

Vivian Sobchack **in Conversation with Scott Bukatman**

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Vivian Sobchack is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media and former Associate Dean of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. She was the first woman elected president of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and served on the Board of Trustees of the American Film Institute for nearly two decades. Her essays have appeared in many journals including *Film Quarterly*, *Film Comment*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *camera obscura*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, and *Screen*. Her books include *The Address Of The Eye: A Phenomenology Of Film Experience*; *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*; and *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment And Moving Image Culture*, and she has also edited two anthologies: *The Persistence Of History: Cinema, Television And The Modern Event* and *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation And The Culture Of Quick Change*. Here, Sobchack joins Scott Bukatman in a wide-ranging conversation about spectatorial experience and fascination, the expansion of screen and media studies and its objects, and the formal and phenomenological effects of digital cinema.

Method

Scott Bukatman: You've recently retired, at least from full time teaching. How has the field changed over the period of time that you've been involved with it? What do you see as the most significant changes?

Vivian Sobchack: That's a great starting question. The first thing that comes to mind is that when I started my career back in the late 60's and early 70's, I could read everything there was in the field. There weren't that many film books. I remember a big debate early on, when I first joined the Society For Cinema Studies (now SC--'M' for media--S) about whether there ought to be more than one book on one director--Hitchcock had the most. Today, for the most part, you have to read on a need to know basis because there is absolutely no way you can possibly encompass the amount and variety of research in the field. We have this incredible amount and breadth of material—and media objects, for that matter. Indeed, one of the things that's been exciting, even if it presents certain daunting problems when you actually sit down to write something, is that we no longer even have a secure grasp of what our object is. I think that's a very positive thing. It has also led to a much greater degree of interdisciplinarity in what we do and what we write about. In terms of radical changes, all this variety has led to, I think, a much more hetero-topic discipline and I'm happy about that. In contrast, I remember the kind of hegemonic "policing" that went on in the field when neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis were the dominant theoretical paradigms. I obviously felt this personally as I was working on *The Address of the Eye*--quaking in my boots because I was trying to do something else, something I hoped was more positive than negative critique. Now I think there is no one dominant paradigm in the field. Certainly, cultural studies has had major impact, as well as feminist theory and the turn to research on gender, race, and ethnicity. I also think that now we see fewer "close readings" of individual films and much more contextual analyses that may include but go well beyond the text itself. Today our field allows for a multitude of sins.

Scott Bukatman: Do you feel that that's been a loss, the loss of the close reading? Do you regret that?

Vivian Sobchack: No--although I think we all ought to be able to do "close something" with our texts.

Scott Bukatman: It seems to me that what you do is a close reading of a medium. Rather than a work within the medium, you may use a work to illuminate the medium itself.

Vivian Sobchack: What you say is interesting--and certainly bears on a kind of phenomenological description that's more interested in what a specific medium does, on the operations of media in terms of our relations with its various forms, rather than on the interpretation of its specific content. Certainly, I talk about content but I'm more interested in larger structures--and primarily use various kinds, genres, forms of content to illustrate these structures and to make them concrete.

Scott Bukatman: I do the same thing in my teaching. I'm not concerned with teaching them what a film means. I want them to think about what the film *is*--that it's not a surrogate experience, it's not a signifier pointing to something somewhere else. It's something that you're experiencing in the here and now. Let's talk about that experience without being too navel-gazing about it; start not with what the antecedent story is, but what is it to be watching it or listening to it.

Vivian Sobchack: I knew there was a reason I loved you.

Scott Bukatman: I water ski in your wake.

Vivian Sobchack: [Laughter]

Scott Bukatman: One of the things that escapes the usual close reading, again and again, is performance.

Vivian Sobchack: Yes. Performance escapes, bodies escape--not only the performance of the people we see on the screen, or the performance of narrative and cinematic elements, but also our performance. Our performative relation to the screen that co-constitutes the film/computergraphic/mobile phone experience also needs describing. In a way, that's what psychoanalytic film theory tried to do with the film experience but it imposed some kind of bizarre passivity on the viewer.

Scott Bukatman: Plus, it was obviously meaning-driven.

Vivian Sobchack: Of course. The goal was to uncover rather than to describe.

Scott Bukatman: It's what was hidden, what was not in plain sight. It avoided what Steven Shaviri called "the weird fullness of the image." Also, the idea that that could be a *positive* relationship was also something that psychoanalysis didn't necessarily allow.

Vivian Sobchack: I really became interested in phenomenology because it responded to my earlier sense that something was so negative and out of whack with psychoanalytic film theory's premise that the audience of a film just sort of sat there and took the vision on the screen as their own. People talk like crazy in theaters. Then, "in the old days," people were much more polite. They actually shut up in movie theaters but you'd still hear overhear things like "I went to that restaurant," or "Love that dress," some of the most banal things, as well as questions like "What's happening now?" That's where the whole *Address of the Eye* came into being--my basic idea was to provide a more dialogical and dialectical notion of the film experience in which both film and viewer met in the vision on screen but were not coincident with each other. That idea went against Metz's view of the film spectator as infantile, passive and overwhelmed by the images on the screen. I still remember, to this day, Metz's "spectator-fish"--"taking in everything with your eyes and nothing with your body." That is the craziest non-sequitur.

