

The Cinematic Presence, between Knowing and Feeling. A Phenomenological Study

Ruxandra GHÎTESCU¹

Abstract: *This article explores the concept of cinematic presence from various phenomenological perspectives, considering its practical implications for film researchers and filmmakers. It delves into Vivian Sobchack's analysis of film experience, Sam B. Girgus's concept of existential presence and also tackles the experiential undecidability of cinematic sensation. The gap between filmmaker intention and viewer experience, as well as the tension between dynamic presentation and representation in cinema, unravel the complexities of cinematic presence and its impact on creators and viewers.*

Keywords: *phenomenology; cinematic presence; existential presence; metaphor;*

Introduction

This article sets itself the relatively minor, but at the same time a complex task, that of anchoring the concept of cinematic presence in different perspectives of phenomenological studies, while discussing some practical aspects of the concept of presence when it comes to actors embodying their characters. This quest is caused mostly by my vocational formation as a film director who, at the same time is pursuing film and gender studies research and works with masterstudy students in film acting. As a film director working in a realist convention, *presence* is one of the most important tools, one requires from the actors to be present, from the camera operator, later from the editor and always from oneself. To be anchored in the present moment, to relate to what is happening in front of the camera, with the camera, to transform the personal relation with the selected environment through the cinematic instruments into a more or less guided mental and sensorial experience for the future viewer. On the other hand, as a spectator I always making the viewing experience my own, there are elements that I suspect come as intentional by the make of the film, but most of the time it is a personal experience lived in a privileged, but shared space of the cinema theater. But what is *presence*? How can one tackle such a profoundly complex phenomenon? I will engage with the text written by Vivian Sobchack, Laura Mulvey, Sam B.Girgus, in order to explore the different perspective that create the phenomenon of *presence*.

This article is a research aspect that I will pursue in more depth in the context of my doctoral research called "The Cinematic Apparatus as a Diffractive Apparatus". In this doctoral research I will try to use a phenomenological and diffractive method for the analysis of a corpus constituted mostly, if not exclusively by films directed by women in the Romanian cinema of the last decades.

¹ Centre of Excellence in Image Studies, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, ruxandra.ghitescu@s.unibuc.ro.

1. Cinematic presence

In her study, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Vivian Sobchack discusses how cinema distinguishes between static photography and the dynamic experience of film. To do so she uses Chris Marker's film "La Jetée" (1962) as an example to highlight this difference.

She explains that in "La Jetée," most of the action is presented through still photographs, except for a short, but powerful sequence in which the woman, who has been the subject of the protagonist's desire and, also object of *the Gaze*², suddenly blinks. This surprising blink is interpreted by Sobchack as crucial moment in the film, as it emphasizes the difference between the static experience of photographs and the dynamic experience of film. A "frozen point of view" gets the spatialization of a dynamic trajectory becoming "a *self-displacing vision*" and a "subjectively experienced temporalization of an essential moment into *lived momentum*"³.

Vivian Sobchack remarks that while the preceding rapid succession of photographs may prepare the viewer for movement, this it is not enough to bring the characters to life or give them a real presence to the viewer.

Sobchack underscores how cinema draws its mechanical qualities from photography while adding a temporal and dynamic element, which transforms the visual experience into something more than just static contemplation: "This radical difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be contemplated and the scene as it is lived"⁴

Drawing on Bazin's observation that photography is a form of mummification, which preserves a dimension of the world and an experience that was real once, in the past, it does not preserve the present. Unlike photography, the cinematic is a constant "*coming-into-being* (a presence always presently constituting itself)"⁵.

The "*coming into being*" concept is also addressed by Sam B. Girgus who brings into discussion the ethics and the emergence of being when it comes to film. He revisits films ontological connection to photography from Laura's Mulvey concept of „delayed cinema"⁶.

Mulvey observes that the sustained tension between "stillness and the moving image," plays out an existential drama that directs access not only to the Freudian "uncanny" - the *unheimlich* - but also to the existential coming into being and presence.

Following Mulvey's theory, it becomes clearer how the tension between stillness and movement in film gives rise to presence. Stillness framed in relation to the moving image creates spatial and temporal conditions for an *extended existential presence*. In film, says Mulvey, stillness alone transforms presence into a living dead while movement alone fails to hold presence, making it a fugitive. The interplay between the two, stillness and moving image,

² The concept of the Gaze comes from ² Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual and Other Pleasures*, from 1989 in which Mulvey states that „In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly". The woman becomes an image while the man is, the bearer of the look.

³ Vivian Sobchack. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts*. London: University of California Press, p. 145.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p 146.

