

10

Realism, Real Sex and the Experimental Film: Mediating Eroticism in *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye*

Beth Johnson

Andrew Repasky McElhinney's *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye* (2003) begins with a grainy, close-up image of a woman giving birth. Over this image is narrated an account not of the life, but of the myth of Georges Bataille. It ends with his death in 1962, a year before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as if there were something uncanny about the relative proximity between the two events. This deliberate 'uncanny' misconception is a signal that Bataille haunts McElhinney's scene, but is not part of it. As Freud notes: 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud, 1990, p. 340). Bataille is ob-scene (in the sense of being off screen), even though his life is referred to and the film takes the title of his most famous novella, *Story of the Eye* (Bataille, 2001b), the 'Ur'-text of a considerable portion of avant-garde pornography or intellectual erotica.

On screen, in full close-up, is the image of a real birth, re-edited from an old army documentary. McElhinney admits to 'de-humanizing the sequence by cutting all the reaction shots' (Kipp, 2003). This scene accordingly appears alien and must therefore be read in a different way. The birth can be read metaphorically: it is the birth of absolute obscenity, the absolutely explicit birth of absolute explicitness. The grainy scene presented denotes that this vision is not contemporary, but a re-presentation of older footage. This connection with the past both establishes an uncanny link between Bataille and McElhinney and further signifies the journey from Bataillean theories and images of the past to the present day. Recognizably, the scene indexes the in-between of intellectual literary theory and popular visual culture by way of similarity in representation to Gustave Courbet's painting 'The Origin of the World' ('L'Origine du monde', 1866): an explicit vision depicting a close-up image of female genitals that signify the origin of desire as well as, critically, the *obscene* in that: '[t]hrough the eyeholes of the door, the voyeur stares at the female "hole" at the centre of the scene, a vanishing point in which there is "nothing to see"' (Jay, 1994, p. 169).

McElhinney's appropriation of Bataille's novella indicates his own avant-garde status as an independent director who has chosen formally to revise serious sexual literature on screen in a non-titillating way. His film, like the literature it has emerged from, is marked by two inseparable movements: the move forward – the film's preoccupation with sex and the 'seen/scene' which, considering its explicit content, allows for a spectatorship of fascination and reflection; and secondly, the move backward – an enforced recoil by McElhinney (and potentially the audience) in order to express the serious avant-garde nature of his subject.

Notably, McElhinney dispenses (almost entirely) with conventions that differentiate film from visual and video art. Speech is purposefully sparse, relationships between characters are neither explained nor set against any recognizable moral/familial schema, and there is little narrative or plot. Interestingly, whereas McElhinney designates his work as film, conventionally the text appears to adhere to definitions of video art. McElhinney's choice of capturing the image – DV Cam that was transferred to DigiBeta for post-production work, thus interrogating the experience of spectatorship – reinforces a significant blurring of boundaries between video art and film. Defined in part by a lack of dialogue, unknown actors and the attack upon viewers' expectations (shaped by pornographic film convention), the work can be seen to traverse the borders between art film and video art, and between artistic beauty and pornography. The effect on the spectator can thus be perceived as a violent rocking motion, leaving the viewer with a feeling of disorientation, nausea and fascination. The close-ups of genitalia and the frequency of repetitive sexual and hardcore scenes do not serve to authenticate pleasure or arouse but to show and dispense displeasure.

McElhinney's real-sex production of *Story of the Eye* keys out the significance of unveiling desire, deferral, decay and death in our contemporary cultural visual field. Alongside immense amounts of real sex the film includes real footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy: a Bataillean allusion, perhaps, to demonstrate the interrelation between sex and death, especially through Jackie Kennedy's proximity to death which could be figured as an erotic 'scene'. The importance of this scene lies in what it signifies: arguably an appropriation of (Bataillean) eroticism and horror equivalent to risking death. Alongside these elements, the film depicts what I argue to be real trauma experienced by one of the actors (Courtney Shea).

The inclusion of such scenes functions to unveil the process of metamorphosis of the 'obscene' in that the spectacle of eroticism, and death, pushes the experience of spectatorship beyond the gaze. The gaze is deterritorialized by the machine through which it is presented and restructures the viewer's amorous/erotic relationship to machines.

De-forming the kino-eye: Kitsch subculture

McElhinney's vision in *Georges Bataille's Story of Eye* is interesting in the way in which it combines avant-garde filmmaking and underground, trash, queer

and explicit content. It also allusively sketches in the history of eroticism from the nineteenth century to the present including the boredom that Bataille finds in 'the pleasures of the flesh' that are served up for the delectation of decent people (Bataille, 2001b, pp. 42–3). The film draws attention to 'the present' of eroticism: the eroticism of the spectator through the digital, the eroticism of being filmed. This is sex primarily in relation to machines, not other people, and is demonstrated most spectacularly through two scenes: one of male masturbation where the sight of the actor's penis becomes interchanged with the image of a joy stick; and a second where, significantly, the aforementioned actor 'cums' onto the lens of the camera, occluding the vision of the viewer. Both of these scenes are analysed below.

