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Title	Corporeal cinema
Authors	Murphy, Ian;Young, Gwenda
Publication date	2014-06-01
Original Citation	Murphy, I. and Young, G. (2014) 'Corporeal cinema', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 7. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.7.00
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.7.00
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Download date	2026-11-02 09:07:19
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5841

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alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Corporeal Cinema

Editorial

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In a 12-second clip featuring trapeze performer Luis Martinetti, shot for Edison's Kinetoscope, the film spectator of 1894 was treated to an astonishing spectacle that bore all the hallmarks of what Tom Gunning would later identify as a "cinema of attraction". Dressed in a tiger print body suit, Martinetti subjected his body to a series of amazing contortions and manipulations, and in doing so presented audiences with what is perhaps the first example of a corporeal cinema. While the specific appeal of this film was undoubtedly related to Martinetti's reputation as a performer who pushed his body to an extreme limit, a fascination with bodies—both human and nonhuman, at rest, in motion, in pain, near death—has been a preoccupation of filmmakers ever since (think back to the slaughter of an ox in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924); the slicing of an eye in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929); the 1920s films of Lon Chaney; the animation of Chuck Jones). In recent years this interest in the body—as both site of violence and a sight to behold—has intensified and is mirrored by a growth in the scholarly work devoted to all matters corporeal.



Figure 1: *Luis Martinetti, Contortionist* (William Kennedy Dickson, Edison Manufacturing Co., 1894). Library of Congress YouTube video upload, 2009. Screenshot.

In the first wave of what we might term body-centric film theory—by scholars such as Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Pete Boss—the concern was mainly with specific genres (such as horror) and the methodology employed was indebted to psychoanalytic theory. More recently, scholars have broadened both the focus and the approach. In *The Address of the Eye*, first published in 1991, Vivian Sobchack draws from phenomenological theories of Merleau-Ponty to posit the spectatorial encounter as an unavoidably fleshy, creative and reversible exchange between the seeing, feeling, sensing body of the viewer and the material, performative body of the film. For Steven Shaviro, in his 1993 study *The Cinematic Body*, spectatorship is marked by a visceral sensation and raw affect, in which the viewer is violently acted upon by the filmic image. Working from these foundations, subsequent scholars have developed the concept of an embodied cinema. Among the most notable entries in the field—and certainly pertinent for this current issue of *Alphaville*—are Laura U. Marks's oft-cited thesis of haptic visuality, delineated in her *The Skin of the Film* (first published in 2000), in which she suggests that the traditional relationship of distance between the viewer and the screen is supplanted by a dynamic intersubjectivity that engages the perception of the whole body; Martine Beugnet's 2007 exploration of a contemporary French filmmaking tradition, in *Cinema and Sensation*, where the sexual transgressions and violent ruptures of on-screen bodies are expressed through a synesthetic attentiveness to the image as material texture; and Jennifer M. Barker's conception of film as an innately tactile medium that burrows under our skin, reverberates in our musculature, and stimulates our viscera (delineated in her 2009 study, *The Tactile Eye*).

Inspired by these and other groundbreaking works that have helped to shift the critical discourse on corporeality and embodiment, this themed issue of *Alphaville* highlights a diverse range of fresh, original work from emerging and established scholars. In setting our mandate for the issue, we wondered how affective theorisations of cinema as embodied experience might usefully intersect with image studies of the human body as raced, gendered, and inextricably tied to broader social and cultural realities. It is fitting, then, that we open the issue with Katharina Lindner's analysis of embodied identity in an explicitly corporeal genre: the female boxing film. Integrating sensory film theory with the queer phenomenology of Sara Ahmed, Lindner considers the contrasting depictions of female boxers in two contemporary boxing films, *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004) and *Die Boxerin* (*About a Girl*, Catherina Deus, 2004). While these non-normative protagonists imbue the phenomenal space of their male-centric narrative worlds with subversive potential, Lindner argues that the female boxing body is just as often recuperated within the heteronormative structures and identificatory dynamics of a conventionally masculine genre.

