

Phenomenology of Film

2.1 PHENOMENOLOGY AS THE PRESUPPOSITION OF HERMENEUTICS

The interconnection between phenomenology and hermeneutics has been regarded as necessary by many philosophers of post-metaphysical thinking, with Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur just two of the most eminent. Both phenomenology and hermeneutics, in fact, appear somehow inadequate when they are considered separately. A solely phenomenological perspective seems to disregard the fact that we live and act in a historical and cultural world already full of meanings and interpretations that, to some extent, influence our perception of things. For its part, hermeneutics should always seek to return to the things themselves, according to the main principle of phenomenology,¹ even though it is borne by a constant awareness of the inescapable relativism of the human condition and its historical, cultural and linguistic premises. Without such a continuing effort, hermeneutics risks closing itself in the useless vicious circle of the relativistic self-validation of those same premises. Following Heidegger (1927), who had suggested that the two phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives give rise to a positive possibility,² Ricoeur established a deep intertwining between the two when he formulated his hermeneutic phenomenology. In ‘Phenomenology and Hermeneutics’, Ricoeur observed how hermeneutic critique had as yet only been directed at Husserlian idealistic phenomenology, which still aspired to an absolute foundation. However, this ‘negative side’ does not preclude

hermeneutic phenomenology from representing positive philosophical research in which the two perspectives share a grounding relationship of mutual belonging and pertinence. Ricœurian hermeneutic phenomenology states the ‘pre-eminence of meaning above self-consciousness’ because consciousness ‘is *towards meaning*, before meaning is *for* it, and still more, before that consciousness is *for-itself*’ (1975, pp. 96–97). In a philosophy of interpretation, the phenomenological question concerning being is a question on the *meaning* of that being, in which hermeneutics avoids fixing consciousness as the initial, transcendental and self-reflective point, emphasizing its necessary historical and cultural identity. For this reason, Ricœur wrote, ‘phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics; and on the other hand, phenomenology cannot carry out its programme of *constitution* without constituting itself in the *interpretation* of the experience of the *ego*’ (1981, p. 114).

Hermeneutic phenomenology raises a methodological problem. How is it possible to consider a methodological demand for generalness and explanation when dealing with an interpretation which is always the relative product of a historical (and historically limited) consciousness and which is hermeneutically based precisely on the impossibility of an absolute objectification? From a Ricœurian perspective, such a methodological issue arises from the interplay between a phenomenology that breaks with a naturalistic–objectivistic attitude and a hermeneutics that recognizes its epistemological status. Ricœurian hermeneutic phenomenology proposes a positive dialectic between explanation and understanding, refusing both the conflict established by Hans-Georg Gadamer between alienating distancing (*Verfremdung*) and primordial belonging (*Zugehörigkeit*), on the one hand, and Heidegger’s direct ontology of understanding, on the other hand. The ‘long path’³ (*voie longue*) of hermeneutics, as Ricœur often defined it, is a route that unravels amidst an open plurality of signs and meanings, without failing to confront with the general methodological question.

Based on these initial observations, in this book, a phenomenological approach is considered foundational to a study of film developed from a hermeneutic perspective. Any *interpretative* reflection on film meaning can only follow a phenomenological description of film experience, and thus, a hermeneutic and methodological investigation of the film can be conducted only through film phenomenology.

2.1.1 *Towards a Phenomenology of Film*

Film phenomenology concerns our perception and understanding of film and the way in which we perceive and experience represented film worlds. The issue has involved many philosophers and film scholars in the past. As early as the 1920s, adopting a remarkably phenomenological perspective, in his short essay ‘Apologie pour le cinéma’, Jean-Paul Sartre (1924) directed his argumentation against the thesis of the French philosopher Alain (1923) who had identified film as a ‘mechanical invention’ in the name of a static concept of art and beauty. In his defence of cinema and according to a law of rhythmic organization, Sartre defined film as a synthetic unit and indivisible flux, equating it to consciousness. In Sartre’s essay, movement (*mobilité*) and duration (*durée*) were constitutive of the film, an argumentation that somehow anticipated what Gilles Deleuze (1983, 1985) would write sixty years later in his comprehensive study of film. Criticizing the thesis of cinema as ‘false movement’ that Henri Bergson (1907) had presented in *L’Evolution créatrice*, Deleuze argued that film is not an image to which movement is added, but rather film gives us movement-images and time-images immediately: ‘it does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement’ (1986, p. 3).⁴ Sartre’s essay is clearly situated along that path which leads from Bergson to Deleuze (and Deleuze’s reconsideration of Bergson’s thought). What is interesting in this early work by Sartre is the manifestation of a desire for emancipation from psychology and from the myth of interiority in order to return to the things themselves. For Sartre, the film seems to offer such a possibility. In this sense, his essay also represents a stepping stone towards Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a phenomenology of the film.⁵

According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a philosophical approach that ‘puts essences back into existence’ (2002, p. vii) and seeks to describe rather than explain or analyse. It is concerned with perception and understanding of the world and being-in-the-world. If the film is a phenomenological art *par excellence* (Merleau-Ponty 1964b), a phenomenology of the film describes how the film world is perceived by the filmgoer, as if she/he were in the film world. Film phenomenology is ‘a philosophy for which the world is always “already there” before reflection begins’ (2002, p. vii). Works on film phenomenology show a recurrent use of keywords such as *embodiment*, *intentionality* and *enworldedness*, thus bearing witness to the importance of

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to film studies and film philosophy. In light of these perspectives, a phenomenology of the film shall be conducted here through a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's thought as an exploration of an embodied *being-in-the-film-world*.

2.2 EMBODIMENT, INTENTIONALITY AND THE SYNTHETIC AND SYNAESTHETIC PROCESS

The phenomenology of perception expounded by Merleau-Ponty (1945) is certainly a fundamental reference for a phenomenological analysis of film experience, and three aspects of his argumentation, in particular, appear to be crucial in developing such an analysis.

