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ABSTRACT
Movies have a striking aesthetic power: they can draw us in and induce a peculiar mode of involvement in their images – they *absorb* us. While absorbed in a movie, we lose track both of the passage of time and of the fact that we are sitting in a dark room with other people watching the play of light upon a screen. What is the source of the power of movies? Noël Carroll, who cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty as an influence on his account of the power of movies, agrees with Merleau-Ponty that our perceptual experience of movies draws on many of the capacities at work in our perceptual experience of everyday situations. Yet Merleau-Ponty's account of perception shows that Carroll's emphasis on intellectual inference and the entertaining of unasserted thoughts is a distortion of the phenomenology of cinematic absorption. According to Merleau-Ponty, such intellectual operations come into play in cases of breakdown but should not be read back into the primary absorbed experience as being implicitly operative all along. After presenting and criticizing Carroll's view, I interpret and expand upon Merleau-Ponty's position, showing that his version of the analogy between cinematic perception and everyday perception is more convincing than Carroll's.

1. Introduction

Movies have a striking aesthetic power. They can draw us in and induce a peculiar involvement: they *absorb* us.[1] While absorbed in a movie, we can lose track both of the passage of time and of the very fact that we are sitting in a dark room with other people watching a sequence of images through the play of light upon a screen. That play of light opens up a whole world before us.

Explanations of the power of movies to absorb us usually appeal to some special process going on in the spectator's mind. Examples of this broad explanatory strategy range from appeals to fantasy and wish-fulfillment in a psychoanalytic interpretation to the following implicit rules of a game of 'make believe' and the operation of 'inferential and interpretational processes' in more recent

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philosophy of art.[2] The approach to perception taken by Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a different way of understanding the power of movies. In a little essay called 'The Film and the New Psychology' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964),[3] presented not long after the publication of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty gives an account of our powerful perceptual experience of movies that draws on his account of our direct embodied perception of our everyday world.[4]

According to Merleau-Ponty, 'perception permits us to understand the meaning of the cinema. A movie is not thought; it is perceived' (FNP, p. 58). After a six-page summary of some of the key claims of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty goes on to remark: 'If we now consider the film as a perceptual object, we can apply what we have said about perception in general to the perception of a film' (FNP, p. 54). In this essay I interpret and develop the account of the power of movies sketched by Merleau-Ponty, and I will critically contrast it to the account articulated by one of the most important writers on this topic in contemporary philosophy, Noël Carroll. Although Carroll and Merleau-Ponty share some substantial common ground, in the end Carroll anchors his theory in cognitive or intellectual processes that Merleau-Ponty claims are derivative, arising in cases of breakdown and not operative in the primordial experience of cinematic absorption. The result is a distortion of the phenomenology of cinematic absorption such that movies are construed precisely as being given through 'thought' rather than being 'perceived', to use Merleau-Ponty's terms.

By drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to criticize Carroll, I do not aim to undermine the tremendous contributions Carroll has otherwise made to our understanding of the power of movies. Many of Carroll's key claims do not stand or fall in coordination with what I will refer to as his 'cognitivism'. Indeed, some of Carroll's cognitivist claims regarding the continuous role of inference and the active 'entertaining of unasserted thoughts' (PMP, p. 155) are in tension with some of his more careful descriptions of the immediate and 'automatic' power of movies to grip us, descriptions influenced, it turns out, by his own early reading of Merleau-Ponty. The view I sketch in this essay will help set the record straight regarding an account of cinematic experience grounded in a better appreciation for the anti-cognitivist thrust of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

According to the Merleau-Pontian approach, our absorbed involvement in a movie is an involvement in the *world* presented in the movie, and this involvement is phenomenologically analogous to our absorbed involvement in our own everyday world, the way we can get around in the world largely without having to stop and reflect on what we are doing because the world directly shows up to us as a familiar context of action that meshes with our embodied skills for dealing with it. The phenomenological description of the perceptual modality involved in our pre-reflective absorption in our everyday world is thus a powerful means for explicating the power of movies and the nature of cinematic absorption. Such is the lesson I take from the central observations

Merleau-Ponty makes about cinematic experience. To get going, I will cite three of the most important passages in Merleau-Ponty's essay:

(1) Let's say right off that a film is not a sum total of images but a temporal *gestalt*.

(FNP, p. 54)

(2) This is why movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his *thoughts* as novels have done for so long, but his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know.

(FNP, p. 58)

(3) [A] movie has meaning in the same way that a thing does: neither of them speaks to an isolated understanding; rather both appeal to our power tacitly to decipher the world or men and to coexist with them.

(FNP, p. 58)

In what follows, I develop an account of four interrelated features of Merleau-Ponty's explanation of the power of movies 'to grip' us: (1) the inherent perceptual significance of holistic gestalts; (2) the distinction between the engaged and disengaged attitudes; (3) the human power tacitly to decipher the world and others; and (4) the cinematic presentation of a world and 'that special way of being in the world'. Before explaining these aspects of Merleau-Ponty's view, I present Noël Carroll's account of the power of movies so I can show how it both elucidates some of Merleau-Ponty's key insights and yet at the same time makes itself vulnerable to his critique. I conclude the essay by extrapolating from my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty an account of the general structure and conditions of the power of movies to absorb us.

In the introduction to *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, a title that deliberately refers to Hubert Dreyfus's Merleau-Ponty-inspired notion of 'bodily coping', Carroll admits to having been influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology from the beginning of his career. Carroll asserts that Merleau-Ponty influenced his critical approach to Keaton's physical humor and his appreciation of the specifically *perceptual* character of cinematic experience more generally. The latter, he points out, was typically overlooked by the dominant 'Althusserian-Lacanian' paradigm of, 1970s Film Theory (Carroll, 2007, pp. 1–3). In a retrospective glance, Carroll writes:

Throughout my career as a film critic/interpreter I persisted in much of my work in plying the improvised variant of phenomenology found in this book – attempting to explain the ways in which modifications in the formal structure of the visual array meaningfully shapes our experiences of and responses to the cinematic stimuli.

(Carroll, 2007, pp. 13–14)[5]

As I will argue below, this improvised variant of phenomenology would have benefitted from a better appreciation of Merleau-Ponty's arguments against accounts of perceptual experience that insist on the mediation of cognitive or intellectual processes.

Carroll's mature theoretical position, recently summarized in his book *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* ('PMP'), amounts to what I will label 'cognitivist naturalism'. The 'naturalist' strand of this position is in tune with Merleau-Ponty's insistence that the skills and sensibilities operative in our absorption in the everyday world are at work in our absorbed experience of movies. The 'cognitivist' strand of Carroll's position involves the claim that cognitive-inferential processes, along with the 'imaginative entertaining of thoughts' mediate and enable our natural propensity to be moved by movies.

Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, as for Heidegger before him, such cognitivism is an illegitimate attempt to read back into our pre-reflective experience mental and analytical operations that are not part of the absorbed experience itself, but that emerge in reflective analyses of it or in situations of breakdown.[6] The result is a distortion of the phenomena at issue. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, such 'analytical perception … is a belated and rare attitude – that of the scientist who observes or of the philosopher who reflects' (FNP, p. 49), not of the movie watcher who gets absorbed.

2. Noël Carroll on the Power of Movies

2.1 Carroll's Naturalism

As I mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty sets out to apply his views 'about perception in general to the perception of a film' (FNP, p. 54). One of the main clues Merleau-Ponty gives about how to pursue this parallelism between perception in general and the perception of movies is the claim that a movie 'appeal[s] to our power tacitly to decipher the world or men and to coexist with them' (FNP, p. 58). Carroll also stresses that the best way to understand our engagement with movies is by considering them as affording experiences that engage the same embodied perceptual capacities at work in our everyday experience of the world, those capacities that have naturally evolved into the 'perceptual equipment' of 'the standard-issue human organism' (PMP, pp. 126, 150). Carroll's defense of this 'naturalistic' account of our perception of moving images is presented as an antidote to the claims of 'capital T' film Theory, which had often likened the experience of movies to the experience of *language*.

