



### **How Films Behave and Narrate**

Ecological film theory and certain formalist accounts of how cinematic devices function in terms of human perception have sought to explain how classical cinematic narration is to a significant degree based on our natural patterns of perception and making sense of our environment. As research done over the past few decades has amply demonstrated, our basic perception of cinematic images is in many ways highly analogous to our perception of the natural world, at least as regards perception of light and darkness, color, depth, shape and movement. It also appears that (on higher levels of cinematic narration) the perception and understanding of film takes place in terms of the same cognitive schemata as the perception and understanding of the natural world. Other, more specifically artistic or filmic schemata are likely to be in operation too, but these function mainly by bending and extending remarkably flexible schemata that have developed through our engagement with the real world. As David Bordwell puts it, “[a] great many conventions piggyback on our nonfilmic experiences of the visible world and social action taking place in it.”<sup>1</sup> Arguably, recognizing characters in a two-dimensional projection on screen requires no more skills or cognitive capacity than recognizing people from a

variety of viewing angles and in a whole gamut of lighting in the real world. Similarly, certain structures of filmic narration are immediately familiar due to close analogies to the way we react, for example, to shifts of attention by people we are talking to. Scholars such as Bordwell and Per Person have put forward accounts of how cinematic devices such as shot-countershot patterns and point-of-view shots mimic our physical orientation in our natural environment, the way we physically and perceptually relate to people and events in the course of our daily lives.

These notions contain certain implications and further possibilities, which their proponents apparently have not been aware of or which they have not yet cared to explore. Their approach requires a phenomenology that would explain the various ways our perception and understanding of classical cinematic narration relates to or mimics our bodily orientation in the physical world, which can be found in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Furthermore, a formalist theory of cinematic narration, such as the account of different levels of narration proposed by Edward Branigan, can serve as a foundation for a more thoroughgoing hermeneutics of cinema.

### **The body and soul of film**

Regrettably, few film-philosophers have sought to apply the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to film studies. By far the most impressive attempt is Vivian Sobchack's account in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. She takes her cue from the core idea of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, that being-in-the-world is by nature participation in the synthesis of perceiving and expressing as two significant and signifying modalities of existence. Being-in-the-world, as well as any phenomenon we happen to perceive, may be analyzed in terms of an objective and a subjective dimension. The two are inextricably intertwined, a feature referred to as *reversibility*. This is something "*given* with existence in the simultaneity of subjective embodiment and objective enworldedness." That is, subjectivity emerges from our bodily engagement with the world, and that engagement in turn constantly expresses our subjectivity. In Sobchack's opinion, this reversibility on which human consciousness is constituted is also the point from which all cinematic signification commences. She writes:

As two modalities of significant and signifying existence, perception and expression are interwoven threads, the woof and warp that together form a seamless and subtle fabric, the whole cloth of existential experience from which specific forms of signification can be fashioned to instrumentally suit specific functions. Thus, in a film

as in life, perception and expression – having sense and making sense – do not originally oppose each other and are not separated or differentiated as distinctly binary constructs and practices. Rather, they are complementary modalities of an original and unified experience of existence that has long been fragmented and lost to those interested in the ontology of the cinema and its structures of signification.<sup>2</sup>

Sobchack argues that cinema differs from all other forms of human communication in that it “uses *modes of embodied existence* (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the ‘stuff,’ the substance of its language. It also uses the *structures of direct experience* (the ‘centering’ and bodily situating of existence in relation to the word of objects and others) as the basis for the structures of its language.”<sup>3</sup>

It should be mentioned in passing that this connects almost directly with some of key ideas that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have put forward in their *Philosophy in the Flesh*, in which Merleau-Ponty emerges as virtually the only philosopher who has been able to appreciate embodiment as the source of all our mental life (including all forms of cognition). This claim is quite outrageous, to say the least, but nevertheless, their point about embodiedness as the source of all our perception and understanding of the world is extremely important.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, it is also compatible with ecological film theory.