First, contrary to intellectualist theory, Merleau-Ponty affirmed that perception is not an intellectual act. Rather, it is an immediate relationship with the world, into which the human being is always already thrown. While such a position is a restatement of the fundamental phenomenological assertion of going back to the things themselves, the Merleau-Pontyan notion of lived body perception makes both the concept of consciousness and a Husserlian attempt at phenomenological reduction impractical. As Merleau-Ponty stated, 'there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself' (2002, p. xii). From the relationship between the lived body and the world, there arise progressive forms of symbolic representation. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a continuous tension between the lived body, which is open to the world and living in an original relation to it, and a constant search for stable (or at least partially stable) symbolic forms. The body is not the subject of a Cartesian *I think* (transcendental, fixed and certain), but instead is a set of meanings and live experiences attempting to move towards a balance which is constantly called into question. The concept of a lived body seems particularly effective in a phenomenological study of film, whereas any symbolic or semiotic analysis of film language, in spite of its evident results, does not seem to be able to fully and convincingly capture the richness of film experience.⁶ In fact, before any interpretation, the filmgoer is already involved in film experience, with analogies and similarities with respect to her/his relation with the (real) world. These analogies and similarities should be carefully examined in a phenomenological study of film.

Second, the perception is always a synthetic and synaesthetic process. The perceptive process always occurs in a synthesis of sensory data and duration, through multiple phases and moments. In a perception, we are conscious not only of what is present but also of what has just passed and what is about to occur. Thus, perception is a synthesis of time that becomes possible only through retention and protention, that is to say, through an intentionality that anchors the subject to the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, retention and protention are not acts of a *central I* but elements of the same perceptual field that has dragged behind its horizon of retentions and is already taking on the future of its protentions. Merleau-Ponty pointed out, ‘I do not pass through a series of instances of now, the images of which I preserve and which, placed end to end, make a line. With the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change: I still have it in hand and it is still there, but already it is sinking away below the level of presents’ (2002, p. 484). There is never a full experience, and everything temporalizes. Perception has its roots in the ambiguity of time: Each thing can offer itself with its determinations only if other things recede in the remoteness, and each present can offer itself in its reality only excluding the simultaneous presence of earlier and later presents. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, time is not an objective succession of instants registered by the subject but rather arises in the relation between the subject and the world. Time is the form of the encounter between the subject and the world, neither exclusively on the side of the subject nor totally on the side of things. From such a perspective, it is possible to understand the temporality of the film as an encounter between the filmgoer and the film world. The film is in such an encounter; its experience exceeds its actuality, and its occurrence is not intra-temporal but temporalizing.

Third, for Merleau-Ponty as well as for other phenomenologists, perception is an intentional process in which consciousness is always a *consciousness of something*. However, such intentionality of consciousness is not conceived as a simple relation to an object and thus is not a cognitive act in a Kantian sense. Before being placed in knowledge and expressed in an act of identification, the unity of the world is experienced as already done, already there. As Merleau-Ponty observes, ‘the world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible’ (2002, pp. xviii–xix). Merleau-Ponty intended to show the inextricable relationship that exists between body-consciousness and the

world, and that no analysis can divide. Thus, while, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty reconfirmed the usual Husserlian meaning of intentionality as consciousness of something (Husserl 1983, § 84, p. 200), on the other hand, he redefined the meaning of consciousness including in it the body itself. Unlike the early Husserl, and in particular rejecting the classical dualism of body/consciousness,⁷ Merleau-Ponty makes the lived body the main reference of intentionality. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not the Husserlian transcendental ego, but the lived body with its functioning intentionality that operates in a pre-reflective way, acting as a set of rays directed towards the possible horizons of a perceptual scene. Before any intellectual activity, it experiences the world in a pre-predicative relation in which there is still no distinction between the subject and the object. The functioning intentionality of the subject in the world seems to be a concept that can be reapplied effectively to our analysis of film experience. However, a few questions immediately arise regarding perception and intentionality: What kind of perception acts in the film world? Is there another intentionality that (inter)acts with the intentionality of the filmgoer?

2.3 FILM EXPERIENCE AS (RE)PERCEPTION

While psychoanalytic theories have described the film as an apparatus of predetermined and deceptive experiences of reality, with the ideological and political consequences exposed by Marxist theories of cinema, at the other extreme, idealistic and constructivist film theories have claimed the fundamental role of the filmgoer in the construction of meaning. For their part, film phenomenologists have rejected any idealism in the film experience. Among them, for example, Allan Casebier (1991) used the metaphoric term *discovery* instead of *construction* when considering film and its meaning, thus opting for a moderate form of realism. In order to preserve the integrity of film, regardless of the relationship it creates with the filmgoer, Casebier defined film experience as an interpretive process, expounding a realist phenomenology that has the advantage of giving an account of the filmgoers' natural beliefs that they are seeing something that they did not construct (Sweeney 1994). On the other hand, tempering his realism, Casebier acknowledged that in addition to the sensitive and hyletic data of film, film experience is highly influenced by the social and cultural context in which it occurs. While the sociocultural context of the filmgoer's real world has a direct influence on the process

of sense-making of the film world, at the same time, there is also a deep influence in the opposite direction, and the film has affected the way we see and interpret the world and ourselves within it.

In a more general perspective, according to Vivian Sobchack (1992), to describe film experience and study its phenomenology would somehow (and even naïvely) require to return to film, getting rid of the heavy burden of over a century of film theories, arduous as it may seem.⁸ In following this observation and rethinking film experience phenomenologically, we can argue that film is neither celluloid (as a material product) nor the production process of film-making. Is it not even the autonomous and transcendental (with respect to the filmgoer) text of its narration. Rather, the film is in its projection and requires the filmgoer in order *to be*; it is in the encounter between screen projection and filmgoer. In such a perspective, one could reasonably argue that film is not a film without a filmgoer.

