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When Surfaces Matter: *Personal Shopper* as Posthuman Exploration of Subjectivity Through Media

A Posthumanist Understanding of Audiovisual Experience

Following Rosi Braidotti[1], we could synthetically argue that critical posthumanities express the need for developing a new ontology, a new materialism that, by shattering the nature-culture split, identifies the human as a situated process, as a dynamic network of ecological relations and systems, continuously redefined by the encounters and possible interrelations to be generated in the world. Resorting to a philosophical tradition that from Spinoza to Deleuze and other scholars has affirmed the absolute immanence of thought in the world, and the dynamic and *differing* notion of a monistic substance, we can argue that no existential hierarchy between objects, beings, and individuals is, therefore, abstractly conceivable when addressing a thinking matter that autopoietically, and yet transformatively, organises itself. What we evaluate, in our experiences, and analyses are relations, compositions of beings and virtualities of our bodies in interconnecting with the world, together with the examination of the relations of power that particular situated systems entail. In this sense, audiovisual experience defines an ecology, and interactive dimension in which affection and intellection are perfectly and dynamically integrated[2].

In this essay I aim to analyse *Personal Shopper* (Assayas, 2016) with some theoretical instruments that tackle the conceptual materiality of aesthetic experience. In particular, I will employ Giuliana Bruno's work on surfaces and on affections, which by rejecting an abstract and dualistic understanding of artistic expressions comprehension, af-

[1] R. Braidotti, *A Theoretical Framework for Critical Posthumanities*, in "Theory, Culture & Society", 0(0). 2018, pp. 1-31.
[2] Cf. G. Galati, *Significante fluttuante, inconscio tecnologico e soggetto digitale*, in A. Bianchi, G. Leghissa (a cura di) *Mondi altri. Processi di soggettivazione nell'era postumana a partire dal pensiero di Antonio Caronia*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2016, p. 205.

firms the complex conceptual nature of material relations[3]. Aesthetic surfaces, for Bruno, are not simply made of sensations to be absorbed and conceptualised; instead, they involve a state of in-betweenness and becoming, a transformative relation between the work of art and its *explorer*. Not incidentally, according to the scholar, the word *medium* emphasises a state of contiguity and proximity, and therefore suggests an analytical approach that is capable of addressing this ecological dimension. Therefore, all the aesthetic features of a specific film work as interactive cognitive maps through which viewers travel within the filmic world and interact with its characters[4]. Viewers' journey into the experiential dimension of a film and through the intimacy of a fictional character is also enabled by the capacity to embody and connect kinesthetic images and sensori-motor conditions to particular moral and abstract notions, and more in general, to associate a semantic framing to aesthetic and perceptive elements. What is more, in this perspective, the typical distinction between the inner self of the character and the outside world dissolves in favour of an immanent and interactive definition of subjectivity, which results from a continuous reconstruction and negotiation of the identity[5] with the environmental systems surrounding and composing it. In this sense Bruno's work invites us also embracing a nomadic notion of the self, one that, as indicated by Rosi Braidotti, rejects Cartesian transcendent definition of thought, and describes the human as the result of continuous complex correlation with the environment[6].

In a similar way, I will also employ the studies of Mikhail Bakhtin on chronotopes and dialogism, which he notoriously applied in his examination of novels and literature. Bakthin rejected the divorce between form and content[7]; indeed, his analysis of narrative structures is not centred on the examination of abstract and regular coordinates, but involves the discussion of experiential situations and spatial motifs, which define the temporal configuration of a particular tale. Consequently, the experience of the work of art is embodied and relational, and, what is more, dynamic and creative. Interacting with an audiovisual artefact means being involved in a dialogical relationship, which is characterised by the creative production of concepts and utterances

[3] G. Bruno, *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, The University of Chicago Press, London 2014, p. 2.
[4] Id., *Atlante delle emozioni. In viaggio tra arte, architettura e cinema*, Johan & Levi Editore, Monza 2015, p. 28.
[5] G. Bruno, *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media,* cit., p. 51.
[6] R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 56.
[7] M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, M. Holquist, C. Emerson, M. Holquist (a cura di), University of Texas Press, Austin 1981, p. 259.

