MOVING BODIES

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What determines the choices we make in terms of our research topics, our academic interests, our speciality, our field? Like any other discourse, our research practice is contingent, depends on contexts, intertexts: obviously, on the society, the culture we live in; more specifically, on institutional power structures, academic fashions, career strategies; but also availability of material, chance, the specific profile of our personal oedipal quests. For me, the geographical and institutional relocation to Utrecht University three years ago brought about, amongst other things, a historical shift in my academic field of vision. The Nederlands Film Museum but a short train ride away, surrounded by colleagues such as William Uricchio, Frank Kessler, Bert Hogenkamp and Annette Förster, the luxury of attending the Silent Film Festivals in Bologna and Pordenone – my first encounter with early cinema was through osmosis.

What made me embrace it as a field of exploration, however, was the new cinematic experience it provided, the different way it affected me as a viewer. Seeing ethnographic films, travelogues, fictional films and actualities, these films touched me through their unique blend of alterity and familiarity: of historical and cultural difference, of exoticism and proximity, of absence and presence, of representation and viewing experience. In contrast to the kinds of cinema I was familiar with, watching these early films affected me quite differently, almost physically. It seemed to be a more sensual, almost tactile experience in which the gaze wanders, brushing objects, touching fabrics. Undoubtedly, the light, the tonal quality, the colour, and often the brittleness and fragility of the material contribute to this effect.

I think, however, that one of the most significant aspects responsible for this peculiar affect early cinema provokes in us, is the way in which human bodies are represented. In this essay, I would therefore like to centre on the body, it’s unusual presence and materiality, as one way of exploring the alterity of early cinema. As Mariann Lewinsky has noted:

"The possibilities to speak and think about this [early] cinema are limited. We lack a vocabulary, models, references, and courage."
Despite the tremendous insights gained in the past two decades of film historical research into this era, that sense of lack is still palpable, particularly when we try to account for the affective engagement these films invite in us today: often the feeling of a sense of sadness and loss, but equally often sheer delight and marvel at the ‘aesthetische und emotionale Strahlungskraft der Filme’.  

In this essay, I want to sketch some implications of these affective viewing responses by examining early cinema’s representation of the body. Two contexts seem particularly productive for this exploration of early cinematic renditions of the body: feminist film historiography and somatic theories of cinema. As feminist approaches to early cinema are addressed more extensively elsewhere (see An overview, p. 114 in this issue), it will suffice to briefly summarise the major positions concerning images of the body and to elaborate more fully on the second theoretical framework.

**Feminist historiography**

Most studies analysing representations of the female body examined gender constructions in early cinema in relation to Classical Hollywood Cinema’s patriarchal conventions. The first semiotic-structuralist readings of the 1980s highlighted fragmentation, display and thus the appeal to voyeurism and fetishism in representations of the female body, particularly during the first decade. More recent studies reject this notion of linear formal and ideological continuity. Here, early cinema is valued for its difference to classical patterns: the alternative it offers in terms of the female gaze, the centrality of the female protagonist, the emphasis on physical experience and female sexuality, on bodily assertion and the autonomy of the actress.

While these aspects are particularly noticeable in the cinema of the 1910s, studies emphasising early cinema’s alterity also provide re-readings of earlier films which describe the body as a site of struggle for competing gender discourses designed to equally address male as well as female viewers.

**Somatic theories of cinema**

Another framework for examining alterity and difference in early cinema’s renditions of the body is provided by recent explorations of the body in the context of somatic theories of cinema. While feminist re-
search tends to focus on the (con-, inter-)textual construction of the body, somatic approaches tend to focus on the body in terms of its representation on screen in relation to the viewer's body in front of the screen. The fact that film as a sensuous experience produces subjectivities also at a physical level, as an affect, has long been neglected by film theory's cognitive, psychoanalytic and social/ideological approaches. This is due to the fact that seeing is here theorised as a mental, rather than a physical activity. Laura Mulvey's conceptualisation of the disembodied, active and sadistic gaze associated with knowledge and dominance is but one, albeit striking, example for the rejection of the notion of visual perception based on seeing as a bodily sense.

As Linda Williams has argued, this disembodiment of the gaze is generally supported by the separation of the body as a medium of fiction that cannot cross the border to the realm of the non-fiction, particularly the realm of viewer and his/her physical presence. According to Williams, however, specific genres such as horror, porn and melodrama are designed to transgress this line between the body on screen and that in front of it. These genres of bodily excess offer extreme images of the body: tortured bodies, sexually excited, and emotionally overwhelmed bodies, i.e., bodies that provoke physical response in the viewer such as fear, excitement, tears. In these genres, the body transcends the control of the narrative matrix, becomes visible in its corporeality and seeks out a visibility we as viewers feel. Films that draw attention to these physical qualities of the body in a way that transcends representation, violate the norm of the structural and functional incorporation of the body in the film's narration and threaten aesthetic distance.

