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BODILY ENGAGEMENTS WITH FILM, IMAGES, AND TECHNOLOGY

Somavision

Max Rynnänen

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Bodily Engagements with Film, Images, and Technology

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This book builds a new understanding of the body and its relationship to images and technology, using a framework where novel writings of pragmatist somaesthetics and phenomenology meet new research on bodily reactions.

Max Ryyänen gives an overview of the topic by collecting the existing information of our bodies gazing at visual culture and the philosophies supporting these phenomena, and examines the way the gaze and the body come together in our relationship to culture. Themes covered include somatic film; the body in artistic documentation of activist art; body parts (and their mutilation or surgeries) in contemporary art and film; robot cars and our visual relationship to them; the usefulness of Indian rassa philosophy in explaining digital culture; and an examination of Mario Perniola's work about the idea that we, human beings, are increasingly experiencing ourselves to be simply "things."

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, aesthetics, cultural philosophy, film studies, technology studies, media studies, cultural studies, and visual studies.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vi
1 Somatic Film: Background, Classification, Education	1
2 Making It Real: The Need for the Presence of the Body in the Documentation of Contemporary Art	32
3 Cutting, Mending, Learning	42
4 Robot Cars	69
5 Disgust, the Inorganic, and the Enigmatic: The Dank Media Philosophy of Mario Perniola	79
6 Rasafiction: Can the Oldest Atmosphere Theory in the World Help Us to Understand Today's Somaesthetic Manipulation?	91
<i>Index</i>	104

Preface

If someone really ought to be thanked for pushing me to write this book, it would be our dog Ruska, who really made me think about my *reactions* to moving images. Her attacks on (even animated) people and animals on TV forced us to lift the television higher, so that she could not reach it. She made me think that I am sometimes just a scared or defensive mammal when I watch movies.

However, also numerous human scholars, artists, and friends have supported, stimulated and/or criticized me and/or parts of the text, and so helped to forge my work. I am not able to thank everyone who has left a trace in the book, but I want to express my gratitude to at least to some of the people who have done it.

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My deepest gratitude, of course, goes to my family – Riikka Perälä, Jasvitha Ryytänen, Simo Konkka, and my parents Esko Ryytänen and Barbro Wigell-Ryytänen. I would feel cold in this world if you would not exist.

Puotila, (East) Helsinki December 15, 2021

1 Somatic Film: Background, Classification, Education

What is somatic film? Think of all the films that you watch so that your body is actively present, not only the romantic films that warm your heart. Think of your bodily presence during films that raise the hair on the back of your neck, send chills down your spine, make the soles of your feet itch, and/or make you jump out of your chair.

I am interested in our *bodies watching film* (the eye is also part of the body, as much as the brain, of course) – and the way in which the film industry targets it, which has been far more witty than film studies or film criticism in understanding the central nature of the body in film reception. This is not to say that film studies haven't noticed that people who watch movies have a body (although sometimes it feels like it), but the body is still peripheral when film is discussed, a bit like a thing of people interested in body philosophy. It does not do justice to its real presence.

I will delve into different examples to clarify some of the basic aspects of physicality in film viewing, while also discussing the background of our strong reactions to film, for which we human beings have to thank our mammal brains (*Background*). I will discuss somatic film as a category of its own which, partly due to the strong somatic development of film lately, one can start to see as something that differentiates it from other types of films (*Classification*). Although all films have something somatic about them, the somatic side of films is sometimes central, and there is no reason to believe that viewers would not (at least often) realize that they consume these films with their body. I will discuss somatic film history not extensively, but enough, I hope, to make the point that somatic film has been around for a while, and that the concept is needed. I will also inquire into the learning processes at stake. When we watch films, we learn about our bodies, about what we feel is disgusting, for example, and about our boundaries, from (our fear of) death to our reflections on what it might feel

2 *Somatic Film*

like to lose a limb (*Education*). I see this as something that could be connected to, for example, Stoic philosophical practice, where the search for one's mind–body boundaries was a key to understanding the self. Is it possible to think that the (Greek and Roman) Stoic philosophers gave us a preliminary framework for discussing somatic film? One could also think of the care of the self as proposed by the same Stoics and later discussed by major contemporary thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Richard Shusterman as something that has could help us frame somatic film viewing.