without a complete semantic closure[8]. This *heteroglossia*, or rather the simultaneity of different semiotic/expressive codes, implies that aesthetic experiences are not bound to pre-ordered interpretations or fixed structures, but define experiential categories whose productive correlation exceeds every monological structure of signification. In addition to these analytical instruments, all stressing the operational and enactive aspects of our engagement as film viewers, we will see also how recent studies on empathy and embodied conceptualisation (not to mention the wide fields of Film-Philosophy/Phenomenology and Affective study of films[9]) shall be useful for the examination of the relational and aesthetic coordinates of *Personal Shopper*. However, I will focus on few embodied approaches, which, I argue, emphasise the process based and enactive understanding of film and aesthetic experiences, analysing the body as an ecological and multimodal space of interaction, instead of a referential and static perceptual structure.

Personal Shopper is a very intriguing case study for several reasons, in particular if observed through the lenses of an embodied and ecological analysis. First of all, it presents itself as very ambiguous and unresolved emotional experience, mixing together the tone of an *intimate* and affective journey with the experiential situations typical the horror and thriller scenarios. However, one the most peculiar aspects of the film resides in its focus on multimediality and on the centrality of technological devices and contextual material elements, which are configured as central features in the definition of individual subjectivity. What we experience in the film, indeed, is a constant process of redefinition in the psychology and behaviour of Maureen Cartwright (Kristen Stewart), the main character, which takes place in correspondence with her relationship with the environment, with architectures, videos, paintings, and clothes. The result is a complete externalisation of emotional states and desires, which the viewer embodies and interacts with. By doing so, I argue that Personal Shopper is not simply a peculiar case study to be discussed through an embodied perspective on audiovisual experience but, I believe, it also constitutes a powerful visual essay on the nature of *surfaces* in contemporary world because of its problematic perspective on the role of materiality and technology.

[8] Id., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, C. Emerson, M. Holquist, V- W. McGee (a cura di), University of Texas Press, Austin 1986, pp. 127-128.
[9] C. Ferencz-Flatz, J. Hanich, *What is Film-Phenomenology?*, in C. Ferencz-Flat, J. Hanich (a cura di) "Studia Phaenomenologica", XVI, 2016, pp. 11-61.

Mapping an Unresolved Subjectivity

There is an evident dialogical tension encompassing the film, a direct and pervasive conflict between, on one side, the technological devices, screens and surfaces characterising urban life in contemporary world and on the other hand, the nostalgic dream of a more traditional, spiritual, and mystical anthropological dimension of experience. This aesthetic conflict is grounded in the correlation between different chronotopic dimensions, but is more evidently embodied and carried out through the evolution of Maureen's multifaceted subjectivity. Indeed, another extremely palpable characteristic of the film is that it appears almost uniquely centred around Maureen, up to the point of presenting a strongly subjective experience. However, this stylistic choice does not prevent the character from expressing a very complex and unresolved subjectivity or the viewer from participating in a constructive, creative and even disorientating experience.

We see that Maureen considers herself a *medium* as her twin brother, Lewis, who recently departed because of a cardiac malfunction, which afflicts her as well. Maureen is looking for signs from her brother, since they both promised to each other to communicate with the surviving twin once one of them passed away. Maureen has a strong disposition and fascination for occultism, which is also motivated by her connection with death and by her precarious health, and longs for a spiritual and metaphysical dimension, completely opposed to her *materialistic* and frivolous profession, namely working as personal shopper for a capricious star, Kyra, who rarely appears in public.

