

Embodied female experience and haptic perception in *O Corno/The Rye Horn* (Jaione Camborda, 2023)

Daniel Mourenza

Facultat d'Informació i Mitjans Audiovisuals, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of women's embodied experiences in the Galician film *O Corno/The Rye Horn*, winner of the 2023 San Sebastián International Film Festival. Directed by Jaione Camborda, the film is part of the Novo Cinema Galego movement. Set in 1971 on the Illa de Arousa, the narrative follows María, a shellfish factory worker who also serves as a midwife and abortionist. I argue that the film prioritizes a sensorial and bodily-oriented mise-en-scène over more conventional forms of representation based on optical perception. Using feminist film phenomenology, this article examines the physicality and corporeality highlighted by critics, understanding the aesthetic reception encouraged by the film through concepts such as "embodied spectatorship" and "haptic images". The film pays special attention to the embodied experiences of women in vulnerable states, such as childbirth and abortion, emphasising their need for a social support network. In this article, I analyse and discuss the use of image and sound to enhance the sensuous perception of the characters' embodied experiences of pregnancy, sex and care.

KEYWORDS

Novo Cinema Galego; Spanish women filmmakers; film phenomenology; haptics; embodied spectatorship.

Introduction

O Corno / The Rye Horn (2023) won the Golden Shell at the 71st San Sebastián International Film Festival, becoming the first film directed by a Spanish woman to receive the festival's top prize. *O Corno* was also the first film in Galician to compete in the Official Competition and the first film in any of Spain's co-official languages to win the top award. Set on the Illa de Arousa, an island municipality in Galicia, in 1971, during the final years of Franco's dictatorship, the film tells the story of María (Janet Novás), a woman who works in a shellfish factory while also assisting women with childbirth and performing illegal abortions. Due to complications arising from one such abortion, María is forced to flee. With the help of a network of women, she manages to cross the border into Portugal. While the narrative primarily follows María, it occasionally shifts focus to other women, including the teenager Luisa (Carla Rivas) and the racialized migrant Anabela (Siobhan Fernandes).

O Corno is Jaione Camborda's second film, following *Arima* (2019), a low-budget production that took her fourteen years to complete. *Arima* premiered in November 2019 at the Seville European Film Festival, where it won the New Waves award. Its commercial release in February 2020, just weeks before the first COVID-19 lockdown, was discreet, attracting only 1,259 spectators. Nevertheless, the experience allowed Camborda to secure support for her second film from Andrea

Vázquez and María Zamora, producers known for films such as Óliver Laxe's *O que arde / Fire Will Come* (2019), Clara Roquet's *Libertad* (2021) and Carla Simón's *Alcarràs* (2022).

Originally from the Basque Country, Camborda has lived in Galicia for 15 years, and her work is associated with the heterogeneous Novo Cinema Galego. This movement is characterized by experimental aesthetics, the use of the Galician language and themes central to Galician culture, such as migration and rurality, with a particular focus on landscape. Novo Cinema Galego films are also known for their versatility on the festival circuit (Redondo Neira 2021) and this film is no exception. Camborda views Novo Cinema Galego as a familial network where members maintain close contact and support one another. For example, she has worked as an art director on films by Lois Patiño and Ángel Santos and as a screenwriter with Alfonso Zarauza.

This is the first film for actress Janet Novás, an accomplished and talented dancer and contemporary dance choreographer. Novás recognized that Camborda sought a strong woman who could express herself physically and choreograph certain scenes. Although the film is not thematically related to dance, it required an actress capable of expressing herself through physical movement rather than words. In this regard, dance critic Mercedes L. Caballero affirms that “el cuerpo de su protagonista Janet Novás cuenta cosas de principio a fin” (2023). At one of the premieres, Novás mentioned that she aimed to set aside psychology and instead focus on her corporeal expression. She also acknowledged that her acting was inspired by the tradition of Galician women with whom she grew up – women who spoke little and expressed themselves through their bodies. For her performance, Novás won the Goya Award for Best New Actress, the film's only nomination.

In their reviews of *O Corno*, critics emphasized the physicality of the film, describing it as “un cine de cuerpos, físico y sensorial” (Zurro, 2023), “una lírica de los cuerpos” (Albero 2023) and “un itinerario intensamente físico desde el primero hasta el último de los fotogramas” (Heredero 2023). Àlex Montoya wrote that *O Corno* “apuesta por la fisicidad, en la vida y en la muerte, en el sexo y en el llanto, en el baile y en la magia” (2023), while Jessica Kiang declared that the cinematography is “so tactile you can almost feel the wet grey sand of the Galician island setting under your toes” (2023). Journalists also noted that several audience members fainted during various screenings of the festival, particularly during the intense, nearly 10-minute opening scene depicting a woman in labour. However, Camborda suggested that the fainting incidents might have been due to the hot weather.

In this article, I will analyse the physicality and corporeality that critics have identified as central features of the film. My argument is that Camborda seeks to express and convey to spectators that experiences such as childbirth and abortion are profoundly embodied and cannot be fully understood without recognising their corporeal and sensual nature. In other words, if such experiences are only communicated cognitively, as mere narrative events, much of their significance is lost. I will argue that this film rejects dominant forms of representation based on optical perception in favour of a more sensory and bodily-oriented *mise-en-scène*. The film invites a corporeal perception, fostering what has been termed “embodied spectatorship”. The fainting incidents during screenings could perhaps be partially attributed to the intense, physical and corporeal form of spectatorship that the film encourages.

