Bodily Engagements with Film, Images and Technology. Somavision - A Book Review

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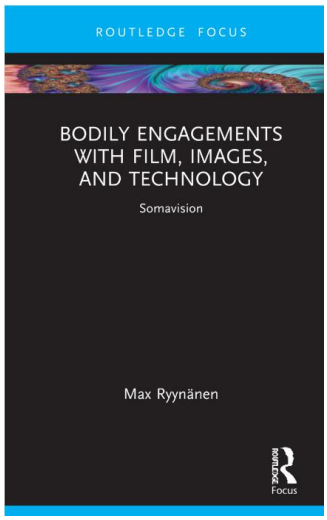

The world of images is a world based on reproduction and production. The production of images is the first cue to introduce the aspect that interests us most in this era, that of interaction. Ryynänen's considerations in this text are based on a concept derived from Dewey's concept of the *living creature, which* posits that the human being cannot separate itself from its environment. This means that interaction is a characteristic inherent to our genetic makeup: "We are mammals that react to seeing things" (Ryynänen 2022, p. 4). We are mammals that react to seeing things and images. Our hair stands up, we get goosebumps, we feel a tingle down our backs, and our palms sweat. All these reactions are the result of simply seeing. This reasoning clarifies, within the

context of Somaesthetics, the war on sociocentrism, particularly as advanced by contemporary Phenomenology, regarding the somatic significance of the sensitive experience of the body in motion through space. However, *Somavision* theory introduces vision as a sensory experience that provokes somatic reactions in us equal to those that might arise from other sensory experiences, such as smell, touch, and listening.

The involvement of the body in *films, images and technology* is an ambiguous topic. How can visions, images, and reproductions of images invade our proprioceptive ability? Do our movements or kinetic shifts? How can photographed images of bodies become our proof of existence? How can the movements of robots make our bodies feel safe? Is the body still the philosophical element that distinguishes itself from the intellect? What differences are still too pronounced between Eastern sensibility and Western reasoning? These are just a few examples of questions answered by Max Ryynänen in *Bodily Engagements with Film, Images and Technology: Somavision*. Ryynänen published this text with Routledge in 2022, anticipating the increasingly concrete aspects of our somatic behaviour in response to digital interfaces and AI.

It all began with the observation of the dog, Ruska, who takes a leading role in unravelling the theses of this text. I can confirm the captivating energy of this animal, who, at the presentation of this text in Helsinki, was the star of a cosy intellectual conversation even though she did not actively participate in the meeting. Thanks to the sweet and protective Ruska, the idea for this book came from her behaviour in front of the television set at home: Ruska barks at the projected images, checks to see if the animals in her view are hiding behind it, moves her tail, yelps, and attacks the screen.

In this regard, the *gaze* and the *body* come together in the six chapters of this book, which deal with somatic cinema, the body in the artistic documentation of activist art, body parts (and their mutilation or surgery) in contemporary art and cinema; robot cars and our visual relationship with them; the usefulness of Indian *rass* philosophy to explain digital culture; and an examination of Mario Perniola's work on the idea that we, human beings, are increasingly experiencing ourselves as mere 'things'.

The first chapter, entitled *Somatic Film: Background, Classification, Education*, examines the concept of somatic cinema, specifically films that engage the viewer's body. Ryynänen analyses how the body physically reacts to films through sensations such as shivering, muscle tension, itching, or jumping out of one's chair. He delves into the role of neuroscience, with a particular focus on the work of Vittorio Gallese and his collaborators, to explain the somatic and empathetic reactions that the human body experiences while watching films. Neuroscience reveals that the human brain is deeply involved in processing emotions and physical sensations when viewing moving images. Studies, such as Nummenmaa, Glerean, Hari and Hietanen (2014), demonstrate that emotions can be mapped onto the human body, with distinct areas of the body activating in response to specific feelings, including love, anxiety, or shame. These findings

highlight the role of somatosensory receptors in the body, which are activated in emotional situations and influence our perception and reaction to films. In this sense, the work of Gallese, Guerra and Anderson (2015) focuses on mirror neurons and their role in empathy and embodied simulation. Mirror neurons, initially discovered in the brains of macaques and later identified in humans, play a crucial role in understanding the behaviour and experiences of others. These neurons activate when we perform an action and when we observe someone else performing it, creating a direct connection between observation and understanding. Gallese and his collaborators argue that cinema leverages this *embodied simulation* to engage viewers. Through close-ups and detailed movements, films stimulate mirror neurons, increasing the viewer's desire to 'reach out and touch the image'. This process explains why films can evoke intense physical reactions, such as the urge to grab an object or the sensation of being part of the action (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 6).