Theorists from V.I. Pudovkin to Christian Metz defended versions of the claim that individual shots are like individual words or conventional signs that the filmmaker combines according to a conventional 'grammar'.[7] Carroll calls this the 'Code Thesis' and offers an alternative that he calls 'The Recognitional Prompt Thesis'. According to the latter, 'recognition rather than convention is the fundamental key to pictorial comprehension' (PMP, p. 111).[8] I will consider

two aspects of this Recognitional Prompt Thesis that relate to Carroll's naturalism about cinematic experience and that set up a consideration of his cognitivism. First, Carroll observes that 'picture comprehension, including motion picture comprehension, appears to require no special training or instruction. It seems to come quite naturally' (PMP, p. 108). Driving the point home, Carroll writes that 'pictorial practices can be *grasped almost immediately* – or, at least, with astounding alacrity in comparison to language learning – and, in a manner of speaking, "all in one shot"' (PMP, p. 107, my italics). This is due to the fact that humans 'acquire the capacity to recognize pictures, including moving pictures, naturally, rather than conventionally, at the same time that they acquire the capacity to recognize the objects pictures represent' (PMP, p. 109). I take Carroll's claim here to be analogous to the claim made by Merleau-Ponty that movies 'appeal to our power tacitly to decipher the world or men and to coexist with them' (FNP, p. 58). Carroll indeed sounds like he is channeling this Merleau-Pontian view when he states that movies are so 'popular and almost universal in their appeal because they mesh so well with certain human capabilities' (PMP, p. 133).

Even if you accept Carroll's claim that individual shots in a movie are comprehended directly and immediately by our ability to recognize the objects represented in the shot, you might still resist this naturalism about cinematic perception by considering the fact that movies, after all, are constituted by very many (sometimes thousands) of individual shots, some of them with complicated camera movements, edited together in certain patterns. Isn't it a 'decoding' or a 'reading' in accordance with conventions that enables us to comprehend such narrational strategies? Carroll argues against drawing this conclusion. He naturally admits that a typical movie is a sequence of many individual shots edited together in accordance with strategies designed to intelligibly present the events and actions that make up the movie's narratives, strategies such as point of view editing, close ups, and other aspects of cinematic sequencing that Carroll calls 'variable framing'.[9] Yet, according to Carroll, even though it might take a little time 'upon first exposure' to acquire some viewing habits and skills and to get 'the hang of a pictorial style' (PMP, p. 109), it would be wrong to compare this to learning how to decode or read a conventional sign because 'to a substantial degree, the cinematic sequencing engages features of our cognitive and perceptual make-up that were already in place before our first exposure to moving pictures and mobilizes them to make sense of the array' (PMP, p. 123).

For example, the use of the close up as a way of signaling the significance of an object or a facial expression should not be understood as a mere convention because, 'given the human perceptual make-up, it is not arbitrary that we attend to the objects that dominate our visual field nor that we are less likely to attend to objects that are not prominent' (PMP, p. 126). Merleau-Ponty would heartily agree. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty links the apparent decreased size of a distant object, for example a man walking in the distance,

to its lack of relevance to and interrelation with the other aspects of the visual scene unfolding before me:

> All that can be said is that the man at two hundred paces is a less articulated figure, that he offers my gaze fewer and less precise 'holds' [or 'grips'], that he is less strictly geared into my exploratory power … To say that an object occupies a small part of my visual field is to say in the final analysis that it does not offer a rich enough configuration to exhaust my power of clear vision.

> (Merleau-Ponty , 2012, p. 272)

Carroll gives a similar account of the intelligibility of point of view editing, the very common strategy of showing a person glancing off screen (sometimes called the 'point/glance' shot), then cutting to an object ('point/object' shot), then sometimes cutting back to a shot of the person who is looking. It is immediately understood that the person is looking at the object. According to Carroll, our ability immediately to understand point of view editing is grounded in the phenomenon of shared attention, the innate tendency to share and follow the gaze of conspecifics (and other animals as well) to its target. Thus Carroll regards 'point of view editing as an elaboration on our ordinary cognitive and perceptual experiences', adding that

> we are able to understand it not because we learn it after the fashion of learning a grammatical rule, but because of the way in which it is related to our own characteristic perceptual behaviors.

> (Carroll, 2003, pp. 46–47, 49)[10]

These strategies of variable framing make possible what we might call, adopting Dreyfus's Merleau-Ponty-inspired phrase, a 'mindless coping' or immediate involvement with the moving image. Carroll (PMP, p. 132, my italics), for his part, notes that our comprehension of the movie 'happens *automatically* because of the way in which the variable framing naturally orchestrates our attention'. He adds that 'the fact that the standard usages of variable framing tap into our natural perceptual dispositions accounts for the way in which most people follow the average motion picture with great ease and accuracy' (PMP, p. 133).

However, the similarity of Carroll's account of our involvement with movies to a Merleau-Pontian account of our immediate, pre-reflective involvement with the everyday world is upended when Carroll gives a more detailed explanation of 'the ways in which modifications in the formal structure of the visual array meaningfully shape our experiences of and responses to the cinematic stimuli' (Carroll, 2007, p. 14). For Carroll, our 'automatic' and 'natural' involvement with moving images is mediated by intellectual judgments and inferences. This is Carroll's cognitivism.

2.2 Carroll's Cognitivism

In tension with his phenomenologically sensitive descriptions of the 'automatic' ease of normal cinematic experience, Carroll claims such cinematic experience

is underwritten by cognitive inference and judgment. Thus he contends that 'cinematic sequencing feeds the spectator the inputs she needs in order *to perform the continuing battery of inferences* requisite for tracking the story' (PMP, p. 132, my italics). Additionally, he writes that

> [A]lthough the variable framing makes certain inferences likely – indeed, often virtually unavoidable – it still usually depends upon the viewer to arrive at the hypothesis that completes the thought the filmmaker intends to convey. Furthermore, what is interesting about the way in which the viewer puts this information together is that it does not, for the most part, rely on special and/or language-like codes and conventions, but instead upon *the same sort of inferential and interpretive processes – including abduction, inference to the best explanation, and practical reasoning – that we employ to negotiate situations in everyday life.*
>
> (PMP, p. 130, my italics)

Here Carroll has switched to defending exactly the kind of theory of cinematic experience against which Merleau-Ponty positioned his own view when he claimed that 'a movie is *not thought*, it is perceived' (FNP, p. 58, emphasis added). According to Merleau-Ponty, abduction, inference, and practical reasoning may indeed be important elements of our experience, but they transpire in cases of breakdown and reflective reconstruction, and should not be read back into our pre-reflective experiences as having been implicitly operative all along. The example Carroll gives to elucidate his appeal to such cognitive operations in our everyday experience is indeed a case of breakdown:

> Think about what goes on in your mind when you chance upon a crime scene in the course of your daily affairs. First, you begin to notice that there are a number of cops milling about; then you observe other details – police barriers, photographers, and the like. Gradually you colligate these facts under the concept of a crime scene.
>
> (Carroll, PMP, p. 131)

Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, the fact that such concept subsumption and inference to the best explanation happen when we reflectively have to come to terms with a disruption in our 'daily affairs' does not license the conclusion that in normal circumstances there is 'a continuing battery of inferences' going on somewhere in our mind. Faced with Carroll's cognitivism, Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 31) would respond that 'Perceptual consciousness [has been] mistakenly identified with the precise forms of scientific consciousness'. Carroll has illegitimately generalized the perspective of the 'scientist who observers, or the philosopher who reflects' (FNP, p. 49). For Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 36), 'to perceive in the full sense of the word … is not to judge, but rather to grasp, prior to all judgment, a sense immanent in the sensible'. A more careful phenomenology of cinematic experience will show that Carroll's appeal to the 'continuing battery of inference' has 'abandoned the lived world for the one which scientific intelligence succeeded in constructing' (FNP, p. 54).

Another aspect of Carroll's cognitivism is his claim that our affective engagement in a movie's narrative is mediated by grasping certain unasserted propositions in our minds. He writes that a fictional motion picture instructs its audiences to hold certain propositions before the mind unassertively – for example, to *imagine* that Hornblower is under fire, or to *suppose* that Hornblower is being blasted, or to *entertain the unasserted thought* (rather than the belief) that Hornblower is just barely eluding the enemy attack.

