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Introduction

Dee Reynolds

Crucial to all the contributions in this part is the idea that subjectivity is embodied and that this embodiment grounds our experience of the world and each other. It follows, therefore, that changes in embodied experience have the capacity to transform both subjective consciousness and relationships between subjects. The authors explore implications of embodiment for empathic and intersubjective experience, in different contexts – cinema, music, dance – and from different disciplinary and methodological angles, drawing on phenomenology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience and affect theory.

In his chapter, ‘Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience’, Adriano D’Aloia discusses the role of empathy in spectators’ involvement in narrative fiction film. He highlights the importance of the ‘quasi’ or ‘as if’ aspect of empathy: when we experience the fictive world of the film ‘as if’ it was real, while also knowing that it is not and we relate to the other ‘as if’ they were us, while knowing that they are separate. This ‘as if’ experience is an imaginary act that activates the spectator’s kinesthetic sensations in a motor imitation of movement perceived in the film, which can be that of a character or of the film itself, as in the movement of the camera. D’Aloia exemplifies graphically the ‘as if’ experience in film spectatorship by contrasting the reaction of spectators within a film who witness an acrobat falling with the reaction of spectators in the cinema; whereas the former jump up in horror, the latter remain seated – perhaps also horrified, but viewing the event ‘as if’ real, while not actually happening in front of them.

Whereas D’Aloia is concerned with the relation between the spectator and the film, in their chapter ‘Musical Group Interaction, Intersubjectivity and Merged Subjectivity’, Tal-Chen Rabinowitch, Ian Cross and Pamela Burnard consider the experience of joint music-making and listening as a situation involving social interaction. They discuss intersubjectivity in the context of embodied interactions among musicians and among listeners. They argue that by synchronising rhythms, where people mutually adjust to one another’s pace, it is possible also to align affective states and promote social interactions. Closely related to
synchronisation is the phenomenon of entrainment, which involves the coming together of two or more rhythmic patterns and which impacts on the relationship among players and also among listeners.

Rabinowitch et al. are particularly interested in the emotional charge of intersubjective communication as experienced through joint music-making and its capacity to influence intersubjective alignment of intentions and emotions. This clearly has significant social implications, for instance in the case of people who have difficulties with empathy, such as autists (see chapter by Shaughnessy in Part 1). Moreover, our body schema, or map, is itself fluid; we can ‘incorporate’ objects and treat them as extensions of our body, and it seems that this may also extend to intersubjective relations where players can experience the actions of their fellow players, at least in part, as their own. Synchronised sensorial experience (such as occurs in joint music-making) can lead to a blurring of self–other boundaries and confusion of agency, which Rabinowitch et al. dub ‘merged subjectivity’.

D’Aloia also explores connections between motor and emotional experience in spectators’ responses to films. However, he regards imitation in the form of synchronisation (e.g. foot tapping) as a relatively basic and undeveloped form of activation, which ‘must not be confused with empathy as such’. D’Aloia emphasises the potential of film to intensify the spectator’s experience, and rather than temporal alignment as in the musical context, he is interested in how, for the cinema spectator, motor imitation carries an affective charge that intensifies emotional response. The camera can include its own movement – that of the ‘film’s body’, which is specific to the film medium – thereby intensifying the spectator’s own kinesthetic sensations as they internally ‘imitate’ the movement of the camera as well as the character. Spectators’ involvement can be enhanced by skilful acting (note connections with issues discussed by Bolens and Donaldson in their chapters in Part III), by narrative, or by the dramatic quality of the movement itself, such as an acrobat swaying on a tightrope, in danger of falling. (The affective implications of movement qualities in everyday situations rather than artistic contexts are discussed by Hayes and Tipper in this book.)

D’Aloia relates spectators’ intensified experience to the cinematic space in which they can be ‘immersed’, and he also discusses writings on cinema from the 1920s and 1930s. It would be interesting to compare historical responses to cinema as a relatively young medium with present-day responses to recent technologies, such as 3D film, or to digitally constructed immersive environments, as discussed by Whatley in her chapter.