At the beginning of the film we see Maureen accompanied by Lara, Lewis's widow, to their former house, a villa in the countryside outside Paris. Maureen wants to find out if her brother's spirit is still inhabiting the house and, in this case, to liberate the mansion from his ghost, thus allowing a new couple to live in it. The house, with its exterior and interior features, appears as a nineteenth century mansion, very detached from chaotic city life which affects Maureen's everyday life; this setting evokes a gothic imaginary, which is reinforced by the condition of the manor, as, for instance, the fact that it is covered by dry fallen leaves, which gives the place the feeling of being un-dead and haunted. Furthermore, we can notice how the exploration and interaction with the mood of the environment is favoured by the elegant camerawork (the cinematography is by Yorick Le Saux), which is mainly based on handheld camera movements slowly following Maureen walking into the house. This gothic mood is reinforced during the night scenes, as Maureen moves continuously looking for a signal from Lewis, and we perceive noises and signs indicating another presence inhabiting the house. Later on in the narration, we will

see these impressions confirmed as a ghost appears close to Maureen and touches her. These explicit spiritual and supernatural elements are features of one of the leading chronotopes of the film, which basically defines a gothic and metaphysical dimension. To be more precise, here I am employing Bakhtin's chronotope not just as an experiential mode of describing the narrative construction of the film, but, as suggested by the film scholar Pepita Hesselberth, as the conceptualisation of operational and existential situations[10]. Bakthin himself used this notion for the purpose of identifying recurrent literary motifs and situations, which conveyed the sense of an artistic experience, or characteristics typical of a genre also capable of connecting the reader with a particular *weltanschauung*. Film experience, following this line of thought, has the same capacity of thickening and of making vivid particular spatio-temporal conditions, and of allowing readers/viewers to embody the perspective of the characters inhabiting them[11]. In this sense the gothic-horror chronotope constitutes a very specific composition of Maureen's subjectivity setting the interaction with an undead dimension, which, nonetheless, defines a constant reference point for her to look at. Lewis' house emerges as a very stable and yet decaying structure, only accessible to Maureen and container for a sense of nostalgic longing related, of course, to the grief for her brother's death, but also to a more general sense of melancholic dissatisfaction with her life. The use of softened colour tones and of a very placid camerawork and slow cutting rate are also useful to reinforce this intimate, mournful dimension throughout the film, thus diminishing, to some extent, the sense of anxiety and tension deriving from the sequence and typical of horror and gothic atmosphere.

Maureen's connection to a metaphysical dimension is early on reinforced by her watching on the smartphone a documentary about Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), a painter and *medium*, whose work anticipated the style of motifs of Abstract art; the artist also believed that her paintings were inspired by her connection with the immaterial world. Maureen is instantaneously attracted by her work, which through its symbolism and strong enigmatic power seems to feed her desire for a metaphysical dimension. The gothic chronotope described in the first sequences is, however, instantaneously contrasted by the emergence of a different experiential dimension and cognitive mapping. Indeed, after having returned back from the Lewis' house, Maureen is shown in Milan choosing clothes for Kyra in a very glamorous and exclusive boutique. She appears

[10] P. Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me*. Bloomsbury, London, 2014, p. 10.
[11] M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays,* cit., p. 177; P. Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes. Here, Now, Me,* cit., pp. 109-110.

annoyed and alienated while being surrounded by very luxurious objects. In this regard, it is also relevant to discuss Maureen's appearance. It is possible to argue that her clothing choices reflect a conceptual opposition to this world. Maureen wears mainly big jumpers or t-shirts, and uses no jewellery or make-up, whereas she chooses very sensual and flashy dresses for Kyra. We, therefore, should not consider these clothes as simple symbolic elements. As Bruno noticed while discussing Wong Kar-Way's *In the Mood For Love* (2000), dresses and *fabrics* constitutes modes of inhabiting the space and of making sense of subjectivity, and, therefore contribute in generating affective and mental images of a particular film experience together with constituting a material and yet complex mode of interacting with the character[12]. The mixture of Maureen physical reactions and facial mimicry together with her dressing style, then, shows a personality that is (apparently) in complete conflict with the world she works in. Indeed, while talking via Skype with her boyfriend Gary, who works in Oman as computer-security consultant, she admits to hate her job, and to find it stupid and pointless. Furthermore, the contrast between Maureen's aspirations and her everyday life is expressed through conflicting architectural and operative spaces. Lewis' nineteenth century villa in the countryside, full of wooden furniture is, for instance, completely opposed to the clear, bright and monochromatic interiors of the boutiques Maureen goes to, or to Kyra's apartment, which is characterised by a very modern and minimalistic style in the décor. Moreover, while carrying out everyday duties and chores, we see Maureen often in anonymous spaces, such as subways, trains, stations and coffee shops, *habitats* that Deleuze would have defined as any-spaces-whatever for their vacuity and for their lack of connections and definitions[13]. On the contrary, Maureen's small flat, full of books and tools for painting reiterates the idea of her looking for something beyond her existing condition, and appears as an attempt to replicate the more *traditional* ecology expressed by Lewis' house. In this sense, the contrast between what we could define as the "city, world of fashion and everyday life" chronotope and the "spiritual dimension" is based on the interactive impossibility to build a stable and reliable positioning of the self within the experiential dimension of the former and, therefore, in the desire for the more clearly defined and closed existential structures of the latter; as further demonstration of her moral dissatisfaction, Maureen confirms to be completely disillusioned about the freedom and the opportunities provided by the world of fashion, and abruptly refuses a job offer from Ingo, Kyra's lover.