Following the rebirth of eroticism as a digital experience, McElhinney presents a mechanical vision that is simultaneously a cliché of kitsch 1930s Berlin (as depicted by burlesque topless dancing girls) and post-1980s gay fetish subculture (indicated by the saturation of 'fetish' clothing, the use of a double ended dildo in a lesbian sex scene, and by heavily pierced, tattooed and leather-clad dominant and submissive, black and white, male actors who engage in anal sex before being murdered by a single bullet in an unclear shot). Through exhibiting naked references to specific underground styles and differing chronological points, McElhinney exposes his intentions to play with normative film conventions. His vision can thus be read from the opening as a deliberate attempt to display the shocking power of subculture.

The shock of the obscene takes place right at the beginning, with a dingy scene of two top-hatted topless dancing women being watched by a sole male viewer in a dark, small music hall. This scene plunges the viewer right back into the nineteenth century and the origins of modern pornography. The dark, heavy setting, music and theatrical mise-en-scène (including the ludic make-up of the dancers, their breasts painted as smiling faces while their actual faces are covered by over-sized hats) hark back to the illicit theatrical images of women captured by the camera from the 1850s onwards, most notably in Paris, Amsterdam and the US, where dance (the cancan and vaudeville) held a strong illicit sway. This scene also points to the male leisure pursuit of viewing stag films in the early twentieth century, particularly popular in the US, where McElhinney's film was made.

An uncanny assault is quickly materialized in the images after the dancing semi-naked women. The scene is now a dance hall, and attention is focused on a strange, seated male figure, who appears to be controlling the speed of the girls' dancing by a joystick which he jerks violently. As the shots cut back and forth, the image of the joystick becomes his erect penis. Essentially then, the figure is seen to control the scene through controlling the speed of the image that the spectator of the film sees. The fact that his penis doubles as a joystick again moves the viewer through time, bringing us right up to the present. The joystick is not that of a World War II pilot, but of a video-game player.

Although certain contemporary computer/video games directly acknowledge the link between technology and eroticism, they tend, in my view, to be focused towards appropriating a climax from a female animated character. As such, the scene is in line with mainstream pornographic models. The male 'gamer', in order to 'win', must prove his potency by pleasuring the animated female character and, as such, is positioned as both controller and voyeur. Writing of the computer game *Orgasm Girl*, in which the purpose of the 'gamer' is to stimulate an orgasm from a sleeping female character, Daniel Ashton notes that such a work 'questions the possibilities and potentials for how sex video games may present more pressing interventions and suggestions for our physical sex lives' (2006–7, p. 20). Such a statement serves to reiterate the point, of course, that the way we view and regulate the *image* of sex functions to infect the physical application of it. Such scenes, then, index an erotic renaissance in that while the pornographic scene is re-mediated, the implications of the repetition interpolate a binate questioning of the 'real' of sex, of the significance of desire, eroticism, horror and excess in light of new technologies. McElhinney's vision thus draws attention to 'the present' of eroticism: the eroticism of being filmed.

The interchange between the joystick and the penis operates to impregnate the scene with strangeness. The only 'known' for the spectator is that the male on screen appears to be manipulating the dancers as if they were a video game. The male can thus be seen to use his 'sex' as a weapon through which to control the women and the spectator. Significantly, however, the masturbatory spectacle calls into question the male viewer's control over his own body (or the lack of it). As Jorgen Lorentzen observes:

[M]en have been seen to embody the idea of rationality. [Yet,] one could argue that the male sexual organ is the only part of the male body that is not controlled by the will but instead governed by a complicated interaction between blood, nerves and muscles. Men cannot control the raising or lowering of the penis by force of will. ... Our culture, to a great extent, has made a taboo of the erect male member. ... That physicians, biologists and cultural fictions have caused men to turn this upside down, associating the experience of pleasure with the penis, and referring to their penises as their brains, has created the basis for misunderstandings, self-deceit, a lessening of the real brain's capability of pleasure, and the potential for sexual abuse. Sex becomes not just a weapon but a weapon that controls itself.

(Lorentzen, 2007, pp. 73–4)

Obscenity operates here then by an unveiling not of the genitals, but of other models of physical stimulation in connection with visual technology such as 'gaming'. The image of the hard penis refers, then, not to itself, but to something beyond the body. This scene sets up an immediate paradox: on the one

hand we have pornography from vaudeville (a theatrical and risqué dance show) and on the other, topless *Tomb Raider*. This merging of the past and present exposes the sexual spectacle of the film with aesthetic and theoretical implications. The joystick/erect penis demonstrates the digital appropriation of eroticism. McElhinney uses an aesthetically 'obscene' image of the erect penis to make visible that which should remain hidden: man's lack of control over the penis and an abandonment to sexuality.

