

JOLTED IMAGES

Pavle Levi

JOLTED IMAGES
(UNBOUND ANALYTIC)

Eastern European Screen Cultures

—

Amsterdam University Press

This book has been published with the assistance of the
Stanford University Department of Art & Art History.

COVER ILLUSTRATION: Mirko Ilić

COVER DESIGN AND LAY-OUT: Andrej Dolinka

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are
distributed in the US and Canada by the University of
Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 361 8

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 396 1

DOI 10.5117/9789462983618

NUR 670

© P. Levi / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2017

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.

Eastern European Screen Cultures

The series *Eastern European Screen Cultures* publishes critical studies on the screen cultures that have marked the socialist and post-socialist spaces in Europe. It aims to unveil current phenomena and untold histories from this region to account for their specificity and integrate them into a wider conception of European and world cinema.

The series aspires to fill gaps in research, particularly by approaching Eastern European screen cultures in a transnational and comparative framework and exploring previously underrepresented theoretical issues. It considers moving images in all stages and aspects: production, text, exhibition, reception, and education.

Eastern European Screen Cultures will also publish translations of important texts that have not been able to travel outside of national and/or regional borders.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Greg de Cuir • University of Arts Belgrade

Ewa Mazierska • University of Central Lancashire

Francesco Pitassio • University of Udine

ADVISORY BOARD

Anikó Imre • University of Southern California

Dina Iordanova • University of St. Andrews

Pavle Levi • Stanford University

Eva Närepea • Estonian Academy of Arts

Dominique Nasta • Université Libre de Bruxelles

Elzbieta Ostrowska • University of Alberta

Katie Trumpener • Yale University

For Jelena, Luka, Eva & Zazu

| Contents

prologue

Syntonics	10
This is...	18

i

The Horror of Proximity	26
Filmmaker as Dreamscaper as Analyst	36
Experimental Tango	44
Aleatory Cinema	60
Framed	72

ii

Camera Politica	80
A World Imbued with Screens	88
Filmmaking Degree Zero	98
Kapo from Omarska	110
Cinema and Ethnic Cleansing	118

iii

Boredom	130
Comics and Cinema	138
Dix Doigts	156
Pocket Plus	180

Acknowledgments	187
Illustrations	190
Bibliography	192
Index	200

(Note for a Lay Cinematic Self-Analysis)

Synt

tonics

| Syntonics

(Note for a Lay Cinematic Self-Analysis)

Syntonics: *n.* A system of therapy in which colored lights are directed into the eyes to resolve various physical and emotional health concerns; also called *optometric phototherapy*.

Syntonics, I have come to realize, occupies a mythic place in my personal history. How effective this method of eye treatment actually is, and how much scientific credibility it marshals today, is irrelevant for this narrative. Optometric phototherapy is the treatment I received as a young boy (at the age of 5 or so), after I was diagnosed with amblyopia (lazy eye). At the time, in the late 1970s, it enjoyed full legitimacy in the medical community of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the country where I was born and raised.

Syntonics, I believe, played such an important role in my early development that the treatments to which I was subjected may be said to have constituted no less than my cinematic primal scene.

The darkened room at the ophthalmological clinic in the George Washington Street in Belgrade — where the nurse would gather all her young patients, a group of 10 or 15 of us, flash a variety of colored lights into our eyes, and tell us to go sit in front of an empty wall to “follow the dot” (the afterimage caused by flashing) — this room was the first movie theater that I hazily remember attending! Of course, no actual film, at least not in the conventional sense of the word, ever played there. However, the conditions were right. All the proper elements were in place — the darkened room, the light (*lumière!*), the wall/“screen,” the dynamic of collective yet individuated spectatorship — and the atmosphere was such that it seemed absolutely possible that, at any given moment, projected images would begin to unfold...

