

Carnal Thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture

VIVIAN SOBCHACK, 2004

Berkeley, University of California Press

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Carnal Thoughts brings together a number of essays by one of the most interesting scholars in film, media and cultural studies, who has brought the novel approach of existential phenomenology to bear on one of the major themes that haunts this interdisciplinary field: the body. Whereas the theories that have dominated film studies for so long, psychoanalysis and semiotics, stressed – perhaps overstressed – the meaning of the body and its meaning-making processes, Sobchack foregrounds the body as matter, as a ‘sentient, sensual and sensible ensemble’ (p. 2), which is materially grounded in the here and now. Embodiment entails ‘the lived body as, at once, both an objective subject and a subjective object’ (p. 2). This focus allows her to shift away from the body as mere representation to the experience of being embodied. In accounting for the lived body as the source of subjective sense perception, Sobchack radically changes the terms of the prevailing feminist analysis in visual culture to view the (female) body as object of the (male) look. While gender is not necessarily a term of analysis in this book, its spotlight on issues of en fleshed embodiment is obviously pertinent to gender studies.

This is most apparent in the first part of the book, in particular in the chapter where Sobchack explores the vicissitudes of women ageing. Contemporary American culture (and much of European and probably other cultures as well) is insistently oriented towards youth and hyperconscious of images, which may explain why growing old is perceived as ‘embarrassing’ and as a ‘narcissistic injury’ (p. 36). Sobchack argues that this perception cannot be separated from the objectification of women’s bodies ‘as images and representations rather than as the means of our being’ (p. 36). She traces the monstrous representation of older women in cinema, and shows how some recent films make a spectacle out of rejuvenation through cosmetic surgery, driving the message home that youth and beauty are the main objects of female desire. Technologies are at the service of a younger look. A funny example is a ‘skin contouring’ television camera that makes wrinkles invisible (‘video collagen’), producing an unreal image of ageing stars or news anchors to look younger (p. 39). Sobchack’s persistent point is that ‘the plasticity of the image . . . has overwhelmed the reality of the flesh and its limits’ (p. 50). I was particularly moved by her witty account of her own despair at seeing a face in the mirror that seems too old for her. She confesses considering cosmetic surgery. However, afraid of turning into an uncanny double of herself and dreading that others – or even worse – that she would no longer recognise herself, she shies away from such drastic measures. But she does avoid facing herself in mirrors. And don’t we all after reaching a certain age? Sobchack offers solace in the realisation that the image remains a reproduced surface, ‘thin and chimerical’, whereas every body is ‘grounded in the fleshy thickness and productivity of a life’ (p. 52). If only we can remember our material ground, we may experience ourselves as – in Sobchack’s beautiful phrase – ‘not so much ever aging as always becoming’ (p. 52).

I singled out the issue of ageing but her chapter on being oriented (or lost) in space and the gender differences in dealing with space is equally engaging and informative. In other chapters Sobchack critiques the postmodern tendency towards disembodiment, especially

in cyber subcultures. She is highly critical of, if not downright upset with, the alienating trend of treating our lived bodies as “things” to be seen, managed, and mastered’ (p. 182). Her anger is partly fuelled by her own experience of cancer and the consequent amputation of her leg. Time and again she brings back the phenomenological axiom that ‘our bodies are ourselves’. This pun on the title of a famous feminist classic drives home the ontological status of always already being embodied. Never reducing the body to any essentialist view, but rather working from experience and perception, Sobchack carefully maintains the *va-et-vient* between the body and its historical and cultural existence. For her, the subjective body and the objective world are inextricably intertwined. It is through her ‘passion of the material’ (as her last chapter is called) that she elaborates an ethical position for the subject. Sobchack argues that the awareness of being materially grounded calls for the reflective experience of ‘response-ability’ (p. 295), because the subject in its own objectivity must always recognise the subjectivity of the other (object). Situating the moment of transcendent consciousness in the objective immanence that the lived body experiences, she opposes any metaphysical transcendence and remains ruthlessly atheist. She calls this reversible structure of empathy between the body and the world ‘interobjectivity’. This position allows for the ‘sanguine sense of not merely being-in-the-world but of also belonging to it’ (p. 317).

Sobchack’s passionate plea for an ethics and aesthetics that puts the body first in all its radical materiality is at times amusing and moving, sometimes polemical, often courageous, and always clear and rigorous. I believe that this collection of essays shifts the grounds for the field of visual studies. *Carnal Thoughts* is a thought-provoking pleasure to read.

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Managing the Monstrous Feminine: regulating the reproductive body

JANE M. USSHER, 2006

London, Routledge

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Readers acquainted with Jane Ussher’s prolific output over the past fifteen years will find themselves on familiar territory with her latest offering, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: regulating the reproductive body*. Published recently by Routledge, the study merges Ussher’s work on constructions of femininity in popular culture¹ with central issues in women’s mental health.² It elaborates on an interest in the reproductive body evidenced in earlier projects such as *Body Talk: the material and discursive regulation of sexuality, madness and reproduction* (Routledge, 1997). In *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, Ussher employs historical survey, cross-cultural observation, the clinical interview, discourse analysis and pop-cultural critique in her diagnosis of the ways in which women have been positioned as ‘mad, bad, or dangerous’ on account of their physiology (p. 25). Her study focuses on three aspects of women’s reproductive life cycle: menstruation, pregnancy and the menopause. These foci are united, however, by Ussher’s