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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Review: Sabine Nessel, Winfried Pauleit, Christine Ruffert, eds.  
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*Wort und Fleisch: Kino zwischen Text und Körper /  
Word and Flesh: Cinema between Text and the Body*

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Conceived of either as a hegemonic apparatus of attraction or an elaborated textual device, cinema enters the 'turn of the body' in style. Such phenomena as the sensuality and the immediacy of film expression, cinema 'pure' or 'brut', bodily responses to the audiovisual flow are subject to a reflection constantly 'shadowed' or 'enriched' – *à votre guise*, as Baudelaire would say in his poems in prose, as you please – by a certain tendency to come to terms with the textual intrigues of our mind.

'Fleshing' the moving image seems to have always been a textual strategy, conducted by the film director, the film spectator and even the object-film itself

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in an 'embodied language'. I am not referring to natural language, no more than to the spectator's linguistic abilities or to the verbal code that our brain activates in order to understand and experience the world. The 'embodied language' clearly states that body and text are intimately, almost ontologically intermingled and that their interweaving is central to film expression, as well as film perception. The theoretical approaches invoked in the process are various and playful, *à votre guise*: semiological, and this implies re-reading Metz in the light of his predecessors or disciples; post-structuralist, with a general new interest in Roland Barthes; phenomenological, both traditional and existential, that is, with Merleau-Ponty or with Sartre; cultural studies oriented, where the body is related to issues such as race and gender; or even the *traditional*, attentive and incisive *reading* of films, always concerned with what escapes precisely this *traditional reading*. Your choice of theoretical field leaves you with no theoretical choice: body and text are intertwined, both in the body of the films you are watching, and in the critical text you're writing.

The main contention of *Word and Flesh*, as the coordinators of this volume insist from the first paragraphs, is not 'to focus again on the turn to the body that takes place in the 1990's film and media studies, but rather to explore how text and body in film can be thought together' (6). The entity formed by text and the body acquires something of a functional principle of the film expression, film perception, as well as the critical discourse on film. It is thus not without importance that the German version of the book comes with an English e-book on CD-ROM, 'e-version' that includes film clips whose appointed task to influence our reading is successful. As readers, we are offered an object whose comprehension requires a more 'bodily' treatment.

This collection rounds up ten articles that, in spite of dealing with different cinemas and different paradigms of theories, offer a tapestry: inevitably heterogeneous, but still a... *corpus*, an organic structure. What sustains this theoretical construction is, to use Goethe's terms, a series of 'elective affinities' that engage the different essays in a profitable dialogue.

Although integrating a rigorous phenomenological approach, and altogether opposing any psychoanalytical prerequisites, Thomas Morsch insists

on the passivity of the subject in the process of film comprehension. Of course, the 'agonal relationship of competition' between the subject and the body (12) that justifies this 'passivity' is highly controversial, but Morsch remains faithful to his precepts. Following the classical opposition between narrative and attraction, he somehow expands the original pattern to contemporary film production. Anyone subscribing to apparatus theory would read Tom Gunning's concept of 'cinema of attractions' as an attempt to 'deconstruct' (for lack of a better word) the critical dominance of the Lumière cinema. [See Burch, Noël. 1990. 'Building a Haptic Space' in *Life to those Shadows*, London: BFI Publishing, p. 162-185.] The 'cinema of attractions' was not 'opposed' to the 'narrative', it simply was not narrative. The difference that characterises the aesthetic and psychological manner in which this 'cinema of attractions' engages the viewer is not a difference of nature, but of degree. Although this competition between the body and the subject is not sustainable within apparatus theory, it becomes reasonably defensible if taken as a prerequisite for the viewer's (cognitive) passivity and as a basis for the 'body genres' (inspired by Linda Williams). Defined as a 'passive and sensorially hyperstimulated body' (10-11), the viewer seems to be caught in a 'pre-reflexive affect': 'we react with our bodies to visual forms before we 'recognize', 'understand', never mind interpret them in any sense that goes beyond basal perception' (11). Seeking to compensate for a general tendency to overlook the role of our body in film perception and comprehension, Morsch inverts the traditional opposition 'mind-body', and proposes a reverted hierarchy: 'in other words, the reactions of the flesh long anticipate any conscious processing' (11). Evidently, Morsch is not the first to find his theoretical way by dividing different categories of perception.

