

ON THE HAPTIC DIMENSION OF CINEMA: THE ROLE OF ABSENCE

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ABSTRACT

The haptic dimension of cinema has been described in several theoretical studies that revalue the role of corporeality in filmic perception, as opposed to the idealist tradition approaches, which tend to promote the intelligible to the detriment of the sensitive. For defenders of the haptic dimension of cinema, film reception is multisensory, implying a dialogue (pre-reflective and direct) between the audiovisual senses and the haptic senses. This theoretical stance is not without difficulties: even accepting the paradoxical character of notions such as “haptic visibility”, the theses on this dimension of cinema sometimes run the risk of falling into radicalisms that are no less problematic than those that these same theses try to rebut. An alternative approach, which we will deepen in this paper, consists of circumscribing the haptic dimension using concepts such as *avatar*, *virtuality*, and *absence*, starting precisely from the observation that cinema, in its classical technical conception, as an audiovisual medium, offers us no more than images and sounds.

Keywords: Cinema; Optical dimension; Haptic dimension; Body; Absence; Kinesthesia.

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE BODY AND THE HAPTIC DIMENSION

The body is implied in phenomenological experience not only insofar as consciousness resides within the body, but also, more profoundly, insofar as all experience is grounded in (and shaped by) the lived body. Bodily physicality is an anchor that constrains the circumstances of phenomenological life. We inhabit our body, and we inhabit the world from it. Every experience is shaped by this corporeal substrate (which persists), on which individual behaviours and social *habitus* are based.

Even the most transcendent poetic figures, such as those of the *epic* and the *sublime*, would not make sense without the counterpoint of the physical body that serves as a measure of human scale, both in time and space. The body is the phenomenological axis par excellence, the persistent core around which difference can flourish without becoming pure dispersion or arbitrariness. Through the body, a profound complicity between persistence and difference is established.

The epic and the sublime are particularly evident examples of the insinuation of corporeality, whether faced with the vertigo of time or space¹. But there are other *figures of difference* that also highlight the phenomenological role of corporality and share a certain aspect of the body's self-reflexibility, even though they are not narcissistic. It is not so much the interiority that is invoked by such figures, but the very surface of contact, of touch, on which the sensorial environment of the body is composed. It is, if we will, a *haptic dimension*.

This dimension has also been pointed out in cinema, whose audiovisual content sometimes seems to transcend the traditional senses of vision and hearing and directly reach other senses. Critics do not hesitate to adopt terms related to touch, smell, and taste in their descriptions of works that have moved them. And some film theorists argue that this haptic ability should not be understood in a merely metaphorical sense; on the contrary, they assume that what is shown through the images and sounds of cinema can also be effectively touched and felt.

It is true that the theses about the haptic dimension of cinema seem frankly counterintuitive, at least in their most radical versions, especially if we insist on the basic premise that, after all, the cinematographic technical apparatus is limited to producing visual and sound contents (here we exclude 4DX cinema or other multisensory modalities that are not representative of the essence of cinema, in addition to missing the intended meaning of the haptic dimension). Theorists of the haptic dimension of cinema have to show how this way of sensitization differs from the simple corporal somatization resulting from visual and sound stimuli, that is, how the haptic can happen directly in cinema, instead of being a mere secondary reaction (for example, a certain emotion caused by an audiovisual content), or the result of any empathic process of sensitive replication (which neurologists attribute to the so-called "mirror neurons"), or a translation already fully reflective of audiovisual

¹ Regarding the sublime, Werner Herzog speaks of "ecstatic truth", describing it as "a person's stepping out of himself into an elevated state – where we can raise ourselves over our own nature – which the sublime reveals 'at once, like a thunder bolt'" (Herzog, 2010, p. 10). But, despite the leap towards transcendence, the sublime is embodied, manifesting itself as a state of ecstasy. More than the suprasensible sublime described by Kant, we approach here the "physiological sublime" in the line of Edmund Burke, for whom the sublime should be understood as something immanent, an emotional and physical force: "The experience of the sublime is [in Burke] the result of an encounter with powers and forces that are greater than anything the individual can reasonably conceive. These powers are embodied in the characters and the natural landscape taking the form of a sensory agitation, a physical disturbance and imbalance" (Branco, 2022, pp. 158-159).

stimuli that, after being processed by consciousness, return to the body the multisensory echoes of past experiences (such as a certain visual landscape that evoked a certain smell). Vivian Sobchack assumes these theoretical difficulties referring to the apparent “lack of ability to explain its somatism as anything more than ‘mere’ physiological reflex or [the difficulty] to admit its meaning as anything more than metaphorical description” (2004, p. 58). But she claims that the rejection of the hypothesis of a “body ‘making sense’ in its own right” (2004, p. 58) is due to an idealist prejudice deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition which insists on the rigid separation between mind and body, and maintains that the basic processing of sensory stimuli is already fully reflective (that is, of the order of thought or *logos*), while sensoriality and corporeality are relegated to the background.

