Stefanie Knauss

More than a Provocation
Sexuality, Media and Theology

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Preface

In writing this book, a process drawn out over several years, interrupted by other projects and then picked up again, I have encountered numerous individuals and institutions who have lent their financial, infrastructural and moral support and I am very grateful to them: in particular to my colleagues, past and present, at Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento (Italy) and Villanova University (USA) for lively discussions of films, texts and images and their support in turning ideas into a manuscript. Thank you also to Sofia Sjö and Alexander D. Ornella who have commented on earlier drafts of chapters of this book.

This book took first shape in the context of the research project "Commun(icat)ing Bodies" at Graz University (Austria) funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, P21352) and I am grateful for both the financial support I received from the Austrian Science Fund and the possiblity to work on my book in a stimulating environment and with great colleagues. Its completion was made possible by a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and I thank Prof. Dr. Saskia Wendel (University of Köln) and Prof. Dr. Ulrike Auga (Humboldt University, Berlin) for hosting me during this period.

I am very pleased that this study is published in the series Research in Contemporary Religion and I thank the series editors for including me in their series and for their helpful suggestions for revisions. Thank you also to the staff at Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht for their help with all the many details that need to be taken care of in the publication process.

Last not least, thank you to all friends and colleagues who have accompanied me to see weird films in the cinema or who have pointed out otherwise useful material – images and texts – for this study. It would not have been possible – and much less fun – without them.

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1. Introduction

While I was working on this book, two media hypes occurred that exemplify the provocative potential of sex and media: the first centred on Steve McQueen's film *Shame* (2011) about a man who seeks fulfilment in innumerous casual sexual encounters, a film most interesting maybe because of its various nude shots of Michael Fassbender. The second hype came up just a bit later, in 2012, and this time it was about E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011), a bestselling sado-masochist romance between a literature graduate and a businessman.

Apparently, sex and media, sex *in* media can still raise considerable attention in today's "sexualised" society. And yet, when the flurry had subsided, it became obvious that these two examples are a good illustration for how the provocative explicitness of sexual representations in images or words often masks relatively conservative, unprovocative ideals of sexuality: in *Shame*, the protagonist's desperate attempts to find satisfaction and fulfilment – in casual encounters, in masturbation, with as many sex partners as possible – ultimately fails because he is unable to relate personally to his partners and to open up to real intimacy. Is it shame about this failure to establish a "successful" relationship to which the title refers? *Ex negativo*, a quite conventional ideal of sex is depicted: good sex is sex in a loving, committed, potentially long-term relationship, a true encounter with another person that contributes to the formation of a grounded, integrated, mature self. *Fifty Shades* is even less radical, in spite of its references to S/M, with its romance theme of a submissive woman who finds her complement in a dominant man, damaged by a childhood trauma, which, of course, she will heal with her unconditional love. By the end of the third volume, they are married with children. Where's the provocation? While on the one hand, more radical and exotic sex seems to be the rule of the day in today's media, on the other hand, traditional ideals of sex in committed relationships, as an expression of love and within the framework of heteronormativity, are perpetuated.

Thus reactions to the provocation of the phenomenon of media sex can be twofold: often they are dominated by an attitude of rejection, closure and prohibitionism in the face of images and stories of explicit sex, as it characterises

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numerous statements of Christian provenance, which in responding to media sex warn of the negative effects of all pornographic material and underline chastity as the ideal guiding "good sex".[1] The provocation of explicit images is seen as a threat to one's own (traditional) values and ultimately one's identity. However, provocation can also be taken as something positive and constructive: as a challenge to reflect on what is perceived as provocative and why.[2] As the examples briefly discussed above show, the result might be quite different from what one expects and media images of sex are possibly not half as "provocative" and dangerous as they first seemed, or if they are provocative, then maybe because they truly provoke thought and reflection.

