Why Is Touch Sometimes So Touching?:
The Phenomenology of Touch in Susan Streitfeld’s
Female Perversions

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Since its release in 1996, Female Perversions, a film directed and co-written by Susan Streitfeld, has received mixed reviews in art and entertainment columns in newspapers and popular magazines in America. Critics have made appreciative comments on the powerful feminist message of the film, commending its vivid portrayal of the lives of women troubled in a sexist society. Many reviews, meanwhile, registered frustration at the apparent overuse of rather vulgarised Freudian psychoanalytic discourses in the film.¹ In particular, some reviewers expressed a slight objection to the ending, which could be seen as a sudden collapse of the plot into a sentimental family drama. A New York Times columnist, for example, writes: ‘For a film this acutely attuned to contemporary sexual politics and feminism, the lame falling back on a psychological answer to Eve’s [the protagonist’s] troubles is tantamount to mounting a sophisticated argument that ends up missing the point’ (Holden 1997). Nevertheless, some viewers, including myself, seem to have been somehow touched by the film and especially by the last scene, in which Eve physically ‘touches’ a girl’s face—though they do not know exactly why they felt the film was so good.

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¹ A Tucson Weekly columnist writes that ‘by focusing on crazy characters, Streitfeld seems to be saying that for women, the primary obstacles to obtaining power are internal and psychological, which is just stupid’ (Richter 1997). A Los Angeles Times staff writer also writes: ‘There’s a whole slew of images supposedly welling up in Eve’s dreams and imagination that vacillate between the too literal and the too obscure’ (Thomas 1997).
Why is the last scene of *Female Perversions* so touching? One thing that complicates this subjective question is that in public Streitfeld has often mentioned her debt to a popular version of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which some critics have rated as ‘lame’ or ‘stupid.’ Streitfeld emphasises the influence of the Freudian-feminist psychiatrist Louise J. Kaplan’s book published in 1991—*Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary*—from which the film is adapted, by saying: ‘The book is challenging and extremely liberating; it identifies behavior as something not solely of your own making. Behavior is something that comes from family and society and has a long history intertwined with social, economic, and political factors’ (Durick 1997, 107).

Contrary to the director’s words, the touching power of the film does not seem directly related to the Freudian psychoanalytic theory from which Streitfeld says she received inspiration. Nor does it seem to depend entirely on the classic feminist thought that critics have identified as the crux of the film. Rather, what makes *Female Perversions* unique is, as I will discuss, its contradictory appeal to the audience. While the film calls on the audience—most likely art-film fans or ‘professional’ viewers (who may read academic film journals like *Film-Philosophy*)—to participate in a discussion about contemporary sexual politics, it eventually encourages them to suspend such a cerebral way of appreciating the film and to engage emotionally and physically in it as mainstream cinema fans are said to enjoy popular entertainment movies. As Vivian Sobchack argues, ‘contemporary film theory has generally ignored or elided both cinema’s sensual address and the viewer’s “corporeal material being”’ (Sobchack 2004, 55-56). This apparently highbrow feminist film, *Female Perversions*, illuminates this gap between an analytic mode of film-watching and a more sensual, corporeal cinematic experience, which is comparable to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls ‘flesh’ in his posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*. Some feminist authors have denounced Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought for its inherent solipsism and androcentrism. But, as I will also

2 Julie Murray argues that ‘[t]he film is at certain moments playful and irreverent with what might be called self-help, or recovery discourse’ (Murray 1997, 102). My argument with respect to the use of psychoanalysis in the film is fairly close to Murray’s.

3 Luce Irigaray claims that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘flesh’ is a closed circuit, an idealistic situation, in which ‘there is no trace of any carnal idea of the other woman or of any sublimation of the flesh with the other’ (Irigaray 1993, 181). Judith Butler also criticizes Merleau-Ponty for assuming in *The Phenomenology of Perception* not only that ‘sexual relations are heterosexual’ but that ‘the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body’ (Butler 1989, 86). Butler’s criticism is intended for a feminist appropriation of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, in which, I believe, the film *Female Perversions* participates.
discuss, the film *Female Perversions* presents at once a fine example of a feminist adaptation of Merleau-Pontian embodied phenomenology and a good model for a phenomenological reconsideration of classic feminist thought. Finally, the uniqueness of this film lies in the very subtle manner in which it invites the audience to move from an analytic, discursive mode of filmic experience to a corporeal, engaged one.

