GENDER
OPEN
REPOSITORIUM

Questions of embodied difference : Film and queer phenomenology

Lindner, Katharina

2012

https://doi.org/10.25595/491

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lindner, Katharina: *Questions of embodied difference : Film and queer phenomenology*, in: Necsus : European Journal of Media Studies, Jg. 1 (2012) Nr: 2, 199–217. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/491.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.2.LIND

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY NC ND 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.de

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY NC ND 4.0 License (Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivates). For more information see:

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES
www.necsus-ejms.org
Published by: Amsterdam University Press

Questions of embodied difference

Film and queer phenomenology

Katharina Lindner

NECSUS 1 (2):199–217
DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2012.2.LIND

Keywords: body, film, identity, phenomenology, queer, tangibility

A phenomenological description of the cinematic situation considers the film as a lived body. Just as the human lived body forms the basis for intentionality, perception, expression and action in the world, the film's body – its technological and instrumental dimension – forms the basis for the films perceptual and expressive engagement with the world. Technological methods and processes thus correlate with modalities of thought and consciousness.[1]

We do not 'lose ourselves' in the film, so much as we exist – emerge, really – in the contact between our body and the film's body. It is not a matter of simply identifying with the characters on screen, or with the body of the director or camera operator, for example. Rather, we are in a relationship of intimate, tactile, reversible contact with the film's body – a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as by attraction.[2]

Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasises the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.[3]

Phenomenological debates around cinema put the 'lived body' at the centre of inquiry – this includes the body of the viewer and the body of the film. Herein lies film phenomenology's most exciting appeal. In responding critically to accounts of the cinematic experience as abstract, disembodied,

illusory, and substitutive (put forward by psychoanalytic as well as Marxist/ideological film criticism in particular[4]), it is the embodied nature of our engagement with cinema that is foregrounded. All kinds of bodies 'matter' within this area of critical debate – or, to put it more cautiously, they *should* matter. The aim of this paper is to begin to explore one of the perhaps marginalised areas within debates around film and embodiment: questions of embodied *difference*.

From the outset, I want to make clear that this is by no means an attempt to reintroduce essentialising notions of 'natural' biological differences of gender or race, for instance. Rather, the aim is to suggest that contemporary work on cinema, embodiment, and affect could benefit from a more explicit acknowledgement of the significance of embodied and 'lived' difference, of differences in affective experiences and memories, of ways of being-in-the-world and therefore perceiving the world. We need to account more efficiently for the ways in which cinema 'touches' and 'moves' us differently.

This article will develop a theoretical argument – that is, an argument about theoretical developments within film studies and the potential resultant directions. Specifically, I will argue that contemporary work on film and embodiment might benefit from drawing on the insights of feminist and queer engagements with phenomenological questions of embodiment. Without calling into question the significance of existing phenomenological approaches to film,[5] I want to focus on some of the marginalised and less developed areas within this field. With the help of Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* in particular, I want to draw attention to the 'straightforward' orientation of film phenomenology and point to manners in which an acknowledgement of queer orientations and ways of being-in-the-world further open up the conceptual and political possibilities provided by the turn towards embodiment, lived experience, and affect within film criticism.

Although the approach developed here could be applied to any film, there are, as Vivian Sobchack argues, certain films that engage the 'sense-making capacities of our bodies' more explicitly than others.[6] It is the ratio of the explicit engagement of body and mind that varies from film to film or from genre to genre. However, I also want to suggest that there are certain kinds of viewers that might be more open to a sensuous and embodied engagement with cinema. Sobchack argues that we 'see and comprehend and feel films with our entre bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium'.[7] This understanding of our perceptive relations to the world and cinema as culturally and historically specific, as situated and 'acculturated', implies that different carnal

histories and knowledges would be linked to differences in our 'sensorium', and as such to differences in our engagement with cinema.

We are likely to be more open to the tactile or kinaesthetic dimensions of the cinematic experience if we have a particular history of tactile or kinaesthetic engagement with the world – that is, if we have come to embody a particularly tactile or kinaesthetic way of being-in-the-world. The 'sense-making capacities' of our bodies might also be more readily engaged if we are not provided with traditional cinematic pleasures or points of engagement. As the literature on queering and appropriation has shown, we can still take pleasure in films even when we are not given opportunities for identification or desire in relation to specific characters.[8] I would like to add an embodied, phenomenological dimension to this debate. Phenomenological approaches to cinema allow us to re-think *what it is* that we are able to recognise, relate to, and identify within our encounter with cinema – a point I will elaborate further.

