review instead of an impartial and judgmental one, because the voyeuristic drive, the passion to watch movies that inspires and propels this book is not a case of domination, but affirmation and abjection. (Ibid.: 308)

O corpo cinemático was written in 1993, when there was a strong debate about the interpretative film theory guided by the psychoanalytic reading, which the author considered iconoclastic, for what he called “image phobia”. However, later, especially in the article *The Cinematic Body REDUX*¹, 2008, Shaviro reviews some of his critical positions, recognizing that more damaging to cinema studies than the Lacanian psychoanalyst theory is the cognitive theory that follows, which the author considers a post-theory, by denying any kind of theorizing, focusing only on the intentional act. ■

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1. The article is available at: <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Cinematic.pdf>. Accessed on March 29th, 2016.