Through the fusion of differing media and generic distinctions, McElhinney makes visible a contemporary overlap that serves to remind the viewer that this film is a culmination of cultural, historical, theoretical and digital thought on the erotic. Generically, as well as demonstrating similarity to the 'stag' film, McElhinney's vision can equally be likened to earlier, non-erotic appropriations of the transgression of reality such as *The Never Ending Story* (*Die unendliche Geschichte*, Wolfgang Petersen, 1984), a film that shows the relay between reality and fantasy through the use of a joystick control, used to access other realms of/in space and time. Undoubtedly, however, McElhinney's scene is a masturbatory exhibition that operates on a micro-level as deliberately sensationalist in its sexual content. The control of sexuality is disrupted and positioned as (male) fantasy. Questioning gender positions in relation to power, Elizabeth Grosz asks:

[C]ould men's refusal to acknowledge the effects and flows that move through various parts of the body and from the inside out, have to do with men's attempt to distance themselves from the very kind of corporeality – uncontrollable, irrational – they have attributed to women?

(Grosz, 1994, p. 200)

McElhinney's vision arguably answers her challenge for men to acknowledge the uncontrollable. Deforming and defamiliarizing the fantasy model, he makes visible the irrational and uncontrollable aspects of male sexuality. Theorist Rosemary Jackson's definition of fantasy, then, is worth noting here: 'The "FANTASTIC" derives from the Latin, *phantasticus* ... meaning to make visible or manifest' (Jackson, 1981, p. 13).

Fetishising queer identity

The male couple McElhinney presents can be visibly pinpointed as belonging to the 1980s queer scene, judging by the males' outer appearance. The *mise-en-scène*, in part defined by the choice of male actors and costumes, is of relevance to notions of cultural obscenity and the underground 'scene'. The fact that McElhinney has chosen to focus on homosexual, rather than heterosexual, real sex, is another insight into his vision of generic and cultural deformations of desire. As the obscene is positioned purposefully outside the 'ordinary' cultural and visual arena, the choice of queer real sex

can be seen as a tribute to underground, 'obscene' visions and versions of Bataillean desire. McElhinney's technical high-key lighting of this scene – rendering it overexposed – has symbolic resonance in line with Baudrillard's statement about contemporary obscenity in the realm of vision. Discussing virtual reality, in which 'signs seduce one another, beyond meaning' (as opposed to when the simulacrum was still a 'game on the fringes of the real'), he argues: 'The disappearance of this scene [of seduction] clears the way for a principle of obscenity, a pornographic materialization of everything' (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 69).

The male actors chosen to perform the real-sex scenes are, by extensive tattooing, body piercing and fetish costume, stylistically distinct. This difference pertains to an underground movement that is connected to an abnormal identity relating to the sexual self. This idea is indexed by the physical honesty of the (male) body in the seen/scene. The appearance, style and dress of the males in this film (all taboo when placed against the accepted 'norms') thus highlight a movement towards otherness: a movement beyond the self. Similarly, in making visible a female queer couple (usually found in mainstream pornography to satisfy, through familiarity, a male demographic – the unseen male viewer), McElhinney reinforces the notion of abnormality. Both women appear bruised, battered, pallid and unsteady. One woman (Melissa Forgione) is seen to have an unexplained angry scar on her body, which she purposefully makes visible to the audience by running her hands across it and weeping before beginning to masturbate. After reaching climax the woman stubs a cigarette out on her arm, further invoking the horror of erotic expectation.

It is essential, here, that the scar, the self-harming and the sexual act are seen. The body as a site of otherness is explored by the presence of the camera rather than the presence of another. By this, I mean that the practices of queer sex in the film are arguably connected to erotic desire by way of the intimacy of being filmed rather than being fucked.

The 'politics' of Queer Theory, as Pearce and Wisker point out, may be a source of illumination here: 'Queerness does not depend upon the sexuality of the practitioners per se, but rather the extent to which *any* liaison (straight or gay), exposes and makes visible hetero-normativity' (1998, p. 15). As with the male couple above, whereas the costumes of the actors posit difference, the actual sexual practices seen are transgressive in that they make visible the 'normal' conventions of the sexual scene. The sexual acts presented are notably 'normal' in terms of the known pornographic model: for the most part mechanical, lacking in intimacy and failing to display emotional complexity convincingly. This pornographic style is further indexed by the fact that the actors change positions regularly, the sex is inconsequential and the camera is positioned to authenticate the reality of the penetration taking place. It is not therefore these explicit shots that convey obscenity, but rather the application of the strange/fetish object within

these scenes and, significantly, the fact that these scenes arguably convey the contemporary significance and experience of *sex being filmed* that is of crucial interest here.

Traumatic re-play: Power and the cine-eye

Amid the very real sex we see, we are, as an audience, alienated from the desire (or the lack of it) that we witness. The extensive use of mirrors throughout the film points to the importance of self-reflexive spectatorship. This notion is reinforced by the fact that one of the dancers wakes, half-naked, to find her eyes bandaged as if she has been blinded (or had her vision castrated) (Figure 10.1).

