

**An Investigation of Affect in the Cinema: Spectacle and the Melodramatic Rhetoric in *Nil by Mouth***

In his book, *A Passion for Cultural Studies* (2009), Ben Highmore uses the word ‘passion’ to describe the variety of ways in which culture can be experienced as something that is both felt, that ‘gets under our skin’, and as something that effects us emotionally (1). Indeed, as he says, the haptic nature of the language used to describe this passionate experience is indicative of our relationship to it: ‘we are *moved* by a sentiment, our *feelings* are hurt, I am *touched* by your generosity’ (author’s emphasis, 5). Highmore argues that as a consequence of attempting to address a phenomenon which straddles this boundary between the physical and the emotional, ‘writings about the passions ... have always recognised the impossibility of treating [them] as exclusively or even primarily mental or ideational’ (6). Unfortunately, this has not always been the case in film studies where, as Vivian Sobchack says, there has been a tendency to regard the notion of affect as ‘a soft, mushy term, a hangover from a sloppy liberal humanism’ (xiv). Considering the almost universal acceptance of the power of cinema to ‘move’ its audience, however, understanding how this process works is a crucial aspect of film theory.

In the following analysis of affect in *Nil by Mouth* (1997), I want to resituate this ‘visceral dimension’ of spectatorship as central to our engagement with cinema (Rutherford, 2002). I will begin by returning to the earliest period in film history, exploring the relationship between affect and spectacle in what Tom Gunning has called the ‘cinema of attractions’ (1989, 57). I want to suggest that the cinematic spectacle is affective by nature, and that there is thus a definite continuity between the affective responses of early spectators and the affect experienced by contemporary viewers. Turning to the ideas of Christian Metz, I will argue that this continuity has largely been possible due to the nature of our relationship with the cinematic image. Characterised by a dualistic tension between intimacy and distance, this relationship has remained unchanged throughout the century or so of cinema’s existence. Nevertheless, such continuity has been masked by the drastic transition between the exhibitionist ‘cinema of attractions’ and the voyeuristic narrative cinema that predominates today. Taking my lead from Gunning’s argument, I will show that spectacle is as present in *Nil by Mouth* as it was in the pre-narrative era, with the difference being that in the former, spectacle is buried in the melodramatic tropes of realism.<sup>1</sup> With reference to the film’s use of the close-up, I will demonstrate the relation of distance and proximity in producing affective spectacle, before pointing out the variety of elements that situate this intensely realist film as a melodrama.

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see, this is not a contradictory statement: despite the common assumption that melodrama and realism are opposed, they in fact emerged in tandem at the birth of contemporary narrative cinema.

Lastly, focusing on the presence of spectacle in the melodramatic *mise-en-scene*, I will show how affect emerges through the film's use of colour and lighting, setting, and finally, voice.<sup>2</sup>

Briefly, I want to preface my argument with a few definitional parameters. It is the aim of this essay to identify the more subtle examples of cinematic spectacle than the explosions and excess these words are usually used to describe. Therefore, in anticipation of the charge that I see spectacle where there is none, I point my reader to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, wherein the definition of the word ranges from 'a person or thing exhibited to ... the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity or contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration', to simply 'the sight or view of something' (their emphasis, *OED*, 2009). I want to make a similar argument for affect, although this is a more complex term which requires a slightly more detailed explanation. Explaining the concept, Eric Shouse distinguishes between feelings, emotions, and affects. Feelings, he says, are personal, referring to the prior experiences or sensations of a person which have then been labelled accordingly. Emotion is the expression of these labelled feelings.<sup>3</sup> Affect, on the other hand, is 'pre-personal', in that it is always 'prior to and/or outside of consciousness' (Shouse, 2005). This is an important point because it describes how affect is involuntary or instinctive, how it is registered on the body before it can be engaged by the intellect. In this way, affect behaves like pain, in that it can be described as 'the body's way of preparing itself for action ... by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience' (Shouse). As with spectacle, then, affective intensity refers to level or degree rather than to something that is necessarily extreme. However, as we shall see, the affective experiences of the medium's earliest audiences tended to be at the more intense end of this spectrum.

