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Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement, by Saige Walton. Amsterdam University Press, 2016 (278 pages).

Michelle Devereaux

Baroque is a word that often conjures the idea of artworks excessive and overripe to the point of meaninglessness, so purposefully extravagant and fanciful that semantics become ancillary to sensation. Exhaustively researched and full of scholarly rigour, Saige Walton's *Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* attempts to rehabilitate, or at least resituate, the baroque within fine art and, especially, cinema. This goal is achieved by painstakingly drawing a suitably circuitous line between seventeenth-century visual art and poetics through to the twentieth-century phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and pioneering studies on affect and embodiment in film aesthetics published by scholars such as Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks.

Walton argues that the phenomenological turn in film studies is as much of a response to the baroque potentialities of the medium than it is to anything else, a debt that has rarely been acknowledged, at least to the extent she does so here. In Walton's definition of baroque cinema, the "hands" of film phenomenology and the baroque touch one another in a continual, reciprocal embrace. It is this "coiling" of the "sensing upon the sensible" (51) that Walton names cinema's baroque "flesh", a term adapted from Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, where "the 'inside' becomes the 'outside' as the internal dynamics of emotion become available for our inter-subjective apprehension" (165). The baroque, Walton insists, entails not only seeing but also *being seen,* a reciprocal communication between art and perceiver. It does not simply enchant or move us with its conceptual or decorative excess, it conveys what Merleau-Ponty himself refers to in *The World of Perception* as "the world of lived experience" (qtd. in Walton 12). The embodied perception of the flesh, its reciprocity and reversibility, leads to an "entanglement" of bodies (18), continually illuminating the "doubled sensation" of the subjective and objective (15). If that sounds like unadulterated film phenomenology, that seems to be the point. Walton entwines the baroque with film-phenomenological thought in ways that make the two seem inextricable. These "strikingly neglected parallels" (14) are then applied to readings of aesthetically and narratively diverse cinema, including films from Michael Haneke, Claire Denis, Sofia Coppola, and—surprisingly, delightfully—Buster Keaton.

Walton works with a variety of metaphors, old and new, when discussing film phenomenology's relation to the baroque—the coil (165), the fold (11), the knot (81), the tickle (173)—in often highly evocative prose, but her approach is first and foremost scholarly, intent on

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imbuing a baroque interpretation of cinema with the precision with which it has so rarely been treated: "When the term 'baroque' is applied to cinema, it usually functions as a metonym for excess—a stand-in for the stylistic verve of idiosyncratic directors and/or ideas of formal extravagance", she laments (102). Worse still, according to Walton, is the critical tendency to treat the baroque merely as an aesthetic expression of feeling divorced of narrative or other meaning. As a response to such thinking, she considers how feeling can offer a "form of storytelling in its own right" (105). The book represents an exciting addition to emotion and mood theory in film, especially in its relation to phenomenology and aesthetics, and it is difficult not to be convinced by Walton's rigorous, systematic arguments, which add a welcome clarity to the oft-imprecise discussion of the baroque. By tracing specific films' connections to historical baroque artworks, she emphasises the transhistoric nature of baroque aesthetics and by connecting baroque aesthetics to phenomenology, she renders the baroque a subject more than worthy of philosophical study.

The book is separated into an Introduction, Conclusion and four lengthy, often heady chapters. Walton chooses to continually return to the baroque as both an "aesthetic category" of film and a "vital undercurrent of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thought" (11). Each chapter begins by highlighting a particular baroque element (e.g. reversibility of subject and object, the use of textural surfaces, or "skin", the use of space) and aligns it with a mode of phenomenological thought. She then devotes a significant amount of space to analysing various historical baroque artworks (e.g. Velázquez's *Las Meninas,* Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila,* Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*) from aesthetic-philosophical standpoints. Finally, she follows with close readings of a film or films that speak to a particular baroque aesthetic philosophy. This structure can make the film analyses seem like afterthoughts at first, but Walton's arguments build in a way that makes this necessary. As a result, the book often presents itself like a collection of multiple texts in one: a phenomenological primer, an art-historical survey, and an exploration of how they both tie together via a book on film aesthetics. Like baroque flesh itself, this multifaceted style creates an entanglement of viewpoints that complements the reciprocal nature of Walton's project but still manages to cohere logically.