[12] G. Bruno, *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, cit., p. 32.
[13] D. Deleuze, *Cinema II, The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press, London 1997, p. 259.

Of course, we can connect her distress and sadness also with her grieving for Lewis, which she believes to overcome by finding a connection with his spirit. It is also interesting to notice that Maureen, differently from her brother, has no plan for her future, and feels Lewis had a more concrete and genuine life, as demonstrated by him living in the countryside and working as carpenter. As I have already mentioned, viewers' access to Maureen's complex subjectivity and to the multifaceted world of the film through the embodiment and simulation of actions and kinaesthetic dispositions, and through the association of sensations with abstract concepts. If we take into account also Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra's work on cinema, we can see how this empathic entanglement is largely based on our neurocognitive activities, which make possible to recognise an audiovisual world and the characters inhabiting it, and, then, simulate their physical conditions and empathise with them[14]. However, empathy should not be intended as a simple act of projection or as a static reproduction of states, but as a dialogical interaction and negotiation between the subjectivities of the viewers and those of the characters on the screen. In this sense, if we apply a Bakhtinian perspective to the above mentioned notion of empathy, we can, indeed, discuss the dialogical encounter with Maureen (and the film) as a creative interrelation; it establishes a semantic and affective contiguity between viewers and the work of art, and allows viewers to understand, embody, and generate interactive ideas by simulating actions, and modes of operating in space[15]. Indeed, it is exactly this empathic polyphony what characterises dialogism, instead of the predetermined and fixed characteristic of a monological discourse. What is more, by bringing together all the considerations carried out so far we can also affirm that embodied simulative activities do not concern only fictional figures in films or specific actions, but spaces and interactive contexts as well. According to Gallese and Guerra, for instance, we empathise with spaces by negotiating a present state of the self with the space surrounding us, then by projecting and imagining possible actions perform (which we enact through imaginative simulation) and by connecting these cognitive mappings with personal memories[16], thus also continuously remediating our operational presence within the ecology determined by the audiovisual experience.

Likewise, although we constantly perceive Maureen's dissatisfaction with her job and her life, her rejection of the elegant and materialistic world of fashion and fame is, nonetheless, not unilateral and fixed. For

[14] V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *Lo schermo empatico. Cinema e neuroscienze*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2015, pp. 15-17.
[15] M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* cit., p. 141, 146.
[16] V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *Lo schermo empatico,* cit., pp. 219-224.

instance, she is attracted by the idea of trying on herself the clothes she chooses for Kyra (an act she is not allowed to do) and enjoys doing it as demonstrated during the small sequence that shows her wearing a pair of shoes. In this scene, the camera lingers for eight seconds on Maureen "walking in Kyra's shoes" and, then, after a reverse shot showing an admiring clerk, cuts to a ten seconds long close up of her while she is visibly pleased by looking at herself in the mirror. The attention given to these simple actions demonstrates her contrasting sensations and desires towards what, we can argue, appears as a more mundane side of life. The pleasure she visibly proves in carrying out these actions reveals, indeed, her desire to adapt to this dimension and a tension towards a different form of existence separated from the metaphysical side.