(PMP, p. 155)

Carroll thereby decomposes the experience of movies into two factors, the perceptual experience (of the image and sound tracks) and the propositions those experiences prompt us to grasp in mind.[11]

One problem is that, as Carroll himself says in response to the claim that viewers 'suspend disbelief': 'Phenomenologically, I have no sense of such an internal process' (Carroll, 1988, p. 99). If I am in the grip of the movie, I directly *see* what is happening in the movie's world.[12] Under normal circumstances, and for typical, unproblematic movies, I don't have the experience of entertaining propositions and processing a barrage of inferences. Merleau-Ponty's view stays closer to the cinematic phenomena.

3. Merleau-Ponty on Cinematic Experience

Again, the four major moments of Merleau-Ponty's account that I will now elaborate are: (1) the intrinsic significance of holistic gestalts; (2) the distinction between the engaged and disengaged attitudes; (3) the human power tacitly to decipher the world and others; and (4) the cinematic presentation of a world and 'that special way of being in the world'.

3.1 The Significance of Holistic Gestalts

Merleau-Ponty contends that the power of movies depends on the fact that our perceptual system is naturally attuned to *wholes* with intrinsically significant gestalt organization. In the first part of his essay on film, Merleau-Ponty presents several of his favorite examples of such gestalt organization: the grouping of dots in a line, the flipping back and forth of figure and ground in a wallpaper design, the visual puzzle with a rabbit and the hunter whose figures are absorbed into the background, and the hearing of a melody.[13] For Merleau-Ponty (FNP, p. 49), these examples all show that the 'perception of forms, understood very broadly as structure, grouping, or configuration should be considered our spontaneous way of seeing'. Moreover, they show how our perception of such wholes tends toward 'a certain constancy and a certain level of stability – not through the operation of intelligence, but through the very configuration of the [perceptual] field' (FNP, p. 51).

What does this have to do with cinematic experience? When Merleau-Ponty transitions from his general discussion of the phenomenology of perception to the perception of movies, he first addresses cinematic sequencing. He writes: 'Let us say right off that the film is not a sum total of images but a temporal *gestalt*' (Merleau-Ponty, FNP, p. 54). With this, he means to compare the visual significance of cinematic sequencing to the aural experience of a melody, about which he makes a parallel claim: 'The melody is not a sum of notes since each note only counts by virtue of the function it serves in the whole' such that 'just one single change in these interrelationships will be enough to modify the entire make up of the melody (FNP, p. 49).

The familiar claim here is that we experience the melody as an already organized and significant whole, not as a linear succession of individual notes occurring separately. Thus, just as the quality of each individual note is experienced in terms of its relation to the surrounding notes and placement in the whole melody, so each individual shot in a movie has its significance in terms of its surrounding shots and placement in the whole flow of the movie. As evidence for this claim Merleau-Ponty cites the well-known experiment of Kuleshov and Pudovkin.[14] In this experiment, a shot of an actor with an emotionally neutral or inexpressive face glancing off screen is intercut with different images (e.g., a bowl of soup, a young woman dead in a coffin, a child playing). The audience is said to have experienced the face, which was the same in each shot, as having a different emotional significance in each case (e.g., hunger, mourning, or bemusement). Of course it is important not to place too much stress on sequencing of distinct shots because there are gripping movies, e.g., Hitchcock's *Rope* and Sokurov's *Russian Arc*, that have no visible montage or intercutting (the effect is captured and the story pushed along by camera movement that mimics the effect of intercutting). Nevertheless, the general phenomenon that impresses Merleau-Ponty here is a heavily used tool in any typical movie: 'The meaning of a shot therefore depends on what precedes it in the movie and this succession of scenes creates a new reality which is not merely the sum of its parts' (FNP, p. 54).[15]

We can see here an instructive parallel between Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the holistic perceptual significance of movies and his interpretation of Cézanne's painting.[16] What fascinated Merleau-Ponty about Cézanne was his attempt to capture things as they appear through the holistic and spontaneous organization of a lived perceptual field (Merleau-Ponty, 2007a, p. 73). Cézanne did this, according to Merleau-Ponty, by synthesizing disparate visual perspectives on an object (along with the accompanying perspectival distortions) into a single perceptual take on it. In our everyday lives we tend not see things from one single perspective, but from a shifting perspective corresponding to our bodily movements and practical dealings. Our tendency in reflecting upon our perceptual experience is to focus on the determinacy of the concrete objects that we perceive, rather than on the ongoing flow of perspectival takes provided by our mobile, embodied point of view with its stabilizing perceptual constants

(size, shape, and color constancy, for example).[17] Cézanne sought ways to arrest and represent the dynamic 'coming into appearance' of things, rather than the stable and determinate objects. Hence Merleau-Ponty writes:

> We forget the viscous, equivocal appearances, and by means of them we go straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects … the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2007a, p. 77)

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, this tendency to overlook 'equivocal appearances' in favor of determinate and stable objects this is what Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 5) calls '*le préjugé du monde*', 'the prejudice of the world'. Thus, Merleau-Ponty continues:

> By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cézanne discovered what recent psychologists [i.e., the titular 'new psychologists' referred to in the film essay] have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that of our perception, is not a geometric or photographic one. In perception, the objects that are near appear smaller, those far away larger, than they do in a photograph, as we see in the cinema when an approaching train gets bigger much faster than a real train would under the same circumstances. To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception the schema of what we would have to see if we were cameras. In fact, we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2007a, pp. 73–4, my comment in brackets)

> The point is that Cézanne's method of painting managed to resist the inherent constraints of the medium (e.g., that a painting presents a temporally and perspectivally frozen image) and succeeded in visually mimicking the dynamics our lived everyday perceptual openness to the world. He does this primarily by appropriating the way our perceptual system is naturally tuned into holistic gestalts:It is Cézanne's genius that when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as the do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2007a, p. 74)

In Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, then, a successful movie does the same thing: by taking advantage of the way our perceptual system is tuned into gestalt wholes, a movie resists the inherent constraints of the photographic medium and enables a world to emerge. After all, a movie is essentially nothing but a sequence of mechanically produced isolated images, each of which presents a view of the world in a geometrical perspective that is not, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in the long passage I quoted above, characterized by the perceptual constants (size, shape, color) that stabilize and characterize our own lived perspective. Yet by judiciously intercutting these images into an holistic arrangement (and by following other elements of what below I will call 'perceptual realism'), a movie, like Cézanne's paintings, can manage to exhibit the emergence of

a world, 'the birth of order though spontaneous organization' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007a, p. 73). The reason Merleau-Ponty calls this 'spontaneous organization' is to emphasize that this mode of experience is not the result of the operation of a barrage of inferences, but rather something that happens automatically or pre-personally given the way our lived, embodied perceptual system is naturally synchronized to what Merleau-Ponty evocatively calls the 'autochthonous sense' of holistic gestalts (see Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 219, 22l, 412).

The anti-cognitivist stance we have here again is that this perception of significant wholes is something that does *not* depend upon (indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is presupposed by) the operation of inference and intelligence. To point this out is not to deny that sometimes inference and intellectual effort must be used in order to make sense of a particular extraordinary sequence of film. To take an example explored by George Wilson (1986) in the opening his excellent book, *Narration in Light*, consider a bizarre sequence in Orson Welles's *Lady from Shanghai*. Here is Wilson's description of the sequence and its effect:

> [T]wo distinguishable series of shots are rapidly intercut. In one series two male characters drive hurriedly toward an important destination. In the other, a female character, who is known to be at that time far distant from the men, learns of their journey and reacts angrily to this information. The following three-shot progression concludes the intercut series: (1) a shot from within the men's car reveals that a truck has abruptly pulled out onto the road ahead of them; (2) the woman's hand is shown reaching out and pressing an unidentified button; and (3) the men's car collides violently with the truck. Viewing these shots, it appears as if the pressing of the button has mysteriously caused the accident, but, at the same time, this impression of causality is difficult to reconcile with common sense and difficult also to integrate into our immediate sense of the film's narrative development at that juncture.

