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Film and the Phenomenology of Art: 
Reappraising Merleau-Ponty on Cinema as Form, Medium, and Expression

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In his prescient 1978 essay “The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory,” cinema scholar Dudley Andrew anticipates the renewed interest in phenomenology within film studies that was to come to full flower some three decades later. Echoing Andrew’s title and theme, at the start of that major revival in the early 1990s, Vivian Sobchack also wrote of a “general neglect and particular ignorance of phenomenology” in then contemporary film theory. Today, however, as a result of Andrew’s, Sobchack’s, and other theorists’ advocacy, phenomenology—more specifically its existential version associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy—is no longer at the margins of film theory but close to its center. Indeed, within this context the word “phenomenology” has become a generally recognized shorthand expression for attention to more immediate sensory and expressive features of films, and to films as perceptual objects instead of, or in addition to, cognitive, narrative, and cultural-ideological ones.

Now that by general consensus phenomenological and related affect-and sensation-based paradigms have largely supplanted structuralist-semiotic, psychoanalytic, and Marxist-ideological ones in the mainstream of film theory, my present concern in this essay is with another related “neglect”: that of phenomenological aesthetics. In the midst of the current phenomenological and more broadly philosophical turn in film theory, this rich tradition of thought has received comparatively little attention from theorists and philosophers of film. Yet it played an important if still largely unanalyzed role in the development of modern film theory (having notably influenced the ideas of such prominent theorists as Jean Mitry and Christian Metz) and is still highly relevant, including in the present digital cinema environment.

Elsewhere I have traced the outlines of one phenomenological approach to cinematic art indebted to French philosopher Mikel Dufrenne’s ideas concerning the created and experienced “worlds” of films as aesthetic objects. Here I wish to focus on Merleau-Ponty’s
chronologically earlier understanding of phenomenology and cinema. Also focused on aesthetic perception and expression, it not only departs in significant respects from what I will call first-generation phenomenological film theory and criticism, but differs even more markedly (and perhaps ironically) from some contemporary phenomenological accounts of film rooted in Merleau-Ponty’s general philosophy of perception. Most notable among the latter is Sobchack’s phenomenology of film, as articulated in her influential study *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Sobchack’s overriding focus on what are presented as fundamental visual, spatial, and affective features of all live-action films, as tied to perceptual conditions of the film *medium* and its *technology*, stands in sharp contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on variable *artistic form, style, and expression* in cinema, together with temporality and rhythm. The reasons for this seldom-noted discrepancy are complex, bound to the evolution of both film theory and film practice from the 1940s onward. Yet, and as I hope to show, the differences in question are of much more than historical interest alone and go to the heart of how the phenomenological aspects of cinema and of individual films may be best understood.

While I have framed the situation in terms of a general neglect, or omission, it must be acknowledged at the outset that the orientations of at least some contemporary, post-*Address of the Eye* accounts of film experience are relatively closer to the concerns of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on cinema and art, as well as Dufrenne’s. Sobchack’s own later film critical and theoretical reflections fall into this category, as partly informed by attention to artistic realities explicitly bracketed from her general phenomenology of film, such as the “cinematic vision” and “world view” of filmmakers embedded in their recognizable personal styles. Yet the particular dynamics I wish to focus upon, as prompted by Merleau-Ponty’s observations on cinema and art and the typical concerns of phenomenological aesthetics (as also applied to literature in the work of Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, and Hans Robert Jauss, for instance), are not widely represented in contemporary anglophone film and phenomenology discourse. The alternative, equally phenomenological and aesthetic approach that I am concerned with explicating and offering qualified support for via Merleau-Ponty’s writing clearly dovetails, however, with more recent developments in French phenomenology. Specifically, its notable “return” to aesthetics that Julien Guillemet has traced with reference to cinema and the work of philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion, Alain Bonfand, and Michel Henry.

With this background in mind, and following a brief overview of the two most influential and historically distinct iterations of phenomenological
film theory as a necessary preliminary, I will revisit their most significant shared source. Namely, Merleau-Ponty’s published lecture “The Film and the New Psychology,” here critically reread in the light of his broader existential phenomenological conception of art and cinema as art.