Furthermore, it is relevant to notice that these clothes are object of Maureen's forbidden desires also because of the erotic content that she attributes to them. Maureen, later on in the narrative, will receive several messages on the phone by a person (or spirit) who threatens to possess her mind, questioning about her fears, about what she considers forbidden, and craves for. Maureen, after the initial fear, starts actively participating in the conversation and confesses to wish to become someone else. This dialogic confrontation with the spirit makes the character's emotional conflict extremely explicit and is perceived as the strongest stimulus for a transformation in her identity. The numerous moments (about sixty-two shots) dedicated to this singular confrontation indicate that, as the architectures and clothes mentioned so far, screens (laptops, smartphones, etc.) constitute other fundamental surfaces that the character inhabits. During the narration viewers have no evidences about who is the other person interacting on the phone; it is possible to imagine it to be the spirit just encountered by Maureen in the house or Lewis, or even a concrete individual manipulating her; the enigmatic ending with Maureen looking into the camera and affirming that all her supernatural experiences may have been just her illusions adds further ambiguity; nonetheless, it is important to notice that this independent dialogical confrontation defines new interactive and chronotopic dynamics and, thus, enlarges and complicates the layers of Maureen's subjectivity. The central narrative and affective role of these moments is demonstrated by the fact that they enact specific transformations in the character and enrich the complexity of the interaction with material and technological surfaces. We can see again how screens, because of their capacity of generating interactive systems are not comparable to separating objects; they are rather joining links similar to doors, as those of Lewis' house that Maureen loves to paint, or to a porous skin that makes possible to access to new levels and aspects of the self.

Indeed, following the unknown messenger's incitation, Maureen sneaks into Kyra's apartment and tries her clothes. The camera slowly follows her while she prepares and looks at herself in the mirror. Though we can recognise a sense of discomfort and distress in her facial mimicry, this sequence externalises Maureen's unleashing of restrained sexual desires (as demonstrated by the fact that she decides to sleep in Kyra's bed and masturbates) and connects it with the need of entering into a new existential condition. This moment of transformation is, what is more, accompanied by the return of the ghost (who suddenly wakes up Maureen) and by the mysterious anonymous booking of a room in the Hotel Concorde St. Lazare. The dialogical composition of these different existential planes, allows us to perceive Maureen's subjectivity as a complex and conflictual dimension, where different levels of the self continuously interrelate and confront each other in correspondence with evolving environmental and ecological conditions. Indeed, we have observed how these different states of the character, and the embodiment of these emotional and intellectual conditions, are always associated with particular external elements, namely through Maureen's relationship with spaces, clothes and technological devices. For this reason, it is possible to reiterate how, borrowing the title of one of Giuliana Bruno's essay[17], Maureen's intimacy is public or rather externalised through her interaction with technological and material surfaces. More precisely, Maureen's subjectivity appears as the concrete battlefield where conflicting chronotopes and affective mappings or opposed modes of inhabiting the space encounter and struggle. A further moment enacting the chronotopic opposition and the dialogical contiguity between these planes is expressed by Maureen watching a (fake) old TV shows about Victor Hugo's occultist practices in Jersey. This small television drama recalls a traditional gothic aesthetic because of the use of dark colour tones (and of half-lighting), of the internal and external setting (nineteenth century library, the natural landscapes island of Jersey). Furthermore, the austere tone of the sequence portrayed, which shows Hugo and other persons holding a séance, is also reinforced by the clothes and physical appearances of the characters (unnaturally standing in fixed poses during the entire sequence).

This TV show as Lewis's house, is, therefore, in complete conflict with the aesthetic and chronotopic dimension staged by the modern architectures and internal locations inhabited by Maureen in her everyday life, and thus relates to the previously mentioned craving for a metaphysical dimension. Nonetheless, this conflict does not prevent the two chronotopes to be mixed and contaminated. Indeed, we see Maureen in her

[17] G. Bruno, *Public Intimacy. Architecture & the Visual Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2007.