Gunning argues that the cinema's early period should be understood as operating according to impulses very different to the predominantly narrative oriented medium it is today. According to Gunning, prior to 1906 (the year marking the influence of D. W. Griffith and his pioneering narrative techniques), it was the affective experience of perceiving moving images that drew audiences to the cinematic apparatus, rather than the content of those images or any meaning gleaned from the order in which they appeared.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the cinema functioned primarily by explicitly offering its audience the visual spectacle of the medium itself. It is a common myth in film studies that the audience at the first public exhibition of cinema ran screaming from the auditorium, terrified that the

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<sup>2</sup> I should point out here that debates which attempt to analyse affective responses to works of art shall always be subjective to a certain extent. This does not make them any less valid than those which pretend to 'objectivity', of course, and it is worth bearing in mind that critics' assessments are as riddled with argument and opinion as the works they discuss. Nonetheless, in the absence of any quantitative audience reception data I am obliged to rely entirely on my own experiences of the films I discuss, though the reader must decide for themselves the extent to which this determines their acceptance or rejection of my argument.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike feelings, he says, emotions may be genuine or feigned, since emotional expression becomes possible only as an adult, when one has gained partial control over the degree to which one communicates sensate experience. Hence, it is a common misconception that infants express emotions of happiness, distaste, frustration and the like. In fact, missing both experience and the power of language, infants are capable only of direct expressions of affect.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed accounts of the intense astonishment, shock, and terror of these experiences, including that of the early filmmaker George Melies himself, see Gunning (1995, 866-7).

train in the film *Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1896) would burst through the screen and smash them all to bits. I am inclined to agree with Gunning when he says this myth underestimates the ‘basic intelligence and reality-testing abilities’ of the average spectator (1995, 863). Nevertheless, it is of use for the way in which it helps us conceive of the intense affective response caused by seeing the spectacle of photography spring into life for the first time.<sup>5</sup> These early spectators did not mistake image for reality to the extent that they fled the screen. They did, however, bear witness to a spectacle that caused them to have an affective experience: feeling – excitement, fear, apprehension, terror – at an embodied, pre-personal level (Rutherford, 2002).

In his book, *The Cinematic Signifier* (1982), Christian Metz explains how this process of affect operates in the cinema. It derives, he says, from a dualism between the spectator’s consciousness of the cinema as a representational medium and yet the very real, indeed embodied, experience of affect. Describing this experience of the viewer, he says:

I know I am perceiving something imaginary (and that is why its absurdities, even if they are extreme, do not seriously disturb me), and I know that it is I who am perceiving it. This second knowledge divides in turn: I know that I am really perceiving, that my sense organs are physically affected, that I am not phantasising, that the fourth wall of the auditorium (the screen) is really different from the other three, that there is a projector facing it (and thus it is not I who is projecting, or at least not all alone), and I also know that it is I who am perceiving all this, that this perceived-imaginary material is deposited in me as if on a second screen, that it is in me that it forms up into an organised sequence, and therefore I am myself the place where this really perceived imaginary accedes to the symbolic (823).

Metz is concerned primarily with the psychoanalytic effects of the cinema and thus the term ‘imaginary’ is being used in both its Freudian sense (as the stage preceding the symbolic) as well as to describe the spectator’s awareness of the difference between representation and reality. Nonetheless, this passage contains a profound insight into the nature of cinematic affect. Metz is describing the way in which even an intensely unpleasant or terrifying image can be tolerably experienced in the cinema because of the spectator’s feeling of safety through distance: we understand the image onscreen as a representation whose referent necessarily occupies an entirely different time and space to our own. However, this knowledge is contradicted by the physical affects of viewing such representations. The fact that these images are made sense of inside ourselves and then become physically manifest upon our bodies appears to transcend this position of safety: our bodies tell us that we are within reach of

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Gunning notes how the exhibitors of early films would exploit this aspect of the medium’s novelty. Beginning the screening with the by then familiar image of a still photograph, exhibitors would maximise the shock value of the technology by bringing the image to life before the audience’s eyes (1995, 867).

the image.<sup>6</sup> Thus we can see how the affecting cinematic scenario is constituted by this dual sensation of intimacy and distance with the spectacle onscreen.