The intensification that D’Aloia discusses as central to the film spectator’s experience of empathy is also central to my own approach to kinesthetic empathy in the last chapter in this part, ‘Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance’s Body: From Emotion to Affect’. However, I suggest that conceptualisations of empathy can be too restrictively tied to the category of emotion and propose instead to treat it in terms of the more fluid notion of ‘affect’, which is embodied and not defined by emotional categories. I explore kinesthetic empathy as a movement across and between bodies, which, in an artistic situation, can have affective impact with potential to change modes of perception and ways of knowing. For different purposes, both D’Aloia and I draw on Vivian Sobchack’s idea of the ‘film’s body’ – for me,
Kinesthetic Engagement: Embodied Responses and Intersubjectivity

this becomes the ‘dance’s body’, which involves movement among dancers and between dancer(s) and spectator, rather than any specific, individual dancer. The affective impact of dance consists in an embodied response (sometime automatic and unnoticed, and sometimes even against our volition), which resists classification in terms of particular emotions. The affect is transmitted body-to-body (where the body is understood as existing in and informed by cultural contexts) and if sufficiently intense, can produce a – sometimes uncomfortable – shock, which induces reflexivity and catalyses reflection. Through these processes, dance can impact on how and what we think. While there are many ways of producing reflexivity, I am particularly interested in work where it is provoked directly by and through the body, and where the impact of the senses on each other shifts our modes of perception and induces reflection. For me, this is the affective force of kinesthetic empathy as constructed through what I call ‘affective choreography’.

This part, then, invites the reader to reflect on how kinesthetic engagement impacts on intersubjectivity, empathy and affect. While these arguments are constructed in the contexts of cinema, music and dance, their implications concern wider issues of connections between empathy and intersubjectivity, emotion and affect, and the social and epistemological resonance of these cultural activities.
Chapter 4

Cinematic Empathy: Spectator Involvement in the Film Experience

Adriano D’Aloia
The aim of this chapter is to bring to light the central role of kinesthetic empathy in spectators’ experience of narrative fiction film. The fundamental argument is that, in the particular spatial and psychological situation of the cinema auditorium, and especially in respect of the main characters, the viewer’s involvement entails both motor and emotional participation despite his/her consciousness of the fictional nature of the filmic events. This participation is mostly realised via the activation of empathy, a factor that reduces the psychological separation between the spectator and the characters.

It is therefore significant that there are strong parallels between philosopher Edith Stein’s description of empathy, which critiques earlier accounts of Einfühlung (notably Theodor Lipps) from a phenomenological position, and the film theory of Belgian psychologist Albert Michotte, which explores motor and emotional empathy in the experience of watching film. Comparing these accounts highlights the structural analogy between the mediated nature of the empathic experience, as they describe it, and the mediated nature of the film experience; and also the processual analogy between the two experiences in their perceptual, emotional and cognitive stratification. I then bring into the discussion some of the main contributions of film theorists writing in the 1920s and 1930s, which relate to my argument about sensory intensification in cinema. I aim to demonstrate that empathy is inherent in the nature of narrative cinema itself and is pivotal to describing the variety and complexity of film spectatorship in the cinema as an intensified experience. In order to evaluate the heuristic potential of the theoretical accounts taken into consideration, I briefly analyse the prologue of the drama film Trapeze (Carol Reed, 1956).

With-in the acrobat

In Grundlegung der Ästhetik, philosopher Theodor Lipps stated that in watching the tightrope walker balancing precariously on the suspended wire, the viewer projects and feels him/herself so inside the acrobat that his/her conscious self completely merges with that of the funambulist. This fusion is achieved on the basis of an ‘inner imitation’ through which the observer internally reproduces the movements of the observed person. Perceived movements are instinctively and simultaneously mirrored by kinesthetic ‘strivings’ and the experience of corresponding feelings in the observer (Lipps 1903: 121–126).

In order to discuss this neo-romantic, utopian account of Einfühlung, phenomenologist Edith Stein reinvoked the case of the acrobat in her On the Problem of Empathy (Stein 1917:
In her view, Lipps confuses the act of being drawn into the experience of the other (for instance the acrobat) with the transition from non-primordial to primordial experience (see Stein 1917: 12). Primordial for Stein is an experience whose content is present, bodily given, whereas there are psychological experiences (such as memory, expectation and fancy) that do not have their object bodily present before them (Stein 1917: 6–9). These are experiences that are primordially given, but non-primordial in their content. In the same way, the act of empathising consists in primordially experiencing something that is non-primordially given, since the content belongs to another: ‘This other subject is primordial although I do not experience its primordiality’ (Stein 1917: 10). The experience of empathy, in the end, consists in the feeling of being led by the other’s primordiality, which is ‘not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience’ (Stein 1917: 10). ‘And in these non-primordial movements I feel led, accompanied, by his movements which are only there for me in him’ (Stein 1917: 17). In the empathic relation, ‘I am not one with the acrobat but only “at” him. I do not actually go through his motions but only quasi’ (Stein 1917: 17). In watching an acrobat, ‘I put myself into the perceived body, as if I were his vital centre, and I perform an impulse “quasi” of the same type as that which could cause a movement’ (Stein 1991: 173, my trans.). The ‘quasi’ describes the ‘imperfect substitution’ of the empathising subject with the empathised subject, a proximity and accompaniment that does not result in a fusion or replacement and that preserves a distance, a ‘unity in distinction.’ The act of ‘putting myself into the perceived body’ is, in fact, explained with the expression ‘as if I were’ that is, an imaginary act that connects the internal, apperceived side of the experience to its external, perceived side. This peculiar contact does not concern the body in its natural or objective physical meaning (the Körper in the Husserlian sense), but rather the vital activity of the experienced, animated, organic, sentient body (the Leib) (Husserl 1960: §§ 42–62, Husserl 1989: §§ 43–47). The activation of the acrobat’s lived-body entails a corresponding activation of the kinesthetic sensations of the spectator’s lived-body.

