

Coming to blows with the audience

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Abstract

Starting with Dadaism, which strikes the public's moral standing, and above all with a certain kind of cinema which, according to Walter Benjamin, can punch the spectator awake, this article studies several different kinds of impact that contemporary art exerts. In this context, the possibility of an "acceptable shock" and an "unacceptable shock" is put forward, and, within both of these categories, the effectiveness of coming to blows with the audience is studied from the perspective of various different authors. On the other side of all this is the spectator abused by excess –whose modern antecedent we have situated in Georg Simmel's *blasé* figure-, and another who is perhaps shaken up by the world before him, which would imply political mobilisation through art.

Keywords: coming to blows, shock, *blasé*, Benjamin, contemporary art

At the height of the modern period, Benjamin condemns how "things press too closely on human society. The 'unclouded', 'innocent' eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression sheer incompetence" (1979, p. 89). This is how the author critiques the visual impact and excessive phatic function of the modern milieu, which can be anything from attention grabbing to a harassment of the gaze. [1] This is essentially an abuse of attention by various different means, now more pertinent than ever, considering its enormously wide-reaching and multimedia nature. Given the current circumstances, the focus shifts today from being harassed to being a labour slave, as Jonathan Beller (1994) seems to suggest. Taking into account today's audiovisual mayhem, as cultivated by the climate of information overload, it is difficult for any element immersed in that milieu to stand out, or even to survive. Due to this, the law of impact reigns supreme. Meanwhile, on the other side of the equation, there remains a subject who is not only affected by this excess, but also mistreated by it.

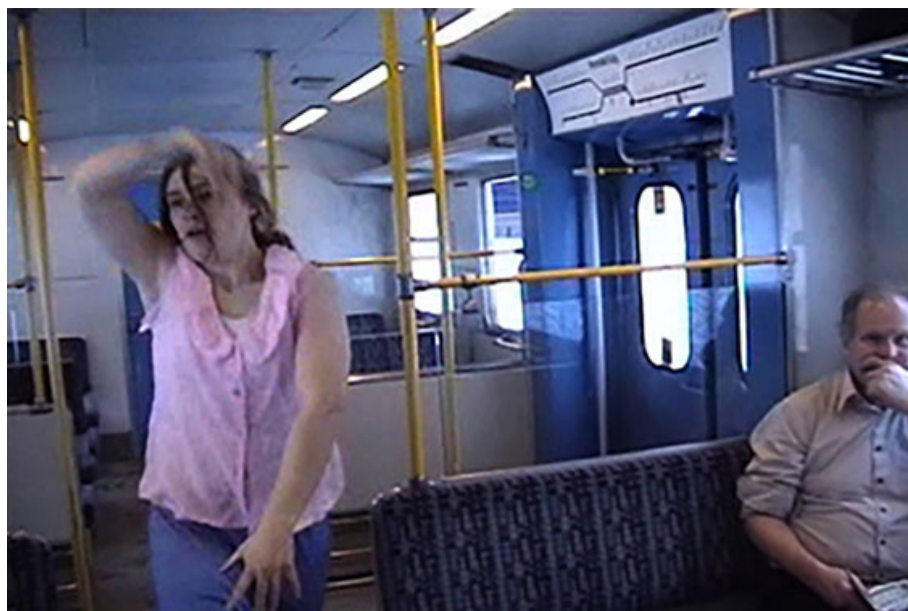
At the beginning of the 20th century, Simmel noted that all citizens in the metropolis must undergo continuous shock, thereby running the risk of losing all sensitivity. This somewhat unfortunate outcome would lead to the figure of the *blasé*: a type of citizen whose nerves have been so worn down by the modern environment, and who, by default, fails to react to the different stimuli in those urban surroundings. Bearing this premise in mind, a clear link can be drawn between the *blasé* and Sophie Whettnall's *Shadow Boxing* (2004). In this video, the artist herself is on her

feet, barely batting an eyelid, as she faces the constant threat of a boxer's blows. However, and paradoxically, he never actually touches her. Her seemingly passive attitude, or perhaps that she manages to maintain her composure, is what stops her from reacting, impulsively, to her attacker. This stance may well remind us of the *blasé* figure, able to put up a hardened shield of inaction as a defence against the violence of the environment. The rise of the simmelian figure does, however, form a paradox: self defence, for the modern subject, is no longer about the physical violence in the surroundings, but rather dealing with the paralysing effects of this urban typology.