Sobchack’s frame of reference, however, is semiotics and she even employs the film-as-language metaphor. Yet, on the level of cinematic expression which she addresses, this appears somewhat superfluous even by her own lights. One of her key arguments is that it is the “mutual capacity for a possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence, through similar modes of being-in-the-world, that provides the intersubjective basis of objective cinematic communication.” We may well ask where is the semiotics in that? On the other hand, Sobchack’s notion of “the lived logic of signification in the cinema”<sup>5</sup> is very apt. This is semiotics in the widest sense of the word, say, in the way Thomas Sebeok for one discusses even molecular biological events in terms of semiotics, but it is a far cry from the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure which is based on the assumption of the arbitrariness of all sign functions.<sup>6</sup>

Talking about film in terms of language in a phenomenological context does make a certain kind of sense, if we adopt Pier Paolo Pasolini’s view of the *world as language*, of which cinema is merely the written form. Merleau-Ponty can indeed be interpreted in this manner, as his way of understanding semiotics is almost as idiosyncratic as Pasolini’s. In this sense, we can also understand Sobchack’s description of film as a “medium that articulates the unified, if ever-changing, experience or existence, that

expresses the original synonymy of existence and language, or perception and its expression.” Thus “cinematic ‘language’ is grounded in the more original pragmatic language of embodied existence whose general structures are common to filmmaker, film, and viewer.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to Sobchack’s account, film itself has the advantage of embodied existence. This is not to be understood metaphorically. In her view, in a certain well defined sense, film *really has* a body. That is, the camera, the projector and all the other mechanisms “substantially embody” the film in a way that transcends their nature as mechanical instruments, in a somewhat similar fashion as the humanly lived-body transcends its physiology.<sup>8</sup> This might appear a bit hard to digest at first, but at least it provides a fresh approach to the question of the perception of the cinematic image. She writes:

Along with its objective existence for us as spectators, a film possesses its own being. That is, it *has being* in the sense that it *behaves*. A still photograph, however, does not behave, rather, it waits – as a vacancy – for us to possess it. Because a film behaves and acts, its present moment adds dimension to the flat space of the photograph. Abstract space is dynamized as habitable, as “lived in,” as described in the depth that lived movement, not geometry, confers upon the world. Thus, space in the film becomes the *situation* of an existence, and objects and landscapes take on a thickness and substantiality, an always emerging meaning that is chosen in the diacritical marking of movement (whether cinematographic or editorial).<sup>9</sup>

What this leads up to is quite astonishing:

What we look at as projected on the screen ... addresses us as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, “other.” And, as we watch this expressive projection of an “other’s” experience, we, too, express our perceptive experience. ... The film experience not only *represents* and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker *by means of* the modes and structures of direct and reflective experience, but also *presents* the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence *as* the film.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, Sobchack strives to explain the special way film gives us a perceptual entry into a world (fictional or real, captured, constructed, or reconstructed for presentation) through representing “an other, who is with

us and for us and in itself as an 'object-subject.'"11 Thus film is thought of, not only as "an object for expression and perception; it is also the subject of perception and expression."<sup>12</sup> At its own primary level film – i.e., the entire apparatus from camera to projector – is in the world it conveys to us as a subject, one not exactly like a human subject but certainly alike in many crucial respects: it perceives and expresses; it has a kind of consciousness and, as we just discovered, a body.<sup>13</sup> Thus, already before it is structured by means of montage and higher level principles of organization, "film makes sense by virtue of its very ontology:"<sup>14</sup>

Perceptive, it has the capacity for experience; and expressive, it has the ability to signify. It gives birth to and actualizes signification, constituting and making manifest the primordial significance that Merleau-Ponty calls "wild meaning" – the pervasive and as yet undifferentiated significance of existence as it is lived rather than reflected upon. Direct experience thus serves double duty in the cinema. A film presents and represents acts of seeing, hearing, and moving as both the *original structures of existential being* and the *mediating structures of language*.<sup>15</sup>

And so Sobchack accounts for the difference between how we might hypothetically perceive things ourselves, and the way something is rendered on film, by assigning cinematic perception to the personality and style of the film as a subject, an "anonymous other," whose lived intrasubjective and intentional experience we as spectators in the cinema get to witness. So what we see is not "merely the intentional *object of our sight* but is always also significant and signifying as the intentional *subject of its own sight*." Just as to be in the world as a conscious being is, in terms of Merleau-Ponty, an instance of being given to oneself "as a certain hold upon the world," then similarly the film can be seen as a certain hold which predicates subjectivity.<sup>16</sup>

