



ADRIANO D'ALOIA

## CINEMATIC ENWATERMENT

*Drowning bodies in the contemporary film experience*\*



*The true eye of the earth is water.*

G. BACHELARD, *L'Eau et les rêves*, 1942

Paradoxically, over the last twenty-five years, as the actors' physical body has gradually disappeared from the cinematic screen (with the advent of CGI simulacra), the bodily dimension of the film experience has increased. In a scenario in which cinema has spread to a myriad of monitors and displays (mobile phones, urban wallscreens, portable media players, digital and on-demand television, etc.) and the film experience seems to lose its integrity<sup>1</sup>, the spectator is still seeking a strong and involving experience, still demanding stories made up of images and sounds that can still arouse the senses. My hypothesis is that contemporary cinema is facing this mutation by developing a number of specific and recurrent "experiential figures". These figures are cases of strong and effective bodily tension, in which spectators' motor, perceptual, emotional and mental activities are embodied into a "sensible substance". Such a substance extends its features from the screen to the psychological space of the experience and transforms it into a unique "sensible environment". The spectators are integrated into this environment, and empathetically act with the filmic objects and interact with the filmic subjects using their own senses.

In this paper I attempt to investigate what is actually meant today by making a *bodily and sensible experience* of film by analyzing the substance of water and the figures of drowning and immersed body, specifically in two successful American films: *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004, USA) and *A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA). The case of "water-embodiment" – what I call *enwaterment* – is significant because of its relevance to the point where psychoanalysis and philosophy meet.

The theoretical background I refer to is dominated by the new *experiential turn* in the humanities

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On relocation of cinema see Casetti, F., 2009. Filmic experience. *Screen*, 50 (1), pp. 56-66; Casetti, F., 2008. The Last Supper in Piazza della Scala. *Cinéma&Cie*, 11, pp. 7-14.

and natural sciences, which is shifting the focus of media and film studies to the “sensory track” of spectatorship and hybridizing its perspective with that of cognitive neurosciences and the philosophy of mind<sup>2</sup>. According to the neuroscientific approach to social cognition, during a filmic experience our physical body remains still and passive in front of the screen, but we internally simulate the observed actions (especially intentional tactile actions) and movements: *mirror neurons*’ activity is the empirical proof that visual and motor frames are connected on a neural basis<sup>3</sup>. The so called “embodied simulation”<sup>4</sup> allows the spectator to comprehend in an empathetic and pre-linguistic modality the meaning of others’ actions, their intentions and even their emotions and internal states. Nothing prevents us from hypothesizing that even in the mediated situation of the film experience, the spectator relates to images and sounds through an embodied simulation. S/he directly *lives* or *feels* the film-world, s/he moves and acts with and within it, s/he performs cinematic intentional acts.

Nevertheless, neural mirroring should be considered only as the basic level of filmic involvement. We cannot reduce consonance to a matter of neurons (nor can we reduce film theory to the metaphor of mirror). It is not by chance that the neuroscientists themselves are trying to recover the philosophical roots of human experience by resorting to the phenomenological perspective, and especially the Husserlian idea of “body”<sup>5</sup> and the Merleau-Pontyan idea of “flesh”<sup>6</sup>. Since the mid-1990s, a part of film theory has been following the same trend<sup>7</sup> and has focused its attention on the bodily and phenomenological dimensions of the film experience<sup>8</sup>. Adopting this theoretical frame, my approach implies a quasi-interactive spectator, involved in both a *relational* (perceptive) and a *reflexive* (apperceptive) activity. My aim is to take you beyond the mirror.

Since its beginnings, cinema has recognized that water can visually give *matter* and *meaning* to

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<sup>2</sup> See Eugeni, R., 2009. *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza*, Roma: Carocci.

<sup>3</sup> See Rizzolatti, G., Sinigaglia, C., 2008. *Mirrors in the Brain. How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*. Translated from Italian by Frances Anderson. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press; Gallese, V., Goldman, A., 1998. Mirror neurons and the simulation theory of mind-reading. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12, pp. 493-501; Gallese, V., 2006. Corpo vivo, simulazione incarnata e intersoggettività. Una prospettiva neuro-fenomenologica. In: M. Cappuccio, ed. 2006, *Neurofenomenologia. Le scienze della mente e la sfida dell'esperienza cosciente*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori, pp. 293-326.