Scott Bukatman: Any sort of model that you're going to build is going to be just that, a model, an abstraction, but the spectator that Metz or Baudry describes is, I think, *too* abstracted. Too much is left out of that model for it to fully account for a lot of what really needs to be accounted for.

Vivian Sobchack: I start from a very concrete experience that's not abstract. What gets abstracted eventually--but never at first--is not the viewer but the structures of viewing. We often confuse abstraction and generalization. There's a difference. One can generalize from specific instances without becoming abstract, without disavowing inconvenient aspects of the instance. Does that make sense?

Scott Bukatman: I think so.

Vivian Sobchack: As a phenomenologist, I very often, although certainly not always, begin with my own specific experience as I start thinking and writing something. And then I generalize these specifics as larger structures of experience. This process is certainly apparent in *Carnal Thoughts*. In the end, I don't write about me. I start out from me (even when I write third person mode). But even when I'm in first person mode, I leave "me" (in the egological sense) to look at the structure of the experience I'm writing about, to move into the domain of a more general experiential structure that anybody might inhabit. I start from me but it's not about me. It goes back to your issue of teaching what the film does rather than jumping to what it means. You need to experience and describe before you start interpreting, before you analyze and theorize, before you abstract.

Scott Bukatman: Can you give me an example?

Vivian Sobchack: Yes, one that demonstrates the need to trust in the value of experience, and also in phenomenological method and what insights it can provide. I was asked to write a piece on two contemporary horror films for *Film Comment* that I eventually titled "Peek-a-boo." One of the films was *The Descent*, about women spelunkers who get lost in this cave system and find flesh-eating horrible thingies down there and one never even knows if they get out at the end. Very, very, well done film. The other film, *Isolation*, was set on an Irish dairy farm that was falling apart. To help make money the farmer had allowed the impregnation of one of the dairy cows with something experimental and it became pregnant with some other kind of flesh-eating horrible thingie. The mise-en-scene was all rusty and muddy and this almost stillborn thing was winched out of the cow and something slithered away. The film was more conventional than *Descent*, but both had central women characters in them and *Film Comment* had some strange idea that I would be interested in them because of that.

Scott Bukatman: You don't like horror films? You've written about them--

Vivian Sobchack: *The Wasp Woman*, yes, but not gory, horrible, gut-ridden films! I stay as far away from them as possible. Anyway, I had these DVDs and a deadline. Of course, I realized that I could say that I didn't want to write the piece, but I wanted to keep up the relationship because I like speaking to a broader audience than just academics. And so I knew I had to watch them. But I watched them in broad daylight, with the sun streaming into my living room. And I watched them like I watch these sorts of horror films in the theater--I watch them in my lap.

Scott Bukatman: Your eyes are down?

Vivian Sobchack: Yes, my eyes are down. And then I'll lift them to look at the screen when sound cues somehow tell me things are okay.

Scott Bukatman: The screams die out.

Vivian Sobchack: Or the sloshy sounds, you know, of thingies eating guts, or whatever. Okay, so I'm watching both of these films this way. Now I had to make a decision about writing about them. Do I pretend I saw them like a normal person, you know, who's actually watching the screen? That would be really dishonest. Do I send them back? No, I decided I couldn't do that either. And then my phenomenological training kicked in. I thought what if I write about watching them the way I was watching them? Now, in various work on horror films, there's been a discussion of "obscene space"--that's the off-screen space in which the monster is located before it makes its appearance on screen. And I began to think about the space I was watching not as obscene but as *oblique*--a space, whether in the dark theater or my bright living room, in which you become aware of your nowness and your here-ness in the theater as well as the assault on you from the screen. This is not just an immersion in screen space. You're in the theater (or living room) and in your body and your seat as much as you are in the film. And so one approaches the film on a slant with a kind of oblique vision, watching it from the corners of your eyes--or in your lap. Sound plays a huge part in cuing you as to when you can look up again. You're aware of being somehow trapped in your seat, insofar as you agree to sit there. There is an intensity and viscosity to this experience--for me, totally unpleasurable. But thinking about this form of viewing led me to tease out, too, the temporal as well as spatial structure of not only my experience but also of the films, which themselves play with the occlusion of vision and then reveal something horrible. So, the films are also playing peek-a-boo like I'm playing peek-a-boo. (I ended up calling the piece "Peek-a-boo.") I know the horror film's oscillation between occlusion and revelation has been written about, but not in its relation to the same thing occurring with the viewer.

Scott Bukatman: Yeah, not in terms of what the viewer is doing.

Vivian Sobchack: So, here I am, the cinephobe--at least where this genre is concerned. And then I start thinking about this urgent, totally present-oriented, temporality, which I hate so much because of its sense of threat and its insistence on my corporeality. And also because it's structured around waiting and not looking and then looking so that the present is extended to the point there is no past or future. There is just this drawn out present and the intensity of awareness of one's own being "now" under potential threat. But it also occurred to me as I teased out and described this spatial and temporal structure that the very things that I hate are probably those things that people who love these movies find pleasurable. The structure of temporality is the same even when it's differently valued--whether it's felt as a horrible threat "here and now" or as the pleasurable affirmation of being alive "here and now." And this understanding came out of my willingness to think deeply rather than disavow seeing these films in my lap.

