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ON SPARSHOTT'S "VISION AND DREAM IN THE CINEMA" by Jack Glickman

George Linden notes that "there is a long history of regarding the motion picture as a form of dreaming (Hollis Alpert calls his book *The Dream and the Dreamers*. Hollywood is called a 'dream factory', and numerous theatres are named 'dreamland')."¹ And some writers on dreams assume them to be a likeness of the screen image — e.g. Masserman's comment that "no dream as such has ever been analyzed, or ever will be analyzed, until we develop a technique of reproducing the dream sequence itself on a television screen while the patient is asleep"²; notice the easy assumption that "the dream sequence itself" can be reproduced as a screen sequence, that the two are that alike. But the assumption seems natural; films, and television, are like dreams: those evanescent and thinly real images arising in darkness have the power to create a world of elastic time and space that is thoroughly convincing, apparently authentic.

But then again, films are not like dreams. In my dreams I can sit with others at a table, drink coffee and converse, pet a lion that wanders by; but in no cinema can I converse with those in a filmed cafe scene, drink their coffee, pet their lion. I am present in and participate in my dreams in a way in which I can never be present in and participate in a film I'm viewing. Even though I do often seem to be watching a dream I am in, seem both in the dream and not in it at the same time, I am nevertheless *in* the dream — in its space, interacting with other things in that space, in a way in which I can never be in the world of a film I'm viewing, interacting with other things in that world. Sparshott says of films that "we have no sense of effort and participation in their world, as we do in that of our dreams"; this seems to me right.

But Sparshott also says "the alienated space of film is not the only experienced space in which the spectator participates without contact" and he speaks of "the dreamlike floating between participation and observation . . . that gives film space its pervasive character". So there is, on his account, "no sense of effort and participation," "a floating between participation and observation," and a participation "without contact." What might be called participation without contact seems to me to be mainly psychological involvement — empathy with the characters, vicarious participation in their actions — combined with that vaguest sense of presence as spectator at the filmed scene produced by the dominance of the large screen and all those gradients, including motion gradients, in the screen image, which give an illusion of depth and distance. Film space is alienated from the viewer; but the dreamer does not know he is dreaming in the way that the film viewer knows he is watching a film, hence dream space is not alienated in the same way. What is missing in my experience of film space is the sense of participation as agent. In dreams I do have contact with other things in dream space; and though I suppose film space does have something of a pervasive character, it is unlike dream space in that I am aware of it as framed and do not move about in it.

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That we do not experience film time as present time becomes apparent when we compare watching a film with watching live television. Our sense that what is happening on the screen is happening (somewhere else) *now* often enhances our viewing of live television,³ but that feeling of present time is absent when we view a film; we do tend to take a film as a record of past events. We are, as Sparshott says, spectators of the film's temporality. But when dreaming I tend to experience dream time as present time, this largely because of my being an agent in the dream's world. In the world of the dream I am actually, not just vicariously, engaged in the action, and what I seem to be doing, I seem to be doing at the time I seem to be doing it.

The world of a film, like that of a dream, is usually constituted of a succession of discontinuous spaces and time stretches, and each of those spaces and time stretches has great elasticity, may be distorted in various ways. I think it is in this elasticity and discontinuity of space and time that there is the strongest analogy between films and dreams. The other analogy that Sparshott suggests — that in our experience of both there is a floating between observation and participation — seems to me a much weaker one, largely because my sense of participation is so much greater in dreams than at films, and my sense of being a spectator so much greater at films than in dreams. The point of all this then is to suggest that although Sparshott effectively exploits the comparison with dreams to display the elasticity and discontinuity of film time and space, by that same comparison he tends to exaggerate the extent to which someone watching a film feels himself present at the filmed event. Since, as Sparshott notes, different people seem to have different dream perceptions — and, it seems to me likely, different film perceptions too — I am only claiming that his descriptions do not fit my own experiences. Nevertheless, any strong conclusion about the extent to which the film viewer participates in the film's space and time rests uneasily with what I take to be a main strand of Sparshott's argument — i.e. his devastating critique of the theory that when we are absorbed in watching a film it is as if we are at the scene of the filmed event, our viewpoint that of the camera, witnessing what is presently going on.