This idealist perspective, whose modern formulations range from Hegel to the structuralists, assumes that “no experience is possible without a concept” and “there can be no perception or other experience without textualization and linguistic articulation” (Shaviro, 1993/2006, p. 25). For Steven Shaviro, this idealist prejudice, in its various variations, always implies “reducing the question of perception to a question of knowledge, and to equate sensation with the reflective consciousness of sensation” (Shaviro, 1993/2006, p. 26). Therefore, such idealism is not limited to supporting the dualistic separation between mind and body, or between intelligible and sensible, but effectively assumes the hegemony of the intelligible against the sensible. In idealist terms, according to Shaviro, it is the body that is excluded from the equation: “The Hegelian and structuralist equation suppresses the body” (Shaviro, 1993/2006, p. 26).

Opposing this perspective, theorists of the haptic dimension of cinema seek to revalue the role of corporeality, relying on an important theoretical trend that flourished throughout the 20th century, especially from Merleau-Ponty onwards, which pretended to criticize and reform the classic dualism between subject and object, or between mind and body, or between intelligible and sensible. Gradually, the body ceased to be understood as a mere receptacle of the spirit or as *res extensa* (in Cartesian terms) and began to “embody” the spirit itself (*cogito*), the experience, the phenomenological realm in general. According to this perspective, which finds echoes in both phenomenology, cognitivist approaches and neurobiology, the body fully participates in phenomenological life, acting as a center of confluence for all the senses. Ultimately, it will be assumed that phenomena are always multisensory, holistically formed from direct (or synesthetic) transfers between the senses, which mutually contaminate each other throughout phenomenon production. It is these kinesthetic exchanges that apparently underlie the haptic dimension of cinema. Contrary to the conventional idea that the spectator, in front of the screen, puts his body in suspension to concentrate only on the images and sounds, this phenomenological positioning assumes that the body participates integrally in the filmic reception, opening itself to a “haptic visibility” that produces multisensory

Gestalts. In Sobchack's words: "At the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to see and to hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 60).

OBJECTIONS TO HAPTIC VISIBILITY THESES

It is undeniable that the body participates in the constitution and modelling of all experience, including the cinematographic experience. And it is also true that the bodily senses can communicate with each other, either through kinesthetic transfers (for example, a sound that is perceived as a flash of light), or through sensory contextualizations based directly on body memory. But we consider that this implication of the body in phenomenological processes – and, correlatively, the evidence that the different bodily senses are deeply interconnected – tends, at times, to lead to excessive extrapolations by sensualist theories that study the haptic dimension of cinema.

A first objection can be pointed against the tendency of such theses to expel from the sensitive domain the bodily senses most directly involved in filmic reception, namely vision and hearing. While these senses are considered windows of perception that look beyond the body itself, the remaining senses are concentrated on the body surface or interiority. Seeing and hearing will be considered of the order of perception, while touch, taste and smell will be of the order of sensation or feeling. It is a distinction that is reflected in the language itself: we refer to images and sounds as perceptions, while we refer to the remaining senses as sensations or affections; we say that we perceive images and sounds, while we feel flavors, smells, touches, interoceptions and proprioceptions. In these terms, visual and audio perceptions end up being tendentially associated with the intelligible, as if such stimuli, and only these, entered directly into the brain, while the remaining senses belonged to the body.

But why would we consider that vision and hearing have a deficient relationship with the sensible, or consider that these senses maintain a privileged relationship with the intelligible, connecting more directly to objectivity and thought? On the other hand, how could the other (haptic) senses affect the body without passing through the brain? In phenomenological terms, what does it mean to say that the body produces meaning by itself? How to avoid contradiction with the use of terms such as "carnal thought" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 60), especially considering that the haptic dimension is understood as necessarily pre-reflexive? In the process of valuing the haptic dimension, not only is the cognitive or reflective dimension rejected, but there is also the risk of excluding vision and hearing from the sensible domain, being those sensory organs henceforth connoted with a certain "insensitivity" or logocentrism. Such

a stance, instead of contributing to overcoming the dichotomy between the intelligible and the sensible, ultimately end up reappropriating it with the same dualistic rigidity, but this time in favour of the sensible, by distinguishing two types of bodily senses: the haptic (pre-reflective) and non-haptic (reflective).