The argument developed in the first part of this article will be illustrated with reference to queer cinema and with a specific focus on *Cracks* (2009) by Jordan Scott, a film with explicitly lesbian characters and an explicit lesbian storyline. I will argue that the pleasures that queer audiences might take from the film are most usefully identified by an emphasis on sensuousness and bodily affect – and, that they are less likely to be found in the realm of the (psychic) identifications and desires available in relation to characters and storyline, for instance.

Cracks deploys a range of 'negative' lesbian stereotypes (exemplified by Eva Green's character, Miss G, a predatory lesbian teacher at a boarding school for girls) and ends in death and devastation. An articulation of the pain and violence inflicted on queer characters by heteronormative and homophobic social structures can of course be useful and is important in highlighting continuing inequalities. This in itself can be 'pleasurable' in the sense that one's identity position and a marginalised and disadvantaged socio-cultural status is acknowledged and made visible. However, an acknowledgement of the sensuous, embodied, and affective nature of our encounter with cinema provides a more comprehensive account of the pleasures and points of engagement offered – especially when differences in our orientations, embodiments, ways of being-in-the-world, as well as our perceptive and expressive relations to the world and others are taken into account.

Turning towards the body

The reasons for a turn away from an exclusive emphasis on optical vision and 'the gaze' and towards the body as a whole, towards questions of embodiment and perception, and towards the interrelated nature of the senses, are, generally speaking, two-fold: concerns about the embodied nature of film and the film experience are linked both to changes in filmmaking practices (and a critical concern with those practices[9]) as well as to developments in theorising about film (that are partially related to changes in cinematic technologies and practices, but mainly to critiques of existing theories[10]). This includes, for instance, concerns over the gendered and racialised implications of established conceptualisations and manifestations of the gaze – both within cinema and also within the wider socio-cultural context, where looking (from a distance) is associated and inscribed with various hierarchies of power and control.

Conceptualising our encounter with cinema in terms of voyeurism, narcissism, and fetishism, as well as in terms of symbolically and ideologically constituted subject positions, tends to replicate dominant symbolic structures and power hierarchies and provides only limited possibilities for an understanding of the various points of engagement and viewing pleasures on offer – in relation to specific films and to cinema as a whole. Donna Haraway suggests that the gaze, including the human gaze and its various technological incarnations, 'signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White [in] scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, male-dominant societies'.[11] She goes on to say that 'eyes', including those artificially constructed as well as our organic ones, constitute 'active perceptual systems, building on specific ways of seeing, that is, *ways of life*' that provide 'highly specific visible possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of *organising worlds*'.[12] This is why Haraway calls for an acknowledgement of the situated, partial, and embodied nature of vision and knowledge, by pointing to the need to 'reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere'.[13]

Importantly, Haraway points to the interrelated nature of the senses (that is, to the 'sensory system' that makes possible our contact and engagement with the world) and she develops explicit links between modes of perception and the different worlds we might perceive and experience. With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that film viewing and film theorising do not take place in an abstract, ahistorical, and disembodied realm (as psychoanalytic film theory would have us believe). Vision and

technologies of vision, including cinema, have very real and material implications. They discipline and shape bodies, relations between bodies, and bodily experiences, in addition to modes of being-in-the-word as well as the 'world' itself in fundamental ways.

Phenomenological approaches to film are useful in that, rather than strictly opposing approaches based on optical vision, distance, and 'the gaze', they complement existing theories. From a phenomenological perspective, it is the body with its expressive and perceptive qualities that constitutes the necessary condition for looking, identification, emotions, and pleasure. After all, it is the material body that makes looking and other sensory engagements with the world (including cinema) possible in the first place. It is at the level of the body that meaning is constituted; it is where we 'apprehend' the world and make 'sense' of environmental and physical stimuli.