In order to identify this foundational relationship between the filmgoer and the film, many authors have described film experience as contact—even physical—with moving images. The physical nature of the encounter with the film does not simply entail the viewing of images but a deeper experience that is able to fully involve the filmgoer—who is, therefore, no longer merely a viewer. Jennifer Barker (2009) followed a similar path in her book *The Tactile Eye*, describing film experience as the tactile interaction of the filmgoer with the film.⁹ Considering film experience in terms of tactile interaction does not mean, however, replacing sight with touch; rather, it suggests a sensorial complementarity and a synaesthetic perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, synthesis among the senses is a precognitive operation: The inter-sensorial communication that occurs in a body is based on an original inherence to the world, which is prior to any division between the senses and the world. Both Barker's study on film tactility and the notion of *haptic visuality* proposed by Laura Marks (2000) take into account such synaesthetic interaction, reinforcing the concept of encounter and contact between the filmgoer and the film.

As a preliminary definition, therefore, we can state that the film is an *encounter*. However, as filmgoers, what do we encounter during the film experience? Certainly, lights and shadows projected on the screen are not the actual data captured by the filmgoer in perception. Rather, from the beginning, the filmgoer enters into an intentional relationship with configurations of meaning that are not reducible to such empirical data.

Immediately, in film experience, multiple horizons of sense open up to the filmgoer, and many perceptual possibilities are available through which that data can be experienced. In order to understand how the filmgoer can experience the film on the basis of such simple cinematic data comprised of light and shadow, it is necessary to assume that intentionality and temporal synthesis so effectively described by Merleau-Ponty. If perception were not an intentional and synthetic process, if it were not an experience based on structures of retention and protention, then, placed in front of a movie screen, filmgoers would witness a chaotic and incomprehensible succession of lights and shadows in disconnected and isolated frames. For this reason, in his essay 'The Film and the New Psychology',¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty observed, '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 [and] it is not surprising that a critic should evoke philosophy in connection with a film' (1964b, pp. 58–59).

What we encounter as filmgoers (and, more generally, as beings thrown into the world) is always located within a horizon of expectations determined by our previous experiences. Our previous perceptual experiences direct our intentionality in current perception. At the same time, every experience contributes to reformulating this perceptual horizon of expectations. A succession of similar experiences, in a gradual process that Merleau-Ponty defined with the term *sedimentation*,¹¹ gives rise to an actual typification of perception. Such typification, which is not fixed but always open to new modifications and developments, directs our perceptual process and guides our expectations. Our relationship with film is always played in the space opened by this typification and pre-knowledge. Therefore, no different than what happens in the perception of the real world, the perceptual experience of the film moves within possible horizons of meaning intentionally perceived through a synthetic and synaesthetic process. Precisely because the film works on the fundamental conditions of our perception, it puts in place possible refigurations of our perceptual experience of the world. There is one aspect that should be emphasized here to grasp the problematic nature of this statement. Perception is a process of an embodied subject in the world, and it takes place entirely at the level of what Merleau-Ponty called pre-predicative or pre-reflexive experience. Therefore, to talk about refigurations means addressing something that happens at a level which precedes thought.

Merleau-Ponty used the concepts of *flesh* and *chiasm* to describe the ontological intertwining between body and thought, perception and language. In particular, the notion of chiasm nullifies any rigid distinction between interior and exterior, because the experience of an embodied being is simultaneously an experience of passivity and activity. Chiasm is revealed as the point of intersection between interiority and exteriority, between the subject and the world, and between the self and the other. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world’ (1968, p. 160). The same concept is effectively adopted by Sobchack (1992) in her analysis of the nature of the film. Sobchack highlighted how a peculiar reversibility between perception and expression is inherent to film and the filmgoer’s experience. In such reversibility, the film unveils the primordial origin of language and meaning: ‘the cinema uses *modes of embodied existence* (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the “stuff,” the substance of its language’ (pp. 4–5).

Based on the previous reflections, and in order to define film experience, we can refer to it with the simple term *re-perception* (i.e., *perception of a perception*). This definition effectively responds to a few considerations. As remarked, the film does not come to us in the form of thought but instead presents itself in the form of images and sounds, gestures and expressions, movements and actions. As Merleau-Ponty wrote in his essay on cinema, we are faced with something that must be perceived and not thought (1964b, p. 58). What we perceive, those images and gazes, movements and actions, are already perceptions. During the film experience, we perceive a film world that has already been perceived and is re-given to us in the form of perception to be re-perceived. During the film experience, when filmgoers see something on the screen, they do not see an object but redouble an act of looking. Albeit in different forms, such a concept has already been applied to film in the past by many authors, including Hugo Münsterberg (1916), Jean Epstein (1946) and Jean Mitry (1963, 1965), and, more recently, in extensive depth by Deleuze (1983, 1985).¹² Even Sobchack (1992) pointed out the relation between perceptions that occur in the film experience. Referring to Don Ihde’s (1977) notion of *instrument-mediated perception*, she argued that his unidirectional model does not account for how the movie experience ‘serve[s] as a conduit from one perception to another’ (p. 172). While Ihde’s model refers to a single intentional

act of instrument-mediated perception (like that of the scientist peering at a cell through a microscope), in the film ‘two intentional acts engage and address each other in a complex and *reversible* structure’ (p. 173). As Sobchack has observed, even though intentionality is a critical component of technology-mediated perception, its functioning within film experience has been ignored for a long time in dominant film theory.