Ryynänen points out that the film industry has understood the central role of the body in film reception better than academic studies. He proposes a classification of somatic cinema as a distinct category, noting that although all films incorporate a somatic element, some make it central to the viewer's experience. The concept of *education* in the first chapter refers to the way somatic cinema educates viewers to learn more about their bodies and their reactions. In this respect, somatic films not only entertain but also serve as learning tools, helping viewers understand their physical sensations and bodily limitations. Watching somatic films, according to Ryynänen, can be compared to a philosophical exercise in which the viewer learns to reflect on what they feel, such as disgust, fear, or tension, and how these feelings affect the body. This somatic learning process can lead to a greater awareness of oneself and one's relationship to the world. Ryynänen emphasises that somatic cinema offers a unique opportunity to explore extreme bodily experiences, such as the fear of death or the loss of a limb, in a safe and controlled environment. These films allow viewers to confront situations that they have never experienced directly but which can be simulated through moving images. In this sense, somatic cinema becomes an educational tool that prepares the body and mind to face the unknown.

The concept of *classification* focuses on Max Ryynänen's proposal to define 'somatic cinema' as a distinct category within the cinematic landscape. The author points out that although all films have some somatic impact on the viewer, some films are distinguished by their strong physical involvement, making bodily reactions central to the cinematic experience. Ryynänen suggests that somatic cinema should be classified according to its ability to stimulate the spectator's body through intense sensations. These films do not merely engage the mind or emotions but directly activate the body, creating a physical experience that is an integral part of their functioning. In the first chapter, Max Ryynänen cites several examples of somatic films that strongly stimulate the viewer's body through intense physical reactions, such as *Endhiran* (2010) by S. Shankar: Ryynänen describes a scene in which the robot Chitti, played by Rajinikanth, performs spectacular actions such as stopping a car with his hands,

crashing trucks and using several guns at the same time. These unrealistic and dynamic sequences stimulate the viewer on a somatic level, provoking physical reactions such as rapid head movements or body tension. From Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) Ryynänen cites the face punches shown in the film as examples of intense somatic moments that evoke physical pain through visual representation. *Hardboiled* (1992) by John Woo is noted for its violent and choreographed action scenes, which evoke physical tension in the viewer, as seen when the protagonist, Chow Yun-fat, throws a pot of boiling tea at a group of Triad members. From Brad Bird's *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol* (2011) Ryynänen cites the scene in which Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) climbs through the windows of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. This somatically stimulating sequence causes dizziness and itching on the soles of the feet of the viewer. Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* (1923) is mentioned for the famous scene in which the protagonist is hanging from a clock hand on a tall building, creating physical tension and somatic reactions in the viewer. These films are examples of works that engage the viewer's body directly and intensely, making physical reactions central to the cinematic experience.

The second chapter, *Making It Real: The Need for the Presence of the Body in the Documentation of Contemporary Art*, explores the role of the body as a central element in the documentation and representation of political and activist art. Ryynänen illustrates the body as an instrument of authenticity, emphasising that the physical presence of the artist's body is crucial for making political art credible and meaningful. The visual documentation of the body gives depth and weight to the artistic idea, transforming it into a real and tangible act. Some interesting examples include artists such as Sasha Huber, a Haitian-Swiss artist who climbed a mountain in the Swiss Alps to rename it 'Rentyhorn' in homage to a Congolese slave. His physical action and visual documentation made the gesture symbolic and powerful. Minna Heikinaho, a Finnish artist, turned her gallery into a breakfast place for drug addicts and homeless people, demonstrating how the artist's body can serve as an example of concrete social action.

Also, visual documentation becomes a political tool. Images and videos showing the artist's body in action not only represent the act but also make it public and accessible, amplifying the political and social message. In this way, the body expresses political potential. The artist, through her body, demonstrates that even small acts can have a significant impact. This encourages viewers to reflect on their capacity to act politically. Foucault's (1984) concept of *care of the self*, as discussed in his History of Sexuality, emphasises self-reflective practices that enable individuals to understand their boundaries and take control over their lives (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 22). Foucault draws inspiration from Greek Stoic philosophy, where self-care involves introspection and practical ethical exercises. These practices were auto-communicative and aimed at fostering self-awareness and self-control. His approach suggests that active participation in the public sphere begins with an individual's ability to reflect on and care for themselves, thereby enabling meaningful engagement with society. Another consideration is that of John Dewey. Dewey's vision of democracy necessitates

active participation in the public sphere as a means of self-actualisation (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 38). Dewey believed that democracy should emulate the open-ended process of inquiry found in the scientific community. He saw aesthetic experience as a model for this self-realisation, where sensually mediated and organically consummated activities foster active engagement. Art and aesthetic experience were central to understanding and participating in the public sphere, as they provided a framework for individuals to connect with and contribute to society.