Building on the work of Laura Marks and Sobchack, Jennifer Barker takes such an approach in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. She argues that

> a phenomenological approach to the cinematic experience … focuses neither solely on the formal and narrative features of the film itself, nor solely on the spectator's psychic identification with characters or cognitive interpretation of the film. Instead, phenomenological film analysis approaches the film and the viewer as acting together, correlationally, along an axis that would itself constitute the object of study.[14]

This kind of approach can go some way in explaining how/why we might enjoy and derive particular kinds of pleasures from a film – even if it does not provide us with possibilities for identification in relation to particular characters and what they stand for and/or in relation to particular narrative structures and trajectories. Following Merleau-Ponty, Barker argues that film and viewer are in a 'relationship of reversibility' and that viewer and film 'inhabit and enact embodied structures – tactile structures – that are not the same, but intimately related and reversible'.[15]

She goes on to provide a fascinating and compellingly detailed exploration of what Sobchack calls the 'common structures of embodied existence [and] similar modes of being-in-the-world'[16] that we share with cinema and that cinema shares with us. Barker goes beneath the skin (of the viewer and the film) in her account of the tactile dimensions of the cinematic experience and locates the 'contact' between viewer and film at the level of 'skin', and (delving further into the murky depth of the body) at the

level of 'musculature' and 'viscera'. While 'skin', following Marks' notion of haptic visuality, is linked to surface and texture and to notions of eroticism and contact with the other, 'musculature' is linked to particular spatial structures, to ways of taking up, moving through, and extending space, and as such, to notions of kinaesthetic empathy, agency, and desire. 'Viscera', according to Barker, is linked to the rhythms in the most hidden depths of the body, and thus to temporal structures, to particular ways of experiencing, understanding, and embodying time that might lead to a 'visceral resonance' between viewer and film.[17] Barker's account is invaluable in its detailing of the various levels and layers at which our contact (or encounter) with film can be located, both in terms of (human) bodies within film as well as with the body of film itself.

Barker's argument is based, at least partially, on an understanding of the relationship between viewer and film in terms of its mimetic dimensions. On the one hand, cinematic gestures and movements have emerged based on human gestures and movements. For instance, the close-up mimics the human gesture of leaning forward in order to get a 'closer look'. Conversely, we, as viewers, might mimic cinematic gestures or adjust our bodies in response to cinematic movements, as when we lean to one side in response to the erratic and swerving movements of a chase sequence. More generally, 'film and viewer share certain deep-seated muscular habits, beginning with the very tendency to move through the world in an upright position. We and the film are both inclined that way, as we are inclined to move and look forward, to face things directly'.[18]

Modes of movement and comportment are also associated with particular affective implications, as they provide the basis for our expressive and perceptive relations to the world. Barker suggests that 'swaggering, skulking, cowering, reaching, flinching, swaying, swerving, leaning or simply standing upright',[19] for instance, are simultaneously expressive and perceptive acts that articulate how we affect and how we are affected by objects and others. They are ways of orienting ourselves and arranging our body in space, and they take place in relation to our encounters with other bodies (human and cinematic).

Developing a similar (although perhaps more cognitive-based) argument, Carl Plantinga in *Moving Viewers* asserts the importance of accounting more specifically for what he calls the 'pre-rational elements of spectatorship, in other words, responses that are to some extent automatic, pre-reflective body responses, rather than the intentional and interpretive cognitions of the conscious mind'.[20] In particular, he focuses on the phenomenon of 'motor mimicry' as one aspect of the pre-rational element of spectatorship

that is 'the tendency of an observer to outwardly mimic the facial and body movements of another person'.[21]

Motor mimicry is associated with affective mimicry and bodily empathy. For instance, we may not only experience sadness when we know why a particular character in a film cries (based on information provided through dialog and narrative); we may also experience, and exhibit, particular emotions when we see them displayed through characters' facial expressions, gestures, and movements, which we then mimic. While Plantinga focuses mainly on the affective and embodied relationships we might develop towards characters *in* films, this argument can usefully be related to Sobchack's and Barker's notion of the body *of* films, including cinematic gestures, movements, and modes of comportment, as outlined above. This argument also contributes to unpacking the ways in which 'emotional contagion' might work – both in relation to characters in films and in relation to the cinematic experience as a whole.

Antonio Damasio's account of the workings of consciousness and emotions from a neurobiological perspective is insightful here, as he points to the wide-ranging physiological changes taking place in the body (including muscular-postural and muscular-visceral-endocrine adjustments) in our affective encounters with objects and others – most of which we cannot consciously control. Importantly, Damasio also suggest that 'the records we hold of the objects and events we once perceived include the motor adjustments we made to obtain the perception in the first place and also include the emotional reactions we had then'.[22] This is why certain bodily responses are not only evoked when we perceive an object or person, but also when we merely think of or remember an object or person – and further, when we witness particular expressions of emotions in other bodies, both human and cinematic.