Scott Bukatman: Right. So even the people who love the films are probably turning their eyes down, that's--

Vivian Sobchack: No, no. That's not what I'm saying. Those who love these films may never take their eyes off the screen. The point is that the structure I'm describing is experienced by *both* those who are glued to the screen or those who watch the film in their laps. They just value it differently--the extended present, the intense sense of bodily being, intensity heightened by threat, the "presentness" of being "here" and "now." Some people find this experience pleasurable. What really interests me about this piece is that I've described a general structure from what began as an initial description of something experienced personally. The piece emerged because I trusted that experience as the place to begin. What was so revelatory was that the phenomenological description and interpretation ended up appropriate both to the cinephile who loves these kinds of horror films--and to me who hates them.

Scott Bukatman: In many ways, our writing has some things in common and one of those is that we both start from our own thing. There are certain places that scholars are encouraged to go because they automatically matter. Race automatically matters, gender automatically matters, power structures automatically matter. Any scholar can go and hit those notes and they don't have to explain why it matters because these things *clearly* matter. Others have to convincingly demonstrate *why* that thing they're writing about matters. It's a different kind of challenge, and I think we've both faced it. In most of my writing, I have tried to begin with the fact that I have some fascination with an object or with a phenomenon and try to get at the source of that fascination. How it is that I'm able to turn that into something that's valid for anyone else, that's a little mysterious to me.

Vivian Sobchack: But you do it. I think you've always had a phenomenological bent—and I did, too, before I even heard the word "phenomenology" or really knew what its method was, what kind of commitments one makes to do a phenomenology. To begin with, you've trusted in your experience: your fascination with an object. That's something we totally share. Indeed, I don't have an agenda of what I'm going to be interested in. Things pop up. Film pops up--and not always in expected places. It's also not always the central thing. Whatever the case, what is fascinating is trying to figure something out--and, somehow, figuring it out doesn't seem to me exactly the same thing as immediately analyzing it. Certainly, I'm very aware of the methodological framework in which I'm operating. However, it's very open and responsive.

Scott Bukatman: It helps that both of us have very eclectic taste and are turned on by a lot of different things in the world. We're not always going to be writing the same thing.

Vivian Sobchack: Oh, God. Can you think of anything more boring? Both of us get invited to speak at universities and conferences a lot. But people usually want you to do the same thing you've already done. That's why they're asking you. They want you to do the same thing but different. Actually, I don't even think they care if it's different. That's when I get really depressed. So if I say yes and want to satisfy the people who have invited me in terms of their expectations, I have to go somewhere else--somewhere new--with something I've already done. Otherwise, I feel like I'm dying intellectually. Obviously, it gets harder and harder--until you've done something completely new and then they stop asking about the old thing. A lot of academics find great security in doing the same thing over and over again or with only small, if incremental, differences. It's called specialization. I certainly don't want to condemn that, but it's not for me.

Scott Bukatman: A lot of valuable work gets done that way.

Vivian Sobchack: A lot of incredibly valuable work gets done that way but I would feel suffocated by "specializing." And I do think that most disciplines tend to forestall certain kinds of very broad interdisciplinarity. They get nervous around the edges, so to speak. I think the boundaries of disciplines, where they become something other or run into other disciplines, are the most interesting sorts of places to be.

Scott Bukatman: Which sends you to the library or sends you to Amazon to buy a new shelf of books.

Vivian Sobchack: That's exactly right. It's great. When I'm writing, even under deadlines, I feel like "Oh, my god. This is an interesting word that just popped into my head. I'm not sure I understand it. I'm going to go to the *OED* and get the etymology and look at it and think about it and, gee, that leads me over to this other book. "Gee, I want to look at Paul Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor*." It's this wonderful kind of thinking *through* something that may never even end up in what you're writing, but it's getting a grasp of it. And none of it's ever wasted either. It comes back for use in something else. But writing the same thing again and again, deadly--

Scott Bukatman: You have reworked at least one of your essays – "Scary Women."

Vivian Sobchack: It's not really a revision. The first essay that used that main title dealt with women in late 50s and early 60s low budget sci-fi horror films in which middle aged women were transformed into something literally horrific and vengeful. *The Leech Woman* and *The Wasp Women* were the most obvious about aging--the one finding a secret African orchid pollen added to male pituitary fluid and the other using royal wasp jelly instead of bee jelly to make them young again, and both turning into murderesses. I focused on those films to prove a point about aging women in American film. But the second piece I wrote, which is in *Carnal Thoughts*, had a different sub-title and only makes reference to that first piece. It's actually quite different although the topic of aging and aging women is similar. But the second is about how cinema and cosmetic surgery are flip sides of the same coin, particularly in terms of special effects, and the ways in which through special effects each informs the other. A friend's facelift plays a major part in the essay. In her emails to me, she uses movie references. In essence, through cinema or cosmetic surgery, we've all had our "eyes done." So I don't see the essays doing the same thing at all.