To justify sensory immediacy, the haptic dimension is described as a process similar to the subconscious, where the senses seem to dialogue directly with each other through kinesthetic channels, without passing through the brain or through reflection. But the subconscious belongs to the brain. And, in any case, it could not be used as a differentiating principle because both the haptic and optical dimensions – and reflexivity itself – are based on subterranean processes of the unconscious. It is these processes that often mislead to immediacy (sensory or otherwise), as happens with intuition, which is an apparently immediate cognitive result because the intermediate steps have not emerged to the surface of consciousness. Intuition and haptic sensoriality seem to share the same immediacy nature; but then why assume that intuition is forged in the brain while haptic sensing is forged in the body? Are not the body and the brain equally involved in both processes? Is it not true that different parts of the brain are dedicated to representing and monitoring different parts of the body, creating a kind of mental double of the organism? In these terms, perhaps it makes no sense to insist on the thesis that the senses literally communicate with each other, without passing through the brain, not even in the simplest cases of kinesthesia. Perhaps multisensoriality, as a bodily representation, always depends on the mediation of the brain, in the same way that phenomena depend on consciousness.

For theorists of the haptic dimension of art, from Aloïs Riegl to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the optical refers mainly to the scope of spatial illusionism, representation, or the symbolic and hermeneutic processes, while the haptic is immediate, visceral, immanent, interacting directly with the body. “Haptic visibility” is associated with direct, unprocessed sensations, while “optical visibility” implies distancing and mediation. Even accepting that optical recognition is not necessarily reflexive (like the apparently instantaneous identification of a face, without rationalizing the characteristics that allowed this recognition), such an optical recognition process will still be considered less immediate than the haptic sensoriality itself.

But what exactly are the terms of this haptic immediacy? Why not defend exactly the opposite, that is, that the haptic is indirect precisely because it operates by groping, as a gradual mapping process, while the optical accesses the object and its perceptual identification more directly? The optical recognition of a face, for example, is not necessarily more reflective than tactile recognition of that same face, but it is certainly more immediate if the objective is to recognize the face.

It could be said that what is at stake in haptic immediacy is direct, raw stimulation, prior to any recognition. But how can there be (conscious) sensation without (re)cognition of sensation? Images and sounds would have to be apprehended directly by the body,

² Regarding the distinction between emotions and feelings or perceptions, see, for instance, Damásio, 2000.

kinesthetically, without going through the brain. This is the core of the haptic thesis. But is it really so? When we feel touched by a film, or when we feel the smells and flavours in audiovisual advertising for perfumes and food, are we really referring, in general, to kinesthetic processes? Isn't this bodily recognition, in most cases, just a secondary (albeit complementary) feedback that the audiovisual perception excited in the bodily memory?

Furthermore, if it is true that vision and hearing are always interpenetrated by the other senses, we must also admit that the haptic dimension is shaped by a bodily memory that includes optical and audiological framings. Emotions, for example, are diffuse and generic; they only acquire their shades – starting with feelings and interoceptive perceptions² – through the global context of experience, the continued relationship with a world. A given emotion, such as that manifested in crying, can fit into diametrically opposed contexts, it can be happiness or sadness, gratitude or revolt, and each of its tonalities is covered by an extended context that also aggregates images and sounds. In short, not only are images and sounds contextually shaped by body memory, but sensations and emotions must also be contextually shaped by images and sounds (and by imagery constructions and memories). This reciprocal contamination between haptic and optical senses undermines the thesis of haptic immediacy and its pre-reflexivity.

As for smells, tastes and tactile stimuli, although they are of the order of sensation and refer to a certain interiority, they do not lose their objectivity, which remains comparable to that of images and sounds. Sensations also constitute objective impressions. It is wrong to think that (haptic) sensations belong to the subjective order, while (optical) perceptions belong to the objective order. Ultimately, a true overcoming of the subject/object or sensible/intelligible dualities will imply giving up the hierarchical relationship between sensations and perceptions, whatever the order of that hierarchy. It will then be assumed that not only are all perceptions felt, but all sensations are perceived. Now, while the first part of this sentence goes along with what the haptic theories of cinema advocate, the second part compromises these theories by refusing, once again, the pre-reflexive condition of haptic sensoriality. The convergence of the concepts of sensation and perception is incompatible with the special affinity between reflexivity and perception (optical or auditory), as advocated by haptic theories of cinema.

HAPTIC IMMEDIACY AND IMMERSIVENESS

Even accepting the immediacy of haptic visibility, the question still arises about the immersive character of this immediacy, as opposed to the distance implied in optical visibility. While the optic measures the object at a distance (thus fulfilling the terms of classical dualism), the haptic proposes a sensorial proximity in which the subject and the object are blended. But, since Hegel, this perceptive merging with the object has been successively associated with alienation, with an uncritical posture, with the passive torpor of entertainment, with the very leakage of the

subject into the object³. Ultimately, it is man's animality that prevails in this numbness, threatening to absorb his humanity, as in the posthistorical view described by Alexandre Kojève.