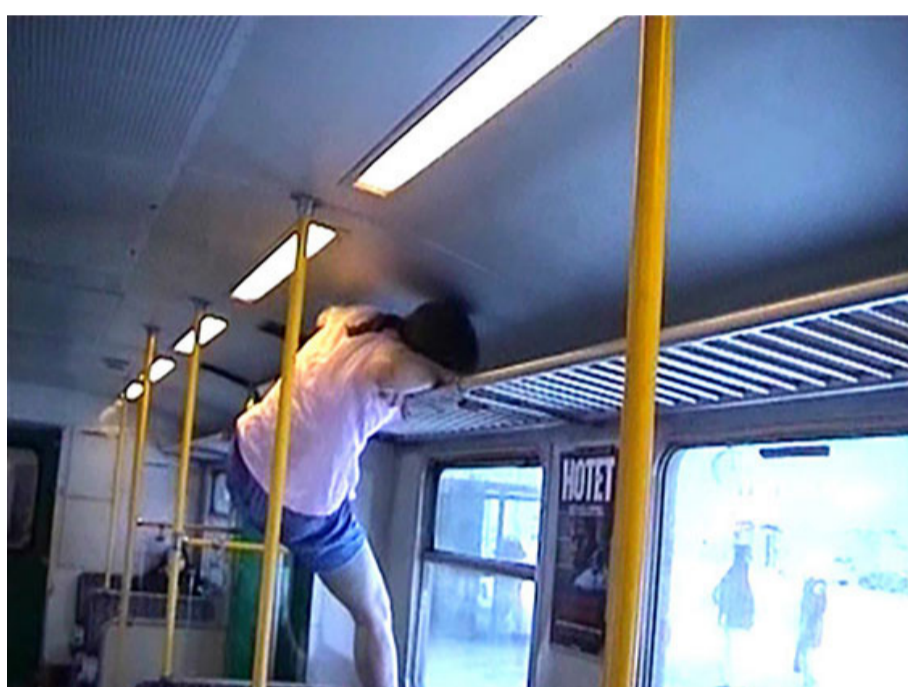


Shadow Boxing, Sophie Whettnall (2004)

In order to liberate the citizen from their reactive numbness, throughout the modern period various different artistic proposals arise which emphasise the tactile quality. In this sense Benjamin highlights Dadaism, which takes aim at the audience's morals to cause scandal. Hence, the Dadaist artwork becomes a projectile thrown at the spectator, thereby acquiring a tactile character. According to the same author, this is transferred to cinema by means of the montage, where it becomes truly effective. More contemporary proposals such as Klara Lidén's performance piece, *Paralysed* (2003), still pursue that moral-defying line. The recording of this work shows the artist getting on an underground train carriage, amid commuters heading home as part of their daily routine. Lidén removes some of her clothes, while performing a sort of senseless dance, taking up all kinds of spaces in the carriage. Just as the woman in *Shadow Boxing* remains impassable to the threat of the punches, the audience who witness Lidén's performance end up ignoring the artist's eccentric conduct, acting as if nothing were happening before them. Therefore, *Paralysed* does not appear to go beyond just making the passengers feel awkward, for it does not confront them with a genuinely transformative violence. As its very title suggests, the effect of her intervention proves to be precisely that which, in theory, the artist sets out to challenge: the paralysation of the passengers.



Paralyzed, Klara Lidén (2003)



Paralyzed, Klara Lidén (2003)

From Benjamin's standpoint, cinema would continue the work of that "clumsy Dadaist precursor" (1990b, p. 1041), taking on the baton of subjecting the audience to shock therapy. Nevertheless, in the case of cinema, the tactile character would be found in:

[...] successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator. Film has then freed the physical shock effect –which Dadaism had kept wrapped, as it were, inside the moral shock effect– from this wrapping (1990a, p. 502).

Regarding its effect on the spectator, Benjamin even states in the French version of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that the genuinely modern work of art acquires a traumatic quality in terms of its percussive character. On the other hand, it works in a similar way to the "genuine advertisement" which "hurtles things at us with the tempo of a good film" (Benjamin 1979, p. 89). However, Benjamin is not stating that cinematographic production carries out the same campaign of abuse against the subject which advertising and other factors of the modern context insist on. On the contrary, this author proposes that certain artistic production,

in conjunction with technique, can be used as a weapon not only against the aggressive nature of technical advancement, but also against the habits and patterns which sedate the subject and make them unconscious of their situation in the world. With this in mind, we can say that the most surprising part of Benjamin's approach is that he detects the solution in the very technology which causes the problem.