What follows is an attempt to re-describe in words the film, the audience, and the intertwining of the two as a sensual, material, and corporeal being. For this purpose, I focus on the moments of ‘touch’—a person physically touching another person or an object on screen—the effect of which plays a crucial role in the subtle shift of the filmic mode that I mentioned above. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reflections on ‘touch,’ I will textualise what happens when touch happens in the film, how touch serves to produce the power of the film, and how it works on us when we are watching it.

**Beyond Psychology/Psychoanalysis**

In a conversation with Eve, Renee, the psychiatrist who has sex with her on the first night they meet, talks about Eve’s character: ‘In my professional opinion ... you are a deeply compulsive, terribly erotic and extremely codependent woman, who more than likely loves too much or too little.’ Eve sarcastically replies: ‘Oh, God. Finally, somebody understands me!’ Eve claims that ‘the problem of psychology’ is that ‘nothing is concrete,’ saying, ‘I prefer the law. Black and white. Obey the rules. Suffer the consequence. Guilty or not guilty.’ This strong antipathy to ‘psychology’ is repeated—for example, when Eve’s sister Madelyn gives an explanation of her kleptomania by citing passages from psychological studies, Eve brusquely says, ‘Come on. Don’t be ridiculous!’ and stops the conversation. The irony is that Eve herself, without realising it, draws on the same psychological rhetoric in various situations—especially when she talks to Madelyn. When Madelyn comes out of the detention room in which she was held after her arrest, Eve tries to remonstrate with her, saying, ‘Your behavior seems pretty self-destructive to me,’ to which Madelyn responds acerbically: ‘For once in your life, see if you can hold off on your judgment of my behavior... . Eve, you are not listening.’

It is not only these educated, intellectual women who use a psychological mode of expression in the film. Emma, the manager of the wedding dress shop from whom Madelyn has rented a room, tells her pubescent daughter Ed(wina) who disobeys her mother and refuses to wear feminine clothes: ‘It’s gonna be a fuck of an adolescence with you!’ (italics mine). As these examples show, a careless use of psychological vocabulary in this film always exasperates those who are supposed to be understood by it.
In this way, the film implicitly criticises a general tendency of a vulgarised psychology that only serves to objectify and alienate the people to whom it is applied. Indeed, Renee’s helplessness in building a mutual relationship with Eve adds another irony to the film. *Female Perversions* is a satire of contemporary American medical culture, in which the simplistic overuse of popular psychology often impedes communication between one person and another, instead of facilitating it.

The film’s antipathy toward psychology in general is inextricably entwined with a feminist inclination of the film—more specifically, with its criticism of Freudian psychoanalysis. This is most clearly seen in the childhood trauma image that recurs in Eve’s mind. In the image, her father is sitting on a chair, writing something with a pen in his notebook; her mother is standing in front of him. She approaches him to sit on his knees. She takes his pen, moving its point on her naked breast. He brushed the pen off, pushes her down on the floor, and starts to write again. This image—of the mother trying to touch him and be touched by him, and the father’s refusal—is the archetype that structures this film. As is repeatedly mentioned in the film, this father is an eminent author and intellectual, who never pays attention to his family. He is characterised as a sort of Freud-type, an incarnation of an objective and analytical understanding of human beings, especially of women. In short, psychoanalysis (or a psychoanalytic way of thinking) is itself the very trauma that Eve has carried through the film.

The recovery from traumatic experience in the film, therefore, must be experienced as a breakout from the discourse of psychoanalysis, or more precisely, the patriarchal law deeply embedded in it since the therapeutic narrative itself is the most traumatic moment for Eve and other women in the film—and for the film itself: Eve’s struggle should be seen as an attempt to depart from this ideology. But how is it possible to depart from this patriarchal ideology? It is, I argue, through ‘touch’—which Eve’s father violently rejects—that she finds a chance to change the way she experiences the world.