But let us forget other theoretical and ideological paradigms and focus for a moment on the phenomenology of the body developed in this essay. For Merleau-Ponty, as well as for Vivian Sobchack's nowadays famous cinematic phenomenology, the subject is the body, or, to borrow Judith Mayne's expression, the body is the 'subject of spectatorship'. As Morsch's essay clearly states, 'Merleau-Ponty's proposition of physically anchored perception implies a concept of the *subject* that is rooted in a *physical, embodied* existence' (12, my

emphasis). Within a phenomenological frame, it would be difficult to agree that 'filmic images speak first to our skin and our gut before they can be perceived as iconic representations or sensible formations' (11); our skin and our gut literally perceive filmic images as iconic representations and sensible formations. In other words, there is no hierarchy: the spectator-subject, the 'reflexive' spectator, is also the body.

The physical address of the spectator, more or less conceived of as the subject of a textual mechanism, represents in fact the red line of this collection of papers. The first essay radically challenges this functional principle of spectatorship and is echoed by the last contribution of the series, Gabrielle Jutz's reflection on 'cinéma brut'. As for the other contributors, by thinking text and the body together, they ultimately address the 'subject-effect' in the film. A significant number of them openly invoke Barthes, whose *S/Z* represented a literary model for the analysis of the subject effect, one which became seminal in the development of textual analysis in film studies. Sabine Nessel's paper on textuality as a phenomenon with its own history in film studies opens up a series of reflections inspired by Barthes: Winfried Pauleit's 'Barthes' Third Sense', explicitly Barthesian, is followed by Christa Blümlinger's article which props her project of the visual standstill in Fassbinder's cinema on the 'third meaning', among other concepts. Her argument follows up on Raymond Bellour's theoretical program, and he was one of Barthes' longtime colleagues. Klaus Theweleit's concept of 'third body', Robin Curtis's 'performative turn' and Wolfgang Beilenhoff's argument on bodily in-scription/ex-scription, all echo Barthes's influential idea that the narrative seduces the reader through the interaction of a variety of formalised vehicles of meaning, and that the body is one of those vehicles (or one of those meanings). Although it is a difficult attempt to sum up the orientation of a collection of articles, especially when its topic is a very controversial one, I would risk affirming that the general approach to the body leads to its definition as the locus of the production of cinematic meaning. What separates and differentiates the contributors is the predilection or the penchant for a mediated, textual meaning instead of an immediate, bodily one.

Cinema and Event: Reading in *Pierrot le Fou*, Sabine Nessel's article formulates from the very beginning the terms of her argument, as she insists that the images representing the act of reading demand themselves to be read, and thus 'simultaneously point to both logos and corporeality' (25). Reading in the bathtub reveals 'a dimension of reading (...) positioned beyond the realm of logos'. Sabine Nessel engages in a more general discussion about the category of 'text' in film theory in order to show how the body played a seminal role in the history of film theory, especially in the transition from the linguistic turn to the 'performative turn'. She doesn't actually use the concept of 'performative turn', the main object of Robin Curtis's contribution, but refers to a theory of cinema as event taking place between the cinema and the body. The concept of performative turn, as explained by Robin Curtis's suggestive essay 'How do we do things with films', was extended by Dana Polan in order to discount a general assumption that film is 'an object to be fixed in its essence, its specificity'. On the contrary, films must be recognised as "'events" which "take place" within specific contexts of both reception and projection' (90). Or, in Sabine Nessel's words, instead of being the object of a 'fixed description', cinema 'displays, it takes place, it speaks, it happens' (33). Although designed from different theoretical perspectives, and with different analytical tools at hand, the two essays tend to define and confront cinema in a very similar manner: cinema is event.

As event, writes Nessel, cinema is 'performatively produced', 'the speech act serves as the medium of the event, to which it gives form in its entire unrepresentability, but not without at the same time being a manifestation of our vocal and gestural reservoir (body)' (35). Cinema thus appeals to our body, but not directly; there is always the mediation of something 'foreign' to the medium, that is, a discursive, indeed textual (to remain close to Barthes) mediation: 'the spectator does not become aware of the event directly, but by way of the detour of discourse' (35).

On the contrary, argues Robin Curtis in a more phenomenology-oriented essay, 'the body is the locus of the manifestations produced by the filmic event, the "institution" which enables this to take place' (93). The reason for the bodily response in film perception is that 'the camera (in conjunction with our

perceptual apparatus) facilitates a kind of performative vision, akin to the performativity of speech' (92). Moreover, the camera is part of a bigger apparatus, or 'institution' which conditions every form of spectatorship, and subsequently even the viewer's bodily responses. Interestingly, Robin Curtis's approach to performative vision doesn't break with the rules of the cinematic apparatus, but rather places in its core the very principle of this performative vision, that is, its phenomenological nature. Cinema, as event, takes place within two realms simultaneously: 'within a particular spatial setting (provided by the cinema as an urban, architectural and technological institution) and secondly, within the perceptual apparatus provided by the embodied viewer, who experiences the event of a screening as a moving phenomenon that has particular spatial, emotional and visceral implications' (92).