> (Wilson, 1986, p. 1)

As Wilson re-emphasizes, echoing Merleau-Ponty's fascination with the immediate gestalt significance of the Kuleshov/Pudovkin montage, faced with this series of three shots, 'We attribute, *immediately and without conscience inference*, a causal connection between the two events [the car crash and the button pressing]' (Wilson, 1986, p. 202).[18] However, despite (or perhaps because of) the immediate comprehension of events afforded by the sequencing, a sensitive viewer may be forced out of her absorptive involvement with the movie and start doing the conscious 'inferential and interpretive processes' Carroll described. Was this just a sloppy edit? Should we take the impression of causality at face value? What could that mean, that Rita Hayworth's character has supernatural powers? What really is the relation between these isolated shots and the events they depict? With such explicit questioning, Merleau-Ponty would say that the viewer has come out of the 'natural' or 'engaged' cinematic attitude, the one that is receptive and responsive to the intrinsically meaningful holistic gestalt experience of the movie, and enters into the disengaged attitude, with its 'analytical perception' of 'isolated elements' (FNP, p. 49).

3.2　The Distinction between the Engaged and Disengaged Attitudes

While we are in its grip we do not *observe* a movie from the outside, as it were, consciously forming beliefs or entertain propositions about what is happening, or making inferences about the relations holding between the sequence of isolated shots. If we do this, we are not experiencing the movie *as* a movie, but as a mere object among other objects in our world.[19] That is, while we are in its grip, we do not relate to a typical movie as a reflective subject over against an external and independent object. (As I will discuss in the final section, this claim is an over simplification. It is indeed possible in certain circumstances to experience a movie with a critical sensitivity and so simultaneously *as* a movie and *as* a contrived independent object. For now, I leave this complication aside.)

Merleau-Ponty associates our immediate responsiveness to gestalt configurations with the engaged attitude; this experience is altered when we take up the disengaged, reflective, or scientific attitude towards our experiences. In our everyday getting around in the world, the 'engaged attitude' and its characteristic perceptual experiences are maintained by habits and skills we execute without reflective effort. Our everyday perceptual experience is shaped by our being bodily situated in a holistically structured meaningful world around which we skillfully know our way – knowing immediately how to use the various items of equipment relevant to our daily routines, and having a basic familiarity with the social norms and practices characteristic of our social milieu – without having to reflect, entertain propositions, or perform inferences. In such a situation, perception is not a matter or rational or inferential processing of a mosaic of discreet 'stimuli' or 'information' from the 'outside world' (FNP, p. 50). Perception is an aspect of a person's being embedded in a familiar world whose solicitations and felt disequilibria motivate certain responses, for example when we automatically back up from a painting in order to get a better view on it and reduce a tension we felt when we were too close to see the image in the right way (Dreyfus and Kelly, 2007, p. 52). The dynamics and structures of perceptual experience are part and parcel of the person's tendency to adjust to such felt tensions and disequilibria in order to maintain what Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 311) calls an 'optimal grip' on his situation. Movies can *grip us* because they draw on our tendency toward maintaining a maximal perceptual *grip on* our own world.

When our skills and habits are disrupted or the world resists their successful unfolding, we experience a changeover from the 'engaged attitude' and its characteristic mode of experience to the derivative 'disengaged attitude'. As a result of such a changeover, *things show up differently*; the character of our perceptual experience itself is altered. Hence, in his explanation of the distinction between the engaged and the disengaged attitudes, Sean Kelly uses what for my purposes is a felicitous example: he instructs his reader to imagine walking around a realistic Western movie set, without knowing that it is a movie set. At first, when you look around you do not experience the buildings as mere facades, thin and without a reverse side. The buildings show up to you in accordance

with your embodied habits and skills for dealing with them, they look 'thick', like you can walk in them to order a drink or behind them in order to hide. But then, Kelly suggests, suppose you gain the knowledge that it is just a movie set:

> If you explore the set enough in this way, then an amazing thing can happen.
>
> Now as you walk down the street *it doesn't look realistic at all*. Instead of buildings on either side, it looks as if there are mere façades. Instead of feeling as if you're in the Old West, it feels as if you're on an old west movie set. And this is not because you can see through the doors to their empty backsides, or indeed because you 'see' anything different at all (at least in one very limited sense of 'to see'). Let us stipulate, in fact, that every light ray cast onto your retina is exactly the same as it was when you first arrived on the set. Still, your experience of the set can change, *a gestalt shift can occur*, so that the whole thing *looks like a set full of façades* instead of like an old west town.

<div align="right">(Kelly, 2005b, p. 78)</div>

This is connected to the way in which being absorbed in our everyday world involves having the skills and know-how relevant to the tools and practices that surround us. It is your everyday skills for getting around towns and dealing with houses and bars that enabled the movie facades initially to show up as a real town. There is a parallel situation for watching movies. It is your skills for watching movies (which harness the naturalistic elements of perception Carroll discusses) that enable movies to show up *as* movies (that is, as cinematic worlds in which we can be absorbed, as opposed to a bunch of façades and actors pretending).

Our perception of and absorption in a movie thus also draws on a characteristic familiarity and know-how: it draws on our familiarity with and ability immediately to understand a stock of narrational and aesthetic conventions, e.g., flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, parallel action, temporal ellipses, fading to black, sudden close ups, et cetera. When we see a close up, we don't all of the sudden get surprised and think 'Wow, that gun just got really big!' Or, when there is a fade to black, we don't get surprised that all of the lights just went dim in the movie world.[20] Or, to take an example from Carroll, assuming we have some familiarity with his style, Godard's idiosyncratic and expressive jump cuts in *Breathless* strike neither as 'rents in the fabric of the universe' nor as simple sloppiness, but rather 'as signs of authorial exuberance' (PMP, p. 120). Where do we get these skills and visual habits? Some of them come quite naturally as part of the built-in perceptual apparatus of the human organism. Others we learn by watching movies. On these points Merleau-Ponty is in accord with Carroll (as well as with Adorno and Horkheimer, for that matter).[21]

Now we can see the parallelism Merleau-Ponty establishes between our skillful perceptual engagement with the everyday world and our skillful perceptual engagement with movies. Neither typically involves the mediation of reflective self-consciousness or intellectual processes. This is why Heidegger (1962, p. 405), in discussing these general issues, claims: 'The self must forget

itself if, lost in the world of equipment, it is to be able "actually" to go to work and manipulate something.' The analog with cinematic absorption is captured by Siegfried Kracauer (1997, p. 159): 'With the moviegoer, the self as the mainspring of thoughts and decisions relinquishes its power of control.'[22]

Both everyday absorption and cinematic absorption involve a special way of taking account of the holistically structured world and perceptual field. Heidegger calls this 'circumspection' (*Umsicht*), and he distinguishes it sharply from a disengaged or analytical *looking*: 'No matter how sharply we just *look* at the "outward appearance" of things in whatever form this takes, we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98). Now we can also say: no matter how sharply we just look at the projected images on the screen, we cannot discover *a movie*.[23] There is a mode of perception we might call 'cinematic circumspection'.

3.3 The Human Power Tacitly to Decipher the World and Others

It seems obvious that if we focus our attention on one object, distractions recede to the margins of our awareness. But, as I have insisted, a movie is not some object we just focus our attention on. A movie discloses a world. The point is not that we somehow intellectually marginalize our normal everyday world and our connection with it. Rather, our familiarity with, our capacities and readiness to engage in, to understand, and to perceive our world need to be *redirected* toward the world disclosed in the film. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he writes that movies 'appeal to our power tacitly to decipher the world and men and to coexist with them' (FNP, p. 58). Victor Perkins makes a similar point in his classic work, *Film as Film*:

> Films cannot simply erase reality; if they do not offer us a substitute experience we return to our environment as people who have paid to sit disconsolately in *this* seat, at *this* cinema, at *this* time, when we could have stayed home and performed other more useful and pleasurable tasks.