The film invokes the notion of sight and the obscene by playing with the concept of temporal delay in terms of sexual fulfilment. The soundtrack audible at the beginning of the film, when McElhinney presents burlesque dancing women, is repeated in a later scene where one of the women is seen endlessly journeying, battered and bruised up the same flight of never-ending stairs. The staircase scene could be argued to depict an underground, art-house vision of hell where the woman is forced to repeat her painful journey up the staircase as, in line with the soundtrack, the audience is to imagine that someone unseen in the house is repeatedly watching a film with her in it. Accordingly, her body becomes an object of fetish



Figure 10.1 Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*: Melissa Forgione awakens wearing a bloody bandage over her eyes. Reproduced with kind permission from Andrew Repasky McElhinney.

to be manipulated at will by the use of a mechanical control: a joystick or remote control. This hellish scene demonstrates a folding back, through an 'imagined' vision of the girl as trapped in a time and space she is unable to control. This scene can, of course, be understood to signify the experience of eroticism itself.

This irrational vision is both perceived to be a traumatic experience for the character (cued by the slow movements indicating her body is on the verge of collapse) and a pleasurable/terrifying experience for the spectator who is, in part, positioned as rationally accountable, by way of watching and potentially controlling the vision (by moving the scene backwards/forwards), for inflicting pain and gaining pleasure from viewing the penetration of (and assault upon) the woman. The positioning of the spectator as both active (through the obscene spectator in the house forcing the woman to endlessly repeat an unseen act) and passive (the film spectator who potentially gains pleasure from submission unto the spectacle and the silent yet direct address unto him/her by way of spectatorial implication) functions to reduce the space between the imaginary and the real experience of eroticism. The repetition of the scene also serves to transform the spectator through a varying experience of emotional and psychological responses. This unexplained scene continues for exactly ten minutes, potentially enabling the spectator outside of the frame to experience fascination, desire, terror, frustration, boredom and trauma.

The compulsion to repeat arguably reflects the abnormal desire of the spectator to experience that which is not rational, and can accordingly be linked to both the psychoanalytic unconscious and the function of repression. Repression does not function to deny pleasure, but rather to avoid displeasure by way of: 'bring[ing] to light activities of repressed instinctual impulses' (Freud, 1991, p. 290). The experience of the erotic that cannot be rationalized (as it depends upon unknown animalistic impulses) is, however, dependent upon the penetration, but not the annihilation, of the Law of the Father (for example, the law that designates it is wrong to gain pleasure from witnessing/causing another's pain). As such, any erotic pleasure/displeasure attained is untranslatable and can never be considered as one's own, but exists only by way of spectral experience of the 'othered' self. The significance of this scene is, then, to be understood thus: the appropriation of transgression is grounded in the image by its revelation that we, the spectators, are *seen seeing*. What the text reveals is the dual positioning of the spectator. This duality allows for, and encourages, a saccadic split to take place: we are horrified and aroused by the sight of us seeing another's fear. As with any such duality, the simultaneous movement towards and away from the object of desire/horror can be experienced as a transformation of the self or a psychological trauma, a wound brought about by stress or shock.

This re-presentation of trauma is highlighted by the blurring of boundaries between actual real experience – real sex – and the mediation of the sexual act as a mere 'act'. However, McElhinney's work uses a third term

for sanctioning the simultaneous artifice/reality of sex, which is 'performance'. As noted by Linda Williams, performance is 'the art of opening the body of the performer up to the physical and emotional challenge of what is performed' (Williams, 2001, p. 22). The emotional challenge is seen, in this film, to elicit trauma. Peter Buse's definition of trauma is of relevance here: 'In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive experience of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena' (Buse, 2001, cited in King, 2005, p. 67). The repetitive nature of this scene posits the register of art-house narrative as sovereign, yet, simultaneously, it echoes the repetitive nature of popular pornography.

The power of the spectator is further interrogated by the ambiguous reality of witnessing the female character/actor's trauma. After watching the woman endlessly climb the staircase, we see her finally reaching the top. The woman walks towards a window and witnesses (by the slicing of original footage) the murder of the former American President John F. Kennedy. As previously mentioned, this scene posits a Bataille reference in that it demonstrates the visual spectacle of death and links it, in proximity to the erotic image of woman by way of making visible the eroticism of Jackie Kennedy's proximity to (her lover's) death. As Bataille states in *Inner Experience*: 'There is in understanding a blind spot: which is reminiscent of the structure of the eye. The nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself' (1988, p. 110). Thus, as Bataille explicates, the blind spot 'absorbs one's attention: it is no longer the spot which loses itself in knowledge, but knowledge which loses itself in it' (1988, p. 111).

Interrogating spectatorship

This scene also serves to interrogate the other 'other': the technological method of capturing images of terror, images upon which the spectator uses reason even where none exists. The very notion of the image, as well as the model of pornographic film, as a realm of spectacular abuse, is called into question. The spectator is shown explicitly the power they have over the production and reproduction of the image and the erotic object. The nightmarish control, drive and desire to see the obscene through the collaboration of eroticism and death – the matrix acknowledged by the actress/character within the film – are, in fact, all too 'real', with psychological implications that reach far beyond this chapter. Psychic reality is also explored through McElhinney's use of the fantasy scenes that can be read as dreams or nightmares.

