

EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 5

The Eye of the Hand

Steve Hopkins

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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5. THE EYE OF THE HAND

Embodied Filmmaking as Movement Practice

Steve Hopkins (UK)

“Me, it’s not movement first.” (Prapto)¹

Although not as troublingly early as the first sit of the day at a Zen sesshin, it’s still cold enough for the morning chill to need blunting by a fire. I pile kindling and logs in the fireplace, enough to warm the cavernous shell of the huge old hall. Soon, Prapto and sleepy workshop participants arrive in ones and twos. We sit in two rows, facing one another, on rugs, cushions and chairs, settling into the quiet, still morning. Breath and blood, bone and mind, muscle and flesh; from the smallest cells of the body: “resting/inter-resting”, as Prapto puts it. It all starts here.

Over the next five days or so the 3m group – Prapto’s name for the meditation, movement and movie groups that have been a part of some of his workshops for the past ten years or so – will explore, express and re-view movement practice on film.² At the close of the workshop, we will show their film. But the aim of the 3m group is not to produce a beautiful film – though that may happen – because embodied film is a practice, rather than a product. And although I can draw upon a lifetime’s professional engagement with documentary, no prior experience of filmmaking is necessary:

1 All quotations from Prapto, unless otherwise indicated, are from unpublished transcripts of a series of interviews Prapto gave me for *Human Nature Spirit*, a film shot at a workshop held at La Bartra, Spain, in September 2011.

2 For ease of use, here and throughout I generally use the word ‘film’ when talking about moving pictures, regardless of the medium on which they were recorded.

embodied film is a matter of attention, attitude and engagement – where you are coming from – rather than technology or technique. It begins with sitting. As Vivian Sobchack (1992) observes, “Embodied perception, whether cinematic or human, is not lived theoretically”.

Accordingly, this account’s point of departure is, as film critic and screenwriter Yvette Biro puts it, “the function of the film as it has proved itself in practice, and not in the wishes and aspirations of theoreticians” (1992). Like Prapto, it seeks to stay rooted and to journey out, acknowledging “the primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception” (Gendlin 1992), and along the way to provide some answer to Laura Marks’s question, “if there is a return to the precious knowledge of the body and the senses, what is that knowledge to be used for?” (2004).

Opening Sequence: The Empty Axis

“How can we still listen of nature? How I can also be seen, or the nature see, or speak to me, or touch me, smell me, taste me? Not only I sensing of them, but the nature sensing of me, and my body sensory, or sensing, touch me, not only I touch the sensory or sensing of nature?” (Prapto)

Touching and being touched; seeing and being seen; hearing and being heard; in an image- and information-soaked culture, the questions Prapto asks himself about openness, receptivity and communication are as important for the 3m groups as they are for him.

Whether experienced movie makers or not, in a digital age we all come with a sophisticated understanding of the image; but the image is only the skin of embodied film. The body of practice lies beneath. To open to it, and to be opened by it, one needs to let go of preconceptions about film, image and story, and sink beneath the surface, in much the same way that meditation enables one to sink beneath other surfaces.

This isn’t about the truth claims of photography, its power to shock, or whether film or video or digital images more closely reflect reality, though all of those debates can be had; it’s about what avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage put this way:

“Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in

life through an adventure of perception... Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the ‘beginning was the word’” (1963).

It’s an invitation to a radical openness beyond concerns with narrative, documentary accuracy or realism, in and through which movement practice can be explored and expressed. Today, cheap digital cameras and iPhones have liberated the eye in ways Brakhage could scarcely have imagined, but the new possibilities they raise come with new dangers. Movement practice grounds embodied film, shifting its focus from the eye and head to the body and limbs, toward what David Abram calls a “thinking with the body”, the distributed sentience he identifies in a bird in flight (2010). It requires the kind of embodied connectedness that Helen Poynor, writing about Prapto’s work in 1986, describes:

“The body is seen as the central point where the vertical and horizontal planes meet. The vertical axis represents spirituality, our relationship to God, the cosmos and the underworld. The horizontal axis represents daily life and communications...we are reminded to keep connection with this central point, with our body on the earth in the here and now...” (1986)

Prapto sometimes refers to that central point as *the empty axis*. More a state of being than a physical place, its emptiness is characterised by that deep connectedness to the natural world which has led some to describe him as a modern day shaman. It’s not an inappropriate description: the radical openness and reframing implied by shamanism, challenges habituated responses and ways of seeing.