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4 For the long history of the antagonism between feminism and psychoanalysis, see Feldstein and Roof (eds.) (1989). For the reassessments of the feminism-psychoanalysis relation after the rises of gender theory, queer theory, and other contemporary theories on sex, sexuality, and gender, see Brennan (ed.) (2002).
The Phenomenology of Touch

Scholars, philosophers, and writers have explored the potential of touch as an alternative way to understand the world from various perspectives. In psychology and medicine, for example, researchers have presented a number of comprehensive works on touch. In the field of robotics, the function of touch in human perception is being closely examined to develop artificial sense organs for robots. In contemporary literary and art criticism, touch is now gaining increased attention. At the centre of this current is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology. The following passage from his posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible* shows us the essence of his phenomenological thinking that contemporary critics attend to:

How does it happen that I give to my hands, in particular, that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the textures of the sleek and the rough? Between exploration of and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty posits three significant points that allow us to re-examine, from outside the so-called Cartesian paradigm of the modern, our relationship with—or existence in—the world: (1) The first point is the *thinking body*, or the body’s capacity for thinking. When a hand touches a thing, the hand, without much help from the thinking ability of mind, moves

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1 David Katz is one of the most influential psychologists in the study of touch. See Katz (1989). For recent psychological studies on touch, see Field (ed.) (2001).
2 See Castañeda (2001).
3 Laura U. Marks (2002) proposes ‘haptic criticism,’ the aim of which she argues is to retrieve tactility and materiality lost in media and film studies. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Gabriel Josipovici (1996) also offers an insightful reflection on touch. My argument shares the same interest with them.
4 Vivian Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts* (1996) is one of the best examples of the productive employment of Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology in film studies.
toward the direction where the thing is. The hand can also tell the sleek from the rough before the conscious mind recognises the surface of the thing as sleek or rough. These phenomena show that the body has a capacity for thinking. (2) The second point is the reversibility of the touching/subject and the touched/object. Touch is less a subject’s working on an object than an interaction between one and another. When one touches another, it is not simply that the subject/the touching touches the object/the touched (or ‘the tangible’). When one touches the other, the other also touches one. Thus, the relation between the touching/the subject and the touched/the object is reciprocal, since, from the object’s location, that which we suppose as the subject is also an object. (3) The third point is the preexisting relation between the two entities, or ‘some relationship by principle.’ In order for the touching/subject to touch the touched/object, it is necessary that the latter is already in a position in which the former can touch it. Only the ‘incorporation’ of the two movements, from two frames of reference, enables a contact between one and the other.

This radical revision of the relations between body and mind, between object and subject—the possibility of which Merleau-Ponty derives from his meditation on touch—is a powerful undercurrent of Female Perversions. This film is indeed full of touches; from the opening to the ending, the screen incessantly lingers on various kinds of touch. In some cases, those touches occur between a human and another and, in other cases, between a human and things. The protagonist Eve is described as a figure obsessed with sexual and sensual bodily touches in both active and passive ways. The film shows how Eve passionately attempts to touch others and to be touched by others. Her sister Madelyn is also characterised as a kind of collector of touches. She touches scarves made of fine, smooth cloths—and then steals them. The camera also follows Emma, the manager of a bridal shop, as her hand sensually touches the bridal dresses that she makes. Meanwhile, the camera also focuses on Emma’s sister Annunciata (Annie) touching her own body when she dances and other bodies when she teaches dancing.

These touch-related behaviors are also catalogued in Kaplan’s book Female Perversions, from which each individual episode in the film is adapted, but we can see a fundamental difference between the film and the book in the way in which the touching acts of the characters are presented to us. The following passage, for example, shows the typical discursive mode of Kaplan’s book:

In kleptomania, the perverse act moves into the public domain, where the theft is an accusation against the social environment and a vengeful attack on its traditions, edifices, and monuments, akin to acts of vandalism and pyromania. The locale in which the theft occurs—department store, hotel, museum, nightclub, cemetery—is the
emotional equivalent of a depriving and frustrating breast. In kleptomania a desire that once attached itself to a human relationship is transferred to a thing, a social commodity. (Kaplan 1991, 287)

In the chapter including this passage, Kaplan gives scrupulous descriptions of what kleptomania is, how it is acted, who becomes kleptomaniac, why some female (and male) individuals develop it, and so on. In so doing, she analyses these behaviors and classifies them into a category of pathology. What Kaplan’s causational description lacks is a detailed depiction of how these people actually handle things when they touch them (and steal them). In Streitfeld’s film, on the other hand, the camera persistently chases Madelyn’s act of stealing things, while the film’s narrative suspends the question about why she steals. This is also the case with other touches in the film. Streitfeld’s description of touch is less about the causal stories behind the acts of touching than about what actually happens when one touches another person or a thing. What Streitfeld is trying to perform is a phenomenology of touch.