Domènec Font and Gabrielle Jutz's essays both attempt to theorize specific manifestations of how the body inscribes itself into the filmic text. Interestingly, they rely upon two very different filmic corpi, understood both as a collection of filmic objects and as a representation of the body. While Domènec Font's questions are aimed at 'disembodied spirits' returning to the screen, and the filmic story as 'all too human' bodies, Gabrielle Jutz seeks to reveal how the body inscribes itself in the case of the experimental cinema. The obvious', states Domènec Font from the start of his contribution 'Human, all too human: Rituals of Contemporary Vampirism', is that 'cinema thought up the body, unveiled the face, and reinvented the human gesture, all with the intention of breathing life into an image, giving flesh to images' (38). 'Cinéma brut' goes further on the road of giving flesh to images, in this sense that it stands for a 'direct translation of the author's physical existence', as the images are etched with a sharp object or bear the pressure of the finger and the intensity of the hand (151). If this allusion to the 'direct translation' of the artistic experience rings a bell it is because of its convergence with the theory of the speech acts. The physicality of *cinéma brut* is not to be understood as a static and rigid materiality, but, again, as event that *happens*. *Cinéma brut* engages the body in a performative act: it 'relies primarily on a material concept that I would

like to call 'performative', in reference to John L. Austin's theory of the speech act', writes Gabrielle Jutz (152).

One might say that Domènec Font devotes himself to setting up a taxonomy of the embodied spirits of 'evil and desire', or in other words, a taxonomy of vampirism. With this invention of human imagination, the body is differently 'exposed'; however, the main reason for thinking together body and vampirism lies in the broad theory of cinema to which this very entity attests: the idea of 'a revenant or ghost inside a body might act as the definition of film-screen'. Moreover, the topic of vampirism leads to a theory of film perception, for it not only reveals the topographical realms of 'here' and 'beyond', but accentuates the possibility of transference, or interchange, between the two, signifying thus the connection between the audience and the film, between a socio-cultural imaginary and the image. For Domènec Font, the cinematic body incarnates thus a socio-cultural discourse, a 'mythical invention of human imagination' (39). The body becomes discourse.

If vampirism is symptomatically related to the individual body, the nation – another mythical construction – requires the concept of a collective body, as argued in Wolfgang Beilenhoff's essay on Soviet cinema. Spanning over twenty years of Soviet cinema and basing his argument on three congruous examples, Beilenhoff paradoxically explores the collective body as discourse, that is, as text, while the the distribution of those movies was intended to compensate for the general illiteracy of its audience. *The Battleship Potemkin*, for example, more than the other two examples chosen by the author, uses the collectivizing potential of the representation of the body in 'a context divorced from language' (66). The collective mass is seen as an organic body, standing thus for a political and ideological negation of the individual. The community as an organic body puts in a 'collective performance', a community discourse conceived of as 'collective praxis' (68). These gestures do not constitute a 'communicative' praxis though, 'nor do they accompany a speech. [...] They are instead 'uninscribed' gestures, to be located in the magnetic field that the film itself construct' (68).

As with Font and the majority of other contributors, Wolfgang Beilenhoff clearly displays a Bazin 'ontological' interest in his essay, an attempt to find a definition of the film-screen embedded in the discussion of the body. The various formatting of the collective body as a 'corpus fictum' are closely linked to the 'media technologies of their age: these define the shape and form of knowledge of their age", reads the article quoting a book about 'knowledge and the body' (65). 'In this context, the medium of film takes on a special importance', obviously as the 'dominant medium of the twentieth century' (65). The ontological issue takes a socio-cultural turn, since 'it was film that beginning in the mid-1920's became the dominant medium in the Soviet Union for generating collective bodies, and would develop the relevant aesthetic and epistemic models' (65). Thus, Grigorij Alexandroff's film *The Circus* (1936), for example, in celebrating a new socialist society in construction, engages a collective festival, a 'march body' (69). But 'the mass is actually set in motion by the medium of the film itself. This is not just about arresting a profilmic moving collective body: the mass as new collective body is instead at the same time to be transformed into a visual spectacle' (72).