In this study, I follow this second path, much less trodden in theology, taking up the challenge of the provocation of media sex and mediated sex from a theological perspective: what does this phenomenon mean and in what ways does it contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of sexuality in human existence? In doing so I am responding to the call of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (4) to take seriously the "signs of the times":

> "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which [women and] men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics."

Although I agree with the need to take seriously the questions people have and to find a theological language that is appropriate and understandable in our times, I would hesitate to say that theology (or the church) has all the answers to all the questions expressed in social phenomena. David Tracy suggests instead that the task of contemporary theology is to critically correlate the meanings present in common human experience and in theological texts and traditions, both of which represent equally relevant sources for theology with their questions and their attempts at answering them.[3]

I argue in this book that media products can be expressions of such common human experience, here in particular the experience of sexuality as part of human existence and a source to study the meaning of sexuality from a theological perspective in the horizon of an ultimate meaning and sense. Their analysis can thus contribute in positive and constructive ways to a more precise formulation of the questions posed in human existence, and help discover new

1 Cf. e. g. Tomeo 2012 on the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.
2 Cf. for a review of *Fifty Shades* that takes up this challenge, maybe with more seriousness than the literary quality of the books really deserves, Pauer 2012.
3 Cf. Tracy 1996.

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possibilities of answering them. To think thus of the relationship between media and theology as a mutual relationship of correlation means that on the one hand, theology with its long tradition of reflections about the human and with its critical attitude towards ideologies can provide a critical perspective on social developments, safeguarding human dignity and human flourishing as principles guiding sexual interactions and their mediatisation. On the other hand, media can provide an equally critical and constructive input to theology, challenging it to reconsider traditional views and its own ideological entanglements in the light of new social and theoretical developments and in particular on the basis of human beings' experiences of sexuality in the context of their concrete lives. Both together can develop an imaginative potential in envisioning ways of being and of sexually interacting that promote the fullness of life of individuals and communities. Furthermore, the particular situation of media reception as an embodied experience of mediated experiences, such as those of mediated and immediate sexual experiences, in which sense is made literally through the senses, allows to focus on the ways in which the feeling body is involved as a "knowing" body in meaning-making processes and on its potential for transcendence in the immanent situation of embodied human existence.

My interest is thus primarily interpretative, namely to understand better what media images and stories of sexuality mean; which hopes, desires or anxieties they express; which aspects of sexuality they take to be important, either positively or negatively; what the mode of their experience tells about embodied ways of experiencing and knowing; and which contributions they can suggest for the further development of theological reflection about the human being. This interpretative endeavour is, as David Tracy says, an event that mediates past and present, linguistic traditions and social contexts, in a "back-and-forth movement" between critical reference to earlier attempts at understanding and their imaginative appropriation – or discarding – for the present situation.[4] The points of reference for the back-and-forth movement of this study of media images and stories of sex are represented by the changes in sexual culture and theological approaches to sexuality, and therefore I will discuss them at some length in chapter three and four.

My approach is informed by cultural studies and their understanding of media and other cultural products as (certainly constructed, condensed) expressions of human experience, of what individuals or groups think about themselves, and as constructive contributions to the formation of experiences as well as self-images.[5] It is important to keep in mind that this mutual relationship between media and individuals does not develop in a perfectly free form,

4 Tracy 1981, 101.
5 Cf. Knauss 2013b, 85 – 104.

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spontaneously responding to needs or inputs, but is regulated and limited by technical or infrastructural conditions as well as by dominant discourses or ideologies that attempt to promote certain images or stories that support power positions. But cultural studies have not only contributed to uncover the traces of such dominant discourses in media products; with their attention to reception processes, they have also shown that in spite of ideological colourings of media narratives and images, subversive readings and counter-discourses can develop. My second point of reference for this study is queer theology with its embrace of the sexual as a form of theological reflection and knowing. This includes both a critique of how sex has been used as an instrument of power by the church, perverting theology as the speaking of the ever-greater God into an ideology of self-serving interests, and the recognition of the subversive potential of sexuality and of the possibility that its sensual-sensorial knowing of the other, its transgressive desire and its ambiguous passion (tensed between pleasure and vulnerability) can become a means of knowing God and of entering into a relationship with God.[6]