2.3.1 *Re-Perception Is Still Perception*

It is crucial to emphasize here that adopting the term *re-perception* to refer to film experience entails no change in its nature of perception—i.e., it maintains the meaning the term perception encompasses in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Similarly, the term re-perception does not demean free intentionality of perceptual action on the part of filmgoers, at least within the possible horizons of meaning opened up by the film. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty (1964b) defined film as an object to be perceived, like any other perceptual phenomenon. Thus, re-perception in the film experience does not imply an alteration of the nature of perception, in that it is still a precognitive relation between an embodied subject and a world. This means that film, in the encounter with the filmgoer, offers itself as a perceptible presence of the film world. Nevertheless, the presence of the film world, following Merleau-Ponty’s thought, is not only a fullness of image and visibility but also ambiguously absence and invisibility. Even though screened, the moving images exceed the physical boundaries of the screen, offering a depth of field and, beyond the frame, an off-screen that is invisible but nevertheless perceived. In this sense, in the film experience, the original and ambiguous foundation of perception is represented. The film becomes an extension of our senses which gives sense to our perception in that it discloses a sense already inscribed in it. The film is nothing but itself and does not communicate anything but its expression. While perception in a novel lies outside of the text because the act of perception on the narrated world is represented through language, in the film the act of perception is given directly and is thus constitutive of it. Working with moving image–sound, film immediately presents us the object together with its perception, the sign together with its meaning. The film does not *tell* things but *how* things become significant.

Why, then, should I use the term re-perception instead of perception? What is the difference between the perception in the real world

and re-perception in a film world? Following Sobchack's (1992) argumentation, one can observe that in the re-perception of film perception, the filmgoer's intentionality can also be directed to the intentionality of the film rather than to the intentional objects of film perception.¹³ In such a case, the filmgoer can perceive the intentionality of film perception, rather than (re)perceive the object of that perception. Actually, during film experience, filmgoers are often perceptually in contact with such film intentionality. Film phenomenology must take into account those moments of film experience in which the filmgoer somehow perceives his/her intentionality as inhibited and obstructed for an object that escapes her/his perception as a result of a camera movement or a fade-out, and is therefore led to perceive film intentionality. Conversely, this is not intended to deny the fact that, during film experience, there is very often a complete identification and overlapping between the intentional perceptual path of the film and that of the filmgoer. The transparency of cinematic apparatus and imperceptibility of mediation is also obtained through the same tools (i.e., fade in/out, close-up, sequence shot, buzz track and so on). Moreover, with regard to the notion of presence, it is also necessary to consider the limits of the filmgoer's action in the film world. It should be noted that for Merleau-Ponty (unlike Sartre, for example), absolute freedom is incompatible with the notion of situation, with an embodied being-in-the-world: Freedom is always an encounter of interior and exterior and is always conditioned and placed within a horizon of possibilities.

Although from a different perspective and purpose than film phenomenology, recent studies in neurophenomenology have identified the notion of *presence* as a selective and adaptive mechanism that allows the subject to control the level of enactment of her/his intentions through an unconscious and continuous analysis of perceptual flow. In this sense, perception and action form a unit, and the world does not exist except in such a permanent connection (Varela et al. 1993). This concept of interaction between perception and action shows how sensory and motor activities cause one another; indeed, there is no perception outside of the action, and, at the same time, the space around us cannot be seen and understood without being lived and acted by our body. It is worth to note that Merleau-Ponty, reflecting on the possibility of an action for a body, does not intend to mean that perceived space is actually liveable. Film worlds are not really liveable; nevertheless, in a Merleau-Pontyan perspective, they can become possible places of our action. We can

represent them to ourselves as coherent spaces where our perceptual experience is possible. However, the question remains; for due to the peculiar characteristics imposed by the cinematic apparatus, a film world can be acted in its own particular way. In this regard, referring to processes of projection, identification and mimesis enacted in film experience, Casetti (2000) pointed out that spectators appear to be restrained in their desire to adhere closely to the film world. The conditions of that experience further prevent them from acting as if they were in the actual place of action (p. 56). According to Casetti, in perceiving film worlds, filmgoers also perceive inhibition and limitation. They can feel anger, disgust and attraction, yet at the same time perceive an inhibiting condition that does not allow them to act directly on the course of the narrated events. They have re-perception of a world already perceived and which somehow has already been and cannot change.¹⁴ Once again, film phenomenology must take into account such aspects and, with respect to the phenomenological reciprocity between perception and action, describe how the filmgoer perceives the film world.

2.3.2 *Characteristics of Film Experience*

The proposed term *re-perception* covers the three main characteristics of the film experience.

First, as clarified in the previous section, re-perception is still a perception. It primarily expresses the relationship between a perceiving subject (the filmgoer) and a perceivable world (the film world). Furthermore, as re-perception, it also identifies the perception of a world that has somehow already been perceived. In this sense, the term re-perception appears to be effective because it highlights how there is a relation between the filmgoer and the film world, from which there emerges a sort of perceptual mediation.¹⁵ The filmgoer (who is thrown into the world and, there, into film experience) seems like a stranger in a film world wherein she/he can re-perceive its 'reality' through an act of perception that is not only her/his own. As previously observed, the perceptual mediation between the filmgoer and the film world may either appear relevant or become transparent (as is often the case), depending on the filmgoer's intentionality. The filmgoer may magnify such mediation by directing his/her intentionality to the intentional act of perception of the film or instead may make the mediation imperceptible by delving into the film world.

Second, mediation appears as an act of perception that, not being a perception of the filmgoer, is the perception of an ‘other’. Such otherness is what some authors have identified using the term *film body*. The term itself, however, appears problematic and deserves a few considerations. Considering Sobchack’s work, it is clear that for this author, as well as for other film philosophers (e.g., Frampton 2006), the term film body ‘is meant to be empirical, not metaphoric’ (1992, p. xviii). In light of these references, some questions emerge when attempting to define the concept of film body. For example, given the technological artificiality of the film process (shooting, editing/cutting and projection), how are we to intend the film body? What is the subjectivity/individuality of such a body? What is the material (and perhaps even the psychological and emotional) nature of this body? Even more simply, where is the film body located?