I argue that the corporeal perception privileged by the film should be examined through the lens of film phenomenology. Since the 1990s, film phenomenology has argued that cinema cannot be understood as a disembodied experience in which critics engage in purely rational interpretation of a film's meaning. As Vivian Sobchack asserts, “the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of*

our bodies but because of our bodies" (2004, 60). *O Corno* emphasizes a sensory aesthetics that favours an embodied perception; an aesthetics that can be described as haptic. According to Laura Marks, haptic images "invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well" (2000, 2). I contend that through a haptic mise-en-scène, Jaione Camborda powerfully conveys the embodied experiences of women regarding pregnancy, sex and care.

Katharina Lindner argues that this shift away from an exclusive emphasis on the gaze towards other senses is linked not only to new developments in film theory but also to changes in filmmaking practices (2012, 202). The increasing number of women filmmakers in recent years has also resulted in more films that convey experiences based on senses other than sight. Silvia Guillamón-Carrasco and Yanire Márquez Etxabe suggest that contemporary Spanish films made by women are trending towards a type of cinema that could be conceived of as haptic. This cinema critiques and deconstructs a hegemonic model of spectatorship based on voyeurism and scopophilia, proposing instead "a mode of representation that evokes the characters' corporeal experiences, appealing to our senses and bringing us closer to the intimacy invoked by the affections and emotions we see on the screen" (Guillamón-Carrasco 2020, 138).

Márquez Etxabe argues that haptic cinema is not necessarily feminine but challenges a voyeuristic approach that objectifies women. She also asserts that the sensory experiences of men and women differ, quoting director Inés París as confirmation: "La experiencia que yo he tenido de un embarazo, una maternidad, por poner un ejemplo muy obvio, es diferente a la de los hombres. Las experiencias físicas y corporales claramente son distintas" (2019, 15). Susan Martin-Márquez has similarly examined the work of Isabel Coixet, concluding that her cinema moves away from ocularcentrism by focusing on a "broader range of everyday sensory experiences" (2013, 551) and using haptic techniques that incorporate spectators into the film (2013, 559). In addition to Coixet, Guillamón-Carrasco and Márquez Etxabe identify other Spanish directors within this tradition of haptic cinema, such as Judith Colell, Paula Ortiz, Mar Coll and Carla Simón—a list that could be expanded to include many other filmmakers, such as Clara Roquet, Elena Martín, Alauda Ruiz de Azúa, Elena López Riera and, of course, Jaione Camborda.

In this article, I will analyse *O Corno* based on my embodied experience of watching the film for the first time in the cinema. To do so, I will engage with relevant theories in film phenomenology that explore the bodily relationship spectators establish with the cinema screen. My argument is that, although all films are ultimately perceived from an embodied and historically situated perspective, some films promote a more sensory perception than others, and this is primarily constructed through the mise-en-scène. Therefore, I will pay special attention to Camborda's mise-en-scène, particularly to those scenes that emphasize the embodied experience of women in situations of childbirth, maternity, abortion and sex. Finally, I will reflect on the feminist network of care depicted in the film. I claim that *O Corno* succeeds in rendering the experience of being a woman in its fully embodied nature. This experience is constructed through a haptic mise-en-scène that cannot be perceived solely through sight and sound; it demands engagement with the entire body. This approach compels spectators to embody and re-enact the experiences of the characters onscreen from their seats.

The embodied experience of childbirth

In one of the most important texts on film phenomenology, Vivian Sobchack reflects on her embodied experience while watching *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), a film that, she said, “moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body” (2004, 63). She describes how her fingers reacted to the first shot of the film—an extreme close-up of the protagonist’s fingers—before her intellect did. Sobchack argues that this experience is not exceptional, asserting that we “see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (63). Nonetheless, Sobchack acknowledges that some films appeal to our sensory capacities more than others. The example of *The Piano* is not incidental; particularly in the early stages of the film, there are numerous shots of hands that emphasize Ada’s attachment to her piano and her daughter, along with images and sounds that highlight the water, wind and other elements their bodies endure. Sobchack describes this experience as “a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience of the movies” (65). Following Sobchack, I will argue that *O Corno* is one of those films that heighten our sensuous experience through a complexly crafted mise-en-scène.

The film’s opening scene has garnered significant attention from critics due to its intensity and ability to captivate the audience (Messeguer 2023; Alberio 2023; Montoya 2023; Pérez 2023; Ocaña 2023). This approximately 9-minute scene depicts a woman in labour. Unlike many cinematic portrayals of childbirth, this scene does not focus primarily on the delivery itself, which is shown only offscreen at the end. Instead, it emphasizes the contractions and the moments of rest in between. In interviews, director Jaione Camborda explained that she aimed to depict women’s labour from a highly physical perspective. She noted that cinema often approaches childbirth psychologically, even hysterically, concentrating on the delivery and neglecting the preceding moments, such as contractions and the pauses between them (Borrull 2023). Camborda, who has given birth to two children, wanted to convey the full experience of giving birth physically, instead of psychologically.