“First Generation” Phenomenology of Film

There have been two distinct waves of phenomenology-inspired film theory, or, in a mid-twentieth-century context, what might be termed theory-criticism. Each takes as its starting point phenomenology’s attention to describing human experience in its immediate concreteness, without bringing secondary or extraneous interpretations to bear. The first wave comprised the books, articles, and reviews of Amédée Ayfre (a student of Merleau-Ponty and contributor to the legendary French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*), Henri Agel, Roger Munier, and, to a degree, André Bazin, among others. It was a product of a specifically French, postwar conjunction of film theory and criticism with the broad concerns of existentialism and phenomenology, as two viable responses to modernity synthesized in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gabriel Marcel. Both Andrew and Metz have pointed out that a distinctly phenomenological understanding of narrative film influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy arose in part as a response to the style(s) and themes of postwar Italian neorealist cinema. With its embrace of location shooting, highly mobile camera work, the long take, a documentary-like concern with place, use of nonprofessional actors, narrative ellipses, and the conveyance of nondramatic (or “lived”) time, neorealism, for Ayfre, Agel, Bazin, and others, presented concrete life experience in a more direct and authentic, as well as uniquely cinematic, way, in comparison with classical Hollywood productions and popular French films. Both the viewer’s experience of neorealist films and characters’ experiences of the environments represented within them were seen to correspond with existential phenomenological characterizations of the concrete human experience of space, time, and physical objects, and of the embodied self, as situated among other selves within the individual’s perceptual “life-world.”

Early phenomenological approaches to cinema shared much with what today is referred to homogenously as “classical realist film theory,” prominently including the leading ideas of Bazin. As is well known, he argued that as a result of the photographic basis of the medium, entailing the camera’s mechanical and optical-chemical generation of moving images, films, unlike paintings, confront viewers with the actual physical
world in its visual, spatial-temporal concreteness (if also its psychological and suggested metaphysical ambiguity). Although Ayfre adopts more explicitly phenomenological terms and reference points than Bazin, including the pioneering ideas of Edmund Husserl, like Bazin he also stresses certain, alleged radical differences between cinema and the traditional visual arts on the basis of its photographic nature. And hence what cinema alone is seen as able to (best) achieve. Yet as already mentioned with reference to neorealism, apart from advancing general theoretical claims concerning the medium, many early phenomenology-informed writings on cinema were grounded in the interpretation and aesthetic evaluation of individual films and cinematic styles.

Phenomenology as a body of ideas was seen, in other words, as a useful descriptive and evaluative tool in the arsenal of the theorist-critic in writings that directly converged with the rise of the politiques des auteurs (the French “auteur theory”), with its substantial attention to the careers and signature styles of particular filmmakers. Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, together with other directors, were canonized as fully fledged creative artists expressing distinct feelings and cinematically embodied ideas about their subjects and the world through their stylistic choices in films such as Umberto D, Bicycle Thieves, and Germany Year Zero. The authorial expression in question was regarded as a major source of a film’s artistic, thematic, and broadly philosophical value. Typified by Ayfre’s 1952 article “Neorealism and Phenomenology,” focused on Rossellini’s cinema interpreted through the lens of Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, primary here was how some films are “phenomenological” with respect to the creative use of the aforementioned film techniques characteristic of neorealism combined with the representation of real-life places and subject matter. These were seen to coalesce into a unique cinematic aesthetic with film form and content held in a complimentary, seemingly organic bond.

Such emphasis, of course, goes well beyond how the film medium in general (including in the hands of many other directors, including much lesser ones) may be considered a form of direct access to the primary perceptual life-world with which existential phenomenology is chiefly concerned.

Despite the common philosophical ground occupied by earlier and more recent theorists drawing on phenomenology, and a shared attention to distinctly perceptual and affective aspects of films, a notably different set of concerns have come to preoccupy many later writers. To a degree, these concerns likewise reflect certain developments in film form, style, and technology. Yet they are also driven by more abstract considerations at a further remove from film practice and evaluative criticism.
Contemporary Phenomenology of Film and Sobchack’s

*The Address of the Eye*

Relatively more recent phenomenological approaches to cinema fall into two broad categories. A more analytic stream of reflection, represented by the writings of Stanley Cavell and Allan Casebier, continues in the vein of Bazin’s realism in stressing the inherent perceptual-psychological immediacy and so-called transparency of the celluloid, cinematographic image. As an object of viewer attention, this medial (or “ontological”) feature is seen to continue to radically distinguish live-action (celluloid) cinema from other forms of narrative and visual art and to also take experiential priority over various copresent fictional, narrative, and formal-aesthetic dimensions of films. In one way or another, these are eclipsed by the reality effect of cinematographic representation.