### **From Phenomenology to Hermeneutics**

How one reacts to Sobchack's thesis depends, of course, on whether one is positively predisposed to phenomenology or not. It does at least offer an alternative, which in some ways provides a much more plausible explanation of the experience of film than most illusion theories (even the more level-headed ones). How common is, for example, Ed S. Tan's account of the cinematic experience: "Even though a filmed scene is recognized as having been staged, viewers still have the impression that they are physically present in front of a or in the scene."<sup>17</sup> A film may indeed evoke momentary physical effects, such as when something ap-

pears to rapidly approach the foreground of the diegetic space (or, in technical terms, the camera). This is only because the visual effect triggers a certain reflex in us, albeit one that is not sufficient to make us actually lose our sense of bodily orientation in the physical space of the auditorium. Our involvement and emotional immersion grows out of our involvement with the fates of the characters. As Tan himself points out, we can indulge ourselves for the very reason that we are *not* involved directly with the characters.

Here we approach the point where ecological or phenomenological film theory must give way to a more semiotically or hermeneutically orientated one, as it becomes necessary to take into account the historical context from which a film emerges. An individual becomes herself through her simultaneous interaction with the physical and biological world on the one hand, and the social and cultural environment on the other. The former defines life as it is in itself, the latter is a matter of the social construction of reality. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their classic study *The Social Construction of Reality* (1964) launched a project of a sociology of knowledge, the aim of which was to cope with “*any* body of ‘knowledge’ [that] comes to be socially established *as* ‘reality’.”<sup>18</sup> They derived their basic premise about our consciousness being determined by our social being from Marx, but a much wider intellectual and cultural movement is involved in their approach, including such diverse thinkers as Nietzsche and Freud and drawing upon conventionalist critique, structuralism, and semiotics on the one hand, and cognitive psychology, phenomenology and hermeneutics on the other.

Berger and Luckmann present a circle of three dialectical moments, *externalization*, *objectification* and *internalization*, as the foundation of the process by which reality is constructed and maintained as a social process. Socialization is the *internalization* of the understanding of the world and the values of the community. *Externalization* of one’s own self is directing oneself towards one’s fellow men and the community at large. The concept of *objectification* in turn covers the manifestations of human action in various kinds of products which become a part of the reality of both its makers and their fellow men. The three moments of externalization, objectification and internalization correspond respectively to three statements about social reality: “*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.*”<sup>19</sup> The existential situation of an individual emerges from a social reality, which is the product of a certain historical process which is both subjective and objective and must be understood as an ongoing dialectical process composed of these three moments.<sup>20</sup> This is an extremely dynamic model in that it emphasizes change at least as much as the more or less stable structures which grant the maintenance of a sense of coherent reality. These processes and

structures are not biologically given, nor can their manifestations be derived directly from biological data. But they are anthropological necessities in that human biological weakness makes it necessary to create a stable environment by artificial means.

While taking into account this entire circle of the moments of the social construction of reality, objectification is of particular relevance in the attempt to understand how we make sense of our cinematic experience. It is a broad concept and covers phenomena such as gestures and facial expressions. It is what enables the birth of culture and consciousness as systems of shared symbols. Perhaps at first meanings were attached to objects, first in a way which connected directly with their purpose or function. Gradually the objects were thought of as belonging to a certain sphere of activities, and they were associated more generally with certain groups in the community. Finally, they came to be understood as *referring* to those groups or activities, i.e. they came to have a sign function (alternatively, we could say that a symbolic sign function was gradually abstracted from the indexical). Culture and truly human life (in the full senses of these terms) are possible only when objectification reaches this level.

Objectification introduces a momentum which breaks this duality, by connecting the individual to his fellow men as a cultural being, and not just an instance of a generalized notion of Being. Only then can perception serve as the root of internalization, and expressiveness truly become externalization. This is why phenomenology must be complemented by hermeneutics and why Sobchack's account of the filmic experience must be followed by an account which focuses on film as a cultural product which participates in the process of social construction of reality. That is, just as we must be understood both in terms of being-in-the-world and being-in-a-given-culture, we should (at a certain level of description) view film as a medium which mimics our way of being-in-the-world and *at the same time* analyze it as a historically contextualized discourse. We must take into account the form of the film as a whole, considering it as an artifact which is an objectification of historically situated agents (the film-makers), however they may be thought of in connection with a given film. This is a hermeneutical task, and extends beyond the scope of this article. What is of crucial importance in reference to the present concerns is how Sobchack's phenomenological film theory could be combined with a formalist understanding of cinematic narration.

