
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Bodies that Matter

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Vivian Sobchack (2004) *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*
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Vivian Sobchack describes her collection of essays, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, as an ‘undisciplined’ book (1). It does not so much borrow from a variety of disciplines as seek to abolish altogether the borders and barriers that might separate them, Sobchack moving with admirable assurance and clarity between registers of discourse and frames of cultural reference. Although the book is likely to be shelved in the ‘Film Studies’ section of university libraries, it belongs equally well within the broader field of Cultural Studies – Sobchack turns her incisive attention to everything from an automated writing doll called ‘Susie Scribbles’ to the contemporary culture of cosmetic surgery – and in that, more closely circumscribed, of existential phenomenology, as certain of the essays constitute an extended commentary on, and application of, the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But if Sobchack is as at ease within the rigour of the phenomenological method as she is discussing the cultural history of writing or the vagaries of ‘behavioural geography’ (29), she is also keen to ground her analyses of embodiment in a range of popular references. For instance she regularly cites film reviews from the mainstream press or finds ironic support in the pop psychology of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* for her contention that men and women have radically different symbolic investments in their lived experience of space, which is why men are too proud to ask for directions (29-34). In accordance with this ‘bottom-up’ approach (3), Sobchack often recounts anecdotes from personal experience in support of her arguments, whether it be a friend’s encounter with cosmetic surgery,

or, on several occasions throughout the book, her own experience of amputation and prosthesis following cancer surgery, and the impact it has had on her thinking of embodiment.

Carnal Thoughts is, then, a book about bodies, before it is a book about cinema. In one of the first essays, Sobchack discusses the social marginalising of old age in our youth- and image-preoccupied culture, arguing that this 'cannot be separated from our objectification of our bodies as what they look like rather than as the existential basis for our capacities, as images and representations rather than as the means of our being' (36). This leads to her analysis of cosmetic surgery which, following Kathleen Woodward, Sobchack describes as necessitating a double *reduction to silence*, both the keeping secret of the surgery itself, and the silencing of the symptom whereby the ageing body betrays itself (45). This might also be related to remarks elsewhere about the changing cultural significance of death. Death is more comprehensible, and more *visible* today as a sudden, violent external event afflicting a young, healthy body, than as the natural, and gradual consequence of an internal process in an ageing body (231), this kind of 'natural' death having become 'an antisocial and private experience' (227). Sobchack refers, in passing, to her work on 1950s science-fiction B-movies such as *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958) as graphically symbolising 'the "unnatural" conjunction of middle-aged female flesh and still-youthful female desire' (42).

Central to the book, then, is Sobchack's concern at a culture in which our bodies are increasingly viewed from a distance as 'resources', or as 'things' to be managed and mastered, such that the *body-object* comes to be seen as 'coincident and synonymous with the *embodied subject*' (182). Borrowing from Baudrillard, Sobchack writes of a culture that seeks to excise negativity and remodel in ideal forms, in which technology promises immortality and self-transformation, 'without time, without effort, without cost' (50). As a psychological result of this culture of the body-object, we have, in Sobchack's words, become 'subjectively "derealized" and out of sequence with ourselves' (50). In a felicitous spatial metaphor, Sobchack suggests that the body may be lived as a *home*, in which case it coincides perfectly with one's sense of self; as a *house*, whereby we merely 'inhabit' it, however much time we may spend on decorating and remodelling it; or, worst of all, as a *prison*, such that the body becomes 'a material limit [...] to be *endured*' (183-4). Sobchack doubtless has a fair point about the role of body-image in our culture, but in places it is difficult not to feel that there is a certain amount of knee-jerk reaction to her critique. In her suspicious discussion of exercise and beauty regimes, Sobchack seems to imply that, if we indulge in such practices, it is because we hate our bodies,

