



The Body As Cogito A Certain Contemporary Film In The Light Of Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

Contemporary film is displaying a kind of "transnational new wave" that seems unique since the mid-60s. Filmmakers as diverse as Tsai Ming-Liang, Karim Ainouz, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, show a similar sensitivity towards the values of the world and of the cinema. What brings the work of these directors together is the taste for a realism more focused on the phenomenon of experience, on issues of skin and surface, and a different look at the body. Our hypothesis is that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty provides us with valuable tools to broaden the debate. The discussion will be carried out by an analysis of the work of Tsai Ming-Liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Karim Ainouz.

Keywords: *Contemporary Film, Body, Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Experience.*



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The Body As Cogito: A Certain Contemporary Film In The Light Of Merleau-Ponty

Julio Bezerra

Something is happening in contemporary film. A kind of "new transnational wave", unique since the mid-60s and 70s, is pushing the seventh art ahead. It is interesting the fact that filmmakers as diverse as Claire Denis, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang, Edward Yang, Karim Aïnouz, Lucrecia Martel, Gus Van Sant, Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Abel Ferrara, among others, show a similar sensitivity in terms of values of the world and of cinema. This sensitivity relates to a different paradigm, different from the hyper-realism, the mannerism and the exploitation of technology frontiers that marked both the 80s and 90s.

Different also from the predominant paradigm in modern film of the 60s and 70s:

if modern film broke the pact of trust between the viewer and the image, giving rise to a generation for which was necessary to reflect on the language to reflect on the world, the vast and multifaceted 'contemporary film' indicates a belief in the image. As an affirmation of belief in the world. The cinematographic image as a privileged mediator between spectator and the world. Surrendered to the images that pulsate, we can then beat with them and feel them in all their intensity (Monassa, *Contracampo*, n°66)

If Jean-Luc Godard bet, among other things, on false raccords, on jump-cuts, and on a different kind of acting, to tell his stories and shake the spectator, if for him the image was something you break down and put it up back again, Claire Denis and Lisandro Alonso go in another direction: to experience another time-space, which is not indefinite, nor just confused. These filmmakers seek sensory blocks, loose fragments of true weightlessness. In *L'Intrus*

(Claire Denis, 2004), for example, Denis multiplies the number of ellipses without marking them as such, never underlining which sequences are "real" and which are dreamed. The impression is that the filmmaker leaves her sequences at the mercy of feelings, unnamed feelings. For that matter, notions of dramatic confrontation and *mise-en-scène* do not make much sense anymore.

This contemporary film (which starts showing up in the late 90's) recounts a state of affairs in full bloom and draws the viewer closer to it. Films like *Tropical Malady* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004), *L'Intrus* (2004), *Last Days* (Gus Van Sant, 2005), *Juventude em Marcha* (Pedro Costa, 2006) seem to demand from us a weird kind of cinematic virginity. For the spectator, what is established is not a cognitive relationship with the film, but something more sensorial. The symbolic content becomes a matter of second order. It is not, however, simply to assert the primacy of sensitivity at the expense of narrative functions. What is claimed is the recognition in the context of film theory, of a sensitive dimension.

Thus, what interests us the most is exploring questions of skin, of a realism centered on the phenomenon of experience, of a more physical relationship with the camera. One of the largest drives of this cinema is a kind of enchantment of the physical body. Contemporary film is intimately connected to a different way of looking to the body. The body as a reflection, as a metaphor, as an experimental place of representation.

As Bernadette Lyra (2002) alerts us, film was the first technological invention to create movement and give life to images, creating bodies without flesh. While constructing spaces of light and shadow, darkness and visibility, film transforms the human body and the body of things in a geometry of shapes, surfaces, volumes and textures. A body dialogues not only with himself, but also with all other elements of film, from lighting to costumes, from setting and

scenery to sound. In its motion, a body expresses itself in a discontinuous dance, apparently free, but ordered in specific gestures and intermittent streams. The body is movement. It is to be in relation.

The body has a place not yet fully illuminated in the movies by critical theory, although film, in its history, has shown precious exercises when it comes to representing a body. There are many filmmakers interested in the relations between body/space or body/actor, either conceptually, narrative, or in their way of filming. From Buster Keaton to David Cronenberg, through John Cassavetes, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson and many others, the body in film is not only an object of representation, but a catalyst of intensity and energy, an area of constant political wrangling, a starting point for the articulation of various passions and desires.