Scott Bukatman: I certainly wasn't saying you did the same thing but rather you returned to something and took it somewhere else.

Vivian Sobchack: Yes, I do *that* a lot actually. Take animation. I can track several essays that I've written on animation and who even knew I was going to write on animation in the first place. It started because of my interest in the digital. I went to see *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and it was dreadful. But I was fascinated with the crazy attempt to simulate supposedly real humans digitally, and thinking about what that meant--not just culturally, but in terms of the effect itself--beyond saying that the "synthespians" were wooden or something like that. I wasn't thinking about animation at the time but rather about the semiological relation of the analog/digital in representation. Anyway, I accepted an invitation to a conference on animation so that I could--or would have to--write it. Then because I had done that, somebody asked me to go to another conference on animation, and another and now I've three pieces on animation: the *Final Fantasy* one, another on the single animated line and a set of Hilton Hotel ads made for television, and another I just wrote on animation and automation using *Wall-E*. Anyway, these things just go on and seem to have a life of their own.

Scott Bukatman: Right. So suddenly you have a body of work on animation.

Vivian Sobchack: And it's like if I get asked again, it's going to be like "What more can I write?" Because it's not like I'm sitting there thinking only about animation. Instead, this thing I've been fascinated with suddenly leaps up, makes itself present, and says, "Here, you've always been interested in this." It could be anything--

Scott Bukatman: So the combination of methodological rigor and the willingness to sort of find the appropriate methodology for the object and the appropriate structure to use to analyze it, but also, a kind of ability to free associate and to follow your fascinations one to the other and take them up. That's sort of a crucial part of the method.

Vivian Sobchack: Yes. For both of us, I think. We don't immediately self censor that fascination. If I do anything for my students, I hope it's to give them a kind of confidence in those initial fascinations, not necessarily in what they "ought" to be fascinated by. Then they've got a chance of doing vital and original work.

Writing

Scott Bukatman: The thing that is important in this whole mix is not to kill the object that you're writing about by burying it with a theoretical structure that is really your main point of interest and you're using this poor little object in a way to do it. But the way I always put it to my students and myself is to respect the unseriousness of some of the things that I write about that are kind of unserious, superhero comics or whatever, and not turn them into something more serious than they need to be in order to justify what my interest in that--

Vivian Sobchack: I think that's absolutely spot on and it says something, too, about, again, certain academic tendencies in terms of expository writing, teaching and so forth, to do precisely what you're talking against here. Why should there be only one appropriate way to write an expository academic essay? Why must it be only sober to make its points? If we laugh, does that make the work less scholarly? Illegitimate? Very often, academic style will be precisely the same from one topic to another topic, rather than using style itself as an expression of one's varying forms of responsiveness to things, let alone their variety. This is real respect for the object that you're looking at, to be able to approach it in the way it calls

for, and not doing the same thing with every object so that you impose upon rather than discovering it. You're right about academic seriousness. I think seriousness and sobriety are seen as synonymous. Why does one need to be sober to be serious?

Scott Bukatman: What's wrong with Nietzsche's idea of "the gay science"? That's what *Matters of Gravity* was about, this notion of levity and rising above and somehow respecting not the gravity of an object but the levity of an object.

Vivian Sobchack: This is a serious—but not sober—pun. By levity, you mean anti-gravitational elevation as well as the lightness of humor. Language is so great. I love reading you. Scholars ought to have fun with language. Unfortunately, though, some scholars tend to pun to show off their facility with language rather than to reveal the object they're talking about, so the pun is more stylistic than substantial. And then it comes across as arch rather than illuminating. I love to pun when, in fact, it makes the relation between the object and language quiver. When I was writing an essay on my prosthetic leg, and I wrote, without thinking, "On the one hand," I wanted to deal with it in the text. How could I not? I'm talking about a leg. My initial malapropism (however ordinary in some other context) raises questions about the metaphors we use—and also questions, in that particular instance, how we learn our bodies in parts. Thinking about this led to other insights. I see it in your work, too. The pun serves a real purpose and points to something about the object or the relation you have with it. It's not just about being clever. Actually, I think language, when used precisely, is pretty much capable of describing and evoking something of experience. This another major area in which I disagreed with earlier theorists who viewed language in terms of its "lack." Language does not have to be some pale substitute for experience; it can also extend and elaborate experience.

Scott Bukatman: So along those lines, could you talk about the way you begin your essay, "What My Fingers Knew," focusing on the language of film reviewers as opposed to that of film studies scholars?