This film, in presenting real sex and real death, questions the validity of technology truly to represent the real. This interrogation is, of course,

a long-standing one that has been explored within the realms of academia many times, most notably by Roland Barthes who in the 1960s proclaimed that with the *effet de réel* the text makes us accept its fictional product as 'real' (Barthes, 1982, pp. 1–17). Most recently, the concept of 'reality' has been interrogated by theorist Slavoj Žižek. Although Žižek's discussion is actually focused on the image of the collapse of the World Trade Centre towers in the US, his theories are equally compelling when applied to McElhinney's choices:

The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition*. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an 'effect', which, at the same time, delivered the 'thing itself'. The 'effect of the real' is not the same as what Roland Barthes ... called it: ... it is, rather, its exact opposite: *l'effet de l'irréel*. That is to say, ... the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre. Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality. ... The lesson here is the opposite one: *we should not mistake reality for fiction*.

(Žižek, 2002, p. 19)

Here, McElhinney keys out explicitly Bataille's theories upon desire and death as a final moment of enlightenment, of absolute recognition in its repetition, delivering, as Žižek notes, 'the thing itself': the reality and public control of real sex, real objectification. Through our technological control of the image in the form of a DVD remote control or a cinematic reel (mirrored in the film by the male in charge of the female dancers and one girl's repeated journey up the staircase) we, as viewers, not only deliver unto ourselves the fictive adaptation, but the 'real thing'.

Transgression, violence and the 'Thing': The unreturned gaze

The concept of spectatorship is further explored towards the close of the film. The scene can be divided into five sections: the first, a masturbatory positioning of the female viewer; secondly, a three-way sex scene between the main characters; thirdly, a woman looking directly at the camera (an assaulting gaze); fourthly, a shot in which the main actor cums onto the lens of the camera; and, lastly, a black, blank screen coupled with an ear-piercing high-pitched technological noise conveying extreme obscenity.

All five segments interrogate vision in slightly different ways. The first extensively uses the mirror image to depict the concept of self-reflexivity as well as employing the woman as erotic object. In this scene we see one of the nameless characters (woman 'a') from behind taking off her clothing and looking

into a long mirror. This segment sets up an accepted pornographic convention in that the woman begins to masturbate and is positioned so that the (unseen male) viewer can read the image erotically. The woman's reflection in the mirror visible to the film audience is interestingly not the full-frontal of the woman's body, but the reflection of events in the hallway. This mirror image makes visible a heterosexual sex act between the other woman in the film (woman 'b') and the main male character. While watching the couple fuck, woman 'a' continues to masturbate. Again, this sight is shown partly as the camera is focused upon woman 'a's back as well as the reflection of the hallway 'action'.

Although McElhinney does not present a fully 'split' screen, the doubling of the images here creates tension. The tension in this scene operates because our vision is restricted. We see neither the close-up of the female spectator's masturbatory sequence or the close-up (and thus the authentication) of the couples' intercourse. This denotes the scene as one that plays with visibility in that the audience are torn between the two eroticized spaces presented. The lack of clarity of either vision serves to create a tension in which we are unsure of what we should be looking at and, more significantly, presents a tension that is exerted in the possibility of the unseen (obscene). Again, such a doubling of the image can be linked to the concept of the 'uncanny' by way of opening up a space where what is not shown serves to infect the seen with both fear and pleasure.

As previously mentioned, this scene mirrors the power relations usually presented in mainstream pornography in that it is a female who traditionally indexes the (represented) reader/viewer of pornography, so that for the (actual) male reader the process of reading/viewing is itself eroticized. This, however, points to a blind spot (perhaps infinitely regressed) in which the actual male viewer is not seen even as he looks, and does not see himself seeing himself in the image of the masturbating woman represented in the book or picture. As such, this segment makes visible the obscenity of the (male) look.

On relocating herself in proximity to the fucking couple, we see woman 'a' slump against a wall. Although she continues to masturbate, she does not look at the sexual spectacle before her, but rather looks off-screen into 'blind space'. This shot again makes visible the spectator's lack of complete vision. We do not know what she is looking at, as it exists beyond the boundaries of the screen frame. What is apparent, however, is that we see she is not experiencing pleasure through her spectatorship, but rather appears to be acting in a mechanical way. Continuing to masturbate she looks blank and appears mechanical in her movements. This action lays way for recognition of the contemporary amorous/erotic relationship to machines. Her appearance suggests she is to be viewed as a 'living doll' rather than an engaged participant. Her lack of pleasure operates to frame the spectator's own perception of this sight as one in which scopophilic pleasure is denied. Accordingly, a paradox is set up for both the failed gaze and fetishistic desire (Figure 10.2).



Figure 10.2 Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*: Courtney Shea 'looks away' from Melissa Forgiore and Sean Timothy Sexton while mechanically masturbating. Reproduced with kind permission from Andrew Repasky McElhinney.