In brief, for Stein, rather than a projection or a fusion, empathy is an accompaniment, in which the spectator’s subjectivity is not ‘one with’ the acrobat’s subjectivity, but only ‘with.’ The empathising subject is side-by-side with the empathised subjects, and their adjacent position implies a paradoxical proximity at a distance. The form of accompaniment implies the structure of a mediated experience, where mediation consists both in an inevitable distance and an opportunity for contact. In this sense, the debate on Einfühlung seems to provide a phenomenological description that relates closely to the spectator’s experience of watching film. In general terms, there is an analogy between the ‘structure’ of empathy and the ‘structure’ of film experience, on condition that we assume the sui generis nature of otherness, which is implied in a film character.

In what sense are the body of the character and the body of the spectator involved in an empathic relation? The oxymoronic ‘proximity at a distance’ of the film experience can be explained by recourse to the notions of quasi and as if that characterise the empathic act. In the light of the phenomenological and filmological descriptions of empathy, the
film experience can be described as the relationship between the spectator and a series of quasi-bodies with which he or she interacts. As Rudolf Arnheim argued in 1932, 'every object that is reproduced [on screen] appears simultaneously in two different frames of reference [and] as one identical object it fulfils two different functions in the two contexts' (Arnheim 1957: 59): the ‘film gives simultaneously the effect of an actual happening and of a picture’ (Arnheim 1957: 27). The film images are experienced as celluloid bodies that, nonetheless, express vitality thanks to their movements and their resemblance to human bodies and movements. In this sense, the ambivalent filmic bodies have to be considered, more precisely, as quasi-bodies capable of expressing a vital essence that the spectator can innerly accompany.

The bodies of the film characters are one kind of quasi-bodies. The character is a paradoxical ‘otherness’ and it cannot be said that he/she has a subjectivity as others in real life have. Also, not only are the bodies on screen experienced as fictional bodies (those of the characters), but they are also inseparable from the performers’ bodies (those of the actors). Hence the film experience is a quasi-intersubjective relationship in which the spectator, under certain conditions, can empathise with the character. What is inwardly represented in the spectator’s lived-body is the vital movement belonging to a primordial otherness that is not contiguous with the spectator’s subjectivity.

**Intensified cinema**

The case of the acrobat at the core of the querelle between Lipps and Stein is particularly significant for the study of empathic involvement in film because it is centred on a movement that is a powerful generator of motor and emotional imitation. Implicit in the choice of the case made by Lipps and Stein is the fact that the spectator is not faced with an ordinary movement (walking), but rather a movement that is characterised by tension (walking on a suspended wire). Prior to delving into the account of empathy offered by the filmological approach and relating it to Stein’s arguments, I want to trace a brief review of major psycho-aesthetic film theories from the 1920s and 1930s, in order to demonstrate cinema’s capacity to intensify experience, and the consequently pivotal role of empathy in watching film. According to these theories, in fact, the situations with most potential for empathy are those in which a strong kinesthetic intensification is invited (for instance acrobatics, falling, sports performance, dance, etc.).

Since its origins, cinema has offered spectators the opportunity to experience strong emotions and has taken its place in the history of popular spectacles conceived to astonish the public with magic performances and phantasmagoria. The trailblazing experiments of cinema pioneers Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard J. Muybridge contributed to the understanding of human physiology but also gave new prominence to the moving human body and stirred voyeuristic impulses that cinema has been able to exploit. The first movie cameras focused their gaze on muscular bodies, acrobatics, sport performances, dance
scenes or fights between men and animals – although they often had a comic or burlesque purpose. Cinema displayed the visible surface of moving bodies, before developing its narrative vocation and requiring a complex interpretative effort.

The first psychological approaches to analysing the film experience focused on the intensified nature of cinematic perception. In the seminal *The Art of Photoplay Making*, Victor Freeburg pointed to the physical pleasure that the spectator feels when viewing images of the human body and its movements: ‘This is an elemental and primitive emotion. For thousands of years gaping humanity has been thrilled by the juggler and the acrobat’ (Freeburg 1918: 17).

