

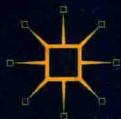


FILMING THE BODY IN CRISIS



TRAUMA, HEALING AND HOPEFULNESS

DAVINA QUINLIVAN



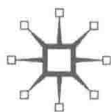
Filming the Body in Crisis

Trauma, Healing and Hopefulness

Davina Quinlivan

Kingston University, UK

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Filming the Body in Crisis

List of Figures

1.1	<i>Waltz with Bashir</i> , Ari Folman, 2008, the diegetic body in crisis	8
1.2	<i>Waltz with Bashir</i> , Ari Folman, 2008, Waltzing with Bashir	12
1.3	<i>Waltz with Bashir</i> , Ari Folman, 2008, recalling the mother's body	16
1.4	<i>Waltz with Bashir</i> , Ari Folman, 2008, hopefulness and sensual pleasure	18
1.5	<i>Broken Embraces</i> , Pedro Almodóvar, 2009, Broken and fissuring landscapes	22
1.6	<i>Broken Embraces</i> , Pedro Almodóvar, 2009, lost embraces felt once more	25
4.1	<i>Felicia's Journey</i> , Atom Egoyan, 1999, mourning the mother	75
4.2	<i>Felicia's Journey</i> , Atom Egoyan, 1999, Hilditch and his treasured objects	76
6.1	<i>The Tree of Life</i> , Terrence Malick, 2011, tentative voices, love and protection	97
6.2	<i>The Tree of Life</i> , Terrence Malick, 2011, the softness of the mother's hair	102
6.3	<i>The Tree of Life</i> , Terrence Malick, 2011, tumbling through the grass	103
6.4	<i>The Tree of Life</i> , Terrence Malick, 2011, mirroring the mother's body	104
6.5	<i>The Tree of Life</i> , Terrence Malick, 2011, the softness of satin...guilt	108
7.1	<i>HERE</i> , Braden King, 2011, mapping the world together in images	116
7.2	<i>HERE</i> , Braden King, 2011, experimental images accompany the film's 'dream'	122
7.3	<i>HERE</i> , Braden King, 2011, Gadarine sleeps	123
7.4	<i>HERE</i> , Braden King, 2011, ruins and lost fragments	124

7.5	<i>HERE</i> , Braden King, 2011, the map they made together	128
9.1	<i>Beginners</i> , Mike Mills, 2010, this is what love looks like...	143
9.2	<i>Beginners</i> , Mike Mills, 2010, or, perhaps, this is what love looks like...	143

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This book begins with an exploration of Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* and for this, above all, I must thank the Tavistock Clinic, London, for their invitation to discuss this film in the context of therapy and psychoanalysis. While researching this book, I also experimented with ideas and concepts which were presented at the annual *Film-Philosophy* conference 2010 and a Think Tank Study Day on Phenomenological Film at Queen Mary University London. Furthermore, this book has also grown out of several postgraduate classes I have taught at Kingston University; I am ever grateful to my students for the many fruitful, provocative and enlightening discussions we have had about the films at the heart of this book. At Kingston University, I have also been fortunate to work with Corin Depper, Will Brooker, Cathy O'Brien, Andrea Rinke and John Mullarkey. Indeed, this book could not have been written without the support of my peers, especially Corin and Will.

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This book was written during the first two years of my first child's life. It has been written at the end of chaotic days with an infant son, contemplated while naps occurred and eagerly returned to in the small hours of the night after teaching. Somehow, the book sustained a life of its own, while I took on the dual role of writer and mother. It grew out of a necessity to acknowledge and return to some of the questions which haunted me while I wrote my first book, *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. I have been thinking about the cinematic medium as a recuperative mechanism, an affirmative object, over the course of five years, especially in the context of philosophy and film theory, and filming the body in crisis is the result of this particular period of research.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 Introduction: <i>Hopefulness</i>	1
2 Resistance and Reparation: Steve McQueen's <i>Hunger</i>	29
3 Queer Bodies between Hopefulness and Rebirth: Rewriting and Transforming the Matter of Bodies in Isaac Julien's <i>True North</i> and Derek Jarman's <i>Blue</i>	44
4 The Haunted House Egoyan Built: Archiving the Ghosted Body and Imagination in the Films of Atom Egoyan and the Art of Janet Cardiff	60
5 Cronenberg's 'Cure': <i>A Dangerous Method</i> , <i>Spider</i> and The Spectre of Psychosis in <i>The Lost Explorer</i>	77
6 The Softness of Her Hair and the Texture of Silk: The Mother's Body and Klein's Theory of 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' in <i>The Tree of Life</i> (Malick, 2011)	96
7 Remapping the Body of Hope: A Map of Emotion, Love and the Cartographic Image in Braden King's <i>HERE</i> (2011) and Contemporary Film Space	114
8 The French Female Butterfly Collector: The Body in Crisis and the <i>cinéma du corps</i>	130
9 Conclusion	142
Postscript: Hopefulness, Healing and Its Contestation	146
<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Filmography</i>	174
<i>Bibliography</i>	176
<i>Index</i>	185