⁶ Laura Mulvey. 2016. *Death 24 x a second: stillness and the moving image*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, p. 3.

⁷ For Mulvey „Delayed cinema works on two levels: first of all it refers to the actual act of slowing down the flow of film. Secondly it refers to the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed. There is a loose parallel here with Freud's concept of deferred action (*nachträglichkeit*), the way the unconscious preserves a specific experience, while its traumatic effect might only be realized by another, later but associated, event". (p. 8). From this perspective Mulvey identifies and discusses in her book two types of spectators: The Possessive Spectator and The Pensive Spectator.

generates a new spatio-temporal dimension for the appearance of the *existential presence* in the film.

I would make a short detour back to Sobchack and her appreciation of the concept of *cinematic presence* in order to underline her argument about the space and time condition of the cinematic existential experience. She argues that cinematic presence is not limited to a single point in time or space it is rather multiply located. It simultaneously displaces itself in past and future situations while being oriented from the present moment where the body is situated. Just as the multiplicity and discontinuity of time are synthesized and centered into the experience of a specific lived body, the same way the multiple and disparate spaces are abstracted and located in the spatial and material existence of that body. In other words, the cinematic experience brings together separate shots and scenes, different spaces, and different timelines into a whole that becomes coherent. This coherence is only experienced through what Sobchack calls “the cinematic lived body”⁸. Sobchack identifies this body as having the camera acting as its perceptive organ, the projector as its expressive organ, and the screen as its discrete and material center of this meaningful experience.⁹

For Vivian Sobchack “cinema represents an objective and visible performance of the perceptive and expressive structure of subjective lived-body experience”, it is a synthesis of time and space, perceived and expressed through the body's engagement with the cinematic apparatus.

2. Existential Presence vs Cinematic Presence

Speaking of the existential presence Sam B. Girgus draws on Jean Luc Nancy theories of emerging existential presence:” Existential presence occurs as a happening and experience in time, including the intervention of a nonchronological temporal regime that can transform the way of being in the world with the suddenness of a revelation or epiphany”. For Nancy “this space-time of freedom” is the argument for emerging existential presence or the coming and birth to presence.¹⁰ In other words, "spacious temporality" refers to a sense of time that is expansive, flexible, and open to possibilities. It allows for moments of insight or realization that disrupt the ordinary flow of time and bring about a profound shift in one's experience of existence. This non-linear temporality enables the emergence of existential presence as a dynamic and transformative event in the individual's life.

Girgus also identifies also the early link made by Nancy between the existentialism of emerging presence and the emerging cinematic image. For Nancy the body “it’s the coming to presence, like an image coming on a movie or a TV screen—coming from nowhere behind the screen, being the spacing of this screen.”¹¹ Or, to offer a more complete context, Nancy speaks of a body that is not reduced to a sign, it is materiality and corporeality, making a clear distinction between the sense and the signification. *The body is an image—insofar as the body*

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁹ Sobchack makes often a clear distinction between the body that she refers to as *cinematic lived body* not being anthropomorphic, but also the term is not used in a metaphorical sense. “The film’s seeing and hearing is consciously moving and connecting things together onscreen for a purpose while inhabiting space and time. The apparatus called ‘the camera’ does not ‘inhabit’ anything. Borrowing upon Richard Zaner’s work, the term ‘body’ is thus meant not only to assert a film’s material status but also its basic functions. Moreover, bodies are not necessarily anthropomorphic. These are the reasons why the film’s body is not a metaphor. Vivian Sobchack. 2017. *The journeys of a film phenomenologist: An interview with Vivian Sobchack on being and becoming*. Retrieved May 3, 2024, from <https://necsus-ejms.org/vivian-sobchack-interview/>.

¹⁰ Sam B. Girgus. 2018. *Time, Existential Presence, and the Cinematic Image: Ethics and Emergence to Being in Film*. Edingburg: Edingburg University Press, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2,

*is the visibility of the invisible, the bright plasticity of spacing. (...) the body is the plastic material of spacing, without form or Idea. It's the very plasticity of expansion, extension—where existences take place. The image (that it thus is) has no link to either the idea or, in general, to the visible (and/or intelligible) "presentation" of anything at all. The body's not an image-of. But it's the coming to presence, like an image coming on a movie or a TV screen—coming from nowhere behind the screen, being the spacing of this screen, existing as its extension—exposing, laying down this areality, not as an idea given to my own vision as a punctual subject (and still less as a mystery), but right at my eyes (my body), as their areality, themselves coming into this coming, spaced [...].*¹²

The existence of the body as a plastic material of spacing and the gap between the understanding and expressing what one understands brings me back to Sobchack's remarks that in exchange for the figurative-literal representations of bodies in cinema, the lived body of the spectator in cinematic experience needs to engage in a form of *sensual catachresis*, meaning that it fills the gap in the sensuous understanding of the figurative world on the screen, turning in on itself to reciprocally „flesh it out" into literal physicalized sense)¹³.

