

The journeys of a film phenomenologist: An interview with Vivian Sobchack on being and becoming

Julian Hanich

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Introduction

Vivian Sobchack, born in 1940 in New York City, is one of the most influential American film theorists of the last 25 years. At the beginning of the 1990s she was the main driving force behind the recuperation of phenomenology as a viable methodology in film studies with her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Insisting on the bodily and material foundations of film viewing, she has fervently defended an existential-phenomenological approach to moving image media ever since, perhaps nowhere more elegantly than in the essays of *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Sobchack was the first woman elected President of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (1985-1987), from which she also received the Distinguished Career Achievement Award (2012). She also served for two decades as the only academic on the Board of Directors of the American Film Institute (AFI). From 1992-2005 she was Associate Dean and Professor at the School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA. Since then she teaches as Professor Emerita at UCLA.



Fig. 1: Vivian Sobchack.

Becoming a film phenomenologist

Hanich: Is it far-fetched to claim that you are a good example of how serendipitously an academic career can develop?

Sobchack: With hindsight you could say that serendipity played a significant role. But it may also have had to do with my own eccentricities, my own desire for existential freedom. I have always tried to keep things open, to remain adventurous and interested in a broad range of things. I once thought about starting the preface to a collection of my essays with the sentence 'I have always considered myself an intellectual slut', which is sort of true, but I knew that all my feminist friends would never talk to me again, so I dropped it! Approaching things spontaneously with an 'Oh, wow, that's interesting!' attitude opens up questions and possibilities that you otherwise might not see or think to explore. I bemoan students who seem to have no intellectual curiosity beyond their one area of specialisation.

Hanich: You were already close to 40 when you entered a PhD program.

Sobchack: Yes. I had done my BA in 1961 at Barnard College in New York in English Literature. I received my MA in 1976 at UCLA in the Department of Film and Television, and did the coursework during my former husband's sabbatical – Tom [Thomas Sobchack] was a professor at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. I wrote a thesis that became the first version of my science fiction book *The Limits of Infinity: The American Science Fiction Film 1950-1975*. Before I went to UCLA, I had been teaching film as a part-time adjunct for many years, and, in fact, my husband and I were co-writing the first edition of a pretty successful textbook *An Introduction to Film*, which came out in 1980. So I wanted to be a 'real' academic. Nonetheless, a few years later, I was very resentful about having to go back and get a PhD, since it was just becoming necessary if you wanted an academic position with a future. I didn't want to have to take classes I had already taught.

Hanich: How did you end up at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale?

Sobchack: We talked earlier about serendipity. Here it is at work. In the early summer of 1978, when I was driving back to Utah from teaching for a year at the University of Vermont, I stopped at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, a place I've described, because of humidity, as the armpit of middle America. I had no reason to stop there, except someone I knew had suggested I see the chair of the Communications Department. I told him I needed financial support, I didn't want to teach given my experience, and I wanted to take as many courses as I could handle, because I wanted to get out

of there as fast as possible. He looked at my CV and said, 'Sure, we'll give you all that.' I was so arrogant, it was unbelievable! I never even looked at the course catalogue until I had to register for classes. It was a huge department with things like Public Relations, Interpersonal Communication and Speech Pathology. But I found this very small area called Philosophy of Language.

Hanich: That's where you encountered phenomenology?

Sobchack: Yes, phenomenology and semiology. I had heard the term 'phenomenology' but didn't really know what it was until I got into the program – although I had been sort of loosely practicing it all along. I spent a whole semester reading semiology. Not only Saussure (as in graduate film studies) but also Peirce, Eco, and Jacobson. I was also reading hermeneutics and social philosophy, like Habermas, Schütz, and the wonderful Gadamer. And then there was phenomenology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty!

Hanich: At that time you probably read Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), a book that is tremendously important to almost all your work.

Sobchack: We had to read *Sense and Non-Sense* by Merleau-Ponty, but *Phenomenology of Perception* was only recommended. However, my mentor, Professor Richard Lanigan, was a Merleau-Pontyian and he saw the particular relevance of *Phenomenology of Perception* to my proposed dissertation topic on film. So I read it. I do need to say, though, that while I studied phenomenology formally in Carbondale, I had been initially intrigued by it from reading Dudley Andrew's *The Major Film Theories* (1976), in which he introduced, if briefly, a number of French film phenomenologists.