Whose body?

What is perhaps slightly problematic about Barker's work as well as other writing in this area is that it is based on seemingly unproblematic, universalising, and at times paradoxically ahistorical understandings of the body and embodiment. Despite the emphasis on the materiality of the body and its concrete functioning, it is the white, male, heterosexual body that is implicitly at the heart of the theoretical underpinnings of much contemporary film phenomenology. Elena del Rio asserts that 'the kind of phenomenology practiced by Merleau-Ponty falls short of considering

the body in particularly gendered ways by simply assuming the white, male body as the universal measure of all bodies'.[23] Arguing along similar lines, Ahmed suggests that Husserl's phenomenology seems to involve an 'ease of movement' that implies a 'mobile body', one that 'can do' things.[24] Ahmed identifies the taken-for-granted ways of being-in-the-world at the heart of phenomenology in terms of heterosexuality and in terms of whiteness. The mobile body that can do things, that is characterised by an ease of movement, and for whom space constitutes the possibility of action, desire, and contact, is a body that takes up a very particular orientation towards the world and others that is based on the normative embodiment of heterosexuality and whiteness.

This normative (white, male, heterosexual, and able) body also inadvertently underpins phenomenological film criticism – a point I want to illustrate in more detail. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Barker conceptualises our encounter with cinema in terms of tactility and contact:

> Tactility is a mode of perception and expression wherein all parts of the body commit themselves to, or are drawn into, a relationship with the world that is at once a mutual and intimate relation of contact. The intimate and close contact between touching and touched, as well as the relationship of mutual, reciprocal relationship that exists between them, are *universal structures* .... Cinematic tactility, then, is a *general attitude* towards the cinema that the human body enacts in particular ways: haptically, at the tender surface of the body; kinaesthetically and muscularly, in the middle dimension of muscles, tendons and bones that reach toward and through cinematic space; and viscerally, in the murky recesses of the body, where heart, lungs, pulsing fluids, and firing synapses receive, respond to, and reenact the rhythms of cinema.[25]

Feminist, gender, and queer studies critiques of traditional phenomenology articulate the grounds on which we might challenge the 'universal structures' and 'general attitude' that arguably underpin our perceptive and expressive relations to the world (and to cinema). Various ways of being-in-the-world are linked to differences in our tactile and kinaesthetic encounters with objects and others. For instance, using the notion of 'sexual orientation' as a starting point, Ahmed points to how different ways of being orientated (phenomenologically) mean that we 'face' the world and others differently; it means that different objects and others come 'into view' and are therefore 'within reach'. In particular, she emphasises the spatiality of sexuality and points to the idea that 'sexuality involves ways of inhabiting

and being inhabited by space' and is related to 'ways of inhabiting and coexisting in the world'.[26]

Queer ways of being-in-the-world are therefore characterised by differences in our relationships to space. We extend space differently based on how we are orientated in the world. This is why sexuality should not be seen as determined only by object choice, but as involving differences in one's very relation to the world – that is, how one 'faces' the world or is directed toward it. Or rather, we could say that orientations towards sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations and different ways of directing one's desire means inhabiting different worlds'.[27] Different ways of being-in-the-world mean that different objects and others are at-hand, within 'reach', and familiar in the Heideggerian sense of the term. It also means that some objects and others are out of sight and not within reach. As such, our different ways of being orientated and of extending space open up (or close down) different possibilities for action and desire and for affecting and being affected by others. Importantly, such an understanding of (sexual) orientation engenders compelling new ways of thinking about the representability of queer identities and subjectivities (in cinema and elsewhere), in addition to new ways of conceptualising the identifications, pleasures, and points of engagement available for queer audiences in cinema.

Elaborating on the affective dimensions of different orientations and suggesting that emotions towards objects and others involve 'affective forms of (re)orientation', Ahmed explains that

> it is not just that bodies are moved by the orientations they have; rather, the orientation we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies .... Orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention towards.[28]

Queer bodies are characterised by facing the 'wrong' way, by tending towards 'inappropriate' others and directing their attention towards 'deviant' objects. This means that queer ways of being-in-the-world are characterised not only by tactile, kinaesthetic, or muscular relations to *different* others, but also by differences in the experience of proximity, contact, touch, and movement itself. Linking this back to cinema, a queer sense-ibility can be articulated not only by the representation of tactile relations to 'inappropri-

ate' others, but also by differences in the articulation of tactility and contact itself. Not only do we touch and are touched by different, 'inappropriate' objects and others, but we touch and are touched differently. Not only do we move and 'tend towards' different, 'inappropriate' objects and others, but we move and extend space differently.