By suspending distance and investing in proximity, entertainment surrenders to the primordial appeals and desires of bodily hedonism. In cinema, genres considered minor, such as melodrama or pornography, invest in sensationalism, sentimentality and fetishism that we tend to associate with entertainment, as opposed to the refinement and distance of art. In the words of Linda Williams: “What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts – an impression that the very colloquialisms of ‘tear jerker’ or ‘fear jerker’ express – and to which we could add pornography’s even cruder sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to ‘jerk off’” (Williams, 1991, p. 5). As Sobchack admits (2004, p. 57): “Bodily responses to such films are taken as an involuntary and self-evident reflexology” that includes “sexual arousal, horror in screams, fainting, and even heart attacks”. But, as Sobchack adds, such “carnal responses to the cinema have been regarded as too crude to invite extensive elaboration beyond aligning them – for their easy thrills, commercial impact, and cultural associations – with other more ‘kinetic’ forms of amusement such as theme park rides” (2004, p. 57). Ultimately, this more general sensorial dimension threatens to absorb the haptic dimension of cinema, stripping it of its specificity and reducing it to the immersive and alienating processes of entertainment, which are clearly inappropriate – or, at least, insufficient – for the discussion of cinema’s aesthetic dimension. By rejecting reflective processes and by insisting on the sensory immediacy and the horizontality of kinesthetic processes, the haptic theory of cinema finds it difficult to establish its aesthetic specificity.

On the other hand, this connection between the haptic and the immersive also seems to clash with the very formal nature of haptic images, which are often described as incomplete, indeterminate, or enigmatic, as in the following passage: “Haptic visibility rarely offers us figurative images. It suggests, indicates, sketches figures, but hardly represents them completely. Instead of making the object fully available to the eye, it seems to call it into question” (Filho, 2012, p. 81). Now, to the extent that such images remain incomplete, prior to objective representation and symbolization, they tend to summon the spectator to a less passive, more critical attitude – in short, they invite estrangement –, which suggests a collision between distance and immersiveness. In haptic visibility, according to O. G. Filho,

there is always something that is not seen or that is not completely seen. There is always something that remains outside the image, that remains invisible, mysterious, yet to come. Here, the objects of vision are more suggested and sketched than properly represented (...). In any case, the viewer is encouraged to engage more critically with the image. He is invited to abandon a passive posture and

But how can this critical and participatory attitude not be distanced or reflective? How not to betray the immersive immediacy of the sensation?

In cinematographic examples, the haptic often appears as a theme (sequences associated with the body, skin, touch, affection, eroticism) or as a formal figure (close shots, close-ups, macros, textural or non-figurative images). In these terms, the haptic regime of the images is not very different from what is described in cinema technical manuals when they refer, for example, to the direct relationship between the scale of the shot and a certain type of cinematographic effect: closer shots will tend to be more intimate, especially when they show details of the human body or facial expressions. Even in Deleuze, the *perception-image* is associated with the wide shot, while the *affection-image* is associated with the close shot⁴. But supporters of the haptic dimension of cinema do not intend to appeal to a technicality of cinematographic images, on the contrary. Their goal is precisely to uphold the untamed nature of haptic images, which are kept apart from any symbolization or formal normalization.

Strictly speaking, it is not exactly the increase in scale that sustains the haptic, but a certain excess of proximity that deforms the images or makes them unrecognizable. The proximity here is not intended to show more closely or with greater clarity, but to suffocate the vision. Let us consider the following film description used as an example of the haptic approach to cinema:

These are close images, so close to the characters (...) that it becomes difficult to recognize them. (...) The camera glued to the skin and bodies can only extract whispered images from the characters. Imprecise images, full of affection and texture, but far from any narrative or explanation. In addition to being captured in the dark, the images suffered electronic distortions (glitches, noise, dropouts) that make our vision even more difficult. The audio also contributes to this indetermination of the video, as it does not match the images seen. (Filho, 2012, p. 84)

We can recognize in this passage several typical characteristics of avant-garde and experimental cinema: deconstruction, deformation, refusal of the narrative, contingency (associated with chance, chaos, ambiguity) and difference (associated with deviation, disparity, estrangement). There is a recurring tendency to frame the haptic in artistic modernity or in what Rancière described as the "aesthetic regime of art", which manifested itself in cinema especially from the post-war period. According to some authors, it was not so much a discovery but rather a rediscovery of the haptic: for Aloïs Riegl, haptic visibility was already present in ancient Egyptian art and was lost with late Roman art and especially with the adoption, from the Renaissance, of the three-dimensional perspective and optical illusionism. Regardless of the historical moment, the haptic tends

4 In Deleuze's words: "three types of spatially determined shots can be corresponded to the three varieties [of the movement-image]: the wide-shot would be above all a perception-image, the medium-shot an action-image, the close-shot an affection-image" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 102).