### **Merleau-Ponty's two subjectivities**

First we must go back to one of Sobchack's key notions and ask, what exactly is the point in assigning subjectivity to cinema and how well does it

actually fit Merleau-Ponty's description of being-in-the-world? To answer this we must focus on a certain inconsistency in the thinking of the philosopher himself. Gary Brent Madison has pointed out that when talking about subjectivity in his earlier philosophy, Merleau-Ponty "oscillates almost imperceptibly" between two different conceptions of the term. In particular, when talking about "us," he means "us as personal subjects, and conceives of subjectivity here in the more or less usual sense of the term." On the other hand subjectivity is for him "also the lived body, a subjectivity beneath our personal and conscious existence, an anonymous and 'natural' subjectivity."<sup>21</sup> In Madison's opinion, ambiguity about these two senses of subjectivity is at the core of what he sees as the ontological problems in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, particularly in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Merleau-Ponty discusses pre-reflective vs. reflective aspects of subjectivity, but basically he sought to overcome such dichotomies. In his late work, particularly in the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*, he puts forward the concept of *flesh*, the common ground of all being, of which both subject and object, Being and consciousness, are simply complementary and absolutely inseparable aspects. Flesh is an "element of Being.... a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being."<sup>22</sup> Thus Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome the subject-world *duality* – having already overcome *dualism* generally in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Yet, he still had to maintain a distinction between two orders of meaning, the natural and cultural, with the latter grounding itself on the former.<sup>23</sup> These distinctions are necessitated by the emergence of the social world with its symbolic systems – i.e., the social construction of reality.

With all this in mind we can now proceed to examine, first, Sobchack's phenomenology of film in light of the dichotomy Madison has pointed out, and then how she extends the metaphor of film having a body and subjectivity into an account of how audiovisual narration can relate to the structures of our conscious being and our concerns as human beings.

First of all, Sobchack does not really address the difficulties of trying to renounce duality. She sees films as becoming and behaving, inhabiting and signifying the worlds they offer to us, and thus, in terms of world-subject reciprocity, cinema has "an existential presence in its own right."<sup>24</sup> But she skates over the concept of *flesh*, and she pretty well ignores that of *Being* as well. So now we should ask, in what sense does film open up a sensible-sensing relationship? Could film be an instance of Being becoming aware of itself?

Granted, a film is an opening into a world, but only the diegetic world of fiction, which is by definition inaccessible to the spectator in any other way except through the film – or the real world as revealed in a documen-

tary film, news broadcast, and the like. But what is more to the point concerning fictional films is that apart from “perception”, the film does not share in the diegetic world it depicts. It is not of the “same stuff,” it does not express itself or externalize itself in that diegetic world but only to us, who stand outside of that world. A film may have individual quality, it may possess a certain style, but all that is expressed lies outside the diegetic world it pretends to inhabit, as expression offered to the spectator. It can only display an “as if” intentionality and style of relating to the diegetic world. Furthermore, in the case of film we certainly do not have the kind of “carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and sensed to the sentient,”<sup>25</sup> that characterizes sensation as the reversibility of the flesh, and as a process of *illumination*.

The subject in Merleau-Ponty’s late work does not emerge as “a mere project of the world [as still in *Phenomenology of Perception*] but is rather the turning back upon itself of Nature, the Sensible, and, as such, a *natural* light, the illumination of Being.”<sup>26</sup> Could film really be a subject of such illumination, i.e., illumination in a deeper sense than the way that any work of art illuminates the world for a human subject – as when Heidegger sees Van Gogh’s paintings disclosing truth, or even being truth in the sense that “this entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being”?<sup>27</sup> Regardless, we can agree with Sobchack about film allowing us a perceptual engagement with the world that is closely related to (but not identical with) our human way of being-in-the-world. Yet even then, we have to be aware of a certain bias in her phenomenology. She refers in passing to the pre-reflective/reflective division, but in effect she focuses on the pre-reflective and discusses subjectivity almost exclusively in the sense of natural subjectivity.