Hence, to avoid any hypostatization, film body will here be replaced by the less problematic term *perceptual unity*—namely, the *perceived perceptual unity of the film world*. Re-perceiving the film world, the filmgoer can perceive an act of perception as implicitly referring to a perceptual unity, which is related to the film world and placed within it. This perceptual unity corresponds neither to the body of the film’s protagonist nor to any other film character, nor even to a narrator who recounts the course of events. Rather, it is something that is perceived by the filmgoer as always *behind* what is presented but still *inside* the film world. This perceptual unity is correlated by the filmgoer to the film world and perceived, therefore, as the unity of the expressed film world.¹⁶ Such perceptual unity, so strictly connected to and intertwined with the film world, does not entail any separation between the filmgoer and the film world itself. Instead, referring to the film body, Sobchack (1992) controversially pointed out that film experience is always a dialogical experience between subjects, filmgoer and film. As Sobchack wrote, ‘the film’s vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical but also intersubjectively dialogical’ (p. 24). The empirical reality of the film body indicated by Sobchack seems, to some extent, to derogate from Merleau-Ponty’s argument that perception is always a process wherein the subject and the world are indissolubly linked.¹⁷

Third, the term re-perception also expresses the availability and repeatability of the film experience. The perception of the film world by the filmgoer can always be repeated and shared. It is important to clarify

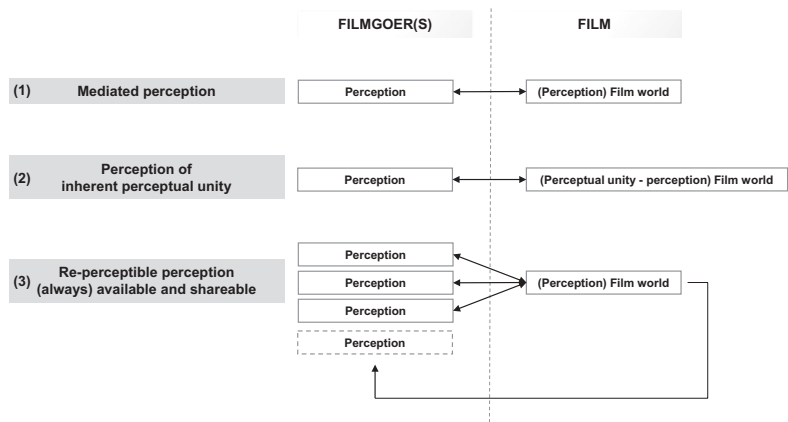


Fig. 2.1 Characteristics of film experience

here that re-perception is never a simple repetition of the same experience for the filmgoer; nevertheless, it is always the perception of a film perception that is reproducible and repeatable. This continuous availability and repeatability of the film has two logical consequences. First, from the beginning, film experience opens up to a process of interpretation of the film world that is also public and shared. Second, the reproducible nature of the film world shows its expressive matrix. However, the expression of the film world is not explicit because it is always reversible in an act of perception that retains its pre-reflective and pre-predicative nature.¹⁸

Film experience, as re-perception, can thus be schematized as in Fig. 2.1.

2.3.3 *Film Experience as Mediated Perception*

In film experience, the proposed concept of mediation seems to indicate that the film world is somehow filtered and that the filmgoer can never grasp it fully. Conversely, one may effectively rebut this by observing that the filmgoer is never able to fully grasp the real world either, at least insofar as his/her perception of reality differs from those of others. On the other hand, progress in technology is precisely directed at making such technological mediation increasingly imperceptible and transparent

when we engage with the world by means of artificial artefacts. When we act on the world through technological mediation, we become aware of a specific device only when it malfunctions, whereas in a functioning state, we direct our act of perception to the world and these technologies remain in the background. This is the reason why even in the film, the notion of mediation remains to some extent elusive and enigmatic. According to Sobchack (1992), '[mediated perception] is a *genuine* perception of world as it exists in an *embodiment relation* with technology. Instrument-mediated perception is an extension and transformation of direct perception but is enigmatic in that extension and transformation' (p. 186). In Sobchack's phenomenological perspective, film experience is defined as the negotiation of perception and expression between film and filmgoer. The filmgoer's experience is mediated by the perceptual act of the film, or as Sobchack puts it, 'the spectator's significant relation with the viewed view on the screen is *mediated by, inclusive of, but not dictated by*, the film's viewing view' (p. 278). In rejecting the perspectives for which, like Marxist film theory, technology is always ideologically determined and conditioning, the notion of mediation proposed by Sobchack reaffirms the active involvement of the filmgoer.

The issue of how mediated perception works and the filmgoer's involvement occurs implies a reflection on the nature of space and time in the film world. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, perception is defined as spatial and temporal continuity between the perceiver and the perceived. For Merleau-Ponty, our engagement with the world is mediated through our body's 'I Can', with or without the mediation of technological artefacts. In this regard, one need only think of the famous example of the blind man's cane that Merleau-Ponty used in order to explain the concept of perception. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'we must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive [...] To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth' (2002, p. xviii).¹⁹ Perception is what opens our being to otherness; it is the original place within which the world occurs. Being-in-the-world means being in internal communication with the world, before any act of thought. The body—the living bond joining inner and outer—is the linchpin of such an original connection. In film experience, technological mediation hides and disappears. There seems to be no place for it in this living and direct connection between the body and the world, nor

can the spatial limits of the film screen, as already noted, alter the presence of the film world. Reflecting on visibility in the preface to *Signs*, once again Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘no thing, no side of a thing, shows itself except by actively hiding the others, denouncing them in the act of concealing them. To see is as a matter of principle to see farther than one sees, to reach a latent existence. The invisible is the outline and the depth of the visible’ (1964c, pp. 20–21). According to this perspective, visibility is not limited to the visible but also includes dimensions, lines of force and fragments, which it suggests as its halo of invisibility, something that is not absolutely absent but almost present. Depth is ‘the dimension of the hidden’ (1968, p. 219), without which there would be no world but only a single amorphous surface. Our relationship with the world is founded on such a concept of depth, and before our eyes, things are the threads of the world structure which connect and ensure our being-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, space is always an existential space; self-consciousness does not found the world and its space (as does the Cartesian *cogito*), but self-consciousness and the world are strictly contemporary (2002, p. 347). These considerations clarify why for the active perception of the filmgoer in the film world, technological mediation in film experience tends to become transparent and disappear. The irreducible intertwining between body and world cannot be unravelled by any technology. Nevertheless, while there is an original and indissoluble existential communion between the subject and the world, the film world does not existentially belong to the filmgoer, even if it is actually perceived and experienced.

