Intimacy in Cinema: Critical Essays on English Language Films

Though intimacy has been a wide concern in the humanities, it has received little critical attention in film studies. This collection of new essays investigates both the potential intimacy of cinema as a medium and the possibility of a cinema of intimacy where it is least expected.

As a notion defined by binaries—inside and outside, surface and depth, public and private, self and other—intimacy, because it implies sharing, calls into question the boundaries between these extremes, and the border separating mainstream cinema and independent or auteur cinema.

Following on Thomas Elsaesser's theories of the relationship between the intimacy of cinema and the cinema of intimacy, the essays explore intimacy in silent and classic Hollywood movies, underground, documentary and animation films; contemporary Hollywood, British, Canadian and Australian cinema from a variety of approaches.

“Intimacy is a closeness that demands or desires to be opened up, either from within, by those who seek this proximity and want to share and show it, or from without, by those who want to intrude on it, who feel threatened by it, or envy it. This is why I associate borders and edges with intimacy, why it can already imply its own negation, its own vulnerability, and its transience. In fact, one might say that at the outer boundary of intimacy (and thus its always looming horizon) is shame: when exposed from without. When exposed from within, its implicit and ever-present obverse is a transgressive self-abandon, bordering on abjection.
My interest in “intimacy” is as a symptom: symptom of a shift, of a crisis, of a change in register and attention. To be more specific, I venture that the topic of “intimacy”, in the context of the cinema, has possibly become symptomatic, thanks to four current preoccupations in film studies: first, we can think of a cinema of intimacy in light of the revival of phenomenology, itself a reaction to both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Anglo-American cognitivism. Second, a cinema of intimacy may be an inadvertent and unintended, but nonetheless distinct response to several tendencies in contemporary cinema: notably the “cinema of the new extremity” (in France and Europe), and the “cinema of the new sincerity” (in the US). And third, a cinema of intimacy could be seen as a promising initiative in the debate over spectatorship, since it offers another possibility of understanding the affective bond linking film and spectator. In this case, intimacy would be a concept somewhere between identification and empathy: two terms that have been heavily theorized by both psychoanalytic and cognitivist film theory.”

(Thomas Elsaesser, Touch and Gesture: On the Borders of Intimacy)