At the beginning of the 1920s, in his evocative *Bonjour Cinéma*, Jean Epstein wrote that, at the cinema, everyday life breaks away from the ordinary first and foremost in sensorial terms: the road runs under the car, the plane crashes, the tunnel swallows the train. Cinema allowed spectators to feel more and to see everything: it offered the giddy excitement of a merry-go-round, a dance seen from multiple perspectives (Epstein 1981).

In 1924, in his *The Visible Man*, Béla Balázs confirmed and relaunched the same idea, focusing on cinema’s ability to offer the spectator enhanced forms of sensory experience: ‘If it is true that film is concerned exclusively with visible, that is, bodily, human actions, then it follows that sporting and acrobatic performances can constitute extremely enhanced expressions of human physical life’ (Balázs 2010: 64). Balázs provided a first implicit description of empathy, affirming the specificity of film experience in respect of reality: ‘In reality we see only a moment, a fragment of movement. In film, however, we accompany a runner and drive alongside the fastest car’ (Balázs 2010: 64). Cinema is capable of including the spectator in the totality of a particularly intense movement, experienced at first hand and through ‘accompanying’ the characters. In particular, the more ‘genuine’, ‘unpolished’ and ‘spontaneous’ the appearance of the character’s physical activity portrayed by the film, the greater the intensity and effectiveness of spectator participation. As Balázs argues, in fact,

Movement in film is not just a sporting or ‘natural’ fact; it can be the highest expression of an emotional or vital rhythm. … Thus, the physical activities of the film hero must take care not to assume a sporting character, even if he has to perform the most difficult stunts. For sport means movement as a goal in itself and is useless as expressive movement.

(Balázs 2010: 64–65)

For this reason ‘the character who boxes must never become “a boxer”, a running man must never become “a sprinter”. For the film then acquires the insidious taint of the “professional”, arousing our doubts as to the authenticity of the performance, and robbing the action of the immediacy of life’ (Balázs 2010: 65). The spectator, Balázs appears to assert, is an amateur acrobat, a tightrope walker for a day, an aerialist on her first performance, a policeman on his first chase, a criminal making his first escape. The ‘immediacy’ of the experience depends on the apparent genuineness of the action, on its rudimentary and provisional characterisation. The expressive impact of the action is therefore undermined where the spectator’s attention
is focused on the prowess of the performance (as can be the case with sporting actions), rather than the intensity of movement in sensorymotor and emotional terms. What is absolutely crucial is the perceived ‘authenticity’ of the action, which is not dependent on physical presence at all. According to Balázs, the tension evoked by the represented action can induce the *feeling of vertigo*. The greatest catastrophe depicted in a pictorial space that is separated from our own space will never have an impact comparable to the image that places us on the very edge of an *abyss* that opens up *before our very eyes*. … The momentary illusion of danger to oneself is always more effective than images of catastrophes that overwhelm others.

(Balázs 2010: 66)

Through the use of specific optical solutions, cinema can reduce or even eliminate the ‘distance’ between the spectator and the screen. Although the film experience consists in being *in* the action, in the middle of the events, exposed to a danger that is felt as real, the pleasure that derives from this situation depends on the fact that the spectator knows he/she is quite safe: ‘What we especially enjoy is the risk-free danger of the filmed sensation’ (Balázs 2010: 65).

For Rudolf Arnheim, cinema elicits a sense of dizziness by virtue of an unbridgeable gap between two bodily frames of reference: the spectator’s physical situation and the specific (optical–aural) condition in which the spectator’s experience takes place, that is to say the cinema auditorium. Filmic movement is not merely a ‘locomotion’ perceived by the spectator as a ‘shift’ of elements in the visual field. The visual experience depends on the dynamic that transforms mere images into expressive bodies. This expressiveness or vitality depends on the tensive force that moves both the bodies on the screen and the spectator’s body: ‘Of course, physically all motion is caused by some kind of force. But what counts for artistic performance is the dynamics conveyed to the audience visually; for dynamics alone is responsible for expression and meaning’ (Arnheim 1954: 408).

The boundary between functional movement and expressive movement is subtle and yet decisive. In the earliest stage of his work, influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergei Eisenstein grounded a theatre actor’s performance in ‘expressive movement’. Like a circus performer or an athlete, the trained actor must be able to communicate emotions through his/her motor skills and to induce psychological states in spectators through their motor responses. The viewer automatically and ‘reflectively repeats in weakened form the entire system of an actor’s movements: as a result of the produced movements, the spectator’s incipient muscular tensions are released in the desired emotion’ (Eisenstein 1979: 37). Eisenstein described the ability of the spectacle to induce and manufacture the emotional effect on the viewers, to elicit emotions that they automatically reproduce internally, albeit in a weakened form, with the result that they experience the observed emotion directly, according to an empathic act. In *Nonindifferent Nature*, Eisenstein argued that the emotional effectiveness of works of art is based on the commutation of expressive registers: the observer
performs ‘ecstatic’ operations transferring himself/herself from one sensorial condition to another, where by ex-stasis is meant a state of ‘being beside oneself’ (Eisenstein 1964: 27).