From the so called early cinema to the supposedly naturalistic aesthetic or the most unabashedly fanciful genres, there is always a desire for the body. In contemporary cinema, however, this desire translates an expressive body, which fills the space in order to compromise it with its meanings. It is not to perceive a body built through a variety of special effects, fostered by the many tools of digital media, but identifying a body that becomes the subject of the discourse. This new appropriation of the body no longer seems based on the intervention of technology in the organic body (think of Paul Verhoeven), nor in the design of the body as an electronic system, originated in the power of computational engineering (as in much of David Cronenberg cinema).

Filmmakers like Gus Van Sant and Pedro Costa seem to return to the question raised by Spinoza: "What can a body do?". Pedro Costa's movies are like a trial on the potential of the body. In *Juventude em Marcha* there is nothing more real/capable than a body. If we are strict,

there are no exact characters, but a body (Mario Ventura) in which a character acts (Ventura). Before being a guy, Ventura is a body with interference and inference capabilities. Gus Van Sant walks in similar developments. Since *Gerry* (2002) we are accustomed to see volatile bodies in his movies, gaseous states of being in contrast to the strong impact of events in which they are immersed. In a film like *Last Days*, Gus Van Sant expresses this proposition firmly surrendering to the time and gesture of Blake. The story is told in a kind of accumulation of impressions and variations of this tired body. It is a postmortem film.

The world depicted in films such as *Madame Satã* (Karim Aïnouz, 2002) and *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001) is first and foremost a physical world, in its interstices, in its permanent microscopic motion, which overlaps and identifies with the sensory aspect of the characters, bodies that interact with the landscape, with the bodies of nature, animate or inanimate. The body assumes a hybrid function, it becomes a field of passages between organic and synthetic elements, a fluid and dynamic structure.

The body becomes no longer a unit, but a link between bodies, between spaces and movements, so as to create virtual bodies, extensions of the body. This cinema of the fluxes deals with a connection with nature, with a sense of flow and variation of energies, forces, vibrations and it has to do with how the bodies visible or invisible are encouraged, how they suffer interference from the environment (Marques, *Contracampo*, n° 21, 2007).

This time, the body is the "anchor of being," a kind of relation with the world. Contemporary film focuses on characters taken by perception. This applies, for example, for characters of such films as *The River* (Tsai Ming-Liang, 1997) and *O quarto de Vanda* (Pedro Costa, 2000), situated in a kind of naive and natural dimension. Movies which express or denote a perceptual immediate dimension of experience - not conceptual (but not chaotic or

disjointed) -, which basically derives from the immersion of the body in the world through the senses.

This recovery movement of a pre-logical dimension or a pre-predicative experience and its ambiguity and vagueness encounters a theoretical framework in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the theory of this French philosopher, the problem of the relations between the soul and the body is exposed in new terms. Merleau-Ponty's tries to create a phenomenology that does not start from consciousness, but from the body defined otherwise. Its originality is to combat empiricism and intellectualism at the same time. Philosophical and scientific views are equally rejected. Merleau-Ponty says we should begin from and concrete situated consciousness.

For Merleau-Ponty, knowledge is not an activity of mind or reason, detached from the body. It is the body, in its immediate immersion in the world, in its perceptually guided action, which allows us a primary way of organizing experience, not yet mediated by meanings, but fraught with discrimination, references, nuances, preferences and rejections, etc..

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 203).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology provides us with valuable tools to broaden the discussion about a contemporary film that seems to condemn the failure of the dichotomy inside / outside, that explores the phenomenon of perception as an activity that marks a bodily relationship with the world. Our proposal is to carry this dialogue forward through a brief analysis of three authors: Tsai Ming-Liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Karim Ainouz. In different ways, these filmmakers represent the body as a vital form of communication with the world and reveal curious affinities with the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

Tsai Ming-Liang

Looking at the social and behavioral consequences of modernization in Asia, Taiwan has revealed great filmmakers in recent years. Tsai Ming-liang is one of them, and figures in a particular way among other directors such as Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Tsai's cinema is the result of a strange mixture of a clinical fascination for observation/contemplation and a very personal kind of mythology, where the social intercourse only intensifies the solitude, where no communication seems possible. Tsai does not seem to think the conflict between tradition and modernity. He constructs a distant look, temporally extended, which mixes irony and anguish, tragedy and comedy, consciousness and hypnosis.