### **Duality in film theory**

Edward Branigan criticizes Sobchack’s theory in *Narrative Comprehension and Film* under the heading “holistic theories of narrative.”<sup>28</sup> Actually, Sobchack’s theory is not about narratives or narration at all – although some of her remarks might easily lead one to form such a mistaken impression. It is much more limited in scope, and its explanatory power can be appreciated only by taking into account the fact that she is mainly addressing a certain aspect of cinematic experience. She only explores the “primary structures, founded in existence and constitutive of conscious experience” and leaves the analysis of a rhetoric or poetics of cinema to which these structures may give rise for future research.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Branigan’s criticism, focused on the level of film as organized into a discourse, reminds us that the “film is a subject” *metaphor* (and taking it as a metaphor is to the present writer the only meaningful way in which it

can be understood, despite Sobchack's claim to the contrary), can hardly be extended to account for the overall narrative organization of a film. There is, of course, an "intellectual and reflective *cogito*" in operation, but it is clearly that of the filmmaker or his metaphorical substitute, the implied filmmaker if you like, who organizes the film into a coherent discourse, as well as that of the spectator (or implied spectator), who employs (or can be hypothesized to employ) pre-existing schemata to make sense of a narrative structure.

Sobchack's phenomenological and Branigan's cognitive approach relate to two different but mutually interdependent aspects of the cinematic experience, roughly corresponding to the two different ways of conceiving subjectivity that can be found in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – and by extension, the two aspects, the direct and the indirect, of our conscious being. Far from ruling each other out, they *can* and *must* be taken to be complementary. Whereas the former explains how cinematic experience is grounded in our primary perceptual relationship with the physical environment, the latter can be used to explain how that primary potential for meaning can be fleshed out into a full blown narrative with all the significance-producing and organizing power of mimesis. Both relate to the interest we take in the natural cum cultural world, to which we must consciously relate in order to survive and experience our lives as meaningful.

Appropriately enough from the present point of view, Branigan presents in his book a scheme of levels of narration, one of which he describes almost as if he was writing about Sobchack's anonymous other: (*Implied*) *diegetic narrator*: "If a bystander had been present, she *would have seen ...* and *would have heard ...*" Below this level there are character based levels, starting from "*Nonfocalized narration (character as agent)*" through different levels of focalization down to "*internal focalization (depth)*." Above are other ways of conceiving the role of a narrator in cinematic discourse as well as the historical and the implied author.

Nonfocalized narration can be interestingly contrasted with the implied diegetic narrator. To give an example of his scheme, Branigan analyses the opening of Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1957) and mentions the shots where "Manny is overtaken by two policemen who seem to walk on either side of him *as if* to take him into custody, but in fact they do not walk on either side of him and do not (yet) take him into custody," as an example of the functioning of an implied author.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the diegetic narrator conveys perceptual information from the diegetic world *as if* he was an on-line connection to the immediate narrative moment as such, the implied author is in charge of the narrative implications of that information, the retrospective and prospective meanings which emerge from the immediate situation as a part of the narrative whole and the various satisfactions and

expectations to which it gives rise.

On an even more profound level the proposed Sobchack-Branigan duality corresponds directly to how we relate to narratives in two complementary ways. On the one hand, inasmuch as we are attached to the immediate concerns of the characters at each narrative moment, we follow the story as if from the inside. On the other hand, we simultaneously view the story as if from the outside: we are aware of its composition, how the story is organized to produce certain effects, how it relies on certain conventions, how the plot is more or less expectable, how it conforms to this or that ideological position, how it is used to define moral positions, etc. The former is the more subjective, engaged view, the latter the more objective and detached. This polarization should not be thought of as static, as both are aspects of cinematic experience and optimally they function seamlessly together with ever changing emphasis. The same inside/outside effect can be encountered in all temporal arts or representations, and a constant interplay of involvement and detachment characterizes all artistic observation, but arguably in the cinema these dual engagements are at their strongest because of the perceptual directness of the address – the address of the eye.

We may note in passing, that this structure also mimics our existential structure as conscious beings, particularly as viewed in terms of Madison's corrective to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of subjectivity, where one side of us is directly engaged with being-in-the-world, the other indirectly involved in terms of our being socially and historically conditioned individuals. Bringing forth such a duality is not entirely new for film theory. For example, Jean Mitry stated that "in the cinema I am at the same time inside the action and outside it, within the space and outside it."<sup>31</sup> This notion gives rise to the question of how the two aspects hold together. Siegfried Kracauer pointed out that, although any element in a film might be "intended to advance the story to which it belongs, ... it also affects us strongly, or even primarily, as just a fragmentary moment of visible reality, surrounded as it were, by a fringe of indeterminate visible meanings. And in this capacity the moment disengages itself from the conflict, the belief, the adventure, toward which the whole of the story converges."<sup>32</sup>