The third chapter, *Cutting, Mending, Learning*, examines the evolution of cultural and artistic paradigms, with a focus on the transition from postmodernism to contemporary global culture. The concept of *cutting* refers to the mutilation or fragmentation of the human body, literally and symbolically, as an artistic and cultural practice (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 47). It is explored through examples of contemporary artists who utilise the body as a medium of creative expression, challenging traditional conventions and reflecting on the complex interplay between the body, technology, and identity. Artists like ORLAN and Stelarc are recognised for their works that involve extreme bodily modifications, such as surgical interventions and technological implants. These practices transform the body into a "post-sculpture" or an object of artistic expression, pushing the boundaries of human perception.

Cutting also serves as a metaphor for the fragmentation of human identity in the contemporary era, where the body is often perceived as a collection of mechanical or technological parts. This reflects the growing influence of technology on our understanding of the body and the concept of subjectivity. A particular choice, the story of Chopin's heart, extracted and buried separately from the rest of his body, is a historical example of *cutting*, highlighting the cultural fascination with the separation and preservation of body parts (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 61). The concept of *learning* in the third chapter refers to an educational process that involves the body, emotions, and mind, often through extreme or provocative experiences. This type of somatic learning enables us to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Ryynänen focuses on Rancière's ideas to reflect on how learning can take place through somatic and cultural experiences. Art, cinema, and extreme experiences can be viewed as tools for self-education, enabling individuals to explore their limits and develop greater self-awareness (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 55). This type of learning does not require external authority but is based on direct interaction with the world and one's own experiences.

The fourth chapter, *Robot Cars*, explores the relationship between humans and machines, focusing on robotic cars and how they influence our perception, behaviour, and sense of interaction. Using a phenomenological and somaesthetic approach, the chapter reflects on how machines, programmed to react and interact with us, become integral to our daily experience, challenging traditional distinctions between humans and technology. Robotic cars are not merely perceived as objects but as 'companions' that interact with us. Heidegger's concepts of readiness-to-hand (and present-at-hand are discussed (Ryynänen, 2022, p.70). Tools become transparent in their everyday use

(readiness-to-hand), while they draw attention when broken or noticeable (present-at-hand). Robotic cars, through their ability to react and 'notice' our presence, create a sense of safety and somatic interaction. Interaction with robotic cars primarily occurs through the body and visual perception rather than verbal dialogue or intelligence. The sensation of being 'cared for' by a machine that slows down or adapts to our movements generates a sense of somatic connection (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 74). The future of our relationship with technology will not be determined solely by machine intelligence but by the quality of somatic interaction they offer (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 76).

In the fifth chapter, *Disgust, the Inorganic, and the Enigmatic: The Dank Media Philosophy of Mario Perniola* is analysed. Mario Perniola's (2004) media philosophy focuses on the enigmatic nature of contemporary society and the evolving relationship between humans and media. Perniola challenges traditional philosophical approaches, advocating for a new methodology that embraces the fragmented, excessive, and often unsettling aspects of modern media culture. Perniola argues that contemporary society is inherently complex, requiring philosophers to detach from their personal biases and desires to better understand its complexities. Philosophy should function as a mediator, capturing the essence of cultural phenomena without imposing rigid frameworks. He explores the concept of *thingness*, where humans sometimes experience themselves as objects or machines. This perspective challenges traditional humanist metaphysics, suggesting that being treated or feeling like a *thing* can occasionally be a neutral or even pleasant experience. Also, Perniola introduces the concept of the *video-man*, a figure shaped by the excesses of video culture in the 1980s and 1990s. This marks the beginning of a shift where humans become extensions of media, losing control over their experiences and becoming intermediaries for media-driven sensations. Ryynänen highlights Perniola's almost futuristic vision. Perniola discusses how contemporary culture fosters indifference and apathy, from repetitive sports to media consumption. This aesthetic of indifference reflects the cold and narrow nature of modern experiences, in which humans are increasingly shaped by their interactions with media and technology (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 86).