to be pointed out in images that suggest physical tactility, such as the two-dimensional plane or the textured surface; and also in the ambiguous images, which not only represent a certain failure of the optical but also seem to align with bodily sensations, which are naturally more diffuse, more interior, in comparison with optical and sound perceptions. Due to their formal characteristics or due to the thematic appeal of their contents, the images will be considered haptic insofar as they tend to fit into a more sensorial and less cerebral regime.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that such images are still fundamentally audiovisual, presented exclusively through visual and sound stimulation. The underlying problem remains: how to understand haptic visibility in cinema in a way that is not confused with simple analogy (as when we associate a certain image with a more sensorial register depending on its theme or its formal appeal)? And how not to reduce haptic visibility to the general emotional effects arising from images and sounds? In the case of cinema, how can we not place the haptic *a posteriori* of the optic? How to avoid the paradoxical nature of the very term “haptic visibility”? On the one hand, as Sobchack argues, “we don't experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 63). But it is not so certain that the viewer's bodily history dialogues directly, or kinaesthetically, with the images and sounds of cinema, so that all the senses are stimulated in unison by the film itself. Nor is it clear how this direct interference of the senses, if it happens, could have any kind of properly aesthetic significance; or how the subtleties of such a process would imply some fundamental change in the understanding of filmic reception (in terms of the distinction between, on the one hand, the horizontality of kinesthetic transferences and, on the other hand, the verticality of bodily feedbacks and emotional reactions that result from audiovisual stimuli).

BODY UNFOLDING: THE AVATARS

Perhaps, after all, the haptic visibility of cinema should not be sought at all costs in sensory immediacy, but, on the contrary, in the very sensory void that is characteristic of cinema as an audiovisual device. Cinema only gives us images and sounds. This sentence does not invalidate the presence of the haptic in the cinematographic experience but invites us to relate it to *absence*. In this perspective, the strength of the haptic dimension of cinema resides precisely in the indirect character of the haptic and in its diffuse nature, irreducible to the objectivity of a given visual, audio, tactile element. The multisensory pregnancy of cinema, its ability to “touch” us, will then be fed by the very absence of touch, smells and flavours. It will be this sensorial emptiness that summons the body memory, exciting it, claiming the body's involvement.

Absence forces a different, indirect – haptic – sensoriality, as opposed to the experience of the real, which is integral. More than

5 Despite this irreducible absence, which is common to the arts in general, artists even so strive not to show too much with their images or words. It is the game of the "unsaid" that Stéphane Mallarmé referred to when saying that "naming an object is equivalent to suppressing three-quarters of the pleasure of poetry, which is made of guessing little by little: suggesting it, that is the dream...". But we should not mistake this concealing game with the sensorial absence related to the technical attributes of the artistic device.

6 Debord considers that the experiences produced by the "spectacle society" are not directly lived or are even contrary to life. There is, therefore, a kind of distancing (as opposed to immersion) here. But this denial of life that Debord speaks of functions equally as a form of alienation or a smokescreen. In his words: "The whole life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign is announced as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived vanishes in the smoke of representation. (...) The spectacle in general, as a concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living" (Debord, 2003, pp. 13-14).

cinema, we could even say that it is literature that dominates the haptic, where even images and sounds are absent. In Patrick Süskind's popular novel *Perfume*, the protagonist, who is endowed with an extraordinarily keen sense of smell, has no odour of his own: this is perhaps a metadiscursive commentary on literature in general. And yet we smell the smells meticulously described in Süskind's novel, and we can even smell the absence of smell in Grenouille, the protagonist. They are participatory, performative sensations, different from real sensations, but no less intense. Literature also summons the body, it also makes us see, hear, feel, it involves us, it creates atmospheres, it makes us inhabit worlds. As for cinema, it did not remove all veils by adding images and sounds, but it created a new relationship with absence. Both literature and cinema explore this haptic dimension in their own way. Just as literature offers us images based on texts, cinema also offers us sensations based on images. We get fascinated with literature's ability to invoke images and sounds, just as we get fascinated with cinema's ability to awaken the other senses. But, in both cases, the multisensory experience is different from what we get from the real. And, above all, it invokes another type of presence, in which the body becomes an *avatar*, a positive correlate of the missing senses. It is the very haptic dimension of difference.

This does not mean that the haptic sense is exclusive to literature, cinema or other arts whose execution depends on technical devices that exclude certain sensory pathways. This absence that we relate here to the haptic does not even require the mediation of artistic objects, but only a particular way of involving the body itself in the experience. It is, above all, an unfolding of sensoriality itself, a process in which something was placed at a distance, on the other side of the mirror, but in which the reflection in the mirror seems to return the gaze. The process involves distance and proximity at the same time: distance from the missing senses (such as those lacking in cinema or literature, and hence the absence associated with this form of presence); and also proximity because this sensory deficit invokes the haptic experience itself, which responds with participatory sensations, sensations that encompass the very bodily act of feeling.