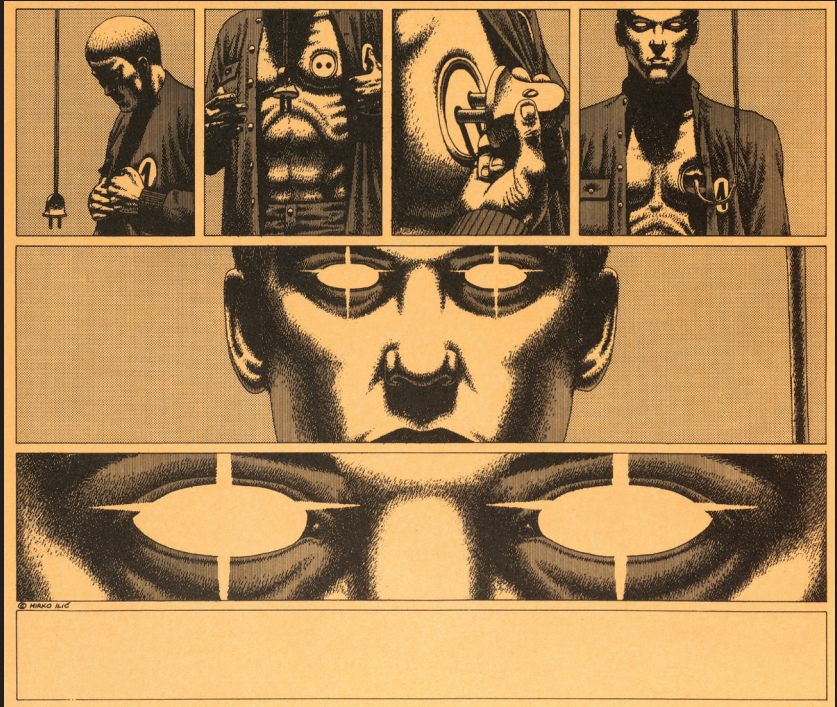
Now, there are a number of films that I vividly remember seeing at a very early age — films that, irrespective of their actual qualities or lack thereof, I cherish and watch repeatedly simply because, at the time when I was initially exposed to them, they impacted me in the most forceful, visceral of ways. These include James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), Stuart Heisler’s *Dallas* (1950), George P. Cosmatos’s *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976), a variety of Yugoslav Partisan war films, Philip Kaufman’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), and Roman Polanski’s *The Tenant* (1976; the latter two, as far as I am concerned, are still the undisputed “scariest movies of all time”). Thanks to syntonics, however, in my childhood universe this initiation into the fascinatingly rich world of (more or less) mainstream films directly coincided with an alternative experience of “pure” cinema: an intense encounter with the movie theatre itself — stripped naked, reduced to its barren form.

As tends to be the case with all truly primal spaces, my *Syn- tonic Theater* came with a built-in traumatic component and a power to induce in its young attendee a veritable affective

ambivalence. Despite my best efforts and desires, I turned out not to be a very accomplished spectator in the house of optometric phototherapy. I was regularly losing my “dot,” always much too soon after the flashing procedure. I repeatedly went back for the refills of my light medicine, while the nurse grew visibly impatient with me. “Try harder!” she would reprimand me, “You must focus on your dot!” I remember the nurse’s deep and harsh voice. On the other hand, her visual appearance was elusive, apparition-like. Protected by the darkness, she controlled the entire syntonic scene from the back of the room.

And try harder I would, indeed, for I genuinely wanted to please the nurse by successfully following my dot. Still, however, I only kept losing it. Finally, in order to avoid any further unpleasant encounters with the woman, I began to fake it. I pretended that I was still following my dot, whereas, in fact, I was merely staring at the wall. I may have rolled dozens of films in my head during those protracted moments of “nothingness.” I do not, however, recall a single one...

p.s. Not long after my syntonics therapy had ended, while flipping through the pages of a freshly published first issue of the comics review, *Spunk*, I came across a strange sequence of images that forever engrained themselves in my mind.



"Survival" (*Spunk*, no.1, 1979); written by Les Lilley, art by Mirko Ilić.

Only now do I think I understand the source of these images' uncanny power: what "Survival" depicts is another, albeit more radical, form of eye-light flashing. Mirko Ilić and Les Lilley's extraordinary vision incites one to imagine *syntonics of the future* as a procedure used to adjust the physiological basis of sight in a manner that will enable the gaze to directly, immediately, affect its environment. *I look, therefore I jolt the world around me* — literally! Another comics artist, Victor Hussenot, recently depicted active spectatorship of this sort with magical simplicity:

the light makes him delirious, and his gaze pierces the landscape...



...transforming it.

Victor Hussenot, *The Spectators* (Les spectateurs, 2015)
 — “the light makes him delirious, and his gaze pierces the landscape... / ... transforming it.”

This

is...



a book about images and image-makers — mainstream and avant-garde, professional and amateur, European and North American. Its protagonists are cineastes, artists, photographers, cartoonists, poets, and revolutionaries. Some among them are well-known; others are anonymous.