A phenomenological reinvestigation could cast a different light on these women’s ‘perverse’ behaviors. For example, in Kaplan’s descriptions of ‘kleptomania’—such as: ‘the perverse act moves into the public domain’—‘the perverse act’ is ascribed only to the person who steals. If we reconsider the stealing in terms of the preexisting relationship between the stealing person and the stolen thing and of the reversibility of the two, however, we can extend our consideration toward the possibility that the ‘perversity’ might be also ascribed to the stolen thing and even to the ‘public domain.’ What if the public domain itself is ‘perverted’? This is not simply to say that the person who steals is not responsible for the act, because the society drives him/her to perform the act, or to say that the actor is ultimately to blame, because it is impossible to deny all responsibility of him/her as the subject of the act. Rather, by suspending judgment—or, in Madelyn’s words, ‘holding off on’ judgment—a phenomenological thinking invites us to take a second look at the act from outside of existing frameworks, such as law and medicine. This phenomenological method, of course, cannot exactly answer why Madelyn steals things, but at least it could remind us that there might be some complex reason, some interrelation behind the act between Madelyn and the things, between Madelyn’s desire and the society that might arouse it, and so forth. In this way, phenomenological thinking could function as a criticism of the situation in which the event happens. What is lacking in Kaplan’s brutally simplified psychoanalysis and also in Eve’s strict legalism is a nuanced critique of the society, in which medicine, law, and other social systems are needed, produced, and practiced—a consideration of the changeability of a system.
When Eve visits the police station to see Madelyn, who is detained for stealing clothes, she asks a female prison officer if she can drop off Madelyn’s books on Sunday:

**THE PRISON OFFICER:** No.
**EVE:** Why Not?
**THE PRISON OFFICER:** Just a rule.
**EVE:** What kind of rule is that?

This short dialogue deftly illuminates the absurdity of some rules: a rule must be obeyed just because it is a rule. The irony is that Eve herself is also bound by a similarly absurd rule—the law of patriarchy. Eve breaks her agreement with her male lover and makes a surprise visit to his office. After he flatly rejects Eve’s flirtation with him just as her father spurns her mother in Eve’s dream, she says, ‘I know I shouldn’t expect to be able to change the rules. You go ahead. I’ll be fine.’ Why shouldn’t she expect to change the rule? The deep problem is that without noticing it she has internalised the rule imposed by her male lover and, originally, by her father. She cannot imagine the possibility that she can intervene in the relationship and might be able to change it. Why must she obey the rule? It is because it must be so. This tautology is a symptom of a sheer ideology. In this way, the film explores and reveals the way in which she is bound by the ideology of the patriarchal law.

As the film progresses, however, Eve starts to change the rigid principles ruling her own life: she gradually renounces her objective and judgmental way of understanding herself and other women for a more engaging and relational way of knowing them. This transition from detachment to commitment, or from indifference to compassion, is the driving force of *Female Perversions*. Her change is hardly detectable at first glance, but her response to Madelyn’s belongings in her room, which Eve sees while Madelyn is detained at the police station, suggests that the way she experiences the world is being profoundly changed. Eve takes a draft of Madelyn’s dissertation in her hand, turns the leaves, and reads it. She sneers at a passage that Madelyn has written in her anthropological study of a matriarchal society in Mexico. Then, Eve casually looks up and finds a picture of a Mexican woman wearing living iguanas on her head. She seems to be one of the women in Mexico that Madelyn studies. The camera shows a close-up of the picture from Eve’s point of view. In the next shot, the camera cuts back to a close-up of Eve’s face looking at the picture, and her

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9 The picture used in this scene is *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca* ([*Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca*](https://example.com)), a work by a Mexican photographer, Graciela Iturbide. Neither Eve nor Madelyn mentions the title of this work in the film.
face becomes serious as if the woman is looking at Eve. When Eve reads the description of the matriarchal society in Madelyn’s dissertation, she laughs it off as ridiculous. However, when she looks at the picture of the woman, she cannot sneer at it. Why does this happen? There must be some real, material, or corporeal communication between Eve and the picture, since, had it not been for any communication between the two, her face would never have changed.

