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Gravity as Index

Abstract:

In this paper (which will inevitably be a short form of a much longer article) I would like to explore the question of the beginning and the end of cinema from the point of view of gravity, and its relation to the indexical. If the cinema's specificity lay in large part in its capacity to register "the event," in all its contingency (cf. Doane, Rodowick), then gravity can be seen as one of the great invisible forces that allowed the contingent event to become visible. One could then argue that the digital image differs from the cinematic image in the specific ways in which gravity is superseded: the ways, for example, in which the predominance of the vertical gives way to an image which is much more malleable, and "floating." (Deleuze, in fact, at the end of *The Time-image*, mentions briefly the idea that with the advent of what he calls "information," cinematic verticality gives way to an image which is equally well looked at as a horizontal plane. This idea is given further credence by Rodowick, where, in *The Virtual Life of Film*, he distinguishes the digital from the cinematic as that which aspires to transform all of the "present" into information, as opposed to creating an inscription of the event.)

But for this paper, I would like to focus on one particular technological development, which antedates by a decade or so the emergence of the digital: namely, steadycam. One of the most interesting critical debates about steadycam surrounded Tavernier's film *Coup de Torchon*, where the use of steadycam to shoot static shots produced a spectatorial sense of ungroundedness. I will discuss this debate in relation to the issues above; but then move on to Kubrick's *The Shining*. Of course, this is one of the most celebrated of steadycam's early deployments; but what I would like to bring out is the link between the use of steadycam and the film's deployment of symmetry in the images, both of which attenuate the vertical in favor of a reversibility in the image. This is connected in the film to "the virtual" (diegetically, the spirit world the boy is in contact with); but, I would argue, anticipates the emergence of the virtual image in digital culture.

Finally, I will look at two relatively recent Hollywood films, with similar themes, which take two different approaches to the problem of gravity: Sophia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. While the latter film uses steadycam brilliantly to suggest the derealization of postmodern space, the former film--both thematically and stylistically--clings to gravity as a last-ditch effort to secure a point of reference for its unmoored characters.