apartment watching the *Hugo à Jersey* video on her laptop while trying a long and flashy suit made of pailettes and with a wide neckline she earlier on chose for Kyra (while preparing to go to the mysterious appointment at the hotel). This specific dress, we can argue, is the most explicit visual map connected with the mundane and materialistic dimension (it was chosen also for the film poster); nonetheless, it coexists with the spiritual and gothic plane, as demonstrated by the interesting detail of the dress' reflections on the screen of the computer. We can notice a further semantic connection between these two existential chronotopes in the fact that the method used in the occult ritual shown in Hugo à Jersey is similar to stenography, a form of communication that reproduces the fast and abbreviated writing used to text with mobile phones. The dynamic and problematic co-presence of these planes, which appear as layers or patterns of a singular personality, then, makes more difficult for Maureen (and for viewers who empathise with her), to establish an order between these different models and conception of the self. Furthermore, through the continuous combination of different existential dimensions, viewers also perceive that the spiritual plane does not present itself as a purely abstract dimension. On the contrary, the intense colour and strong evocative symbolism of Hilma af Klimt's paintings, Lewis' villa, or the TV show with its peculiar aesthetic elements, all enrich the surfaces and interactive coordinates of the film, expressing virtualities of Maureen's psychology or, as maintained by Bruno (who reuses Deleuze's work on the baroque), folds, through which it is possible to access to a new existential potentiality of the character[18]. In this sense, we could say that more in general the narrative construction of the film coincides with the perception and embodiment of Maureen's transformations.

Nonetheless, her emotional complexity is connected with negative sensations, in particular with her inability to overcome grief and to make plans for her future. Therefore, it is difficult to associate the folds of Maureen's subjectivity with a sense of power and affirmative discovery. On the contrary, what we perceive is a never-ending conflict unravelling through the combination of spaces and chronotopes. Indeed, the most dramatic moment of the film, which puts to extreme consequences the correlation between the mundane and spiritual dimension, is constituted by Maureen's discovery of Kyra's corpse in her apartment. We will only later discover that she was killed by her lover, Ingo, driven by jealousy. In these moments, instead, we receive ambiguous information; for instance, while following Maureen's actions, we just hear repeated noises on the apartment's door, indicating somebody trying to access it, and we will

[18] G. Bruno, *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media,* cit., p. 15.

find out, after she is questioned by the police, that the jewels she was supposed to bring to Kyra, are, in reality, in her flat. In this sense, viewers are also led to think that Maureen may have been unconsciously responsible for the murder, and maybe has been possessed by the spirit tormenting her. The late mysterious resolution of the case, ending with Ingo's arrest, does not provide answers to these questions and rather adds further ambiguity to the real nature of the events taking place. However, notwithstanding the possibility to definitively responding these narrative interrogatives, this climactic construction allows us to participate in the extreme affective conflict of the character; to experience the turmoil and existential uncertainty deriving from being completely divided between different desires and experiential planes.

This affective/intellectual complexity defines also an unfinished dialogical confrontation for the viewers, who empathise with Maureen without reaching any affective and moral catharsis, and interact with an unresolved character whose personality remains stuck in grief and existential disorientation. Two final moments further stress this unresolved emotional and conceptual conclusion. The first one is the sequence that depicts Maureen's dialogue with Lara's new partner, Erwin. After the initial natural embarrassment due to them meeting for the first time, the conversation assumes a pacified and conciliatory tone. Maureen approves their relationship, and Erwin invites her not to be obsessed by Lewis' memories. This moment of relief, and the general relaxed mood pervading the dialogue let viewer assume that Maureen is finally moving beyond the melancholic longing for Lewis or the desire to communicate with him. A long and intense close up of Maureen sitting in the garden stresses these emotions, and makes possible for the viewer to embody a sense of momentary conciliation. However, as soon as Erwin leaves the scene we perceive a figure (probably Lewis) moving behind Maureen's back, and then we see a glass floating and, after few seconds, falling on the floor and shattering; therefore, the possibility for relief is denied by the re-emergence of spiritual elements which automatically undermine this affective reconciliation.