Hanich: Were there other phenomenologists on the syllabus or did you read up on phenomenology later?

Sobchack: I was certainly introduced or referred to several other phenomenologists who became very important to me during the writing of my dissertation, the first version of *The Address of the Eye*. For example, both Richard Zaner and Erwin Straus, because of their work on the body and its movement. Also useful was a course called Qualitative Sociology, which consisted of a semester-long exercise with a selected case study. The one I had involved an institutionalised blind and deaf young girl and a critique of how she was dealt with by the people trying to 'reach' her. This was really fascinating, because it raised questions such as 'How do I see?' and 'How do my other senses give me access to the world?'

Hanich: You once mentioned that the reason why you worked so idiosyncratically – and working with phenomenology was certainly idiosyncratic

at the time – had to do with a lack of peer pressure. Was your geographical isolation in Salt Lake City and Carbondale a special form of freedom?

Sobchack: Absolutely. This was most obvious to me with regard to second-wave feminism with its then rather ‘programmatic’ attempts to unify women by eliding their differences. At the time in the US, the ‘hot bed’ of feminist film studies was in the Midwest and on the East Coast. I’m thinking of scholars like Linda Williams, B. Ruby Rich, Tania Modleski, Patricia Mellencamp, and Patrice Petro. I might well have felt pressured if I had been in that milieu, since I cringe at the pretense of homogeneity, which can be really destructive to creativity and to acknowledgement of differences among women.

Hanich: Did you write your dissertation in Carbondale or in Utah?

Sobchack: At Carbondale, I got a dissertation fellowship award for my second year and went home to Utah to begin writing. I also went on the job market and, in 1981, the University of California at Santa Cruz hired me as a Visiting Assistant Professor. I was given a certain period of time to finish the dissertation, but in 1984 I was diagnosed with cancer in my leg, and so I got an extra quarter and finished the dissertation that year. After that, I immediately became a tenure-track Assistant Professor and the next year was promoted to Associate.

Hanich: What was the status of phenomenology in film studies at the time?

Sobchack: If we’re talking about the 1980s, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and neo-Marxism were dominant. Perceived as subjectivist and uncritical, phenomenology was not on anyone’s agenda at the time, so I was pretty much on my own. But I was just really pissed off, as I indicate in *The Address of the Eye*, at the negativity of contemporaneous methodologies, particularly their emphasis on the cinema as a bad object, their contempt for spectators (from whom they seemed to exempt themselves), and their denial of pleasure as having anything positive about it whatsoever. The spectator was an empty receptacle, a stupid dupe of bourgeois ideology. That negativity was my provocation for writing. I had no mission to ‘sell’ phenomenology.

Hanich: Why the importance of Merleau-Ponty rather than Husserl, Sartre, or other phenomenologists?

Sobchack: The truth is that I found Husserl almost impenetrable, and I didn’t read that much of him in my graduate program. Reading Merleau-Ponty – if in English translation – I found a poetic sensibility that spoke to me. You have to know that I started off as a creative writer. Language is, and

always was, incredibly important to me. Against the psychoanalytic Lacanian position that language is a *substitute* for being, I view it as an *extension* of being. But Merleau-Ponty's major importance for me was his focus on vision as embodied. He fleshed out and brought all our senses into the act of seeing.

Hanich: You mentioned that you started off as a creative writer. You wrote poetry when you were young, right?

Sobchack: Yes, poetry and short stories. When I was still in New York I actually wrote a novel that editors wanted to publish. However, one publisher, who never read it, rejected it because, as he put it, 'Who needs another Greenwich Village college novel?' I started another one but then I realised I was only 21 and had nothing more to say at that point. So I went into a completely different career, doing social work, helping find and develop jobs for college grads looking for their first jobs and then for high school dropouts with few skills and limited support systems.

The breakthrough of *The Address of the Eye*

Hanich: Your dissertation, which you finished in 1984, was published in 1992 as *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. We are celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Sobchack: Oh God!

Hanich: Why did it take eight years for the book to come out?