(Perkins, 1993: 137)

What would such a 'substitute experience' need to involve? In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 4) emphasizes that the essential feature of perception is of a figure against a ground. Our perception is characterized by a flexible horizon such that, according to the requirements of embodied activities in which we are engaged, our perceptual field will take on a different significance, that is, a different figure-ground 'polarization' varying what stands out as figure and what recedes as ground. For example, for a bicyclist potholes on the street will (hopefully) show up prominently as figures 'to-be-avoided' against the background of the surrounding road and garbage in the gutter, but for people driving cars the bicyclist (hopefully) will stand out as the figure with the significance of 'to-be-avoided', with the garbage in the gutter remaining in the background as irrelevant to the current situation.

In such cases according to Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 133), 'the subject's intentions are immediately reflected in the perceptual field: they polarize it, place their stamp on it, or finally, effortlessly give birth there to a wave of significations'. He also calls this our 'spontaneous evaluation' of our perceptual field. 'Without the latter', he writes,

> we would not have world, that is, a collection of things that emerges from formlessness [*l'informe*] by offering themselves to our body as things 'to be touched', 'to be taken', 'to be climbed'.

>   (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 465, translation slightly modified)

But here I have to face an objection: if as mere spectators we are in a state of bodily passivity, how are we to understand Merleau-Ponty's contention that 'a movie has meaning in the same way that a thing does'? After all, things have meaning in the context of our being bodily engaged in certain activities like cycling, driving, or picking up garbage in the gutter. There are two things to say here on behalf of Merleau-Ponty.

First, the images presented in movies appeal to the perceptual capacities we have as embodied beings. As such, movies appeal to our whole bodies, not just to our eyes and ears. This is so despite the fact that we are not actively doing anything with our bodies. Movies present us with a perceptual world characterized by a richness of visual detail that rivals the richness characteristic our own world. Things in the movie's world do not merely look like mere facades or flat surfaces. They *do* look 'thick', like they have a backside, and like you could walk around the other side and see it. Things in the movie *do* like things 'to be touched' and 'to be climbed over'. And when we see the people inhabiting the movie's world doing just these kinds of things, they look to us first of all like people, and not mere props or actors. We see in them, that is, 'that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people' (FNP, p. 58). As Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 370) puts it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> I experience own body as the power for certain behaviors and a certain world, and I am only given to myself as a certain hold upon the world. Now, it is precisely my body that perceives the other's body and finds there something of a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar manner of handling the world.

Here we can also adopt an example that Merleau-Ponty adapted from Proust's description of Marcel witnessing the actress Berma playing the role of Racine's Phaedra. Despite the fact that this example pertains to live theatre, the phenomenon of direct 'intercorporeal' engagement with a fictional character is what is of interest to me here. Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 188) writes:

> [T]he actress becomes invisible, and it is Phaedra who appears. The signification absorbs the signs, and Phaedra has so fully taken possession of Berma that her ecstasy in Phaedra seems to us to be the pinnacle of naturalness and of facility. Aesthetic expression confers an existence in itself upon what it expresses, installs it in nature as a perceived thing accessible to everyone, or inversely rips the signs

themselves – the actor's person, the painter's colors and canvas – from their empirical existence and steals them away to another world. [24]

The second response I have to the possible worry about the claim I make for the parallelism of cinematic absorption with everyday absorption is that, while absorbed in a movie we can have a significantly structured or 'polarized' perceptual field despite the fact that we are sitting idly and not engaged in concrete activities that in normal cases serve to give structure to our perceptual field according to Merleau-Ponty. In fact, this is just what the movie frame is: a polarized perceptual field with certain things counting as significant figures and others receding into the background as not currently relevant. The perceptual horizons and the figure-ground organizations offered to us in the moving pictures temporarily play the part of our own perceptual field.

It is in this context that the darkness of the movie theatre takes on its true phenomenological significance. Darkness is not merely the objective condition for the illumination of the screen by the light bearing the images from the movie projector. The darkness of the screening room promotes our disengagement from the world of our pragmatic concern so that we may become absorbed in the world being projected onto the screen. Indeed, in the experience of cinematic absorption, the movie screen itself, with its own internal perceptual polarizations, is ideally offered to us as the sole figure of our visual field while our own world, shrouded and withdrawn in darkness, functions as a neutral, indeterminate background.[25]

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 70) remarks that 'the screen has no horizons'. What he means is that it is not up to the viewer how the figure-ground structure of the movie frame works: we cannot choose something that is out of focus in the background of the picture and make it the figure in a new configuration of the perceptual field. But if the movie is successful in eliciting from us a relationship of absorption, we will not experience this as a lack or confinement: we pre-reflectively accept the guidance of our perceptual horizons offered by the movie. We let the movie structure our perceptual horizons.[26]

It is important to note here that this phenomenon is crucially linked to factors such as the rhythm of the editing and depth of field of the movie. For example, when we are presented with shots that are wide (especially in Cinemascope), deeply focused, and held for a certain duration, we find ourselves naturally exploring the visual field presented to us, not just honing in on one focal object or other. This is one reason why Bazin celebrates the cinematic styles of Welles and Renoir:

Orson Welles restored to cinematographic illusion a fundamental quality of reality – its continuity … Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the

dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an *a priori* significance.

(Bazin, 1971, p. 28)[27]

Cinematographer Nestor Almendros, on the other hand, cautions against the overuse of depth of field for the very reason that it can give rise to the spectator's own perceptual polarization of the frame: 'If there is too much depth of field, the audience's attention, which in the cinema should be centered on the actors, is dispersed into the whole frame' (Almendros, 1984, p. 17). In such cases, we *can* and do impose upon the filmic image a figure-ground organization of our own.

This brings us up to another point regarding the disanalogy between cinematic perception and everyday perception. If 'a movie has meaning in the same way that a thing does' and the skills and capacities operative in our everyday perception are also operative in cinematic perception, we would expect that our perception of the characters and things in the movie world would incite us to act in some way. After all, we perceive situations in terms of what we can do in them: 'Everything I see … is marked upon the map of an "I can"' (Merleau-Ponty , 2007b, p. 354). As Charles Taylor (1995, p. 24) explains the point:

> our perceptual field has the structure it has because it is experienced as a field of potential action. We perceive the world, in other words, or take it in, through our capacities to act in it.

What, then, according to the Merleau-Pontian view, explains the inhibition of our motor intentionality, that is, the inhibition of our disposition to bodily move and act in response to our perception of our situation?

The answer lies in the appreciation for the specific kind of perceptual situation characteristic of a movie viewing. In a word, it is part of our perceptual experience that we are watching a movie from whose spectacle we ourselves are excluded. Being so excluded from the world of the movie is a condition on our becoming absorbed into it as a spectacle playing out before us. As Gadamer (2004, p. 124) puts the point in a different context:

> The spectator is set at an absolute distance, a distance that precludes practical or goal-oriented participation. But this distance is aesthetic distance in the true sense, for it signifies the distance necessary for seeing, and thus makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us.

Moreover, the experience of viewing a moving picture projected on a screen while seated in a state of relative bodily passivity in a dark auditorium has features that are unsurprisingly quite different from viewing things in the midst of our concrete dealing with them in our everyday world, even though the same range of skills and capacities are drawn on in our absorption into the movie's world.[28] For example, the camera gives views of the movie world which may be in black and white and with non-diegetic music, and in a geometrical perspective that is not the same as our lived perspective that is characterized by size and shape constancy not provided by the camera (Merleau-Ponty, 2007A,

pp. 73–4).[29] Furthermore, our body takes direct perceptual account of the fact that we are sitting down and seeing the screen from a certain fixed angle and distance, and from behind other people in the audience who may be obstructing our view, perhaps by craning our necks in a particular way to get the best view of and 'maximum perceptual grip on' the scene unfolding on screen.