The close-up shot is an ideal example of this sensation, and is as evident in early cinema as it is in *Nil by Mouth*. Gunning offers the close-up of the countess' ankle in *The Bride Retires* (1902) as an example of spectacle in the 'cinema of attractions'. Despite working to arouse different sensations, affect in this spectacle operates in the same manner as in the opening sequence in *Nil by Mouth*. The frame cuts from black into a close-up of Ray's (Ray Winstone) face as he stands at a bar. His face fills half the frame, and is in sharp focus, centring our attention, yet the bustle of bodies surrounding him at the bar draws the eye away, at one point even breaking our vision of Ray as someone leans across the bar in the foreground. However, the excitement created by this initial shot lasts only eight seconds before the scene cuts back to the black screen displaying the credits - though the music and dialogue remain. That the film is denying *visual* access to the image having already stimulated the audience's attention intensifies our curiosity, an affective response which escalates as this edit sequence recurs throughout the credits. In both *The Bride Retires* and *Nil by Mouth*, then, it is the spectacle of the image that causes the embodied emotions of the spectator. The desire and arousal created by the spectacle in the earlier film is immediate, but the object of desire is entirely unavailable. Likewise, the mixture of uncertainty, suspense, curiosity and intrigue contained in the image of Ray at the bar cannot be satisfied. Of course Raymond gets served and returns to his friends, but we can never 'know', or experience the image to the extent that is demanded by the embodied sensations it produces. In this respect, we can see that the close-up demonstrates, in Alison Young's phrase, how affect in the cinema emerges from the 'paradoxical proximity' that characterises our relationship with the cinematic image, from our 'investment in an experience which is both distant ... and proximate' (Young, 2).<sup>7</sup>

Clearly then, the affective spectacle does not disappear in the wake of Griffith's influence and the cinema's subsequent drive towards more traditional storytelling modes. Instead, as Gunning says, the 'cinema of attractions' was incorporated respectively into both avant-garde practises and as a component of narrative cinema. Being beyond the remit of his article, Gunning's argument understandably does not venture any further into this issue other than to suggest its spectacle is more visible in some genres than others, offering up the musical and what he calls the 'Spielberg-Lucas-

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<sup>6</sup> This is related to the notion of 'live' communications media that John Durham Peters discusses in his book *Speaking into the Air* (1999). According to Peters, 'live is the prosthetic form of life, *something that announces its authenticity*' (my emphasis, 218). Film might be described as 'live' in exactly this sense, then, in that it gives the impression that the filmic body is indeed 'present in the flesh' (218).

<sup>7</sup> *Nil by Mouth* is an especially interesting film to look at in terms of this relationship because of the conscious attempts of the filmmakers to intensify it. First, the film was shot on 16mm film and then blown up to 35mm. The grainy texture and detail of the smaller stock is then magnified in the finished film. Second, the interior scenes were mostly shot in close-up, yet with a telephoto lens on the camera. This technique, in the words of Nick James, gives exactly that 'paradoxical combination of intimacy and distance' (10).

Coppola cinema of effects' as some of the more blatant examples (1989, 57).<sup>8</sup> As my readings of the close-up suggest, I want to unearth a more subtle genealogy of the cinema of attraction, following its route into narrative realism as melodrama. Mapping out this generally unacknowledged course of spectacle will, I hope, lead to an understanding of how affect is manifest in contemporary realist cinema.

Realism and melodrama played a dual role in the development of modern narrative cinema.<sup>9</sup> However, in both general and academic usage the melodrama has traditionally been situated into oppositional and subordinate relationships with realism. Despite the notable attempts of some critics to redress this situation, melodrama remains widely used today as a pejorative term to denote sensationalism and sentimentality in works deemed absent of artistic merit. Contrary to this misleading reputation, melodrama in fact refers to 'a form of exciting, sensational and, above all, moving story' (Linda Williams cited in Mercer, 88-9). Accordingly, it is the pervasive mode of almost all forms of realist narrative cinema, *Nil by Mouth* included. For instance, a classic trope of the melodrama is the depiction of protagonists suffering undeservedly. This role is arguably inhabited by all the female characters in the film, although it is of course most clearly manifested in the intense suffering of Valerie (Kathy Burke). These characters then become objects of *pathos* (sources of extreme pity or tenderness), immediately evident in Valerie's case although perhaps most devastatingly so during the moment of Ray's brutal attack. *Peripeteia* (suddenness) and *aporia* (doubt how to proceed) often appear alongside *pathos*, again evident in the explosive violence in the film and the question of how it should be engaged by the characters (Gledhill, 2000, 236). *Nil by Mouth* also fits Michael Walker's categories of the melodrama of passion and family melodrama, concerning respectively the internal traumas of the characters emotions and the constraints of gender, social position and psychological make-up (17). However, the ubiquity of melodramatic tropes in narrative realism is one of the primary reasons why melodrama is so hard to spot. Rather than be thought of as a genre in and of itself, then, Christine Gledhill has argued that melodrama is best conceived as a 'rhetoric' or style which is capable of informing a range of genres, 'westerns, gangster and horror films, psychological thrillers and family melodramas alike' (1987, 13).