Apart from this moment of affective bewildering and confusion for Maureen (and the viewers alike), a more traumatic dynamic characterises the last scenes showing Maureen in Oman reaching her partner. There is almost no dialogue (apart from Gary's voice over reading a letter to Maureen) and we hear the placid motif of the soundtrack (*Ponç d'Ortafa – Si ay perdut mon saber*, performed by Jordi Savall and Hesperion XXI) associated with the beautiful and sunny landscapes of Oman. The absence of a urban setting, the *exotic* architectures and natural scenery (together with the soundtrack) staged by this chronotopic dimension seem to determine a clear diversion from Maureen's typical existential spaces. How-

ever, as she finally reaches Gary's hotel in the countryside, we see again a floating glass, which falls and shatters on the floor. Maureen thinks it is Lewis and starts asking questions, which are answered by loud blows on the walls of the room (one sound for yes, two for no as shown in Hugo à Jersey). At a certain point, Maureen realises that the answers are contradictory and starts doubting about the nature and the intentions of the spirit. As already mentioned, the film ends with Maureen asking if the spirit is just her talking, and with a fade-out on her close up while looking into camera. This ambiguous ending, therefore, by reassessing the constant presence of the unresolved spiritual element works by deconstructing the possibility of an *outside* from her everyday life dimension, and traumatically reconnects this experiential situation with previous chronotopic configurations, denying any possibility to escape a pre-existing uncertainty. We could say, observing the type of interaction the film in its entirety stages and the dialogical dynamic it entails, that *Personal Shopper* traces a series of conflicting cognitive and experiential maps Maureen inhabits and, at the same time, outlines the unsettled affective cartography of a character lost and trapped into the succession and interaction with these spaces, surfaces, and screens.

The affective and chronotopic heteroglossia and complexity of Maureen's personality externalised through her relation with material surfaces, however, delineates also a more intricate cartography of our *human* subjectivities within contemporary world. While discussing Personal *Shopper* Roberto De Gaetano affirmed that the film does not ravel into a simple meta-textual reflection upon the nature of audiovisual experience, but directly tackles the destiny of our identity in a world surrounded by screens and by the appearances and ghosts (indeed) of reality[19]. The continuous refraction of our subjectivities on technological devices and material surfaces makes impossible for us, as for Maureen, to rely on an authentic-essential definition of the self as coherent whole. The *loss* of a balanced and reliable experiential territory for our identity can lead us to the fear of the tragic fate of being lost in our projections, in our relationships with surfaces without establishing any concrete reference point, thus becoming victims of fragmented truths that prevent us from constructing an affirmative relationship with the world. This fear of disorder, chaos and confusion enacted by the complexity of this predicament generates, on one side, the desire for purity and solid roots, which, as for the case of Maureen, can be found in a metaphysical and spiritual dimension where the sense of reliability can be re-established and config-

[19] R. De Gaetano, *Il doppio e il fantasma*, in "Fata Morgana", disponibile al link http://www.fatamorganaweb.unical.it/index.php/2017/06/05/il-doppio-e-il-fantasma-personal-shopper/, 2017.

ured. At the same time, this desire brings with it a melancholic longing for a stable past, or a constant grief for our incapacity to adapt and act in relation to such extremely dynamic and unsettling existential condition. Indeed, we can see how the melancholy Maureen feels and expresses is enacted exactly by the dialogue between the different chronotopes of the film, between the ghost of an emotionally reliable past and the modern urban setting, which, because of its multilayered composition, prevents the definition of coherent and constant models of the self[20]. In general, it is also important to notice how the unresolved dialectics between the old and the new, technological and artistic innovations and the maps of an un-dead past is a stylistic and thematic pattern in all Olivier Assayas' works from *Irma Vep* (1996) to the recently released *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014) and *Non-Fiction* (*Double Vies*, 2018).

In any case, *Personal Shopper*, through the affective evolution of Maureen, raises a problematic and necessary confrontation with the construction of contemporary subjectivity revealing the urgency and existential necessity of a posthuman perspective on the world. Indeed, on one side, following the previously mentioned considerations on the ecology of the human, we could argue that *Personal Shopper* contributes in decentring the status of human subjectivity by perceiving it as the continuous production of embodied and embedded material relations with contextual and situated surfaces. On the other hand, the film also outlines a lost and disoriented subjectivity incapable of constructing a positive and affirmative composition with the surfaces she interacts with, remaining in a state of absolute existential uncertainty. In this sense, we could argue that the film avoids easy conciliatory answers to the critical status of the *human* and implicitly rejects the Transhumanist myth of a completion of the Enlightenment ideal through the implementation of digital technologies as the tools to reach a final and total control of Reason over Matter. *Personal Shopper*, instead, seems to address these passages as a Bakhtinian dialogue, as the configuration of intertwined chronotopic dimensions and interactive dynamics for the subjects that can lead to undetermined results, without any preconfigured teleology or stable constitution of truth. This point of view relates also to Braidotti's notion of nomadism, where subjectivity function as its capacity to relate effectively to the context surrounding it, as the power to affirmatively create collective assemblages[21]. Destructive and creative outcomes are already there, however, the results of our connections depend only on our experimental and intensive qualities in acting in the world by expressing an ethics of joy that allows life