From *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) to *Faces* (2010), Tsai works are based on the same material. It is as if all of Tsai's films constitute one very long film. It is a Truffautian project, starring Lee Kang-Sheng, always in the role of Hsiao-Kang. This impression that we are always seeing the same movie results not only because of the existence of an extremely coherent universe, but also due to a cinematic style at the same time quite characteristic and

relatively constant: the preference for more medium shots and long-term shots, the camera fixed, expressive frame entrances and exists, the study of rhythms, physical comedy, the delicate change of focus from foreground to background, etc. We can not forget the frequent symbolisms (starting with water) and the lonely characters.

Perhaps the most interesting element of Tsai's cinema is the fact that we always become intimate with his characters. Their most banal gestures, the most unattractive parts of their lives are thrown into our lap. Merging voyeurism and critical awareness, the films find their characters in their attitudes and mannerisms - as small and mundane as their lives. It's the cinema of small moments, small ideas. *The River* (1997) is a good example. In its first half, the film follows a very precise logic of character construction. Hsiao-kang (or Kang-sheng) showers in the hotel. Her friend arrives with his clean clothes and some food. They have sex. A cut interrupts the action and leads us to an unknown space where a naked male body wrapped in a towel rejects the caresses of another man. He goes to the room of baths, showers again, and goes home to take care of her household duties. Then he is eating at McDonald's inside of a mall. The film thus follows a strictly physical characterization technique that remind some critics, not without reason, the cinema of Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati.

Like Michelangelo Antonioni, Tsai is often seen as "an artist of rootlessness." His films would be the expression of the identity crisis of individuals in large, urban and contemporary cities. However, although the influence of the seminal Italian director is undeniable, would not it also be a source for misunderstandings? Because as tempting as it may be interpreting the attitudes of Tsai's characters as passive, or define them as aimless wanderers, vague dreamers, their secret or essence is elsewhere. Tsai's actors are malleable bodies. They are always in a constant state of readiness, always on alert. In this sense, an approximation with filmmakers

such as Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati may be more fruitful. Like Keaton and Tati, Tsai's characters are bodies constantly summoned by the world. And these bodies accept this invitation as a whole, immersed in an adventure that at every turn allows them to discover more about a world that never stops to surprise them.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the fact that my body has a curious attitude toward the world. I'm not in the world as someone who contemplates it at a certain distance. For Merleau-Ponty, "truth does not 'inhabit' merely the 'inner man', or rather, there is no inner man; man is in the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: V) He continues: "The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: XII).

Merleau-Ponty says the world is older than consciousness, older than us: "We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive" (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 13-14). In his work, the invocation of a thoughtless, of a "tacit cogito", prior to any claim brought by the intellect, try to find in experience, a way out of the enclosure of consciousness in order to effectively carry out the project of Husserl's return to "things themselves".

To return to the things themselves is to return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge always speaks and in relation to which every scientific determination is abstract, indicative, and dependent, like geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: III).

This “return” is on Tsai’s agenda. That is the adventure of Hsiao-Kang. He does not feel paralyzed in front of the contradictions of the sensible world. He is defined by this exploration movement. "He is completely available to the world, open to sensation throughout his body and ready to adapt to things, to all the challenges of the real, at the risk of hurting himself", says Rehm (Joyard, Rehm, Rivière, 1999: 56). A movie like *The River* (1997) is based on a perceptual faith in the world in an accession to the experience lived by the characters. Hsiao-kang (actor-model-body) takes actions almost symbolic of a state of affairs. Shots are less a unity of action and drama than a way of looking. For Tsai, as for Merleau-Ponty, the best way to understand the human is looking to the way we engages in the practice of our existence. The shot becomes a field of phenomenological observation.

Karim Aïnouz

Karim Aïnouz does a somewhat Brazilian version of Tsai’s cinema. In his films (including his short *Seams and National Passion*) characters are always stuck in unsustainable intimate situations. They are all creatures of a dignity not at all cordial. They all seem immune to the hardships that the world imposes on them as a condition of existence. There is always lots of labor and money on Karim’s movies. Characters are always talking about money and we get to know the costs of almost everything. Karim is interested in talking about the material conditions of his characters lives. For him, that is what determines things at the end of the day. And it's always cinema as a political act of faith that will be responsible for a transformational experience for them. In Karim’s movies, film is a transforming experience (aesthetic and political). Its logic rests on the belief that every revolution begins and ends in the individual.

His starting point is always an image, sometimes a theme or the need to talk about something. Hence there is a feeling. A feeling we would like to emanated from the movie. A feeling people will have to leave the room with. In *Madame Satã* there is a feeling of an explosion, of a big bang, which guided the look of the character and became the compass of the process. In *Madame Satã*, characters do not exist only to tell us a story. Quite the contrary. The film is unapologetically "mundane". This worldliness of his characters is closely related to the construction of a certain fragility, of the way the Karim isolates his characters in the shot letting them run by themselves.