Tom Gunning, in his turn, sees as the basic task of the "filmic narrator" the overcoming of the "initial resistance of the photographic material to telling by creating a hierarchy of narratively important elements within a mass of contingent details." Through the shaping and defining of visual meanings a "transformation of showing into telling takes place." Thus the excessive realism of the cinematic images is "bent" to narrative purposes.<sup>33</sup> Yet, with reference either to Sobchack's phenomenological account or even to ecological theory, we may well ask where this "initial resistance" is supposed to lie. Perhaps Gunning should have written about "cinemato-

graphic material” to begin with, so as to realize that moving images of characters in action beg to be organized into a narrative. Images of people engaged in activities that are apparently purposeful cause us question what they are doing and why, and pique our curiosity about what will happen next. Even a still photograph of a person, might catch our attention and make us wonder what kind of a person she is (or was). What has she experienced to make her look like that, to have that expression on her face? It’s all about the interest we take in the world, life, ourselves, and other people.

Sobchack’s theory reminds us of the fact that on one level we as the spectators of a film are not supposed to imagine ourselves witnessing the narrative events *in* the diegetic world ourselves. Rather, we see the diegetic world from certain angles, in different framings, etc., *as if* we were agents in the diegetic world, controlled in certain ways by the cinematic narrator. Once this is accepted we can better appreciate how cinematic narration can be fruitfully examined as originating from the quasi-presence of an anonymous other in the fictional world.

### **The Invisible Observer**

How does Sobchack’s notion of the “invisible other” relate to one of oldest notions in classical film theory, that of the “the invisible observer”? This idea appeared fairly early on. It is present in Hugo Münsterberg’s writings on cinema and was elaborated into an overall theory of film narration by Vsevolod Pudovkin in his *Film Technique* (1926). Later on it was used to explain the workings of continuity editing and often identified with the narrator or thought of as the film’s storyteller itself. David Bordwell, a staunch opponent of all anthropomorphizing in film theory, has pointed out how awkward the concept of the invisible observer, however ideally conceived, soon became in attempts to use it to explain the working of various cinematic devices.<sup>34</sup> Sobchack is at the brink of making the same mistake, but she halts just before stepping too far.

The danger here lies in taking the idea of an invisible observer or film as subject too literally and expecting it to account for all aspects of filmic narration. As Bordwell writes, “the invisible observer is not the *basis* of film style but only one *figure* of style.”<sup>35</sup> We might also think of such a concept as a heuristic device which can be used to explain why it is that certain features of filmic expression appear to us so natural and are so easily adopted: it is because they correspond to human bodily orientation in the world. Even with this we have to beware of being too literal minded. Bordwell criticizes the idea that the low camera height in the films of Yasujiro Ozu corresponds to the viewpoint of an invisible witness, seated in the traditional Japanese kneeling position, by pointing out that Ozu uses

this height also outdoors and in public places where no one would be expected to be thus seated. But surely, if we are as inspired as to talk about *invisible* observers in the first place, we might as well assume them taking whatever viewing positions they may find fit in view of their style of observation. We need not think of them as being “of the same stuff” as the world they observe for us. The low height of their observation point in Ozu’s films might well help to produce the effect of calm observation of a person thus seated even if the idea would not make any literal sense. As a narrative device this is simply an example of counterfactual blending in terms of fictional truth.

Similarly, in terms of Sobchack’s theory we should note that we do not actually have to imagine a person thus seated to account for the anonymous other to whose vision we have access. Sobchack’s notion can be thought of merely as a way of explaining how a certain visual effect corresponds to a bodily orientation which might not be implied itself as much as the affect to which it is instinctively related to. A nervous hand-held camera style, perhaps accompanied by rapid editing, need not imply that there is an invisible observer romping around the scene of the action. It simply creates a certain nervous effect by means of suggesting nervous bodily behavior.