The first scene shows a childbirth in which the woman in labour, Carmen (Julia Gómez), is at home, surrounded and cared for by a group of women: her mother, her daughter Luisa and María. Carmen’s pain is conveyed through sounds of her panting, moaning and heavy breathing, as well as through images of her bodily expressions and her tactile interactions with the midwife, who supports her by holding her body, wiping her forehead with a soaked cloth, and providing physical support during the most intense moments of delivery. The space is entirely feminine, but during a pause between contractions, Carmen’s husband enters. He kisses and hugs Carmen in a shot that vividly and corporeally captures their emotional bond.

Various shots focus on Luisa’s eyes observing the action. In a way, we experience the scene through her perspective, yet we are also inside the room, feeling and understanding the scene, as Luisa does, with all our bodily senses—even after she leaves. Sound plays a particularly important role in this scene. Carmen’s moans, groans and heavy breathing resonate with our bodies, emphasising the embodied experience of pain and exhaustion during childbirth. Laura Marks argues that “sound is a sense perception that is ‘closer’ to the body than sight” (2002, 117). She asserts that sound can be haptic when it cannot be reduced to simple signification, such as dialogue. In other words, sound is haptic “insofar as it is experienced kinesthetically” (2000, xvi). As an example, she references the effects of deep bass tones and other rhythms on the body. Non-verbal sounds such as moans, groans and panting, heard in this and other scenes in the film, are similarly not apprehended solely by our intellect. They convey the embodied experience of the character’s pain and reach not only our ears but our entire bodies.

Most of the shots in this scene are medium shots and close-ups, concentrating on the physicality of the delivery, particularly the woman’s body in labour and the tactile relationship

between her and the midwife. This audiovisual depiction of the embodied experience of labour is particularly intense. When I first watched the film in the cinema, I felt the intensity and physicality of the scene within my own body, as though the images and sounds were not merely touching me but also kicking me. The scene is, in short, highly immersive. It invites you to engage with the scene using your entire body.

The temporality of the scene is significant. Although time is clearly condensed—since the event portrayed would take much longer in real life—the scene does not concentrate solely on the action. Rather, it emphasizes the sensory experience of those present in the room. In this sense, the haptic portrayal of the childbirth scene prioritizes sounds and images that are embodied by the audience. The scene becomes very intense, not only physically but also temporally, as the film focuses from very close on small movements and gestures, rather than on the whole narrative of giving birth to a baby.

Although the experience can vary from one spectator to another, depending on their particular history and way of relating to the world, the *mise-en-scène* conveys labour very physically as an embodied experience, which the spectator also feels. Like Luisa's gaze, our vision participates in this experience, but it is an embodied vision interwoven with other senses. Here, sight cannot be a distant sense through which we rationally engage with the screen. The eyes partake in the reception, together with our bodily sensorium, modulating our sense of embodiment and, to use Jennifer Barker's terminology, appealing to our viscera (2009).

Film phenomenology critiques the mirror identification proposed by psychoanalysis, in which spectators are expected to identify rationally with characters onscreen. Instead, authors of film phenomenology discuss ways in which spectators establish a sensuous, physical relationship with the image. Laura Marks, for instance, argues that "[h]aptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure – a sensory-motor reaction – so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (2000, 164). Vivian Sobchack introduces the term "cinesthetic subject" to describe the spectator immersed in the film experience. This subject, she contends, both touches and is touched by the screen and is capable of "experiencing the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen" (2004, 71). Kate Ince suggests that a bodily relationship with cinema may involve some form of identification, but it always emerges from the spectator's embodied, affective relationships with the world and others (2011). Similarly, Jennifer Barker argues that meaning and emotions do not reside solely in the film or the spectator but in the "embodied encounter between film and viewer" (2009, 15). In this context, Katharina Lindner adds an important insight about the encounter between spectators and the film. She posits that some spectators may be more receptive to a sensorial and corporeal relationship with cinema if they have "a particular history of tactile or kinaesthetic engagement with the world" (2012, 200-201).

These authors elucidate various ways in which spectators may engage bodily with a film and how their reactions may differ based on their personal experiences. For instance, a woman who has recently given birth would undoubtedly experience this scene differently from those who have not, reacting to the film in a distinctive bodily manner. Through this engagement with film phenomenology scholars, I aim to emphasize that, in narrative cinema, identification can arise corporeally – not only with a character but also with the bodies onscreen – through a *mise-en-scène* that is inherently both visual and aural. Indeed, the more spectators immerse themselves in and surrender to the world onscreen, the more likely they are to feel and embody the sensations experienced by the characters. This identification occurs not necessarily through the characters' psychology but through a heightened focus on their corporeal experiences.