Vivian Sobchack: Well, I point to and quote a lot of the vibrant language of reviewers. Scholarly writing is supposed to avoid rhetorical flourishes—as if rhetoric were merely ornamental. Reviewers are not beholden to that premise. They start describing their experience and use language that would be anathema in scholarly writing--sensual and affective, as well as descriptive and evaluative. Certainly, academic writing has changed since the days of high theory, and it's much more relaxed than it used to be. How many times today do you see the word "diegesis" in someone's essay. I remember looking it up in the dictionary and it wasn't there! That really threw me for a loop when I was a student. "Diegesis" can be a very useful word if you're dealing with complex and multiple layers of narration in a film where you need to make very, very fine distinctions. But just to throw it in as used to happen? So, okay, academic writing has relaxed a certain amount, but, at the same time, much of it is devoid of a certain vitality. It's as if life and experience shouldn't get in there or you won't be able to make your point, or it won't be taken seriously. And reviewers just don't have that burden. One can be precise and rigorous and use vital language! What is essential in an argument is not just to persuade but to persuade through re-cognition, a new configuration of cognition---and vital language can help accomplish this. Obviously, within academia, you can't write any way you want and you don't teach your students to do things that are not going to get them jobs or exile them from the scholarly community. But you can teach them to demonstrate that they can do the "straight stuff," right, but animate it--but really precisely and to serve a purpose. They can mix it up. Keep readers on their toes. Not as some stylistic call to "Look at me, aren't I clever?" But in service of the object they're looking at.

Scott Bukatman: Well, think about affect. I mean, reviewers are allowed to be, as you state in the essay, moved by films. Scholars are not supposed to be moved by films--

Vivian Sobchack: I think that's crap.

Scott Bukatman: Right. But they chose it as an object of study, so they must have been moved *somewhere* in there. It's implicit, but too seldom explicit. It seems that the reviewer is allowed to be present to the film, rather than the film serving as nothing more than an "object" of study for the scholar.

Vivian Sobchack: Right.

Scott Bukatman: There's more of a give and take between the film and the writer in criticism than in scholarship.

Vivian Sobchack: The question is: Why should anybody read what we're writing? I mean, why should it matter? Meaning--even scholarly meaning--is informed through and through with affect and carnality and everything that's existentially who and what we are. Our consciousness, academic or otherwise, is embodied and in the world. We shouldn't deny that for the sake of some pathetically reduced idea of "objectivity."

The Address of the Eye

Scott Bukatman: Let's talk a little more about *The Address of the Eye*, which is different from much of your other writing in that you don't use examples in the way that you do in much of your other work.

Vivian Sobchack: Actually, I beg to differ. I do use examples. The issue was I used very few *film* examples. And the others, apparently, didn't count. Like, for example, when I talk about the baby who has not yet learned about mediation and who sees a film on a wall not as a mediated perception, as film, but as brute color and movement that is not a specific thing, let alone a perceptive medium. Or the cat. I was very fond of my cat in that book. I used it show how a cat, unlike a baby, understands mediation because when it put its paw on what it thought was a bug on the television screen (which was just a small car or something the background) it not only realized its touch was ineffective but it also understood something was blocking it and walked around to the back of the TV set to get behind the barrier. It recognized mediation, that something was coming between the object and its touch. So the cat is cleverer than the baby, right? But what it doesn't understand is that mediation can be perceptual as well as material. It doesn't, in fact, recognize its own acts of perception as such. And so, however clever, it will chase its own tail. I actually used quite a number of those kinds of examples. When it came to film, however, I only wrote at great length about *Lady in the Lake*. And in passing, several Antonioni films--and Chris Marker's *La Jetée*. But you do have a point--and I learned a lesson about examples from *Address of the Eye*. At the time that I wrote it, however, I was so bent on trying to work out the phenomenological relations of vision and then of the cinema and then our vision engaged with cinema's vision, that this occupied most of my consciousness. I was also writing at a time when high theory was in high dudgeon. (I like that. [laughter]) And I was writing counter to Metz--and counter to the apparatus theory people. And, most of the time, they were writing with no examples either. That was the mode of writing high theory, right?

Scott Bukatman: Good point. Touché. Actual films just interfere with Theory.

Vivian Sobchack: I do think the book would have been easier to read with more examples, but not a lot more. I was trying to focus on our relations to the screen as seeing and being seen in a new way. And I was trying to model that in the language I was using and introducing what were then very strange reversibilities. I think too many examples would have broken up the progression and the doubling back and the moving forward and the doubling back and then moving forward some more, the layering from the act of being with one's own eyes, to cinema's act of being with its own eyes, and then to the conjunction of two viewers viewing, two viewing views meeting in one viewed view. So I want to defend my rhetorical choice. Nonetheless, I learned a lesson about the lack of examples—hearing from people (and this was both a praise and a complaint) that every word counted. You bet! I mean, I can't tell you how many hours I spent, and still do, sitting and thinking about prepositions, because I was talking about the relations of bodies and things in space. Did I mean "in" or "through"? I was really trying to model in language the very relations and reversibilities that I was talking about. And I did think consciously that too many examples would break up awareness of that. But I probably could have used some more. And certainly I did learn something over the years if you contrast *Address of the Eye* to *Carnal Thoughts*.

Scott Bukatman: Oh, yeah.

Vivian Sobchack: By *Carnal Thoughts*, I'd already internalized what I was struggling to articulate in *Address of the Eye*. And I was also writing a set of related essays that, while they cohere, gave me a certain kind of freedom. I wasn't developing a really, really rigorous and sustained phenomenology--except overall. I had great fun in *Carnal Thoughts* using stuff from self-help books and jokes and whatever. And it did relieve some of the heavier philosophical stuff. But I don't think it would have worked in *Address of the Eye*.