From the same perspective, we can also consider film temporality. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, time is not an objective succession of instants that sequentially follow each other, one by one, and are recorded by the subject. Rather, the time comes from the relationship between the subject and the world; it is the form of their inseparable connection. Therefore, time is not an object of our knowledge but instead a dimension of our being (2002, p. 483). Considering the time of the film, Sobchack underlined how the fascination of the film lies precisely in not transcending our lived experience of temporality: ‘film exists for us as always in the act of becoming’ (p. 60). The essence of the film lies in its rhythm, its duration and its succession of sequences in a temporality that is experienced by the filmgoer during the film experience. Film temporality is the form through which the filmgoer experiences the film world; nevertheless, in a mediated perception of the film world, such

temporality can also be perceived as cinematic time. The filmgoer can distance herself/himself from the temporality of the film world and bring out the latent temporality of the film experience. As with the space of the film world, film temporality does not belong to filmgoers originally, and they experience it through technological mediation.

2.3.4 *Film Experience as Perception of a Perceptual Unity*

Focusing on its second characteristic, the perceived perceptual unity of the film, one has to wonder what (or who) is encountered in the film experience. The main aspect of Sobchack's (1992) film phenomenology is the identification of a relationship between subjectivities, that of the filmgoer and that of the film. The film gives us the embodied perceptions of another subject. Just as the human body is the foundation of perception and action in the real world, the technological and instrumental body of the film is the basis for perception and expression of the film world. Sobchack defined film as a body, intending it not metaphorically, but in a literal sense—'like the human body, the film's body is animated and lived with existential prospects and purpose' (p. 219). Following the works of Sobchack (1992) and Marks (2000), Barker (2009) adopted the same perspective and argued that 'phenomenological film analysis approaches the film and the viewer as acting together, correlationally, along an axis that would itself constitute the object of study' (p. 18). For Barker, filmgoer and film are in a relationship of reversibility: they 'inhabit and enact embodied structures—tactile structures—that are not the same, but intimately related and reversible' (p. 19). In a similar vein, Chamarette (2012) pointed out that the phenomenological study of film experience is based on the intersubjectivity between film and filmgoer. Referring to Merleau-Ponty's notions of flesh and chiasm, Chamarette wrote, 'that chiasmic *in-betweenness* of film encounters is what initially lead me to reflect on conditions of subjectivity, or possibilities of subjectivity, in cinema' (p. 3).

Such perspectives, which pinpoint film subjectivity as being neither symbolic nor metaphorical but literal and empirical, raise some questions. Primarily, film subjectivity distances the filmgoer from the film world. The film experience becomes an intersubjective relationship and not the direct relationship between a subject, the filmgoer and a world (i.e., the film world). Second, in the type of Merleau-Pontyan film phenomenology to which the authors cited above refer, film subjectivity brings with it

a corresponding film embodiment. This techno-anthropomorphic notion of the film, which establishes a parallelism between the human sensory-motor system and the devices of cinematic apparatus (e.g., camera, lenses, projector, screen, etc.), gives rise to several legitimate doubts and criticisms. What is problematic about these perspectives is that they are based on a universalizing and ahistorical understanding of the film's body and embodiment. Despite the emphasis on the body and its active functioning, these phenomenological views (like that proposed by Sobchack 1992) implicitly refer to a universal white heterosexual male body, and for this reason, feminist, gender and queer studies have justifiably criticized such an approach.²⁰

As already observed, adoption of the term *perceptual unity* instead of *subject* serves here to explicitly reaffirm, in Merleau-Pontyan terms, the inseparability of the film body and the film world, avoiding any ontological-transcendental hypostatization. Phenomenologically, it is the perceptual unity directly perceived by the filmgoer in connection with the film world. Nevertheless, from an analytical point of view, such unity can hermeneutically accommodate some instances of film theories. First, it can be considered the representational and narrative unity of film, in other words as unity of film discourse and narrative and unity of film context and situation. Second, it can be considered as the expressive unity of the film-maker's artwork. It is worth noting that the term film-maker can be used either in a broad sense encompassing within it all those who contribute to the process of film-making, as Sobchack (1992) appropriately did, or to refer to a specific role. In the latter case, depending on the interest of the filmgoer (or scholar), the perceived unity may then be interpreted as an expression of the director's work, the actor's interpretation, the skill of the cinematographer or editor, and so on. Usually, when the term film-maker matches a name/surname, such unity does not only refer to the analysis and interpretation of a single movie but is reconsidered in comparison to other film experiences. Third, it can sustain historicization or typification of film being. In such cases, the perceived unity is put in relation to a particular genre or age or artistic movement in the history of cinema, and film analysis tends to correlate different film experiences to that unity.

However, irrespective of the theoretical perspective adopted, the key starting point in film phenomenology is the perceived *perceptual unity*, which remains inseparable from the perception of the film world. Then,

analytically, such unity appears to be a concept that is fruitfully adaptable from different points of observation.