Haptic aesthetics

Haptic images are typically understood as conveying touch through optical means, “as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes” (Marks 2000, xi). However, as we have seen, Laura Marks conceives haptic images as those that, through the *mise-en-scène*, favour an embodied reception, “a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” (2000, 164). Thus, it is at the level of the film’s aesthetics that haptic perception can be encouraged in the spectators, although it ultimately depends on their individual experience and way of relating to the world. Marks defines haptic perception as “the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies” (2000, 162). In other words, we experience haptic images and sounds not only through touch but also through other senses and perceptual processes within our bodies. Jennifer Barker argues that spectators respond to film at three levels:

haptically, at the tender surface of the body; kinaesthetically and muscularly, in the middle dimension of muscles, tendons, and bones that reach toward and through cinematic space; and viscerally, in the murky recesses of the body, where heart, lungs, pulsing fluids, and firing synapses receive, respond to, and reenact the rhythms of cinema. (2009, 3)

Similarly, Sobchack argues that we not only perceive but also give meaning to the film with our entire sensorium: “our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to see and to hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension, gravity, and movement in the world” (2004, 60). Therefore, according to film phenomenology, films are not only perceived with the eye and the ear, not even with the five traditional senses, but with all our bodily being, including proprioception, kinesthetics and interoception.

Another film phenomenology scholar, Scott C. Richmond, has explored the centrality of proprioception in cinema. He defines proprioception as “the set of perceptual processes whereby we orient ourselves in and coordinate ourselves with the world” (2016, 6). For Richmond, proprioception is not a sense in itself but a process of self-perception that involves all sense modalities. He characterizes cinema as a technology that disorders and reorders spectators’ perceptions, continuously modulating our proprioception. Indeed, he argues that, from its inception, “the cinema’s vocation of manifesting a world unfolding before us onscreen is fundamentally proprioceptive” (6). Therefore, our bodily presence is continuously appealed to and altered by the stories presented onscreen. I will argue that *O Corno*, through its haptic aesthetics, directly addresses our bodies and, therefore, also our own embodied position *in* and *of* the world.

The opening titles appear after the first scene, around ten minutes into the film. In the following scenes, the narrative focuses on Luisa. It is as if the eyes shown at the beginning facilitate our identification with her, although this focus does not last long. The first scene depicts her running on the beach with other girls, establishing that Luisa is an outstanding runner. This skill may enable her to earn a scholarship to study in Vigo and compete in athletics at the national level, information revealed in the next scene and further discussed in a conversation between Luisa and María later in the film. However, this running scene also contributes to the portrayal of physical exhaustion depicted in the childbirth scene. Close-ups show the girls’ feet and the footprints they leave on the sand. Other shots focus on the bodies of the girls and Luisa, who eventually overtakes them.

While watching this scene in the cinema, I found myself moving my feet and toes as Luisa ran. My muscles were still tired from a running workout the day before, during which I did similar reps. This physical resonance enabled me to feel the exhaustion depicted in the scene within my own muscles. This experience illustrates that our bodies may react differently to various audio-visual impressions depending, as Sobchack suggests, on the history and carnal knowledge of our sensorium.

Close shots prevail throughout the film, with little space left above the characters. Camborda explains that she wanted to anchor them to the earth and avoid an easy portrayal of the beautiful landscapes of Illa de Arousa: “Me interesaba un paisaje con poco cielo, con mujeres apegadas a la tierra. Quería que el paisaje envolviera al personaje, por eso no quería planos generales, más postales con belleza abrumadora” (Cantó 2023). In this quotation, she suggests a shift away from contemplation towards a more haptic approach. Walter Benjamin associates contemplation with the reception of traditional art, particularly painting, where the viewer engages with the artwork primarily through sight, “at a distance of two meters from the body” (1999, 4–5). In contrast, he links film to the type of perception that Alois Riegl attributes to architecture, where sight alone is insufficient to apprehend the building; instead, it is perceived through a combination of tactile and optical stimuli (2002, 120). Today, we might argue that the passerby who notices a building does so not merely through touch and sight, as Benjamin asserts, but through their entire proprioceptive system, experiencing the building from the situatedness of their own body. Nevertheless, some films encourage a contemplative mode of reception, allowing viewers to appreciate the beauty of the landscapes on screen, a characteristic that has been often associated with the Novo Cinema Galego (Redondo Neira 2021, 208). *O Corno*, however, promotes a tactile, bodily reception, closely connected to the materiality of the bodies and objects depicted. As Camborda explains, the women in the film are connected to the earth, to other people and to the animals they live with. This material relationship is conveyed through close-ups of hands that touch or are touched, caress and grab, as seen in the shot concluding the first sequence, showing María cleaning her hands after the birth.

The scene of Luisa’s date with her boyfriend similarly begins with close-ups of their hands picking blackberries from a tree. When they kiss, the camera shows their mouths in extreme close-up, emphasising their carnal relationship to the point where the shape of their bodies is almost blurred. Luisa’s boyfriend kisses her with a blueberry in his mouth, and an extreme close-up of a red drop falling down Luisa’s neck invites both material and symbolic interpretations (see Kiang 2023). Another shot emphasizes Luisa’s physical relationship with the world: on the shellfish platform where she works with her father, she touches and tosses the mussels into her bucket. A close-up highlights the physicality of her hands handling the mussels. However, her father instructs her to stir the mussels more quickly, suggesting a more masculine and less tactile approach to the work. Interestingly, the camera does not show the father handling the mussels; instead, the shot remains focused on the conversation between father and daughter.

