

# Opción

Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía, Lingüística y Semántica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

26

Año 36, 2020, Especial N°

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1587 / ISSNc: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



Universidad del Zulia  
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



# The Phenomenology of Transparency in Thriller Films

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## Abstract

In film theory, transparency is a key concept to know both the truth and the myth of what the spectators watch. This paper attempts to redefine the concept of Transparency by understanding its phenomenology and essence. It also attempts to create a theoretical framework that helps the viewer understand its ultimate meaning. This paper addresses the effect of the phenomenology of transparency on the viewer, both consciously and corporeally by relating it to the concepts of proximity, accessibility and touch. The suggested definition helps to define different forms of transparency, a topic that will be discussed in another paper by the researchers.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology; Transparency; Thriller Films; Film Theory; Corporeality

# La fenomenología de la transparencia en las películas de suspenso

## Resumen

En la teoría Del cine, la transparencia es UN concepto clave para conocer tanto la verdad como el mito de lo que ven los espectadores. Este artículo intenta redefinir el concepto de Transparencia mediante la comprensión de su fenomenología y esencia. También intenta crear UN marco teórico que ayude al espectador a comprender su significado final. Este artículo aborda el efecto de la fenomenología de la transparencia en el espectador, tanto consciente como corporalmente, relacionándolo con los conceptos de proximidad, accesibilidad y tacto. La definición sugerida ayuda a definir diferentes formas de transparencia, UN tema que será discutido en otro artículo por los investigadores.

**Palabras clave:** Fenomenología; Transparencia; Películas de suspenso; Teoría del cine; Corporalidad

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In general, transparency has been used and described as a means for experiencing something through something else. This way of understanding transparency allows all the layers of material to be detected by the different senses, by vision, hearing, touch, smell, and even by taste (Gerbino, 2012; Leach, 2005). As for vision, the concept of transparency has been used by theorists, such as Kepes (1944) and Gibson (1954), to express the double experience. In his book entitled

Language of Vision, Gyorgy Kepes (1944) considers transparency a condition to be discovered in art.

When two or more figures overlap, and each one of them claims for itself the common part, the figures are endowed with transparency, which means that they are interpenetrated without causing the optical destruction of one another. This condition implies more than one optical characteristic. It implies a broader spatial order, the perception of different locations, and equivalence in the position for the overlapped figures; the closer figure gets the same meaning like the further one (Kepes, 1944 qtd. in Gibson, 1954). Beside visual arts, the emphasis on perceiving sounds through other sounds has heightened the audible transparency. In terms of touch, transparency has been analyzed by Katz (1925, 1935), it is seen as the means to resolve any conflict that occurs from the visual perception of double layers (qtd. in Krueger 1970).

In his *Vision in Motion*, the artist Moholy-Nagy points out to issues of time and space, highlighting the idea that transparency leads subjects to travel though different layers of space at a fixed time. Those layers transfer “insignificant singularities into meaningful complexities” because the transparent quality of the superimpositions suggests a transparency in the whole context that is able to reveal the unnoticed structural qualities in the object (Moholy-Nagy, 1947 p.210).

Shonfield argues that the classical notion of depth of field in photography has been revitalized by the depth of time enabled by advanced technologies (2003). On the other hand, the transparency of

technology, and consequently the mediation of the natural world through the built environment, can be directly linked to the occupant's ability for physical engagement with architecture (Patterson, 2010).

In their book entitled Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky (1963) argue that transparency is loaded with many possibilities of meaning and misunderstanding? Accordingly, they have distinguished between two forms of transparency; (i) literal transparency, which is an inherent quality of substance, that of being penetrable to air and light, as in a glass curtain wall, and (ii) phenomenal transparency, which is an inherent quality of organization; a “result of an intellectual imperative, of our inherent demand for that which should be easily detected, perfectly evident, and free of dissimulation” (Rowe and Slutzky, 1963, 45).

The architectural analogy of the material qualities of glass produces literal transparency. Rowe and Slutzky (1963) notice that glass is able to create compositions of superimposed layers that are produced by the reflections and accidents of light playing on any surface. Lars Spuybroek confirms that such consistency of material leads generally to what modernists call transparency, since the internal structure is exposed to the exterior; in addition, the internal structure transforms while being exposed (2016). However, Rowe and Slutzky confirm that glass does not always guarantee transparency. They claim that the overlapping and interpretation of the movement through spaces exposes the building and generates a state of transparency. Accordingly, transparency is created by achieving the rules of transparency; that is, by experience.

In film theory, transparency is known as a key concept for the truth and myth of what the spectators watch (Hayward, 2013). This paper contributes to film studies by providing a new definition of transparency, a definition that is related to phenomenology and the lived body experience of the viewer with the characters. In order to redefine transparency in film, one should look at its essence and describe its effect. To achieve this end, the researchers argue that it is better to define it from a phenomenological point of view.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In general, phenomenology can be considered to be a method that helps one to see, with new eyes, a stance which conveys careful description. Phenomenologists try to understand instances of the same phenomenon in the lived experience in order to point out more general qualities and characteristics that describe the nature and essence of the phenomenon. According to Hanich, phenomenology is based on commonalities, not on differences (2010).