or at least refuse to accept them as they are. Yet there is no question that exercise, and to some extent beauty treatments, involve *taking care* of our bodies and making ourselves feel better about them, in other words making them accord more closely to our projected ideal self-image and, to that extent, it is hard to share Sobchack's concern. In Sobchack's troubled engagement with the body-image culture, and more generally in our society's ambivalent relationship to the body, we can perhaps see something of Friedrich Nietzsche's profoundly ambiguous stance on the issue of embodiment. As brilliantly exposed by Deleuze,¹ Nietzsche's life and philosophy is a bewildering maze of contradictions in which the celebration of health and healthy pursuits is offset by the philosopher's own persistent (physical and mental) ill-health, and his insistence on the futility of attempting to outrun one's inherited constitution. Nietzsche is never mentioned in *Carnal Thoughts*, but perhaps an engagement with the paradoxes of this discourse might have added an extra dimension to Sobchack's critique. As it is, she is certainly right – but then so was Nietzsche – to suggest that our culture remains beholden to an Enlightenment conception of the body as 'an alienated object, quite separate from – if housing – the subjective consciousness that would discipline it into shape or visibly shape it into a discipline' (185). And her observation that a certain 'technology of fitness' seems somehow to pre-empt the need for 'bodily action in the lived world' (186) goes a long way to explaining the paradox whereby the USA leads the world in promoting gym-culture while, at the same time, boasting the world's highest rates of obesity. It is on this basis, too, that Sobchack shows herself to be highly suspicious of various technology fetishisms within academic discourse, from the trend for cyborgs that followed Donna Haraway's infamous manifesto (1985), to the more recent fashion for the prosthetic which, as Sobchack points out, leaves behind 'the experience and agency of those who, like myself, actually use prostheses without feeling "posthuman" and who, moreover, are often startled to read of all the hidden powers their prostheses apparently exercise both in the world and in the imaginations of cultural theorists' (208).

For Sobchack, a sense of embodiment is vital to the emergence of an ethics. An ethical stance is dependent upon 'the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyses among other objects but as a material subject that experiences and feels its own subjectivity' (178). In other words, an embodied subject can empathise with another subject's capacity to feel pleasure and pain by virtue of her or his own identical capacity. In this way, Sobchack distinguishes between objectification and what she calls 'objectivation',

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche* (1999 [1965]), 10): Deleuze describes Nietzsche's health as a mask for his genius, but this first mask is in turn masked by his ill-health.

defined as ‘the capacity to see oneself objectively as one might be seen by an other self (that is, as a material, substantial, embodied self intentionally occupying space as well as time)’ (182). Sobchack argues that our objectification of the body is partly due to the privileging of vision within the hierarchy of the senses, and that the experience of embodiment is to be more properly *felt* through the combination of the senses. This theory of the ethical dimension of embodiment is drawn largely from Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘flesh’ in which, to quote Sobchack, ‘the subjective lived body and the objective world do not oppose each other but, on the contrary, are passionately intertwined’ (286). ‘Passion’, here, is to be understood both in the sense of suffering – which ‘brings subjective being into intimate contact with its brute materiality’ (287) – and of active devotion, through which we seek to ‘enfold other subjects (and often the world itself), to know their materiality and objectivity intimately and, indeed, to embrace their alterity as *our own*’ (288-9). This ‘fleshy facticity’ (295) that constitutes the condition of possibility for both subjects and objects, thus serves as the ground for both an ethics and an aesthetics. To some extent, then, Sobchack rejoins Jean-François Lyotard in suggesting that our only salvation from an objectifying techno-culture lies in an ethical and aesthetic philosophy that takes the experience of embodiment as its fundamental ground.² From this point of view, it is worth remembering Keith Ansell Pearson’s trenchant critique of Lyotard (1997, 169-73), which suggests that his theory is based on a double reification, both of the ‘evolution’ of cybernetic capital and of the human body itself. We might argue, too, that Sobchack’s conception of embodiment, and the ethics that she draws from it, rests on too holistic and totalising a notion of the body, as emphasised by her convenient, idealising metaphor of the body as ‘home’. A critique based in Deleuzian becoming (such as that of Ansell Pearson) would surely object that the body itself is an historical construct serving to rationalise and reify a series of discrete, directionless processes and machinic connections that can only retrospectively be interpreted as constituting a meaningful whole. For instance, Sobchack’s identification of a ‘sixth sense’ of ‘proprioception’ that accounts for our impression of being in a body (192-4) – despite the empirical evidence offered from a case study in Oliver Sacks’s *Man who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* – comes across as a post-hoc rationalisation of a series of disconnected sensations and intensities.