Another scene depicts Luisa’s mother with her newborn baby in a beautiful and extended close-up shot. The mother brings the baby close to her breast and the baby, crying, dithers before finding the nipple and beginning to suck – a process that takes some time and is filled with the baby’s cries. This image depicts a deeply carnal and material relationship between mother and baby. The experience of breastfeeding is rendered in very sensuous terms, aiming to replicate the tactile experience of a mother nursing her baby. This image not only haptically conveys the physical nature of that experience but also highlights the mammalian nature of women, a point that Camborda has emphasized in interviews and to which I will return later in the article. Our proprioceptive sense is

engaged through a carnal identification that is not necessarily with either the mother or the baby alone, but with the bodily encounter between the two.

The embodied experience of abortion

Camborda has acknowledged in interviews that she was not interested in maternity per se, but in “la idea de la mujer como mamífero capaz de dar vida. Y así como es capaz de dar vida, también cómo esto está relacionado con la muerte” (Pena 2023). In other words, she sought to explore women’s biological capacity for giving birth without focusing solely on childbearing and stress women’s responsibility to decide over their bodies. Phenomenological accounts of pregnancy and childbirth view these experiences as manifestations of “embodied vulnerability”, characterized by unpredictability and inherent violence. Jennifer Scuro critiques the normative assumption that “all meaning of pregnant embodiment rests on the production of a child”, emphasizing that pregnancy frequently involves loss, death and violence, which are intrinsic to the experience (2017, xii—xiii).

Camborda’s words resonate with Scuro’s critique of understanding embodied pregnancy as equivalent to the phenomena of labour, childbirth and motherhood, noting that the experience of pregnancy may not lead to such outcomes and is experienced differently by different women (2017, ix). For this reason, abortion is depicted in the film in parallel with, and between, two scenes of childbirth. Abortion is depicted as an embodied phenomenon of vulnerability that is inherently violent.

Luisa seeks out María because she has missed her period for the past three months and wishes to terminate the pregnancy. Even as a teenager, she would be forced into marriage to “rectify” the pregnancy; however, if the father refused to marry and recognize the child, she would face social stigma as a single – and underage – mother. Luisa explains to María that she is undergoing bodily changes, underscoring that pregnancy is, above all, an embodied experience. At the time, both contraception and abortion were illegal in Spain. Nevertheless, abortion procedures and techniques were passed down orally and performed clandestinely. In rural areas, the voluntary termination of pregnancy was often carried out by individuals without formal medical training, typically in straw lofts or other places with minimal health standards. Women seeking an abortion were supported by a network of solidarity among other women – friends, neighbours and midwives – who shared common knowledge and offered domestic remedies (Nash 1988, 22). In the film, it is known within the town that María not only assisted in births but also performed abortions – as many midwives actually did. Despite María’s initial reluctance, she eventually agrees to help when Luisa threatens to attempt the abortion herself.

Following a brief legalization of abortion during the Second Republic – first in Catalonia and later in the loyalist areas during the Civil War – abortion was recriminalized under Franco. Legislation that sought to control women’s bodies and restrict them to a reproductive role was first formalized in 1941 through a law for the “protection of natality, against abortion and contraceptionist propaganda”, and later by the 1944 Civil Code. Under these laws, healthcare professionals were required to report any abortion they encountered, even spontaneous ones. Sentences were imposed not only on women who underwent abortions but also on those who assisted them. As a result, abortions were driven underground and, in most cases, were carried out by women, particularly in rural areas (López Fernández 2022, 652-55).

The abortion scene in the film mirrors the opening birth scene. It is a lengthy sequence that does not focus on the procedure of the abortion itself but rather on Luisa’s experience, rendered in a

deeply embodied manner. María gives Luisa a drink made from a black fungus that grows on the ears of rye. In earlier scenes, María is shown gathering the fungus in a rye field and preparing the drink. This fungus, commonly known in Galicia as “corno” (horn), gives the film its title and was traditionally used, not only in Galicia but across Europe, to prepare an infusion that would induce contractions, thereby triggering labour or, in the early stages of pregnancy, an abortion (López Fernández 2022, 665).

After giving Luisa the drink, María lays her down, holds her by the back of the head and touches her forehead, while singing a traditional Galician song. This song, which functions as a kind of lullaby, is intended to relax her before the abortion. As spectators, we know what is coming and we are tense. Nonetheless, thanks to the song and the caresses, the *mise-en-scène* provides a moment of relaxation. Then, the sound of Luisa yelling and moaning, together with close-ups of her face in pain and an extreme close-up of her hand gripping the sheets, conveys her suffering. However, at no point do we see what María is doing. An extreme close-up of two blood drops on the white towel beneath Luisa are the only visual evidence – besides Luisa’s bodily expressions – of the abortion. There is no need to show explicit images of this clandestine abortion to depict it as an experience of pain and violence against the female body – caused, among other reasons, by the criminalization of contraception and abortion. Indeed, the event is portrayed as an embodied experience of vulnerability, not very different from the childbirth scene, as indicated by the similar haptic sounds of moaning and screaming.

Visual and embodied perception

After the abortion, the film transitions to a very different scene that depicts the celebrations of Saint John’s Eve in the town. After leaving Luisa, María arrives at the festival, where a band plays music and the magician Mago Barreiro (Diego Anido) is introduced. The magician asks a lady from the audience to come on stage and places her inside a box, with only her legs and head protruding. Then, the magician saws the lady in half with two blades and moves the two boxes apart to show that she is indeed in two pieces. The scene is shot from the audience’s point of view. Counter-shots reveal people, including children, watching the spectacle and expressing awe as the woman is “cut” in half. Thus, we see the trick from the perspective of the spectators, from a distance, which is necessary to maintain the illusion of the lady being sawn in half.