This study is therefore situated in two different contexts, whose combined contributions are essential: first, in the context of media-and-religion studies, with their interest in the interaction between media and religion/theology on the level of content, of representation or form, and of reception. Understanding the relationship between media and religion/theology as a communicative relationship, I am equally open to inputs from media, from theological or philosophical reflections and other conversation partners in thinking about questions like these: how have media changed the experience of sexuality? How do they represent it, and which aspects do they emphasise? Do media express a connection between sexuality and religion or religious experience, and if yes, in which respects? And how can we work with media theologically in order to answer these and similar questions?

The second context is provided by Christian theological anthropology, i. e. the theological study of human "nature", of the human as created by God to be in relationship with God. In the chapters to follow, I argue that theological anthropology has not sufficiently taken into account the sexual dimension of the human being and the human-God relationship, and that media can provide a constructive provocation for theological thinking in that respect, discussing issues such as: in what way can media representations inform theological reflections on sexuality as a part of human existence and a form of human relating? How have media had an influence on basic theological categories in the reflection on sexuality, such as communication or relationality? What can media

6 A more detailed discussion of the theoretical frameworks and concepts that this study engages with follows in ch. 2.

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images and mediated experiences of sex contribute to thinking the human being before God? And how can their stories and images help to find a language to communicate these ideas in a society for whom institutionalised Christianity and its sexual ethics have lost most of their relevance?

The basic presupposition in this is that the vertical and the horizontal dimensions in human relating are interconnected and that we can learn something about the human-God relationship by understanding better how humans relate with other humans. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of these relationships will also contribute to a better understanding of the "nature" and being of both human beings and of God. Tracy describes this interconnectedness between the horizontal and the vertical as an analogical relationship of similarity-in-difference.[7] However, following queer theology's embrace of the sexual as a way of knowing and speaking theologically, I would argue that there is more than an analogical relationship between them, namely, that one *partakes* in the other: our relationship with God is embodied in relationships with human beings, and human relationships – including sexual relationships – can become a moment when God's presence is felt, when relationship with God is established or deepened. Furthermore, as the chapters to follow will show, I think that media representations of sex or mediated experiences of sex can contribute in a particular way to understanding this participative and experiential interconnectedness between the horizontal and the vertical dimension in human relating. This does not mean that the reality of the transcendent God could be *fully* experienced and understood in the immanence of human sexual relationships, but it underlines the possibility of relating with God – imperfectly – under the conditions of finite humanity and to approach ever closer the mystery that God is.

Maybe a word on terminology is in order at this point: so far I have used "sexuality" and "sex" fairly synonymously and will continue to do so when referring to the act of having sex (when using "sexuality" in the sense of sexual or gender identity or sexual orientation, I will indicate this). I will however avoid as much as possible the terms "erotic" or "eroticism" (as long as they are not used by scholars to whom I refer, such as Georges Bataille), because I think that the distinction between (physical-biological) sex and (spiritual-imaginative) eros perpetuates the dualism between sex and love, body and mind that has distorted western attitudes towards sex for centuries. Instead, following Margaret Farley, I understand sex as a multi-dimensional experience that includes both the bodily and mental-spiritual aspects of the human being. Farley writes:

7 Cf. Tracy 1981, 429.

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> "I take [sexuality] here to include everything that pertains to the sexual – in the sense of sexual desires and loves, feelings, emotions, activities, relationships. As such, sexuality can have physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, personal, and social dimensions. When we ask about its meanings, we can include individual, relational, species, and cosmic meanings, private and public meanings, biological and cultural meanings. Sex can refer to genital and non-genital sex, sex with or without desire, sex with or without pleasure."[8]

