

Ariel Rogers

Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies

Columbia University Press, New York 2013, pp. 352

“Psychocinematics,” according to Shimamura, “is grounded on a scientific analysis of our *aesthetic response* to movies” (p. 2, emphasis in original). The critical approach that Ariel Rogers carries out here consists in comparing how the experience of cinema has been formulated in conjunction with radical technological transformations which occurred in the 1950s – such as widescreen, together with stereoscopic 3D – and in the 1990s and early 2000s – when the emergence of digital cinema became a key issue in the industrial and popular media. The result of this long and detailed study is double. Not only does it shed light on some crucial periods in cinema history, but it also provides a historical overview of the discursive and affective frameworks within which the relationship between films and viewers was formulated. Despite some similarities in the public speeches of these different eras, the kind of experience that cinema offers today – regarding the involvement of the *body* of the viewer – is very different, because it has been profoundly transformed in conjunction with both the evolution of society and the concomitant technological change.

From a theoretical point of view, Rogers draws on some suggestions that come from the apparatus theory, even though she moves away from it. She, in fact, points out that the concept of film experience is *historically* rooted, following on this point some academic studies on spectatorship which are focused on “early cinema” and its relationship with the modern metropolis and the supremacy of capitalism. More specifically, on the one hand, she borrows from Baudry¹ the concept that we can fully understand the cinema effect on the audience only if we consider both the cinema material’s organization and the kind of viewing arrangements that it produces. But, on the other hand, she takes a different idea of a viewer’s position from Gunning, and other scholars, that focused their attention on “early cinema,” arguing that until 1906-7 the film experience was different from the type of immersive absorption that the apparatus theory presented as

¹ See Jean-Louis Baudry, *The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema*, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus Ideology*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, pp. 286-98.

intrinsic to the spectatorship. Taking ideas elaborated by Kracauer and Benjamin about the experience of industrial modernity, they instead underline the historical specificity of the cinematic encounters.

Moreover, Rogers acknowledges as influential the notion of experience she uses here, which is not only established in specific historical contexts, but also related to the various technologies that have emerged in those moments. That is the reason why she focuses her attention on examining historical materials, such as technical manuals, fan magazines, marketing materials, trade journals and popular periodicals to explore how the dominant culture promotes the new cinema's appeal. She believes, however, that these materials, even if reflecting the promotional rhetoric, are essential to understanding the encounter between cinema and audience, since they allow us to infer the frameworks within which the cinema experience has been developed in different periods. In the first chapter, for instance, she investigates how the public discourses about widescreen cinema invite beholders into a close, tactile and sensual immersion in the film spectacle. Conversely, as many commentators at that time pointed out, the gigantic figures displayed on the screen would render the human image strange, if not grotesque. In short, widescreen offered a bodily participation that was both thrilling and frightening, inviting spectators to feel more intimate with the overwhelming images and, at the same time, to feel more anxious and uncomfortable with technology (in general) that was transforming life both inside and outside the theatre.

Although the bodily involvement of the viewer in the experience of cinema is considered to be central in all the historical periods taken into account here, specific to the contemporary period is the problematization of concepts of bodily experience and intersubjectivity. The author, in fact, not only analyzes the public discourses surrounding the emergence of 3D cinema in 1950s and 2000s, but looks carefully at some prominent movies – such as *Creature from Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) –, coming to the conclusion that the terms with which the cinematic experience was framed should be reviewed in the light of the new context, profoundly changed by the emergence of digital technologies.

Looking at the aesthetic of these films, Rogers points out that they both emphasize the experience of immersion, but while the usage of 3D in the earlier movie promises a scary tactile encounter with Otherness, underlining the body's vulnerability, the latter movie's use of 3D invites a bodily free navigation into a digital rendered world, Pandora, providing a new type of encounter with a digitally mediated environment.

In addition, the author underlines that, even if the form of bodily immersion, offered by the 1950s technologies, has never disappeared, as we have just seen, the contemporary discourses surrounding the idea of digital cinema problematize this very concept of immersion. We can find similar terms through which the cinema experience has been framed in both periods, but the meaning of

them should be reconsidered. In the era where the information has seen as immaterial and transmissible as a flow, through the wide variety of digital devices, the spectatorial embodiment is being reformulated in conjunction to the deeply changed contemporary context.

Ariel Rogers, then, leads us into a fascinating journey full of information, which is theoretically robust, and in which she illustrates how public discourses and modes of presentation (including film style and form of exhibition) act together to device cinema's appeal for beholders, arguing that the forms of this cinema experience, historically articulated, continue to develop along with contemporary concerns.

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