This scene is particularly interesting because it presents the woman as an object, in contrast to the rest of the film, where the female characters’ corporeality is portrayed through close, intimate and subjective perspectives that allow us to empathize sensuously with their feelings. Thus, this scene underscores the traditional roles of women as passive and men as active, which Laura Mulvey identified in classical Hollywood cinema in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. In this scene, the woman appears in her traditional exhibitionist role, “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (2009, 19). Although she is not presented as an erotic object, a power dynamic is still established through the act of looking. This dynamic exemplifies scopophilia, which Mulvey defines as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (2009, 17).

In this scene, the magician does not even need to touch the woman to cut her in half. She lies down, and he inserts two large mirror-blades into the boxes. While women in classical cinema were often fragmented by shots focusing on their legs, necks or faces, the woman on stage in *O Corno* is literally cut into pieces. Vivian Sobchack and Linda Williams have criticized Mulvey for using a psychoanalytic approach in her critique of classical cinema. They argue that Mulvey, in her essay,

conceives of visual pleasure as “grounded in a voyeuristic gaze whose pleasure presumes a distanced, decorporealized, monocular eye mastering all it surveils but not physically implicated in the objects of its vision” (Williams qtd. in Sobchack 2004, 59). Sobchack contends that any pleasure we derive as spectators is never fully rendered through a single sense, as spectatorship is always an embodied experience. This scene emphasizes that the all-powerful gaze can only be a fantasy – just as the woman being sawn in half is a fantasy – since we always perceive reality from an embodied perspective. The scene provides a distant view to underscore that this spectacle, to render its fantasy, must be perceived with the eyes alone, i.e. disembodied. This contrasts with the rest of the film, where the experience of women is always embodied and conveyed haptically.

The scene following the magic trick in *O Corno* brings us back to a closer, more intimate focus on the body. After exchanging glances while dancing, María and the magician Juan Barreiro engage in a furtive sex scene in a rye field – likely the same one where María gathered the ergot fungus for the abortion. For the single, middle-aged María, sexuality remains clandestine, as she cannot freely enjoy her sexual experiences. The sound and imagery heighten the scene’s sensuality and corporeality: close-ups capture Juan licking María’s body, her skin, the scar on her belly and sucking her breasts. During their sexual encounter, the shots focus on María’s face and her moans, culminating in an extreme close-up of her hand grabbing the earth as she reaches orgasm. As in the scenes of labour and abortion this sex scene conveys the experience through María’s moans – this time of pleasure – without focusing on the genitalia. The film thus establishes a parallel between these different moments related to sex: coitus, parturition and abortion.

This sequence presents two contrasting approaches to engaging with the body. The first scene, featuring the magic trick, maintains a distance and relies on sight, rather than touch, to establish a power relationship. In contrast, the subsequent sex scene is more tactile and literally down-to-earth. There is a debate regarding whether tactility represents a more feminine mode of perception. Luce Irigaray criticizes the “predominance of the visual” and the “dominant scopic economy” in Western civilisation for placing women in a passive position as “the beautiful object of contemplation.” She argues that women “take pleasure more from touching than from looking” and posits that female genitalia are more tactile than visual (1985, 25-26). Laura Marks does not consider touch an inherently feminine sense. She rather regards conveying tactility through haptic images as “a feminist visual strategy” (2002, 7), for it moves away from an optical representation.

The spectacle scene is the only instance in the film that favours masculine scopophilia, positioning women as objects of contemplation. By emphasising its nature as spectacle and fantasy, the film suspends our reliance on sight, shifting the focus to the tactile and corporal. In the rest of the film, the *mise-en-scène* conveys an embodied experience of feeling through a more haptic representation. The bodily experiences of women giving birth, having sex and undergoing an abortion are rendered through image and sound, aiming to make spectators physically feel the characters’ experiences. Thus, women’s experiences are not merely presented before the spectators’ eyes but are re-enacted within the audience’s own bodies. Consequently, the film demands a very intense act of spectatorship.

A network of care

The second part of the film loses the intensity of the first forty minutes. The narrative takes an abrupt turn when Teresa (María Lado) visits María the following day to inform her that Luisa has died and that she must flee. According to the 1944 Civil Code, midwives who assisted in consensual

induced abortions faced prison sentences of between six months and six years. If the woman died, the sentences were extended to twelve to twenty years (López Fernández 2022, 654). Although only around 1% of abortions were discovered by the authorities, the chances of detection increased in cases of complications, often due to seeking medical assistance or denunciations (López Fernández 2022, 660).

When María learns of Luisa's death, she weeps. However, the film does not dwell on judgment or (self-)criticism, instead swiftly shifting its focus to María's breakout. The remainder of the film follows her attempt to cross into Portugal and start a new life beyond the reach of Spanish authorities. Critic Enric Alberó notes that, at this point, the film "muda de estudio ambiental de una comunidad cerrada a *road movie* supervivencial tras un giro de guion" (2023). To be fair, the journey occupies only a small portion of the film's runtime, making its classification as a road movie seem exaggerated. Nevertheless, the narrative clearly shifts direction. María initially departs by boat and later travels by lorry to a town near the Portuguese border. Subsequently, she crosses the river separating Spain from Portugal on a smuggler's boat, though part of the journey must be completed by swimming. The film thus moves away from the enclosed world of Illa d'Arousa and centres on the migrant experience. Characters such as Anabela, the Portuguese woman in the tavern and María herself are migrants who must evade border authorities while navigating the illicit activities of smugglers who profit from the border's liminal reality.

