

Introduction

Our concern with the space of experience in cinema is symptomatic of the changes cinema has undergone in the past thirty years. In film studies it points to a bifurcation of interest: For much of the 1950s and 60s, the focus has been on the makers – the directors as auteurs and artists; but since the 1970s more emphasis has been laid on audiences, reception and the physical spaces of cinema experience. But even within this shift to audiences, there are differences of emphasis: between “film” and “cinema”, between “ocular vision” and “embodied vision”, between “sight” in the cinema and its “sound-scape and sound spaces”, between the “visible” and the “invisible”, or as I would summarize this in-between-ness of cinema: between *film* as “text and narrative” and *cinema* as “event and experience”.

Initially, when analyzing how these changing conditions, these different spaces, under which we now encounter and interact with moving images, have affected the viewer, I returned to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.¹ At least, that was my contention two decades ago, when I started writing about these transformations and their philosophical implications. Benjamin’s distinction helps to differentiate the cultural value of “experience” (as *Erfahrung*), in its long-term

¹ Elsaesser 2009a.

effects (i.e. memory and recall on the side of the subject), from experience's short-term impact (as *Erlebnis*), with its connotation of sensory stimulation, including shock and trauma, to which, on the formal level, correspond spectacle, action, and sensation. In this sense, my formulation "Cinema as *Erlebnis*" vs. "Cinema as *Erfahrung*" was my first response – both as an acknowledgement and a critique – to Tom Gunning's seminal essay and his distinction between the "cinema of attractions" and the "cinema of narrative integration", which has become one of the most widely applied paradigms in the whole history of cinema studies and film theory.²

Before going on to examine what has changed in the intervening 25 years since I published Gunning's essay in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, let me take both a step backwards and a step sideways. The sideways step is Senta Siewert's concept of "Entgrenzung" which I think is helpful for our topic in several ways: boundary breaking with respect to European cinema's national boundaries; boundary breaking with respect to cinema's capacity to engage all senses; boundary breaking with the exploration of extreme states of mind and body; and finally, boundary breaking insofar as cinema sound and music create such a different "space of experience", both in terms of the hierarchies among the portals of perception, and in maintaining quite a different alignment of private and

² Gunning 1986.

public compared to the classic formulation of cinema experience as “isolated by darkness and surrounded by the collective” might suggest.

The step back is to reconfirm that my thesis about cinema experience as developed around the distinction of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* was not intended to generate yet another binarism, such as spectacle vs. narrative or cinema of attraction vs. cinema of narrative integration, nor to suggest a Hegelian *Aufhebung*.³ Instead, it wanted to suggest that the German terms, with their long history via Dilthey’s Life Philosophy and Walter Benjamin, are useful for cinema because they lend themselves as a pair of mutually sustaining oppositions to a better understanding of the specificity of cinema, at least, when considered from the point of view of the spectator. They suggest

³ My thoughts on Benjamin’s *Erfahrung* versus *Erlebnis* were first presented at the workshop “Ritual and Performance” in Monte Verita, June 2002. At the same workshop, Francesco Casetti gave an early version of his paper on “Filmic Experience”. Both papers were subsequently published in German in a volume in honour of Christine Noll Brinckmann (Hediger et al. 2005). The current paper was originally presented at the conference “The Cinematic Space: Experience, Knowledge, Technology” in Hamburg, June 2014. To meet again with Ursula von Keitz and Francesco Casetti at this occasion was not only a pleasure and an honour, but also gave the conference the feel of a retrospective, taking stock of and re-assessing an important trajectory in film studies.

that cinema is necessarily an internally divided medium, oscillating between two different modalities, depending on which side we look at it from. *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, as the two sides of the cinema experience, would constitute just such an index of internal division, here with respect to the different modalities of an affective somatic effect. For the spectator, I argue, cinema can either be an *Erfahrung* without *Erlebnis* (i.e. a mediated experience without first-hand exposure), or an *Erlebnis* without *Erfahrung* (i.e. a series of thrills and shocks without lasting reverberations).