A differently oriented, more “continental” brand of film theory and philosophy of film has adopted existential phenomenological language and concepts in its address of certain embodied, affective, and haptic (i.e., visually tactile) features of films. In some cases explicitly eschewing Bazinian realism, while still retaining a focus on films considered first and foremost as perceptual objects, the intellectual fulcrum of the “new” phenomenology of film is Merleau-Ponty’s anti-Cartesian account of embodied, and hence affective, perception. The latter sets itself in opposition to the vestigial Cartesianism and Kantianism (and therefore idealism) of Husserl’s original transcendental phenomenology. Together with Sobchack, such recent authors as Jennifer Barker, Jane Stadler, Hunter Vaughan, Daniel Frampton, and Laura U. Marks are among the large number of film theorists who draw on Merleau-Ponty’s work in this vein. The general discourse in question is often presented as an alternative to semiotic, psychoanalytic, narratological, and cognitivist approaches to cinematic perception and meaning, which are all centered on the represented and narrative contents of the fiction film. In the case of cognitive film theory, for example, this entails analysis of acts of viewer imagination, emotional response, and mental representation conceived in empirical psychological terms rather than phenomenological ones. No less than its rivals, however, Sobchack’s phenomenology, for example, also purports to be a fundamental, bottom-up approach to the experience of films and the comprehension of their meaning (*AE* 5–7).

More than any other single work, it is Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* that has served, in Stadler’s words, “to define the field” of contemporary phenomenology of film, with its dissemination having led to “an explosion of research on affective responses to cinema” and related ideas of cinematic perception and embodiment. Sobchack largely rejects the
French film-phenomenological writings of the late 1940s and 1950s on the basis that, like both realist conceptions of cinema and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, they are still tied to an untenable “idealist” and “essentialist” view of the human subject (or mind) existing somehow apart from the natural world (AE 29). On her view, they thus fail to properly recognize the human body as the fundamental source and vehicle of perception, as theorized in Merleau-Ponty’s major revision of Husserl’s original phenomenological project. Such recognition leads Sobchack to critique what she refers to as the “film-as-frame,” “film-as-window,” and “film-as-mirror” analogies prevalent in film theory, which are associated with formalist, realist, and psychoanalytic positions, respectively. All posit a film as a “static viewed object” that is merely presented to viewers for their inspection, not relevantly different in this way from a painting or still photograph (AE 14–15). She argues, to the contrary, that all films regardless of style are prereflectively perceived as viewing subjects (or quasi-subjects). Complete with nonhuman material “bodies,” they are experienced as enacting their own dynamic perceptual and expressive processes that replicate those of individuals as conscious, embodied agents and are perceived accordingly. Every film, on Sobchack’s view, “duplicates the structure and activity (although not necessarily the particular content and significance) of its spectator’s vision,” through the aegis of the technology-enabled reproductive capacity of the camera-projection apparatus as an extension of embodied human perception (AE 136).

To briefly unpack these arguments presented here in condensed form, Sobchack regards basic conditions of natural, embodied perception understood in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenological terms as being central to the experience of two-dimensional films. The working assumption is that all live-action cinema simulates the conditions and response mechanisms of the sensible world-at-large. On Sobchack’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s model of perception, this entails the self’s embodied and always reciprocal perceptual engagement with other selves and inanimate objects. For instance, by virtue of the camera’s presence and movement in the actual physical space of a film’s shooting, as concomitant with the generation of the moving image, cinematic space is experienced as more or less continuous with the actual physical space of the viewer who perceptually inhabits the virtual filmic space much like any other. However, and clearly departing from earlier phenomenological views, Sobchack maintains that on the basis of experiential features of the medium and its technology, as often reinforced by camera view and movement, what equally defines the embodied viewer’s perceptual experience of a film is its self-like and “perceiving” nature. A film, or more precisely its imputed “embodied” filmic consciousness, is experi-
enced as acting within, and having visible intentions toward, the objects that make up its (own) represented world; it views people, places, and things, and the spaces in which they are situated, while viewers view it viewing, as it were.

Sobchack’s identification of the camera “eye,” in conjunction with the projector-screen combination, with the vision of a living subject is anchored in a larger, all-encompassing “functional analogy” between the suggested material and prereflectively experienced presence of a film—its “body”—and the human body. Films and seeing bodies are both engaged in a “commutation of perception and expression” on the basis of similar perceptual activity toward objects. This occurs on a functional level, irrespective of obvious material and instrumental differences between films and embodied agents (AE 220). For all of these reasons, among others, Sobchack advocates replacing a conception of cinematic experience rooted in the idea of filmmaker(s) as expressing subject(s) with that of a film itself as an “expressing subject and object.” Indeed, most if not all other aspects of her phenomenology of film relate back to this radical proposition, which has the ancillary effect of marginalizing significant features of a film as a created artifact, and of certain consequences of its status as such.