In the same way that photography’s new way of seeing at the end of the nineteenth century led to a letting go of some deeply held visual preconceptions, and at the end of the twentieth century digital cameras invited us to continue that journey, for filmmakers Prapto’s *empty axis* suggests a letting go on both physical and cultural levels, with many implications for narrative and structure, the physical use of the body in filming, and the place of mind.³ Together, these require a

³ Nuanced discussions of what ‘physical and cultural letting go’ implies can be found in Pitty (2005), Reeve (2011), and, in specifically Javanese terms, Hughes-Freeland (2008, 21). A radical perspective, going beyond the human to embrace animals and spirits, can be found in Vilaça (2005).

radical openness that remains physically connected but is not seduced by the visual sense or intellectualised. Prapto's suggestion as to how we might begin to realise this is quite simple:

"You know this concept? Resting, re-lease, inter-resting? I am resting. They are resting. I will develop from the earth, lying, sitting, crawling on the earth, create the wind."

The Frame: Moving in Not Moving

It is late in the afternoon by the time the 3m group makes its way out of the house and across the fields. A few hundred metres along the higher path, we stop. This will do. From here, the fields fall away in wide, curved terraces toward the valley. Wooded hills rise on either side, and in the distance La Garrotxa's mountains shimmer in the heat. I set the camera up, pointing it more or less at random across the fields, and flip open the monitor.

"Where there is attention, reality is." (Krishnamurti)

The frame is about attention, focus and boundary. The body is a frame. The mind is a frame. The bodymind... What is contained within the frame, and how we view it, is the subject of much writing about film⁴; how it is achieved technically, the subject of much writing about cinematography; and the concepts involved much discussed in media and cultural studies. But as we study the monitor, none of these much concern the 3m group. A busy, strenuous, physical day behind them, they settle slowly.

Prapto sometimes begins to work with *frame as window* at a very simple physical level. Melinda Buckwalter describes such a session:

"Prapto asks his students to use their arms to make windows to look through by opening and closing the shoulder, elbow, wrist, and finger joints as they move in space. Later the legs, the back, and the whole body are included in the activity. The windows open and close as the body moves, giving different views." (2010)

Before walking out across the fields the 3m group had begun to work with frame by using metre-long lengths of strong blue nylon cord. If you try to hold it up, the cord routinely frustrates any attempt to

4 E.g., 'Cinema as Window and Frame' in Elsaesser & Hagener (2010, 13-34).

create a static frame. Letting it – and preconceptions about frame – go produces quite different results. New frames emerge, boundaries are re-defined, bodies, and minds, relax.

Although the frame in our camera is far more rigidly defined, its 4:3 aspect ratio reflects the visual angle of human eyesight. As the film group contemplates the view it presents of the landscape, questions arise as new perceptions form. Had I deliberately sought to create this picture?⁵ No, not really. Then, as attention settles, a more subtle awareness of what is happening within the frame emerges: changing light, wind in the trees, people moving through the frame: arising, abiding and passing away.

As the group quietens, stillness deepens and other senses come to the fore: hearing seems more subtle and acute, birdsong and distant voices come into focus, we feel the heat on our skin. Some say that meditation has its roots in the quiet gaze into the fire in the cave, or in the kind of focused awareness, stillness and patience of the hunter on the plain, sitting quietly and watching as we are. We shift our weight, move around the camera, look out, beyond and around the frame. There's no attempt to move the camera, but any attempt to change the frame – perhaps to zoom in or out – immediately reveals the state of the body, illustrating, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, how “the art of seeing is entwined intimately with the act of being” (1992).

In both still and movie photography, digital cameras, iPhones and many other devices have radically changed the relationship of the body, and especially the eyes, to the frame. Liberated from the viewfinder, it's common for movers to use cameras and frames in increasingly free ways, responding, expressing and following – embodying, in fact – their movement, reconnecting us with a truth that Xenophanes, one of the very earliest Greek philosophers, understood: “it is the whole that sees, the whole that thinks, the whole that hears” (Ihde, 1976: 8-9).

Dusk begins to settle. We fold the viewfinder, pack up the camera and walk back to the house. Freeze frame. As at the end of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, we leave the scene with one image. It's another illusion. Even as the frame on the screen freezes, the film still runs through the projector, and our thoughts run wide: *moving in not moving*.⁵

⁵ For Prapto's own use of these terms, in diagrammatic form, see 'The Idea of Joged Amerta' (Suryodarmo 2013).

