

# *Film Theory as Sense Theory*

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While debates about sense perception run throughout the history of film theory, they would appear to become particularly intense at times of media change. For cinema's first theorists, moving photographs offered first and foremost a powerful means of addressing the senses: of dazzling them with magical displays, exciting them with nervous jolts and "thrills," or confounding them with optical illusions. No doubt, the main sense at stake here was that of vision, albeit not the disembodied vision of classical optics, but a thick vision shot through with the murky and visceral operations of the body. It should thus come as no surprise to find expressions such as "visual pleasure," "joy in vision" ("New Terrain"), "feast for the eyes" (Arndt) and "treat for the eyes" (Forch) throughout the book's first chapter as theorists grapple to understand the cinema's power to captivate, excite and confound the gaze. The conjecture by one anonymous writer that the cinema "has taught us to see for the first time" ("New Terrain") anticipates, in its own way, Francesco Casetti's retrospective argument that the cinema, more than any other medium, framed the ways in which people saw the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and one could indeed usefully compare Casetti's inventory of filmic modes of vision – from partial points of view to excited and immersive gazes – with the types of embodied vision thematized in the article of chapter one and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, none of these functions was completely new, and it should hardly be surprising to find the articles in this book situating the cinema's modes of vision with respect to familiar forms of visual entertainment such as vaudeville and variety theater, public games and mass sports, the circus and amusement parks, gladiator fights and other spectacles of death, fantasmagoria and ghost illusions. Early cinema scholars such as Tom Gunning have written extensively on the cinema's imbrications with such forms of popular entertainment, arguing that early film drew fundamentally on modes of "visual curiosity and desire for novelty" which – while stretching back to Augustine's condemnation of *curiositas* and "lust for the eyes" – became absolutely central to an entire industry of modern entertainment that ran directly counter to notions of disinterested contemplation.<sup>2</sup> But even as the cinema looked back to established practices of embodied vision, its "curious pleasures" – as Ewers called them in the article that opens the book – could confound habitual forms of sense perception in new ways by reversing cause and effect on the screen, rearranging conventional synchronizations of sight and sound, or showing us "all the things that do not exist and never will" (Melcher).

Such "visual pleasures" form the centerpiece of many of the articles in chapter 1, which attempt to examine the cinema's immense sensual appeal from several angles: its kaleidoscopic quality (what Lou Andrea Salome described as its ability to "shower us with forms, images, and sense impressions like nothing else can"), its suspenseful thrills (Forch), its brushes with violence and death (Arnd, Serner), its creation of immersive worlds and optical illusions (Hood, Mack), its ability to bring distant objects near and transport the spectator across the earth (Brod, Melcher), etc. But in their efforts to understand what Miriam Hansen called the cinema's "new sensorium," these texts were not

simply interested in accounting for the medium's evident success.<sup>3</sup> They also form part of an ongoing investigation and reconfiguration of modern "techniques" of vision. Like the 19<sup>th</sup>-century visual culture examined by Jonathan Crary, the emergent film culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century assumed a thoroughly embodied spectator, one both fallible (susceptible to the kinds of 'Alabastra' illusions described by Mack in the closing chapter) and eminently excitable.<sup>4</sup> Even observations of cinema's supposed superior "realism" recognized this embodied quality, since these texts understood cinematic "realism" or "naturalism" to be a matter of acquired spectatorial protocols, conventions and mental operations. Fred Hood, for example, in the article reprinted in chapter 5, follows the logic of the "vanishing" mediator familiar from other media discourses on fidelity to argue that the cinema should hide its mediations (above all the obtrusive presence of the screen) in the interest of enfolding spectators into its illusions.<sup>5</sup> But Hood also recognized that the immersive "sensation of participating in the drama" is as much a product of perceptive operations – for example the ability to translate black-and-white gradations into imaginary color familiar from photography – as it is a quality of the image itself. The creation of such "illusions" thus depends not simply on inherent qualities of media technologies, but also on knowing how embodied vision ("embodiment" understood here as a historical production of the senses) works.

As the article from Albert Hellwig at the end of the opening chapter shows, the cinema could function as a laboratory for the testing of such spectatorial operations. But as someone like Hellwig (a criminologist and the chief proponent of the emerging cinema reform movement) understood, the cinema's appeal to the senses also had significant social and political ramifications. This is evident in a number of the texts that address the cinema's interactions with an

*urban* sensorium. Observers such as Hermann Kienzl, Karl Forch and Walter Serner all understood the cinema's excitable spectator to be caught up in an "economy" of sensations with more or less direct relations to modern capitalism and its centers in urban environments. In some cases, the cinema was understood to provide a counterforce to the monotony of a leveled and commodified world or nervous "replenishment" for exhausted sensory systems (Kienzl, Salome, Serner, "Career of the Cinema"). In other cases, here anticipating Walter Benjamin, it was understood as a space for training the kinds of accelerated perception required by contemporary economic conditions in a world "gripped by work fever" (Kienzl, Strobl). In other cases still, the cinema was seen as a space that could potentially diffuse threatening drives – that "visual pleasure" described by Walter Serner in terms laden with Augustinian resonances – that might potentially threaten the social order. Serner has precisely this function in mind when he writes that cinema's visual pleasure allowed the spectator to find "satisfaction for his rudimentary primal drives in an image." If the cinema's excitations were, as Kienzl argues, akin to drugs, contemporary observers understood this narcotic effect as a *pharmakon* in the precise sense of the term: a visual stimulant at once useful for industrial capitalism and (as the cinema reformers would later argue) potentially explosive. As a laboratory, the cinema could be seen as a kind of "safe-house" for indulging in such visual pleasures, but also for observing and shaping them, for diffusing their potentially dangerous impacts and identifying their utility. In short, the cinema's new sensorium, while wildly entertaining, also went beyond entertainment, implicated as it was in broader questions of governmentality, economics and social control.

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<sup>1</sup> See Francesco Casetti, *The Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* (1989), 827.

<sup>3</sup> See Miriam Batu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999), 71.

<sup>4</sup> On the fallibility of the senses as an object of 19<sup>th</sup>-century research and its imbrication with new technologies of vision, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). On the history of the 'Alabastra' 3D technique, see Katharina Loew, "Tangible Spectators: 3-D Cinema in the 1910s," *Film Criticism* 3.1 (2013), 87-116.

<sup>5</sup> On the ideal of the "vanishing mediator" in the modern discourse on fidelity in sound media, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 215-287.