To consider the nature of this communication between Eve and the picture, the concept of the thinking body that I mentioned previously is insightful. In light of the thinking body, the issue is not that Eve reads some serious thought in the iguana-woman’s face and consequently her face assumes a serious expression. The fact is rather that Eve’s face mimics the woman’s facial expression, and at the same time her consciousness recognises some seriousness in the woman’s face. The movement of her facial muscle and her consciousness cooperatively bring her new insight into the picture. Then, she starts to meditate on some thought and emotion that might exist behind the iguana-woman’s facial expression. A further consideration along this line also allows us to consider what makes Eve turn her eyes to the picture. In the same chapter of The Visible and the Invisible, which includes the above-cited passage, Merleau-Ponty extends a ‘preexisting relationship’ between the touching and the touched to that between the seer and the seen. He describes the preexisting relation between the two as ‘flesh’:

> We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived—and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135)

It is not just an accident that Eve sees the iguana-woman’s picture when she is reading Madelyn’s dissertation. Indeed, it is when she first entered the room that she saw the picture for the first time. She does not understand what the picture means, what the facial expression of the woman implies, or why Madelyn put the picture at that place. At that moment, however, she has already begun, if not thinking, feeling some thought and emotion—of the iguana-woman taken in the picture, of the person who took it, or of Madelyn who hung it on the wall—embodied in the picture. This embodied knowledge in the material being of the picture—as well as things in her room, such as stolen clothes and tools for theft—has already told Eve a small portion of
Madelyn’s lived experience. Also, she already knows the location of the painting. This preexisting situation in which she is already set only enables her to look up to see the picture while she is reading Madelyn’s dissertation; her thinking body has already found some connection between the picture and the letters on the draft of the dissertation. Thus, although she does not agree with Madelyn’s argument in her dissertation at all on the conscious level, she feels a slight hesitation to denounce it as merely absurd. In other words, when Eve entered Madelyn’s room, the communication between Eve and Madelyn’s things (and Madelyn herself) had already started; the space of the room itself is the ‘means of communication’ that is ‘flesh.’

But, of course, not every touch is open to such a bilateral communication between the touching/the seer and the touched/the seen as Merleau-Ponty conceives. We should not forget that touch does not always promise the harmonious intertwining between one and another. As Sonia Kruks warns us, in order for a mutual understanding between two persons to be established, it is necessary that their pre-existing relationship is, if not entirely, to some extent buttressed by some sort of egalitarianism; in the real world, however, ‘situations of inequality, oppression, or exploitation, which invite us to cast others as objects while withdrawing into self-referential and absolutist modes of consciousness, are all too common’ (Kruks 2006, 39). In the film we repeatedly see Eve involved in a sort of sadomasochistic relationship with her male and female lovers. At the moment of ecstasy during her sex with them, her eyes are always closed, and she is not paying attention to the person in front of her. All she can see is an image that recurs in her mind. In the darkness she is walking on a tight rope or she is tied with the rope, and there are some other figures around her. Some of them are just like a statue: their faces are expressionless and their bodies motionless. Others are covered with clothes and their faces covered with masks. These images imply that at the moment of physical contact with others Eve turns those others (or herself) into objects while herself withdrawing to ‘absolutist modes of consciousness.’ As is shown in Eve’s occasional bad daydreams, in which she is being violently touched by molesters in an asymmetric power-relation such as that between men and women in a patriarchal society, touch could be tantamount to violence itself. What Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology poses is not a perfect solution to stop this violent objectification of oneself and others. Rather, we should read his philosophy as that which suggests ‘a site of potential communication and affirmative

10 When Emma, who looks devastated by her breakup with her boyfriend, comes into the room in tears, Eve unwittingly approaches her, takes a glass of whisky, and starts to drink it sitting next to Emma, who has already started to drink whisky. In this scene, Eve unintentionally mimics Emma’s physical movement. This is another example of the thinking body.
intersubjectivity’ (Kruks 2006, 42). In the same way, the film *Female Perversions* should be seen as the process of Eve’s becoming aware of the way in which her often unilateral relations with others are structured and of her opening herself to, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, the ‘possibility of situations’ (Merleau-Ponty 2006, 473), or, in other words, of more reciprocally affirmative relations.