Potentially, this scene (and the paradox inherent) can be read in two ways. Firstly, woman 'a' could be seen to have withdrawn/retreated because she is sickened by her own loneliness compared with the couple. As such, the mechanical pleasure she can give herself can be read as the *only* pleasure she can have, and hence is a mark of failure. Secondly, the woman's lack of reaction – her reticence to look – positions her as a figure of monstrous perversity. Although her body is on show, she is not seen to be 'turned on'. Rather, her actions are focused towards the obscene, off-screen space that we as a film audience do not 'know'. One effect of this is that it positions woman 'a' as both an object of desire by the fact she is unable to challenge the situation she finds herself in, as well as a figure whose displeasure we are forced to confront.

As the scene continues, we see woman 'b' fellating the male. In a doubling up of aforementioned displeasure, woman 'b's face betrays no pleasure; she coughs extensively throughout the performance before finally withdrawing and curling up in a foetal position. This performance can be read psychoanalytically in that it explicitly links the physical to the psychological. Unlike pornography, in which the sexual act is disassociated from psychological consequence, woman 'b's actions mirror both the mechanical spectacle of woman 'a's movements and function to make visible the painful reality of such an act by way of distorting and re-appropriating 'the physical mechanics and rhythms of sexual performance' (Krzywinska, 2006, p. 225). This vision then points to a contradiction in that the mechanics of hardcore pornographic rhythm are repositioned in a site of visible displeasure.

McElhinney's refusal to cutaway from the scene means that the film-spectator is made complicit in the women's vulnerability. The framing

of woman 'b' in a stream of bright light as well as the male's re-asserted dominance (his presence demands pleasure) functions to reintroduce the concept of the mirror. The mirror here is appropriated metaphorically in that this scene can be proposed to represent the economy of sex in a patriarchal field and, accordingly, make visible gender conflict beyond the diegetic world of the film. In terms of regimes of looking, identification is split between an alignment with the power of the male gaze and identification with the object of the look.

Direct address

This dual positioning is indexed by the static status of the spectator who, unable to affect onscreen action, is forcibly positioned within a masochistic spectatorial experience. The appropriation of displeasure operates in terms of causing an assault upon the eye of the spectator. The seen displeasure is not expected from real-sex models and, as such, is shocking. This assault upon the audience continues in the third scene in which woman 'a' directly addresses the audience by staring at the spectator. This gaze both shocks and assaults as the woman has not, before this point, acknowledged the presence of the spectator directly. Her look essentially denotes that we, the audience, have been, and are currently seen, looking.

Her return of our gaze constitutes a shocking revelation in that she acknowledges, through our looking, the notion of sexual spectacle, and as such concedes the presence of the camera for the first time. For the politics of looking, specifically 'looking back', John Ellis observes: 'direct address makes explicit the relationship between viewer and the subject of the look' (Ellis, 1992, p. 60). This direct address further has the effect of making reference to early and silent cinema in that, as Johnathan Auerbach notes, it functioned 'mainly to shock, astonish, assault and/or delight its spectators rather than tell coherent stories to them' (Auerbach, 2000, cited in Peirse, 2006, p. 86). The woman's direct gaze at the audience lasts for 12 seconds, then cuts to a black screen with the words 'Arranging narrative is a bourgeois mania' in its centre.

This statement points to a further paradox. That is, putting things into a rational order of cause and effect, a structure of meaning, is evidence of *mania*: a pathology, an illness or a derangement. Such a quotation begs the question: What is a narrative if not a story? What is the *Story of the Eye* if not the story of bourgeois mania? All literature (though not necessarily all narrative) is bourgeois. That is to say, literature is a product of the bourgeois era, modernity from the nineteenth century to present day.

What is interesting about McElhinney's, and in fact all real-sex middle-brow, art films is that they attempt to mix narrative and pornography. Currently, in the West, mainstream pornography is not interested in narrative. Instead, a *series* of acts and practices is presented in the same order in every film.

The introduction of narrative, drama and subjectivity into the relentless mechanical utilitarianism of pornography is unquestionably a new thing.

'Cumming' on (the) camera

After this statement, we suddenly find ourselves looking up at the male who is positioned naked in front of the camera. In one single shot, the actor purposefully cums onto the lens of the camera.

As a background to the event, a gigantic eye can be seen to fill the screen. This two-second shot is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the cumming onto the camera makes visible *the presence of the camera itself*. Secondly, this imposition of the camera serves to displace the spectator. The erotic/sexual act ends here in ejaculation onto the camera, thus occluding the vision of the viewer and simultaneously establishing a new non-human relationship: an intimacy with the camera. The cum shot is directed at the gaze of the spectator and foregrounds the gaze as the camera (Figure 10.3).

This scene is significant as it connects the first masturbation scene to this final shot in the eye. The vision of the viewer is occluded through this act and therefore the shot draws attention to the act of viewing. In essence, the viewer has to become aware of (him)self. More importantly however, the occlusion draws attention to the *camera* itself and the means of viewing. The obscenity of the viewer, his position of off-screenness, is both disclosed and rendered redundant. As such, this act points to the last area of obscenity/eroticism in contemporary society which is the eroticism of being filmed: of being exposed to vision by vision machines.