Queer bodies live their tactile, muscular, and kinaesthetic relations to objects and others differently. So if, as Sobchack and Barker suggest, we can conceive of cinema as a 'lived body' that shares our structures of embodied existence and modes of being-in-the world, including various gestures and modes of movement and comportment, then queer subjectivities can be articulated by and identified in relation to not just characters in film but the body film itself and our embodied relationships with that body.

With reference to both Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as well as to Judith Butler's phenomenological account of gender as a repetition of bodily acts,[29] Ahmed adopts a model of history as 'bodily sedimentation'. She argues that 'phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture and their gesture'.[30] It should become clear at this point what a queer film phenomenology might look like and what shape it might take, as well as the kinds of conceptual and political possibilities it opens up. Rather than conceptualising our tactile, muscular, and kinaesthetic encounter with cinema in universalising terms (as Barker does, at least to a certain extent), an acknowledgement of the ways in which our embodied histories and habits shape our expressive and perceptive relations with the world and others adds a vital element of specificity – without, as I would like to re-emphasise, rehashing essentialising notions of bodily difference.

Re-thinking identity and identification

In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack calls for a return to questions of identification from a phenomenological point of view: '[w]e might wish to think again about processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not only to our secondary engagement with and recognition of "subject positions" or characters but rather to our primary engagement (and the film's) with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself.'[31] I want to follow Kate Ince in suggesting that the rather old-fashioned concepts of identity and identification (laden as they are with all kinds of ideological baggage) can regain significance if we move away from their largely abstract, ahistorical,

decontextualised, and disembodied incarnations and move towards an understanding of 'embodied cultural identity' within film criticism.

Ince follows Sobchack in suggesting a move away from a Lacanian understanding of primary and secondary identification as always involving a specular image (and the ways this has been taken up by Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, for instance) to argue for an understanding of identification based on the 'sensational body'. She proposes that identification 'is not specular at first, but "affective"', that specular identification can only take place on the 'ground of a preliminary affection'[32], and that it is from our embodied, affective relations with the world and others that various forms of identification emerge.

Such an understanding of identity (formation) and identification allows us to re-think our engagement with cinema in 'sensational' terms. Films not only provide possibilities for (psychic) identification with particular characters, they also open up possibilities for identification with affective situations that are constructed both through characters and narrative, but also through various (cinematic) movements, gestures, textures, or rhythms. In a similar vein, Misha Kavka points to the usefulness of thinking about 'situational identifications that are affect based' when she argues that we tend to 'project ourselves into the scenario there where the affective flow feels most "true"'. [33] In this sense, the screen functions as a permeable membrane between different 'affective worlds' that communicates this sensibility viscerally, through movement, gestures, colours, and sound.

Various points of identification are on offer in our encounter with cinema, as we can identify with particular ways of being-in-the-world, particular orientations, and particular affective situations. These can be based on our embodied experiences and memories, our sedimented histories of accumulated affect, our acculturated sensorium, and the ways in which we extend space and time and relate to objects and others. The bodies in and of cinema embody and express our different attitudes, tendencies, habits, and orientations, and this is where possibilities for our embodied, sensuous, and affective engagements with cinema partially lie.

Cracks

I would now like to illustrate the ideas outlined here with reference to *Cracks*. While this approach could be applied to any film, queer cinema provides a particularly useful starting point. With *Cracks*, I want to suggest that the film's most powerful appeal lies in its articulation of particularly queer orientations and ways of being-in-the-world that provide opportuni-

ties for recognition and identification in tactile, muscular, and kinaesthetic terms.

In her discussion of the significance of lesbian films in the context of queer cinema, Anat Pick writes that 'screening lesbianism is not simply a matter of making the invisible visible, but of negotiating different *regimes of visibility* [and, I would like to add, different *sensuous* regimes]'. She asserts that we 'need to interrogate marginal sexual identities not only as subject matter, but also as a *stance*, as a process of reinscription, as a way of situating oneself in relation to sets of images, experiences and historical formations'.[34] What I want to focus on here is the embodied and bodily dimension of this 'stance'.