2.3.5 *Film Experience as Available and Shareable Perception*

Considering the availability and shareability of film experience and its pre-predicative and pre-reflective nature, one has to wonder what interpretative analysis it demands. The act of perception on the film world offered to our re-perception is also, reversibly, a pre-predicative expression of that film world. From the beginning, film experience offers us the expression of a film world that is open to interpretation, and the filmgoer is the needed interpreter. In Ricoeur's terms, the interpreter makes herself/himself available and is willing to listen to the film and (re)perceive the film world. As in the real world, (re)perception of the film world always requires interpretations. The shareability and constant availability of that perception characteristically make the film world constantly open to (re)interpretation and dialogue with other filmgoers. As essential aspects of the film, such constant and shared availability and its pre-predicative expression open the film experience to the hermeneutical investigation in order to understand (and, once again, re-understand) philosophical thought inscribed in the film world. The hermeneutical investigation does not seek either to recover an alleged, inaccessible intention on the part of the author or to identify, for now and forever, the meaning of the film world. Rather, it is always in a dialogue with other possible interpretations of this shared perception and expression of the film world. Interpretation of the (film) world is never given in absolute terms as a complete, objective and a-temporal meaning; instead, it always requires other interpretations. Phenomenology of the film is the foundation required for subsequent hermeneutical investigation of the philosophical thinking of the film. The availability and shareability of the film experience characteristically make it possible for the filmgoer a philosophical investigation to unveil philosophical meanings of the film world. As Merleau-Ponty (1964b) observes, 'contemporary philosophy consists not in stringing concepts together but in describing the mingling of consciousness with the world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others; and because this is movie material *par excellence*' (p. 59).

2.4 THE FILM WORLD THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS

The first key element that emerges from the phenomenology of film proposed here is the basic role played by the filmgoer. The film experience is essentially an experience *of* the filmgoer, who is the subject—the only one—of that experience. The filmgoer is essential to the very being of the film, which is merely due to and within the film experience. It is worth emphasizing that this issue is not purely cultural in that it does not identify the filmgoer as a simple viewer who cooperates with the artwork by contemplating it, but rather is strictly existential. In short, as already noted, the film does not exist without the filmgoer. Such a perspective has been adopted both in film phenomenology and, more generally, in aesthetic philosophy. As Mikel Dufrenne pointed out, ‘the being of the aesthetic object is not the being of an abstract signification. It is, rather, the being of a sensuous thing which is realized only in perception’ (1973, p.218).

Thus, the film exists only through the filmgoer and his/her perception.²¹ What is shown in the film experience is a perception whose duration extends beyond the original act which generated it through the filmgoer who re-perceives it. Film perception exists neither for an original perceiver that is no more (the camera) nor for a hypothetical film perceiver whose body (namely, the film body) problematically raises questions in terms of Merleau-Pontyan film phenomenology and is too cumbersome to coherently find a place in the film itself. The film is a perception that exists only through the act of perception of the filmgoer, and in this sense, the film and filmgoer see with the same eyes, those of the filmgoer. In film experience, the original perception becomes transparent and through re-perception blurs the difference between it and that of the filmgoer. The film shows us a perception that is not (yet) objectified and is not an autonomous being-in-itself, but rather it comes to being in film experience and only through the act of re-perception on the part of the filmgoer. It is worth noting here that, from their anti-phenomenological perspective, Deleuze and Guattari (1991) instead asserted the autonomy of being of the artwork, which is independent of any subject and viewer.²² For this reason, Deleuze used the term *percepts* instead of perceptions (and *affects* and *concepts* instead of affections and conceptions); what interests him is to highlight their autonomy and their transcendent being with respect to the subject of those perceptions.

In such a perspective, the artist is the one who allows this creation and transcendence of the percept, extracting and creating the objects of perception from the perception. An object of perception is a totality of perceptions and sensations that survive those who experience them.

The phenomenology of film proposed here, following Merleau-Ponty's thought, claims instead the crucial role played by the filmgoer in the film experience for the coming to being of the film. Nevertheless, coming to being through the filmgoer's perception, the film always exceeds and is always problematically beyond that perception. Referring to the object of perception, Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'One cannot [...] conceive any perceived thing without someone to perceive it. But the fact remains that the thing presents itself to the person who perceives it as a thing in itself, and thus poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*' (2002, p. 375). Similarly, when defining the aesthetic object, Dufrenne wrote, 'on the one hand, there is a being of the aesthetic object which forbids its reduction to the being of representation. On the other hand, this being is dependent on perception and is attained in it, for the being at stake here is an appearance' (1973, pp. 223–224). The film as an aesthetic object is in its appearance, but in this appearance, there is more than appearance. In other words, while the film exists only through the filmgoer, it comes to being as other than her/him. For this reason, Dufrenne wrote that the aesthetic object constitutes itself in the spectator in the very act by which he/she vows him/herself to its service. Instead of positing it, the filmgoer embraces the film, which in turn affirms itself in this embrace. Thus, the film is both perception and expression; it is the original perception that reconstitutes itself in the perception of the filmgoer and is an original perception which through that re-perception becomes a meaningful expression to be interpreted.

Hence, the phenomenological notion of presence takes into account the expressive nature of film and does not identify moving images only as a record or memory of the world of the past, but rather as the place where the filmgoer experiences his/her relationship with a world. The film is not a presence which simply evokes an absence or an image that is somehow related to a missing external reference, but rather it is the place of the relationship with the filmgoer. Thus, the film does not entrust a recorded image to the filmgoer but instead offers him/her a film world as a place of existence. In the film experience, two different plans of perception and meaning coexist for the filmgoer, that of the filmgoer as the subject of the real world and that of the filmgoer in the film world. The

concept of the film world consolidates that relation between phenomenology and hermeneutics described at the beginning of this chapter. A film world (like the real world) is a place where the phenomenological problem of perception is constantly correlated to the hermeneutic problem of signification and interpretation. From the perceptual origin of sense, film experience leads us to an interpretative analysis of the symbolic and philosophical meanings of the film world. The film world is the place where the perceptions of the filmgoer become meanings.