The Shot: Moving in Moving

The 3m group assembles on the steps of an old Victorian hall in the English countryside. Few have much, if any, experience of movie making. Each person will take the camera, shoot whatever they want for a minute, and hand it back to me. I then shoot something and pass it to the next person, and so on. All of this loosely framed by a walk down the long, tree-lined drive that runs from the house to the road. It's a ragged journey. Some take the camera and describe what they are shooting as if in a documentary, others move around, shooting trees, sky, leaves and track, some frame the journey as if we were in a road movie. At the close we have about thirty minutes of footage – Tim Ingold, theorist of lines, might call it 'the alongly integrated knowledge of the wayfarers' (2011).

“The shot is the movement-image.” (Gilles Deleuze)

If the frame in some way holds or defines the contemplative space of the film, the porous and shifting boundary between frame and action – mover and movement – is the shot. It reflects both what occurs in movement and is in and of itself movement: it has direction, angle, attitude, duration and revelation. The moment when the camera and its operator move, reveals both the physical and the mental state of the mover, where attention is, and where and how the body is: the embodied reality. If axis and frame ask questions about who we are, where we are coming from, and from where we look, the shot invites us to find answers in movement, and, especially when we take the camera in hand, reveals them to us. As Alva Noë says, “Perception is not something that happens to us. It is something that we do” (2004).

At the start of the walk, the nervousness of those of the 3m group who had never handled a movie camera before was palpable. Despite its ease of use, their shots were hesitant, jagged and uncertain. Prapto has sometimes said his practice arises “from the Buddha walking, rather than from the Buddha sitting” (Reeve 2009). As the 3m group walk down the track and let go of what they thought they should do, an ease and fluidity begin to emerge: a meditation that puts them into the stream.

The shot itself – its physicality, duration, staying and letting go, and the sense of what is happening outside the camera – intimately involves breath, touch, posture, attention and sensitivity. As they move down the track, the 3m group also come to understand

something about moving in and moving through, and how the difference between observing or participating changes one's relationship to the world. 'Holding that shot' becomes, to use Prapto's words, an exercise in *active/passive*.

The end of a shot – and the end of the shoot – represents a closing with the world through which embodied information about posture, relaxation and attention is revealed: the world, of course, goes on. Back in our bodies, and at the bottom of the track, we turn back toward the house, noticing the difference.

The shot is: *moving in moving*.

Editing: Finding Your Stopping

"Prapto says 'composing while dancing' is like recognizing ourselves in the dancing. 'Find your stoppings!,' he reminds us, 'then you can recognize your composition.'" Melinda Buckwalter (2010)

I am sitting in my office, listening intently to Prapto – is that 'axis,' or 'access,' or 'excess' – as he moves through a fast running Spanish river, trying to edit video shot more than six months before. The sound of the river rises and finally drowns out his words. I get up, go outside, reconnect with trees and my own riverbank, then email Paul, my editor – who is either 200 or 4,000 miles away – and get better versions of the sound files sent from Devon. I send Paul marked up transcripts, he sends back cut sequences. It's always a startlingly revelatory, emotional process, this letting go and reformulating. From the confusion and incoherence of hours of footage something that works begins to emerge, flickering across the computer screen.

As John Cage said, "we really need a structure, so we can see we are nowhere."

Editing is as much a letting go as a putting together. It begins not just after you've stopped recording, but at the very beginning, from the first moment the idea of a film arises. The stopping of editing, in Prapto's words, is an opportunity to *recognise your composition*. And although it might seem to represent a big step away from the embodied experience of filming toward the disembodied manipulation of information, it is increasingly recognised that abstract and decontextualised thought is both rooted in and grows

out of embodied cognition.⁶ Artists have long been ahead of this curve: “thinking” as Bill Viola puts it, “is a form of movement... art itself has always been a whole body experience” (1995).