Jolted Images (Unbound Analytic) comprises a series of brisk and lively critical-theoretical reflections on a wide range of phenomena from the realms of cinema and visual culture: experimental film in the late socialist era (Miodrag Milošević, Ivan Martinac, Bojan Jovanović); directorial styles (Roman Polanski, Slobodan Šijan, Ingmar Bergman); links between photography and imagistic poetry (Michael Snow, Vujica Rešin Tucić, Miroslav Bata Petrović); representability of ethnic cleansing and its aftermath in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Jasmila Žbanić's documentary work); politics of (in-)visibility and identity formation among

the European migrants and marginalized people (films of Želimir Žilnik); surrealist drawings and fantasy comics (Dida de Mayo, Tiziano Sclavi, Mirko Ilić); and more.

Jolted Images is also a book about a peculiar sort of viewing, comprehension, and critical interpretation of the image. It approaches its visual subject matter from a variety of perspectives: aesthetic, political, historiographic, comparative, but also at times... oneiric. The history of oneiric perspectives on art is, of course, extraordinarily rich and as long as the history of the humankind itself. In the twentieth century alone (which, notably, began with the publication of Sigmund Freud's seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*), some of the most powerful and sophisticated conceptions of the image have come out of this tradition: from a multitude of "dream poetics" (August Strindberg, Franz Kafka, Germaine Dulac, André Breton, Maya Deren, Georges Perec, Federico Fellini, David Lynch) and analyses of artistic form modeled after the dynamics of dream-work (Salvador Dalí, Ella Freeman Sharpe, Gaston Bachelard, Thierry Kuntzel), to oneiric theories of cinematic spectatorship (Edgar Morin, Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry), and recent philosophical musings about "organology of dreams and arche-cinema" (Bernard Stiegler).¹

A number of these perspectives have, unquestionably, influenced my own approach. However, for the purposes of this book, I invoke oneirism as a rather rough-hewn, unstructured, and under-theorized heuristic: one that, quite simply, authorizes periodic reliance on dreams and dreaming as triggering experiences and sources of writerly inspiration, as well as, in some cases, model aesthetic/formal structures. Taking my cue from Jorge Luis Borges's claim that "writing

1 Bernard Stiegler, "The Organology of Dreams and Arche-Cinema," *Screening the Past*, no. 34 (June 2013). Works by other authors mentioned here are listed in the Bibliography.

is nothing more than a guided dream”, I seek to infuse a measure of *uncodified creative transfiguration of the material at hand* (a procedure central to all dreaming, including the “guided” or “lucid” variety) into some of my analyses of assorted visual and audio-visual content.² That is, I strive to playfully, imaginatively, and without obsequious commitment to the inherited scholarly norms of instrumental logic, *explore the formal possibilities* (and in some cases the limits) of the written critical-analytical endeavor itself. It is thus that the book may be said to evince a certain “unbinding” tendency: a wish to suspend the common standards of authorial gravitas before immersing oneself and sailing among the various modalities of exchange, hybridization, contamination, tension, and even conflict, between word and image, genres of writing, multiple authorial voices, reliable and unreliable sources, discursive continuities and discontinuities, material and immaterial aspects of textual production, and so on.

2 Jorge Luis Borges, “Preface to the First Edition,” *Doctor Brodie’s Report* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p.xi.

According to a recent practical guide on the subject of guided or lucid dreaming, “(I)lucid dreaming is the ability to know you’re dreaming while you’re dreaming. A lucid dreamer is able to go to sleep at night and wake up within his or her dream. With this unique awareness, you can generally behave like someone who is awake, exercising the free will, imagination, and memory of waking life. Once lucid, you can explore and even change elements of the dream.” (See Dylan Tuccillo, Jared Zeisel, Thomas Peisel, *A Field Guide to Lucid Dreaming: Mastering the Art of Oneironautics* [New York: Workman Publishing, 2013], p.x.). Of course, it matters little here whether lucid dreaming is actually possible and on what scale. It is the *idea* of cognitive awareness while dreaming — creatively developed in such remarkable fictional and semi-fictional works as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865); Mynona’s (Salomo Friedlander) 1919 philosophical fantasy, *The Creator*; Borges’s short story, “The Circular Ruins” (1964); Joseph Rubin’s 1984 film, *Dreamscape*; and Aleksandar Zograf’s “dream-watching” comics (1990s – present) — that provided the inspiration while parts of this book were being composed.

Since form is always a fundamental aspect of meaning—the “how” that crucially determines the “what” of signification—there is no reason why the method of *formal analysis* should not be explored to its full potential: as both analysis of artistic forms (be they visual or audio-visual, moving or static) and analysis that proceeds by means of some purposely developed formal devices and interventions.

