

The Cinematic Condition

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*Where is cinema? It is all around you, all over the city,
that marvelous, continuous performance of films and scenarios.*
– Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1988) ¹

Cinema 1

We are driving. Gettysburg, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and through Amish Country to Hershey. The car journey runs a sort of parallel to the Appalachian trail, though the landscape is hilly at most. Our travels are punctuated by repeated radio exposure to ‘Graceland’, ‘Piano Man’, ‘Fast Car’, and ‘Time After Time,’ as I look out the side window. From my mobile frame, the ground immediately in front of me blurs past, the distant horizon moving at a much more languid pace. For every point in-between those extremities, there is every range of rhythm. Each sound finds a resonance with the passing scenery, the various beats enacted by some specific point in the view. With each tree, each farm, each clump of grass moving at its own pace, any song finds a sympathetic relationship with the passing landscape.

The simultaneous occurrence of sound and vision are fused by our experience of that single moment. Michel Chion joined together ‘synchronism’ and ‘synthesis,’ creating ‘synchresis’ to denote our “Pavlovian” ² habit of spontaneously welding together visual and auditory phenomena that occur at the same time. He coined the term to describe our listening engagement with classical cinema, in which sound emanates from the screen, seemingly from the world of the image itself. But turning on the radio, we still create a relationship between the sounds imposed by the wavelengths and our rhythms of motion in our immediate surroundings. It is not so much a learned response as a necessity of our five senses, one that cinema capitalizes on in order to complete its illusion and create an immersive narrative experience. What feels cinematic, then, is in no small part due to the associative relationships we create between what is heard and what is seen.

In this sense, radio has been one of the most widely available cinematic forms of the past century. In broadcast music, the old theatrical dramas of Superman and the Green Hornet, or even the news, the sounds engage with an intricate web of mental imagery and physical environment. Your sitting room becomes the proscenium for your imagination to enact a private cinema of the mind. Moments such as those described above are not rare, though at the same time the cultural importance of the radio has significantly, and tellingly, declined. Take, for example, countries such as Italy, France, and Belgium, where mid 20th century cycling races commanded the nations’ attention. The lengthy, immersive competitions appearing monotonous to the point of almost defying visual communication, they were instead better suited to radio commentary. Race broadcasts were widely listened to, but with the rise of television, however, the spectacular goal scoring of football took over as Europe’s enduring most popular sport. This shift gestures towards the ways we now look, away from the active involvement of the audience towards the primacy of the visual event.

1 Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 56.

2 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 63.

(The) experience of watching a fiction...with an anonymous group of people, who need have nothing more in common than the fact that they have been attracted to that particular place and that particular fiction. Cinema in this sense becomes a very precise urban experience, that of the crowd with its sense of belonging and of loneliness.

- John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (1982) ³

Cinema 2

There is a giant lump of granite in north Georgia. In the relatively flat state in the southeast of the United States, Stone Mountain is a dome shaped monadnock just outside of Atlanta, rising only 255 metres into the air. On its north face is carved the largest bas-relief sculpture in the world, featuring three horse-bound figures of the Confederate States of America, President Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson. Every Saturday from April to October for the past 25 years, as the warm evening fades to dark, people gather on the lawn facing the sculpture and it becomes the centerpiece of the Lasershow Spectacular. I’ve been countless times, though when I was younger- barely old enough that only on the final few visits was I able to unplug my ears during the array of fireworks. Projecting laser light onto the stone, the mountain transforms into the screen for a colourful display of abstract designs, cartoon characters, and tourist highlights of the south, accompanied by a medley of songs like *Georgia on My Mind*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, and *Proud to be an American*. When Elvis Presley’s *American Trilogy* comes on, a constellation of points begin to join up, outlining the contours of the sculpture itself. The three horsemen, fully defined, then begin to move, their steeds at a canter as Elvis sings, “glory, glory, hallelujah...”. Suddenly, they raise their swords as if charging into battle, breaking into a gallop along the side of the mountain before turning to run towards the audience themselves. They begin to fade with the song, the light from a burst of fireworks finally dispelling them.