Cinema was, for him, one of these combative instruments. Nevertheless, and despite Benjamin's occasional generalisations when speaking about cinematographic technique, it is necessary to distinguish, in this context, the different typologies which, in turn, will correspond to various types of shocks. Dorothee Brill warns that we should differentiate between works which include "acceptable" shocks, and those with "unacceptable" ones. The latter are related to the shocks which aspire just to be seen, like the nature of the pop-up, and which enter a downward spiral of "shock for shock's sake" (2010, p. 151). This may remind us of the "excess heaped on excess" to which Paul Virilio refers, generated by the "desensitization to the shock of images and the meaninglessness of words [that] has shattered the world stage" (2004, p. 36). This might be the same type of shock for which Eisenstein previously rebuked Pudovkin, for limiting himself to simple shocks, as defined by a general formula of opposition or violence in the image.

Despite the fact that shock, when used as a formula for excess, invariably arouses suspicion, there are authors like Claudia Schaefer who deem it essential in "lower class cinema" or paracinema. This type of cinema includes subgenres like gore, splatter, schlock... which the author includes in the *body-genres*. They can all be characterised by their explicit violence and therefore questionable images. Schaefer argues that these cinematographic genres of excess elicit a less overly-theorised kind of pleasure and response from the audience, more spasmodic and potentially more explosive in the social sense, in contrast to "higher class" cinema. Perhaps even a "traumatic" kind of violence, as Benjamin suggests in the French version of "The Work of Art" essay (1990a, p. 733). For this reason, Schaefer considers "unacceptable" shock to be capable of deploying greater reactive potential than "acceptable" shock, and that it "hold[s] the potential to break through the distracted eye of the spectator and to disrupt the unbroken visual harmony of uninterrupted consumption" (2003, p. 20). This is how she justifies that "often, the most dreadful is what makes one react in a manner that is out of sync with the rhythms of a surrounding daydream and what forces the sleepwalker into awakening" (p. 23). In this way, from Schaefer's standpoint, the *body-genres* would bolster moral defiance, aiming to invert the dynamic of the passive spectator consumed by their own consumption, giving them back their ability to look by means of provocation. That is, using the violent content of the image as a basis. Virilio, on the other hand, states that "yet the conformism of abjection is never more than a habit the twentieth century has enjoyed spreading round the globe" (2004, p. 37). Therefore, according to Schaefer, the rupture that these genres incarnate would be, for Virilio, nothing more than an established dynamic of the age. In that sense, as Virilio sees it, "whence contemporary art's shrillness in its bid to be heard without delay, that is, without necessitating attention, without requiring the onlooker's prolonged reflection and instead going for the conditioned reflex, for a reactionary and simultaneous activity" (p. 90). Deleuze also offers his view on this matter, arguing

that within bad cinema shock is confused with “the figurative violence of the represented instead of achieving that other violence of a movement-image developing its vibrations in a moving sequence which embeds itself within us” (1997, p. 157).

Let us speak now about this “other violence”, as opposed to the “unacceptable shocks” defended by Schaefer. By means of this other type of shock –which we can consider “acceptable”, or aggressions somewhat removed from plain explicit violence– so-considered transgressive art would be able, according to Kieran Cashell, to threaten “the emotionally distanced perspective associated with the aesthetic attitude” (Brill 2010, p. 13) as a way of claiming back part of the lost social and political agency. For Benjamin, this attitude can be found in Brecht’s epic theatre, or in Eisenstein’s *Kino-Fist*, the film-fist. For the former, it is an art of “correct political tendency” (Benjamin 2008, p. 80) –that which follows the appropriate political direction, i.e. the revolutionary– allied with a technique in keeping with the time –at that moment, the cinema– where the audience’s capacity of activation, reaction and critique towards the milieu can be found. In this regard, certain critics, film-makers and intellectuals try to apply “shock therapy” through artistic and technical means. For Laymert Garcia dos Santos, this corresponds to a “politicization of perception”, a process which consists of familiarising the modern subject to “be[ing] exposed to the shock treatment performed by cinema on their vision of the world and of reality” (Molina 2008, p. 54). The kind of artist who applies this treatment corresponds to the poet about whom Benjamin said “he rejects the narcotics the gamblers use to dull the consciousness that has forced them to march to the beat of the second-hand” (Benjamin 2003, p. 332). Which, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, would parallel the output of the “serious artist” who is “the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception” (1994, p. 18). The same type of artist whose shock, as Katharine Kuh points out, operates upon us on a large scale: “these are shocks we never get over, for they have literally re-educated our vision. The art that finally reaches us, that infiltrates our thinking is not about life but is an active part of life” (1965, p. 29). [2] The kind of shock deployed by the work of the artists discussed by these authors, whether the work contains explicit violence or not, does not merely aspire to be seen by as many eyeballs as possible. Its potential is based on the way it transforms the audience’s body, experience and thinking, in conjunction.

