

## THE EMOTIONAL BODY AND VISUAL EXPERIENCE

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The pioneer of the conception of art based on experience is John Dewey. In his *Art as Experience* (1934) Dewey lays out the theoretical grounds for the concept of the instrumental. An object of art is instrumental if it causes excitement either from time to time or constantly. Translating into contemporary language Dewey's somewhat old-fashioned terminology, one can say that to be instrumental means to be included into the current sphere of cultural reference. Following John Dewey, Mark Johnson considers aesthetics as "the basis of any profound understanding of meaning and thought". This goes far beyond the study of the arts and reveals "the bodily depths of human meaning-making through our visceral connection to our world".<sup>1</sup> Johnson expands the sphere of the applicability of aesthetics to the boundaries of our placement in the world; however, his primary interest is the visceral connection to the world.

Cinematography creates an interesting case for the study of the "bodily depths of human meaning-making" and the on-going excitement instigated by the instrumental object of art. In the situation of watching movies, the process of "meaning-making" is based on visual experience of the body and its actions. However, the body of the subject that we see on the screen is not ours, and therefore our visceral connection to the environment, which is presented on the screen, is indirect. Moreover, since both the subject and his environment are obviously part of the cinematographic world, whichever of the subject's bodily dynamics we experience while watching movies are experienced in a situation in which we are "as if" staying static. Furthermore, the organism-environment interaction in the situation of watching movies typically holds a multi-subject structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. xi.

Johnson claims that "meaning is not just a matter of concepts and propositions, but also reaches down into the images, sensorimotor schemas, feelings, qualities, and emotions that constitute our meaningful encounter with our world". It is well known that the meaning of a thing is constituted by its consequences through experience. Taking this assumption as a starting point, Johnson positions meaning "within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment", and he sees meaning as a result of organic activity. Thus reasoning is an embodied process "by which our experience is explored, criticized, and transformed in inquiry".<sup>2</sup> A number of questions arise when one starts to analyze the construction of meaning as an embodied meaning in the process of viewing films. Does the process of watching movies constitute any kind of experience? Does watching any movie necessarily constitute experience? Are there movies that do not constitute any kind of experience? Let us try to answer these questions drawing on Johnson's theory of embodied mind.

The answers to the questions above involve the notions of cognition and enactment. Francisco J. Varela, Evan T. Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in their well-known book proposed the term "enactive" in order "to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs".<sup>3</sup> Daniel Dennett in his "Review of F. Varela, E. Thompson and E. Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*" pinpoints several key differences between the cognitive and enactive approaches to cognition. The main difference lays in active interaction with the world that is a kind of world making, and is characteristic of the enactivist point of view. In an enactive approach the information is not transmitted by symbols, as in traditional cognitivist views, but is earned through

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp xi, 10, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco J. Varela; Evan T. Thompson & Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (The MIT Press, 1992), p. 9.

enaction on multiple levels of sensorimotor networks. Cognition is seen by enactivists as the result of interaction not with the symbolic forms but with their meanings, and therefore it is not representation but enactment of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Enactivists developed the idea of an active perception. The process of watching movies from this point of view is a way of acting, in the first place, because it involves emotions. In the situation of watching a movie a viewer experiences certain emotions, enacts the events on the screen, and shapes the meaning of what he sees. William James in his "What is an Emotion?" claims that "the emotional brain-processes not only resemble the ordinary sensorial brain-processes", but also "are nothing but such processes variously combined".<sup>5</sup> For James, emotions have a distinct bodily expression; the standard emotions he distinguishes, e.g. surprise, curiosity, rapture, fear, anger, lust, greed, and the like, are manifested through identifiable body language. James proposes a disputable thesis that "the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion".<sup>6</sup> James is opposed to the standard view that an emotion is mental perception and that bodily expression follows mental affection. James says that such a sequential order is incorrect; he argues that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be". In the case of ignorance of the bodily component, a perception is purely cognitive in form and lacks emotional warmth. As he states, "We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult

and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually *feel* afraid or angry".<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who developed James's ideas, consciousness is multi-layered. Since there are several levels of the self, we may suggest that there are several levels of watching movies. Thus, depending on the level of consciousness involved in a certain period of the process of movie watching, we may speak about emotional immersion (core consciousness) and back-to-reality surveillance (extended consciousness). In the case of enactment, the core consciousness is necessarily involved in this process. Enactive cinema in general means that the flow of narration is made as the result of the subconscious psychological involvement of a spectator, along with conscious surveillance. It also means that subconscious involvement inevitably comprises emotions that are happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise. Damasio distinguishes between feelings and emotions and argues that emotions are the fundamental basis for all cognition. He sees an emotion as brain process, and the interaction between the individual and the environment as the interaction between the body and the brain. Consciousness of bodily changes and emotional expressiveness emerges in the neocortical environment as an extension of the organism's unconscious awareness of the environment. Immersion of the viewer into a cinematographic reality leads to the birth of emotions caused by the interaction of the subject with the environment in the virtual reality of the movie. The cinematographic emotions have a biological basis that is to some extent recognized by contemporary cognitivist theories.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, "The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience. Book review", *American Journal of Psychology*, no. 106.1 (1993), pp 121-125. Discussed by Pia Tikka in: *Enactive Cinema: Simulatoriam Eisensteinense* (Juväskylä, 2008), pp 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> William James, "What is an Emotion?", *Mind*, vol. 9, no. 34 (April 1884), p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 189-190.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine* (Routledge, 1995); Greg M. Smith, *The Film Structure and the Emotional System* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