Scott Bukatman: You made a conscious decision not to use any images from films. Talk about the way you used images in *Address of the Eye*.

Vivian Sobchack: Well, I didn't.

Scott Bukatman: But *Address of the Eye* does have an image.

Vivian Sobchack: One.

Scott Bukatman: On the cover--it's an image by Magritte.

Vivian Sobchack: That's right.

Scott Bukatman: And your next book, *Carnal Thoughts*, uses an image on the cover by Saul Steinberg.

Vivian Sobchack: That's right.

Scott Bukatman: Two very playful image makers, whose images serve--

Vivian Sobchack: --to question the image itself. I hadn't actually thought about the connection between the two images.

Scott Bukatman: There are a lot of cultural critics for whom the aesthetic component of a work is more or less irrelevant. You're not one of those, and I don't think I am either. My writing has become more and more devoted to things that I find aesthetically satisfying.

Vivian Sobchack: But I don't think you ever reduce it so that it's not somehow existentially connected to something other than aesthetic form. And that's where I think you are very phenomenological. Your work is never removed from something important and is not just about formal properties. You wouldn't have a book called *Matters of Gravity* if that were true. But we should talk about culture, or we might be perceived as talking too much about form, structures and the like. And that would perpetuate the idea some people have that existential phenomenology is ahistorical and acultural. That is just not the case. Merleau-Ponty's corporeal turn on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was anti-essentialist and, with his introduction of and emphasis on the body, entailed history and culture from the get-go. He said that the real lesson of the phenomenological reduction is that it can't reduce itself to some final "essence"--this because we exist and are not transcendental subjects. Once we're in existence, we're in culture, in history. There's only qualified essence in existence--and the qualifiers are history and culture. And these--and the generations within them--change. For instance, I like the look of your iPhone, I like that it's so sleek and black when the screen's turned off. That's cool, it's a cool object. But the idea of watching a movie on it? I just can't fathom that. I know it's possible but... I am confounded in certain ways by the fact that there are all these people walking around watching everything on teensy-weensy screens. Their structures of viewing may share certain aspects with the ones I talk about in *Address of the Eye*, but these are qualified. No structure of perception or experience is for all time or all cultures. It's always qualified by its cultural context and historical conditions. What phenomenological method reveals in its thick descriptions and structural reductions and, finally, its interpretation is not ahistorical. It's proto-historical, pointing to the way objects and experiences are more than we take them to be and also could be--and have been--taken otherwise. In this regard, Don Ihde's work is very, very useful because he performs a good deal of cross-cultural and historical phenomenology, in which he shows that life worlds engaged with the same phenomenon may live it very differently.

The Digital and Materiality

Scott Bukatman: I was thinking about two of your essays, "The Scene of the Screen," which distinguishes between the materiality of the photographic, the cinematic and the electronic images, and then "Surge and Splendor," your phenomenology of the epic historical film, in which you discuss the materiality of the image. What I was thinking about was the increasing prominence of digital practice in the cinema. At this point, digital effects are integrated seamlessly into all kinds of film, to the point where we don't always know that we're seeing something computer generated. I was wondering about the implications of that kind of fully integrated digital production for the materiality of the image. I know this is kind of a huge question.

Vivian Sobchack: It sure is. I find it interesting to consider what "fully integrated" might mean. On the one hand, we could talk about CGI being fully integrated into a narrative but still visible as such, and, on the other, fully integrated into the image to the degree that it's not visible and we're not really noting it as a difference. At one point in the history of cinema, if horses fell down or animals were hurt in some fashion, as a viewer, you'd sit there and flinch seeing this. To the extent these images are made now through CGI, we no longer flinch to the degree we once did. The pleasures of CGI are not about the gravity of flesh and blood. The same things are not at stake in terms of the illusion, but it goes deeper. There's some indexicality that counts that CGI can't achieve--like a real sense of death, of being hurt, of flesh being torn. So the pleasures of the digital are different. The kind of transcendent effects I think digital simulation can achieve are different from the pleasures and terrors that emerge in the presence of analog/indexical cinema. It's very materialist. The body counts rather than computes. Certainly, the body is still there--but it's rendered and its thickness and resistance reduced.

Scott Bukatman: A good example is the current wave of superhero films, which on the one hand are very corporeal and physical, and on the other are exactly *not* that – these are not real bodies--they *don't* count.

Vivian Sobchack: You mentioned "The Scene of the Screen." I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote it. I was just fascinated by what I saw phenomenologically as radical breaks between the way that we experienced photography, cinema, and electronic media even as these media coexisted. At the end of the essay, when it was first published, I talked in cautionary terms about the digital--the electronic--as disembodiment. Many years later, when I came to reprint the piece in *Carnal Thoughts*, I remember sitting there and reconsidering. To say the digital was disembodiment was too extreme—it came from the historical moment, from the beginning of thought about the digital--

Scott Bukatman: Well, when you get right down to it--and this is a big shift from my earlier writing--I really can't think of anything that really is a disembodiment experience.