[20] G. Bruno, *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, cit., pp. 28-29.
[21] R. Braidotti, *Joy, Ethics of*, in R. Braidotti, M. Hlavajova (a cura di), *Posthuman Glossary*, Bloomsbury, London 2018, pp. 221-225.

itself to transform and endure. For this same reason, according to Braidotti and Bruno, we do not need to mourn for a pure human identity that never was, neither we should abandon our search of possible futures in the name of a melancholy for an inscrutable and disorientating present. Instead, we should embrace our process-oriented and ecological nature in the most creative sense in order to live actively and intensely, and also to generate *sustainable ethics*[22] to face the crises of our time in an affirmative and revolutionary manner. Hence, we need to tackle the nature of our material relations, in particular referring to the digital world surrounding us, by embracing their disturbing and fascinating complexity without naively attributing to them a direct sense of affirmation and completion, which would simply confirm the present state of affairs. On the other hand, we also should avoid closing ourselves to the confrontation with a transforming reality in the name of a possible loss of purity and existential space, which will condemn us to a passive and melancholic inactivity. We need, on the contrary, to continuously ask ourselves what can our bodies do and accept the challenge of travelling through an unresolved and uncharted mysterious immanent reality. Of course, recognising the process-oriented and situated nature of subjectivity means also rejecting universalistic temptations as the existential dynamics lived and expressed by Maureen cannot arbitrarily answer for the socio-political challenges and issues affecting all the various precarious, marginalised and expelled subjectivities constellating our not-yet posthuman non-anthropocentric world. Thus, the *we* here used to address the dialogic and interactive dynamics of *Personal Shopper* is not an homogenous category, but a map emerging from the confrontation with the world expressed by the film, which modifies in relation to its politics of locations, to its affective and contextual dynamics[23].

In conclusion, it is the continuous experimental drafting of new maps, the creative explorations of our collective assemblages that provides us with the opportunity to give justice of every variations of the *we* inhabiting the world, and with the capacity to overcome the fear of remaining lost and fragmented in a multilayered and magmatic reality. In other words: "It is not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but of finding new weapons"[24].

[22] R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman,* cit., p. 90; G. Bruno, *Atlante delle emozioni.: In viaggio tra arte, architettura e cinema*, cit., p. 115.
[23] R. Braidotti, *Posthuman Critical Theory,* in R. Braidotti, M. Hlavajova (a cura di), *Posthuman Glossary*, Bloomsbury, London 2018, pp. 339-342.
[24] G. Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, Columbia University Press, New York 1995, p. 178.

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When Surfaces Matter: *Personal Shopper* as Posthuman Exploration of Subjectivity Through Media

This essay addresses *Personal Shopper* as an essential case study to examine the radical transformation of subjectivity taking place through the relation with digital technology and screens in our everyday life. The discussion will be mainly directed on how the film describes the psychological and emotional conflict embodied by the main character, Maureen, as the result of a complex entanglement with spaces, technological, and material surfaces. The decentring of Maureen on the physical context surrounding her, reveals her identity as an ecological notion, an immanent and enworlded process of continuous remediation with the environment. Employing Giuliana Bruno's work and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the Chronotope, I will demonstrate how *Personal Shopper*, far from describing technological developments as the accomplishment of a humanist ideal, allows us to tackle, without conciliating answers, the radical crisis of the human characterising our age.

KEYWORDS: critical posthumanities, embodied cognition, film-philosophy, cinematic chronotope, surfaces.