This corporal unfolding does not coexist well with the notion of *immersiveness*. Unlike the immersive relationship with the real, the haptic requires a distance, from which it is dedicated to restoring the missing senses using the bodily history, which knows all the senses. The haptic derives its strength from the absence of the sensory body or parts of it (for example, the absence of touch in cinema, or the absence of sounds in literature)⁵. This does not mean that cinema and literature cannot be immersive – they could never fail to be partly immersive. But immersion, by itself, does not really integrate the haptic body into the experience: on the contrary, it constitutes an integral surrender to the object. Some authors, such as Brecht, accused in this immersive process a passive and uncritical attitude and the danger of alienation; others, like Debord, associated this immersion with escapism and the dangers of the "spectacle society"⁶.

In immersiveness we can feel intensely, literally, but we don't feel ourselves feeling, we are not distanced from sensation or perception or action. The sensory body coincides with the literal body. In turn, the haptic dimension is not to be confused with this immersive state that is linked to objectivity, the automation of experience and the hedonism of the flesh. In response to the estrangement of the sensory body (which is absent or partially absent), the literal body is projected onto another body: the avatar, the *haptic body*. An equally intensive body, but no longer immersive, because it preserves a minimum distance from itself and its sensations. Without this performative distancing, the avatar would cease to exist and would, for all intents and purposes, become the original body.

But the avatar is not just an intermediary that compromises the full objectivity of sensations; it is at the same time a hyper-awareness of one's own body, an intensification of bodily presence. The body, here, is no longer just perceptive, but becomes an integral part of perception. It does not mean that this bodily hyperawareness is necessarily self-centred. Rather than narcissism, the haptic dimension works as a retreat of perspective to a broader framework that joins what is seen or felt to the very act of seeing and feeling. This is what the haptic difference consists of. Sobchack speaks of a “sensual enhancement in which the body reflexively reflects – without a thought – on its own sensuality” and “in which we ‘feel ourselves feeling’: a fantastic dish or incredible glass of wine in which we reflectively taste ourselves tasting, great sex in which we lose ourselves in feeling ourselves feel” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 77). Absence is also implied here, in these direct engagements with the real. It constitutes the very movement of retreat in which the real is placed at a distance and gives way to performativity, while the literal body gives way to the avatar.

The sensoriality then becomes participatory to replace the absence. The haptic dimension produces participatory, performative, co-authorial sensations, which should not be confused with simple imagination or creativity in general. Cinema invites us to fill in the sensory gaps that its images and sounds announce; and, sometimes, also the sensory voids of the characters themselves: in *Land of Silence and Darkness* (Werner Herzog, 1971), the haptic dimension is not given to us by the addressed theme (the world of the deaf-blind), but in the deeply affective and empathetic way how the film manages to transport us, through images and sounds, to this sensorial absence of vision and hearing. The documented people, who can't see nor hear, become the spectator's avatars, who thus project himself into darkness and silence, seeing and hearing the absence of these senses precisely to the extent that they are lacking.

Through the performative body, absence is transformed into virtuality – which, although implied in experience in general, becomes more preponderant in aesthetic fruition. In the words of Paul Zumthor: “Our perception of the real is frequented by the virtual knowledge resulting from the memorial accumulation of the body (...). In this way, the

virtual emerges in every discourse. In the discourse received as poetic, it invades everything" (2007, p. 82).

Such haptic involvements can be subtle, performances hidden in the shadow of real experiences, such as the gaze of the tourist visiting an unknown place or even of the *flâneur* while strolling through familiar places. The haptic dimension of difference imposes an unfolding between the literal body and the performing body, similar in every way to the unfolding of the spectator watching a film. In the performative experience, the body is out of place not so much in the sense of being displaced from its natural habitat, but in the sense of being displaced from the objective and pragmatic relationship with places. Inhabiting without the habit, that is the motto of the tourist and the *flâneur*. Just as the moviegoer remains safe from all diegetic threats, so the tourist and the *flâneur* are protected by a kind of performative envelope. More than observers or literal agents, they are actors, agents of crossings. They move freely through the places, without commitment. They imagine themselves in alternative roles and actually live these experiences, offering them to the body. But, at the same time, they maintain a minimum distance that allows them to experience the difference without fear of compromising the integrity of the literal body, which remains safe.

DIFFUSE SENSORIALITY AND THE ATMOSPHERES

In cinema, where the haptic dimension refers to a sensorial plane that transcends images and sounds, the body unfolds into two correlates: the literal body of the spectator (who observes from his place in the audience, but does not participate) and the haptic, participatory body, which actively replaces the missing senses using the body memory history. In this unfolding, bodily presence is no longer completely in the side of the physical or literal body of the spectator, but it is not completely in the other side either, that is, in the haptic construction that embodies the world of the film. As a result, neither the film can harm the physical body, nor the haptic body can sensorially apprehend the world of the film with the same kind of objectivity with which the physical body apprehends the real world. On the one hand, the body becomes more aware of itself, more haptic; but at the same time, the bodily senses become less objective, more diffuse. Quoting Sobchack: "Insofar as my lived body senses itself in the film experience, the particular sensible properties of the onscreen figural objects that sensually provoke me (the weight and slightly scratchy feel of a wool dress, the smoothness of a stone, the texture and resilience of another's skin) will be perceived in a somewhat vague and diffuse way. This diffusion of the film object's particular sensual properties, however, does not diminish the sensual intensity of my engagement with them since they are what solicit me and are where my intentional interest invests itself" (Sobchack, 2004, pp. 77-78).

