

Vivian Sobchack and the Phenomenology of Film

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Essay 02 - Curtin University 2005

Phenomenology is a philosophic method closely tied to the work of Edmund Husserl. Although the term has been used in philosophical history before Husserl's time it is with his work on intentionality as the main characteristic of consciousness, meaning that every mental act, such as belief or desire, has a content and is directed towards an object in the world. This object is what the mental act is about; it becomes the *believed* or the *desired*. Phenomenology was later developed through the works of Heidegger (seeing phenomenology as a metaphysical ontology) and Merleau-Ponty (seeing the perceiving body as the means by which we encounter meaningful things in a unified though ever open-ended world).

Merleau-Ponty's work serves as the point of departure for Vivian Sobchack's explorations of the phenomenology of cinema. Her project can be seen as both radical and even as she herself says 'perverse', but she is not so much interested in discovering the 'essences' or 'universal structures' of cinema as she is: "[...] to cry out my *inherent qualification* of the world of essences and universals, to allow for my *existential particularity* in a world I engage and share with others."¹ Her endeavour is to establish cinema as an art form for which life and therefore human experience is its subject and at the same time its object. She wants to both acknowledge as well as explicate the rich and meaningful sensuous register the cinema has and its 'somatic intelligibility' and put an end to contemporary film theory's denial of the body as a meaningful and far from crude mediator of signification.² In this way cinema becomes life expressing life, experience expressing experience in an ongoing mutually dependent relationship between the film, and in extension the filmmaker, and the spectator. "In sum, the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of my body, but because of my body*."³

Sobchack⁴ sees the film experience as presupposed on an intersubjective nature based on the intelligibility of the embodied vision, meaning the way we experience the world through the sensuous body, and that any semiotic or hermeneutic understanding of cinema therefore must be returned to a radical reflection on 'cinematic communication' as originating from and informed by the practical structures of existential experience. These common structures

¹ Sobchack, V. (1992). *The address of the eye: A phenomenology of film experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. xv

² Sobchack, V. (2000). What my fingers knew: The cinesthetic subject, or vision in the flesh. *Senses of Cinema*, 5. Retrieved February 25, 2005, from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/fingers.html>

³ Sobchack, *What my Fingers Knew*, p. 5

⁴ Sobchack, *The Address of The Eye*

we all have as a consequence of the embodied experience of the world and form the methodology she applies to the objective cinematic communication. She claims that the film experience must be understood as a system of communication that finds its foundation in the bodily experience we all share as people in this world as a vehicle of conscious experience. In other words, when we watch cinema, Sobchack says, we see someone else seeing and speak back to this seeing-eye, actively grasping this other eye's expression through a tactile cinematic experience.⁵

In this way she implements the inside-outside structure of phenomenology into the film experience. The film experience becomes a back-and-forth exchange. The outside world of the film almost becomes our inside world, as we temporarily 'exist' in the film's narrative. When I say almost, it is because we are never a total part of the film. We are part of the experience, but also outside it at the same time. As Sobchack says: "Cinema is both "Here, where we see" and "There, where I am not" for the viewer."⁶ Thus, the film is both outside us and inside us at the same time. Sobchack is worth quoting in full here:

"As viewers, not only do we spontaneously and invisibly perform these existential acts directly for and as ourselves in relation *to* the film before us, but these same acts are coterminously given to us *as* the film, as mediating acts of perception-cum-expression we take up and *invisibly perform* by appropriating and incorporating them into our own existential performance; we watch them as a *visible performance* distinguishable from, yet included in, our own."⁷

Following from this Sobchack says that the film experience consists not of a sender and a receiver, but of two senders and two receivers sharing a mutual temporary world that is both universal and particular, mutually visible but hermeneutically negotiable. In other words, the world of the spectator and the world of the film do not conflate but meet in a mutually shared space, a world that is both intrasubjectively dialectical and intersubjectively dialogical, a world in which the body becomes both the agent as well as the agency of an engagement with the world, in this case the world as filmic

⁵ Ibid., p. 9

⁶ Ibid., p. 10

⁷ Sobchack, *The Address of The Eye*, p 10

representation, a world that is lived both as the subjective modality of perception and the objective modality of expression creating a unity of meaningful experience. When we watch a film we engage in the film's world in much the same way as we engage through an embodied and enworlded performance with other seeing subjects in the real world. According to Sobchack it is this primary act of perception, and its expression, that enables cinematic intelligibility and communication and makes the secondary 'codes' of semiotic and hermeneutic conventions available to us.⁸

As a consequence it is the body, and the embodied experience of the world, that becomes the basis for understanding the film experience. Following on from this it becomes clear that the film and the viewer are equals, uniquely situated and embodied yet mutually resilient and resistant parts of the same space. As a spectator therefore, I take part in the film's experiences through the perception of the film, but I use my own experiences, my own body, to actively compare the film's expression to my own in an invisible and inaudible engagement. This can be seen as analogous to Boris Eikhenbaum's theory of 'inner speech'⁹, something that Sobchack acknowledges, so that what we see, we see not as mine but as the signification of lived-body experience that is comparable to mine through a continuous dialogue grounded in our inside experience of the perception of the outside.