All in all, in a more or less classical style any shot is likely to appear as if it were taken from a certain point in the diegetic space and this is how it makes sense. The degree to which this implies bodily orientation on the axis metaphorical-subjective-concrete varies constantly, even within the same shot. This applies also to shots that are taken from an “impossible” or unlikely point. In François Ozon’s *Sous le sable* [*Under the Sand*] (2001) the Charlotte Rampling character comes to a bed and lies down on her back. The camera has been on the bed in front of her and the next shot is of her head on the pillow – upside down on the screen. This is perfectly logical in terms of spatial orientation as this second shot is taken from a position close to the previous point without turning round the camera, which would have been required to have her face the right way round on the screen. This could have been done, of course, and the result would have looked more natural. Ozon’s solution is not only more exciting and logical in its own right: by suggesting a bodily presence it also uncannily supports the story about a woman who refuses to accept the death of her husband and still experiences his presence in their flat.

Camerawork can easily be used to suggest a presence, and often does so in suspense and horror films. Still, Stanley Kubrick’s use of it in *The Shining* (1980) is exceptionally gripping. The way the camera is employed to render a sensation of an anonymous presence is probably the reason why this film is so effective – perhaps all the more so on repeated viewings. As Wendy and Danny explore the labyrinth in the park we see them in a follow-shot. Within the parameters of classical style, this is incon-

spicuous enough. But as Wendy and Danny reach a dead end and turn around, the camera turns round them and continues to follow them in a way which foregrounds the fact that there is an observing agent which moves deliberately in relation to their movements. Strangely enough, instead of baring the device this has a chilling effect, as if someone invisible whose point of view we share was following them. This sensation is strengthened immediately after, as Jack is seen inside looking at the model of the labyrinth and – impossibly, or, “as if” – seeing Wendy and Danny in there. There is a continuum from an invisible observer through an impossible observer to an implied observer. Later on in the film there is a shot-countershot sequence as Danny stops to look at the door of the forbidden room. Here the effect is strengthened by his reaction, escape-like moving away from the door. This sequence works so well, because we have learned to associate shot-countershot sequences with the encounter of two persons looking at each other. In this kind of blending of cinematic means associated with certain character positions and movement in the diegetic world, it is possible to suggest presence of something that might never be assigned a precise ontological status in terms of fictional truth. As in the best of linguistic blends, the result is beyond complete verbal transcription.

In *The Shining* the implications created by the camera work of presences, attention, something following or not following characters, are constantly varied. Most remarkably, there is the sensation we get when Danny starts once again off with his tricycle and suddenly the camera does *not* follow him. It is almost as if we were barred from following him and looking after him. This reminds us that at times, instead of representing the gaze of a character or an invisible observer, the camera might also “represent” our gaze as spectators. We are at the mercy of filmic narrators choosing what they want to show us. There is plenty of variety in how the perspectives in a film can be blended to produce narrative effects which constantly vary our engagement with the characters and with the narration.

### **Conclusion: embodiment, cinematic narration and imagination**

Sobchack’s phenomenology of the cinematic image suggests how audiovisual representation corresponds to a human mode of being-in-the-world. This can be extended to how certain cinematic devices mimic human behavior and thus correspond to certain patterns of perception. One of the tasks of contemporary film studies is to examine how these are put to use in cinematic narration in modeling our being, as individuals and as members of a community in specific historical and social circumstances. In addition to the approaches discussed above, there is a need for a sociology of knowledge, such as that proposed by Berger and Luckmann. This in turn

must be further complemented by a hermeneutics of 'texts' such as Paul Ricoeur has proposed in his *Time and Narrative* and *Memory, History and Forgetting*. The way a film 'behaves' and narrates is indicative of a certain mode or style of being-in-the-world, of having acquired a certain hold on the world, of a situatedness with a physical, biological and social dimension. In a film, such situatedness is most fundamentally expressed most by a cinematic style, which again may be seen as analogous to the phenomenological idea of a person's individual style of being-in-the-world.

And what if that situatedness seems temporally, geographically, socially, or historically quite distant to us? The appreciation of such works involves a degree of *domestication* or *rationalization*, which involves some refiguring of culturally coded features in our own terms.<sup>36</sup> But then again, as Richard Gerrig notes, for a film or a novel to become truly significant for us, it must appeal to our more or less idiosyncratic predispositions.<sup>37</sup> In order to understand such narrative involvement we must analyze the mental activities that enable readers or spectators to "reduce [their] own reality' and achieve the duality of inhabiting the real and narrative worlds as a real and narrative character."<sup>38</sup> As has been argued above (from the point of view of cognitive film theory), this calls first of all for an analysis of how our perception of the moving image is based on schemata which emerge from our bodily orientation to the world, as well as from other schemata which have developed through our engagement with a given social environment. These schemata enable us to understand and make sense of audiovisual narration. Inevitably, this also involves a complementary analysis of how these schemata are, in their turn, enhanced by being applied to films or other forms of audiovisual representation, and how the cinematic experience thus influences our experience of the real world.