**Living with/in the Riddle of Woman**

It is not only Madelyn’s belongings that lead Eve to more corporeal communication with others. Her unintentional contact with other women, especially of other social strata, is no less important in this context. Her gradual change coincides with her recognition of some preexisting relationship between herself and the women she encounters in Emma’s bridal shop in the middle of the desert. One thing common to all these female characters is that they are forced to identify themselves as “women” according to the traditional gender norm, or, to put it more precisely, each of them is in some way involved in an existential question of what woman is in a patriarchal society, though they differ widely as to how to answer (or not to answer) the question. As I have already shown, by applying strict legalism both to herself and to others Eve refuses to consider their problems from different perspectives. Her sister Madelyn meditates on an alternative to the present society by studying a matriarchal society in Mexico. Emma reads popular romances and tries to imitate a stereotype of the ideal woman. Her sister Annie tries to dominate men by using her sexual appeal that she says she has acquired through her training in striptease. Ed(wina), who had her first period not long ago, has difficulty in coping with the fact that she is biologically categorised as female and tries to reject the categorisation. Each of these characters is depicted as a somewhat exaggerated archetype of contemporary women. Above all, the characterisation of Annie is interesting: her theory that ‘femininity’ is ‘not natural’ but ‘artificial’ is almost a parody of the so-called constructivist gender theory, which has been dominant in feminist criticism and gender studies in Anglo-American academia since the 1990s.11 Through these characters, the film illustrates the nub of contemporary discourses on femininity.

The ingenuity of the film *Female Perversions*, however, does not consist of the clever dramatisation of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality, but rather the fact that the film addresses the conundrum of femininity and feminism and presents a tentative solution to it from a

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11 Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929), written from a psychoanalyst perspective, anticipates what we now call the constructivist view of femininity.
phenomenological perspective. Judith Butler argues that recent feminism has reached an impasse as a result of the high sophistication of post-modern feminist and gender theories for the past two decades. Butler says: ‘Criticisms of feminism as inattentive to questions of race and to the conditions of global inequality that condition its Euro-American articulation continue to put into doubt the broad coalitional power of the movement’ (Butler 2004, 175). To categorise women of different origins as a singular entity—‘woman’—carries an inherent danger of erasing the uniqueness of each culture, especially of each minor culture, that some women embrace. On the other hand, the strong defence of a particular culture—based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and the like—also makes it difficult to build ‘the broad coalitional power’ of feminism among different groups of women. The dilemma is what can be done to build the wide coalition while at the same time embracing differences.

A number of feminist authors have recently explored the potential benefits of Merleau-Pontian embodied phenomenology for considering this dilemma of feminism. Kruks contends that ‘[f]or feminism to endure as a movement that can encompass differences among women without reifying them, it is urgent that we explore areas of possible common experience: notably those of the lived feminine body’ (Kruks 2001, 152). The following scene in the film sketches a possible scenario of different women sharing common experience through their lived feminine bodies, which Kruks and other feminists/phenomenologists believe to be needed for building the coalitional power of feminism. Eve and Ed(wina) are watching stars:

EVE: Look, the man in the moon.
ED(WINA): My mother told me that the moon was a woman.
EVE: Yeah, she would.
ED(WINA): You don’t believe that?
EVE: My father showed me the man in the moon when I was a little girl, and I believe him.

This riddle of the moon is an analogy of our familiar question about gender—whether femininity (or masculinity) is given by nature or constructed by nurture. While positing this question, the film does not give us any clear answer; the question remains open through the entire film. The film does not necessarily tell us what woman in general is, or why women suffer as Kaplan does in her book and many feminist critics/gender theorists do. Instead, it shows us how this person lives as a woman in the society and, in particular, how this person suffers from her being categorised as a woman.

