

The War film as Moral Space

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In *Cinematic Corpographies: Re-mapping the War Film through the Body*, Eileen Rositzka critically examines and interrogates audiovisual and tactile representations of war cinema through semiotic and phenomenological frameworks in an effort to historically ground the spatial production of somatic and aesthetic experience. She uses the term 'corpography', coined by geographer Derek Gregory, in order to foreground the relationship between war, cinema and the body and to trace the intersubjectivity of experience.

She begins her analysis by arguing that corpography, which establishes a direct link between cartography (the study of maps) and corporeality, allows us to 'articulate the missing link between already established theories of cartographic film narration and ideas of (neo) phenomenological film experience,' since they also entail 'the involvement of the spectator's body in sensuously grasping what is staged as a mediated experience of war' (Rositzka 2018: 3). In other words, the audience or spectator is viscerally and actively imbricated in a kind of participatory and/or affective interaction with the signifying qualities of the audiovisual images of war presented in film.

Rositzka's reconceptualization of filmic space as an expressive space of intersubjective or transformative embodiment and perception is indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. By deploying Gregory's and Merleau-Ponty's theories she succeeds in foregrounding the incorporation of the spectatorial other in film and media studies and in reframing film from a visual genre to one which is both embodied and embedded in socio-historical and phenomenological contexts.

According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is prior to being. In *The Visible and the Invisible* he posits a universal or 'anonymous visibility' that inhabits all of us, a vision or visibility of the flesh in the here and now which 'radiat[es] everywhere and forever' (1968:142). This flesh of

the world grounds the subject and the object. Yet there is no radical split between the two viewing positions taken up between them. For Merleau-Ponty even the subject is objectified because seeing is not seeing: ‘to see the other is essentially to see my body as an object, so that the other’s body object could have a psychic “side”’ (1968: 225). In other words, it is this conflation of this other body within me that allows me to experience the other’s experience.

In the case of war cinema, it is the soldier-cum-subject-cum-actor and his body that function as the other and allow for such a projective identification to take place. There is an apparent conflation of the material reproduction of the subject’s aesthetic performance or acting (the scripted and theatrical *habitus* or imitation) with the performative event itself, in an ideological transference in which emotional values are intromitted in a straight line and without inflection from character (as soldier) to actor to members of the audience.¹ This intromission can be quite powerful, allowing the audience or spectator to navigate within the filmic and narrative space. What is more, affective transmission creates shared or collective memories of events such as war and situates spectators ‘within a shared world of sentiment, a sense of belonging to a common world of aesthetic, emotional, and moral judgement’ (Kappelhoff et al., cited in Rositzka 2018:175).

By examining various auditory and visual representations of war throughout media history and literature, starting from WWI till today, as well as how such representations change over time, Rositzka powerfully drives home how our cultural understanding of military conflict and modern warfare are inextricably linked to renditions of the body and affective sensation in relation to space. This is nowhere more forcefully evoked than in her final chapter ‘Zero Dark Thirty: Corpographies of the War on Terror,’ where she shows how a contemporary war thriller bleeds into our nightmarish and technocratic world of drones, militarization, the endless cycle of suspects, targets, aerial strikes, and ‘the terror of contemporary political conflict’ (2018:172).

By examining how cinematic representations of war speak so closely to our human condition, Rositzka skilfully depicts how such representations are inflected with intersubjective permutations and assumptions about the material body, gender, and even race, assumptions which can be challenged or interrogated through aesthetic, cinematic forms in order to undercut – even subvert – a predominantly visual discourse in film and media studies.

It may be disconcerting to constantly be bombarded by audiovisual and virtual renditions of past and contemporary wars, but keeping visceral and affective dimensions of war (both the cinematic and actual corpography of war) to the foreground of our consciousness will allow us to remember, anticipate, and even try to prevent the massive scale of destruction brought on by war. Particularly in this mechanized and digitized world of ‘disembodied aerial or satellite views, chaotic urban spaces’ (Rositzka 2018:24), drones, and modern warfare, a world where terror and paranoia often reign supreme, it behoves us to constantly challenge the notion of a disembodied body without affect or organs. Not only does it behove us – it is our moral duty.

NOTES

1 Here I am using the term 'performative' in a very specific way, in order to distinguish performativity from actual performance and acting. As Elin Diamond stipulates in *Unmaking Mimesis* (London & New York: Routledge 1997), 'Though "performativity" is not an "act" but a "reiteration" or "citation", why should we restrict its iterative sites to theory and to the theorist's acts of seeing?' (1997: 47). Diamond's formulation of performativity as a 'reiteration' rather than an act opens out the possibility of imagining performative acts or gestures as more than just embodied or repetitive events or even visual markers. They can be reconfigured and reimagined in different ways and along different trajectories or chains of signification. In the same way, although cinematic (and actual) codes of war and audiovisual images can be seen as being performative and repetitive events, their permutations allow for a plenitude of interpretative possibilities along the axis of representation. These codes are both embodied in that they are materialized through the body – and hence felt – and performative in so far as they are enacted and re-enacted in performance, a (re)enactment which often has the paradoxical effect of erasing this body's materiality. It should be noted that Rositzka reconceptualizes 'the poetic processes of film viewing in terms of sensuous engagement' (2018: 9) and the relationships between the body and cinema in fresh and exciting ways, even though she often seems to conflate the soldier and actor into one body and to forget that affect may not simply be intromitted in a straight line and without inflection from character (as soldier) to actor to members of the audience. Whatever the case may be, she is right to say *pace* Michael Wedel that the staging of bodies 'do[es] not solely operate on the basis of identification processes; rather, these bodies entangle their viewers in a perceptive process of involuntary physiological mimicry: the filmic sensations and emotions are somatically transferred to the spectator' (2018:17) This is reminiscent perhaps of Diamond's 'shudder of catharsis'.

REFERENCES

- Diamond, Elin 1997. *Unmaking Mimesis*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
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