Sobchack: Books weren't published as fast as they are today, I had another cancer operation during that period, and I was teaching full time. But the substantial reason was that, in the dissertation, I hadn't addressed sexual difference, which was a major concern at the time. I knew this omission would be a reason to dismiss the book. I just didn't want to deal with it in binary terms and so it took me a while to work out the section 'Whose Body? A Brief Meditation on Sexual Difference and Other Bodily Discriminations'. Then, after I had written it, I felt I needed to balance it and wrote a new section in the following chapter titled 'Film's Body: A Brief Intentional History'.

Hanich: In *The Address of the Eye* you use a very challenging style that is less present in your later work. I have a hunch that this had to do with the situation in film studies at that time.

Sobchack: That's right. This was a period of high theory! Also, I was figuring things out. I've never thought for such a long time about prepositions as in *The Address of the Eye*: should I use 'in' or 'through', for instance. But apart

from this precision of word choice, I also engaged in serious wordplay. And I hyphenated words to make them strange and to emphasise those prefixes that thicken or complicate their meaning. This first time on my own, I was rigorously exercising my phenomenological training. Later, I allowed myself to become a little looser. As well, my style and tone often change, but that's not because my underlying orientation does, rather it's in response to the particularity of my object.

Hanich: There are some other stylistic elements one finds in *The Address of the Eye* that recur in your later writing.

Sobchack: Yes, the use of chiasmatic structures which both separate and conjoin things, and explorations of etymology. But I hope I don't use these stylistic elements as a 'tic' that calls out 'Look, how clever I am!' I hate that kind of writing, and being accused of it would just kill me. Structure is another important thing to me. I don't think one rigid objectivist structure should define 'academic writing' for our field. If you are writing about comedy, for instance, it seems to me counterproductive to write a completely sober and somber essay – unless, of course, this is done as itself a 'send-up' of typical academic writing.

Hanich: Let's move to your conceptualisation of the 'film's body' – the idea that in films we encounter a quasi-subject that not only perceives a world but also confronts us with the expression of its perception. This was certainly the most controversial concept in the book.

Sobchack: Right.

Hanich: Some critics claimed it was an interesting metaphor, but shouldn't be taken literally. You did not mean it metaphorically though.

Sobchack: In *The Address of the Eye* I was focused on our vision as embodied and entailing all our senses. For me, the big realisation was that a film also sees (and hears) and that seeing (and hearing) are always situated somewhere. Thus, I had to deal with the material substrate of that offscreen presence. To just call it 'the camera' seemed to me too easily reducible to much less than it was. And it was also other than the filmmaker. The film's seeing and hearing is consciously moving and connecting things together onscreen for a purpose while inhabiting space and time. The apparatus called 'the camera' does not 'inhabit' anything. Borrowing upon Richard Zaner's work, the term 'body' is thus meant not only to assert a film's material status but also its basic functions. Moreover, bodies are not necessarily anthropomorphic. These are the reasons why the film's body is not a metaphor.

Hanich: Phenomenology is supposed to bracket theory, to attend to phenomena as they are given in experience and to describe this experience as presupposition-less as possible. Some scholars argue that the ‘film’s body’ introduces precisely a theoretical concept, something we don’t experience when we watch a film.

Sobchack: Did I start with the theoretical presupposition that a film has a body? No. I started with the question ‘What is it to see?’, which led me to vision as always both situated and finite, which led me to it necessarily inhabiting space materially as well as temporally. This is why Merleau-Ponty was so important to me. He talks about how, when you look at something, what you visually gain from one perspective, you lose from another. There is finitude to perception because it is materially embodied, and so movement indicates choice-making which gives everything meaning. The film’s body emerged from my phenomenological work. It was not a presupposition. Its materiality, situated-ness, finitude, and choice-making were uncovered as objectively there as well as subjectively comprehensible. Did I start with a grand theory? No. I might add that the term ‘film’s body’ also has been criticised for being anthropomorphic, yet I have never made the claim that the film’s materiality and vision are essentially the same as human vision. Indeed, my one extended example, Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* (1947), points to just the opposite!

Hanich: The discussion of *Lady in the Lake* is an extremely important one, but, as you say, it is the only extensive film example. What was the reason for that?

Sobchack: There are two reasons. The most substantial was that too many examples would have broken up the argument – they would have distracted from the logics of its movement. The most rhetorical was that I was afraid that the book would have been dismissed if it had too many examples. Today, even people doing theory will often demonstrate it through case studies. But this wasn’t the case back then. Retrospectively, the book was criticised for this lack. The example from *Lady in the Lake* was important, however, because I wanted to discuss the case of a film’s body assuming a human body. As you know, the film is narrated almost exclusively through the subjective perception of its protagonist Philip Marlowe, but the film does not see exactly as a human sees and it was necessary to point out the differences.