Following Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, taking up a particular stance means adopting a particular orientation towards the world; it means not only that we see/experience the world from a particular situated location, but that we 'face' the world in a particular way. What I will explore in relation to *Cracks* is not only the kind of stance, or orientation, embodied by the characters in the film, but also the ways in which the film 'faces' us by taking up a particular stance and embodying a particular orientation; what kind of 'affective world' is articulated in and through the film?

Cracks is situated in 1930s England and takes place in a boarding school for girls. Miss G (Eva Green) is a teacher at the institution as well as the coach of the school's diving team. The narrative tensions and resulting 'love triangle' evolve around Miss G and her fascination with and desire for her student Fiamma (Maria Valverde), as well as one of the other student's (Di, played by Juno Temple) crush on Miss G and jealousy of Miss G's (unrequited) desire for Fiamma. However, rather than focusing on characters or narrative, I want to explore the significance of the numerous sequences that take place in the lake in which the girls train. It is the depiction of bodily movement in and through water and the relations of bodies in water that provide the film's most explicit articulation of queer ways of being-in-the-world and the kinds of 'affective flows' that might resonate with queer viewers in particular.



Fig. 1 *Affective flows*

The quality of the 'matter' in which this movement of bodies occurs, and the ways in which bodily movement changes the arrangement of elements in the surrounding space, is made 'visible' through the camera's positioning underwater. The air bubbles and sun rays, floating through the water and past the bodies and the camera, emphasise the substance of the space in which movement occurs. The underwater sequences highlight the muscular efforts of movement and point to the resistance to movement that can be experienced in muscular terms (when particular movements are slower and much more strenuous in water than they are in the air). It is the tactile quality of the experience of moving in water that is foregrounded in particular. We are always consciously aware of the continuous contact between our skin and water because we are not used to it – it is unfamiliar, in ways in which our skin's continuous contact with air is not. Ahmed, drawing on Heidegger's account of 'familiarity', explains that familiarity is central to the notion of being orientated.[35] The underwater sequences can thus be read and *felt* as articulations of a sense of disorientation, of unfamiliar ways of being-in-the word, and of non-normative or queer orientations toward the world and toward others.

The materiality of water also becomes particularly poignant when the characters open their eyes underwater. Looking in/through water gives the gaze a particularly haptic quality, as the materiality of the medium or 'matter' that touches and connects the bodies is emphasised. Air is often 'invisible', whereas water is not. What is articulated here is a different kind

of looking, one that is explicitly linked to the sense of touch: the water both touches the eye the floating bodies, and the consistency and materiality of water becomes 'visible' as we look through it (along with the characters). It is not the distance implied by the gaze that is highlighted but rather closeness, proximity, and contact.

In a number of sequences taking place in or around the lake the surface of the water also constitutes a threshold, where anything that is below this surface is unknown, both fascinating and perhaps threatening, especially if the camera and we as viewers remain above the surface. This becomes a threshold that we cannot see through. For instance, in one diving sequence, Miss G forces Fiamma to perform another dive when she is too exhausted to do so. Miss G's cruelty in this scene can be linked to Fiamma's refusal to reciprocate Miss G's approaches. Fiamma is forced to cross the threshold constituted by the surface of the water and enter into an unknown, threatening world. We remain on the platform along with the other characters and share their concern as to whether Fiamma will resurface, which she does after a considerable length of time.

Water can be associated with a sense of disorientation because it implies a threshold into a different world, one in which normative and familiar rules of gravity and bodily movement do not apply. When we are in water our senses have to adjust because the normative and familiar rules of perception and expression become irrelevant. Our sensory relationship with the world changes dramatically, including our sense of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, but also our kinaesthetic and muscular senses as well as our proprioceptive sense (our sense of our own bodily weight and the sense of the position of our body in space). This queer sense of space is articulated both through the movement of bodies in water as well as through the positioning and movement of the camera (underwater) that seems to be free from the familiar rules of gravity and comportment. We do not always know what is up or down, left or right, as the camera, the human bodies, the air bubbles, and the rays of light float freely and in seemingly unrestricted fashion, connected by the malleable materiality of water.