What, though, does any of this have to do with the cinema? In an important essay in *Carnal Thoughts* entitled ‘The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic and Electronic “Presence”’, Sobchack lays out clearly how

² See for instance Jean-François Lyotard, *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (1988).

her thinking on embodiment and ethics relates to the historical development of visual culture. Sobchack identifies three separate moments in this culture – the photographic, the cinematic and the electronic – which she maps on to Fredric Jameson's periodisation of realism, modernism and postmodernism, themselves conforming in turn to the shifts from market capitalism to monopoly capitalism and subsequently to multinational capitalism (see Jameson, 1991). It is clear that, for Sobchack, the privileged term in this triad is that of the cinematic. The uniqueness of the cinematic, according to Sobchack, is that, in addition to offering us an objective vision of the world (like the photographic), it also 'signifies its own materialised agency, intentionality and subjectivity' (147). In other words, the movement of the film is 'phenomenologically experienced as an *intentional stream*' (147), such that the film is 'perceived as the *subject of its own vision*, as well as an *object for our vision*' (148). Thus, 'rather than merely replacing human vision with mechanical vision, the cinema functions mechanically to bring to visibility the reversible structure of human vision' (150), that is the cinema *shows us* our own dual status as agents of vision and as visible objects, through its ambiguous nature as at once 'an activity of seeing (a "viewing view") and an image of the seen ("a viewed view")' (150). One consequence of this is that the cinema is able to demonstrate the heterogeneity of time: on the one hand, in its objective mode, the film gives us to see time as a linear, irreversible progression while, in its subjective mode, and through such technical and narrative devices as flashbacks and altered motion, it presents time as discontinuous and differently paced depending on the desiring investment of the experiencing agent (150-1). At the same time, through its capacity for movement, the cinema exceeds its visual remit, creating 'a space that is deep and textural' (151) through the appeal to motor functions and tactile sense, thereby generating not so much points of view as 'concrete *situations of viewing* – specific, mobile, and invested engagements of embodied, enworlded, and situated subjects/objects' (151).

It is this conception of cinema as presenting not only an object to be viewed but also the activity of vision that leads Sobchack, elsewhere in the volume, to consider cinematic space as necessarily *ethical* space. She summarises her position with the following piece of wordplay: 'In the cinema the visible representation of vision inscribes sight not only in an image but also as moral insight. This is to say that vision visibly inscribes its own investments in the world in a concrete situation – or site' (243). Because of this embodied investment in cinematic space, and because of the necessary ethical implications, discussed above, of inhabiting a body, for Sobchack, 'the very act of looking at the film is ethically charged' (244). I should specify here that, in this particular chapter of the book, Sobchack is discussing

documentary cinema, where the ethical implications of the gaze are underlined since the space of the documentary is 'indexically constituted as the perceived conjunction of the viewer's lifeworld and the visible space represented in the text' (247-8). However, as Sobchack points out, the terms 'fiction' and 'documentary' do not simply designate different genres of film text, but rather name 'an experienced difference in our mode of consciousness' in apprehending the film (261). And, to this extent, our relation to the text as fiction or documentary can change during the course of a viewing, for instance when poor acting causes us to see the reality of the actor rather than the fictional character or when we wonder whether the passersby on a location shoot are aware of the presence of the film. As Sobchack puts it, 'although documentary and fictional consciousness are *incommensurable*, they are *compossible* in any given film' (275).