1

Introduction: *Hopefulness*

Ideology collapses, utopianism atrophies, but something great is left behind: the memory of a hope.

Henri Lefebvre¹

In the closing images of Ari Folman's award-winning *Waltz with Bashir* (*Vals Im Bashir*, 2003), the failure to recuperate from the psychical and physical effects of war is mediated and reconfigured. The film's final, animated sequence is abruptly superseded by live-action footage, newsreel material of the aftermath of the Sabre and Shatila massacre in Beirut during the war in Lebanon in 1982. Civilians, mostly women mourning the deaths of their loved ones, are seen first as animated subjects and then re-appear as newsreel 'objects', doubling and, importantly, troubling their presence on screen. The advanced technology involved in the filmmaking process adopted by Folman generates a kind of rotoscope-style visuality,² but this is dramatically disrupted in the last few minutes of the film. The hyper-real, fluid corporeality of the film is relinquished in favour of the 'concrete' realism of the live-footage of the same events. Contextually, the move from one visual medium to another might be seen to neatly articulate a leap from the imaginary, and often dream-like, subjective perception generated throughout the film to an objective, historical frame of reference. Yet, the impact of *Waltz with Bashir's* final moments tends to transcend their diegetic purpose. The specificity of this closing sequence, its innovative combination of digital animation

and video images, serves to crystallise *Waltz with Bashir's* most implicit question: how to engage with film, and by extension art, as a reparative object and implicate it in modes of recuperation in the 21st century.

Throughout its history, the filmic medium has invariably operated as a virtual 'looking-glass' and recuperative space in which cultural crises can be safely negotiated, reconciled or reworked. However, the more risky, destabilising effects of contemporary cinema, in particular, raise new questions about the effectiveness of the medium as a recuperative device and the increasingly varied ways in which it interrogates cultural experience. This book is concerned with the question of how the filmic medium might resemble an object of hope, especially when brought into contact with object relations theory, and its meaning in the context of recent developments in film theory which have sought to question cinema's ontological status and the epistemology of moving image culture.³ The book begins by exploring how trauma is embedded in the very fabric of the image, specifically questioning the implications of acts of hopefulness and embodied gestures of mediation and reconciliation in film. I hope to show that the fabric of the image, its material properties and sensuous attributes, holds the potential to orient the viewer towards the question of catharsis, to a kind of viewing pleasure situated within a field of cathartic possibility predicated on a particular sense of renewal and selfhood.

This book engages with the subject of reparation as a vital element of film experience and this is explored in two ways: firstly, in the context of the thematic presentation of the healing mind and body on screen and secondly, as an affective attribute of the image itself in which a 'healing' body is registered at the level of reception. My close analyses of particular films will emphasise cinema's potential to resemble an 'object' of hope. This leads me to interrogate what might be understood as the restorative dimensions of film viewing and its negotiation of trauma.

The aim of this book is not to identify a new genre or movement in contemporary cinema. Rather, the subject of reparation, and my concern with film's healing 'body', questions the ways in which an intersection might emerge between sensory pleasure, self-affirmation and cinematic fascination and, subsequently, how such a relation might characterise key moments in contemporary film viewing

experience. Indeed, given the significant investment in phenomenological discourse in recent years in Film Studies, and the theoretical emphasis on a corporeal cinema, especially in the work of Steven Shaviro, Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack and Martine Beugnet and Jennifer Barker, the introduction to this book explores the alternative ways in which film encourages the mediation of trauma beyond its representational qualities, and constitutes a kind of 'healing body' through the very texture of its material attributes and multisensory images. This leads me to contextualise and elaborate on the notion of film as a reparative object, a theoretical model which draws together, and sets in dialogue, object relations theory, in particular, the thought of Melanie Klein, and recent developments in the field of embodied film theory. While my interest in Klein's contribution to the field of child psychology may suggest that my concern with film as a reparative object amounts to an alternative approach to maternal relations and pre-symbolic discourses in film, this is not the case. Rather, object relations theory enables me to deal with questions of reparation in film and highlight the material specificity of such acts.