It could be said that Benjamin associates the more “correct” cinema (i.e. that which exercises the “other violence”) with a defibrillator, bringing the spectator back to life, or rather, back to emotional life, something the *blasé* could no longer access. As Naomi Klein (2012) explains, only through understanding the experience of shock is man able to overcome it. Cinema (considered here as an aesthetic apparatus, as with Jean-Louis Déotte (2004), or as a particular kind of “correct” cinema), from the Benjaminian standpoint, not only shows the audience the finer details of modern life, as in Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), but it also deliberately exposes them to violent content. In that regard, Benjamin argues that cinema can subject the spectator to sadistic and masochistic scenes as a kind of training for living in the modern milieu, although never quite as extreme as in the cinema defended by Schaefer. Nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer indicate that this is rather an attempt to accustom the spectator to being an object of violence:

Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to them. The enjoyment of the violence done to the film character turns into violence to the spectator (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 110).

Benjamin, on the other hand, postulates that this does not happen in order to accustom the spectator, not always at least, but rather that some films like Chaplin's can in fact lead to a greater understanding of shock thanks to being exposed to it. Those "vast amounts of grotesque events" present in cinema are for Benjamin "a drastic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization" (1990a, p. 462). Therefore, for the present author, perceiving such images as a kind of training would help men and women overcome the technical and social state of alienation in which they are immersed.

Perhaps for this reason we should return to Whettnall's video, of the artist under attack yet never touched, to discern the attitude which enables her to control her reactions, a result of her resistance to aggression. On the other hand, in the boxer's air-punches we can observe a rhythm which encompasses that of the media and cinematographic image, which "in fits and starts" – as Benjamin would say about cinema (1990a, p. 464)– adapts to the same cadence of modern life. Could we not then comprehend this work as one which shows a spectator watching a film? The strikes, just like cinematographic shocks, are never real, although they do imply a tactile quality. In this case, we could interpret the impassibility of the woman as the result of a perceptive training. It is not the boxer who is training his punches, it is the woman who is training how to take the blows, as a kind of a warm-up exercise for "real life". The projection *Punch Screen* (2009), by Patrick Laffont, makes these cinematic impacts visible by means of a series of consecutive knocks delivered behind the white fabric of a projection screen. A surface whose whiteness could represent an ensemble of "all images" –a blending of additive colours [3]– and, in turn, evidence the jostling hidden behind all cinematographic images. This rhythm sets the pace of the projection, making it palpitate so that it seems alive, as with cinema, due to the blows it makes. In an interview with Jonas Mekas, Peter Kubelka declares his admiration for the English expression "to hit the screen". For, according to him, "hit the screen–this is really what the frames do" (Kubelka 2000, p. 291). This position contradicts Eisenstein's film-fist approach, where the strikes are located between the scenes, although it is equally susceptible of being interpreted in this way in *Punch Screen*. Its author, Laffont, in a text about the work, writes that it "suffers [the blows]/ as we suffer [them]". [4] A synchrony between screen and spectator which can find its explanation when Beller refers to how

[...] our myriad participations in the omni-present technology fest are [...] engaged in insuring the compatibility of our *sensoriums* with prevailing methods of interpellation. These interpellations reach us not only by calling us into identification in the Althusserian sense but by calling us to rhythms, to desires, to affects (Beller 1994, p. 31).