Vivian Sobchack: Absolutely right. It's more about the dispersal or diffusion of embodiment. So in *Carnal Thoughts* I changed the essay somewhat. I am still cautionary, but obviously there is pleasure as well as threat in diffusion, which is not the same thing as disembodiment. When I initially wrote the essay, however, we were all just beginning to try to understand the structural and cultural implications of "new media" and "the digital" and asking the big questions and, of course, making large claims and dramatic arguments.

Scott Bukatman: [shameless plug] *Terminal Identity*

Vivian Sobchack: Yes--and we're still here. A bit less cautionary but a lot more jaded. One of my favorite pieces, written toward the beginning of major interest in the digital, was about Quick Time movies. It was called "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quick Time." (It's funny to me that it was first published in the 90s in *Millennium Film Journal* and then later abridged and reprinted a decade later in a volume called *Future Cinema*.) The title was meant to be ironic. Here were these extraordinary little works of new media that emerged because of the limitations of computer memory and the lack of broadband. But the form was already doomed because, from the first, everyone was talking about streaming. Quick Time in those days was definitely not quick. That was part of its fascination. The pieces stuttered, and most were looped because of the limited memory. So you'd get this tiny, little window of something dream-like that opened on your rational desktop--this kind of poetic little jewel case of a thing, a memory box (which the computer is, in fact)--that reminded me of Joseph Cornell's boxes. The rational and the poetic appearing on your desktop together. As Gaston Bachelard said, "Two kinds of space encourage each other." And so I wrote the essay, knowing before the fact that this form was going to disappear. And I was right; we now have streaming. Now it would be hard to find any of those early Quick Time movies. What I wrote was both a detailed phenomenological description (which included looking at Quick Time's documentation) and a phenomenology of the poetic experience and effects of the form as it was then. I'm very proud of the essay because it's possibly the only record that there ever was such a form.

Scott Bukatman: Let's go back though to "Surge and Splendor" and historical epic. Let's take *Flags of our Fathers*. They used digital technology to put an enormous number of ships on screen. It was beautiful and vast--but we know it's digital. There's simply no way that they marshaled that many ships. So how does that knowledge (or deduction) affect our sense of the scale of what we're seeing? Does the shift from physical to digital change what you regarded as the materiality of the epic image in "Surge and Splendor"?

Vivian Sobchack: Yes, to a great degree. First, of course, there is the materiality of the epic film experience—the running time of the film itself, and all of the things it does to your posterior in the theater, where you feel, by the end, you have in some way "endured" the epic time and scope. That materiality and its bodily experience is very phenomenologically persuasive that, even though it's only been for three hours, one has lived through "history."

Scott Bukatman: And that's still there.

Vivian Sobchack: And that's still there. Indeed, in that essay I pointed to the historical mini-series on television which eliminates that same sense of physical endurance; it shapes our commitment of time in another way. You may sit watching history for more hours but it's broken up and you don't have to "endure" it in the same way. It's not precisely the same kind of phenomenological experience. The temporality is different; the physical labor is different. Labor is, in fact, important to the epic form--the "feel" of the epic--although I think the digital has changed that. One of the things I looked at in "Surge and Splendor" was a Hollywood press book for *How the West Was Won*, in which the studio PR people quite explicitly link all the filmmakers trekking west to wherever it was the intrepid pioneers trekking west.

Emphasis is on the problems encountered in the film's production: amassing thousands of animals, and enough food, and transportation breakdowns. They also celebrated all the historical pioneering with the pioneering invention of a new film technology: Cinerama--

Scott Bukatman: The hardships that they endured.

Vivian Sobchack: I also point out that nearly every film historical epic constructs part of its epic scope by pointing beyond the screen to the history of the production--hence news and magazine stories and now DVD extra features about the production difficulties endured, things like moving three thousand buffaloes and feeding thousands of people--

Scott Bukatman: Moving steamboats over mountains and--

Vivian Sobchack: Steamboats, exactly. As I put it, the production of history is constructed from--and reversible with--the history of the production, and this enlarges the scope of the film and the film experience. There are nothing like reversals, are there, to tell you something important? Just try reversing whatever it is and you'll come up with an interesting relation that pushes your thought further. But the press book was actually already doing this explicitly with its analogy. But you asked about more contemporary epics that use digital effects. I think the scope is still there, but the labor--the physical labor--seems lost. The image just doesn't seem to have that ballast, that weight of how hard it was to get that pro-filmic event together. Physical labor becomes such an important thing here and although there's a huge amount of labor involved in digital effects, this tends to get suppressed or doesn't seem physical enough or, more particularly, physically harrowing. Yes, there are press pieces and DVD extras about how many people it took to do the effects and how many hours--

Scott Bukatman: And what technology, and what kind of processors.