In the Introduction, Walton lays out her principal argument and traces its phenomenological roots. While she notes that "flesh" in its meaning here is not meant to be taken literally, she also acknowledges that *bodies* are crucial to the creation of a baroque cinema, and baroque flesh in general: "baroque art and film creates a heightened spatial, emotive, and experiential continuum between bodies", she writes (18). It is this continuum that represents the "art of entanglement" of the title (18). Instead of linking the baroque to the traditional notions of "extravagance" in set design, special effects, or "stylistic hyperbole" (21), Walton understands the cinematic baroque as something far more "sensuous" and "tangible" (25), a transhistoric phenomenon that values the visual but is also embodied, dynamic and concrete.

Chapter One concerns the baroque as a "phenomenology of vision" (29), one that is self-reflexive, inviting the perceiver to engage with it through direct address. Walton draws on a diverse selection of art historians and theorists (Michel de Certeau, Remy G. Saisselin, Christine Buci-Glucksmann) to relate the baroque to, according to Saisselin, a "desire and compulsion to be seen" (qtd. in Walton 32). Through such stylistic modes as the mise en abyme, frames within frames, frontal looks to the viewer, and references to a work's own medium, the historic baroque, says Walton, "lend[s] artistic form to Merleau-Ponty's *chiasm* of the 'flesh'" (33). As an example, she follows with a close analysis of the historic-baroque painting *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez, 1656). Walton sees the literal mirror within *Las Meninas* as "a baroque mirror that distorts,

multiplies, and prolongs its reflections" (41). Rather than create a space for a classical subject in which to view the scene, there is no singular or fixed point of view to the image. In this chapter Walton also addresses the one potential stumbling block for connecting the baroque with traditional notions of film phenomenology: how can something as self-conscious and self-reflexive as baroque art be aligned so closely with the pre-reflective? "If 'flesh' is a general manner of being that exists prior to our consciousness of it, then it is something that can also be consciously reflected upon or figured in baroque art and film", she argues (58). It is these dual foci of "genuine" feeling and conscious reflection that ultimately distinguishes baroque cinema from the embodied cinema discussed by theorists such as Sobchack and Jennifer M. Barker.

Walton goes on to exemplify this distinction with readings of the big-budget 1995 techno-thriller *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) and the decidedly more austere French thriller *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005). The juxtaposition of such different works gives a good sense as to the breadth Walton's idea of what "baroque cinema" can encompass. Her fascinating analysis of Bigelow's film, which sees its science-fictional viewing apparatus of "snuff" films as a metaphor for the embodied cinematic experience, points to an entanglement of spectator and on-screen avatar, a multiplicity of embodied sensation rather than a classical interpretation of singular subjectivity. In *Caché*, Walton again sees "a baroque plurality of vision and of meaning" (68) by way of the film's circulated, anonymous surveillance tapes: "*Caché* makes explicit how cinematic vision is not the same as that of the director nor any other human body; rather, it belongs to a discrete and technologically enabled 'I'/eye" (70). Both films relate to technology, but Walton explicitly aligns this techno artifice to organic embodiment through a multiplicity of subjective visions.

In Chapter Two Walton builds on the concept of direct address of the spectator through a discussion of "co-extensive space", which ambiguously locates the viewer both on-screen and off-screen, invoking Sobchack's idea of "cinesthesia" in connection to the baroque (79). For Walton, baroque cinema entails a "knotting together of space and sensation … as the film's body entwines with our own" (81). In a discussion of the "unwieldy" subject of cinematic excess, Walton connects the baroque to both emotional and spatial excess. She returns again to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the "knot" as an abiding metaphor for a baroque "cinema of the passions" (81) in which the senses are "co-extensive," "embodied," and the "result of conscious reflection" (84, 86). Her analyses begin by comparing Sobchack's cinesthesia to the historic baroque's *Bel Composto* ("beautiful union"), the seventeenth-century practice of unifying art forms such as painting, theatre, sculpture, and architecture. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, she points to how baroque art was not "restricted to the visual but diffusively spread out across the sensorium" (89). Such a passionate baroque relies on the overwhelming of the perceiver's senses. These ideas align with a more stereotypical version of baroque than Walton wants to suggest. However, she takes pains to delineate how the baroque more than just serves to overwhelm the spectator. Instead, she suggests, there is meaning in the perceptual madness. Its mode of narration, in fact, is in its very form. It possesses "an open attitude towards the frame" that articulates a continual push–pull as the painting confronts us and draws us in at the same time (108). This creates an emotional, perceptual narrative felt as much as reflected upon. In her reading of the book's most obviously baroque film, the erotic and bloody *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), she employs the concept of the "cruel baroque" (112). According to Walton, Denis's vampiric horror film engages with extremes of both pleasure and pain in "regenerative loops of desire", assaulting the viewer's senses as much as it does its characters' bodies through alternating haptic imagery and absorption into narrative space (112). "Denis fully inhabits horror by getting 'under' its skin and burrowing deep into matter

to expose the material textures of death and desire", she writes, evoking the dark melancholy and twinning of love and death so characteristic of the historical baroque (125).