As such, the underwater sequences might lead to a sense of disorientation: when we are in water, we are not 'in our element' and we do not experience the world in familiar ways. We need to re-orient ourselves in order to find or re-gain our bearings. However, there are certain characters who seem to be 'in their element', 'at ease', or 'at home' when they are moving (and looking) in and through water. There is a sense in which they (and we as viewers) might experience a pleasurable and exhilarating sense of disorientation, of not knowing what direction we face, of not being restricted

in our movement by the pull of gravity. When we are underwater we are also not being 'directed' in particular ways – we can find our own way and we do not have to follow the 'path most trodden'.

The masses of water that constitute space are explicitly and visibly malleable; they 'take the shape' of the bodies that inhabit it. Ahmed argues that spaces are not exterior to the body, but that space is 'like a second skin' that unfolds in the folds of the body.[36] She also makes reference to the 'skin of the social' that makes impressions on and shapes the surface of the body, directing it in particularly heteronormative ways. What the smooth and comfortable movement underwater makes 'visible', then, is the ways in which queer bodies, those that do not 'fit' the skin of the social, are 'in their element' within a space that is unmarked and fluid.

Ahmed argues that when bodies extend space comfortably, space constitutes the possibility for action and desire – and it is in this regard that the film's depiction of bodies in water embodies particularly queer possibilities. The underwater sequences in particular function to articulate a sense of the queer affective relations between bodies that are 'in touch' and 'in sync' within a space that fits their shape and that provides a ground on which bodies can 'gather' and 'tend toward' each other. This includes the bodies in the film, the body of the film, as well as the body of the viewer.

What characterises *Cracks*, then, is that although it largely conforms to mainstream cinematic conventions, and although the female body and the relationships between the female characters are often heterosexualised and posited for a heterosexually desiring gaze in very traditional and stereotypical terms (and water dripping off the female body is certainly part of this), the film also manages to articulate particularly queer subjectivities. These possibilities exist outside of traditional binaries of identification and desire; they exist in relation to the film's embodied articulation of subjectivity and desire (sexual and otherwise) that might 'resonate' with certain viewers based on their own embodiments of subjectivity and ways of being-in-the-world, and based on their own kinaesthetic, muscular, and tactile memories, experiences, and habits.

Cracks might also appeal to, touch, or move viewers based on their embodied aspirations and 'tendencies'. Borrowing Patricia White's argument in *Uninvited,* this is to say that films might not only speak to, touch, or move already-formed identities, but that they might play a part in their formation and their 'becoming'. Ahmed's phenomenological discussion of 'tendencies' (that recalls Butler's notion of performativity) provides an embodied dimension to this argument: '[b]odies are shaped by what they tend toward and the repetition of this "tending toward" produces certain tendencies.'[37]

What I want to suggest, then, is that the film can be read and 'felt' as an articulation of particularly queer orientations and tendencies. It focuses on 'minor' characters (in the sense suggested by White in her discussion of lesbian minor cinema[38]); also, the film in part traces the processes through which the characters acquire certain 'queer' tendencies and orientations by 'tending toward' certain others in ways that disrupt the straightness of phenomenal space, and ways of inhabiting that space. Particularly in those moments that focus on bodily movement in, through, towards, and with water, the film itself, as I have tried to show, 'embodies' those tendencies, orientations, dis-orientations, and re-orientations.

This opens up possibilities for embodied viewer engagements with the process of acquiring certain tendencies and orientations, of extending space and 'facing' others in particular ways, and of disrupting straightforward understandings and experiences of phenomenal space. This is why the film might speak to, touch, move, and resonate with viewers that are not entirely comfortable, 'at home', or 'in their element' within the heteronormative structures of phenomenal space and the possibilities for action and desire it provides.

So what?

Kavka argues that affects do not reside in bodies but rather arise between bodies.[39] Embodied engagements and affective identifications therefore depend on the interplay between a range of bodies: between bodies on and off screen, where the screen functions as an affective surface, a permeable membrane that allows for the relations between bodies and between the 'affective worlds' on either side of the screen; and between the body of the spectator and the body of the film. Affects are economic in that they circulate between bodies and create alignments and attachments.[40] The political significance of cinema can therefore be located, at least in part, in the ways in which certain films provide opportunities for the alignment of, and attachment between, certain kinds of bodies.

Queer bodies might gather in and around certain films and form the basis for a sense of community through shared alignments, attachments, and orientations. We might think of community and identity in terms of shared affects, tendencies, and habits; and of cinema as giving expression to, and resonating with, particular histories of bodily sedimentation. With this in mind, a phenomenological approach to cinema that accounts for embodied differences allows us to think about our various encounters with

cinema, including pleasures, frustrations, tensions, alignments, repulsions, mobilisations, and attractions in non-essentialising terms, while not losing sight of the body that makes these encounters possible in the first place.