Experimental filmmaker Maya Deren’s notebook reflects her own more visceral take on the embodied realities of film editing in the mechanical, celluloid age:

“The minute I began to put the Balinese footage through the viewer, the fever began... The immediate physical contact with the film, the nearness of the image – the fact that as I wound, my impulses and reactions towards the film translated themselves into muscular impulses and so to the film directly... All this seemed for me very important... this physical contact creates a sense of intimacy... (the film) is not an image independent of me, of which I am a spectator... It comes to life out of the energy of my muscles... this ultimate copulation between me and the film must take place, and out of it will be born the independent child...” (1947)

Deren’s physicality is echoed elsewhere. Bergman said that film is “inhalation and exhalation in continuous sequence”; Eisenstein, that “montage is the nerve of the cinema”; Bresson, that “film is born three times”: film’s body has a history as long as the medium. And though it is sometimes argued that video and digital have lessened or damaged the physical and artistic relationship of editor to image, emotional, felt responses remain fundamental to the process whatever medium is used.

Emotion, like much else in editing, is often thought of in pictorial terms, but it is at least as strongly triggered by sound. And here editing returns us to an often overlooked aspect of Prapto’s work: his purposive use of sound. Prapto commonly sings, chants and drums in workshops and performance, and that carries with it a psychophysical charge.⁷ For all that film is a visual medium, the brain is said to

⁶ See, for example, Wilson (1997).

⁷ Prapto’s use of sound is too complex a subject to be gone into in any detail here, embracing as it does the sacred traditions of Hindu chant, Buddhist mantra, and drumming that both echoes the gamelan and sometimes carries with it a shamanic force. He often asks that ‘Someone to Play’ be invited to his workshops, and has worked extensively with musicians. Elsewhere in this volume, Tim Jones and Sean Williams discuss examples of his practice.

process sounds a thousand times faster than images, and register sound even while we are asleep. In the womb, it is one of the first of our senses to be switched on, but at birth, as Walter Murch, who has won Oscars for both picture and sound editing, poetically puts it, “sound pulls a veil of oblivion across her reign and withdraws into the shadows” (2000). For 3m groups, whose access to editing is usually constrained by time and technology, the truth of Murch’s observation that “King Sight still sits on his throne (whilst) Queen Sound haunts the corridors of the palace”, is usually brought home by the often startling consequences of adding music to the films they have shot.

With Prapto’s words, and the sounds of the river, ringing in my ears, a structure emerges. His observation that in “Western culture they have more linear time... I really had culture shock with that” (Morgan 2011) now somehow seems in unexpected agreement with Jean-Luc Godard’s, that “a story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order” (Grøngaard 2001).

Endings: Blossoming in the Blessing

“As soon as we see other seers... henceforth, through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible... For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*⁸

I am sitting in a large hall with the 3m group at the end of a movement workshop. Roughly projected on a big, drop-down screen, the movie they have made unwinds before us. For most, it is the first time they have seen themselves in a film, let alone one they have made. Around us, another audience – the rest of the workshop – is gathered. I’m nervous that they won’t like the result, be bored or offended, but there’s no reason to be. As the movie plays out, gasps, sighs, laughter, shy looking away and, finally, applause. Just like it always is at the movies. “Films”, as Truffaut put it, “resemble the people who make them.”

Whether viewed intimately and informally on an iPhone, or publicly in a cinema, film’s intimate disclosing and sharing with an audience

⁸ Quoted in Sobchack (2004, 149).

of self and others is anything from as odd and subtle as catching a glimpse of yourself in a mirror to a transformative engagement. Laura Marks calls it ‘embodied contemplation’, and talks of ‘haptic visuality’: “a way of seeing and knowing which calls upon multiple senses without depending upon the presence of literal touch, smell or taste” (2000). Neurobiologists tell us mirror neurons show that the process is embodied. Vivian Sobchack writes that “the moving picture is a visible representation not of activity finished or past, but of activity coming into being and being... the very moment of vision itself” (2004).

However framed, viewing is a deeply embodied response. It also allows us, as Sharon Salzberg says of mindfulness, “to get better at seeing the difference between what’s happening and the stories we tell ourselves about what’s happening” (2010). In Prapto’s terms, film allows us to inhabit “*the space between the wind*”:

In *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art*, Chögyam Trungpa writes that “the basic problem in artistic endeavor is the tendency to split the artist from the audience and then try to send a message from one to the other. When this happens, art becomes exhibitionism... In meditative art, the artist embodies the viewer as well as the creator of the works. Vision is not separate from operation, and there is no fear of being clumsy or failing to achieve his aspiration” (2008). In the end, embodied filmmaking is not about doing something, or about being something: it is about being. As Prapto says: “*So I think the main how to be enjoy pleasure, perceiving, breathing, melody, rhythm. Blossoming in the blessing.*”

~ ~ ~

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