Chapter Three takes a less obvious tack by attempting to tie a baroque "skin" to semiotics as well as sensuality. Here Walton develops a language-based conception of baroque poetics. She hints at—although never explicitly names—the baroque's relation to the sublime, or "the close connection between ideas of the infinite and the development of baroque poetic language" (126). She turns to Merleau-Ponty's conception of the chiasm to link language and experience in an "inherently renewable exchange" akin to the "flesh" (133). "Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is as much a semiotic as it is an existential philosophy. This is because he grounds semiotics in the reversibly lived structure of the visual and the visible", she claims (130). If the marriage of signs and sensations, the abstract and the concrete, seems counterintuitive, Walton argues that "even the early semiotic work of Christian Metz had once flagged film as a techno-sensory machine" (132). Walton sees such divisions as "deny[ing] the embodied intelligence of the image" (133). The meaning of images, Walton seems to be saying, can arise directly from the feeling of images. Accordingly, she analyses a film that is often decried as valuing empty sensation over semantic significance, the much-derided biopic *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006). Walton not only links the film to its historic baroque context (a surfeit of luxury, theatricality and spending), but also to its enmeshing of appearances and power. In Coppola's retelling, "[f]ully commensurate with baroque flesh … is how movement, materiality, decorative décor, surfaces, and textures function as highly charged repositories of meaning" (153). Conversely, "we are invited to participate" with the sensorial expressions of the "film's body" in an intertwining of "subjective feeling with the expressivity of sensuous surfaces" that characterises baroque flesh (157, 158). This Walton sees an indicative of what Deleuze refers to as "baroque texturology", which can have multiple sensorial outcomes (162). In her analysis of Buster Keaton's silent action-comedies such as *Sherlock Jr.* (Keaton, 1924), Walton writes about the "tickle" of baroque wit. Keaton's films provide visceral sensations for the viewer through "shocks, jolts, lurches, slaps" that arise from "the sensuous sympathy that connects film and viewer" (171, 182).

In her final chapter Walton engages more closely with recent theories on film embodiment, specifically the haptic and its connection to the baroque. A "baroque haptics", she concludes, is not reliant solely on vision, but also extends to "touch, sound, and sensibility in general" (185). According to Walton (unlike Marks's conception of the filmic haptic, which relies on abstract surface sensation and "horizontal movement" along the image), "a baroque haptics can move between surface and depth. It is hastened by tactile, mobile, and successive perceptions and it is filtered through shifting masses of detail" (187). Where Marks's haptic visuality is abstract, the baroque haptic can be both abstract and figurative, most likely continually oscillating between the two. As an example of such a haptics, she analyses in detail the experimental autobiographical documentary *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003). Walton links Caouette's extraordinarily personal film to the baroque in its formal complexity and multiplicity as well as its use of the so-called "baroque database": an "analogical world view" that heterogeneously catalogues memory and "makes visible, tangible, and sensible to us the 'invisibility' of subjective remembrance" (221, 223).

Throughout her book, Walton makes specific reference to the technology of filmmaking as specifically suited to the representation of baroque flesh. She transmutes Merleau-Ponty's famous phenomenological concept of "one hand touching the other" into "one hand filming the other", representing "a two-sided exchange of tactility in film that demands from us the work of our own

haptic, thoughtful, and analogical participation" (227). In the book's conclusion, her brief reading of the intertextually rich *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012) posits the film as a baroque analogy for the cinema-going experience itself, with "cinema as an endless, 'holy' motor that keeps running, regardless of its technological basis" (231). Walton's arguments linking the baroque, phenomenology, and the experience of film offer the most convincing explanation for the popularity of film-philosophy's recent phenomenological turn. She successfully, painstakingly, and sometimes even poetically, maps out the connections between the film's "body" and our own, a relationship that is loaded with as much meaning as the baroque itself is rife with sensations and ideas.

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Michelle Devereaux received her doctorate in film studies from the University of Edinburgh and most recently was a teaching fellow in the University of Birmingham's Department of Film and Creative Writing. Her monograph on American independent cinema and Romantic aesthetics and philosophy will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2019.