The cinematic body exists, comes into being, only in relation to others. Or, as Sam Girgus rephrases Luc Nancy „Spacing, happening, co-appearance, and co-presence create a common ground for being and existential presence in a shared temporality. Birth to being becomes existential presence with and in relation to others. Existential isolation turns into isolation «with»"¹⁴.

Unable to concretely represent time as past or present, the meaning of cinema rather originates in space and movement, than in time. As Sobchack puts it: "in its being as an always emergent, dynamic, evanescent, embodied, and (Derrida notwithstanding) ungraspable presence"¹⁵.

She remarks a sameness of *presence* and *perceptual activity* between the film and the spectator in space of the theatre. As Sobchack puts it, there is a perceptual dialogue that is initiated by this encounter between the two bodies, an encounter in which the filmmaker, even though absent from this perceptive activity, is represented in her/his absence "as *histoire*", while the film's perceptive and expressive activity is presented by its body's presence "as *discourse*".

Thus, as a phenomenon of this double experience, the film emerges as an autonomous presence "in its intra-subjective perceptive and expressive activity"¹⁶.

Sobchack and Girgus offer complementary insights into cinematic presence, my aim being to underline that the film presence is conditioned by the spectator lived body experience, that both are entangled and they influence each other more than in an inter-action. To paraphrase Karen Barad, they are formed through *intra-action*. In other words, they mutually constitute themselves into phenomena. In this sense, apparatuses "are not passive instruments of observation. On the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) the phenomena"¹⁷, they acquire agency, an agency that I would read as *coming into being* or *presence*.

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy. 2008. *Corpus*. New York: Fordham University Press, p. 96.

¹³ Vivian Sobchack. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts*. London: University of California Press, p. 82.

¹⁴ Sam B. Girgus. 2018. *Time, Existential Presence, and the Cinematic Image: Ethics and Emergence to Being in Film*. Edingburg: Edingburg University Press, p. 13.

¹⁵ Vivian Sobchack. 1992. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 217.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p 217.

¹⁷ Karen Barad. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham-London: Duke University Press, p. 93.

3. The Experiential Undecidability

Another problematic aspect raised from a phenomenological stance is that of the spectators as *cinesthetic subjects*¹⁸ who found themselves both “having and making sense”¹⁹ of the films. This is a struggle that both film researchers face when they try to overcome the impossibility to completely express the film experience, and also the filmmakers put in the situation of expressing something that is still to come into being.

The spectators are split between their rational understanding and corporeal sensations which turn into emotions. Sobchack points out that this split reveals to us the chiasmatic function of the lived body as both carnal and conscious and tries to make sense of the screen both figurative and literally. Sight commutes to touch, not in a literal way, instead the sense of the vision of touch is translated in our own flesh in haptic ways that cannot be reduced to understanding through sight alone.

As stated already a bit earlier, in cinema, the lived body of the spectator is engaged in a form of *sensual catachresis* or as Linda Williams explains it: „(...) our own sense of touch is invoked when we watch touching on the screen.(...) My mouth may pucker, my tongue may move, but I do not myself kiss. Rather, one bodily sense translates into another, energies transmute, and I experience a diffuse sensuality.”

The same relation of reciprocity we find ourselves when trying to describe our film experience. The meeting between the body and the representation, triggers a very particular situation in which we, as researchers, find ourselves trying to bring figural sense of that experience as literally physicalized. Sobchack remarks that in our film experience as well as in our attempts to describe it in words, the sense of metaphor and figurality is still to be found and this makes us captive in a *catachretic structure* of sense-making. A catachretic structure is a place we are forced to confront and name a gap in language because we are supplementing this linguistic deficiency. This situation can be experienced and described as Sobchack put it’s “as both real and “as if” real”²⁰.

This incomplete linguistic mediation of the cinematic experience finds for Sobchack a response in Paul Ricoeur interpretation of Wittgenstein’s distinction between “seeing” and “seeing as,”: “[S]eeing as” designates the non-verbal mediation of the metaphorical statement. With this acknowledgment, semantics finds its frontier; and, in so doing, it accomplishes its task. . . . If semantics meets its limit here, a phenomenology of imagination . . . could perhaps take over”²¹. Ricoeur concludes: “Half thought, half experience, ‘seeing as’ is the intuitive relationship that holds sense and image together.”