Up to this point, María has been depicted as a caregiver for Carmen, her baby and Luisa. Now, she is cared for by a network of women who assist in her escape. Teresa instructs her to go to Forcadela, where her cousin, who works in a tavern, will help her cross into Portugal. In the film's second half, the shots become longer and fewer close-ups are used, diminishing the physicality that characterized the earlier scenes. The narrative seems to prioritize the unfolding events over the protagonist's embodied experience, even though acts of care continue to play a central role.

The film has been acclaimed for its portrayal of a network of sorority based on caring (Martínez 2023; Messeguer 2023; Cantó 2023; Montoya 2023). María tends to Carmen during her labour and offers advice on caring for her baby. She also supports Luisa during her abortion. In the second half, Teresa, Mabel and Anabela care for María as she escapes. At the end, Anabela proposes that María stay in her home and care for her child at night while she goes to work, establishing a mutual care arrangement. In all these instances, care is depicted as inherently female, representing an act of solidarity among women who understand and assist each other.

Nevertheless, viewing care as inherently female risks essentialising women and reinforcing their relegation to reproductive labour. Silvia Federici argues that housework—now often referred to as care work—has been imposed on women and "transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (2012, 16). Care work, according to Federici, has been naturalized because capitalism requires women to believe that housework is not work but rather a fulfilling activity, and therefore it should remain unwaged. The perception of housework as something other than work also prevents women from struggling against it and, by extension, from challenging the social role of women as carers (2012, 19).

Fiona Robinson similarly acknowledges the feminization of care work but argues that certain ethics of care should be preserved. For Robinson, care ethics should be integrated with politics, asserting the value of care while simultaneously challenging the norms that govern it. On the one hand, "care must be recognized as a social responsibility, an attribute of citizenship, and a basis of feminist solidarity" (2015, 308); on the other hand, care must be made more visible to "challenge the

norms and structures that continue to degrade, devalue, and feminize care work”, alongside the “gender inequities, racializations, and economic and geopolitical implications” these structures produce (2015, 306-07).

O Corno could be criticized for emphasizing care as something inherently feminine, implying that the reproductive work is a female attribute. However, care in the film could also be viewed as a feminist strategy of solidarity. Moreover, the film can be praised for making visible (and sensuously recognizable) the social significance of care and the extent to which it is gendered and racialized. Acts of care are embodied acts experienced primarily at the level of the body, both for the carer and the cared-for. The scenes of childbirth, breastfeeding and abortion, analysed earlier, depict these moments of care as intense, embodied acts lived in and through the body. Unfortunately, the moments of care in the second half are rendered less haptically, and the experiences are not transmitted as vividly as in the earlier scenes. Mabel provides María with shelter, sustenance, protection and guidance on how to cross the border. However, these acts of care – perhaps because they need to avoid direct contact – are not depicted through tactile, embodied interactions. In contrast, in the scene with Mabel’s deaf-mute daughter, there is a moment of physical connection as she traces a smile on María’s face with her fingers. Nevertheless, the decision to make the character mute appears to be a somewhat awkward attempt to prioritize non-verbal communication over spoken language.

Anabela is one of the caregivers in the network of solidarity woven around María. She can be seen as a mirror-character for María, as she is another migrant struggling to make a living. However, Anabela highlights a critical difference: she is racialized. In other words, she is denied certain job opportunities because she is black. Another mirror-character for María is the Portuguese woman drinking in the tavern at the Galician border. This woman crossed the border and grew older in a foreign country, possibly for reasons similar to María’s. She drinks and listens to fados on the Portuguese radio, feeding her *saudade* – a situation that María might find herself in a few years. Finally, Luisa represents a younger María, having also undergone an abortion as a teenager. Ultimately, these women care for each other because they understand their similarities, but also their differences.

Variety critic Jessica Kiang argues that, despite the film’s ostensibly feminist stance, it ends up beatifying motherhood and reducing women to “our most basic biological instincts for survival and reproduction” (2023). While the film certainly addresses motherhood – or rather, as I noted at the beginning of this article, the bodily capacities of women to give life – it does not criticize abortion or being childless, contrary to what the critic suggests. Kiang’s criticism, however, does highlight a valid concern regarding the film’s emphasis on the mammalian nature of humans. At times, the film shows female bodies as part of a natural and biological cycle, overlooking to some extent the cultural mediation of sensations and, indeed, our very bodies. For example, the violence endured by the women in the film is not only a natural phenomenon but also a cultural one, shaped by a patriarchal society that regulates women’s bodies and confines them to roles centred around motherhood or, as in Anabela’s case, prostitution – a dynamic that was intensified in Franco’s Spain and Salazar’s Portugal.