Thomas Elsaesser has argued that a primary characteristic of the melodramatic rhetoric is the way in which *mise-en-scene* becomes a repository of meaning, to the extent that one must give 'critical importance to the *mise-en-scene* over intellectual content or story-value' (52). For the

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<sup>8</sup> In Linda Williams' essay 'Discipline and Fun', in a subsection entitled 'The New "Cinema of Attractions"', she notes this continuation of spectacle from early cinema, further exploring Gunning's examples and updating his argument with more contemporary instances of her own, such as *Titanic* (1997) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) (356-58).

<sup>9</sup> There is not space here to explore in any detail this equal role of melodrama and realism in founding the modern narrative mode. Suffice to say that the birth cinematic technologies provided the means with which to reconcile a tension that had emerged in the theatre between the desire for verisimilitude, on the one hand, and exciting, episodic narratives on the other. The photographic realism inherent in the cinematic apparatus, combined with the ability to edit images together, provided a mixture of authenticity and excitement that was impossible to replicate on the stage.

purposes of my argument I want to focus on this element of the melodrama since it is here, in the *mise-en-scene*, that we can see most clearly the melodramatic rhetoric creating affect through spectacle.<sup>10</sup> Illustrating his point, Elsaesser uses an example from the master of Hollywood melodrama, Douglas Sirk. Asked about his use of colour in *Written on the Wind* (1956), Sirk replied: ‘Almost throughout the picture I used deep-focus lenses which have the effect of giving a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colours. I wanted this to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is inside them and can’t break through’ (43). This is a delicate technique, certainly, but one which indicates how Sirk used the spectacle of colour to generate an affective response, to give ‘resonance to dramatic situations’ (54). Set designer Hugo Luczyc-Wyhowski used an even more understated technique in *Nil by Mouth* to generate affect through colour. Describing the colour palette for the film, he says: ‘I used mid-tone real colours with a few bright colours, I didn’t want to enforce the colour of the set onto the look of the film. If it looks like there was no art direction at all, then that’s how it should be ... You can include subtle colour changes without apparently making a huge statement’ (cited in James, 10). His use of the word ‘apparently’ is suggestive of how this self-effacing style is, paradoxically, a manifestation of spectacle: an artificial visual style which powerfully connotes the everyday, yet in a way that creates particular embodied sensations in the viewer *prior* to their cognition. A case in point is the scene in which Billy, a heroin addict in withdrawal, seeks help at his mother’s flat. The dark, early morning greys and blues in the exterior shots are an affront to the eye, evoking the cold, harsh reality of the environment. Inside the flat, the colour tones are much softer, relieving the threatening atmosphere outside, although the bright white of the fridge and phone mask this affect and make the scene appear unconstructed. Even in this more welcoming environment, however, objects are soaked in washed-out greens, browns and yellows, affecting a sense of gloom and sadness in the audience. When Billy enters this space, the stronger colour of his jacket is invasive, lending these sensations a sense of inevitability. As the scene ends, however, the characters’ emotional interactions are filmed in a closer shot. Bringing out a tenderness and warmth in the skin tones of their faces, these underlying feelings of inescapable sadness and despair are laced with impressions of courage and indomitability.

Of course, *mise-en-scene* refers to everything that features in the frame, not just colour and light. Accordingly, spectacle can be found at work everywhere from setting, dialogue, and the placement and movement of the camera and actors, to focus, props, sound, and music. For instance, in

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Rutherford’s statement regarding the analysis of affect in *mise-en-scene* is useful here. She describes *mise-en-scene* as ‘not just what is put into the frame, but what is put into the moment of experience: how the spectator is drawn into the scene. This must be understood as the evocation of a sympathetic excitation or resonance in the spectator as embodied - how the embodied affect of the spectator is aroused, activated, enhanced, brought into play’ (2002). This notion of affect as resonances and evocations is testament to the sensitivity and delicacy that is required when trying to assess its operation in the kind of cinema I am looking at here. Hence, the reader should bear in mind that I am not trying to overstate the intensity of affect in the scenes I examine, but rather to foreground an element of the cinema experience that, because it is embodied at low-level intensity, more often than not occurs at unconsciously.