It is possible to consider phenomenology a subjective approach since it is an approach that is based on the lived experience. However, as Julian Hanich (2017) convincingly argues, it is not exactly subjective in the sense that “it is a thick description that creates the ground of lived experience and for further, if secondary, research” because those who follow the experiences and objects which arouse their curiosity go to where the experiences and objects take them, they

do not go to where those experiences should go (p.16). Hanich adds that what makes phenomenology the best approach is that it does not have a closure. Through observations of experience, phenomenology leads to very close descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon under consideration (Hanich 2017).

To support the subjective experience of the viewer, and to provide a reflection to the character in the film, Sobchack's (1990) phenomenology of cinematic experience stresses the interactive character of film viewing it as an exchange between two bodies; the body of the character and the body of the viewer. She states that the relationship between spectator and film is fundamentally mimetic in that it is experienced through the body. However, she does not clarify how the exchange between the two bodies occurs. Accordingly, the viewer in the present paper is considered as a subject who has an interpretive lived experience that interacts with the character when enveloped by the dread atmosphere in a thriller on screen. In short, what happens to the character can be reflected on the viewer.

### **3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

To understand the phenomenology of transparency in film; i.e. its essence, it is important to focus on what Kepes (1944) stresses in his Language of Vision regarding the spatial arrangements and the equivalence of the close and the further; whereby the close has the same meaning as the one that is far away. He focusses on a very

significant point; namely, proximity to objects behind a transparent surface and the concept of visual accessibility. The definitions and applications of transparency discussed above may be different, but they are all based on the fact that all the objects, once they are seen, have the opportunity to be accessible, they can be close enough to be reached eventually.

Proximity leads to accessibility; the short distance to the character opens more accessibility to him/her. In the context of film, it can be argued that proximity works at two levels; the level of distance between the characters, which can be tangible and intangible, and the level of filming and framing the characters. In film, the tangible distance between the characters is assessed based on their nearness; mainly, the distance between the protagonist and the antagonist. It is also assessed based on whether there is a barrier between them or not. Meanwhile, the intangible distance is described in terms of the strengths of the relationships amongst the characters. For example, the case of a husband and wife, a boyfriend and girlfriend, cousins, etc., is a close relationship that adopts accessibility and allows the characters to reach to each other easily.

The movement of the subject helps him/her to exist and to be-in-the-world. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world expresses the subject's existence. He argues that this existence can be achieved by two ways; the de-distancing, and the sense of directionality. Accordingly, it creates what he terms as 'the spatiality of Da-sein' (Heidegger 1996). In the German language, Da-sein means being there; bringing things closer in the sense of bringing them within the range of their concern.

In English Oxford dictionary, Da-sein can be translated to mean existence (Press, 2018).

Heidegger highlights that the act of bringing near requires de-distancing, i.e., moving towards the things to shorten the distance. De-distancing requires directionality in movement; namely, to move to the right or to the left, and/or up or down. Da-sein employs these directions together to be grounded in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996; Shīrāzī, 2013).

When relating proximity, as a motivation for movement, to Heidegger's (1996) Da-sein, one can argue that proximity between characters and proximity with the viewer fosters the presence of the viewer and increases his/her corporeality. Consequently, the shooting style and the framing size is highly important to reflect the exact distances for the viewer. As Metz and Laine argue, shot sizes, such as the wide shots, medium shots, close-up shots, have the power to position the viewers by providing them with an imaginary vision at the center of the visual field of the photographic image (Metz 1974; Laine, 2006). The short distance between the protagonist and the antagonist raises the possibility of touch, and all that matters for the viewer is to keep the two characters apart. These various techniques that have been used will be underlined during further discussion of different forms of transparency in future papers by the researchers.

Tarja Laine (2006) considers the fear of touch as the main factor that awakens the skin of the spectator. She considers skin as a medium of intersubjective connection that is able to create the effective engagement with the screen because it forms the structure of haptic

perception that represents a mode of bodily consciousness (Laine, 2006). This paper uses the same example that Laine uses in order to support her claim about relating proximity to fear and then to the corporeal consciousness, it is an example taken from a scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

### **The Kinesthetic Experience (for the viewer)**

Proximity and accessibility are aspects of transparency. They both lead ultimately to touch. This section clarifies how proximity, which causes touch, can be a kinesthetic experience that ends with an experience of corporeal consciousness. The viewer experiences the kinesthetic experience of movement in dread in two main ways; the first one is the actual movement of the antagonist, especially when he de-distances and directs himself towards the protagonist. The second movement is created by fear, the fear of the atmosphere, or the fear for the characters. However, both experiences are able to create a kinesthetic and corporeal experience to increase the embodiment of the viewer. To understand both experiences, it is important to recall the phenomenology of movement according to Sheets-Johnstone (2011) who has drawn upon the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and relates it to Schmitz's Expansive Away!-tendency discussed by Hanich (2010).