Through the media material I work with and the sources I draw on, I situate this study in particular in the western, North Atlantic cultural context and in Christian, in particular Catholic, theology, because these are the contexts in which I am situated and qualified to study as a German, Catholic theologian, because they have an important impact on other cultures through the world-wide distribution of western media[9] and because the public association of Catholic sexual ethics with restrictive sex-negative views has had a strong impact on how the relationship between sex and religion is imagined. As will become clear in chapter four, this is and is not the case, since sexual ethics and sexual theologies have developed much further and recent statements by Pope Francis also suggest that Catholic magisterial discourses about sex might change over the next years, both with regard to the language that is used and its content.[10] But I also engage with theological and non-theological conversations partners beyond the realm of Catholicism and their insights for the development of a sexual theology that is queer also in the sense that it goes beyond denominational boundaries in its reflection on the human being. However, I have to leave the analysis of different cultural and religious contexts to other, more competent scholars and future comparative studies. The conclusions I draw have therefore to be read as limited to this western, Christian context; I am curious to see in future work whether comparable results will – or will not – be achieved for other cultures and religions.

I will therefore begin with a brief reflection on the theoretical frameworks that inform my study of this particular *ménage-à-trois* between media, sexuality and religion/theology, in which I draw on, but also develop further, approaches in cultural studies, aesthetic theology and queer studies, with a particular focus on the role of sensoriality and sensuality, which characterise not only what is represented in media, but also how we experience media and how we make sense of them. These reflections are not only important for how I approach the media analyses that follow in the fifth chapter, but I also hope to contribute with them to

8 Farley 2008, 159.
9 Cf. Altman 2002.
10 Cf. Spadaro 2013.

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future developments in aesthetic theology and media-and-religion/theology studies on a more general level.

The next two chapters are dedicated to a description of the "signs of the times", i.e. the developments in western sexual culture (in chapter 3) and in Christian theological thinking about sexuality (in chapter 4), paying particular attention to the role of media in both. These provide the reference points for my following analyses of media representations and their contribution to theological thinking, as neither emerges from a vacuum, but are influenced by their contexts of social phenomena and traditions of thinking.

The media analyses of the fifth chapter are case studies of three media: advertising, internet and film. The first section is dedicated to the analysis of the representation of sex and religion in advertising, focusing in particular on how religious or theological concepts are taken up and transformed in advertisements and how the sexual and the religious interact in the dynamics of capitalist consumerism of which advertising is a part, although often uncomfortably positioned on the border between economy and arts. The next section focuses on the medium of the internet and in particular on its use for cybersex. Here, my main interest is on how media are not simply means of representing sexuality, but are directly involved in sexual experiences. The third section on film will focus on formal issues in cinematic representations of sexuality and on several over-arching aspects of sexuality that emerge as significant from the films' treatments of the topic.

The concluding chapter will take up again the twofold context (media-and-religion/theology studies and theological anthropology) in which this study of the meaning of human sexuality in media and theology moves. It will show the synergetic effects of bringing these two perspectives together through a summary of the functions of media in theological reflections and the discussion of three elements of sexuality which have emerged from the media analyses in their correlation with social and theological discourses on sexuality as particularly characteristic of sexual experience. I argue that these elements also provide a meaningful contribution to the reflection upon human beings as embodied, sexual beings in relationship with God.

My response to the provocation of media sex contributes, I hope, to fill some blank spots in the theological reflection on the human being by understanding sexual experience not as a mere extra in human life (today not even necessary for procreation), but rather as an experience in which human relationship with God is mirrored and established, and thus to provide an example of how the theological engagement with media products can result in productive developments in theological thinking, at the same time as it represents a critical perspective on sexual phenomena in media and society.