But there is yet another component involved, namely imagination or fantasy, which also has a foundational role in our mental architecture. It, too, feeds upon and functions through the same schemata with which we relate to our environment, and it, too, modifies those schemata. Furthermore, the interaction between fiction (which is interpersonal) and fantasy (which as such is private) also plays a significant role in the social construction of reality. This applies on all levels, from processing perceptual data to understanding any form of purposefully structured information which challenges us with the task of having to conceive of wholes on the basis of fragmentary information. On the level of perception this is where *post-perceptual* processing comes into the picture. As Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft put it, "imagination might be thought of as capable of influencing the conceptual spin we give to perceptual contents".<sup>39</sup> On a more complex level, under the concept of *simulation programme*, Currie and Ravenscroft discuss the "the existence of states of recreative imagining, their role in our everyday understanding of minds, and their capacity to

reduce the amount of psychological theorizing that we need to attribute to people in explaining their mentalizing capacity.”<sup>40</sup> As Currie and Ravenscroft (along with many other scholars) emphasize, fiction plays a major role in the formation and development of these faculties. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* Gerrig explores the metaphors which have been used to explore the relationship of a reader to a narrative, *being transported* and *performance*. Of how “someone (*the traveler*) is transported,” he writes:

This suggests that the traveler assumes certain new characteristics (as called for by the narrative) as a consequence of undertaking the journey. This idea is virtually unexplored in cognitive psychology, which has emphasized the way the reader constructs the narrative world rather than the way the narrative reconstructs the reader ... In this context we can wonder whether narratives, by causing us to collapse the distinction between reader and narratee, might change our views of what sort of people we are.”<sup>41</sup>

This kind of change could be analyzed in terms of a modification of schemata as suggested above. On the surface, it may appear that films require less of the spectator in mentally constructing their diegetic worlds than literary fictions. However, by virtue of its capacity for what might be called embodied representation (or, with a slight shift of focus, representation of embodiment), there are ways in which cinematic narration poses even more complex questions about how our being-in-the-world emerges from the interaction of being situated in a given environment, having imagination, and creating and consuming representations.

## **Henry Bacon**

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> James Schmidt writes in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (London: Houndmills and Macmillan, 1985) about Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Saussure: "... his discussion of Saussure, more often than not, is simply wrong. ... I need to stress as well that it is not at all clear that Merleau-Ponty was able to bring many of the problems discussed here to anything even remotely resembling a convincing or even an unequivocal conclusion. But it must also be stressed that in almost every case I would rather have Merleau-Ponty's misreadings and equivocations than the scrupulous but tedious exegeses of more responsible, but less provocative, commentators or the clear but implausible or inconsequential theories of more single-minded, but less gifted theorists. Merleau-Ponty may have been staggeringly inaccurate reader of Saussure, but what he forced Saussure to say is as important as anything Saussure actually said." (p. 11.)

<sup>7</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>12</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> This could perhaps be seen as a reversal of Christian Metz's stand, as he writes: "the film is what receives, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records." (*The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, tr. Celia Britton, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 51.) However outrageous the idea of film as a subject with a body may appear, it does seem to be more illuminating than that of a spectator with alternately a camera and a projector as a body.

## *How Films Behave and Narrate*

<sup>14</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. Merleau-Ponty quotation from *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 354.

<sup>17</sup> Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, tr. Barbara Fasting (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), p. 68. At one point Tan seems to come close to Sobchack's notion of an anonymous observer: "The viewer is represented in the fictional world by a sensitive and intelligent observer, who nevertheless lacks command of any effectors" (p. 241).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1964; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, p. 237.

<sup>24</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 216.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 156.

<sup>29</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of The Eye*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, vol I. (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1963), p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 303.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 9-12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> From this point of view we can see that Cultural Studies could greatly benefit from aligning with this line of study. Understanding how cognitive functions can throw light not only on the general patterns of perception and understanding but also on culturally specific questions such as why one interpretative community might emphasize one aspect of a narrative, another such community quite different aspect, even when both are founded on the same intuition of "the visible behavior" of the film standing for a certain biologically and socially conditioned way of relating to an environment.

<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, pp. 11-12.