The foregoing points about the specific kind of perceptual situation that a movie screening is can be summed up neatly in Noël Carroll's terms: the screen is a 'detached display' and it is experienced as such. To say that the screen is a detached display is to point out that the spectacle unfolding on the screen is indifferent to the placement of my own body, that, my moving across the auditorium or craning my neck just so will not afford me a new angle on the action or characters within the world of the movie. As a detached display, 'the screen has no horizons' in Merleau-Ponty's sense. Craning my neck, for example, will not let me see around the doorjamb that Roman Polanski put it in foreground of a shot in *Rosemary's Baby*, will not afford me a better look at Minnie Castavet (Ruth Gordon) sitting on Rosemary's chair talking on the phone. Carroll makes the point at issue here nicely:

> If I move from the right aisle of the movie theatre to the opposite side, there will be no change in what I see of Big Jake [or Minnie Castavet]. I will not start to see around his other side. In other words, I will not perceive what I would perceive were I moving relative to a real person who was actually present to me. The perceptual experience will be radically different; it will not feel, even if I am not able to put my finger on why precisely, as though I am seeing someone in the flesh … [T]he film image does not seem – does not even feel – literally co-present to me. *My body, so to speak, rejects this impression.*

> (PMP, p. 86, my italics)

This explains, then, why even though 'the movie has meaning in the same way a thing does', it does not draw me to move or act in the same way that real things and situations do in my everyday experience.[30]

3.4 The Cinematic Presentation of a World and 'that Special Way of Being in the World'

I can now turn to a discussion of the role of a movie's worldhood in conditioning an absorptive cinematic experience. This involves the following two points: (1) the cinematic presentation of a world and 'that special way of being in the world'; (2) the suspension of our everyday involvement in our own world.

> As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty ties the effectiveness of a movie's 'grip' on us to the way it 'directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people … which clearly defines each person we know' (FNP, p. 58). Our special absorptive engagement with a movie depends on the successful presentation of a world and of the people involved in it. What do I mean by 'successful presentation'? Here we come to the issue of realism.

> Merleau-Ponty, by his own account, advocates a realistic aesthetic. He writes: movies do have a basic realism, the actors should be natural, the set should be as realistic as possible; for [citing now the French film critic Roger Leenhardt] 'the power of reality released on the screen is such that the least stylization will cause it *to go flat*'(FNP, p. 57, my italics)

Merleau-Ponty's realism is what we can call a 'perceptual realism'.[31] The realistic imperative for Merleau-Ponty is not based in what Noël Carroll has convincingly criticized as a 'specificity thesis' concerning the supposed essential nature of the medium (Carroll, 1996c; see also PMP, Ch. 2). That is, Merleau-Ponty's realism has nothing to do with some supposedly special ontological connection of the photographic image with reality, as it does according to theorists such as Bazin, Kracauer, or Cavell. Merleau-Ponty's perceptual realism is based on the fact that 'the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other' (FNP, p. 58).

One of Merleau-Ponty's basic theses is that the union of mind and body is evident to us in our normal everyday perceptual encounters with other people. We do not have to activate some special capacity for 'mind reading' in order to gain access to the other's emotional condition, we just have to get a clear look at them:

> We must reject that prejudice which makes 'inner realities' out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them.

> (FNP, pp. 52–3)

A movie is thus successfully realistic for Merleau-Ponty when it manages to present its events and characters in way that engages our capacities to respond immediately and pre-reflectively to the emotions of our fellow human beings and the incarnate significance of human bodily engagement with the world. When he says that the actors and the set need to be sufficiently 'natural', he means that the spectator must find them more or less in tune with the ways we typically find other people and things in our daily lives.[32] Much of this work is done by the automatic richness of perceptual detail available in a photographic image (Gunning, 2008), but there is more to it than that.

The movie's world needs to be presented, for the most part, as an independent, self-enclosed and self-subsistent world. This is, of course, what film theorists call 'the diegetic illusion'. It calls for a set of narrative conventions: for example that the movie conceal its conditions of production, that is, its ontological supervenience on our world – no bit of lighting apparatus or microphone is shown, no grips are visibly lurking in the shadows, the actors avoid looking directly into the camera and try to act in a way that covers up the fact that they are in fact just acting. Note that other relevant cinematic conventions include

certain principles of continuous editing (what is significantly called 'invisible' editing), focus, lighting, and framing (see Wilson, 1986, Ch. 3).

When these conventions are accidentally or purposefully breached, the disclosure of the movie's world is interrupted and the power of reality goes 'flat' (FNP, p. 57). This involves an upsurge of our world into the movie's world that tends to provoke laughter or distraction, as when we see a boom microphone inadvertently dip down into the frame, or when we are witness to bad or overwrought styles of acting, or again, when we become distracted by a conspicuous features of the movie's set, for example the fake-looking hair pieces worn by many of the actors in Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*. This is not to deny that there is historical and cultural conditioning of what we tend to regard as bad acting or cheesy props. I accommodate this important fact near the end of the paper.

All of these classical conventions of narrative naturalism go into maintaining what Michael Fried, in another context, calls the 'supreme fiction' of the non-existence of the audience. There is an effort to sustain maximal dramatic effect by promoting the illusion of an 'ontological impermeability' between the movie's world and our own world (Fried, 1980, Ch. 2).[33] Thus, Merleau-Ponty's call for a realistic presentation of the world is a call for it to represent a self-enclosed, self-subsistent, integrated world. This is a condition of the possibility of our not perceiving it *as* a mere *representation* of the world, that is, as a mere object in our world.

I need to hedge a little here: obviously these conventions of cinematic world-representation are frequently violated: they began to be flouted almost immediately after their emergence, e.g., by experimental, surrealist, and ideologically minded filmmakers. Filmmakers such as Godard, Buñuel, Lynch, Haneke, Allen, and many, many others aesthetically and politically profit from a self-conscious defiance of such conventions. But, the crucial point is that they do so essentially while *participating in them at the same time*. One goal of flouting the typical conventions of cinematic world-disclosure is, of course, to interfere with typical absorptive transparency by thematizing the position of the spectator and promoting a dual orientation: along with an absorptive involvement one is brought to sustain a kind of reflective awareness of the image *as* image and oneself *as* a spectator. I have more to say about such two-ply orientations just below.

So, what does it mean for 'the power of reality to go flat', which is what Merleau-Ponty says happens when our world ontologically interrupts the movie's world and the diegetic illusion fails? An aspect shift happens. Things start to look thin and flimsy and flat. We become thematically aware of our position *as* mere spectators over and against a mere object. We fall out of the engaged cinematic attitude and changeover into the disengaged attitude, what Merleau-Ponty calls the analytical mode of perception and what Heidegger calls the thematizing-objectivating attitude. Hence, we come to experience the movie

explicitly *as* a contrived object, we see the characters *as* actors, the world *as* a mere set.

In a case of cinematic breakdown, the movie world begins to look like a mere set. In Heidegger's terminology, the movie's world has become 'de-worlded', that is, the movie has been 'deprived of its worldhood', and now it shows up to us as an assemblage of mere objects in *our* world.[34] This brings us directly to the second point that I wanted to make about worldhood in this section: our engagement with a movie's world *as* a world involves the *withdrawal* of our own everyday world and our usual relationship with it – our world becomes inconspicuous, it recedes into the background, as I mentioned above. If we are seeing the world of the movie *as* a mere set, we are seeing it *as* a part of our world, then our world has explicitly come to fore. The explicit presence of and any explicit attention to our world have a tendency to modify the nature of our involvement with the movie.

4. The Structure of Cinematic Absorption

I will conclude by extrapolating from Merleau-Ponty's account something like a general structure of cinematic absorption. I do not offer these details as an interpretation of or attribution to Merleau-Ponty, but as a conception of cinematic absorption that is inspired by and consistent with his view.

Now, of course not all of our experiences of movies are totally and unrelentingly absorptive. Absorption is a phenomenon that emerges from the relationship between two worlds: our world, and the movie world. The experience of cinematic absorption thus arises, modifies, and breaks down according to the combination, recombination, and uncombination of a constellation of factors contributed by each of the worlds in the relation. The degree of our absorption in a movie vacillates along a continuum of intensity, with one extreme being deep nonthematic immersion in the movie's world, what Fried (1980, p. 103) calls 'the perfect trance of involvement', and the other extreme being the totally disengaged, analytical perception of the film as a mere object, the people as mere actors, the world as a mere set. The vast majority of our cinematic experiences take place at a mobile intermediate level that moves between these two poles of engagement and disengagement, and takes on a different character depending on the particular combination of elements contributed by the two worlds.