According to James's theory, emotions emerge at the physiological level as the result of motor and sensory activity, and as such constitute individual experience. Yet laboratory investigation of emotions with the help of contemporary scientific methods has failed to provide supporting evidence for James's theory of emotions. And for a while it seemed that James's theory had arrived at a dead end. However, in the situation of watching movies, first comes the perception of the "exciting fact" on the screen, then this perception is followed by bodily changes, and afterwards comes the feeling of these changes, which is, according to James, the emotion. The viewer immerses himself in the film's milieu and identifies himself with one or another character of the film. The interaction of the character with the environment on the screen, and his movement in space, may cause bodily response in the viewer. The viewer subconsciously mimics and lives through the bodily changes of the characters that he watches. He may instinctively respond by moving aside or back to the attack on the film character, may wiggle, vibrate, fidget, hum and flap in excitement or impatience.

Furthermore, the film director may employ close-ups, certain angles of camera, or other strategies in order to enforce a particular kind of psychophysiological response. The mission of some episodes, e.g. the famous "shower scene" in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, is to keep the spectator in a certain emotional mood. In Lev Kuleshov's well-known experiment, known as "Kuleshov effect", an emotional connection is established on the basis of brick-on-brick montage. When the spectator watches interchanging shots of the face of the actor Ivan Mosjoukine, and of a plate of soup, funerals, etc., he construes the emotional link between the shots and prescribes certain emotions to the unchanging face of Ivan Mosjoukine. The emotional link that incorporates the subject (Ivan Mosjoukine) into the contextual milieu holds the shots and sequences together.

The psychophysiological reactions of the viewer, even if

minor ones and not quite visually noticeable, that echo psychophysiological reactions of the characters on the screen come first, and they are then followed by the spectator's emotions. Thus, bodily changes precede emotions in the situation of watching movies. The spectator, on the one hand, mirrors the bodily mechanics on the screen; on the other hand, as the film director manipulates the emotions of the spectator and envisages them, cinema becomes a kind of exposure of the inner emotional space of the spectator. An enactive approach helps us to understand the nature of the embodied emotions of the spectator. The term 'enactive' in this case means that there is no pre-given independent milieu; rather there is a perceiver-dependent milieu where action is perceptually guided. The interaction with the environment is carried out at the level of the character's actions and at the level of the emotional line in film narration. The perceiver (who is the character and the film viewer) is both internal and external in relation to the film milieu; "the organism both initiates and is shaped by the environment".<sup>9</sup>

While in the situation of direct interaction with the environment, the link between imagination and bodily processes is rather obvious; it is less obvious in the situation of the interaction with the film sequences and with the environment on the screen. The experience of direct interaction in the situation of watching movies is reduced to the viewer's interaction with a particular media device, and it differs from whatever interaction the viewer may have with the film's content. However, following a body's dynamics on the screen, we do experience interaction with the environment, though it is mediated. The question about the kind of engagement that we have with the cinematographic reality can be answered by saying that what we have is in the first place "emotional engagement". James's theory of emotions, though it fails in laboratory investigation of

<sup>9</sup> Francisco J. Varela; Evan T. Thompson & Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (The MIT Press, 1992), p. 174.

emotions in everyday life, works when we speak about cinematographic experience. It brings the emotional component to the center. In the end it is not worth arguing whether or not emotions are in the first place bodily changes. What is important in James's theory is the connection he makes between body and emotion, or embodied mind and emotion.

Damasio updated James's views with the metaphor of 'movie-in-the-brain'. According to Damasio, movies can be regarded as external representations of the process of narration that takes place on the level of core consciousness, or simple consciousness of the self, that defines the spatial coordinates of the self in the present. Consciousness recognizes itself and reaches the level of extended and then higher extended consciousness in the act of interacting with the world. 'Movie-in-the-brain' is a metaphor used to denote the story of the interaction of core consciousness with the environment. Movies serve as "the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds. What goes on within each shot, the different framing of a subject that the movement of the camera can accomplish, what goes on in the transition of shots achieved by editing, and what goes on in the narrative constructed by a particular juxtaposition of shots is comparable in some respects to what is going on in the mind, thanks to the machinery in charge of making visual and auditory images, and to devices such as the many levels of attention and working memory".<sup>10</sup>

In cognitive narratology it is assumed that experience of events and human relations necessarily takes a form of a narrative. Experience inevitably requires narration. The principle figure in narrative is the presence the anthropomorphic figure of an *experiencer* – somebody who experiences whatever happens in the story. The emotional and bodily reactions of an experiencer to the

events as well as his actions form a dynamic component of narrative. Narrativity then is a mediated experientiality. Narratives, including film narratives, are one of the forms of transferring experience. The stories are initially aimed at expressing "what it is like?" from the position of the experiencer and sharing a way of experiencing certain events. That is why "qualia", or a what-it-is-like, is one of the basic elements of narrative.<sup>11</sup> James, who did not speak about films in his works, anyway raised the question that should be taken into account in the discussion of the emotional body in connection to movie watching. This is the question of emotion sharing in the process of perceiving the work of art.