Figure 10.3 Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*: Sean Timothy Sexton cums onto the lens of the camera, blinding the spectator. Reproduced with kind permission from Andrew Repasky McElhinney.

The question, the purpose of his work, is potentially brought to bear only once the vision has died. As Phil Hall of *Film Threat* notes, McElhinney poses, through the composition of this scene, certain questions: 'Is this not what you have been waiting for? Does this scene, this performance authenticate your experience? Can you understand my reasoning, my vision?' (Hall, 2004). To make 'sense' of the film the audience are required to respond to the act of being blinded. Such a response is formulated through language. Language thus acts as an instrument through which the importance of spectatorship becomes reinforced. Technicity is as important as maleness as it is the obscenity of the look that the camera exposes. The gaze and the voice are here bound up with machines that serve to change and render them uncanny. As Felix Guattari notes in *Chaosophy*: 'By opening the series of partial objects beyond the breast and the faeces, to the voice and gaze, Jacques Lacan signified his refusal to close them off and reduce them to the body. The voice and gaze escape the body ... by becoming more and more adjacent to audiovisual machines' (Guattari, 1995, p. 104).

McElhinney's final cut to a black screen is accompanied by a technical and high-pitched noise. The darkness of the screen image and the noise projected render visible the blind spot in which the gaze and the voice operate as obscene machines. As Bataille states: 'There is in understanding a blind spot: reminiscent of the structure of the eye. The nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself. Thus, the blind spot "absorbs one's attention: it is no longer the spot which loses itself in knowledge, but knowledge which loses itself in it"' (Bataille, cited in Botting and Wilson, 2001, p. 91). McElhinney's blinding of his spectator can then, conclusively, be read as a sight that acknowledges the sovereign status of non-knowledge, of darkness and of death in the erotic body.

The re-presentation of sexual performance in terms of producing and purposefully evoking *displeasure* offers a contradistinction to common pornographic visions of sexual utopia, pleasure and titillation. The illumination of the uncanny and the 'abnormal' in association with eroticism also serves to disturb spectator expectations by way of making visible the blind spot in which the erotic can be perceived scientifically, while paradoxically 'undoing' science. The real sex on scene is not presented as spectacle but rather as a spectre of the unknown and the obscene, which, in connection with the erotic, signals death. Ultimately, McElhinney indicates that the camera itself, that is the spectacle of sexual performance to/for a camera, is a locus of non-knowledge and as such is profoundly erotic.

Note

I acknowledge and thank Andrew McElhinney, director of *Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye* (2003, www.ARMcinema25.com), for his permission to use the images.

References

- Ashton, Daniel (2006–7), 'Design for an Orgasm', in *RevolveWire*, Winter–Spring, pp. 20–1.
- Auerbach, Jonathan (2000), 'Chasing Film Narrative: Repetition, Recursion, and the Body in Early Cinema', in *Critical Enquiry*, 26(4), Summer, pp. 798–820.
- Barthes, Roland (1982), 'The Reality Effect', in Tzvetan Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, trans. by R. Carter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–17.
- Bataille, Georges (2001a), *Eroticism*, trans. by Mary Dalwood. London: Penguin Books.
- Bataille, Georges (1988), *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie-Anne Boldt. New York: SUNY Press.
- Bataille, Georges (2001b), *Story of the Eye*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschal. London: Penguin Books.
- Baudrillard, Jean (2005), *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. by Chris Turner. Oxford: Berg.
- Botting, Fred and Wilson, Scott (2001), *Bataille Transitions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buse, Peter (2001), *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Eidos Interactive, *Tomb Raider* (1996), available on <http://www.tombraider.com>, accessed on 2 February 2007.
- Ellis, John (1992), *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television and Radio*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Flash Games, *Orgasm Girl* (2005), available on <http://2flashgames.com/f/f-738.htm>, accessed on 21 November 2007.
- Freud, Sigmund (1991), 'Repression', in Angela Richards (ed.), *Penguin Freud Library 11: On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. London: Penguin, pp. 139–58.
- Freud, Sigmund (1990), 'The Uncanny', in Albert Dickson (ed.), *Penguin Freud Library 14: Art and Literature*. London: Penguin, pp. 335–76.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1994), *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Guattari, Félix (1995), *Chaosology*, Sylvere Lotringer (ed.). New York: Semiotext[e].
- Hall, Phil (2004), 'Review of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*', available on http://www.ARMcinema25.com/GBSOTEFilmThreatMarch25_2004.html, accessed on 21 November 2007.
- Jackson, Rosemary (1981), *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Routledge.
- Jay, Martin (1994), *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. London: University of California Press.
- King, Geoff (ed.) (2005), *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Kipp, Jeremiah (2003), 'Blue Movie: Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye', in *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, 12(2), available on <http://www.ARMcinema25.com/GBSOTEFilmmakerVol12No2.html>, accessed on 25 January 2007.
- Krzywinska, Tanya (2006), *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower.
- Lorentzen, Jørgen (2007), 'Masculinities and the Phenomenology of Men's Orgasms', in *Men and Masculinities*, 10(1), pp. 73–4.
- Pearce, Lynne and Wisker, Gina (1998), 'Rescripting Romance: An Introduction', in Lynne and Wisker (eds), *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1–19.
- Peirse, Alison (2006), 'The Destruction of the Male Body in Classic Horror Cinema' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Lancaster University).
- Williams, Linda (2001), 'Cinema and the Sex Act', in *Cineaste*, 27(1), pp. 20–5.
- Zizek, Slavoj (2002), *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Other Related Dates*. London: Verso.