This review demonstrates that, progressively throughout its history, cinema has engaged the spectator in a ‘bodily relationship’ with the characters on-screen and this kind of involvement is based on a sensory intensification that seems to be intrinsic to the cinematic medium, similar to the way in which the acrobatic performance was crucial in Lipps’ and Stein’s argument. The most effective cases of empathic relation in the film experience are those in which the movement of the represented body elicits tension and creates a field of energy that vitalises the space between the character’s body and the spectator’s body.

In the case of strong elicitation of sensory responses, movements in film (both the meta-movements of the camera and the depicted movements of objects and subjects) can generate an effective internal kinesis in the spectator. The spectator is a sensitive subject who experiences a relationship with lived-bodies on-screen. Although these bodies belong to a fictional world and cannot be considered as ontologically analogous to his/her lived-body, they are phenomenologically similar (in their movements, postures and gestures). In this sense, the character’s body should be conceived as a quasi-body. Empathy is a factor that ‘fills the gap’ between bodily presence of the spectator and bodily absence of the character thanks to the film’s mediation (in the double sense of keeping separate and putting in contact) between the two lived-bodies, although that of the character is only a quasi-body.

**Cinematic empathy**

Empathy was first discussed extensively in film theory in 1953 in an essay by the Belgian psychologist Albert Michotte van den Berck on the emotional participation of the film spectator (Michotte 1991). Michotte states that the psycho-physiological distance of the spectator from the fictional events on-screen can be reduced by empathy, which acts to compensate for the ‘gap’ between direct and mediated experience. Empathy is defined as a psycho-physiological process that involves an immediate form of experience, that is to say something that occurs ‘when we observe what someone else is doing and we ourselves live it in some sense, rather than just understand it at an intellectual level’ (Michotte 1991: 209).

Michotte distinguishes between motor empathy and emotional empathy, connecting the sensorymotor component of movement to feelings, mental attitudes, judgements, thoughts, and all those categories of events that are intimately connected to the viewer’s inner-self. Motor empathy, which develops progressively, precedes and accompanies emotional empathy: a structural homology allows the viewer to identify the movement seen on the body of the actor with that which is felt and experienced from the inside of his/her own body. When witnessing motor performances, for instance dance, acrobatics or sports competitions, the spectator’s reactions can extend across a range.
Case 1: There is no empathy at all, in the case where the perceived movement and the spectator’s motor reaction are clearly separated, that is to say there is a gap between visual impressions and their tactile-kinesthetic correlates. At the emotional level, the spectator and the character have quite different emotions.

Case 2: At the most basic level of empathy, the movement of the spectator accords with that of the character merely in the form of synchronisation, for instance following a musical or dance rhythm by tapping one’s foot. The emotions of the spectator and those of the character are connected by some accidental or casual reason, such as when the criticisms made by one protagonist about the behaviour of another also apply to the behaviour of the spectator when confronted with a similar situation in real life. The spectator is directly affected by such criticisms, albeit due to a motivation external to the film. Such a situation is evoked by expressions like ‘I join in your joy’, or ‘I share your pain’.

Case 3: Actual motor empathy occurs when the spectator reproduces the observed movement, such as assuming a facial expression similar to that of the character. This imitation takes place at the musculo-skeletal level and is less intense than that of the body that actually performs the movement. As in the Steinian description of empathy, this mirror-effect does not result in a fusion of inner states. It is as if there is a single action presented in two different forms (visual and proprioceptive), belonging to two distinct subjectivities.

Case 4: In the extreme case, an apparent fusion of subjectivities occurs (here Michotte mentions Lipps). The spectator ‘puts himself into the skin’ of the character: there is not only a single motor action, but also a single ‘moving I’ (Michotte 1991: 210–211). In this case, there may be a deep identification between the ‘person’ of the spectator and that of the character, in terms not only of motor imitation but also of emotional absorption (Michotte 1991: 214–215).