Writing in 1958, on the occasion of an exhibition of modern American art in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and particularly inspired by Alexander Calder’s “mobiles”—kinetic sculptures that invite direct contact with the audience (touching, pushing)—Dušan Makavejev, filmmaker and radical innovator of audio-visual forms, argued that there are times when it is necessary “to jolt art, no matter what the outcome”.³ As a methodological directive, Makavejev’s credo strikes me as highly applicable to the instances of critical writing contained in this book. By “jolting” art, the spectator/receiver demonstrates a whimsical determination to enter into a thoroughly inquisitive and properly inter-active, even egalitarian, relationship with it. To jolt art (or, for that matter, to jolt an image, *any* image) is to become an active participant—not unlike a lucid dreamer—in a “show” that is not (or does not appear to be) one’s own creation. This book, it may be said, seeks to jolt some images in a rather specific manner: by undertaking conceptual maneuvers and exercises in style *in the very course of analyzing these images*. No matter what the outcome...

3 Dušan Makavejev, “Umetnost treba cimnuti,” *Poljubac za drugaricu parolu* (Beograd: Nolit, 1967), p.77.

i



| The Horror of Proximity

Dream

As a student, I dreamt that I discovered the “secret” of Roman Polanski’s directorial technique — the essence of his approach to filmmaking. I still vividly remember jumping in my bed ecstatic about this discovery, only to realize that, once awake, I was unable to recall more than a few fragments of the revelatory dream.

Polanski was sitting in a room... He was a character/actor in one of his own films... The camera was slowly dollyling forward... It was operated by... Stanley Kubrick...

Despite the dream’s overall inaccessibility, I did realize immediately that Kubrick’s appearance in it was just a snare. Its only true protagonist was the *auteur* who gave us some of the most memorable, and frightening, moments of cinematic oneirism (often cast as indistinguishable from wakefulness) — from *Repulsion* (1965) and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), to *Macbeth* (1971), *What?* (also known as *Diary of Forbidden Dreams*, 1972), and *The Tenant* (1976). The evening before I had my dream, I watched Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and this experience must have later prompted a partial transposition of the figure of one eminent filmmaker onto another.

I also understood, intuitively, that the essential Polanski technique that was at stake here had something to do with the specific nature of camera movement in his films. But what exactly were the traits of this “Polanski effect”?

Wakefulness

It took some years of repeated viewing and thinking about Polanski’s oeuvre before I was able to succinctly articulate what now feels like a satisfactory diagnostic substitute for my lost dream of cinematic analysis.

The “Polanski Effect” = Cinematically Generated Horror of Proximity

1. To begin with, a pervasive sense of barely suppressed horror is a standard feature of Roman Polanski’s film world. Random and erratic eruptions of violence pose an ongoing danger to his protagonists, giving rise to what James Morrison aptly describes as a feeling of “free-floating anxiety”.⁴ The violence in question is often actualized, but just as often it remains an oppressive potentiality. Furthermore, whether real or imagined, this violence is typically represented by and materialized in various threatening objects and entities: knives and blades (which prominently figure in *Murder* [1957], *Knife in the Water* [1962], *Repulsion*, and *Macbeth*); wardrobes (all films in the “apartment trilogy” — *Repulsion*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Tenant*); pendants (*Rosemary’s Baby*); severed hands (*Repulsion*, *Macbeth*) and heads (*Macbeth*, *The Tenant*); displaced teeth (*The Tenant*); rotting potatoes (*Repulsion*); glasses (*Chinatown*, [1974]); bed-sheets (evocative of sex, as in *Repulsion*); books (*Ninth Gate*, [1999]);

4 James Morrison, *Roman Polanski* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 3.

and—last but not least—menacing looks (particularly prominent in *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*).

2. The manner in which Polanski spatially situates his characters in relation to these dangerous and disturbing objects/entities, casts the above sense of *proximity of horror* as, more specifically, *the horror of proximity*.