Hanich: Looking back at the 25 years since the publication of *The Address of the Eye*, what influence has your work left on film studies?

Sobchack: It took a while, but my work did eventually influence a number of people (a lot of them graduate students, always a compliment) and there was a renaissance of phenomenological work in film studies. But I think feminism, and its interest in the body, really set the context for that renaissance. It enabled a transition from 'the body' (held at arm's length) to the phenomenologically lived sense of 'embodiment'. Unfortunately, the bad news now is that the body has increasingly become reduced once again, because somehow consciousness and cognition seem to have dropped out. What seems to have happened is that fascination with embodiment has substituted affect for consciousness. I have nothing against affect but such a substitution returns us to the mind/body split once again! There is no such split in lived bodily experience.

The method of phenomenology and its politics

Hanich: Film studies has long entertained plural methodologies. While some frameworks seem to be more popular than others, not a single paradigm dominates. What can film phenomenology add to this huge toolbox that scholars and students can choose from? What makes it valuable over and above the ones also on offer?

Sobchack: I would certainly not put it on top of a hierarchy. It's not healthy to live only in your own little niche. As I mentioned before, I see graduate students often doing that – they don't let their intellectual curiosity wander. But that's one thing phenomenology allows you: you can take anything as your object. It doesn't act hierarchically; it's not proscriptive; it's open and generative and, in existential phenomenology, descriptions and interpretations are provisional and open to variations and amendment by experience. In this regard, many people have told me they found *Carnal Thoughts* and, particularly, *The Address of the Eye* liberating. They felt freed up to follow the experiences and objects that aroused their curiosity where the experiences and objects took them, rather than deciding where the experiences and objects should go. To describe this phenomenological journey calls for a precision that you have to achieve for yourself, and that can be scary but also empowering.

Hanich: Phenomenology is certainly not compatible with every other method. There are competing approaches that phenomenologists have to reject on metaphysical or methodological grounds. In your writing one can find

occasional stabs at apparatus theory and cognitive film theory. Is there anything in contemporary theory that makes you angry?

Sobchack: Yes. The term ‘post-human’. Who is using this term? A dog, an insect, a plant? No! It’s a human being. Certainly, we humans and the lived bodies that we are have been augmented and transformed over time and in a variety of ways. But to think that we are, or will be, no longer human to me seems dangerously delusional. As I’ve written, my prosthetic leg does not go out dancing without me. This is not a criticism of post-humanism – a term meant to decry human arrogance and ignorance in the context of other life forms with which we share the planet. However, to be post-humanist is not to be post-human. To confuse the two and their very different implications and possible consequences is really problematic insofar as one may lead to a sustainable future while the other to its annihilation.

Hanich: We live in an academic climate where ‘objective’ empirical work seems to be increasingly important in the humanities – from ‘softer’ ethnographic studies via big data analyses in the digital humanities to scientifically ‘harder’ eye-tracking studies, physiological measurements, or neuroscientific fMRI scans. This puts the pressure of legitimisation on phenomenology as a methodology sometimes deemed too ‘subjective’. How would you deal with this allegation?

Sobchack: Take an example that I have written extensively about: phantom limbs. If someone hadn’t been able to subjectively describe phantom sensations – it’s not always pain – then how would anyone have known to look for the neurological processes that cause them? However, the neurological activities going on in our bodies aren’t experienced as such. But I am not at all against empirical research. I am a secret science junky. As a child I wanted to be an astronomer.

Hanich: Does phenomenology work as a complement to other methodologies then?

Sobchack: Indeed yes! However, objectivist research usually comes after, not before, description. Where do the questions come from that lead to empirical research? Phenomenology can lead to asking, ‘What’s going on here?’ What phenomenology does at its best is that it doesn’t provide closure. It takes you through observations of experience, close descriptions of it, and then possible interpretations of it. It’s not subjective in some sloppy or thin sense; it’s thick description that creates the ground of lived experience and for further, if secondary, research.

Hanich: Does this make phenomenology an endeavor that includes paying more attention to language than other film theoretical approaches do?

