

RITA FELSKI  
ENCHANTMENT

[...]

The wide-eyed face of Mia Farrow dominates the opening and closing scenes of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, as she gazes up at the movie screen in a state of utter absorption. Farrow plays the role of a young woman mired in poverty and an unhappy marriage in the dog days of the Depression. The movie theater serves as her solace and refuge, allowing her to banish, if only briefly, the aggravations and afflictions of the work-a-day world. The glossy black-and-white aesthetic of her favorite film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, with its glamorous adventurers, endless dry martinis, and dinners at the Copacabana, offers a stark visual counterfoil to the dun-colored drabness of her workplace and her marriage. Farrow's character loses herself in a way that we are often encouraged to think of as escapist and mindless, yet her beatific expression, as her radiant face fills up the screen, announces a state of pure bliss that is not so easily discounted. When dashing explorer Tom Baxter steps down off the screen and comes striding toward her, she is not especially nonplussed, for the world of the film has become more vividly present to her than her own. [...]

Popular art is often accused of disorienting and bewitching its audience, calling up an association of art with magic that stretches back to antiquity. For much of the *longue durée* of modernity, the novel is the genre most frequently accused of casting a spell on its readers; like a dangerous drug, it lures them away from their everyday lives in search of heightened sensations and undiluted pleasures. Disoriented by the power of words, readers are no longer able to distinguish between reality and imagination; deprived of their reason, they act like mad persons and fools. *Don Quixote* inaugurates a swathe of novels anxious to diagnose the dangers of such mind-altering fictions while advertising themselves as their cure. Modernism, especially, announces itself as an art of disenchantment, initiating copious commentary on literature's counterfeit status and its power to beguile and

deceive. Meanwhile, film will soon supplant the novel as the medium most often accused of lulling its viewers into a trance-like fascination with unreal worlds.

Women are often seen as especially prone to such acts of covert manipulation. Susceptible and suggestible, lacking intellectual distance and mastery over their emotions, they are all too easily swept up in a world of intoxicating illusions. Aesthetic enchantment leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment. In his description of Emma Bovary's visit to the opera and her reaction to *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Flaubert invites us to observe a case study in such feminine absorption. Caught up in a tumult of feeling, Emma sees her own destiny echoed and magnified in the prima donna's agonized lamentations. All pretense of aesthetic distance is wiped out as the encounter with Donizetti's opera triggers an ecstatic yielding and melting, a form of quasi-lascivious abandonment. The erotic undertow of aesthetic enchantment becomes all too evident as Emma, caught up in a mélange of chaotic and swirling emotions, mistakes the male singer for his role. "A mad idea took possession of her: he was looking at her right now! She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, 'Take me away! carry me with you! let us leave! All my passion and all my dreams are yours!'"<sup>1</sup> [...]

The common experience of enchantment, of total absorption in a text, of intense and enigmatic pleasure [...], of being wrapped up in a novel or a film – whether "high" or "low" – confounds our deeply held beliefs about the rationality and autonomy of persons.

Enchantment is a term with precious little currency in literary theory, calling up scenarios of old-school professors swooning in rapture over the delights of Romantic poetry. Contemporary critics pride themselves on their power to disenchant, to mercilessly direct laser-sharp beams of critique at every imaginable object. In Lyotard's words, "demystification is an endless task."<sup>2</sup> Yet this desire to purge aesthetic experience of its enigmatic and irrational qualities merely has the effect of driving them underground. While critics do not talk of enchantment, it does not follow that they have never been enchanted. What follows is an attempt to find surer footing for a condition of aesthetic absorption that is frequently

---

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 26.

portrayed in literature and film but rarely awarded sustained or sympathetic attention in theory.

Enchantment is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter. Stephen Greenblatt writes, “looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded.”<sup>3</sup> Wrapped up in the details of a novel, a film, a painting, you feel yourself enclosed in a bubble of absorbed attention that is utterly distinct from the hit-and-miss qualities of everyday perception. This sense of immersion seems self-enclosed and self-sustaining, demarcated by a distinct boundary; the transition back to the everyday world feels unwelcome, even intrusive. As the credits roll and the house lights come back on, as you reluctantly close the pages of the book and look up at the world around you, there is an awkward moment of readjustment, a shuddering change of gear, a momentary twinge of sorrow or regret.

Enchantment is soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect; it is often compared to the condition of being intoxicated, drugged, or dreaming. Colors seem brighter, perceptions are heightened, details stand out with a hallucinatory sharpness. The effect can be uniquely exhilarating, because of the sheer intensity of the pleasure being offered, but also unnerving, in sapping a sense of autonomy and self-control. The analytical part of your mind recedes into the background; your inner censor and critic are nowhere to be found. Instead of examining a text with a sober and clinical eye, you are pulled irresistibly into its orbit. There is no longer a sharp line between self and text but a confused and inchoate intermingling. Possessing some of the viscerality of shock, enchantment has none of its agitating and confrontational character; it offers rapturous self-forgetting rather than self-shattering. You feel oblivious to your surroundings, your past, your everyday life; you exist only in the present and the numinous presence of a text.

Not only your autonomy but your sense of agency is under siege. You have little control over your response; you turn the pages compulsively, you gaze fixedly at the screen like a sleepwalker. Descriptions of enchantment often pinpoint an arresting of motion, a sense of being transfixed, spellbound, unable to move, even

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 49.

as your mind is transported elsewhere. Time slows to a halt: you feel yourself caught in an eternal, unchanging present. Rather than having a sense of mastery over a text, you are at its mercy. You are sucked in, swept up, spirited away, you feel yourself enfolded in a blissful embrace. You are mesmerized, hypnotized, possessed. You strain to reassert yourself, but finally you give in, you stop struggling, you yield without a murmur. [...]

Enchantment matters because one reason that people turn to works of art is to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness. While much modern thought relegates such hyper-saturations of mood and feeling to the realm of the child-like or the primitive, the accelerating interest in affective states promises a less prejudicial and predetermined perspective. The experience of enchantment is richer and more multi-faceted than literary theory has allowed; it does not have to be tied to a haze of romantic nostalgia or an incipient fascism. Indeed, enchantment may turn out to be an exceptionally fruitful idiom for rethinking the tenets of literary theory. Once we face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal, once we relinquish the modern dogma that our lives should become thoroughly disenchanting, we can truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience.

Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 2008