This stratification requires some elucidation. Case 1 includes the possibility that not necessarily every film experience will entail a kind of involvement, whether sensorymotor or psycho-affective. In these cases there is no reduction in the segregation of spaces: the spectator’s experience consists solely of witnessing a fictional world that remains clearly distant. Case 2 describes a physiological activation due to a form of pre-empathy (rhythmic synchronisation). However, this form of basic activation must not be confused with empathy as such. Whereas an extreme level of fusion is realised in Case 4, where the total assimilation of subjectivities refers to an identification in which the viewer loses the knowledge of him/herself and fuses his/her own ego with that of the character, Case 3 corresponds to the relationship between the spectator and the character of a narrative film. Even if there can be shifts in and out of different levels of empathy, depending on a number of interfering factors (such as spectators’ tiredness, low level of attention, state of mind) in general terms, Case 3 designates a range of psycho-motor correlations between motor and mental states that nevertheless preserves the separation between the subjectivity of the spectator and that
Feeling the other

It is this combination of sharing and separation that makes Case 3 akin to Stein's interpretation of the case of the acrobat. Both the spectator of the acrobatic performance described by Stein and the film spectator described by Michotte are involved in a quasi-intersubjective relationship, that is to say a relationship between the spectator's primordial body and the non-primordial, or quasi, body of the acrobat/character. The film character is a quasi-other, empathically experienced as the other's lived-body.

In this sense, Stein's model seems to provide a philosophical account of cinematic empathy. As we have seen, in phenomenological terms, empathy consists in primordially experiencing something that is non-primordially given. It is a primordial act of a non-primordial content. Analogously, the film experience of the relationship with the character could be thought of as the primordial experience (in the spectator's lived-body) of non-primordial movements and emotions (those that are performed and felt by the character's quasi-body). Both empathy and the film experience are intimate or 'immediate', experiences of an at-a-distance, 'mediated' experience. The nature of the film experience of narrative cinema as a sui generis form of intersubjective relationship between the spectator and the character is structurally empathic.

The pertinence of Stein's account of empathy for film theory lies not only in its structural analogy with the filmic experience, as just described, but also on the processual analogy between the stage of realisation of the empathic act and the dynamic of the film spectator involvement in the character. My argument is that the dynamic of empathy proposed by Stein is complete and complex enough to explain the psychological relationship between the spectator and the filmic quasi-bodies. Here is Stein's description of the empathic process:

When [empathy] arises before me all at once, it faces me as an object (such as the sadness I 'read in another's face'). But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (try to bring another's mood to clear givenness to myself), the content, having pulled me into it, is no longer really an object. I am now no longer turned to the content but to the object of it, am at the subject of the content in the original subject's place. And only after successfully executed clarification, does the content again face me as an object.

(Stein 1917: 9)

For Stein, empathy is a composite process, one that has at least three grades or modalities of accomplishment: (1) the emergence of the experience: suddenly, I see sadness on the character's face; (2) the fulfilling explication: I am involved in his/her inner state, I experience the sadness s/he lives by moving 'at' him/her, 'with' him/her in front of the same object; (3)
the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience: in the end, I am aware of the character’s sadness (see Stein 1917: 10). In brief, at the starting stage, I am in front of the object, and I experience it with my senses. In the middle stage, a fulfilling explication drives me to the subject and drives me back. At the final stage, I am again in front of the object, and I receive it into my experience, I internalise it.

In the phenomenological framework, therefore, empathy is not a purely physiological reaction, nor a purely cognitive act. Rather, it is a feeling composed of different levels, namely perceptual, emotional and cognitive, grounded in the lived-body. The three levels seem to be parallel to the levels of filmic experience involved in relating to a main character on screen: (1) a perceptual act: I perceptually face a filmic body that expresses an external and internal state and attracts my attention and my senses; (2) this act is lived as an emotional act: I move closer and place myself ‘at’ the character, ‘on his side’, in front of the origin of his emotion; (3) this experience is objectified by a cognitive act: I exit, I move back and detach myself to face the object again, to cognitively perform a new objectification. Distance, proximity and distance again: empathy allows this psychological ‘round-trip’ of approaching, fulfilling and detaching. The distance moments correspond respectively to an optical and mental stage (emergence and interiorisation of the experience), whereas the core of the process is a ‘rapture’ in which disbelief is temporarily suspended and the spectator is fully immersed in the fictional events and has the impression of living an intimate relational experience. The oxymoronic structure of filmic experience consists in an ‘e-motional’ moment embedded in an optical-cognitive frame. The act of filmic empathy consists in the fulfilling of the quasi-intersubjective structure of the filmic relation.

The third body

At this point, it is important to delve into the specificity of the film experience in respect to the ordinary experience (that is to say, the specificity of cinematic empathy in respect to empathy in everyday life) and to focus on the nature of the medium that makes it possible to fill the gap that separates the spectator’s body and the character’s body. What makes the viewing of narrative film an experience with specific and autonomous traits is, in fact, the capacity of cinema to enhance stimuli and to enhance the receptivity of the audience through the potential of its specific ‘bodily language’. A new kind of peculiar though specifically filmic body takes part in the cine-empathic relationship: the film’s body. In the wake of Merleau-Pontyan philosophy, in the early 1990s Vivian Sobchack stated that, even in the film experience, the consciousness we have of both our own and the other’s body is not a mere audio-visual perceptual act, nor a thought or a knowledge act, but rather a pre-reflective and pre-linguistic – that is, empathic – act:

Even if the intentional objects of my experience at the movies are not wholly realized by me …, I nonetheless do have a real sensual experience that is not reducible either
to the satisfaction of merely two of my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only 'after the fact' through the cognitive operations of conscious thought.