The sixth and last chapter, entitled *Rasafiction: Can the Oldest Atmosphere Theory in the World Help Us Understand Today's Somaesthetic Manipulation?* Explores the topic concerning the aesthetics of ancient Indian thought, specifically rasa and its potential application in understanding somatic manipulation in contemporary digital culture. Ryynänen examines how the concept of *rasa*, which describes emotional atmospheres, can provide tools for interpreting the ways in which design and media shape our daily experiences. The rasa theory, developed by Bharata and later expanded upon by Abhinavagupta, focuses on the aesthetic emotions experienced during artistic performances. This theory can be applied to analyse the atmospheres created by digital media and contemporary design, which continually influence our emotional states (Ryynänen, 2022, p. 91). Contemporary life is described as a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), where every element, from social media to digital interfaces, creates an immersive atmosphere. The connection between rasa theory and

somaticity shows how digital atmospheres affect the body. Somatic experiences, such as the anxiety caused by notifications or the comfort derived from well-designed digital environments, are compared to the effects of *rasa* in classical Indian theatre. Rasa refers to the emotional and aesthetic experience evoked in the audience through a performance. In classical Indian theatre, rasa refers to the emotional and aesthetic experience evoked in the audience through performance. It is a heightened state of reflection and bliss that transcends everyday emotions, creating a unique connection between the audience and the art. Rasa transforms everyday emotions (*bhavas*) into refined, aestheticised versions. The audience becomes fully absorbed in the performance, losing their sense of self and entering a parallel world created by the play. This state of *aesthetic self-forgetfulness* enables a deeper engagement with the art. In accord with this, the concept of *rasafiction* refers to the production of feelings and emotional atmospheres designed by professionals, which are distributed through digital media, public spaces, and consumer objects. These atmospheres are not personal experiences but aesthetic products that surround and influence us.

The somatic perspective developed by Max Ryynänen in *Somavision* resonates strongly with the contemporary reflections *of Artificial Aesthetics* (Arielli and Manovich, 2024). In their work, the affective and bodily dimensions of aesthetic experience are not peripheral but central to the emerging logic of AI-generated art. Ryynänen's view of the body as a sensory and epistemic interpreter, capable of shivering, reacting, and tensing, is echoed in Manovich and Arielli's analysis of *affective computation* and the artificial gaze, where digital aesthetics become immersive, intimate, and often uncanny.

By proposing concepts such as *rasafiction*, inspired by Indian rasa theory, Ryynänen shifts the focus from representational aesthetics to one rooted in atmospheric and somatic engagement. Similarly, *Artificial Aesthetics* discusses how aesthetic generation is no longer purely cognitive or symbolic but embodied, generative, and predictive. Both frameworks suggest that contemporary images do not just address the eye; they resonate within the body, shaping our affective and perceptual fields. Just as Ryynänen examines the subtle somatic responses to visual stimuli, Manovich and Arielli show how AI aesthetics amplify or reconfigure those responses through algorithmic design. Ryynänen's work is not merely descriptive but diagnostic: it helps us understand how aesthetic experience is transforming under the pressure of technological immediacy. What emerges is a hybrid regime where the soma, the machine, and the affordance intersect – a path contemporary aesthetics must take seriously.

Somavision argues that images do not simply show or represent; they inhabit us. They touch, reverberate, and recompose us from within. Ryynänen's work outlines a twenty-first-century aesthetic paradigm in which the body is not a passive witness but the very site of vision, affect, and knowledge. In the background, the discipline of somaesthetics, was introduced by Richard Shusterman, a central figure in Ryynänen's book, provides a theoretical foundation for analysing the body and its interactions with images and technology. Shusterman's ideas enrich Ryynänen's discourse, offering

a philosophical framework that connects somaesthetics to contemporary visual culture. Ryynänen uses Shusterman's work to emphasise how the body is not merely a passive object but an active agent in interacting with images, films, and technology. Specifically, Shusterman is cited to highlight the body's role in constructing aesthetic experiences and somatic perception. Ryynänen draws on Shusterman to introduce the concept of somaesthetics, a discipline that places the body at the centre of aesthetic experience and philosophical reflection. Shusterman is also cited for his contributions to understanding the body as a tool for knowledge and reflection, particularly in the context of the arts and visual culture. Ryynänen utilises Shusterman's work to highlight how the body is not merely a passive object but an active agent in its interaction with images, films, and technology. Specifically, Shusterman is cited to highlight the body's role in constructing aesthetic experiences and somatic perception. In *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Shusterman, 2012), Ryynänen finds the idea to explore how the body reacts to and engages with visual and technological stimuli, such as films and digital environments. In *Somavision*, he offers a cultural diagnosis of contemporary aesthetics, focusing on unconscious bodily reactions and somatic atmospheres triggered by media. Shusterman and Ryynänen both reject the mind-body dualism. Yet Ryynänen describes a condition, whereas Shusterman advances an aesthetic ethics of embodied living.

In the contemporary environment of pragmatic philosophy, Ryynänen's position in his theory of *Somavision* opens new avenues of research, proposing the gaze as a further sensory and aesthetic exchange of our perception of reality and how this can help us live better. The aspect of improvement understood by somaesthetics is also very much present in the dynamics of *Somavision*, in which, as Ryynänen reminds us, we must be careful with artificial reproductions and simply savour the authenticity of our animal reactions, just like Ruska.

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