Moreover, given this structure, a viewer's experience of a movie can have a heterogeneous orientation, with elements of both first-order engagement and higher-order disengagement. A.O. Scott, movie reviewer for the *New York Times*, once remarked that as a critic he has learned how to *watch a movie twice in one sitting*: both as a 'normal' viewer (in the 'natural' or engaged attitude), and as a critic, with a more distant, reflective perspective.[35] Significantly, the way certain movies promote such a heterogeneous orientation is one of the main concerns of George Wilson's book *Narration in Light*. In Wilson's view,

exceptional narrative films 'simultaneously sustain both a salient, standard perspective and a distinct, oblique perspective, both of which may be equally and continuously coherent' (Wilson, 1986, p. 198).

Take for example Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (1997). In this movie, there is a scene in which the vicious assailant picks up a remote control and 'rewinds' the movie because he did not like it that his accomplice was shot with a shotgun by one of their captives. Haneke has the images of the scene play in reverse until the point in the story just before the shooting occurs. With this Haneke shakes us from our primary, first-order absorption and prompts us to reflect on the fact that the stark and disturbing violence portrayed in the movie in which we have been absorbed is there for our casual amusement. We have a sense of being implicated in the violent spectacle (see Wheatley, 2009, p. 98).

I need to say more about the elements of the absorptive relationship contributed by each of the worlds. The elements contributed by our world are conditions that, roughly speaking, can be divided into those contributed by the viewer, and those contributed by the screening context. What I take to be contributed by the viewer are:

(1) The basic familiarity with his or her own world, including its shared cultural norms and practices, on which our understanding of and engagement with a movie's narrative draws. Thus our world is not only the inconspicuous perceptual background for our involvement with a movie, it also serves as the general hermeneutical background (see Perkins, 2005; Musser, 1990).

(2) Things like our personal psychology, and the occasion of our watching the film (on a date, as a critic, as a projectionist, et cetera).

(3) Our familiarity with watching and perceptually interpreting movies; the *visual habits* we have formed and the perceptual expectations we bring to our viewing of a movie. It is through watching movies that we gain the hermeneutical know-how that enables us to read and immediately understand certain narrational and aesthetic devices, e.g., flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, parallel action, temporal ellipses, fading to black, sudden close ups, etc. The kind of movies a particular viewer is used to watching tends to shape the sensibilities of the viewer, what she will find convincing and absorbing, what she will find distracting. Young audiences today who are accustomed to quickly cut, fast-paced movies and television will find 'old' movies un-absorbing and boring. There are historical conditions for what we will find absorbing.

The contextual conditions contributed by our world are the features of what I call 'the screening situation' (conditions and context of film exhibition). Variations in the screening situation impact our experience of the movie. Things like cell phones ringing, audience members snoring or talking, scratches on the

movie print, and defective image focus because of an inattentive projectionist promote the re-emergence of our world from its indeterminate presence in the background. There is no doubt that historical conditioning is also at work in our experience of the screening context. Modes of exhibition and audience behavior (such as smoking in the theatre or heckling the movie) have changed radically over time (Musser, 1990).

The conditions contributed by the world of the movie include its story and its techniques of narration. Much of the time a moving story (and/or a suspenseful presentation of events) can sustain the effect of absorption despite the relative failure of some other aspects of the absorptive relationship. There is a narrative momentum animating the pictures of the movie and our experience of them.

A breakdown in our absorption or modification in our hermeneutical perspective can arise from within the world of the movie, or a breakdown can arise from the side of our world. The example of Haneke's *Funny Games* belongs to the former, as do modifications that obtain due to an opaqueness or surprise in the film's narration, as when, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, 'Madeline', one of the main character's with whom we have been lead to sympathize, falls to her death in the middle of the move, prompting the viewer to wonder explicitly what could be going on ('Why would they kill the main female character half-way through the movie?'). We then try consciously to piece together the mystery, using inference and practical reasoning like Carroll says. Occasions of breakdown or modification arising from *our* world are: a ringing cell phone, an out of focus film or missed change-over, and things of the sort I mentioned just above.

5. Conclusion

I have been spelling out an account of the nature and structure cinematic absorption suggested by Merleau-Ponty in his essay 'The Film and the New Psychology'. The main claim is that our absorptive involvement in a movie is phenomenologically and structurally analogous to our absorptive involvement in our own everyday world. This general approach is shared by Noël Carroll, who, I have tried to show, gives it an inappropriately intellectualist rendering. I will end now by summarizing Merleau-Ponty's version of this analogy in four main points:

(1) As a *perceptual phenomenon*, our involvement in a movie, just like our involvement in our everyday world, draws on our perceptual openness to the intrinsic significance and organization of holistic gestalts.

(2) Both cinematic absorption and everyday absorption involve the possible aspect shift that corresponds to a shift between the engaged and disengaged attitudes.

(3) The maintenance of our involvement in a movie depends upon our having a certain kind of know-how. We learn how to watch and

understand movies by watching movies. This is analogous to the case of our involvement in our world, which is an enactment of a skillful engagement with things and people.

(4) Our absorption in a movie-world draws on many of the same capacities at work in our perception and understanding of our world and the other people in it. When a movie presents us with 'that special way of being in the world', it draws on our 'power tacitly to decipher the world and men and to coexist with them'.

Notes

1. By referring to 'movies', I mean to make use of Noël Carroll's broad definition of 'movies' as 'popular mass-media films, the products of what might be called Hollywood International – films made in what has been dubbed the 'classical style', whether they be American, Italian, or Chinese, and whether they be made for the screen or for TV' (Carroll, 1996a, p. 79). Merleau-Ponty also states explicitly that he is interested exploring the power of motion pictures that tell stories in this classical style (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 57). None of this is to deny that we can experience a kind of absorption in documentary or experimental films, but, as Carroll (1996a, p. 80) points out, such films do not offer the same 'widespread and intense engagement' that has enabled movies to become the major mass art form of recent times. I believe the account I give in this paper can be adapted to elucidate our experience of other styles of moving image, but this is not the place I propose to do so. When I talk about the experience of being absorbed by a movie, regardless of the particular setting, I use the phrases 'cinematic absorption' or 'cinematic experience'.

2. For a clear example of a psychoanalytically informed interpretation, see Allen, 1995. On 'make believe' see Walton, 1978, 1990. Walton makes a cognitivist appeal to a viewer's 'implicit understanding' of rules (Walton, 1978, p. 11; 1990, p. 38). Carroll, as I discuss in more detail below, refers to 'inferential and interpretive processes' (Carroll, 2008, p. 130). I'll refer to Carroll, 2008, as 'PMP' from now on.

3. I'll refer to Merleau-Ponty, 1964, as 'FNP' from now on. Merleau-Ponty provides further reflections on motion pictures later on in his career in Merleau-Ponty, 2011. However, the discussions in these 1953 course notes do not contribute to the project of a general phenomenology of cinematic absorption in the vein of the 1945 lecture, so I do not take them up here. For an engagement with the 1953 lectures, see Carbone, 2015, Chapter 4.

4. By 'direct' perception I mean a mode of perception not mediated by cognitive or intellectual processes. For an expansion upon this, see the anti-mediational 'contact theory' of our relation to the world recently defended in Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015.

5. For more of Carroll's commentary on phenomenology and its influence on his methodology and critical approach to film studies see Carroll, 2007, pp. 3–5.

6. This is what Sean Kelly calls 'The Refrigerator Light Hypothesis', being parallel to the hypothesis that since the refrigerator light is on when you look, it must be always on (Kelly, 2005a, p. 20). Hubert Dreyfus makes a similar point with his comparison of the cognitivist claim for unconscious application of rules to

an appeal to invisible training wheels. This is the major upshot of Dreyfus, 2005, the very essay that inspired the reference to 'bodily coping' in the subtitle of Carroll's book on Keaton. Carroll refers this essay (Carroll, 2007, p. 15, n.11). I am going to argue that Carroll's cognitivism about cinematic experience displays an acceptance of what Dreyfus calls 'the Myth of the Mental' – the assumption that 'all intelligibility, even perception and coping' is implicitly mediated by mental activity.