If we return to Sobchack's triadic presentation of visual culture, we can see that it is precisely the depth and complexity, the phenomenological weight and reversibility of this ethical space of the cinematic that has been lost with the advent of the electronic. For Sobchack, the electronic image has neither the material 'thingness' of the photograph, nor the 'subjective animation' of vision found in cinema and, as such, presents a vision of the world divorced from the physical and moral gravity of things (154). Where the cinema presented us with the disparity of, on the one hand, objective, linear time and, on the other, the subjective and discontinuous experience of duration, Sobchack suggests that, in electronic culture, these conceptions of time have become homogeneous again, but with the significant difference that *objective* time is now understood to be just as nonlinear and discontinuous as subjective time (156). The result of this is that 'space becomes correlatively experienced as abstract, ungrounded, and flat – a site (or screen) for play and display rather than an invested situation in which action counts rather than computes' (158). In short, electronic space is *disembodied* and can thus only be inhabited by a disembodied consciousness, which is to say an agency without ethical grounds.

Much of the rest of *Carnal Thoughts* might be understood as a celebration of cinema precisely inasmuch as it allows for this kind of embodied response, inasmuch as, to borrow Sobchack's own phrase, it 'inscribes ethical space'. In an essay entitled 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh', Sobchack discusses the role of tactile and sensuous experience in film spectatorship. She notes the striking frequency with which the language of the tactile appears in popular reviews of film and finds theoretical antecedents for the cinema's operation on the physiology of the viewer in the work of Eisenstein, Benjamin, Kracauer and Deleuze,

as well as identifying a more recent wave of theorists dealing, in one way or another, with 'the carnal sensuality of the film experience' (56): Linda Williams, Jonathan Crary, Steven Shaviro, Laura Marks, Elena del Río, Jennifer Barker. Nonetheless, Sobchack suggests that, as film scholars, we remain rather uncomfortable when faced with our physiological response to the cinema and embarrassed at granting this level of response anything other than a metaphorical value in writing about film (58). But there has never been any doubt that the information we receive in the cinema is, first and foremost, filtered and absorbed through our senses and, if sight and hearing are the most prominent of those senses, we do not, as Sobchack points out, leave our other senses at the door, and it is precisely our capacity to smell, to touch and to taste that allows us to experience in a heightened way *on film* events or activities that would engage those senses in real life. It is precisely because the cinema appears as both an *object for the senses* and an *agent of sense* (particularly, but not exclusively, vision), it is because the cinema employs 'lived modes' of perceptual experience as 'sign-vehicles' of representation, that it plays a uniquely privileged role in demonstrating the reversible figure-ground relationship of subjective embodied experience and objective representation (74). If we abandon the strict hierarchy of the senses, if we accept, for instance, that 'vision is informed by and informs our other senses' (80), then it need no longer be in an exclusively metaphorical sense that the cinema 'touches' us.

To demonstrate her theory, Sobchack recounts her own response to Jane's Campion's *The Piano* (1993), describing how she 'understood' the opening shot (a disorientating 'point of view' shot of light filtered through the fingers that are placed over Ada (Holly Hunter)'s eyes) first of all *in her fingers*, that it made sense through a kind of involuntary twitching in her digits before it was objectively recognised by her eyes (62-3). Sobchack goes on to discuss how, when Baines (Harvey Keitel)'s fingertip touched Ada's skin through a hole in her stocking, she was unsure *whose* tactile experience she was identifying with, the reversibility of the flesh made manifest through the experience on/of the screen. Sobchack proposes that we speak of the 'cinesthetic subject' of cinema, a neologism she forms from synaesthesia – 'the exchange and translation between and among the senses' – and coenaesthesia – which refers to 'the way in which equally available senses become variously heightened and diminished' to convey an overall sense of embodiment (69). Sobchack argues that spectatorship works by rebounding off the sensual experience represented on screen and returning to the spectator's own body such that, in experiencing what takes place on screen, I 'touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality' thanks to the

reversibility of subjective object and objective subject described by Merleau-Ponty as the shared flesh of the material world (76-7). Later in the same essay, Sobchack describes this process as one of 'sensual catachresis', whereby the spectator's body 'fills in the gap in its sensual grasp of the figural world onscreen by turning back on itself to reciprocally (albeit not sufficiently) "flesh it out" into literal physicalised sense' (82).