<sup>4</sup> Gallese, V., 2003. The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity. *Psychopathology*, 4, pp. 171-180; Gallese, V., 2005. ‘Being like me’: Self-other identity, mirror neurone and empathy. In S. Hurley, N. Chater, eds. 2005. *Perspectives on imitation. From cognitive neuroscience to social science*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, pp. 101-118; Gallese, V., 2005. Embodied simulation: from neurons to phenomenal experience. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 4, pp. 23-48; Gallese, V., 2007. Before and below ‘theory of mind’: embodied simulation and the neural correlates of social cognition. *Philosophical transactions of the royal society B: biological sciences*, 362, pp. 659-69; Gallese, V., 2009. Mirror neurons, embodied simulation, and the neural basis of social identification. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19, pp. 519-536.

<sup>5</sup> Husserl, E., 1952. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. Zweites Buch: *Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Den Haag: Nijhoff; Husserl, E., 1931. *Méditations cartésiennes*. Paris: Colin, then 1950. *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*. Den Haag: Nijhoff; Husserl, E., 1973. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*. Den Haag: Nijhoff.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard; Merleau-Ponty, M., 1947. Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie (1945). *Les Temps modernes*, 26 (3), then 1996. *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Gallimard, pp. 61-75.

<sup>7</sup> Sobchak, V., 1992. *The Address of the Eye, a Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Sobchak, V., 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> Even film theory is rewriting itself putting the body at the core of its investigation, see Elsaesser, T. Hagener, M., 2007. *Filmtheorie. Zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.

human desires, dreams and needs. Very often, the mere presence of water elicits suspense and a sense of imminent danger. In many cases, cinema cut the water surface on the orthogonal plane and offers a peculiar point of view (the frame is horizontally split by the water edge). As an example, think of the “awash shots” and “empty first-person shots” in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975, USA). By embodying the perceptual frame of a shark and the concrete features of the ocean, the camera immediately communicates a high level of suspense that is bodily experienced by the spectator.



*Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975, USA)

Using different aesthetical and technical strategies, contemporary cinema shows “enwatered” and drowning bodies to represent and express obsession and depression (like Virginia Woolf’s suicide in *The Hours*, Stephen Daldry, 2004, USA), state of shock (like in the intense prologue of *Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg, 1998, USA), past or infancy trauma (like the car accident in *I, Robot* [Alex Proyas, 2004, USA], or the father’s death in *The Truman Show* [Peter Weir, 1998, USA]), hallucinations and nightmares (like for *Ray*), self-negation and the split-subject (the clones’ homicides in *The Prestige* [Christopher Nolan, 2006, USA/UK], or to recall the pre-birth situation (like for the “precogs” in *Minority Report* [Steven Spielberg, 2002, USA]). Many other examples can be cited. The point is that film *embodies* in its own body the sensible features that ground the human faculty for experiencing the World, the Other and the Self. We all have a primordial sense of liquid or fluid and we have an (unconscious) memory of the *in utero* state; we instinctively associate water and drinkable fluids in general with the act of swallowing or with the state of being thirsty; we oppose our flesh consistency to water liquidity, our opacity to its transparency, our fleshing to its flowing; we involuntarily associate the quality of warm or cold, fluid or muddy, with expressive states, like relaxing or annoying, safe or dangerous, calm or slimy. We all have a “hydro-knowledge” of things.



Cinematic immersed and drowning bodies

*Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002, USA), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, USA),  
*The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002, USA), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005, USA),  
*Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998, USA),  
*Sphere* (Barry Levinson, 1998, USA), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998, USA)

However, I want to clarify that I do not adopt a psychoanalytical approach. Rather, I refer to Gastone Bachelard's "psychoanalysis of waters"<sup>9</sup>. The French philosopher argued that both *substantial* and *formal* imaginations are supported by *direct images of matter*. The experiential figures I propose are modalities of Bachelardian "materializing imagination": they are not conceptual metaphors, but rather "lived-experiences", because they incorporate "sensible and sensual" qualities and transform them into actions and relations, which are connected with intentional objects in the film. They are "lived-bodies" in the actual and virtual space of the experience. What I am interested in pointing out is the formal modalities of how contemporary cinema both physically and psychically engages the spectator in a "watering relation". My aim is to prove that cinema embodies "aquatic" modalities of perception and expression, pulling the viewer into a liquid *environment* that is the *confluence* between the film-body and the filmgoer-body. In the case of *enwaterment*, the observer explores and breaks the "surface" of the film and gets its "adjectival" features, its sensible qualities, which are substantially connected to intentional objects, that is, to "actions" and "relations" with objects and subjects in the film-world. This "lived" implication connects the basic sensomotorial mirroring with emotional sharing and cognitive reflexivity.