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2. Theoretical frameworks and central concepts

2.1 Interpretation as communication and relationship

Maybe most formative in my engagement with media is my understanding of interpretation as a communicative relationship between work[1] and recipient/interpreter in which both are involved as active, equal partners.[2] In a way, one might say that it is a relationship driven by powers of attraction, desire and pleasure, the sensorial and the sensual, which is not dissimilar to a sexual relationship, in which different partners approach each other and engage with each other in increasing intimacy. This understanding of interpretation has several implications: first, it highlights the mutuality of exchanges between the two parties in which both bring something new to the encounter and take something from it. Interpretation is not a unilateral activity on the side of the viewer, to which the work is the passive object. Rather the work also brings something to the activity of interpretation and "changes" with each person who has engaged with it in a history of reception, acquiring new layers of meaning. This change does not only refer to how different interpretations of a work can influence each other and alter a work's meaning, but it also has a quite material dimension. In film, as Laura Marks points out, each projection causes abrasions in the material,[3] paintings change in their material dimension under the influence of human presence when exhibited, and dance or theatre performances depend quite directly on the feedback they receive from their audience and change accordingly. Equally, a recipient is more or less profoundly changed by the experience of the encounter with a work and the reflections caused by it.

The idea of a communicative relationship also implies that the encounter between work and recipient is dynamic and to be thought of as a process that

1 In the following, due to the focus of this study, I refer in particular to works of art, visual media or cultural products with a visual dimension, but my thoughts on the relationship between work and recipient can also be applied to literary or other works.

2 Cf. Knauss 2011b.

3 Cf. Marks 2000, 20.

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continues after the precise moment of interaction, leading into an unknown future. Interpretation is not a fixed result, an appropriation of meaning, but an event, it can change with time or its significance might emerge only later. Something new may surface, just as partners surprise each other with new ideas, facets of their personality they have not shown so far or developments through which they live. This can be a positive enrichment of a relationship, but of course it can also lead to the recognition of incompatibilities: not always does mutual understanding deepen, it can also turn out to be possible only up to a certain point or to fail altogether. This reminds us that, as in meaningful interpersonal relationships, we can certainly endeavour to meet all necessary requirements for successful communication and interpretation, but in the end, meaning is something that is given to us, that we cannot force into existence, that remains beyond our control and is a gift of insight and inspiration emerging from the communicative relationship between one subject and another. It is important to remember that not each conversation I have uncloses such insight or touches me in the most profound dimensions of my being. But if it happens, it is an experience that can have a significant impact.

Understanding interpretation as a communicative relationship also points to its subjective character. It depends on the partners involved, on their situation and context and thus can drastically change from one person to the next. One need only look through several reviews of the same film or book or follow the feuilleton discussions for a brief time to get an idea of the plurality of possible relationships to one and the same work. Yet this multiplicity of meaning is not only due to the diversity of viewers' backgrounds that shapes their relation to a work and what they see in it, it is also part of the "nature" of an artwork itself, because both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of expression are always polysemic and multi-referential so that multiple meanings are inherent to the work itself and are ultimately the reason for its attractivity to its recipients and the inspiration it can offer them. Furthermore, the model of communicative relationships also suggests that the relationship between work and viewer is part of a network of other relationships, such as intertextual "communications" with other works, histories of interpretation and reception, relations between the individual and his/her socio-cultural context and social institutions, all of which shape both the production and the experience of a work on a micro and macro level.

To think of the interaction between media and viewer as a communicative relationship rather than a dialogue, which is the model traditionally used to describe interactions between theology/religion and media,[4] underlines that it is

4 Cf. for the film-religion dialogue Furnal's critique of Steve Nolan's and Christopher Deacy's approaches in Furnal 2011.

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not limited to language and discursive exchanges, but includes affective, emotional and physical dimensions as well. In its best form, it is a relationship of mutual attraction and desire that motivates the engagement with the other on different levels and pushes towards ever better understanding and deeper relationship. Yet it can also be a relationship of repulsion and rejection when a work hurts a viewer's sensibilities or a viewer's reaction to a work does not take seriously its autonomy and "otherness" – something comparable to the vulnerability of partners in their exposure to each other and to the fragility of each attempt at relationship, which is always a risk and an adventure into an unknown future.