Sparshott shows that this sort of account is the incorporation of two untenable dogmas. One, that film viewers identify with the camera's viewpoint, is falsified by the viewer's (often unnoticed) acceptance of shifts in viewpoint. The second, that viewers always take film time to be present time, is falsified by the viewer's easy acceptance of flash-backs and flash-forwards. Sparshott argues convincingly that because of its photographic quality, film's authenticity is that of a faithful recording of events; in the absence of counter-indications we tend to believe the filmed events really occurred as we see them. That we take the film as record partly explains our ready acceptance of quick shifts in viewpoint and leaps in time; we do not expect in a narrative record what we expect of experienced actuality — chronological order of events and continuity of viewpoint toward them. What really explodes the myth of the viewer as camera is that for some shots there is no possible real viewpoint, and sometimes what's on the screen has no spatial or temporal location even in the film's world of reality; the status of what's on the screen is often not clear at the time we see it and may be clarified only later. What makes the world of the film intelligible, then, is primarily that there is, and we

understand there to be, a narrative structure governing the succession of events, and we accept spatial and temporal distortions, the objectification of characters' thoughts and feelings, and evocative images introduced by the director, as expressive narrative devices.

The line of Sparshott's argument that I sketched in the preceding paragraph is one with which I agree enthusiastically. What Sparshott does not argue explicitly, but I would, is that when the film is not taken as a recording of events that really occurred, it is taken as a recording of events that were contrived; and that it is taken as a *recording* entails that *no* film time is taken as present time. One point that I think is implicit in Sparshott's account but that perhaps is worth emphasizing is this: when we are caught up in viewing a film we are primarily concerned with the *story*. As Durgnat writes:

"It is in the spectator's sharing of, and concern for, the experience of *these* characters in *these* predicaments. It is a simple empathy-sympathy — and no more uncritical than is our sympathy for friends and acquaintances in real life.

"Thus the spectator's response is largely to human experience. Undoubtedly this experience is nuanced by, affected by, 'seen through' all the 'secondary characteristics' of style — cutting, camera-angle and movements, and so on, and so on. But, in the dramatic films which are now the mainstream of the cinema, it is the function of these characteristics to relate themselves to, to build up, to add to, this 'resonance'. This resonance can be discussed only in moral-emotional terms."⁴

Our *fundamental* concern is not, of course, with the film's space and time, but with certain characters in certain human situations; often to the extent that we attend to spatial and temporal features of the film's world, to that extent we have lost that primary form of engagement. That our main concern is with human experience partly explains why the narrative structure dominates in a way to make intelligible the film's world. And it also partly explains our sense of presence at the filmed scene — largely psychological involvement with the characters and their situation.

NOTES

1. George W. Linden, REFLECTIONS ON THE SCREEN (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1970) p. 171.
2. J. Masserman, as quoted by William C. Dement, "An Essay on Dreams: the Role of Physiology in Understanding Their Nature" in NEW DIRECTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY II (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965) p. 140.
3. There is in television something of an analogue to what Sparshott argues for concerning film's authenticity: we often tend to assume that what we are viewing on TV is happening now, unless there are counter-indications. One needs to distinguish, though, live TV reporting and non-dramatic entertainment, from live TV drama: in the former the event is taking place now, in the latter the acting is taking place now, but not the scene enacted. Penelope Houston makes some interesting comments on still another sense of "that absolute conviction of here and now which is television's special advantage over the cinema." THE CONTEMPORARY CINEMA (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1963) p. 17. See also p. 191f.
4. Raymond Durgnat, FILMS AND FEELINGS (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967) p. 173.