The most important facet of this experience is what Sobchack has termed perception. For her perception are the visible, audible, and kinetic aspects of sensible experience. Perception is a gestalt, an organizing activity continually engaging the world through an embodied intentional encounter. But more interesting is that perception is also always synaesthetic, it is a cross-modal multisensory experience in which *all* of the senses inform our perception in a *total* and *commutable* experience rather than existing as discrete and fragmented parts of the sum of the experience.¹⁰ Therefore perception cannot be seen as being either intellection or sensation, it is rather lived by the body. The senses function as different openings to the world, differentiated

⁸ Ibid., p. 49

⁹ Eikhenbaum, B. (1973). Literature and Cinema. In S. Bann & J. E. Bowlt (Eds.), (T. L. Aman, Trans.), *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation* (pp. 122-127). Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press. (Original work published 1926)

¹⁰ Sobchack, *The Address of The Eye*, p. 24

modalities of access, working together, unified in providing perception and informing expression. “The lived-body does not have senses. It is, rather, sensible. It is, from the first, a perceptive body.”¹¹

The perception, as well as the expression, of the audiovisual moving image is therefore a completely sensuous experience informed by the synaesthetic aspects of the body as well as the body’s own projects as it mutually receives and resists the images offered up by the film and incorporates, or appropriates if you will, these images. Cinema is the restructuring of parts of the whole lived experience of consciousness, applying all the different tools and conventions available to the filmmaker offered up by the cinematic apparatus (the film’s body), into the consciousness of experience.¹² By applying the tools of the cinematic apparatus (editing/lighting/camera/sound/effects) the filmmaker can create what Sobchack has called ‘cinesthetic’ imagery.¹³

This is a neologism made up of the word *cinema* and the two scientific terms *synaesthesia* and *coenaesthesia* denoting the particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium. As we have seen synaesthesia foregrounds the complex and rich bodily experiences that ground our experience of the world and consequently cinema. But more importantly these terms point to the ways in which the cinema, through the dominant senses of seeing and hearing, communicate intelligible to our other senses.¹⁴ Furthermore, Sobchack claims, it points us to metaphor, the conscious and mediated exchange between the sensorium and language, and the Symbolist movement. *Coenaesthesia* refers to the body’s perception one’s complete bodily state as made up of somatic perceptions, or what Sobchack calls a: “[...] pre-logical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation of that hierarchical arrangement of the sense achieved through cultural immersion and practice.”¹⁵

Cinesthetics then consists of audiovisual imagery that communicates intelligibly to all our senses *through* our eyes and ears because of our embodied experiences and the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 49

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sobchack, *What my Fingers Knew*, p. 5

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10

¹⁵ Sobchack, *What my Fingers Knew*, p. 11

encoding of these experiences into memories. In some way one can almost call this imagery memories in themselves, because they are after all the ‘memories’ of the filmmaker, if not directly then indirectly seeing that the *cinesthetic* imagery he expresses will be informed by his bodily perceptions. They are *his* conscious and intended expressions of *his* conscious perception of the world; consequently they are informed by and grounded in the synaesthetic experience of embodied perception and will therefore resonate with the ‘memories’ of the viewers in their intentional act of perception, in the activity of ‘inner speech’. And so, perception is already informed by culture, already encoded into the different configurations of our senses, creating memories that inform the imagery we see.

According to Laura Marks perception takes place not just in the phenomenological present but also as a continuous dialogue with the individual and cultural memories we have, so that when we see an object on screen we constantly move between the image, our immediate embodied reaction to it as well as the recall of virtual images the object brings to mind, and the dialogic comparison between the two.¹⁶ As Marks says: “All sense perceptions allow for, and indeed require, the mediation of memory.”¹⁷ This process is not only present in the cinematic perception but also in the cinematic expression. The filmmaker’s memories will inform the encoding process of the imagery he creates. But the filmmaker only has two sense modalities to express with and address himself to: audition and vision. Fortunately, the audiovisual sense modalities does provide what Marks calls a ‘zone of indetermination’ in which the sense stimulation is not immediate like it is for smell/taste/touch, and which therefore provides more room for memory and more opportunity to extend the signification process into it.¹⁸

¹⁶ Marks, L. U. (2000). *The skin of the film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 147

¹⁸ Ibid.