In short, the haptic dimension combines two apparently contradictory aspects: on the one hand, the intensification of bodily presence; and, on the other hand, the diffusion of the sensorial body, the distancing of the

body in relation to itself. This body disparity is common to all avatars, regardless of the device, from literature to cinema to modern virtual reality. In cinema, according to Sobchack, “the sense I have of sensing at the movies is in some ways reduced in comparison with direct sensual experience – this because of my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of my cinematic object of desire” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 77). But, on the other hand,

the sense I have of sensing when I watch a film is also enhanced in comparison with much direct sensual experience – this because my only partially fulfilled sensual grasp of the original cinematic object is completed not in the realization of that object but through my own body, where my sensual grasp is reflexively doubled”. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 77)

It is to the extent that such haptic sensations are participatory – that is, that they involve the body and intensify bodily presence – that they preserve their performative force. However, ultimately, they remain incomplete and fuzzy compared to literal sensations of the real, which is direct, objective, and integral.

The haptic unfolding begins in the body – a body that is now detached from itself, an *avatar* – and, from there, it extends into the performative space. Like the literal and objective relationship with the real, the haptic dimension also implies a relationship with exteriority, but refers to a more holistic sensoriality. Still according to Sobchack:

In the film experience, because our consciousness is not directed toward our own bodies but toward the film’s world, we are caught up (...) in this vacillating and reversible sensual structure that both differentiates and connects the sense of my literal body to the sense of the figurative bodies and objects I see on the screen. Within this structure my experience of my sensorium becomes heightened and intensified at the same time that it is perceived as general and diffuse. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 77)

This relationship between bodily presence and diffuse sensoriality has similarities with the concept of “atmosphere”, as analysed by Gernot Böhme. The atmosphere is felt in our skin, but it always keeps a certain indetermination: it is not so much of the order of the place and the event, but between places and events. Böhme speaks of an “ontological non-localizability” (Böhme, 2017). More than an objective property of the place and the moment, the concept of atmosphere refers to the body and its haptic relationship with space, beyond the subject/object dichotomy. In the words of Böhme: “The human being must be conceived essentially as body, such that his/her self-givenness and sense of self are originally spatial: to be bodily self-aware means at the same time the awareness of my state of being in an environment – how I feel here”⁷.

⁷ Böhme, 2017, I, chapter 1, subchapter “The thing and its ecstasy”, 1st paragraph (non-paged e-book).

The vagueness of the concept of atmosphere brings it closer to other concepts that were more exhaustively analysed in the aesthetic tradition, such as that of *aura*. Böhme points out that, although the notion of atmosphere is also used in descriptions of art, it is not as directly thematized as the notion of aura, which was adopted earlier in aesthetic studies (notably by Walter Benjamin). However, they are similar concepts. The atmosphere is to the place what the aura is to the object: in both cases, there is something that remains elusive, a deviation that does not allow us to establish the objectivity of the place (in atmospheric terms) or of the object (in auratic terms). Both concepts point to an essential indeterminability. In the words of Böhme, “what makes a work an artwork cannot be grasped solely through its concrete qualities. But what exceeds them, this ‘more’, the aura, remained completely undetermined. ‘Aura’ signifies as it were atmosphere as such, the empty characterless envelope of its presence”⁸.

In compositional terms, the concept of atmosphere has an affinity with the notion of style. Both concepts share the same essential indeterminacy. Stanley Kubrick's style is very different from Terrence Malick's, and Tim Burton's style is very different from Woody Allen's (to mention only relatively close authors in the historical context of cinema). However, even in cases as radically different as these, although it is easy to distinguish specific differentiating characteristics, both in terms of themes and approaches, what actually allows us to recognize the style of these filmmakers is not reduced to the mere sum of differentiating characteristics. It is a more intuitive or holistic perception. From a phenomenological point of view, style relates, first of all, to tones, atmospheres and atmospheric differences⁹.