(Sobchack 2004: 76)

In her view, film has a lived-body in the sense that it ‘uses modes of embodied existence (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the “stuff,” the substance of its language’ (Sobchack 1992: 4). Although film uses linguistic and technical means, its mechanical movements embody the human spectator's modes of experiencing the world: a close-up is the focusing of the viewer's attention on the character's face, a fluid tracking shot is the sinuous body of the film, a shadow on the wall is its discreet presence, etc. All these technical and representational solutions are calculated to betray the presence of a ‘transparent’ body. The spectator in his/her lived-body is moved by the movements of this peculiar and ‘invisible’ lived-body, which differs from the former in its concrete nature, but has a similar capability of expressing vital movements in tactile, muscular, cinematic terms.

In brief, the film spectator experiences the vitality and the human-likeness of a complex of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic, or even technical-linguistic, filmic bodies. The film experience is an encounter between the empathic tendency of the spectator and the expressive properties of the film, two bodies that move together. The expressive power of the observed object can be ‘designed’ with accuracy by the film-maker and the actor, and is embodied into the film ‘bodily language’ (camera movements, editing, point-of-view etc.). The empathic relationship is established thanks to this sui generis bodily communication. The mediated nature of the film experience simultaneously gives a subjectual appearance to objects (they seem to act as if they are endowed with intentionality) and an objectual appearance to subjects (that remain images on a two-dimensional screen and occur under a certain aspectuality). Empathy is enabled by the intensification of the bodily dimension of viewing through a specific and effective way of ‘moving’ objects and subjects on the screen, aimed at generating a motor and emotional activation in the spectator.

The fate of the acrobat

In the light of this framework, both in order to explore the structural and processual analogy of the film experience and the empathic act and to analyse them in practice, let us consider a cinematic example. In the prologue of Trapeze (a drama film by American director Carol Reed, 1956), the acrobat Mike Ribble performs a triple somersault in front of two kinds of audience. The first audience comprises the spectators-in-the-film: extras acting as the crowd of people around the circus ring that follows the performance with bated breath. The second audience consists of the spectators-of-the-film: real people who have gathered in a cinema auditorium to watch the acrobatic performance (and the circus audience) represented in Trapeze. This film excerpt allows us to focus on the different psychological situations of the two kinds of audience.
It is useful to note that *Trapeze* is a narrative film that makes a ‘fictional pact’ with the spectator: whereas the action of the acrobat is ‘direct’ for the spectator in the circus, the on-screen events are considered as far from being real (as in a documentary), and nevertheless they are considered as realistic, since the represented bodies appear as human, the image is photographic, and actions and events obey the physical rules that the spectators use to interpret the real world (for instance the acrobat does not fly). It must be clarified that in mediated experience like live television broadcasting, spectators’ involvement mostly depends on the fact that the beholder knows that the events that he/she is watching are actually happening at that moment and cannot be manipulated (so an accident might occur). Cinematic images can involve the spectator in a more engaging experience through the utilisation of a narrative perspective (for instance the re-enactment of the performance with an actor, suspense-inducing music and fast editing). Every narrative text, in fact, makes a pact with its spectator, depending on the interpretative route proposed (Eco 1994: 75–96). This pact can be referential in the case where the object of the experience is reality, or fictional, when the spectator is invited to suspend his/her disbelief and accept the imaginary world represented.

Now, consider the audience reactions to Ribble’s acrobatic performance and its tragic outcome. As Ribble loses his grip and falls down in the middle of the circus floor, spectators-in-the-film jump to their feet in an icy silence; some of them approach that motionless body with astonishment and fear, incredulous that the show has had such a dramatic conclusion. Both the suspense and the sense of suspension experienced by the spectators-in-the-film are strictly dependent on the actual danger of the performance, that is, on the physical presence of the acrobat’s body, who is up there in the flesh – no tricks – at risk of falling. By contrast, spectators-of-the-film do not interfere with the events represented (they do not stand up or call the ambulance), since they are voluntarily disposed to view the represented events as if they are actually happening; although they maintain an awareness that those events are merely fictional. Given this peculiar psychological structure of the film experience, spectators-of-the-film (or ‘spectators’, for short, henceforth) can experience the character’s sense of vertigo, loss of balance and impact with the ground vicariously. Their sensorymotor and affective activations are realised by varying degrees of empathy. The degree and quality of motor activation and emotional involvement depend on the effectiveness of the forces and tension created by the movement of on-screen bodies, as well as on the tension and movement inherent in the film’s body itself.