Movement itself, according to Sheets-Johnstone (2011), is the source of the senses in space and time. She structures the process of the self-body movement into four phases; kinesthetic experience, transcendental subjectivity, kinesthetic consciousness, and corporeal consciousness. Accordingly, when the antagonist physically moves

towards the protagonist, the viewer produces a tensional quality of movement because of the effort produced internally to stop, or delay, the antagonist from touching the protagonist, especially when the proximity is shot from a first-point perspective, as in the Silence of the Lambs in the basement scene. Here, the desire to stop Buffalo Bill (the antagonist) triggers the body to add force and an intellectual effort to push, stop, or remove that touch. It is not only his movement, but also his pause, which expresses a big effort for the viewer to build the anticipation of Buffalo to move. This tensional quality can be better described as a heavy movement produced by the synaesthetic experience of the subject. The effort produced awakens kinetic energy and stimuli to move physically, as in holding a breath or in stillness, or visually, by focusing on the screen. The effort then provokes the senses and heightens them in a way that extends time and makes that moment count to produce transcendental subjectivity. The subject then turns its attention to the body itself to feel its locomotion, and accordingly, the experience becomes corporeal and conscious. Laine argues that touch is the motivation for fear. In addition, Laine argues that fear is the moving force of the dreadful, which is experienced as touch to which “our skin responds and starts to crawl” (2006, 101).

So, fear, as discussed by Hanich and Schmitz, is characterized by Expansive Away!-tendency; it enters the felt-body, which is the absolute phenomenological location, to experience constriction in the moments of fear, the body tries then to escape the skin, but it cannot; consequently, tension is produced (Hanich, 2010; Schmitz et al., 2011). This tension in turn creates an amplitudinal aspect of the

kinesthetic experience, a felt contractiveness, and a spatial contractiveness for the body of the subject.

According to all these kinds of contractiveness, the fear of touch, the experience of touch that starts to crawl, in addition to the Expansive Away!-tendency to escape the skin, make up an effective engagement that increases the corporeality and the consciousness, which in turn increases the corporeal consciousness. According to this experience, transparency that is fed by proximity and touch can create a corporeal atmospheric effect produced kinesthetically by the muscles and skin, and synaesthetically by the contraction of the felt-body because of closing the absolute space.

The engagement of the spectator with the character is necessary to build the kinesthetic experience, which leads eventually to a corporeal experience. In order to be embodied, the spectator has to feel for or feel with the characters; she/he should have both sympathy and empathy.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This paper attempts to redefine Transparency in thriller films and describe its phenomenology which is based upon proximity, accessibility and touch. The ultimate aim is to create a kinesthetic experience for the viewer and increase corporeality and consciousness for a more embodied experience full of corporeality and consciousness. This new definition structures a framework that

extracts three forms of transparency that may be found in thriller films; Personal, Substance, and Sensorial Transparency. All these forms will be thoroughly discussed with examples in another paper by the researchers.

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Lama Bilal Abuhassan has recently completed her PhD combining Architecture with Cinema from Cardiff University. She has completed MFA in Cinematic Arts (2012), M.Sc. in Architecture (2009), and BA in Architecture (2005). She is the co-founder and project director at SPACES Architectural design studio. She has been working as a film producer for many short films coming out with two award winning films. At the moments, she is a lecturer at the Department of Architecture and Design, University of Petra, Amman, Jordan.

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KIFAH (MOH'D KHAIR) ALI AL OMARI was born in Amman, Jordan, on June 6, 1970. He earned his BA in English at The University of Jordan, Amman in 1991, his MA in English Literature from the same university in 1995, and his PhD in English Literature from The University of Texas at Arlington in 2006. He has taught English for more than five years in different public and private schools in Jordan before he has worked another five years as a Teaching Assistant of English in different universities, including The University of Jordan, The Hashemite University, and The University of Texas at Arlington. Then, he has joined the academic staff of the Hashemite University since 2007. He works now as an Associate Professor of English literature at the Department of English Language and Literature in The Hashemite University, Jordan. During the years 2011-2013, he worked as Director of the Office of International Relations at the same university. In addition, he works now as Vice Dean of the Faculty of Arts. His research interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature, detective fiction, modern theories of literary criticism, and cultural studies. He has more than fifteen published articles in international refereed journals. Kifah Al Omari is a member of APETAU – Association of Professors of English and Translation at Arab Universities- since 2008. He is also a member of Arab Society of English Language Studies.

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Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 36, N° 26, (2020)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

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