While the idea of hope might be more frequently aligned with the concept of utopianism, such a view undermines its more risky connotations and complexities. Indeed, the subject of hope is part of the vocabulary of reconciliation or reparation and it implies, above all, an openness to change. To 'repair' something is to affirm and assert the possibility of hope, after all, even if the reparation is incomplete, inactive or faulty. The title of this book makes use of the word 'hope' for several reasons. In the words of Giuliana Bruno, 'film moves, and fundamentally "moves" us',⁴ but while this observation has implications for the understanding of the kinetic, emotive and spectatorial experience of film, it also reveals a certain desire for intimacy, for the acknowledgement of our existence through the gratifying spectacle and, importantly, physical sense of energy and mobility, emanating from the moving image itself. In these terms, film viewing corresponds with a kind of 'hopefulness', a gesture motivated by a searching desire for knowledge and, indeed, to take comfort in that knowledge. For theorists such as Marks and Jennifer Barker, knowledge is invariably communicated through the 'tactile epistemology' of cinema, but this book privileges the tensions that are enmeshed within such gestures – the ways in which haptics

might be seen to relate to bodily trauma and vice versa. Marks's and Barker's thoughts, in particular, offer alternative reflections on film and the subject of trauma, especially in the light of Cathy Caruth's significant contribution to this area of enquiry in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in which the cinematic medium is discussed as a powerful mediator of loss, reworking notions of consciousness, truth and the failure of memory.⁵

As the title of my book also implies, I want to consider filmic notions of hope as they are implicated in the corporeal attributes of the image and its figuration in film. Indeed, hope is written on the body, as Jennifer Barker remarks in her treatment of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, Alain Resnais). On the film's heroine and her coming to terms with the events of Hiroshima, she writes:

Once her own tactile history of love and loss has been brought to the surface, and has been recalled by her own skin, the actress has a better understanding of Hiroshima. In the opening sequence she had described the images of bombing victims accurately but impersonally: 'human skin, hanging free, still writhing, in its first agony...Anonymous hair'. But later in the film, it is her own skin that hangs free, after she's scraped it along the cellar wall, and the hair is hers ... no longer anonymous, but a tangible sign of her own pain and hope.⁶

If hope is written on the body, then, this notion also has implications for the conception of film as itself an object of recuperation. Furthermore, I am interested in how pain and hope come to be exquisitely intertwined, as Barker suggests in her treatment of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Hope is finally felt through the layers of skin and suffering flesh of the female protagonist in Resnais' film, symbolised through the image of her flowing strands of hair which are recognised as physical reminders of her own identity, a material affirmation of her own self-knowledge.

While hope might be symbolised through the image of the healing body, its general presence in film has been invariably discussed either in relation to its diegetic occurrence or as a consequence of engaging with broader debates about trauma and psychoanalytic discourse. On a diegetic level, the healing body is more often than not emphasised in terms which privilege the viscosity of psychical

and physical decay, especially those in dialogue with Marxist theory. For example, Steven Shaviro has written an excellent account of the zombie genre and its fertile critique of capitalism and consumerist culture. The filmic body is also discussed in terms of disease, obliteration and terror in Akira Lippit's *Atomic Light*.⁷ However, the discipline of psychoanalytic film theory tends to necessitate a turn towards the prospect of healing disturbed minds and bodies and the thematic evocation of such discourses in film. Indeed, Barbara Creed's engagement with Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection in her book *The Monstrous Feminine* might be understood not only as an exploration of bodily transgression, but as the study of fragile bodies whose futurity lies in their unravelling, their undoing.⁸

As a means of exploring cinema's 'hopeful' gestures, my project will focus on the involvement of the senses in the formation of object relations in film, drawing especially on the thought of Klein. This will lead me to think through the concept of film as a mediatory object involved in responses to trauma, as well as its cathartic potential. This will also involve the exploration of the formal qualities of film sound and its role in haptic film viewing – an area yet to be adequately theorised in film studies. My examination of film sound will not only raise vital questions about the auditory dimensions of the embodied filmic encounter, but also offer new insight into the involvement of sound in the filmic evocation of trauma.