Sobchack's argument is undoubtedly persuasive and she has a talent for bringing a phenomenological rigour to bear on an experience that doubtless all of us have had in the cinema. To this extent, her book should be of tremendous value to all of us in seeking to account for, describe and analyse the experience of watching, and loving, films. But, by the same token, perhaps my greatest regret with regard to *Carnal Thoughts* relates to the small number, and narrow range, of films discussed. For instance, although Sobchack is obviously entitled to describe her sensuous experience in viewing *The Piano*, to do so – as she nearly, but not quite, acknowledges, but as Dana Polan has pointed out (2001, 22-3) – has already become something of a cliché. *The Piano* has routinely been discussed, both in the initial reviews that greeted its release and in subsequent academic articles, in sensual, and deeply personal terms, as a spectatorial experience that is intensely *felt* to the very core of one's body. But it has been discussed as such *almost exclusively by women*. Which is not to belittle the experience of these writers, nor to challenge the textu(r)al splendour of Campion's film, but rather to warn against the danger of Sobchack's theory becoming ghettoised within some dubiously-identified realm of 'women's cinema'. After all, since we *all* (barring disability) have the use of our senses, and since *all* films, according to Sobchack's theory, necessarily engage them, why fall back upon the most obvious and well-established example as 'proof' of that theory?

This slight tendency to privilege a certain kind of cinematic received wisdom appears again in an essay entitled 'The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World', in which Sobchack uses the example of Krzysztof Kieslowski to demonstrate the cinema's capacity to show us 'something *within* existence that is always potentially both awful and awesome in its obdurate materiality, its nonanthropocentric presence, and its assertion of the *existential equality* of all things, human and animate or otherwise' (91). Here, Sobchack focuses on the ink stain at the beginning of *Decalogue 1* (1988) that appears miraculously to coincide with the death of a child, and her suggestion that objects in Kieslowski's worldview 'look back' at both the characters and at us naturally rejoins Lacan's infamous sardine tin, itself coming to figure, for the

psychoanalyst, the *stain* which 'makes us, through its sudden and dark excess, acutely aware of human *finitude* and *death*' (94). It is a neat, circular argument, but once again it seems just a little too easy to choose an example from an already canonised European art cinema director to illustrate the theory. It is practically the explicit mission of a ponderous art cinema such as this to demonstrate the 'obdurate materiality' and 'existential equality' of the world. Surely it is more urgent to show how the cinema performs this function – or at least is capable of doing so – *everywhere*, in all genres, nations, and eras. For instance, doesn't the moment in *Collateral* (2004) when a coyote is momentarily caught in the headlights of the taxi while it waits at a stop light serve precisely the same existential function while being seamlessly and realistically incorporated within a big-budget action-thriller narrative? Finally, to close this round of tired cinematic references, when Sobchack discusses the postmodern moment as one which is 'hermeneutically suspicious not only of photographic realism but also of any realisms at all' (144), must she really have recourse to the most hackneyed reference of all – Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) – when countless films over the past decade have renewed this formula, whether in the Hollywood mainstream – *Fight Club* (1999) – European cinema – *Abre los ojos* (1997) – or Japanese anime – *Perfect Blue* (1997)?