Background

Once or twice a week, while watching a film or TV series, our dog suddenly attacks the screen. I have turned down the volume to test the effect of sound on her, but she continues to attack horses, dogs, and other animals – and sometimes a human, like the fire chief in Milos Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (1967).

A dog's breed may influence its reactions to TV. Hounds, whose olfactory sense is stronger than their visual sense, do not react as much to television as herding breeds, such as terriers. Ruska (our dog who we adopted at the age of 3) is a mix between a Jack Russell and Parsons Russell terrier. Sometimes, she checks to see if undesired visitors that she saw on the screen have disappeared behind the TV. She doesn't recognize a horse, dog, or cat on my mobile or my computer screen, but our technically relatively advanced television makes her lose her mind.

In any case, dogs have better visual ability than most of us give them credit for. I often hear the comment that dogs are not able to make sense of TV. However, they are more like us than we think. For example, they are able to recognize their own species by looking at an animal's face, although the visual ability of the approximately 400 breeds of dogs in the world vary considerably.¹

What is interesting, in the way the dog acts, is that when I raise my voice (too often angrily) and say "get away from there," she often does it. This would be a sheer impossibility with a horse, cat, or another dog somewhere in "real life" while walking outside. Doesn't she take the animals on TV seriously?

During a film where there are many of these encounters, and, importantly, many of my negative reactions, she often goes to her own basket and turns around to avoid seeing the moving images. She seems to have some kind of control over her aggression towards these film animals, something lacking in real life when we meet rabbits or

squirrels outside our home. It isn't that she would *understand* that the animals on TV are not real, but they definitely do not seem to be in the same category as "real" animals, partly, and I am just guessing here – because they never come off from the screen. To quote animal behaviorist Nicholas Dodman, some dogs "have been desensitized to television. When they see a dog [on TV], they [may] think, 'Those guys just hanging out on the television. They never actually walk around.'"²

Increasingly, I feel that my reactions to the manipulations of a film are not much different from those of my dog. Sometimes, they are about the nearly magical make-believe world of fiction. Kendall Walton's classical text on make-believe discusses the way "the barrier" separating our sense of the real world and the fictional one "appears" in some cases "to be psychologically transparent."³

Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes roll around, finally fixing on the camera. The slime, picking up speed, oozed on a new course straight towards the viewers. Charles emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair. Afterwards, still shaken, Charles confesses that he was "terrified" of the slime. *Was* he?⁴

Walton's answer is no, but his text spurred reactions by other theorists, some of whom adopted the third view that film audiences are just "irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent" in their relationship to fiction.⁵ Some others followed Walton in believing that fear must include a belief that one is in danger and that audiences are so not terrified about what they see on film.⁶

Notes on quasi-emotions (in Walton's case quasi-fear) raise an age-old interest in reactions to fiction, which takes us all the way back to the early theories of aesthetic experience, like Bharata's (500BC–500AD) theory of *rasa*. Rasas, or emotive atmospheres, are based on an idea that was later repeated and philosophically refined on the Indian continent by many thinkers, especially the eleventh century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta). For the *rasa* theorists, the emotive effects of theater (fear, love, and hate) are a reflective version of everyday sentiments. The skilled work of the artists absorbs and elevates (real memories of) perceptions and emotions to a higher level into a parallel world, which is based on a higher consciousness, a reflective attitude, which also makes the heightened experience possible (in the original scripts also religiously rewarding). Fear, according to

4 *Somatic Film*

these thinkers, is not fear, but a stunning, reflective version and experience of it.⁷ Through the bliss of *rasa* the audience enters another divine stage of consciousness.