In the case of *Erfahrung* without *Erlebnis*, it is the task of narrative to manage the sensory stimuli so that the one-directional, irreversible cinematic flow linearizes but also limits the actual bodily and sensory input brought into being through a mechanical recording of the world's sensory output in terms of sight and sound.⁴ This is Friedrich Kittler's argument, via Claude Shannon and Jacques Lacan rather than Dilthey and Benjamin, trying to explain why the imaginary and the symbolic are necessary registers in order to deal with the real. For Kittler, this real is the real of the media, in the first place mechanical and subsequently electronic media. They produce sense data too dense, too diverse, and too intense to be processed by human senses and brains without symbolic or semiotic shortcuts.

⁴ Kittler 1999: 246.

Yet, as suggested, cinema can also be *Erlebnis* without *Erfahrung*. This is what Walter Benjamin suggested with his theories of the shock experience of cinema and what I have tried to adapt in my concept of “media trauma” when I argue that contemporary cinema, and especially contemporary American cinema and its sub-category I call mind-game films,⁵ are attempts to both “represent” and “therapize” the traumata that the media themselves induce even where they suggest that the causes of trauma are “out there” in events like the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, or 9/11. So “*Erlebnis* without *Erfahrung*” wants to suggest that cinema today is “traumatic” both as a symptom and an antidote, that it is – in Jacques Derrida’s vocabulary – a “pharmakon”.⁶

The momentous changes which cinema has undergone have become commonplaces and clichés since we first debated them in 2002 at the workshop on “Ritual and Performance” in Monte Verità. Put more positively, the end result of all these symposia, books, and research initiatives has been that a new paradigm is now firmly in place, even if we do not have a name for it. It is signalled by terms such as “cinema of attractions” and “film experience”, “embodiment”, “affect”, “haptic vision”, “cinema history”, or in my case: “cinema as event and experience”. The persuasive force of this new paradigm is its apparent self-evidence, manifest in the fact that it now seems as if

⁵ Elsaesser 2009b.

⁶ Derrida 1981: 95–116.

the whole of cinema history as well as of film theory is being re-written with the new paradigm either explicitly in mind or implicitly assumed and taken for granted.

The Paradigm Shift: from “window and mirror” to “ubiquity and invisibility”

What follows wants to make these assumptions once more a little explicit. From a historical point of view, the argument is that new thinking is needed because of the changing nature of how we encounter the moving image – meaning the *sites* (art house or multiplex, open-air performances or in-flight entertainment), the *conditions* (alone or in a crowd, at a film festival or on Saturday night at the local Cineplex), the *platforms* (big screen projection or iPhone and tablet), and the *occasions* (with friends as a civilized night out, or a Pixar/Disney film as a special family treat). What has changed even more are the forms, genres and modalities: We now have the choice between a traditional film experience, such as watching a full length feature film in a theatrical setting, or any number of other formats. Be it on YouTube or Netflix, in the form of mash-ups and video clips, or found-footage films in installations: everything is somehow moving images, and moving images wherever we encounter them now generally imply “cinema”. And there is yet another factor affecting our sense of cinema experience poised between private and public, namely

our awareness that electronic eyes are monitoring public spaces and keeping track of our private footprints, so that any act of watching or viewing invariably implies a reciprocal acquiescence in being watched.

As a consequence, the idea that voyeurism and fetishism define the spectatorial position needs to be revised, or reflexively doubled by interactive, reciprocal, looped feedback relations of viewing practices. In this respect, the new paradigm instantiates “surveillance” and “self-monitoring” as the key social dimensions to which it responds. In fact, the assumption of cinema as either “transparent window” (realism) or “reflecting mirror” (modernism) has to make room for the possibility that today’s cinema is actively engaging with “ubiquity and invisibility”, those aspects of the surveillance paradigm that interest me, because both these concepts have (positive and negative) connotations of space. It cannot be assumed that the changes for which we tend to use the short-hand term “digital” are the sole or perhaps even main reason why we have to recast what we mean by “cinema”, although it is incontrovertible that the default values of our understanding of cinema have definitely been re-set by the digital. Hence I usually answer the question: “how is digital cinema different” by saying: “Everything has changed and everything has stayed the same.”