Towards healing bodies

A specific sense of embodied recovery, recuperation and futurity emanates from *Waltz with Bashir*. This film, in particular, serves to raise questions about healing in contemporary cinema and invites the excavation of what I call cinema's 'hopeful' gestures, of which a framework of embodied film theory is most relevant. *Waltz with Bashir* does not represent or formally propose an end to trauma. Rather, it probes the nature of human pain and our desire to repair, to acknowledge, and to bring to the surface hidden suffering and unspeakable loss, issues that are at the heart of this entire book. While *Waltz with Bashir* is at the centre of this section's exploration of film's healing 'bodies', introducing questions which I consider to be vital to this book's interest in hopefulness and the reparative conditions of film viewing, the subsequent section's focus on the

'broken' embrace evoked through the title of Pedro Almodóvar's *Los abrazos rotos* /*Broken Embraces* leads me to a closer examination of the physical and psychic conception of 'wholeness' in the film and its especially spatial co-ordinates. As case studies, *Waltz with Bashir* and *Broken Embraces* offer entry points into the discussion of trauma in contemporary cinema and emphasise the potential for thinking through both the representation and evocation of healing on screen and the applicability of Klein's thought to the film experience.

Waltz with Bashir is ostensibly a film about the subjective recollection of Ari Folman's personal experiences gathered while employed as an Israeli soldier during the war in Lebanon, but its combined use of animation and non-linear narrative opens up the film to wider questions surrounding the usefulness of the filmic medium as a reparative 'object', that is, as a recuperative device, especially in the context of our increasingly uncertain political and social climate and its unavoidable intertwinement with post-9/11 cultural anxiety. Indeed, for Douglas Kellner, in particular, the media 'spectacle' and its filmic corollaries are inextricably entwined:

- (Yet) in a highly saturated media environment, successful political projects require carefully planned and executed media spectacles ... during an era of Terror War, politics are increasingly mediated and constituted by the production of spectacular media events and the political agendas of their producers.⁹

In this context, a study of the healing body in film or, rather, the film itself as a healing body is especially timely.

Waltz with Bashir encapsulates one of the most striking developments in 21st century moving image media, shoring up the question of how to recover from trauma, as well as the problem of how to engage with an aesthetics of hope and reparation. Such an aesthetics, I think, is rooted in a diverse set of questions regarding notions of illness, physical and mental trauma, the relationship between creativity and healing (both in terms of filmmaking practice and as a contextual concern), reconciliation and conceptions of selfhood in contemporary culture. These issues are broadly relevant to *Waltz with Bashir* and *Broken Embraces*, but it is their formal specificity which leads my theorisation of film as a reparative object. Here, the formal aspects of film, especially the use of the close-up and the material

attributes of the image, combine to generate a kind of reparative object pertinent to the viewing relations of *Waltz with Bashir* and, as we shall see later, *Broken Embraces*.

Any point of access to trauma, as a means of negotiating the effects of war and reclaiming of selfhood, is 'hunted' down and chaotically encountered in *Waltz with Bashir*, like the drooling hounds which pursue the protagonist in the first few minutes of the film before their execution. Folman interviews soldiers he fought with, but his memory fails him. A sequence in which Folman is immersed in water, rising from the coast as Beirut burns is replayed over and over, but his interviewees deny the existence of this recollected event. Folman, then, emphasises the embodied nature of psychical trauma – Folman's only real memory of Beirut is principally experiential, he recalls the burning heat of the flames, the enveloping water and frequent images of his heaving chest intimates the physical exasperation of swimming. Moreover, Folman is positioned as a spectator at the margins of the terrible events unfolding on the beach, marking out his desire for separateness in spite of his complicity.

Yet, *Waltz with Bashir* does not only narratively convey Folman's experience of war, as the closing images of the film suggest. As the film critic Peter Bradshaw observes, 'this is an extraordinary film – a military sortie into the past in which both we and Folman are embedded like traumatised reporters'.¹⁰ While Bradshaw emphasises the embodied nature of *Waltz with Bashir*'s potent exploration of war, it is also a film that plays with the specificity of the medium, and, indeed, with the ways in which viewers are oriented towards the traumatised mind and body of its protagonist; it makes apparent its filmic properties in order to synthesise the experience of bearing witness to the de-stabilising affects of war.

Raya Morag, in her essay, 'Perpetrator trauma and current Israeli documentary cinema', sees Folman's film as a highly relevant account of the somatic and epistemological conditions of guilt – two areas of concern especially significant to my own treatment of the film.¹¹ Ultimately, for Morag, Folman's redemptive narrative is predicated on a crisis of narrative structure (represented by the protagonist's failing memory), but it is my view that the images themselves evoke a different form of guilt at a somatic and epistemological level, a dimension of the film which calls into question the possibility of the troubled and destabilised body of the 'perpetrator', to use Morag's