

Book Review

Bodily Engagements with Film, Images, and Technology: Somavision, Max Rynnänen

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We have two dogs in our home, the golden retriever follows the movies we watch in attention, the kangal mix could not care less, unless a dog barks in the movie. The golden watches so intently that we have to cover her eyes when the gore of our horror movies is too much for her, for us. Of course, we have no idea what her experience of human movies is, nor do we worry about our own exposure to gore. These reactions are all part of a larger somaesthetic relation to screens, images, our pets, and so forth. Do we cover our dog's eyes because we think she cannot somehow filter out the violence the way we believe that we can? Why is violent imagery not harmful to us? If somatic reactions are somehow biologically determined, why does only one of our dogs react to any screen images?

These questions are similar to the questions that Max Rynnänen opens his book with, also reflecting on his dog's relation to screens. Here, different screens elicit different canine reactions. Of course, Rynnänen's book is not a book on animals, or rather, nonhuman animals. It is a book on the human animal and our bodies watching and engaging with films, images, and technologies. In emphasizing bodily and somatic relations to images and technologies, Rynnänen's book is part of a larger shift towards rectifying the imbalance between cognitive and corporeal emphasis in aesthetics and philosophy over the past decades, if not centuries.

Bodily Engagements with Film, Images, and Technology is thus part of a larger aesthetic-philosophical shift towards somaesthetics, as its subtitle *Somavision* also signals. Read and understood in that light, Rynnänen makes several important forays into contemporary audiovisual media culture. First, some films — Rynnänen calls them “somatic films” — engage a physicality of experience, an experience that educates viewers (somehow a poor phrase for Rynnänen's aim) about somatic boundaries and somatic entertainment. Second, these somatic boundaries are amorphous and a two-way street: films, specifically documentary films for Rynnänen, may make us feel more like machine bodies, understood in a positive way that affords insight into these machines' role and position in a larger, hybrid lifeworld. Third, this two-way street between human and machine bodies may be informative to understand the larger implications of our attitudes towards cars, robots, and robot cars. Their uncanny liveliness may bring insight into our own human liveliness, such as the programmatic media philosophy of Mario Perniola, through whom Rynnänen argues for an immersion into mediated and technologized sensibilities as a saturation of human experience. An experience best understood through a version of Indian philosophy known as *rasa*, a philosophy, Rynnänen argues, that offers a more fruitful

conception of human-technological relations through the concept of atmosphere as something that permeates and suffuses experience.

If this overview makes it sound as if Rynnänen slowly opens up human capacities and experiences towards a more technological lifeworld that presents exciting possibilities and different problematics, then that is quite accurate. On the one hand, Rynnänen has a deep respect for human bodily experience as something that must not be underestimated the way it has been, historically. On the other hand, Rynnänen also, quite rightly I believe, rejects the idea of a static human sensorium — bodily engagements are *changeable* and *historical*, so that new technological and aesthetic forms bring about different experiences. Attending to these historical changes of somatic experiences offers a way to trace and understand contemporary technological advances and their impact. Or, really, any period but Rynnänen's focus is contemporary.

What Rynnänen's book is not, is an aesthetic study understood in the more traditional formalist approach, where certain aesthetic devices are investigated and analyzed for their contribution to, for instance, the cinematic tradition. Anyone looking for close analyses of films and documentaries will not find that here and should look elsewhere. What readers will find are forays into framing and understanding older questions in new and different ways.

There is a clear, vibrant desire to understand the larger implications of technologies — broadly conceived — and to understand them differently. If there is a weakness in Rynnänen's study, it is that vibrant desire, often fueled by autobiographic anecdotes. The difficulty runs deep. The study depends on these autobiographical framings, not just for the engaging style that Rynnänen has, but also the embedded nature of the arguments that are essentially deliberate enactments of somaesthetics. Change the embedded nature and you change the situation. As always, such a form of argument runs up against a phrase from what is certainly a somatic film, the Dude in *The Big Lebowski* saying "That's just like, your opinion, man."

And yet, it is not. It is a testament to Rynnänen's philosophical range that it is exactly the enacted nature of the case at stake that *requires* an autobiographical embedded framework. To do otherwise would be to miss the entire point of bodily *being there* confronting *this* problem in *this* way. Such analyses are meant to be followed and engaged with, not summarily dismissed. Certainly this is also part of Rynnänen's point when critiquing Adorno's critique of mass culture — framed differently, we are able to see the issues at stake in a new light. Maybe then things aren't as bad. Or, maybe we should attend to more and other markers than Adorno's highbrow leanings. Maybe the body has a say, too.

In these ways, Rynnänen's book offers a meaningful contribution to bodily being in the world and also a meaningful decontribution to critical theories that leave bodily experience out of the relation between humans and technologies. Whether or not the examples or cases are what readers would want, the book suggests methods that should be emulated — attend to these problems, here, now, in these ways. Attend to the body, its somatic markers, its somatic boundaries, blurred as they may be, because these embedded situations bring fresh perspectives that could not emerge in other ways.