João Francisco is not what we might call a politicized man, but he resists through his body. *Madame Satã* becomes a political figure par excellence. Since there is no social place to give expression to his actions as he desires, the character is always ready to challenge any moralizing instance that wants to prevent him from moving as he pleases: police, security guards casino patrons... Karim builds a picture of an explosive and complex character, a passionate figure, feverish, guided by an overriding passion for life. After all, João Francisco is a contradictory character, split in half. *Madame Sata* is a name that summarizes all the duality of the character: *Madame*, feminine, sophisticated, delicate, imported from France, and *Satã*, masculine, violent, destructive.

From Rio de Janeiro in the 40s to the interior of contemporary Ceará, themes were modified, but Karim remains delicate and vigorous in his project to let us see the interaction between the individual and his condition. And it is in the body that racial and social oppression are stamped. This physical, bodily element functions as a metonymy for the entire proposal of the film. The body is a mean of responding to the incompatibility between the individual and

their social environment. It is through their body that Karim's protagonists will react to the world and build their own space. The body is like a weapon of self defense. It is the actual subject of his movies. In "Madame Satã", the protagonist uses his body to require a space and stay there. It's his body that allows him to create other lives, he fantasizes about himself, he survives. The general plan of "Madame Satan" is not Lapa, but his body, a body that does not fit in the frame. In *Suely in the sky* (2006), Hermila needs her body to get out of her space. The body is a prime anchor point from which they can become, manage, manipulate and overcome themselves as someone among others.

João Francisco dos Santos becomes Madame Satã. Hermila turns Suely. It is politics without a thesis to prove;

which is born rather of a personal situation, out of individual dilemmas that engage the rest of society along with them: homosexual love and disenchantment with the country in 'National Passion', prostitution as the only means of leaving a place in 'Suely in the Sky', the unforgiving figure of a rogue black homosexual in the first half of the twentieth century in 'Madame Satã'. This small change in the structure of the movie involves a broad conceptual shift in the way of making films that touch on social and political problems. The starting point is more abstract as an ideology (and ideologues will say that there is nothing more concrete than an ideology, which somehow it is also true) or a syllabus that it is fictionally illustrate (Gardnier, *Contracampo*, nº50, 2003).

The body, as the editors of *Cinética* identified, seems set between the oppression of the social environment and the existential exile:

'Suely in the sky' comes also in the wake of a thing that distresses me too: a utopia done through the body, a place I do not know what it is. Because I think there is a project of utopia today, in Brazil and worldwide, which is very scary, which is a religious utopia: the possibility of an exile to a supernatural place. This nullifies any possibility of a physical, material, immanent, non-transcendent utopia. That to me is very important in all my films. They are all an attempt of a

material utopia that does not have to be explained, but experienced through the body. There is a desire of mine which is a bit programmatic, but it is a programmatic with some freedom: the viewer at the end of my movies must have the possibility of a utopia that he can exercise. I am talking about a desire to imagine an act, an experience that the viewer can experience and which is not transcendent (Eduardo e Feldman, *Revista Cinética*, 2007).

Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Apichatpong Weerasethakul makes movies like someone who intuitively feels a tone, a mood. It is a cinema of abstraction, without losing emotions. A filmmaker who is credited not by the traditional “directed by”, but by the somewhat pretensions “conceived by”. A strange description that is, nevertheless, completely justified. Although his films are very strict conceptual experiences, there is a sensuality that emanates from each of their shoots. In movies such as *Blissfully yours* (2002) and *Syndromes and a century* (2006), there seems to be a certain innocence when it comes to *mise-en-scène* that opens to another kind of fruition. *Tropical Malady*, for example, begins with the movements of a detachment of soldiers. A naked man crosses the shot from one corner to another. Everyday images of an idyllic countryside life. Friends chat in the traffic. Very few characters gain names. A cinema of atmosphere in which characters come completely tuned with the spaces they occupy.

Actually, the list of acknowledgments at the end of *Tropical Malady* contains the names of Brian Eno and Pierre Huyghe. The first of them is a well known musician, the father of the so called ambient music, a musical genre often organized or performed to evoke an atmospheric, visual or unobtrusive quality. The second is a video artist whose remake of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), shot on video with non-professional actors, is an excellent example of how contemporary video art has dealt, provocatively and creatively, with film icons.