<sup>9</sup> Bachelard, G., 1942. *L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris: José Corti 1942.



## 1. Reflex

The first level of sensibility is sensomotorial. The scenes in which the character's body is completely surrounded by water help us to understand how water can constitute the bodily *environment* of the filmic experience, and how the spectator can immediately experience the film-body. In those cases the spectators' proprioception is strongly stimulated. Our skin – that is, the sheath of the body, our osmotic boundary – comes into contact with the water and we feel as if we are fully immersed in the “amniotic fluid” of film. Drowning scenes especially arouse spectators' actual response, like lack of breath and sense of choking. In effective cases, we hold our breath, and we can even feel as if we are suffocating (especially in the case that we are empathising the drowning character's inner state).

To clarify (and then to move over from) this basic level, I want to show you a clip from *Ray*. It is a case in which the protagonist's blindness accentuates the feelings of the sense of touch. There are five water-based fragments in the film. In the first two Ray Charles's hallucinations are showed. We first *see* Ray performing a tactile activity (he is packing his suitcase, he has been kissed and cleans his lips). Then we *hear* the noise of water. Only at this point, an audiovisual close-up allows us to *see and hear* Ray's fingertips exploring the wet clothes, until he encounters a lifeless foreign body.



*Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004, USA)

Ray encounters the human limbs of a child (hands that touch hands...). He is terrorized and abruptly retracts his hands and stumbles backward (and so do we). The synaesthetic strategy of film puts us in Ray's hands, so that we *feel* his *sensory* activity. Our physical body remains still “in front of” the screen, but we instinctively and haptically “simulate” actions and movements, thanks to sensomotorial consonance, an “embodied simulation” supported by the activity of mirror neurons. The second hallucination is constructed on the same structure, but in this case Ray's feet are shown immersed in the water; he bends over the floor, and his hands encounter George's dead foot; he leaps up and stumbles backward. In both cases, the passage to the hallucination regime is *in abyme*, with no cross-fade, or perceptual alteration, nor any usual solution that signals the change.

## 2. Mirroring

However, there is something more. As I mirror Ray's moves, I realize that I am not only involuntarily mirroring his motor activity. I am also mirroring his inner state, his emotions, his fear. I cannot discuss here the relevance of fictional and aesthetic empathy for a non-cognitive film theory in the light of

neurosciences findings. It is sufficient to say that sensibility also affects the emotional attitude. In the case of water, the most relevant quality is *depth*. Ray's hallucinations lay in shallow water, just under the surface. Nevertheless, the surface is a plane of separation of the body and, at the same time, of connection of two worlds. It is a perfect *topos* – rather than *tropos* – of the filmic situation: the surface is the screen, a fluid and trespassing threshold between conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping, life and death, present and past, here and there.



*Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004, USA)

It is not by chance that we see only the limbs of George, Ray's brother, as he drowns in the flashback that makes us aware of Ray's past trauma. The sensitive and sensible strategy of the film is focused on the body split. It is feet that slip, it is arms and legs that tumble into the rinse tub, it is limbs that return in Ray's hallucinations. George's body is a divided body, split into two worlds. But the body parts that remain and return in Ray's "actual" world are non-vital organs. The surface is a space of appearing and disappearing, through which something emerges and something immerses. Water cuts and sutures.

I will discuss a scene from *A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* that solicits a response to tactile stimulations and which represents immersed and drowning human and "almost-human" bodies. A group of children are playing beside a swimming pool and one of them tries to hurt the "mecha", David, with a knife to see if he can feel physical pain. "Tell me when you feel it?", he says to David, who responds to being pricked with the knife with a leap, an instinctive motor reaction. And we physiologically mirror his reaction, we feel a pinch on our arm as the involuntary reaction to a stimulation that we have internally reproduced.



*A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA)

However, this is only the very basic level of our involvement. There is something more than a sensory-motor reaction. David's shocked facial expressions allow us to get his fright (in the first close-up) and his disorientation (in the shots from the bottom of the swimming pool). The water surface becomes a

sight-filter that acts on bodies. And the filter texture can be more or less dense and penetrable. David sees and hears deformed bodies and voices from the other side of the water's surface – a curved and faraway world. Again, the surface explicitly splits the body with no actual cut (we see the legs and the feet of Martin, David's foster-brother, this time backing from death to life, from standstill to movement).