In the context of this study, the model of a communicative relationship means that media are taken seriously as partners in the communal attempt to understand better what sexuality means for human existence; they are not used (or abused) as illustrations of preconceived ideas and theories but instead perceived as potential inspirations, as a space beyond the traditional limits of theological thinking in which nevertheless new theological insight is created.[5] The specific formal and technological means of media enable a different form of communication of such insight that addresses other dimensions of the human being than the texts that theological tradition has focused on for centuries. It is important to underline that theology is not only done in texts, but also in the images and narratives of media, addressing not only human rationality, but also emotions, affects and sensory perceptions, the whole human being which is part and partner in this relationship.

2.2 Body as a medium

In this communicative relationship between a work and a recipient, body plays a fundamental role as a medium. As Brent Plate points out with regard to film, the body – in particular its sensory organs – is literally the medium that enables the work of film to pass through to the viewer, and doing so it gives meaning to it: "Just as filmic sounds and images are understood to be mediated, so […] should bodily perceptions of these sounds and images be understood as having a mediating effect. The medium of sense perception is the corollary to the medium of film."[6] Vice versa, media, in particular film, can themselves be understood as bodies in their movement, perceptive engagement with reality and how they relate to their viewers, and thus, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, "the conjunction of viewer and film is co-constituted as a series of *mediated exchanges* between our

5 Cf. for examples and further literature Pezzoli-Olgiati/Rowland 2011.
6 Plate 2005, 261.

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bodies".[7] With film, the bodily engagement on both sides is particularly strong because of the specific combination of movement, words, music and sounds, forms and colours, but the same can also be said for other media. While often a media-skeptical perspective bemoans the "disembodiment" of interactions and relations to others and to reality because of the increasing use of communication media and warns of the danger of alienation from ourselves through media,[8] it has to be kept in mind that these media unfold their effect only in their mediation through a perceptive, active and reactive body, as can be seen in a particularly striking way in the case of cybersex, discussed below.

It is only relatively recently that media and in particular film studies have paid attention to the mediating, active and formative role of the body in reception processes,[9] inspired in particular by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the human body and its fundamental contribution to not only the perception but also the understanding of the world. As "a two-dimensional being" the body is both part of the world of objects and a subject and thus enables a particularly close yet also reflectively distanced relationship to the world that is required for its understanding.[10] This makes it possible "that the lived body both provides and enacts a *commutative reversibility* between subjective feeling and objective knowledge, between the senses and their sense or conscious meaning"[11] – a reversibility of subjectivity and objectivity, which dissolves the artificial opposition between feeling and knowing and enables a new understanding of knowledge beyond objective distance and universal truth.

Different from earlier theories of the senses as windows or doors through which sense data enter in order to be dealt with in rational processes of understanding, the awareness for the body's being both a part of the world and a thinking self shows that it is an active part of the process of making sense of the world and gives shape to the representations, images and media we encounter in this world. Acknowledging "the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body's essential implication in making 'meaning' out of bodily 'sense'", as Sobchack writes,[12] contributes to the further dissolution of the body-mind dualism in which bodily experience as sensory perception is limited to an auxiliary position, while meaning-making and knowing are rational operations and thus privilege of the mind only. Physical reactions, such as heart beat, jerking or sexual excitement, emotions and affects

7 Sobchack 2008, 196 (emphasis in the original).
8 Cf. Müller 2010, 201; Killmeier 2009. Interestingly, Killmeier claims that disembodiment occurs precisely because media communications replace body as medium (35).
9 Cf. Sobchack 1991; Marks 2000; Knauss 2008b.
10 Merleau-Ponty 1968, 36.
11 Sobchack 2004, 61 (emphasis in the original).
12 Sobchack 2004, 1.