Following the framework constructed by the comparison of the Steinian account of empathy and Michotte’s description of the film experience, a circuit of empathies can be recognised in the relationship between the spectator’s and the film’s lived-body. At an initial level of the involvement process, the spectator is in front of the fictional world: he/she is positioned ‘in the middle’ of the events, so that he/she in a way participates in the performance, rather than only witnessing it. Through a series of techniques (for instance camera angle, shot scale, point-of-view), the spectator is brought closer to the action. In *Trapeze*, thanks to the alternation of long shots and close-ups, only spectators in front
of the screen can see the fatigue on Ribble’s face and the sweat on his forehead, or watch the action from above or just under the safety net, behind the trapeze or even clinging to the trapeze artist’s belt. In addition to camera shots, camera movements also have to be considered. Conceived as film’s body movements, camera movements do not simply produce a motor activation, but rather are capable of generating or implicitly suggesting a relation between the movement perceived on the screen and the movement that is internally experienced by the spectator. In the prologue of Trapeze, Ribble’s pendulum movement in mid-air is shown not only by the overall view provided by the extreme long shot; rather, the camera follows the acrobat and sways, on both the horizontal and vertical axes alternately, in order to keep him in the centre of the visual frame. This film body movement simulates the character’s movement, but it is also different and autonomous. Through this solution, the spectator can perceive the loss of balance elicited by the movements of the camera as it follows the acrobat. In this sense, he/she has an experience that is available only through film (Figure 4.1).

Emotional participation is connected to cognitive and narrative factors (for instance, if the character is shown in close-ups and his action dominates that of the other characters, then he must be the main character – and if he is, he cannot die in the first scene – but if the stunt is shown in the prologue, something bad is going to happen). Here the series of close-ups that precede Ribble’s fall and the related camera movements enrich the involvement strategy. This group of shots places the spectator in the midst of the events, ‘at’ the heart of the emotion. Because of the closeness to Ribble’s face and to the acrobats’ hands, and because of the swaying camera movement, the spectator perceives the beads of sweat on Ribble’s furrowed brow, the tension in the grip of the two trapeze artists hanging in mid-air and the hands slipping away. Then the hold is lost and Ribble falls. By means of a high-angle shot, the spectator sees the body falling, bouncing off the recovery net, and plunging to the ground. The impact with the ground is not shown: it is hidden by the re-establishing shot of the reaction of the spectators-in-the-film: they leap up, the orchestra stops playing, the trapeze keeps see-sawing without its artist. After the fall, by means of a low-angle shot, the spectator sees the bleak image of the trapeze that swings in the air, now empty, the reverberation of a movement performed by an absent body, a dramatic failure, the futility of a fictional spectacle into which reality is tragically plunged back, an action without an actor. These deep meanings are communicated by the film’s body through a very powerful symbolic image that embodies a presence that is no longer visible. As in the Steinian model, the moment of detachment and objectifying interiorisation completes the empathic process. Here a more complex stage of empathy is at work, one which has fed on all the previous stages and now stands out and culminates in a reflective interiorisation, the ‘comprehensive objectification’ (Stein 1917: 10) of the other’s experience, which nevertheless preserves distance.
Figure 4.1: The prologue of *Trapeze* (Carol Reed, USA, 1956)
Conclusion

As the analysed example helps to clarify, cinematic empathy is a composite and developing dynamic that is rooted in kinesthetic and enterceptive processes of the body and that is connected to the sensorial audio-visual activity of the beholder. As the brief overview of classic film theories (Freeburg, Epstein, Balázs, Arnheim, Eisenstein) I traced suggests, the extreme intensification of the senses is inherent in the nature of cinema, which since its origins offered the spectator particularly effective motifs of sensorimotor involvement (such as acrobatic performance). As in the filmological account of both motor and emotional empathy given by Michotte, a single movement depicted on-screen is experienced in two forms: the visual impression of the character's body in motion and the inner kinesthetic feeling experienced by the spectator in his/her body. The ‘bridge’ between visual ‘external’ perception and bodily ‘inner’ perception supports the rise of emotional empathy, that is a more complex relationship between the spectator’s body and the character’s quasi-body, both of which are to be conceived as lived-bodies in a phenomenological sense. According to Stein and Michotte (Case 3), the movements and emotions of the spectator's subjectivity remain extraneous to, or separate from, the character's quasi-subjectivity. Empathy implies an ontological separation that, nonetheless, represents the constitutive act of the film experience as a paradoxical ‘proximity at a distance’.

Note

1. Editors' note: For a discussion of the relation between character and performer in film, see Chapter 8, Lucy Fife Donaldson, 'Effort and Affect: Engaging with Film Performance'.

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