The Lacanian Real in Danny Boyle’s *127 Hours*

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FPA 335 Introduction to Film Theory

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3rd December 2012
With the development of digital film and animation, popular modern cinema has a tendency to rely upon two strands of narrative cinema; a cinema that exists in a reality that it is not our own such as James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), or a narrative that uses metaphors to represent a form of naturalistic realism. However, Danny Boyle’s *127 Hours* (2010), which tells the real life survival story of Aron Ralston, is able to adapt these modern film making techniques into a narrative that begins to resemble the unbearable nature of the Lacanian Real. Throughout this essay I will be using Gilles Deleuze’s image theories to demonstrate the way in which Boyle was able to represent the Real by using the symbolic language of cinema. I will be focusing specifically upon the scene leading up to the amputation of Aron’s arm and then looking at the image of the amputation itself. Upon my conclusion, I shall demonstrate that through the use of these images the Real was successfully symbolically portrayed, and that these Images were only possible because of Aron’s survival.

The most prominent way in which *127 Hours* communicates the Lacanian Real is the way in which the death drive is communicated through the use of movement images. As Aron enters his final hours trapped in what he describe as a “crack in the surface of the Earth”, he begins to see his past and his present in a fractured state, turning his life into a series of images that are all infinitely connected.¹

In Deleuze’s work “The Movement Image and its Three Varieties”, he refers to images in this way stating that “every image acts on others and reacts to others, on 'all their facets at once' and 'by all their elements’”, as each person is simply an image in a universe of infinite images existing in a plane of immanence.² During this sequence of

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¹ *127 Hours*, dir. By Danny Boyle, (Pathé, 2010)
images, Aron realizes the futility of his own life, and the inescapable nature of his situation, claiming that the rock that has trapped his arm has been waiting for him his entire life, turning his life into a sequence of movement images. Towards the end of the sequence the screen divides into three parts, thus dividing our perception, and as it progresses the changes become more and more frequent overwhelming the emotions of both Aron and the audience. The sequence of these images become synchronic with that of the movement image as they are centered on Aron’s affective response to what he is actualizing in his perception. This image culminates in an outwards panning shot that rejoins our perception, showing the entirety of the Blue John Canyon and its surroundings conceptualizing how small Aron is in comparison to the rest of reality. As an audience member, we see these separated images as small parts of Aron’s life, and thus by transitioning the fast paced sequence into a large panning shot, we see that even when put together, these images are nothing in comparison to the grandness of the Earth, as he is put into contrast with the entire plane of immanence. In realizing this, Aron accepts his situation and upon seeing this, he is affected and chooses to act by writing “R.I.P 75- 03 Aron Ralston” on the wall, thus giving up on his chance of survival. This movement image is synonymous with the Lacanian death drive as it captures the moment in which he begins to see himself as a subject who has no control in the face of death. Lacan defines a subject as an “empty gesture, by means of which we freely assume what is imposed on us” and whilst the term “freely” could be argued in the context of Aron’s situation, the principle is still applicable. This movement image perfectly demonstrates the way in which Aron is able to accept the death drive, as he accepts that death is inevitable despite what choices he may make.

1 Zizek, Slavoj, “Looking Awry,” October, 50 (Fall 1989): pg. 31-55, p. 52
However, despite this acceptance of death and Aron’s subjectification of himself as a helpless victim, by choosing to cut of his own arm to escape death, it is arguable that he is choosing to refute the death drive, as he is attempting to master his own life. In Lacanian theory, the process of subjectifying oneself as a helpless victim, demonstrates that one has chosen to “confront the utter nullity of our narcissistic pretentions”, which would mean that if 127 Hours were to fully demonstrate the Lacanian Real, Aron would give up on his survival. However, after seeing the image of his son, a close up of Aron looking at his arm shows how he becomes inspired by a desire that has stemmed from his imagination, thus deciding to cut of his own arm in order to survive and turn a virtual image into an actual. In Slavoj Zizek’s work discussing the objects of desire in Lacanian theory, he stipulates that “the paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e. an object that can be perceived only by the look “distorted” by desire”, which is how Aron is able to see his future son. He sees what he desires, despite the fact that in his current situation it would seem impossible, but it is only by looking awry and perceiving his son that he is able to see what must be done in order to attain his desire. Aron has no control over the Lacanian Real, and he has no control over the reality that put him into this situation, therefore in order to survive he must accept the unbearable Real and cut of his own arm, even if this does not guarantee his survival. This display of perception, affection and action images that constitute the movement image are able to demonstrate the reality of the situation because they show that only by having hope in the imaginary are we able to live in the Real that is too unbearable to embrace. Being based upon the true story of Aron Ralston, it is not necessary for Aron to die in order to demonstrate the Lacanian Real; instead through the use of movement images that demonstrate the