The sensoriality of the atmospheres interests us above all in the context of the displacement of the body itself, taking this displacement in the sense of being-out-of-place. It is when the body is displaced that it becomes phenomenologically more explicit, and this includes the cinematic experience. The body can change places without feeling displaced, and it can also feel displaced without moving, like the spectator in a movie theatre. By losing its place, the body strips itself naked and passes into focus, not necessarily insofar as it focuses on itself, but in the sense of a concentration on the haptic relationship with the environment. In *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), the main character, who suffers from severe amnesia, has his body tattooed with messages from the past that serve as his last stronghold of memory and identity. The body, here, seems to symbolize one's own presence in a perpetually different world, where there is no longer any other anchor of memory or reality. Skin tattoos serve as a metaphor for body memory itself. Facing the (sensory) unknown, the body becomes not only more perceptive, but also more perceptible, more involved in the face-to-face with exteriority, such as the feeling of being displaced, out of place or in a different place, *hic et nunc*.

8 Böhme, 2017, I, chapter 1, subchapter “Benjamin's aura”, 1st paragraph (non-paged e-book).

9 Admittedly, the (persistent) styles of filmmakers are also what make them recognizable and familiar. But it is still a familiarity of difference. We do not return to the same authors in search of absolute novelty, but rather a familiar difference, a certain tone or atmosphere that we are used to finding strange. Strangeness does not necessarily become less viable when it occurs within familiarity, which can even facilitate the recognition of difference, allowing it to be marked out, so that it does not become mere dispersion and arbitrariness.

Strictly speaking, the haptic dimension is not more sensitive or “intensive” than the optical dimension, but it awakens a different type of sensitivity and presence – or rather, a mode of presence sustained by difference itself. Presence can be excited by different ways that intersect and complement each other in the triangulation of the aesthetic experience: a first form of presence is related to duration, to the temporal *persistence* that reinforces and certifies the objects that last¹⁰; a second form is related to the *contingency* of the real, expropriating objects from their labels or prejudices to expose their naked existence¹¹; and a third form is related to *difference*, to the strangeness of experience, not exactly by subtracting labels, as in Sartre’s existentialism, but by a kind of transposition to the other side of the mirror. The difference is always referring to a shift in perspective, like an inverted *mise en abyme* or a schizophrenia made up of successive unfolding of the gaze. It is in these terms that we see ourselves from the outside in the act of seeing. This specific form of presence is opposed to persistence because it no longer concerns repetition or memory, but deviation, difference; and it is also not to be confused with contingency because it does not refer to the casualness of the real (which is orphaned, without authorship), but to a participatory appeal (co-authorship) that reinforces the bodily presence by including the body itself in the perceptive framework (as an actor or avatar).

This intensification of bodily presence is, as we said, not necessarily self-centred or narcissistic: the body asserts itself, above all, as a contact plane or reflecting surface. However, to the extent that the haptic dimension intensifies bodily presence, it tends to inspire another variant of existentialism, no longer associated with the contingency of the world, but with the haptic difference, with the estrangement of the body itself. In terms of this existentialist consciousness, the body is assumed as a sensory project based on the flesh, which is manipulable or even disposable. At the limit, we arrive at a corporal nihilism in which the body becomes strange in the manner of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* – a strangeness exploited in cinema with special sharpness in works by authors such as David Cronenberg or, more recently, Julia Ducournau, where bodies self-mutilate or transform gradually into freaks. For example, in *Crash* (1996), by Cronenberg, bodies become disposable instruments at the service of dangerous libidinal forces in which the haptic dimension of difference is clearly assumed as a theme, in a kind of visual essay on the “sex-appeal of the inorganic” (Perniola). And, in *Crimes of the Future* (2022), also by Cronenberg, a dystopian world where physical pain no longer exists serves as a premise for the free aesthetic manipulation of flesh and physiognomy, in a double questioning about the limits of the human and the arts.

In its maximum subtlety, the game of difference proposes to describe the very absurdity of the human condition and its behaviours.

10 See Martins, 2020.

11 See Martins, 2023a.

Here, it is not so much a question of highlighting the contradictory nature of the characters in order to humanize them and distance them from the stereotype (such as the villain with heroic intentions or the hero with dubious vices and motivations), but of creating paradoxical images from the own collision between good and evil or between life and death. To illustrate the poetic richness of this human landscape and its contradictions, Tarkovsky gives the following example:

A group of soldiers will be shot for treason in front of the [enemy] troops. They wait among puddles of water, next to a hospital. It's fall. They are ordered to take off their coats and boots. One of them walks through the puddles for a long time, wearing only socks with holes, while he looks for a dry place where he can put his coat and boots, which, in a minute, he will never need again. (Tarkovsky, 1998, p. 25)

The human condition exhibits a fundamental contradiction that only poetry can seize. For man, existence is absurd because all his psychic strength is constantly threatened by nihilism, which is also a nihilism of the body. This is the existential lucidity illustrated in the myth of Sisyphus, for whom the successive efforts to rise will always be corrupted by the inevitability of the fall. This absurdity of human existence, which Albert Camus synthesized through the questioning of suicide, constitutes yet another inexhaustible source for the poetic exercise of difference.

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