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as embodied states are not only primary reactions to a film, work of art or music, a dance performance or an email exchange, but they are also the beginning of making sense of it and play an active part in the reception process. As a medium, the body has not only a perceptive function, but also an epistemological one, making it possible to make sense of subjective experiences in an objective way. As Sobchack states,

> "Indeed, I would argue that this prereflective bodily responsiveness to films is a commonplace. That is, we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire, bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium."[13]

While these immediate bodily reactions often find expression in phrases like "a touching film" or "a sweet voice",[14] they usually remain unconscious, are trivialised as "only" metaphors,[15] or even actively repressed and intellectualised, because, as David Freedberg writes, "they were unrefined, basic, preintellectual, raw",[16] an embarrassment rather than part of meaning-making processes. This attempt at suppressing physical reactions to art and media also plays a role in the hierarchisation of arts, in which those art forms with the most immediate and effective bodily and emotional impact (e. g. pornography, horror films or comics) are lowest in the cultural pecking order.

In the reception process, the mediating potential of bodies develops in two directions: we feel the work we engage with, we feel its impact, but even more importantly, in the particular situation of a film viewing, a visit to the museum or theatre, our attention is focused not only on what we perceive, but also on how we perceive so that we are intensely brought to our senses in that "we feel ourselves feeling", as Sobchack writes.[17] Bodily reception thus does not only contribute to the knowledge about things outside of ourselves that are inscribed in our bodies when we experience them, but also deepens our knowledge and awareness of processes of perception and of ourselves as perceiving beings. Thus the embodied engagement with films and media, with *their* bodies, blurs the distinctions between subject and object, between the here of the off-screen and the there of the on-screen, and thus enables an experience of transcendence in the immanence of bodily experience. At the same time it increases the self-awareness of the bodily constitution of the viewing subject and his/her concrete situation and situatedness, in the particularity of the human subject as being

13 Sobchack 2004, 63.
14 Cf. Sobchack 2004, 53.
15 For a reflection on the bodily basis of metaphors and their role in intellectual, rational argumentation, Johnson's 1987 study is still fundamental.
16 Freedberg 1989, xx.
17 Sobchack 2008, 198.

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both bound to the here-and-now and yet capable of transcendence: "our sense of transcendence in immanence not only relocates us 'beyond' the *presentness* of our flesh to dwell in the on-screen world but also refers us reflexively (and without a thought) back to our own fleshly *presence*".[18]

"To feel ourselves feeling" in/through the medium of our bodies also means to become aware of the basic synaesthesia of human perceiving and knowing that is particularly highlighted in media experiences that focus on one or two of the senses, such as film, which refers to hearing and sight, or visual arts, which is limited to the visual dimension, and yet synaesthetically address all senses in a comprehensive experience engaging the whole human being. Thus paintings can evoke sensations of taste, sounds those of touch, to see a movement in a film can mean to feel it although one doesn't leave one's seat in the cinema. David Freedberg intuited this synaesthetic relationship between a recipient and a work of art in his concept of "tactile imagination", through which an image can develop its strong multi-sensorial impact on us while we are simply looking at it.[19] Sobchack further elaborates the fundamental idea of the comprehensive interaction between the senses in the media experience, describing the viewer as a "cinesthetic subject",[20] a term in which cinema, synaesthetic film experience and coenaesthesia as a "feeling with one's whole body" without yet distinguishing the perceptive contribution of individual sensory organs, are brought together in the experience and meaning-making of a film through a viewer's bodily involvement. Sobchack writes, "as cinesthetic subjects, then, we possess an embodied intelligence that opens our eyes beyond their discrete capacity for vision, opens the film far beyond its visible containment by the screen, and opens language to a reflective knowledge of its carnal origins and limits."[21] Thus reflective and epistemological capacities, and even the capacity for transcendence, are located in the ability to relate to a medium through the medium of one's body, in the transcendence of the boundaries between the distinct senses, between bodily knowing and rational knowing, between the subject in front of the screen and the world on-screen in an experience of being taken out of oneself in an ecstatic moment, precisely when being most firmly grounded in one's corporeal perceptive situation.

18 Sobchack 2008, 197 (emphasis in the original). Linda Williams has come to similar conclusions in her studies of the "body genres" pornography, melodrama and horror; cf. Williams 1991.

19 Freedberg 1989, 339.

20 Sobchack 2004, 67.

21 Sobchack 2004, 84.

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