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4 Ibid, p. 53
5 Ibid, p. 34
approach we take to our survival, Boyle has shown the reality of human nature. In presenting Aron’s reluctance to allow the Real to control him, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that ultimately he have no control over his survival – as even after the amputation, he still relied on the help of others to survive – he has shown a reality which we do not consciously perceive; because in Lacanian terms, we do not want to.

What is conceptualized from the movement image however, is not the only way in which 127 Hours is able to bring us closer to the unbearable Real. The use of the time image is in some ways more effective at symbolically communicating the Real in the way that it immerses the audience in a pure optical and audio image, especially throughout the amputation of the arm. Deleuze defines a time image as an image that frees itself from the formula of the sensory motor schemata that reveals itself “in a visual and sound nakedness, crudeness and brutality which makes it unbearable, giving it the pace of a dream or a nightmare”. Starting from the moment in which Aron’s character breaks the bones in his arm to the point where he is finally free, this naked image is what we are given. Looking at the way in which this image immediately affects us, it put my entire body on edge, clenching my arm muscle as if I were the one about to cut of my own arm, and this effect is then amplified by the following opsigns and sonsigns that are perceived. As Aron cuts through his arm, we are forced to watch, through a series of fast paced editing shots, the impact this action is taking upon Aron’s consciousness, symbolizing how unbearable it is for him, whilst also making it unbearable for the audience. By far the most effective part of the image is when Aron begins to cut through the nerves in his arm. As we see Aron put pressure upon the nerve with his knife and then cut through it, a sharp electronic screeching sound is played that makes the scene almost unbearable to watch, optically

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and sonically symbolizing the unbearable task of performing this in the Real. Where we would usually expect the camera to cut away from the protagonist using cinematic metaphors, showing us only a shadow, or a splash of blood across the wall, we are instead confronted with the direct optical-sound image of Aron cutting of his arm that immerses us within the moment. Furthermore in distancing itself from typical cinematic clichés that utilize metaphors, it is able to represent a greater form of reality, as we are able to see images in a way they are not usually seen. French philosopher Henri Bergson stipulates that we, as viewers of the world, only see what interests us, selecting the way in which we choose to perceive reality based upon our interests. Therefore, combining this with the Lacanian concept that we choose not to accept the Real, the use of the time image that deconstructs the use of cliché in images, forces us to accept a symbolic view of the Real. This sequence in 127 Hours disregards the use of metaphors and cliché becoming an image of pure sound and vision, which as Deleuze describes, “brings out the thing in itself, literally in its excess of horror or beauty […] because it no longer has to be justified”. By this point in the visual experience, we do not need to this image to be justified, as we understand that Aron has no control over the reality of the situation, and as viewers we have not been given control over what we choose to perceive and we too must perceive the reality of the situation. Whilst Boyle relies upon the use of the symbolic in order to communicate this Real to us, the emotional and physical response it instills in us, forces the audience to undergo an almost unbearable experience that enables the viewer to come close to that of the unbearable Real that Aron’s character experiences.

In conclusion, the use of these two sets of images; the movement image preluding the amputation; and the time image of the amputation itself, are both

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7 Ibid, p.20
8 Ibid
successful examples of the way in which Danny Boyle was able to communicate the unbearable reality of the Lacanian Real. What is important to note however, is that only by the introduction of a new movement image after the time image, that shows Aron’s survival, are we able to perceive this Real. Whilst Aron’s survival is typical of that of a cinematic cliché – as he survives the ideal following a life changing epiphany and therefore creates an image that we want to perceive – because of our understanding that this narrative is based on real life the ending is not just a cliché; it is a combination of cliché and reality. Thus we are able to accept and perceive the unbearable nature of the Lacanian Real communicated within these two images, because it is followed by a Real in which the protagonist survives, intertwining the Real with naturalistic realism, and presenting to us a Real that can become partially bearable and therefore perceptible.
Bibliography


Filmography

*127 Hours*, dir. By Danny Boyle, (Pathé, 2010)