The body becomes the bearer of a performative concept, to use one of the favorite terms running through the pages of this volume, when it comes to the representation of race. Lena Horne, the first African-American star to be signed to a long-term contract by a major Hollywood studio, represents a relevant case for Richard Dyer in his attempt to draw up a model of 'beauty' in classical Hollywood cinema. It is at the same a reflection on femininity and blackness. A singer, and a 'pretty' Black woman, Lena Horne couldn't be cast in musicals, because of the impossibility of having her in a romantic affair with a white male star, a fundamental feature of the genre. 'Yet, there was also a visual problem about her singing. (...) She recounted how, called to Hollywood from developing success as a singer in New York, she was instructed by the studios to alter the way she looked as she sang, to make her mouth smaller, to sing "prettily"' (129). Dyer rightly concludes that while this was offered as a purely technical concern, 'yet it surely also encodes assumptions about femininity and blackness and, not least, the two together' (129). A big mouth filling the screen

is acceptable in other circumstances, but not when it is the face of a young black woman. Although very unique in its approach, compared to the other essays published in this collection, Dyer's contribution thus very elegantly deals with the question of the physicality of the body, and the physical performance of the actor's body. He reveals a whole new level of conceptual and ideological choices and influences that predetermine and accompany the actor's physical performance.

Another story of physical performance represents the object of Gabrielle Jutz's already mentioned essay on experimental or avant-garde cinema, on what she calls 'cinéma brut', or raw, or pure, a category that includes 'the so-called direct film [not to be mistaken with the direct cinema], found-footage film and expanded cinema' (149). More exactly, cinema brut refers to handmade films, camera-less photography, appropriated found material, as well as to any expansion of the standard film presentation. As this critical reading already mentioned, the aim of 'cinéma brut' is also and above all, to directly translate the director's physical presence. How is this physical presence actually translated? The answer given by this contribution insists on the 'flesh of film': 'cinéma brut reminds us that the filmic sign cannot be reduced to its function as a bearer of meaning, but itself bears a physicality that needs to be adequately taken account of' (152). Relying on a rich series of examples, this paper looks in fact for a deeper theorization; its author focuses on Bataille's concept of 'informe' and the already discussed notion of performativity in order to draft a model of 'indexical' cinema, in Peirce's sense of the word. Although very promising, the argument ends up entangled into a complicated conceptual net. Its ultimate point is that 'the informe only makes sense as an operational or performative term', which is defined as one of the 'conditions of embodiment in cinéma brut', as suggestively announced in the title (154).

Focusing on 'The Figure of Visual Standstill in R. W. Fassbinder', Christa Blümlinger attempts to show how 'the dialectics of standstill and movement can only be examined in a concrete filmic form' (136). One might say that she wants to reveal the functionality of a 'cinéma brut' within the regime of the narrative cinema. The standstill becomes 'a form of exchange between visual regimes'.

What makes this essay particularly intriguing is the way it shifts from a poetics of the visual standstill to an aesthetics of perception. The figure of standstill places the spectator, the receptive body, in a 'perceptive situation within which the uniqueness of what is seen counters standard modes of perception and dominant values'. Thus, without directly addressing the questions of the body, the text, or the body-text, Christa Blümlinger's essay surreptitiously unravels those very questions.

'Transfer and Countertransfer. The Third Body: A Resonance Object Between the Body and Technological Media', Klaus Theweleit's essay is, if not the more controversial, the more puzzling one in the series. It attempts to show how the viewer's emotions lead to the emergence of a 'third body' conceived as an entity which mediates the exchanges between the filmic object and the spectator's consciousness. The reason for the difficult density of this paper might be its entangled theoretical texture, for it mixes cognitive sciences and psychoanalytic practices, theories of new-media and accounts of 'primitive' media à la Méliès. In spite of the doubtful line of argumentation, the article reads between lines certain theses that echo the other contributions in this volume, and, at the same time, enhances their hypothesis: 'the primary physical sensationization that film and music undertake with me – in that they form a third body outside of my own and their own bodies – is not verbalized and cannot be verbalized. They live in the body as stored vibrations. They become something else when I process them with my consciousness' (120).

The first essay of this collection methodically classifies what the title itself announced as the 'discourses of the body' in the 'aesthetic modernism' (9). A systematic review of the theories of the body in film studies facilitates a more fluent reading of the other articles in this series, a choice for which the editors must be congratulated. If the first article initiates a debate on the aesthetics of astonishment, the future reader of this series becomes the subject of a theoretical astonishment. What keeps our attention alert and conscious is the constant feeling of attending a seminar. The book is organized as a theoretical and analytical laboratory, a test field for concepts and conceptual practices, without preaching or being dogmatic. Moreover, it mirrors the intention of

finding an intermediate realm between the text and the body, between the word and the flesh, by successfully mediating between film expression and film perception. As an ensemble, the book faithful to the principles of phenomenological philosophy, with a strong taste of European poststructuralist semiology.