By bringing to attention Sobchack’s thoughts on the experiential undecidability. I indicate that the fact that film directors often find themselves facing the same linguistic barriers in

¹⁸ Vivian Sobchack. 2000. *What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh*. Retrieved May 5th 2024 from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/conference-special-effects-special-affects/fingers/>. Here Vivian Sobchack explains the *cinesthetic subject* as a neologism which derives not only from *cinema*, but also from two scientific terms, *synaesthesia* and *coenaesthesia*, that designate particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium.

¹⁹ Sobchack makes a clear distinction between *having sense* and *making sense* — meaning that the lived body is constituted as both a carnal matter and a conscious meaning that emerge simultaneously (if in various ratios) from the single system of flesh and consciousness.

²⁰ Here Sobchack refers to Richard Dyer expression that she discusses earlier in her book about film and it’s *experiential undecidability*, to quote Dyer: “The celebration of sensational movement, that we respond to in some still unclear sense ‘as if real,’ for many people is the movies”. (Richard Dyer.Oct. 1994. “Action!”. *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 10, pp. 7–10).

²¹ Paul Ricoeur. 1977. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 212.

expressing their vision to the actors and crew creating a gap that may either be filled through communication that becomes more sensed than literally expressed or through the intuition of the co creators of the filmic act. Yet, there is another reflection that can be applied to both sides of the screen surface: the disjuncture between the cinema as simultaneously representing experience through dynamic *presentation* (the always verb-driven and ongoing present tense (...)) but it also presents experience as *representation* (the post hoc fixity of already-perceived and now expressed images that stand as equivalent to noun forms). This is also the experience of the editor. In the editing room the shot footage has no connection to the reality of the events on set and becomes found footage for the editor who is a stranger to events that constituted what one can see on screen.

The same experience of disjuncture could take place between the spectator's lived body and the cinematic representation, an experience that for Sobchack turns to the *unheimlichkeit* concept. The *uncanny* is caused by the friction between the encouraged bodily knowledge while opening up the recognition of a peculiar kind of non-knowing. Out of these tensions come out "a series of gaps or discontinuities between knowing and feeling that sometimes sharpen into a sense of the uncanny". I ask myself if this feeling is not what creates the *spectatorial presence*, an engagement that brings us to look deeper for a meaning connecting us differently with the film, in the same way that Mulvey stated about earlier on that the tension between stillness and movement creates *existential presence*.

4. Conclusions

Being in a phase of methodological research I chose to turn the attention towards some phenomenological instances of cinematic presence in contact with the existential presence of the spectator, addressing in the same time some of the struggles faced as a filmmaker and film researcher.

The presence, or coming into being is a concept that preoccupies me for a long time now given mostly my vocational formation. The phenomenon of coming into being is a thing that happens on the film set after a lot of hours of work. The routine of the text rehearsals, technical rehearsals, the actor adjustment to the set, the role, the costumes while watched by a numerous crew and under the spotlight, most of the time determines a distance to the act of presence in the actor's play and interactions with the other actors, objects etc. The same happens to the film director who can get lost in trying to reproduce and put together the good bits and pieces of previous takes, maybe. But sometimes coming into being, the phenomena of presence happens and these are the moments that are used in final edit of the film. Of course, I am speaking now from the point of view of the realistic convention.

The starting point for the selection of the texts analysed in this article is the junction between „real” and „if real”. Even if not used in a discussion of how the films are made but as films are perceived for me it was the point of access into the meaning of the texts. There are lots of incongruities in the making of a film, but once projected on the screen it has its own life, comes into presence at the meeting with the spectator who is also drawn into an existential presence by this encounter, intra-activity, mutually constituting themselves into phenomena.

5. References

Books:

- Girgus, Sam B. 2018. *Time, Existential Presence, and the Cinematic Image: Ethics and Emergence to Being in Film*. Edingburg: Edingburg University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2016. *Death 24 x a second: stillness and the moving image*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *Corpus*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1977. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts*. London: University of California Press.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts*. London: University of California Press.

Electronic sources

- Sobchack, Vivian. 2000. „What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh“. Retrieved May 3, 2024, from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/conference-special-effects-special-affects/fingers/>.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 2017. „The journeys of a film phenomenologist: An interview with Vivian Sobchack on being and becoming“. Retrieved May 3, 2024, from <https://necsus-ejms.org/vivian-sobchack-interview/>.