William's observations, however, can be made productive for other generic and rhetorical forms as well. Thus Thomas Morsch points to the affinity of comedies to the body genres listed above, while Jennifer Barker describes documentary, especially ethnographic film, as a privileged site for the representation and perception of the body as a material body beyond the controls of the narrative matrix. In documentaries, Barker argues, the real materiality of the body with its specific reference to the real prevents the efforts to incorporate it through the narrative authority of the voice-over. These bodies refer to our own 'creatureliness' (Susanne Langer) and thus refer to the physical quality of the body which transcends representation.

We should consider early cinema in this context as yet another site where bodies may take on a life of their own, gain a physical independence which transcends categories of the fictional and representational and which overcomes, at least temporarily, the domination of the gaze as mastery based on distance - a cinema that gives us moments when seeing im-
plies a physical contact, a touch, an annihilation of distance and a cinema that tends towards a representation of the body which foregrounds its materiality over its status as an image, that displays the body as a corporal entity that cannot be fully recuperated as a sign. The fascination of early films that has its roots in the material presence of the body, which we may experience more affectively than in other forms of cinema, is described succinctly by Maurice Blanchot, who contrasts this fascination of the physical gaze to the distancing gaze based on mastery and knowledge.

'Seeing presupposes distance, the separating definiteness, the ability not to come into contact and to avoid confusion while in contact. (...) But what happens when that which one sees, although at a distance, seems to touch one with a deeply stirring contact, when vision is a kind of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance? When the seen compels the glance, as if the glance were moved, touched, brought into connection with the vision? (...) What contact gives us at a distance is the image, and the fascination is the attraction of the image, the image as passion and suffering. What fascinates us removes our possibility of making sense.10

Body doubles: Irma Vep-Musidora and Irma Vep-Maggie Cheung

I'm going to examine this particular mode of specular engagement and study more closely the conditions under which the body no longer appears as a chiffre for a fictional character but is allowed to transcend it, inviting a somatic-affective experience that goes beyond meanings established via narration. To illustrate this point, a scene from Louis Feuillade's LES VAMPIRES (1915-1916) seems particularly well suited, as it allows, in a second step, a comparison to the restaging of the same scene according to Classical Hollywood Cinema standards in Assayas's IRMA VEP (1996).11

Feuillade's series centres on its female protagonist, the notoriously famous Irma Vep, who frequently changes partners, appearances, social roles and even gender in her breathless pursuit of crime. What is above all striking for contemporary viewers is her acting style, her physical expressiveness and the material presence of her body. Part 6 (LES YEUX QUI FASCINENT) of the series focuses on Irma Vep (Musidora) wearing a black catsuit that both hides and reveals her body. In long takes that are framed mostly as long shots, we observe Irma Vep/Musidora sneaking along corridors, searching a hotel room, being caught, struggling and ultimately surrendering to the physical strength of her opponent.
This particular scene can be used to illustrate five aspects which seem particularly pertinent to the way in which early cinema invites a perception focusing on the body as semantic excess that transcends narration.

1. What directs our attention towards the body is, above all, at least at first sight, its strangeness, the unfamiliarity of the particular cultural body codings. Thus the body is never natural, pre-semantic, but the product of a specific culture, subject to body fashions, that we have trouble deciphering when they are too much removed from our own culture. It seems alien, yet seems strangely touching in its inflected familiarity, its statuesque posing and agility, its authority and dignity. Containment is here achieved not through the smoothness of body surface, but through posture. Even when posing, this body can hardly be reduced to a two-dimensional image, but seems to vividly assert its full three-dimensional presence.

2. A similar point can be made in relation to the clothes, which are perceived less as signs to be readily decoded in their social references and meanings, since we are unfamiliar with their language. So, instead, we try out their looks as empty signifiers, examine their cut, proportions and
lines and linger on the fabric, its material texture, its satin heaviness or its light gauze, the way it drapes and moves.

3 Due to the emphasis on physical expressiveness, the acting is strongly perceived as a performance. In contrast to the realistic acting styles we are familiar with, the actress presents her role, exhibits it. This is a display that solicits the complicity of the camera, a play for and with the camera, rather than the man in the audience. This distance between the actress and the - potentially objectifying - gaze of the camera has been described as a characteristic feature of early cinema both in its earlier (as in what happened on 23rd street and getting strong) and later periods (as in the films of Asta Nielsen). Through this distance, the body is foregrounded as an instrument that can take on various roles and thus be isolated as a site.

4 In addition, fragmentation of the body is prevented by long shots which allow the body to be examined in the context with which it interacts. As figure movements are rarely synchronised with camera movements, more autonomy is granted to the body in motion. Thus we explore the cinematic space primarily with and through the body of the ac-

Because we are unfamiliar with the languages of the clothes, we try out their looks as empty signifiers, examine their cut, proportions and lines and linger on the fabric, its material texture, its satin heaviness or its light gauze, the way it drapes and moves. Still from: les vampires
The confrontation between the two bodies in Olivier Assayas' IRMA VEP (1996): the shiny armoured surface of Irma Vep's suit and the vulnerability and voluptuousness of the naked woman

tress rather than through the enunciation by the camera. In addition, shots, tableaux, deep space compositions, and long takes with little decoupage invite a distracted gaze that lets us wander off to investigate diegetic space on our own.