If Sobchack is often frustrating in the choice of films with which she illustrates her arguments, it is a testament to the quality of those arguments that one cannot help but find multiple applications for them, even as one reads the book. I will suggest only three such applications in conclusion here, by way of demonstrating the true reach and potential impact of Sobchack's work. In increasing order of seriousness:

1. Given her wry but authoritative discussion of athlete and model Aimee Mullins's prosthetic legs and their symbolic resonance – her 'Cheetah' sprinting legs, her 'Barbie' pretty legs, her 'Cinderella' glass legs – one can only regret the fact that *Carnal Thoughts* went to press before the release of Guy Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003); one can but wonder what Sobchack might have made of the extraordinary psycho-sexual symbolism of this film in which millionaire brewer Lady Port-Huntley (Isabella Rossellini), amputated of her legs following a drink-driving accident caused by her alcoholic husband, is subsequently given a magnificent pair of glass legs *filled with beer*.
2. Sobchack's theory of the embodied experience of spectatorship, of sense impressions that rebound off the screen to find reinforcement in the lived body of the spectator, would surely go a long way to explaining, for certain

spectators, the addictive appeal of film pornography. This example might provide a useful corrective to Sobchack's rather 'womanly' example of *The Piano*, especially since Linda Williams (1991) groups porn and melodrama together (along with horror) in her productive category of 'body genres'. Also relevant in this respect is Sobchack's suggestion that 'the lived body is in crisis' (161) and her discussion of the paradoxical conjunction of, on the one hand, moving-image representations of the vulnerable, wounded, destroyed body, 'riddled with holes' and, on the other, the 'popular obsession with physical fitness and cosmetic surgery' and its fantasy of an invulnerable body (161). Sobchack points out, rightly if, again, somewhat predictably, that these tendencies meet most resonantly in action cinema around figures like Schwarzenegger, but here too the world of film pornography is telling with, on one hand, its presentation of idealised bodies on sexual display and, on the other, the punishment of those bodies in sexual action that is – as commentators from Martin Amis to Michel Houellebecq have remarked³ – increasingly gladiatorial.

3. In her discussion of documentary cinema and ethics, Sobchack returns obsessively to the image of the rabbit killed on screen in *La Règle du jeu* (1939). For Sobchack, if the death of this rabbit retains the power to shock and disturb the viewer far more than the narratively-prepared death of André Jurieu (Roland Toutain), it is because 'the rabbit's death violently, abruptly, punctuates fictional space with documentary space' (247). Now Renoir's dead rabbit has also played a key role in another recent theoretical elaboration on the ethics of cinema, namely Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98) where it symbolises at once the cinema's prophetic announcement of the horrors of the Second World War and its ultimate impotence in the face of that horror. For Godard, the cinema died in the Second World War when it failed in its mission to bear witness to atrocity, and most specifically, to the reality of the Nazi death camps. As Alain Bergala has convincingly argued (1999: 180), Godard's obsessive *working over* of images from film history – both their repetition from film to film and his deliberate slowing, reversing or decomposing of those images with *Histoire(s) du cinéma* – ultimately comes across as the painstaking work of a historian desperately trying to pinpoint the precise moment in which the cinema committed its fatal error, an error of

³ See Martin Amis, 'A Rough Trade' (2001) Michel Houellebecq, 'Que viens-tu chercher ici?' in *Interventions* (1998, 123-5) and *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005, 159-63).

omission, a failure to take note. What Sobchack's argument perhaps adds to this debate is, firstly, the reassurance that this identification of the precise moment of catastrophe, the moment of death, is *impossible* in the cinema. As Sobchack points out, death is 'always in excess of representation': 'we do not ever "see" death on the screen nor understand its visible stasis or contours. Instead, we see the activity and remains of the event of *dying*' (233). In other words, 'death can only be represented in a visible and vigorous contrast between two states of the physical body: the body as *lived body*, intentional and animated – and the body as *corpse*, thing of flesh unintended, inanimate, static' (236), and it is precisely in this interval, between the sound and fury of images from film history, and the silent documentary footage of the destruction wrought by war, that Godard's film *does* locate the fatal trespass of cinema. But, at the same time, Sobchack's book delivers the Good News of a medium that, because it is made from the same *stuff* of the real that constitutes the spectator's body, because it belongs to that same flesh, enables a reversible identification that invites an ethical gaze at the world on screen. Ultimately, then, *Carnal Thoughts* would seem to imply that if real, unsimulated deaths rarely appear on film, it is because the very nature of the medium grounds an ethical space that makes the dispassionate recording of death all but impossible.

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