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12 Sara Heinämaa (2003) and Gail Weiss (1999; 2008) present various ways in which Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and feminism can complement each other. Other examples are also found in Olkowski and Weiss (eds.) (2006).
In this sense, this film’s tentative answer seems to come fairly close to Butler’s recent argument that ‘sexual difference is neither fully given nor fully constructed, but partially both,’ and that it is ‘a site where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed ... but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered’ (Butler 2004, 186). By avoiding generalisation, the film complicates the question of femininity and holds in abeyance the simple essentialist/constructivist dualism, which has predominated in the discussion of gender since the last decade of the twentieth century.

What is even more significant in this dialogue on the moon and femininity between Eve and Ed(wina) is a different level of communication occurring beneath the surface of this exchange of words. To consider the nature of this communication, Merleau-Ponty’s meditation on his friend Paul and him looking at the same landscape is helpful:

My friend Paul and I point out to each other certain details of the landscape; and Paul’s finger, which is pointing out the church tower, is not a finger-for-me that I think of as orientated towards a church-tower-for-me, it is Paul’s finger which itself shows me the tower that Paul sees, just as, conversely, when I make a movement towards some point in the landscape that I can see, I do not imagine that I am producing in Paul, in virtue of some pre-established harmony, inner visions merely analogous to mine: I believe, on the contrary, that my gestures invade Paul’s world and guide his gaze. When I think of Paul [...] I [...] think [...] of someone who has a living experience of the same world as mine as well as the same history, and with whom I am in communication through that world and that history [...]. Paul and I ‘together’ see this landscape, we are jointly present in it, it is the same for both of us, not only as an intelligible significance, but as a certain accent of the world’s style, down to its very thisness. (Merleau-Ponty 2006, 471-72)

When the two of them are looking at the same landscape, the two perspectives do not perfectly overlap each other. One can have a great influence on how the other sees the landscape, but it still does not happen that one’s perspective entirely assimilates the other’s, or that one’s inner vision wholly occupies the other’s. The two persons see the same landscape from slightly different angles, but the difference of angle does not put into doubt their intersubjective recognition that they are looking at almost the same landscape, experiencing almost the same history, and living in almost the same this world. This ‘almost the same’ experience gained from ‘different’ perspectives—like ‘the two halves of an orange’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133)—is the nature of the communication between the two. This intersubjective experience is similar to what occurs between Eve and
Ed(wina). Eve’s view of femininity revealed in their metaphoric conversation is rather inclined to that of constructivists because she believes (or used to believe) that the moon could be a man, while Ed(wina)’s view is closer to that of essentialists because she thinks that the moon is a woman as a centuries-old tradition says. But what is most important to them in this scene is that they fully recognise that, though from somewhat different perspectives, they share almost the same experience of living with/in the riddle of what woman is, which is embodied in this moon and in this sky that they are looking at together at this moment and in this place. The possibility of an intersubjective experience of commonalities between two women of different origins is the very feminist message that the film Female Perversions sends out.

**Touch the Pain/Film**

Just after reading Madelyn’s dissertation, Eve finds a projector. She turns it on and starts to throw pictures onto the wall. The film is a record of her family in her childhood. When she is watching her family’s smiling faces in the film, her stern face breaks into a smile. At this moment, a sort of mimetic faculty of the thinking body moves her facial muscles, similar to what I mentioned previously regarding the thinking body, and along with this movement comes the recollection of happy childhood memories. Does the same corporeal communication—as that which arises between Eve and the iguana-woman in the picture, between her and Ed(wina) looking at the moon, between her and a Hispanic charwoman who enters her room when she panics due to a bad daydream, or between her and a homeless woman who is watching her when she is pleading with a policeman to ignore her parking violation—occur when we watch this film Female Perversions? The change that happens to Eve while she watches the family record is indeed analogous to what may occur to the spectator watching this film. What the film implicitly teaches us in these scenes is the way to participate emotionally and physically in a film, rather than to analyse and understand it as a mere narrative. The power of the film consists in this call for the audience to a more sensual and corporeal cinematic experience, which ‘sophisticated’ film-watchers (like us) have often ignored or forgotten.