Punch Screen, Patrick Laffont (2009)

Following this, the fact that “good films” follow the rhythm of the “genuine advertisement”, as Benjamin (1979, p. 89) claims, is clearly mimetic, regarding an environment which has already modified the perceptive system of the modern citizen. It is not only economic, political and social transformations that modernity has brought along. For it has also generated, as Beller (1994) states, an organic shift carried out by, among others, visual practice. This statement is not so far from Benjamin’s own thinking, when he declares that “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film” (Benjamin 2003, p. 328). With the aim of playing a part in modern society and making itself more accessible, art follows the rhythm of the times, becoming part of the same *Zeitgeist*. According to benjaminian theory, the blows coming from cinema, besides constituting part of a perceptive training to help adapt to the environment, can make their way towards the audience’s subconscious, who as a result connect with their own world, evoking it through film. The tactile quality of these images, far from being mere touches, unleashes great force onto the spectator, manifesting itself in the form of shock. This means the images do not just touch the spectator, they actively shake them up.

Whether by the shock of the scenes in the montage –Eisenstein; Benjamin–, by the colliding of frames –Kubelka– or by the elements inside the frame itself –Eisenstein; [5] Barthes–, the moving image has the power to deliver a serious blow to the spectator “right in their subconscious”, which makes them free up a particular space within the course of the film. This other, liberated world, different for each spectator, takes up a smooth space, as with Deleuze and Guattari (2006), within the striated filmic space. Both the cinematographic shock -the crushing blow- and the subconscious revealed in the audience make up parts of the smooth space corresponding to an “intensive space” with “tactile qualities”. This place

[...] is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is *haptic* rather than optical perception. [...] materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 p. 479).

But if, for Benjamin, Dadaists works are like projectiles, and films, or certain films at least, “have a percussive effect on the spectator” (1990a, p. 464/2003, p. 267), we could say that works

like those of the Structural movement, and *Flicker* films in particular, bombard the audience there in their seats. The frenetic rhythm of the flickering frames places them in the middle of an audiovisual detonation. This is something that Paul Sharits already takes into account when he indicates, with respect to *Ray Gun Virus* (1966), that “the projector is an audio-visual pistol” and “the retinal screen is a target” (Wees 1992, p. 151). Just as Benjamin thinks cinema produces “a therapeutic demolition of our unconscious” (1990a, p. 462), for Sharits the aim of this work means “the temporary assassination of the viewer’s normative consciousness” (Wees 1992, p. 151). The fast-moving nature of the images both in the *flicker* films of the first structuralists –like Peter Kubelka, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits– and the post-structuralists –like Ken Jacobs and Michael Snow– lays waste to the spectator on the receiving end of this intermittent rhythm. Philippe-Alain Michaud states that this style forces together “on one side, the violence, the anxiety, the auto-destruction, and on the other side, the agreement, the fusion” (2006, p. 129). But in Sharits’s work, *flicker* violence is joined by another explicit, such as in frames where somebody threatens to cut their tongue off with some scissors or whose face is scratched by someone else’s hand– *T:O:U:C:H:I:N:G*, 1969–, where the author points a gun at his temple– *Piece Mandala/End War*, 1966–, where there are clear sexual images –*Piece Mandala/End War*, 1966– or other ones which account for epileptic seizures –*Epileptic Seizure Comparison*, 1976–. As a result, in these works, the “acceptable shocks” of the *flicker* rhythm are present, as well as the “unacceptable” ones deployed by the content of certain images. Hence, an explicit language of violence is formed, occasionally administered among the other monochromes, which alters the spectator in different ways: when watching the shocking images, because of their content; when witnessing the “emptying” of these same images carried out by the monochromes; and when exposed to the hectic tempo of the alternation between different kinds of frames.