NOTES

1. In his *Logical Investigations*, Edmund Husserl had pointed out that meanings inspired only by ‘remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions’ are not enough, ‘we must go back to the “things themselves”’ (2001, p. 168).
2. In this regard, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had observed, ‘in the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves’ (1962, p. 195).
3. Ricoeur undertook the ‘long path’ opposing to both a Cartesian self-asserting *cogito* and a Heideggerian direct ontology. For Ricoeur, the first truth of the self (I think—I am) ‘remains as abstract and empty as it is invincible’ (1970, p. 43). The only way for consciousness to comprehend itself is to interpret the expressions (as actions, works and institutions) that objectify it. As Ricoeur stated, ‘the short path of intuition of the self by the self is closed [...] only the long path of interpretation of signs is open’ (1974, pp. 264–265).
4. Deleuze wondered if Bergson had indeed forgotten his discovery of the movement-image: ‘what is again very odd is that Bergson was perfectly aware of the existence of mobile sections or movement-images [...] The discovery of the movement-image, beyond the condition of natural perception, was the extraordinary invention of the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* [Bergson 1991]. Had Bergson forgotten it ten years later?’ (1986, p. 3).
5. Merleau-Ponty was Sartre’s friend and co-editor of the journal *Les Temps Modernes*. For a consideration of their perspectives on film, see Justus Nieland’s (2009) ‘French Visual Humanisms and the American Style’. Referring to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘The Film and the New Psychology’,

- Nieland observes that he ‘echoes the terms of Sartre’s account of objectified emotion and perceptual situatedness’ (p. 124).
6. Conversely, according to Dominique Chateau (2003), who stated the impossibility of a pure phenomenology intended as a comparison with film data, Francesco Casetti (2005) noted that film experience always involves a confrontation with a work, with a textual composition and (in the broadest sense of the term) with a system of signs, and thus with semiology. The constant contamination between phenomenology and semiotics of cinema is evident in the Italian scholar’s use of the oxymoron ‘semiotic phenomenology’ (*fenomenologia semiotica*).
 7. On this issue, see, for example, Françoise Dastur’s essay (1983) ‘Husserl and the Problem of Dualism’.
 8. In the preface to *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack (1992) stated, ‘I want to begin again’. In order to respond to such a demand, we need to go back to questioning film vision freely: ‘vision as it is embodied, [...] as it radically entails a world of subjects and objects to make sense of them and of itself as it is lived’ (pp. xvi–xvii).
 9. Barker (2009) placed the tactile relationship between filmgoer and film in three locales: the *skin*, the *musculature* and the *viscera*. Referring to film tactility, the author wrote, ‘exploring cinema’s tactility thus opens up the possibility of cinema as an *intimate* experience and of our relationship with cinema as a *close* connection, rather than as a distance experience of observation, which the notion of cinema as a purely visual medium presumes’ (p. 2).
 10. ‘The Film and the New Psychology’ was delivered by Merleau-Ponty as a lecture at IDHEC (*Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques*) on 13 March 1945, and further published in *Sense and Non-Sense* in 1964.
 11. Referring two stages to *world structure* and its of *sedimentation* and *spontaneity*, Merleau-Ponty pointed out, ‘I am free in relation to my being in the world, free to make my way by transforming it. But here once more we must recognise a sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us’ (2002, p. 513).
 12. In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze defined *perception-image* (together with *action-image* and *affection-image*) as one of the three types, the ‘first avatar’ in Deleuze’s words, of cinematic movement-image. The perception-image, as perception of perception, identifies the viewpoint of the camera (i.e., what the camera sees). Deleuze wrote, ‘[the character] perceives (subjectively) the room, the things and the animals which are there, whilst [the camera] perceives (objectively) [the character] himself, the room, and its contents: this is the perception of perception, or the *perception-image*’ (1986, p. 67).

13. Referring to the possibilities of a viewer's perception before a film sequence showing the movement of a stagecoach, Sobchack (1992) wrote, 'I may intentionally direct my interest and my vision *away from* the stagecoach that is the film's intended perceptual object, and *toward* the *mode* of the film's perception of the stagecoach, that is, toward its *intentional act* of perception and expression' (p. 280).
14. Albeit in a different perspective, this concept is expressed by Stanley Cavell (1979) in his book *The World Viewed* when he stated that film tense is the past: 'I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)' (p. 26).
15. Sobchack (1992) suggested that when the film is projected onto a screen for a filmgoer, there is always a latent *echo-focus* of the camera in film experience (p. 178). Interestingly, in virtual reality (VR), technological mediation is measured through the degree of *presence* offered to the user by an experiential application. It is directly proportional to both the degree of perception of reality and the degree of interactivity offered.
16. As Sobchack (1992) emphasized, in film experience there is a constant dynamic reversibility between perception and expression, between perception of expression and expression of perception.
17. It should be noted that Sobchack (1992) opted for an existential phenomenology of film experience, as opposed to any transcendental phenomenology (of the Husserlian framework). As Sobchack keenly observed, the latter perspective offers a problematic and objectionable idealism of the camera (p. 29).
18. As Merleau-Ponty (1964b) pointed out, 'the meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself' (p. 57).
19. A particularly illuminating example of perception is offered by Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind*: 'when through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections: I see through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place' (1964a, p. 182).
20. See, for example, Sara Ahmed (2006) and Elena Del Rio (2008). In this regard, it is worth noting that Chamarette's book (2012) is concerned with 'a plurality of multidisciplinary phenomenological approaches' that sidestep some of these critiques (p. 8).
21. Such a statement does not preclude analytical and critical work on film; rather, it is its necessary premise. In fact, any theoretical or critical reflection on the film and, in general, any discourse on it, which involves

considerations made for the most part away from the screen and in the absence of film images, is always based on some previous sort of film experience (during which the relationship between the film and the filmgoer was established).

22. In this regard, the two French philosophers wrote, 'percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts and affects, are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself' (1994, p. 164). In the same book, the authors also wrote, 'by means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations' (1994, p. 167).

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Baracco, A.

2017, XXVII, 321 p. 57 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-65399-0