*A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA)

However, the most “aquatic” shot of the *A. I.* sequence does not take place in the water, but yet it is *enwatered*. Before the two boys fall into the pool, their mother turns her face, in response to Martin's cry for help. We would describe such a movement as “fluid”, with a certain density and consistency, a slowed down and softened movement, and it could even be described as the first-person shot of a fish. Nevertheless, there is no manipulation of time: the *slow-motion* effect is obtained with a mirrored-parabolic movement of the camera with respect to the movement of the face and, at the same time, with a typical, cushioned, underwater sound. A liquid substance, with certain sensible properties, makes the movement emotionally loaded. Thus, the spectator is already immersed in a liquid environment before any characters' bodies have plunged into the water.



*A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA)

### 3. Reflection

There is a third step that concerns the *sensate* domain of sensibility. We cannot reduce consonance to a matter of neurons or physiological evidence, nor can we narrow our interest to the aesthetics and bodily nature of film communication. The experiential figures do not exclude cognitive activity. Rather, they affect the whole narrative development and they configure body-based orientation-maps or interpretation-scripts for the spectator. The figures of immersion and drowning are often strategically placed at precise turning points of the narrative (prologue/epilogue, climax, finale, etc.). For example, in *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000, USA), the female body in the water appears first as a floating corpse in the dense and murky surface of the lake, while later it is immersed in the transparent and reflective (though

menacing) water in the bathroom, and toward the end it is a dead body – the body of a submerged and unconfessable past (the adultery and the homicide) – that comes back to life to take revenge. At the end of the film, it returns, swallowed by the deep blue water of vindictive revenge. A range of depths and densities are used as significant sensible qualities connected with a precise narrative function.



*What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000, USA)

This inferential and conceptual activity involves memory and personal past experience. As in *What Lies Beneath*, or *I, Robot* or in many other films, in *Ray* a painful past trauma suddenly emerges on the surface, from the deep of the protagonist's past experience. What is relevant to us is the fact that the hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks are built "in water". During the medication treatment, Ray has a nightmare in which the water becomes blood and the whole world is altered by solarised photography and a stormy montage. Blood-coloured water leaks from the tub onto the camera lens, that is, onto the screen (a strong sensomotorial stimulation that, in fact, reveals the fictional nature of film experience).



*Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004, USA)

During his rehabilitation therapy, after a conversation with the doctor, Ray has other hallucinations in which he accesses his past by plunging into the tub. He goes into himself *in depth* to solve the sense of guilt that haunts him. As he decides to face the present (he is addicted to heroin) by facing his past, he breaks the water's surface. Cinema conveys the psychological progress/regress dynamic with a deep/surface dynamic.

#### 4. Reflexivity

The experiential figures not only affect physiological reflex, emotional mirroring and cognitive reflection, but also *reflexivity*. Thanks to the dynamic between point/glance shot and point/object shot, that is, David's semi-subjective-shots from the bottom of the swimming pool – from the deep of his perspective of a hostile world – we both empathetically get his inner state and we auto-empathetically get our own



sensible state, our bodily position in the psychological space of the film experience. When the camera penetrates the surface, David's, and our, "reverse point-of-view" makes us "sensibly aware" of two things: we see the world from a new, underwater and *enwatered*, perspective; and we see the place and the body we occupied before.



*A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA)

This confirms both Merleau-Ponty's idea of *chiasmus* and *reversibility* and Sobchack's idea that the spectator is both a *viewing* and a *viewed* subject, *seeing* and *being seen*, involved in both a conscious perceptive activity and an unconscious apperceptive activity, that is reflexivity.

To conclude, enwaterment is a form of *experiential and environmental* situation that "invisibly" helps the spectator to sensorially, sensitively, and sensately (in a single word: sensibly) perceive, share, comprehend and internalise the substance of film. Water is, eventually, a space of organisation of cinematic experience that is constructed on a triple sensibility: physiological reflex, emotional mirroring, cognitive reflection, and subjective reflexivity. Cinema allows the spectator to experience such a sensibility both by acting on the characters' bodies and by proposing itself – its "language" and its aesthetics – as a body: fluid movement accelerates or decelerates body motion, aquatic photography makes the characters' bodies "dense" or "diluted", and underwater sounds and "awash" shots create a liquid film style that calls for a liquid spectatorship. Contemporary cinema enwaters both the filmgoer-body and the film-body in the same imaginative, materialised substance.