Notes

1. Del Rio 2009, p. 112.
2. Barker 2009, pp. 18-19.
3. Ahmed 2006, p. 2.
4. Del Rio 2012, pp. 11-12.
5. See Sobchack 1992 & 2004 and Barker 2009.
6. Sobchack 2004, p. 62.
7. Sobchack 2004, p. 63.
8. See White 1999.
9. Marks' exploration of what she terms 'intercultural cinema' in *The Skin of the Film* (2000) is a key example here.
10. Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye* (1991) is another key reference point.
11. Haraway 1997, p. 283.
12. Haraway 1997, pp. 258-259, emphasis added. To a large extent, this argument holds true in the context of digital technologies and the possibilities for (re-)presentation that they provide. For example, we continue to speak of the 'camera' even when referring to digitally-created scenes or films. As established, analog methods of 'shooting' or 'framing' tend to be replicated in the digital realm.
13. Haraway 1997, p. 283.
14. Barker 2009, p. 18.
15. Ibid.
16. Sobchack 1992, p. 5.
17. Barker 2009, p. 123.
18. Barker 2009, p. 81.
19. Barker 2009, p.77.
20. Plantinga 2009, p. 112.
21. Plantinga 2009, p. 124. Recent research on mirror neurons has begun exploring the neurological basis for this phenomenon.
22. Damasio 2000, pp. 147-148.
23. Del Rio 2009, p. 114.
24. Ahmed 2006, p. 138.
25. Barker 2009, p. 3, emphasis added.
26. Ahmed 2006, p. 67.
27. Ahmed 2006, p. 77.
28. Ahmed 2006, p. 3.
29. See Butler 1997.
30. Ahmed 2006, p. 56.
31. Sobchack 2004, p. 65.
32. Ince 2011, pp. 4-5.
33. See Kavka 2012.
34. Pick 2004, p. 115, emphasis added.

35. Ahmed 2006, pp. 6-7.
36. Ahmed 2006, p. 9.
37. Ahmed 2006, p. 129.
38. See White 2008.
39. See Kavka 2012.
40. See Ahmed 2001.

References

Ahmed, S. 'Communities that feel: Intensities, difference and attachment' in *Conference proceedings for 'Affective encounters: Rethinking embodiment in feminist media studies'* edited by A. Koivunen and S. Paarson, 2001. Available at: http://www.hum.utu.fi/oppiaineet/mediatutkimus/tutkimus/proceedings_pienennetty.pdf.

_____. *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Barker, J. *The tactile eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Butler, J. 'Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory' in *Writing on the body: Female embodiment and feminist theory* edited by K. Conboy, N. Medina and S. Stanbury. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997: 401-418.

Damasio. A. *The feeling of what happens: Body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. London: Random House, 2000.

Del Rio, E. 'Film' in *Handbook of phenomenological aesthetics* edited by H. R. Sepp and L. Embree. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009: 111-117.

Haraway, D. 'The persistence of vision' in *Writing on the body: Female embodiment and feminist theory* edited by K. Conboy, N. Medina and S. Stanbury. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997: 283-295.

Ince, K. 'Bringing bodies back in: For a phenomenological and psychoanalytic film criticism of embodied cultural identity', *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2011: 1-12.

Kavka, M. 'The screen as affective surface', Paper presented at the *Screen* Studies Conference, Glasgow, 29 June – 2 July 2012.

Pick, A. 'New queer cinema and lesbian films' in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* edited by M. Aaron. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004: 103-118.

Plantinga, C. *Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Sobchack, V. *The Address of the eye: A phenomenology of film experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

_____. *Carnal thoughts: Embodiment and moving image culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

White, P. 'Lesbian minor cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Winter 2008: 410-425.

_____. *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood cinema and lesbian representability*. Chicago: Indiana University Press, 1999.

About the author

Katharina Lindner is a lecturer in film and media at the University of Stirling, UK. Her main research interests include gender and queer theory, media and sport, as well as film phenomenology. She has published work on athleticism and cinema, dance in film, sport and (post)feminism, and also on bodily performance and embodiment and/in film.



2013 Lindner / Amsterdam University Press.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.