Sobchack: That's an interesting question. There are some really good writers in film studies. Linda Williams, for instance, is a wonderful writer. So is Thomas Elsaesser. Their language lives – it's not tedious or dry. And there are other scholars who seem to write with an ease that makes you feel comfortable but also challenged reading their work. But I would still say that phenomenology gets you to think in a way that is open to variations, to different structurations, and to the surprising insights that words provide. The big challenge for me over the years has been not to get lazy, to keep struggling for precision and those words or phrases that 'quiver' with a sense of experience. Here is where phenomenology and poetics work together.

Hanich: Another criticism sometimes leveled at phenomenology is that it is a-political. With its insistence on the description of lived experience, it focuses on what *is* rather than what *should* be.

Sobchack: I would counter by saying that phenomenology is proto-political. It is not only committed to description but also to identifying and 'bracketing' presuppositions and, just as important, an interpretation that in existential phenomenology is always provisional. Phenomenology also entails a variational method – that is, looking at one's objects and experiences in different ways. Easy at first, but becoming increasingly difficult as you continue, this method opens up both the object and its experience to a variety of modalities and dimensions of being that were not apparent at first. Here I would recommend Don Ihde's *Experimental Phenomenology*, which takes you through a series of variational exercises around simple drawn figures. In relation to politics, phenomenology thus enables the possibility of understanding other vantage points, other ways of seeing – i.e., where other people are 'coming from'. This understanding is not equivalent to an endorsement, but it can be helpful in creating dialogue rather than forestalling it.

I'll relate a personal anecdote. Each year, I go on an ocean cruise for my vacation and, alone on purpose, I ask to sit at different and large tables every night. I meet people whose politics and backgrounds are often radically different from my own. I engage them but also listen. Very few of them can be written off as merely 'stupid'. Their views come from their experiences, their lives. We are really all different but we're all trying to cope and to make sense of our lives. I stay and listen long after some tablemates with politics more like my own have left. The main point here is that phenomenology's variational mode of thought can use this understanding of other positions to more

positive strategic purposes, to the development of productive dialogue, to coalition around a very specific issue. In this regard, I have always been resistant to identity politics and committed to coalition politics. It emerges from objective issues – not from the necessity for subjective homogeneity. In sum, phenomenology does not ignore different ethical values or political choices. It describes and interprets them rather than dismissing them, and leads to a more reflexively-informed and varied set of possibilities for both thought and action.

Hanich: Would you also see a proto-political side of phenomenology in its concern with communality rather than identity and difference?

Sobchack: Yes, I would. But this communality is very basic, although always inflected by cultural mores. We are all embodied, we all need to eat and drink, we all get tired and need to sleep, and we need a place to feel safe when we do so. Think of a homeless person living under a bridge in a cardboard box. Most people say, ‘What a shame! This is terrible!’, or they turn away as if this person is an alien ‘other’ rather than a person who sees the cardboard box as a protective and sheltering place that is ‘his’. To recognise this person who, like all of us, needs and understands the qualities of ‘home’ even in the worst circumstances is certainly no justification for tolerating poverty, but perhaps it is one for real – rather than lip-service – empathy and a sense of communality that produces ‘care’.

Hanich: My final question is meant for students or scholars becoming interested in phenomenology. What are the books you would recommend?

Sobchack: First: Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). Second: Don Ihde’s *Experimental Phenomenology* (1977), *Listening and Voice* (1976), and *Technology and the Life-world* (1990). Third: Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (1958). And fourth – and this may sound strange in a phenomenological context – Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* (1928). However, if I had to name the four philosophers who mean the most to me, my tentpoles, to use a film industry term, would be the three Bs: Bachelard, Benjamin, and Bakhtin, because the latter introduces a chronotopic union of space and time and also understands how representation and culture permeate each other. And, of course, there’s always Merleau-Ponty.

Author

Julian Hanich is Associate Professor of Film Studies at the University of Groningen. His first monograph, titled *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (2010), provided a phenomenology of fear at the movies. In November 2017 his second monograph *The Audience Effect* – a film phenomenological study on the collective cinema experience – will be published by Edinburgh University Press. He was also co-editor (with Christian Ferencz-Flatz) of a special issue of the journal *Studia Phaenomenologica* on Film and Phenomenology (2016).