Apichatpong constructs an immersive ambience comparable to the music of Brian Eno, and his films are conceptual and aesthetic adventures just like Huygue's videos. It feels that Apichatpong does not care about the story being told, but with the sensory experience a movie can generate.

Living, breathing, is a joy. And this I believe. What I want is for my work to reflect the way I live my life, the pleasurable way I relate to images. It is not always possible because the film is not life, and is full of small technical complexities. That's why somehow I want my films to reflect at least the 'joy of being able to shoot and be shooting'. It is a way to combine and my life when I am not shooting and my life while I film. It's the closest I can get to the truth. A two-way interaction between these two forms of being alive (Bragança, *Revista Cinética*, 2006).

To understand/extend Weerasethakul's movies we appeal once again to Merleau-Ponty. The investigation of being in Merleau-Ponty continues with a more radical revision of the categories of classical metaphysics. In this movement, Merleau-Ponty claims that the ontological problem is the one to which all others are subordinate. Therefore the ontology can not be a theism, a naturalism or a humanism. This position is reaffirmed in the last note of his unfinished book, *The Visible and Invisible*, "it is precisely to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 245).

Contemporary film seems to follow the developments of Merleau-Ponty. Weerasethakul's cinema is very close to the proposal of a modern Alain Resnais, for example, when he fuses past, present and future, when he denies a humanistic conception of the nature and anthropomorphism, but at the same time it differs radically from movies such as *L'Année*

dernière à Marienbad (Alain, Resnais, 1961) or Muriel (Alain Resnais, 1963) for also refusing to do any distinction between subject and object.

To see a movie of Weerasethakul is to become part of a slippery universe, which dissolves itself in a description of a physical world where all things are identified with each other. It is a cinema marked by the brute presence of things, by different forms of escaping from representation to achieve some other kind of reality. Weerasethakul seems to shoot the world at a time prior to the separation and organization of its objects, "creating a shared sense of flow. A cinema that makes no distinction between men, animals, plants or machinery, and in which all share the same state of suspension" (Oliveira Jr., Contracampo, n° 83).

Weerasethakul's description is close to Merleau-Ponty. If there is a plot in *Tropical Malady*, it comes down to the tension of waiting for an event, always imminent and effective only after the event. Those two guys who meet each other early in "Tropical Malady" separate. Keng need to return to the peloton and Tong turns away toward the black background, to become indiscernible. The film reconstructs itself all over again, now in the form of a passionate encounter between two men, two beings of nature, devoid of any attribute. Keng searches the ghost of a tiger, mystical embodiment of a shaman who "lives in the memories of others" and dominates the body of Tong (maybe there are two creatures, played by the same actors. It is not known). Weerasethakul throws the bodies into nature, undertakes a centripetal force, pulling everything into the landscape. Sensuousness transforms nature and narrative into one.

Weerasethakul does not identify the "being" with one of the beings (God, man or nature). He rejects thinking according to this cleavage between God, humans and creatures. A movie like *Tropical malady* is not meant to spread mankind everywhere, nor show the distance

between subject and object, but just confuse them, treating everything indiscriminately. Looks, characters, romantic encounters and sweat running down the body are described in the same level, in the same narrative hierarchy. This is a narrative that emphasizes the physical unity of all things, a kind of cosmos. It is not nature that is humanized, it is man who loses his humanity.

No wonder why Merleau-Ponty made a brief foray into film theory. For him, film sets, in general terms, the conditions that make seventh art a privileged place of expression of a "world view" where contingency, ambiguity, and the conception of man as being-in-situation are key elements. That what he said in *The Film and The New Psychology*, a lecture Merleau-Ponty gave at IDHEC on March 13, 1945. In this quite dense essay, his phenomenological and existential perspective illuminates the "recovery of the visible."

Facing film as a site for the organization of new sensory stimuli, shock and joy, for the defense or search for a privileged link with reality, the movies of Karim Ainouz, Tsai Ming-Liang and Weerasethakul approach Merleau-Ponty. At the end of *Suely in the Sky*, Hermila parts alone, with a slight smile on her face, while João goes behind the bus on his bike.

this image erases the idea of someone who exchange her body for money, and shows a person turning into a vector, to cross the world, to live it to the diagonal - as it seems in fact to ask us to (...) Is this not the poetry of a floating new individual, vectorized, perplexed by his own experience of being in the world (Oliveira Jr., *Contracampo*, n° 82)?

At a time mediated by technology, contemporary cinema stresses a body that does not belong to idealized categories, but rather to a state of questioning of its sensitive potential.

phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit. Well, the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 116).

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