Near the ending of the film, Eve sees Ed(wina) making a cut on her thigh with a razor in the bathroom. After a scuffle with Madelyn, Eve, in a fit of anger, performs a self-mutilation too. In the field of psychoanalysis, this act has been long studied in connection with the issue of femininity. Barbara Jane Brickman points out that Western medical discourses since nineteenth century have categorised self-mutilation as a ‘demi-aggressive act ... of a passive individual,’ which in traditional patriarchal societies was a synonym for ‘woman’ (Brickman 2004, 96). More recently, especially after the rise of
feminist criticism, researchers’ view of self-mutilation has drastically changed. Some critics have come to consider the practice to be more a means for a woman to ‘express her inward condition on the surface of her body’ and to argue that skin ‘can be seen as the ideal location for the move between inner and external selves she describes’ (Brickman 2004, 102-03). We should not, however, forget that this rather positive view of self-mutilation has another danger of objectifying and alienating the person who actually feels the pain of cutting, turning her physical pain into a mere abstract concept.

The film Female Perversions takes a different approach to this problem of self-mutilation. It does not explain either what self-mutilation is or why someone does it; rather, it invites us to do the same thing and to know how it feels, if not actually, vicariously. By tracing her mother’s movement of a pen on her naked breast and by following Edwina’s movement of a razor on her thigh, Eve makes a cut on her breast. The film shows in close-up the razor slowly moving up and down on Eve’s naked breast. In this scene, where the background music is intentionally cut out, Eve’s expression concentrated on making a cut almost compulsively fixes the viewers’ eyes to the movement of the razor and the red line appearing on her breast. At the same time, the slightly amplified sound of the razor cutting the skin and Eve’s panting almost physically coils around the viewers’ auditory senses, making it difficult for us to distract our attention from the event happening on the screen. When Eve feels vicariously her mother’s pain and Edwina’s pain, we are also, almost forcibly, invited to feel Eve’s (and her mother’s and Edwina’s) pain. In this way, the film tries to produce a shared moment of pain as a corporeal being not only between Eve and other women but also her, them, and the audience.

When Eve asks Edwina why she mutilated herself, she says, ‘I wanted to carve the heat into my bone.’ Technically, a film itself does not directly transmit heat through the screen to the audience, but, as many of us may know, the combination of the image and sound of cutting and the word uttered by Edwina could produce physical ‘heat’ in the viewers’ own bodies. The last and inmost desire of the film Female Perversions is to rediscover the potential of the mimetic faculty in the human body for living vicariously through others’ lives, the faculty that many of us often fail to exercise both in watching a film and in our real lives. The reason why the last scene of the film, where Eve soothingly touches Edwina’s face, is so ‘touching’ is not only that on a narrative level it dramatically shows Eve’s rediscovery of her mimetic faculty of feeling vicariously other persons’ pain or the two women’s mutual understanding of each other’s pain. It is also that it reminds us of the same faculty that may be sleeping in our own bodies. When Eve’s hand touches Edwina’s face and Edwina’s face touches Eve’s hand, each of them vicariously feels each other’s pain. When we watch them
touching each other, we are, through them, not metaphysically but *vicariously reminded* that we also have the faculty of feeling others’ pain (and pleasure that is given as the pain abates). All these things happen in a flash in this last scene—it is in this moment that the ‘touching’ power of the film lies.

Of course, this is not just a happy ending; this miraculous moment of sensual, corporeal communication will not last forever. Eve and Ed(wina) have to go back to the world that might continue to cause pain in their bodies as before—just as we have to come back to this world after watching the film. If there is any change between before and after the touch, it is that both Eve and Ed(wina) will keep a shared memory of the shared pain, which might give them a little power to live in their world—just as we will keep a shared memory of the film, which could continue to allow us to consider our own lives in this sexist world.

But to return to the film’s potential for building a coalitional power among women of different identities: Should the consortium really be exclusive to ‘women’? Is it not, in the end, a victory of the film if it has succeeded in making both female and male viewers, including myself who is biologically male, share, even if only slightly, the pain of being a woman, the pain of living with/in the riddle of what woman is—and, perhaps, the moderate pleasure, since I cannot help feeling, if not strongly, mildly sensual pleasure in vicariously living in the intimate entwinement between the women gathering at the desolate place in the middle of the desert? If the film *Female Perversions* has a truly radical political potential, it consists in its capacity for allowing the audience, biologically male or female, to live vicariously a woman’s life and to share a common understanding and feeling of what it is like to be a, not ‘the,’ woman. Or, you could say, one is not born a woman but becomes one—by watching, touching, being touched by, a film.
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