Vivian Sobchack: Exactly. I'm not trying to demean that labor at all. I think it must be much more tedious than driving a wagon train or taking a grip truck across the country. But, dare I say, it's less dramatic. Its labors are less available--visible--to the imagination, particularly the epic imagination. Sitting in front of the computer is just not as thrilling to think about in terms of time, history, epic labor. It's mental effort. It's not physical--

Scott Bukatman: The analogy breaks down. It's still labor. It's still time. It's still material. It's still expense. But it's not the same kind of work that I think led to your locating this really nice analogy--which, as you say you didn't invent, you discovered in the press books--that the labor of making the film was second only to the labor of the original event. I just recently saw *The Big Trail*, Raoul Walsh's 1930 epic film about a wagon train made in an early 70mm wide-screen process called Grandeur.

Vivian Sobchack: My goodness.

Scott Bukatman: The amount of *stuff* on screen is unparalleled, and you really cannot help but think of the logistics of the production, that it was indeed as arduous for the film makers as for the characters you're looking at on the screen.

Vivian Sobchack: That seems to me basic to the historical epic, and it's effected in terms of the indexicality of photochemical cinema. What the digital gives you is a second order indexicality. I prefer that to the term "simulation."

Scott Bukatman: Uh huh. That's different.

Vivian Sobchack: And, so, when we're viewing something that had or could have actual existence beyond the screen--rather than being only imaginary and imaged which is of its own first order--and it's rendered digitally, the existential ballast, the weight, of the resistance of objects in the world, of the world as obstacle as well as playground, is gone. Digital pleasures may occur but they're located elsewhere.

Scott Bukatman: I just saw Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* which was shot digitally, but there's no question that in nearly every shot, there's a pro-filmic *there* there. There is indexicality. It's not a photochemical indexicality, it's bits and bytes, but it's still indexicality. Something happened in front of the lens, it was recorded in a certain way. And for me, that matters. However, the older I get, the more Buster Keaton and Fred Astaire and people like that, who did things in front of the camera, loom large for me. Contra Christian Metz who said all films are fiction films, I think we're both intrigued by the idea that all films are nonfiction films. *Rio Bravo* is a document of John Wayne and Dean Martin, not their fictional characters, Chance and Dude. How generational do you think that concern is?

Vivian Sobchack: It *is* generational--which implicates both the phenomenological and the historical. Different media technologies and the way we take them up change. Different media set certain constraints on the way we see and hear, the way we perceive and know and reflect on ourselves. Certainly, a variety of media are always operative at a given historical moment. There is, however, a kind of dominance that occurs and a medium's ascent happens over time and across generations. We're living

through a period in which we in a certain age range remember photochemical cinema as dominant, while our students know digital cinema as dominant. At some point, let's say 50 years from now, using a projector, someone will show a photochemical film in a film class or a media class and it will seem very strange to those viewing it. Students will say, "There's something wrong with the depth" or "The image is blurred." Think of our showing our undergraduate students silent films. There is a different phenomenology of viewing. Great attention must be paid to the screen which provides the only information you get. Once sound comes in, you can look away from the screen; your attention can be more diffuse. The intensity is shifted and changed as are the sensual commitments. The phenomenology of our engagement with media allows us to think through historical questions. We're all always in some transitional moment. Given my age (and I'm a lot older than you are), I hate the idea of the "death" of what we knew as film. But I'm not nostalgic (well, only a little). Nonetheless, I do mourn the loss of the qualities of the analog: the quality of light, the difference in depth, a certain existential blur between things in the world that we come to notice against the sharpness of the digital.

Scott Bukatman: When I was first starting out as a teacher, it would be important to explain to a class that Buster Keaton was doing his own stunts because this would be a later moment when stunt men would be commonly used. So you had to tell your student, "Oh, he did his own stunts." But the sequel now is not only that I have to say, "He did his own stunts," that there was no stunt man, but I *also* have to explain that they're watching a record of a physical body performing in a physical space. There was a guy. He did these things as you see them.

Vivian Sobchack: There--you're back again to the issue of a certain form of gravity in levity--where, in fact, the comedy is not only thrilling, but possibly fatal. Take Harold Lloyd dangling in *Safety Last* from the clock, or Keaton with the house falling around him in *Steamboat Bill*, which just blows me away every time I see it. It causes everyone to gasp. How many people now gasp at a digital effect? The issue of gasping, taking in a breath, means you're feeling something existentially there. The digital has its own pleasures. There's the clarity, the extraordinary resolution, the color saturation, all of which create their own intensity as well as erotics. So this has been really fascinating. We could go on for hours.

Scott Bukatman: Yeah, but I feel like the schmuck in the Platonic dialogues, who's always going, "Yes, that is true."

Vivian Sobchack: That is *not* true. That's not what you've done here--

Scott Bukatman: I'm just kidding.

About the Author

Scott Bukatman is an Associate Professor in the Film and Media Studies Program in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. He holds a Ph.D. in Cinema Studies from New York University and is the author of three books: *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, published by Duke University Press, one of the earliest book-length studies of cyberculture; a monograph on *Blade Runner* commissioned by the British Film Institute; and a collection of essays, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*. His writing highlights the ways in which popular media (film, comics) and genres (science fiction, musicals, superhero narratives) mediate between new technologies and human perceptual and bodily experience. His latest book project has the tentative title of *The Poetics of Slumberland*.

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