his article, 'Space, Place, Spectacle' (1984), Andrew Higson describes how 'place becomes a signifier for the state of mind of the protagonists' which can also 'be read as *spectacle*, as a visually pleasurable lure to the spectator's eye' (his emphasis, 134). He notes this is most apparent in the films of the British New Wave and their common use of what became known as 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill' (Krish cited in Higson, 133). *Nil by Mouth* also features this multi-functioning shot, though it appears in a two-shot sequence (and is updated for the inner-city, non-working class of the 90s, being positioned their tower block rather than a hilltop). Following an interior scene of Billy (Charlie Creed-Miles) making a joint, the scene functions narratively as an establishing shot, placing his location. Psychologically, the shot functions as a metaphor for the alienation of the characters from the rest of the community, with the grim architecture of the top three flats, crammed upon one another, standing out in the foreground in contrast to the large, semi-detached houses in the far distance. This metaphor continues in the next frame, which is filled by a long-shot of the high-rise estate. Here, the screen dissected by the harsh lines of the buildings, the spatial isolation of the first shot is replaced with its consequent claustrophobic intensity, and yet is depicted in a spectacle reminiscent of a cubist world war one painting.<sup>11</sup> Viewing these images, it is the 'unbeautiful' spectacle that is manifest affectively. Before we can ponder their meaning, desolation and loneliness have taken root in our stomachs; they have, as Lindsay Waters would say, already 'dropped anchor in our souls' (212).



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

Voice is also used as a spectacular vehicle of affect in *Nil by Mouth*, although the range of embodied sensation it gives rise to differs greatly. At Ray's flat, for instance, when Ray is engaged in a friendly dialogue with Mark (Jamie Foreman), with Billy and Dan (Steve Sweeney) as their audience, Ray and Mark's speech is almost harmonised. Mark reminds Ray of an amusing experience they shared, which Ray introduces to the others before Mark then tells the story. Their language is like that of a double act, in which they finish each others' sentences and tell the punch lines to each others' jokes (Creeber, 199). This calm yet upbeat tempo of the dialogue, punctuated with laughter, ingratiates the audience into their social circle; we are included in the scene and experience on a

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Franz Marc's *The Fate of Animals* (1913) or Fernand Leger's *The Cardplayers* (1917).

physical, embodied level the same cheerful delight that radiates from the two men as they tell their stories. At other times, however, a very different kind of affect is created from the spectacle of Ray's language, such as when he visits Valerie's mother's flat demanding to see his wife and daughter. In a rage, Ray's words are shouted or even screamed. His language is repeated, eventually becoming nonsensical as sentences become meaningless jumbles of expletives. Combined with the blunt, harsh timbre of his accent, previously so amiable, these qualities produce an affect that is deeply unsettling and frightening - embodied in the quickening of my heartbeat and knot in my stomach.

Investigating the ways in which the melodramatic rhetoric is articulated in *Nil by Mouth*'s *mise-en-scene* reveals the centrality of spectacle to the mode of melodrama more generally. Using the examples of the close-up, colour, setting, and dialogue, I have tried to show how it is the spectacular quality in these elements of *mise-en-scene* that gives rise to affect. Picking out the movement of the affective spectacle from its place in early cinema to its presence in a contemporary text like *Nil by Mouth* is an attempt to reinstate the notion of affect as central to film spectatorship. Indeed, being one of the most recognisable aspects of the film viewing experience, researching affect is an important project that constitutes a fundamental part of understanding our relationship with audio-visual images. As I have found in the writing of this essay, analysing affect, particularly its most subtle manifestations, helps us reflect more carefully on our own viewing experiences: we become more conscious of our relationship to the medium and hence more literate spectators. Laura Mulvey noted in her famous essay that 'it is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it' (8). That may have been the intention of her essay but, as I have been arguing, it can never be the case with affect which, by its very nature, exists in and on the body before it can be grasped by the mind. This indestructible quality of affect is useful for thinking about how cinema has come to be one of the most powerful forms of mass communication in existence. In his history of the idea of communication, John Durham Peters argues that 'all action, especially all communicative action aimed at coming into connection with another soul, is action at a distance' (178). This argument clearly applies to communication in the cinema, in which, as we have seen, distance is an integral part of the film viewing experience. I have tried to show that affect is a fundamental process in 'bridging the chasm' of this distance, to borrow Peters' phrase. A process that brings us back neatly to the theorist with which we began and Highmore's interest in 'the ability of media to touch across time and space but to touch without bodies' (77). In the cinema this ability comes, in part at least, from the affective quality of the spectacle.

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### **Filmography**

*Arrival of a Train at the Station* (Louis Lumiere, 1896, France)

*The Bride Retires* (Unknown, 1902, France)

*Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993, USA)

*Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997, UK/France)

*Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, USA)

*Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956, USA)