Although I am not convinced that Walton meant it that way, Walton and his “idea of make-believe” have been criticized for our actual lack of choice when facing manipulative fiction. Noël Carroll writes that Walton makes it sound like we could really choose when we enter the mode of make-believe. “I could [so] elect to remain unmoved by *The Exorcist*; I could refuse to pretend I was horrified. But I don’t think that was really an option for those, like myself, who were overwhelmingly struck by it.”⁸

Sometimes, though, film audiences do not encounter make-believe when they are strongly affected by moving images. Looking at Walton’s example, one can ask if it is only fictional make-believe that moves Charles. Even the reader can share Charles’ disgusted reaction, to some extent, when trying to understand what Walton is talking about. However, Walton did not explain the narrative context.

To continue on this path of questioning, it might be helpful to look at examples, where we can see a film’s physicality at stake without the disturbance of narrative, fictional world-making.

The slime in Walton’s example is not just a work of fiction for us. Like Ruska, my dog, we are mammals that react to *seeing* things, of course, without forgetting the strong role of music and sound effects such as in horror movie experiences. We see a slime *moving*. Maybe we even hear the noise it makes as it oozes. Some (like Carroll⁹) think that monsters are popular because we want to learn about them (I have no objections to this); but their victorious presence in film is at least partly about something more than curiosity for the unknown, as their hair-raising impact is so dominant, when we see them. At the moment, when we have been well scared, I don’t believe we are experiencing a desire to know more about monsters. We might rather feel like escaping.

In my body philosophy talks, I have used an example from the stunning Tamil film industry, a clip from the 2010 movie *Endhiran*, directed by S. Shankar, and starring Rajinikanth. It perfectly shows film’s special quality as somatic stimulation. Although most of my listeners are not from India or that part of the world (e.g. Iran, South East Asia) where Kollywood (in Chennai, the Tamil film industry; or Bollywood, the Mumbai film industry, Lollywood (Lahore), etc.) films land in the mainstream, which means that the cinematic “language” does not appear “natural” to “read,” the action still appeals to the viewer somatically.

In the clip, Chitti, a robot played by superstar Rajinikanth, saves a woman, jumps on fast-driving cars, uses multiple guns at the same time, and is so invincible that some viewers might laugh a bit. The clip is 2 or 3 minutes of action. It is absolutely unrealistic, yet comprehensible for anyone, regardless of their prejudices, and stimulating to watch. One sees Chitti, for example, stopping a car with his hands (one can hear the bump), trucks crashing, and bullets going through metal and Chitti himself.

Afterwards, I ask about the audience's bodily reactions to the film, although this is not necessary, as I see people reacting with their feet, rapidly moving their heads, and becoming physically intense during the screening. Not much make-believe about a physical world is constructed, as the clip is so short.

One could, of course, do this even more stoically from an aesthetic point of view, and show just 5 seconds from one of the most vicious punches in the face in Martin Scorsese's *The Raging Bull* (1980) or a scene from any horror or gore movie where someone's skin is cut.¹⁰ It is our relationship to the *seen* that makes movies so effective in a way that is different from other arts.

Current brain research leads us to understand the background for this and other bodily issues involved in watching film. In "Modily Map of Emotions," Lauri Nummenmaa, Enrico Glerean, Riitta Hari, and Jari K. Hietanen report on their tests with film audiences in Finland, Sweden, and Taiwan, in search for emotional "somatosensations" from reactions to the seen and show that they can be mapped quite accurately. Feelings of love were expressed in the chest area, anxiety in the stomach, and shame, besides these places, in the head.¹¹ We have to thank the somatosensory receptors that are spread around our body and that become activated in different situations, when we think of our abilities of coping with the environment and its many challenges,¹² and the way we observe the complex web of sensational impulses we encounter in everyday life. While watching film, the way in which the areas of the brain that support certain functions in the observer become activated when we see another person's actions and feelings of the same type, is what keeps our bodies intense when we watch even a short silent clip of something that *touches* us.

The mirror neurons of humans as well as monkeys are the base for our emphatic relationship to the seen. This explains many things in our relationship to moving images. One of the strongest most central things we react to is when somebody grabs something.

This is where Vittorio Gallese, Michele Guerra, and Frances Anderson land in their *The Emphatic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience*.