In her article on *The Skin I Live In* (2011), Tarja Laine examines the relationship between the body and empowerment in Pedro Almodóvar's film. Making reference to Paul Crowther's explorations of the links between the artist and his or her work, Laine analyses how the film proposes art as a "guaranty of sanity", a method used to negotiate and overcome both physical and psychological trauma. Paying close attention to the significance of the skin and tactile sensation, she details how the central character Vicente/Vera (Jan Cornet/Elena Anaya) uses artwork inspired by Louise Bourgeois to reestablish an identity in the aftermath of the violence enacted on his/her body by the disturbed surgeon, Robert (Antonio Banderas).

This link between the body and art finds further elaboration in Jill Murphy's analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini's short film, *La ricotta* (1963). In it, she considers how the director uses a wide range of art-historical and cinematic references to develop one of his key cinematic obsessions: that of the link between the corporeal and the divine. Using Jean-Luc

Nancy's theory of transimmanence (in which he argues against a separation of the transcendent from the immanent), Murphy notes that Pasolini aligns the body of the central character, Stracci (Mario Cipriani) with the cinematic (influenced especially by Chaplin) and the associated carnivalesque. She argues that the film's emphasis on Stracci's earthiness and mobility—his impulse to satisfy all his corporeal urges, however excessive they may be—inscribes him with a transimmanence that is in marked contrast to the "abstracted transcendent divine" of the Mannerist paintings that are strikingly reenacted in the film (16).

For his article, David Andrews presents the reader with innovative methodology, in the form of a biocultural theorisation of the tropes of male sexual coercion that structure two problematic genres centred on the body: rape-revenge and postfeminist softcore. Arguing that such genres stimulate especially visceral affective engagements, Andrews firstly considers how rape-revenge films such as *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) mobilise a direct application of evolutionary psychology in their depiction of bodies in crisis and their enduring appeal for viewers. He then offers a biocultural evaluation of the sexual coercion motifs that define the softcore films and serials of Zalman King, which stylise rape in order to remain inoffensive to their considerable female viewership.

Also concerned with our affective response to the dynamic processes of genre cinema, Lucy Fife Donaldson's article sheds welcome light on the work of an offscreen performer who intimately shapes our engagement with the visible image: the foley artist. Drawing upon sensory film theory's claims of kinesthetic reciprocity between on-screen bodies and the body of the viewer, Donaldson explores the sounds of footwork that bring expressive nuance to a dance number in *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) and moments of intense action in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988). In the process, she argues that these invisible performances constitute a creative and often overlooked vector for our embodied relations to the filmic experience.

Just as the issue opens with Lindner's intimate focus on the lived experience of the human body, so it closes with a striking new critical approach to an auteur who has been widely read in terms of corporeality, embodiment and affect. Synthesising Jean-Luc Nancy's ecotechnic thinking with Deleuze's account of the crystal-image, Laura McMahon extends the discourse on Claire Denis's cinema of the body to trace an ecological impulse expressed through her nonanthropocentric evocations of body, landscape and animal life. As McMahon argues, while the crystalline temporality of *Beau Travail* (1999) works to elucidate nonhuman histories of the landscape, this formal structure in *The Intruder* (2004) both reactivates traces of nonhuman pasts and conveys nonhuman perceptual life in the present through an unusual attentiveness to canine corporeality. McMahon's article thus intersects with emerging scholarship that concerns itself with theorising human-nonhuman bodies and their relation/interaction; animality; and the natural world (see Anat Pick; Akira Mizuta Lippit; Jane Bennett; Jonathan Burt; Pick and Narraway, among others). As such, it makes a fitting conclusion to an issue that we hope will generate further research on what constitutes a corporeal cinema.

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Suggested Citation

Murphy, Ian, and Gwenda Young. "Corporeal Cinema: Editorial". *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 7 (Summer 2014). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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Gwenda Young lectures in Film Studies in University College Cork and is Co-Director of the Film and Screen Media programme there. Her work has appeared in a variety of national and international journals, including *Sight and Sound*; *Popular Culture Review*; *Film/Film Culture*; *Film Ireland*; *Journal of Irish Association for American Studies* and in edited collections on American cinema of the 1920s (edited by Lucy Fischer for Rutger's U.P.) and Irish American cinema (edited by Ruth Barton for Irish Academic Press). Her most recent publication is a coedited collection (with Laura Rascaroli and Barry Monahan) titled *Amateur Filmmaking*, published by Bloomsbury in 2014. She has also contributed to radio programmes on the national broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, on local radio, and on Irish national television. Her monograph on American director Clarence Brown will be published in 2014.