The word ‘cinema’, shortened from the Lumière Brothers’ word *cinématographe* to describe their newly proclaimed invention, originally meant ‘film hall’, the space itself where people would assemble to experience a film performance. The cinema is a space that commands a commitment of time, with the corresponding weight of expectation. It is a space in which you willingly devote intense sustained attention, which at the same time is a submission to the event. The creators of the Spectacular managed to turn a geological phenomenon into an outdoor cinema, drawing on the century-old history of the projected image and sound as a theatrical event, an evening’s entertainment, while combining that with the explosions and melodrama of a modern crowd-pulling Hollywood blockbuster. Dominant cinema has taken the wonder of the projected image, and its seemingly primary role in the creation of cinematic narrative, turning it into a series of ever-more-impressive ‘tricks’ to be performed for the audience. Now, if we witness something hypercomposed or visually dramatic, it triggers our sense of the ‘cinematic’. Just like the show every week at Stone Mountain, the contemporary sense of the cinematic looks to a visually aggressive style and an overbearing imposition of sight as the primary giver of meaning.

3 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 26.

The film corresponds to profound changes in the perceptive apparatus- changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic.

– Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) ⁴

Cinema 3

You enter the building, making your way to the room where the show will take place. Evening light streams in the large rectangular window, casting a pale light on the few people already gathered in the sitting room. Slowly, more people arrive until, at the appointed time, Dennis McNulty sits down at the table opposite the window and begins to play. The music coming from his computer is ambling, sounds from the street crossing with guitar sheens and clacking bricks, layering with the shuffles and murmurs of the group who have assembled in a loose semi-circle around him, sitting on chairs, divans, cushions, and the floor. The air thickens with the lowering light, the moment of dimming lights just before the film extended to a whole space in itself to inhabit and explore. The details of the room begin to reveal themselves in the trippings and collages of the sound: the curved lines of the trellis framing the window, the wooden carving of the last supper on the wall, the pronounced shades of each person’s shoulders. As the heavy dusk air takes full hold, the audience are rising one by one and walking carefully, quietly, onto the balcony outside. Leaning on the railings facing the countless flats, the sounds step in a slow dance with the lights coming on throughout the city, with the languid cars on the streets below. The light inside stays off, one or two people sitting with their eyes gazing towards the ceiling. The music slows, from expectant chords to a crumpling, tearing sound, before fading with the last of the light into night.

McNulty’s *Anti-tours*, ostensibly a series of concerts within domestic environments, shared more than just sound with radio and film. There were, firstly, formal parallels with cinema; drawing on its collective encounter within a designated architectural space, McNulty instigated a set of conditions that bound his audience to that time and place, where they anticipate providing their sustained attention. The performances’ scheduled occurrence during dusk’s ‘magic hour’ created a deliberate relationship between his own improvised sound and the ambient natural light, his own intimate and subtle ‘lightshow spectacular’.

But as his ‘anti-’ title asserts, this was a form of intentional non-event. McNulty’s live performance, the room in which it occurs, the window’s view to the wider world outside, deny any single point of focus. The music is drifting and amorphous, while the setting is any familiar home room, both refusing to provide a coherent, pervasive narrative. What remains is for each individual member of the audience to turn to their own perceptions and associations, to weave their own meaning from the situation created. Here, drawing from radio’s cinematic imagination, McNulty reclaims the mundane as the site of the active audience. As a result, the *Anti-Tours* created an experience that was profoundly, and primordially, cinematic. McNulty locates his cinema in a particular intersection of public and private experience, that both intensely personal but widely shared. It is a cinema that discards with spectacle, finding its definitive spark within the synapses of the audience themselves, and connecting a personal phenomenology with wider contexts via each performance’s unique architecture and geography. Here, we could cast each apartment’s window as a sort of two-way screen, and the sun as the projector, bringing the experience of film in association with the wider phenomenon of the daily rotation of the Earth and its cycles of darkness and light. What the sun projects through as its celluloid, then, includes all the particles, bodies, and objects it encounters as it travels through space, through the atmosphere, into the gathering in the apartment below.

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⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 250.