The emphasis on humans as mammals is particularly problematic in a scene. The beautiful shot of the baby slowly managing to suckle at her mother’s breast is replicated twice in the film as Oedipal fantasies involving adult men. First, the magician Barreiro suckles María’s breast in a close-up during the sex scene. Secondly, and more disturbingly, a client pays extra money to sex worker and recent mother Anabela to suckle at her lactating breast. In this latter instance, the shot is wider, and Anabela looks away in discomfort. Although this scene critiques the man’s behaviour, the

repetition of these three images underscores the mammalian nature of humans and, to some extent, might justify such male fantasies. While it is important to recognize our similarity to other animals in the way we are nurtured and raised, it is crucial to remember that sexuality is thoroughly gendered.

In the second half of the film, the images and sound lose their haptic quality. There are few close-up shots that emphasize the physicality of María's body. One such shot occurs during her journey to Forcadela, where María is seen placing her wounded feet in a river. Another close-up, while she is concealed in the cellar of Mabel's tavern, shows María running a knife across her wrist, probably considering suicide. Additionally, there are two extreme close-ups during the scene where Mabel prepares María as a sex worker to cross the border. One focuses on the application of golden eyeshadow to María's eyelid, while the other shows red lipstick being applied to her lips. Finally, when María begins working in the potato harvest, one of the few shots that highlights manual labour depicts her picking potatoes from the soil. Later, she starts feeling nauseous and vomits. These bodily experiences of nausea and vomiting, however, are not depicted haptically; instead, they function as narrative clues suggesting her possible pregnancy.

Conclusion

The scene depicting a herd of cows crossing the river Miño towards the end of the film has captured the attention of many critics (Pena 2023; Heredero 2023; Kiang 2023). María watches from the shore, smiling as she observes a little calf swimming after its mother. This scene shares the contemplative stance on the landscape which is typical of many films from the Novo Cinema Galego. Now, beyond its visual appeal, this scene is intriguing in terms of proprioception. Apart from the empathy with the protagonist, who looks at the cow from a distance, spectators can bodily empathize with the efforts of the cows struggling in the water. Personally, I found myself in the cinema moving my feet, as if I wanted to float in the water, a sensation I also experienced earlier when María is thrown into the water from the rowboat. The scene unfolds slowly, showing the cows exiting the water and continuing on their way. A traditional song begins to play over this serene imagery, seamlessly leading into the film's final scene.

The final scene mirrors the opening, depicting another childbirth, this time María's. Anabela assists her, providing the social support she needs during this vulnerable moment. The scene is captured in a single take that focuses on María's face, displaying her expressions of pain and effort during the delivery. The baby only enters the frame at the end, when María hugs the child against her body to do skin-to-skin contact. However, the scene lacks direct sound, with the song from the previous scene continuing as the only auditory element. This absence of sound makes the scene feel less physical and haptic. Although the images are similar to the first scene, the lack of sound underscores that haptic images require auditory elements to convey a tactile and proprioceptive experience. Despite the scene's aesthetic beauty in its combination of image and music, it does not possess the same ability to engage and move the spectator. The rationale behind the director's choice is unclear, but she may have opted for a more soothing conclusion with the song, rather than revisiting the intense atmosphere of the opening scene. Consequently, the result is a scene that is less gripping and sensorially evocative.

The film, particularly in its first half, excels in depicting the embodied experience of women in relation to a body that, for better or worse, possesses the capacity to create life. Its meticulously crafted *mise-en-scène* serves as a compelling case study for film phenomenology scholars, illustrating a heightened sensory experience that directly engages the audience's bodily senses.

Camborda's decision to prioritize physical representation over character psychology effectively portrays the embodied experiences of women during vulnerable states such as childbirth and abortion, emphasising the necessity of a supportive social network. Care involves physical contact and is a highly intensive endeavour. The film's cinematography and sound production stress very well the physicality of this work through close-ups and the use of haptic images and sounds. Unfortunately, the second half of the film becomes more narratively digressive, and the protagonist's experiences are rendered less haptic compared to the first half. As a result, the audience is less able to physically engage with the film's images as they could earlier. Nevertheless, the film's ability to move viewers ultimately depends on the cinesthetic subject, and on their personal history of sensuous and carnal engagement with both the world and cinema.

With this film, Jaione Camborda joins a group of Spanish woman filmmakers who place the female body at the centre of their aesthetics. Recent films such as *Las niñas / Schoolgirls* (Pilar Palomero, 2020), *Libertad* (Clara Roquet, 2021), *Cinco lobitos / Lullaby* (Alauda Ruiz de Azúa, 2022) and *Creatura* (Elena Martín, 2023) explore women's generational experiences with and through their bodies. In these films, the body becomes a space for struggle, through which the characters come to terms with their own womanhood. Despite their differences, the aesthetics of these films privilege a sensorial approach, conveying women's challenging experiences through their embodied existence. As Laura U. Marks considers haptics "a feminist visual strategy" (2002, 7), these filmmakers use haptic aesthetics to express their intimate experiences of womanhood from their own bodies. In doing so, they transform private moments of bodily intimacy into public, and thus political, statements. These statements are conveyed through the body and the full sensorium, offering embodied, rather than rational, accounts of what it means to be a woman in a particular place and time. In this way, they align with feminist phenomenological critique, emphasizing from their bodies their distinctive ways of being in the world.

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