

## I DON'T GO TO THE MOVIES

Joanna Zylinska

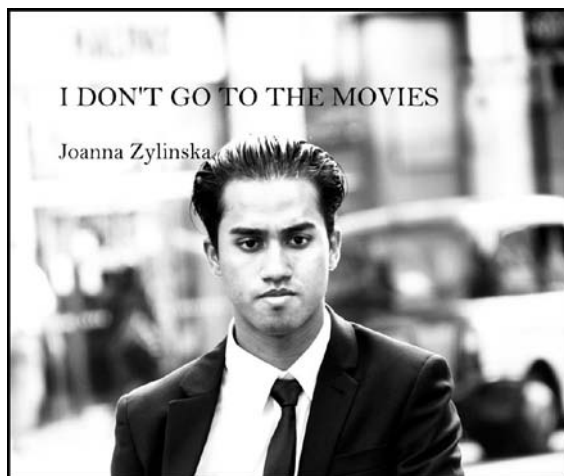
### **The medium is the message (but we have known this all along)**

*For months I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me.  
(Sophie Calle, Suite vénitienne)*

*You exist only in the trace of the other, but without his being aware of it; in fact, you follow your own tracks almost without knowing it yourself.  
(Jean Baudrillard, 'Please Follow Me')*

*I Don't Go to the Movies* is a photographic project which is instantiated in a variety of incarnations, edits and media – an exhibition of fine art prints, a book, a series of postcards. For the readers of this piece in the *Culture Machine* journal, the digital 'flipbook' available online provides one possible entry point into the work. The book can be accessed by clicking on the image below, or by cutting and pasting this link into the Internet browser:

<http://issuu.com/joanna-zylinska/docs/movies>.



*Ideally viewed in full screen mode.*

The project has a dual heritage: it arises out of my long-term engagement with the philosophy of media and mediation but also out of a desire to think about the media visually as well as conceptually. In other words, it is an attempt to develop art practice along the lines of 'philosophy as photography' (not to be confused with 'philosophy of photography!'), whereby image-making becomes a form of tracing the complex relations between aesthetics, ethics and politics. Yet if it is not to serve as a handmaiden to the written word, this kind of practice needs to remain attentive to the singularity of the visual, i.e., the physical operations and interventions of the eye. It also needs to engage, creatively and critically, with the material practices, machines, technologies and techniques of photography.

*I Don't Go to the Movies* explores the process of looking at strangers in public spaces, be it through a machinic device such as a camera, or more 'immediately' (were such a thing ever possible). In using a familiar cinematic look and in staging encounters between the already-seen and the merely-imagined, it aims to create the experience of 'street cinema'. The images playfully mix filmic conventions with those of other media and genres – classical photography, graphic design, TV drama – to stage an imaginary world within a familiar one.

### **Don't you really ever go to the cinema?**

This work encompasses numerous points of encounter and emergence. It enters into a conversation with Sophie Calle's *Suite vénitienne*, a 1980 project in which this French artist followed a strange man all the way to Venice – not because she was particularly interested in him as a potential lover or friend but because she became intrigued by the very process of following him. However, in Calle's book the idea seems to take precedence over the images. This is evident in the snapshot-like quality of the photographs she uses and also in the way they are displayed in, or rather dispersed throughout, her book. Yet what is appealing about Calle's project is the method of 'controlled obsession' that she exercises – in *Suite vénitienne* as much as in her more recent *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).

Calle's Venetian photographs are accompanied by an essay by Jean Baudrillard, which strongly resonates with my own philosophical position (Zylinska, 2005, 2009). The essay's central idea – originally

developed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas but then taken up by many other contemporary theorists – is that we exist only with and through the other, and that it is the other's alterity that both brings me into being and calls for my response and responsibility. It is this ethical scepticism that my work aims to enact and test here. The question of sexual difference, which for Luce Irigaray is the key question of our times (1993), has also made its way into *I Don't Go to the Movies*, although not in any straightforward, deterministic or biologist way. The fact that this is a project by a female photographer, who has made a seemingly conscious choice to photograph (strange?) men, hopefully appears as significant – but this significance is itself troubled by the introduction of a woman into certain sequences of images and by the simultaneous lack of any explicit references to gender or sexuality. Instead, the work references 'cinema' as its direct protagonist and object of affection.



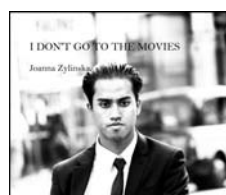
Joanna Zylińska, from *I Don't go to the Movies*, 2009

In doing this, it reworks Victor Burgin's idea of 'remembered film' discussed in his eponymous book by taking it one step further. For Burgin, our memories are fantasies with a decor derived from film (2004: 15). He writes: 'Collecting such metonymic fragments [of films] in memory, we may come to feel familiar with a film we have not actually seen' (9). What seems important to Burgin is that the film itself HAS BEEN SEEN – even if only in fragments, vicariously. The film then becomes a form of 'the real' that, even if mediated, furnishes a collective unconscious of a given generation with particular mental images and affects. However, I do not share Burgin's investment in cinema as a cultural form – and it is in this, rather than literal, sense that 'I don't go to the movies'. So, rather than being about the 'remembered film' that comes to us through what Burgin calls 'sequence-images' taken from movies that circulate in the wider media culture, my project engages with what we may term 'imagined film', i.e. a kind of 'film-look' which consciously and

playfully mixes filmic conventions with those of other media and genres, without remaining faithful to any of them. Film images do not serve in my work as unconscious borrowings or references from the actual seen films to mask or reveal a certain reality but more as products-in-themselves, imagined or imaginary sequences that enact 'an otherwise world' in the middle of the familiar one.

The idea of a triptych, with its religious connotations of iconicity, signals what Jacques Derrida has termed iterability (1988) – i.e. repetition with a difference – through which the ordinariness of the city life and its inhabitants becomes transformed into a temporary theatre-like performance. The mixing of genres and art forms – religious iconic paintings, Renaissance portraiture, cinema posters, film strips, TV drama – aims at both creating a sense of familiarity and introducing a certain defamiliarisation, on a visual as much as textual level. The text included in the book is a mash-up. This collage of philosophy bits, famous film quotes and my own sentences (which can obviously never be entirely 'mine') arranges itself into a minimalist essay exploring the relationship between cinema, photography and desire.

Ironically referencing Jean-Luc Godard's dictum, 'all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun', *I Don't Go to the Movies* seemingly 'forgets' about the girl and yet puts her in the position of exceptional power: behind the (still/moving image) camera. In this way, it explores the kind of visual and sexual dynamics that is established in chance street encounters with strangers and the kinds of narratives we tell ourselves and others about such chance encounters. It also asks whether there is something potentially cinematic about the very being-in-the-world, with its duration, flow of time, and the fleeting appearance and disappearance of bodies. It further interrogates whether the gaze – of the photographer, film director, friend, lover, passer-by – is always inevitably violent, and whether we can ever see someone 'for the first time', without resorting to the accumulated apparatus of visual images, memories and cues. *I Don't Go to the Movies* thus raises questions of obsession, desire, curiosity, fleeting interest, detachment and indifference, both as forms of art practice and as everyday affects.



To view the book, click on the image:

**References**

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