Perhaps most importantly, narrative organisation seems looser, less orderly, controlled and streamlined, exerting considerably less control over fictional characters than in later forms of cinema. The confusion over character, narrative coherence and trajectory may result in a kind of wild semiosis, an emptiness of meaning which opens a space for sensual, affective perception and experience.

These characteristics of early cinema which invite somatic-affective forms of reception can be underscored by their contrast to other politics of representation. Assayas's IRMA VEP, which portrays the attempt— and failure— of a French director to remake Feuillade's LES VAMPIRES with a Chinese action film actress, illustrates these differences in a particularly striking way. In the first sequence I want to examine, Assayas shows us the shooting of the remake of the previously discussed scene of Irma Vep/Musidora and the screening of this footage as film within the film. In both instances, the Irma Vep/Maggie Cheung who is seen in a tight, shiny latex suit sneaks up a staircase and enters a hotel corridor, closely followed by the camera which captures her from a variety of distances and angles in a sequence of shots. Apart from the fragmentation of the body and the camera's enunciative presence, the most striking difference is brought about by the replacement of Musidora's jersey catsuit, which softly contours the body it covers, by Cheung's latex suit whose reflexive
surface (enhanced by lighting) freezes the body in an image in which the body as live organism all but disappears.

This negation of the body is further enhanced in Assayas’s film when, after the director acknowledges his failure, the actress succeeds in bringing the Irma Vep character to life by roaming the hotel at night, secretly entering a room, watching a naked woman and stealing her jewellery. This confrontation between the two bodies, the shiny armoured surface of ‘Irma Vep’s’ suit and the vulnerability and voluptuousness of the naked woman, ‘Irma Vep’s’ bold agency and the other woman’s masochism (on the phone she pleads with her lover who let her down) seems to visualise the conceptual and affective gap between contemporary and early cinema. In Assayas’s rendition, the negation of the ‘Irma Vep’s’ body returns in the other woman’s naked body with a vengeance. Here, the body seems to appear as the interior turned outside, externalised in a gesture of exposure that humiliates the person inhabiting it. At the same time, the confrontation highlights the disembodiment of ‘Irma Vep’ in her reduction to a mere surface, an image. In contrast, Feuillade’s and Musidora’s Irma Vep derives her fascination from the fact that she is able to inhabit a body that can transcend the patriarchal one-dimensionality of the above images, a body that can be observed and experienced, but never fully deciphered.

Conclusion

If feminist critics turn to early cinema to analyse historical constructions of female subjectivity, the challenge and pleasure for many lies in the ex-
perience of difference. In this context, early cinema is constructed as an alternative to Classical Hollywood Cinema, as a cinema in which gender difference is less settled and coded, and this is more of an open terrain of negotiation. For many film scholars, the fascination of early cinema is closely related to a longing for, what De Lauretis has called 'to see difference differently', i.e. the different ways in which experience of difference (as woman) can be made visible differently.¹\(^{3}\)

What early cinema can indeed grant us are glimpses of moments in which we are confronted with different representations of the body and its experience, as well as different constructions of gendered bodies. Thus we may encounter representations of femininity as a space of experience and as a different way of being in one’s body. In a way then, early cinema occasionally seems to prefigure the concerns of filmmakers of much later decades such as Chantal Akerman’s attempt in JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES (1975) to create a space for female experience, everyday actions, the body and its gestures without aestheticizing them as an image.

The experience of early cinema as a site in which the familiar is made strange and experienced differently, may, however, also be related to another form of longing, another fantasy. Of the three basic fantasies which Linda Williams associates with specific film genres – the primal scene (porn), castration (horror) and fantasy of origin (melodrama) – it is perhaps above all the fantasy of origin which feeds these desires for difference: the imaginary of the experience of bodily fullness and unity, of a bodily experience beyond image and language. Fantasy is always based on a loss, whereby it presupposes the absence of that which is fantasised. The particular fascination of early cinema may thus also be related to its possibility of letting us experience the body in its strangeness, our inability to grasp it in its pre-linguistic dimension. In this way, the experience of early cinema may work against the loss of experience, against the increasing alienation from bodily sensations brought about by modern technology.¹⁴

As Benjamin has pointed out, the disabling effects of technology can only be overcome through technology and technical media can thus facilitate the recuperation of subjectivity. Film may allow us to re-experience lost experiences. One of the pleasures and fascinations of early cinema are rooted in those moments when it becomes a site in which the body is shown and experienced differently, when the body is allowed to step out of its own image.
Noten

8 L. Williams, 'Film bodies: gender, genre, and excess', in: *Film Quarterly* 44.4, 1994, p. 2-13.
11 I would like to thank Annette Förster whose – published – lecture on Irma Vep inspired the following thoughts. A. Förster, 'De verering van een schim. Musidora en de overlev(ering) van Irma Vep', in: *Tijdschrift voor mediageschiedenis* 1, 1998, p. 4-31.
12 See: C. Balides, 'Scenarios of exposure in the practice of everyday life'; H. Schlüpmann, 'Cinema as anti-theater.'
14 For a more extensive elaboration of this aspect see: T. Morsch, 'Der Körper des Zuschauers', p. 284.