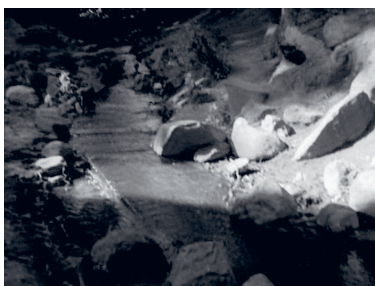
At their most effective, Polanski's anxiety-inducing subject-object relations involve a deftly orchestrated interplay of on- and off-screen space: a dynamics of presence and absence activated within a carefully defined, at times claustrophobically so, field of vision. Violence commonly resides in the immediate vicinity of the diegetic protagonists. It tends to linger around the edges of the film frame—in the most frightening of situations, literally just outside of it—so that, at any moment, it can be expeditiously moved inside the shot, incorporated with utmost ease into the space occupied by the character in question.

3. The stylistic device used by Polanski to give distinct cinematic form to this “horror of proximity” (or proximity as horror) is the simple, brief, and surgically precise camera movement: a short, sometimes barely noticeable, pan; a slight tilt; a quick dolly or zoom forward.

Examples

Two Men and a Wardrobe—Memorable camera movements, elementary in form yet powerfully suggestive of random outbursts of violence, initially appear in this short film from 1958. Here, the moving camera gives rise to an unmistakable sense of absurd disjointedness of the world. Take, for instance, the brief scene rendered in a single shot, in which the two titular protagonists carry their wardrobe in

the far background, while the camera follows a stream of water in the immediate foreground. A quick tilt downwards and slightly to the right reveals a gruesome event: one man brutally killing another with a rock.



The chilling nature of this scene stems from the fact that (unlike in Polanski's subsequent films) the movement of the camera is not at all motivated, not attributable to some diegetic character's point of view. The two events — the men carrying the wardrobe and the murder — are linked, but not on the plane of narrative causality. Rather, a simple tilting action by the camera performs an operation of arbitrary metonymic displacement: as the viewer's attention is abruptly transposed from one event to another (from the wardrobe to the murder), she becomes a witness to the haphazard and always dangerously close cruelties of the world.⁵

Repulsion — The first in Polanski's "apartment trilogy", *Repulsion* is, in its entirety, a film about the horrors of proximity being played out in a crassly patriarchal context. It depicts a range of extreme psycho-physiological manifestations — disturbances, really — implicitly attributable to the principal protagonist, Carol's, past sexual traumas. The film is also a primer of Polanski's masterful alignment of the simplest among the camera movements with his character's volatile gaze.



⁵ A number of authors have analyzed Polanski's frequent use of cinematic metonymies, most notably Herbert Eagle in his essay "Polanski," *Five Filmmakers*, ed. Daniel J. Goulding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.92–155.

For example, in an early scene in the film, Carol washes her legs in the bathroom sink. The camera discreetly tilts up from the sink to the shelf above it to reveal a razor blade that belongs to Carol's sister's lover (a man who repels Carol). Perfectly synchronized with the upward movement of Carol's look, the moving camera hauntingly conveys her unease with the object she has spotted.



In a later scene, one of the most terrifying in the film, Carol catches the glimpse of an unknown man in the mirror while shutting her wardrobe. Conveniently placed on the wardrobe door, the mirror functions as a substitute for the moving camera: as it “pans”, it briefly introduces a stranger's image into Carol's/spectator's field of vision. However, subsequent investigation of the space of the

room reveals that, beyond the edges of the mirror, this man does not actually exist. He is a figment of Carol's paranoid imagination and, therefore, an exclusively off-screen threat.



The Tenant—This film, *Repulsion*’s “male” counterpart, is once again concerned with the turbulences of sexual identity (here linked much more directly than in Carol’s story with the socio-economic apprehensions of immigrant life). In *The Tenant*, the gaze, as marshalled by someone or something other than the principal protagonist, itself becomes an intimidating and even persecutory entity. It regularly intrudes into Trelkovsky’s (played by Polanski himself) private space, always at the most inopportune moments.



Consider the scene in which Trelkovsky and Stella fondle each other in (the darkness of) a movie theatre. A minute but exceptionally eerie camera pan reveals another patron of the cinema sitting immediately behind them and staring at them intently. From a zone of comfort (a hideout), the movie theatre is thus swiftly transformed into a space of exposure and vulnerability...



It was a dream that prompted this analytic exercise. Dreams will, it seems, also be responsible for abruptly bringing it to a close.

I never had any reason to think of my oneiric episode with Roman Polanski as an exclusive phenomenon. However, to my astonishment, in the course of composing this text I discovered that there actually exists on the internet *a whole gamut* of postings detailing other people's Polanski dreams! True, very few—if any—of these dreams have anything to do with Polanski's *cinema*. Yet this discovery thoroughly drained me of any desire to continue writing...

The horror of proximity.