7. For Carroll's critique of The Code Thesis, see PMP, pp. 102–108 and Carroll, 1996a, pp. 80–83. For Carroll's extended, and at times bitingly humorous, critique of capital-T film Theory, see Carroll, 1988.

8. Note that it is not only the Code Thesis Carroll criticizes and as an alternative to which he offers his Recognitional Prompt Thesis. He also criticizes both the 'Illusion Thesis' that says cinematic experience is a kind of illusion that fools viewers into believing (or 'suspending disbelief') that what we see on screen is really happening, and the 'Transparency Thesis' that attributes the power of cinema to the way a movie camera can put us into automatic contact (unmediated by the human hand) with the events that transpired before its lens (in the same way that binoculars, telescopes, and mirrors put us in automatic contact with what happens before them). See the references Carroll gives for these views (PMP, pp. 114–15). Carroll's arguments against these views are compelling (PMP, pp. 81–102). I would argue that the view Merleau-Ponty sketches, when properly developed, would be similarly poised against these alternative theses.

9. Variable framing includes bracketing (using the frame of a shot to bracket out objects and events not relevant to the story), scaling (making things appear bigger or smaller), indexing (using camera movement or editing to direct our sights to the narratively relevant phenomena).

10. See also PMP, pp. 188–9; Carroll, 1996b.

11. For a criticism of Carroll's claim here, see Wilson, 2011, especially the end of Chapter 3.

12. There are passages which suggest that Merleau-Ponty understands our seeing of characters and events in the movie world as an 'imaginative seeing' of fictions (see n.24 below and my discussion of Merleau-Ponty's account of seeing fictional characters on stage). Indeed, George Wilson's version of the 'imaginative seeing hypothesis', especially in the interpretation that Robert Pippin gives of it his review of Wilson's book, is consistent with the Merleau-Pontian view I go on to describe in the rest of this paper. As Pippin (2013, p. 336) puts it: 'If I understand Wilson, there are not two steps here, and he doesn't mean that the images of actors and scenes "prescribes" as in instructs us to imagine something. We imaginatively see; we don't image something in response to what we actually see.' Imaginative seeing, in Pippin's version, is a capacity we have directly to see and respond to fictions. It is not a two-factor process involving a higher-order mental entertaining of propositions, like Carroll posits. Pippin's explanation of 'imaginative seeing' is intriguingly similar to his explanation of apperception (the 'I think' that can accompany all of my thoughts) 'in a nondyadic, non self-monitoring sense' in Hegel, Kant, and McDowell (Pippin, 2012a, p.101). See also Pippin's discussion of apperception in Pippin, 2010.

13. As additional support for this claim for our perceptual openness to a 'sense immanent in the sensible' (2012, p. 36), Merleau-Ponty adduces some of his other favorite examples of the intrinsic holistic organization of our perceptual experience: directly seeing the haptic texture of things (the 'wooly blue' of the

carpet), the relation of background lighting and object coloration, the perception of a whole cube even though the image cast on my retina is perspectively partial, the way the objects behind my back continue to count for me in the way my situation show up, just as the ground continues beneath a figure placed on it (FNP, p. 51).

14. The experiment is described in Kuleshov, 1974, pp. 53–5. Carroll, for his part, doubts the historical details of this legendary experiment, but obviously not the general claim that the individual images in a movie gain significance by their place in a holistically structured sequence (Carroll, 1996b, pp. 129–30).

15. Merleau-Ponty goes on to give more support for his claim that a movie is experienced as a holistic gestalt by considering the relations that hold between the images, dialogue, sound effects, and music used in movies (FNP, pp. 55–6). Yet, in the interest of space I will leave these claims aside for my present purposes.

16. I'm grateful to Sean Kelly for suggesting this comparison to me.

17. For Merleau-Ponty's account of the perceptual constants see Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 312–31.

18. Robert Pippin (2012b, pp. 66–9) also analyzes this curious sequence in his chapter on *The Lady from Shanghai*.

19. Vivian Sobchack has seen and discussed the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to theories of film spectatorship. She similarly notes that 'The film for me is never a merely viewed "thing"' (Sobchack, 1992, p. 24). But Sobchack's unsatisfying solution is to subjectify the film, to conceive of the film as another viewing subject confronting the viewer, rather than to conceive of the movie as involving the disclosure of and absorption into a world. Sobchack (1992, p. 23) writes: 'It is as this signifying subject that [the film] existentially comes to matter as a signified object.' Although her appropriation of Merleau-Ponty is interesting in its own right, this paper is not the occasion for a detailed engagement with it.

20. Here I am drawing upon James Conant's (2009, pp. 302–303) insightful discussion of move 'world-disclosure'.

21. Horkheimer and Adorno (1990, p. 127) write: 'Those who are so absorbed by the world of a movie – by its images, gestures, and words … do not have to dwell on particular points of its mechanics during a screening. All of the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they have seen have taught them what to expect; they react automatically.' Carroll (2003, pp. 33–4) also refers to this passage.

22. Although Kracauer is pointing out the same general phenomenon in his remark – the slackening of the viewer's reflective self-awareness – he himself is not making the point that watching a film is analogous to exercising a skill. Kracauer's own immediate concern is to set up a discussion about how such 'lowered consciousness' may leave viewers more susceptible to propaganda. For a similar worry see again Horkheimer and Adorno's (1990) chapter on the 'Culture Industry'.

23. As Heidegger puts it, the 'genuine reality [of ready-to-hand-equipment] appears in looking away from it as a mere thing on hand … no scrutinizing objectification occurs' (Heidegger, 1985, p. 191).

24. This passage suggests that Merleau-Ponty does hold something like the 'imaginative seeing thesis' described in Wilson, 2011. See n.12, above.

25. Several writers on film have noted the role of darkness in cinematic experience, but none have properly appreciated its phenomenological significance as I lay

it out here (Perkins, 1993, p. 134, Kracauer, 1997, p. 159). Jean Goudal, for his part, writes: 'The darkness of the auditorium destroys the rivalry of real images that would contradict the ones on the screen' (Goudal, 2000, pp. 86–7).

26. Merleau-Ponty would accept, with the proper modifications, what Carroll calls the 'attention management' theory of cinematic sequencing.

27. Along these lines we can appreciate another of Bazin's characterizations of Italian Neorealism: 'It is a phenomenology' (Bazin, 1971, p. 65). For the record, I don't think Merleau-Ponty would accept Bazin's claim, made in passing, that cinema is an illusion.

28. Something like this is at issue in the way Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the way we perceive pictures from the way we perceive things: 'I would be hard pressed to say where the picture is that I am gazing at. For I do not gaze at it as one gazes at a thing, I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007b, p. 355).

29. Merleau-Ponty endorses Panofsky's rejection of the claim that traditional Renaissance perspective corresponds to our lived perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 2007b, pp. 364–5). Thanks to Taylor Carman for stressing this point to me.

30. Thanks to Hubert Dreyfus for pressing me to clarify this point.

31. For a brief yet illuminating discussion of the position I have called 'perceptual realism' see Morgan, 2006.

32. The 'more or less' qualification is important, since many movies obviously present characters doing things very different from the normal kind of things we expect people to do in our everyday world. But each movie will set up its own economy of what counts as a 'realistic' mode of activity for the depicted people in the relevant movie world. Thus, the fact that Superman flies in the Superman movies does not keep us from being absorbed in the movie and recognizing in Superman 'that special way of being in the world'.

33. On the relevance of Fried's work on theatricality to an account of cinematic absorption, see Gunning, 1990; Conant, 2009.

34. 'De-worlding of the world' translates Entweltlichung der Welt. It is Heidegger's word for what happens when we attempt to give a purely theoretical, third-person account of the equipment and other people we have to do with in our everyday activities. Heidegger, 1985, pp. 168, 184, 196, 217; 1962, §69b.

35. Scott, n.d.

Acknowledgments

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