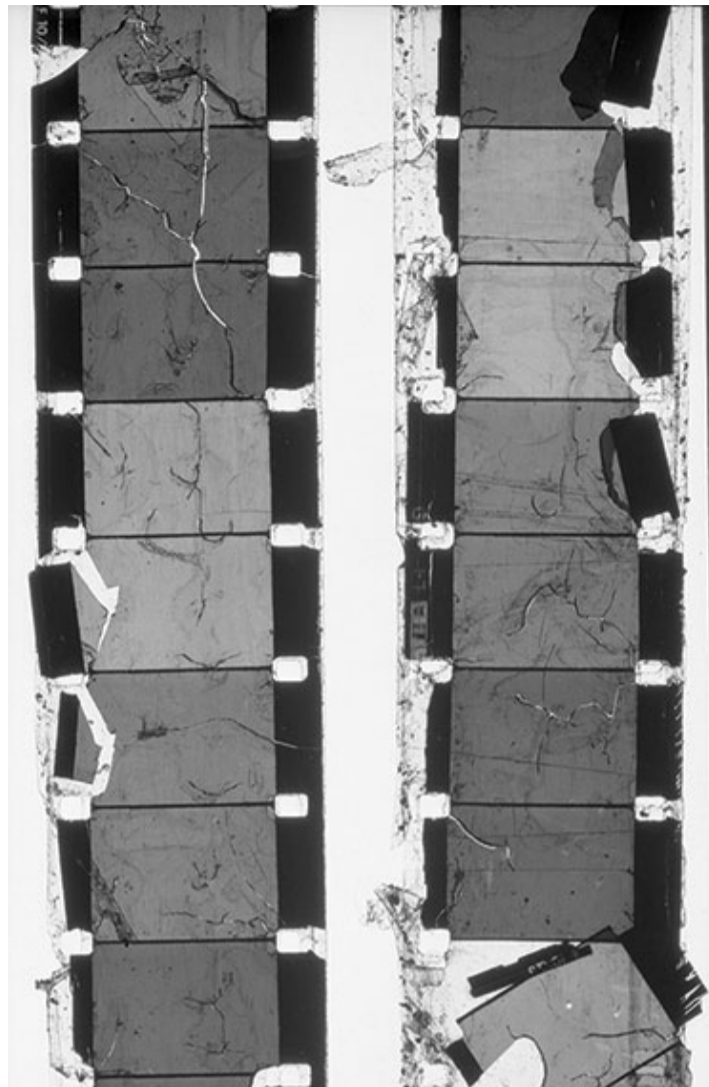


T:O:U:C:H:I:N:G, Paul Sharits (1969)

But it does not end here, for some of these authors deliver literal blows against cinema, like Conrad in his *4-X Attack* (1972), when he destroys an unexposed film with a hammer and then spends three weeks putting it back together. The developed film later shows an image of this very filmic destruction. Sharits also follows a similar procedure –this time on one of his films composed by monochromes– in *Damaged Film Loop*, later called *The Forgetting of Impressions and Intentions* (1973-4). In both of them the artist acts violently against filmic materiality itself. Thus, flicker films encompass a wide range of blows: performative –as in these last two cases–, figurative –as in the images of Sharits’s *T:O:U:C:H:I:N:G* and *Piece Mandala/End War*– and/or conceptual –as in the films with alternating monochromes, like Sharits’s *Ray Gun Virus* or Kubelka’s *Arnulf Rainer* –. These impacts do not just pass before the spectator’s eyes, but they are actively unloaded into their *sensoriums*.



4x Attack, Tony Conrad (1972)



Damaged Film Loop, Paul Sharits (1973)

None of the structuralist works to which we have referred give the spectator much of a breather. These films' violence, in varying degrees of explicitness, is taken out on the audience, even if it is not actually directed at them, but rather against the illusion of the fictional image, against the absence of reaction and against the perceptive habit. What these blows really aim for is so that the spectator can unload their own experiences onto the work, whenever –as Benjamin proposed– “all the decisive blows are struck left-handed” (1979, p. 49). In that sense, body and mind become inextricably closer, in a type of artistic experience about which Olafur Eliasson emphasises the importance of “putting the brain in the body and the body in the brain” (Aitken 2006, p. 116). This leads to a relationship between haptic producers and tactile (audio-) spectators.

Notes

[1] Paul Virilio defines the “phatic image” as that which “grabs our attention and forces us to look” (1994, p. 62).

[2] Kuh presents, as artistic examples of this shock, Bosch's imagery, Picasso's *Guernica* and Malevich's *White on White*.

[3] An example of a blending of cinematographic images in white would be Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs, made of indoor and outdoor cinema projections –*Movie Theatres* and *Drive in Theaters*–

[4] The whole text is as follows: “It is violent/It is the expression of violence/ It is the expression of violence in the image/ It is the expression of violence on its own medium/it does not break/it does not move/suffers [the blows]/ as we suffer [them] [*comme on encaisse*].” These words appear in the information brochure of the exhibition in the 104 Centre, Artistic Institution of the City of Paris, which took place from 11th to 31st December 2010.

[5] Barthes (2009) indicates how Eisenstein changes his opinion and shifts from considering the shock between scenes as the important element in cinema to assigning that importance to the element within the scene.

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