Also by Lúcia Nagib

WERNER HERZOG: Film as Reality

AROUND THE JAPANESE NOUVELLE VAGUE

BORN OF THE ASHES: The Auteur and the Individual in Oshima's Films

THE BRAZILIAN FILM REVIVAL: Interviews with 90 Filmmakers of the 90s

BRAZIL ON SCREEN: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia

THE NEW BRAZILIAN CINEMA (*edited collection*)

OZU (*edited collection*)

MASTER MIZOGUCHI (*edited collection*)

WORLD CINEMA AND THE ETHICS OF REALISM (*forthcoming*)

Realism and the Audiovisual Media

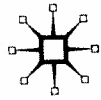
Edited by

Lúcia Nagib

and

Cecília Mello

palgrave
macmillan



Introduction, selection and editorial matter © Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello 2009

Individual chapters © contributors 2009

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-57722-0 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| <i>List of Illustrations</i> | vii |
| <i>Notes on Contributors</i> | ix |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | xiii |
| <i>Introduction</i> | xiv |
| Part I Theorizing Realism | |
| 1 World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence <i>Thomas Elsaesser</i> | 3 |
| 2 Whither Realism? Bazin Reconsidered <i>Leighton Grist</i> | 20 |
| 3 Brecht, Realism and the Media <i>Marc Silberman</i> | 31 |
| 4 Melodrama as Realism in Italian Neorealism <i>Louis Bayman</i> | 47 |
| 5 Scale and the Negotiation of 'Real' and 'Unreal' Space in the Cinema <i>Mary Ann Doane</i> | 63 |
| Part II World Cinema and New Realisms | |
| 6 Realism and Gus Van Sant's <i>Elephant</i> <i>Anna Backman Rogers</i> | 85 |
| 7 Observational Realism in New Taiwan Cinema <i>Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley</i> | 96 |
| 8 Realism and National Identity in <i>Y tu mamá también</i> : An Audience Perspective <i>Armida de la Garza</i> | 108 |
| 9 A Journey through Time: Alexander Sokurov's <i>Russian Ark</i> and Theories of Mimesis <i>Vlad Strukov</i> | 119 |
| Part III The Realism of the Medium | |
| 10 Realism, Real Sex and the Experimental Film: Mediating Eroticism in <i>Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye</i> <i>Beth Johnson</i> | 135 |

Realism and the Audiovisual Media is a major and entirely original contribution to contemporary scholarship on realism. Once dismissed as representative of narrative closure and bourgeois ideology, realism has made a remarkable comeback in recent years as a predominant trend in world cinema and television productions, as well as a topical line of enquiry in audiovisual theory. This book provides the first organized and comprehensive assessment of these developments, making it an indispensable read for anyone interested in film and media studies.

Subjects covered include new developments in realist scholarship; new realisms in world cinema; realist schools and genres; sensation, the body and real sex in cinema; cinematic scale and the real; the production of reality and the ethics of representation in film and television. A wide range of case studies survey past and current tendencies in Korean, Italian, German, Russian, Mexican, Brazilian, American, Taiwanese, French, Japanese and British film and television.

Lúcia Nagib is Centenary Professor of World Cinemas and Director of the Centre for World Cinemas at the University of Leeds, UK. She is the editor of *The New Brazilian Cinema* and the author of *Werner Herzog: Film as Reality*; *Born of the Ashes: The Auteur and the Individual in Oshima's Films*; *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia and World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (forthcoming).

Cecília Mello is FAPESP Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Film, Radio and Television, University of São Paulo, Brazil.

List of Contributors:

Thomas Elsaesser, Leighton Grist, Marc Silberman, Louis Bayman, Mary Ann Doane, Anna Backman Rogers, Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, Armida de la Garza, Vlad Strukov, Beth Johnson, Davina Quinlivan, Jacob Leigh, Cecília Mello, Lúcia Nagib, Ismail Xavier, João Moreira Salles and Diane Myers.

The cover reproduces a detail from *3 Iron*, directed by Kim Ki-Duk, 2004. Reproduced by kind permission of Kim Ki-Duk.

ISBN 978-0-230-57722-0



9 780230 577220

Printed in Great Britain

www.palgrave.com



palgrave
macmillan

realism and the audiovisual media
edited by lúcia nagib and cecília mello

realism and the audiovisual media



edited by
lúcia nagib and cecília mello