Emotional narration is one aspect of a complex film narration. Since the events in everyday life occur in chronological order, the chronological film sequences are more easily perceived. Disruptions of natural succession take place in flashbacks, in narrating past events, in transposition of sequence. Roman Jakobson states that cinematographic time is linear in "Is the Film in Decline?".<sup>12</sup> However, it is possible to suggest that film linearity is historically sensitive, and in contemporary film narrative several narratives can be developed. One of the examples can be found in Roman Polanski's films *The Pianist* (2002) and *The Ghost Writer* (2010).

In *The Pianist*, alongside the story line of a Polish-Jewish pianist Władysław Szpilman, who survived the Nazi invasion of Poland, Polanski creates the narrative line of fear of the cornered. In *The Ghost Writer* Polanski creates rooms and spaces that are meant to convey the feelings of suspicion, fear and alienation experienced by the ghostwriter (Ewan McGregor), who is supposed to finish the memoirs of the former Prime Minister Adam

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), p. 188.

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<sup>11</sup> David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp 143, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Is the Film in Decline?", in: Roman Jakobson, *Selected writings*. Volume III: *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (Mouton De Gruyter, 1982), p. 737.

Lang (Pierce Brosnan) after the strange death of the previous ghostwriter. The house where everybody seems to shadow one another is shown as full of undisclosed and unspecified danger. Polanski shoots film sequences so as to bolster the line of fear and suspicion. Though the fear turns out to be true, it is a product of the consciousness of the ghostwriter and not a trait of the milieu itself. Polanski projects the character's feelings onto the space and thus creates the emotionally colored surroundings. Even the gloomy landscapes of Martha's Vineyard (shot on the island of Sylt in the North Sea), with permanently windy, rainy and foggy weather, seem to reflect a general gloominess of the situation that the ghostwriter finds himself in. The final scene, where CIA people supposedly kill the ghostwriter, is portrayed like a disappearance of a ghost. In a sense it is one more case of mimicry as the character, which is in the beginning of the story a ghost due to his profession of a ghostwriter, turns into a ghost (in a different sense), and finally ends as a ghost merging into the milieu that seemed inhabited by "ghosts" from the very start. Besides, the final scene embraces the story in a ring and retrospectively strengthens the ghost-motif; the film starts with a scene where the police looking for the ghostwriter discover the empty car he has just left.

In *The Ghost Writer*, what allows us to follow the "ghost track" of the film is an emotional component of film narration. According to William James, passion helps focalization as "no one can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change".<sup>13</sup> Damasio supports the idea that emotions help "deliberation by highlighting some options".<sup>14</sup> Emotion sharing in the process of watching a film instigates the construction of a cinematographic milieu that is an introspection of characters' consciousness. In *Principles of Psychology* James stated, "as emotions are described in novels, they

interest us, for we are made to share them. We have grown acquainted with the concrete objects and emergencies which call them forth, and any knowing touch of introspection – which may grace the page – meets with a quick and feeling response".<sup>15</sup> The emotional narration creates emotional milieu, emotional landscapes and cityscapes, like the milieu in *The Ghost Writer*. The emotional component allows us to decode the meaning of the episode giving us track or direction.

There are various forms of spectators' engagement with the content of the film, e.g. intellectual, sensitive, emotional, etc. Intellectual engagement is characteristic of detective stories; sensitive engagement takes place in films expanding our possibilities of perception, e.g. *Avatar* (2009); and emotional engagement is characteristic of the films that are structured as multi-path narratives where one of the paths is emotional. On the one hand, it serves as a leading line of the narration; on the other hand, it is a path for the experienter to travel.

Thus the imagination in the situation of watching movies is tied to bodily processes, and in this capacity is "creative and transformative of experience".<sup>16</sup> As a result of an active perception the viewer acquires and expands his experience. Films that fail to entice interest, emotional immersion, and active perception do not constitute any experience. Our experience of the events and characters in the film is transformed into inquiry predominantly with the help of the emotional link. Inquiry in this case is a journey travelled by emotional path.

<sup>13</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*. In two volumes (New York: Henry Holt and company, 1890), vol. I, p. 421.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1994), p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology*. In two volumes (New York: Henry Holt and company, 1890), vol. II, p. 448.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 13.