My aim here is not to analyze and evaluate Sobchack’s complex, highly technical, and voluminous study in detail. As its continued influence attests, The Address of the Eye contains valuable insights concerning cinematic experience and phenomenology as both a philosophical movement and method. One problem with her project, however, from the specific standpoint of my present concerns—and, as we will see, a number of Merleau-Ponty’s—is that rather than being presented as one useful way of conceiving film viewing experience, with its undoubted singular features (including a powerful perceptual and affective immersion in filmic space on the part of viewers), it is instead offered as a viable replacement for, and in direct competition with all “expressivist,” “aesthetic,” and “formalist” views. These are seen to unduly reduce any narrative film to the status of an “aesthetic and expressive object” of consciousness alone (AE 20). Yet despite its nominally seeking to embrace a film as a work of art, at least in some experiential senses, Sobchack’s study is primarily a phenomenology of the celluloid film medium and its technology. It describes aspects of cinema that, if granted at all, are pre-aesthetic, even pre-formal, as well as pre-semantic (i.e., below the threshold of narrative comprehension, and the recognition and appreciation of non- or extranarrative meaning contents). The model of film viewing offered is unable to account for most of the artistic features of films, including those that may be a significant part of their direct perception and af-
fective experience. As I will explain further, however, and contrary to what some critics of contemporary phenomenological approaches may suggest, this and related limitations are not a necessary consequence of the adoption of a generally “phenomenological” perspective nor do they correspond to Merleau-Ponty’s own arguments about cinema.

In order to fully appreciate these last observations, it is necessary to recognize a categorical distinction between the film medium (or media, to encompass digital as well as celluloid filmmaking) and film form, in its plurality and diversity, and as cutting across various moving-image media and formats (e.g. live-action film, animation, experimental film, etc.). A moving image medium has many uses, values, and attendant modes of attention, which may be neither narrative nor aesthetic, for instance. By cinematic “form,” on the other hand, I mean to refer to that total, singular audiovisual structure created by a film’s maker(s), which shapes and channels the presentation, experience, and interpretation of perceptual, narrative, and thematic content. Such a structure often also evidences the style of a school or movement (e.g. film noir, neorealism) or that commonly attributed to an individual filmmaker (e.g. Hitchcock’s style, or Almodóvar’s). While certainly not confined to it, a substantial part of the aesthetic character of a film resides in the perceptual experience of “form” in this sense. If it is accepted (a) that cinema is or can be art, (b) that art is a product of both expressive and communicative intentions, broadly understood, and (c) that phenomenology is in some sense an approach to the understanding of objects of consciousness (often referred to as “intentional” objects), then there is a need for a dedicated phenomenology of cinematic-artistic form and expression—including an existentially oriented one that builds on the foundation of relevant phenomenological studies of photography, painting, literature, and other arts (and aesthetic experience in general)—as well as phenomenologies of celluloid and digital film media as media. Rather than films as ordinary or natural perceptual objects or mere manifestations of a given medium, the former takes as its appropriate subject the relatively more immediate aspects and so-called lived experience of films as artworks, i.e., intentionally made and expressive artifacts. Even if necessarily overlapping at many points, I am suggesting that these phenomenologies may, and should, remain distinct subjects and inquiries and be neither confused nor conflated. A more convincing description of the full (i.e., not only empirical) perceptual experience of film as art rests upon recognizing such a difference in aim, and in pursuing its manifold implications. As we will now see, Merleau-Ponty was not only sensitive to this basic form/medium distinction and its implications, but it is assumed from the outset in his discussions of cinema, art, and phenomenology.
Rereading “Film and the New Psychology”

The “new psychology” Merleau-Ponty refers to in the title of his 1945 lecture delivered at l’Institute des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris (later published as an essay in Sens et Non-Sens) is Gestalt psychology. Founded upon the relation between perceptual figure and ground, the early twentieth-century school stresses the active movement from initial perception to comprehension of phenomena, from “non-sense” to “sense,” in Merleau-Ponty’s terms. This is an ingrained movement of attention from the whole of a perceptual field to specific parts or objects within it, as much as from part to whole. Like art theorist and psychologist of perception Rudolf Arnheim, whose canonical formalist as distinct from realist account of film (laid out in his 1932 treatise Film as Art) was also deeply influenced by the Gestalt paradigm, Merleau-Ponty takes Gestalt theory to support the idea that the external world as actively perceived is not a matter of building a picture up from discrete elements of sense data, as is argued or simply assumed in much of classical psychology and empiricist philosophy. Instead, it is an act of recognizing implicit patterns and orders. Present outside of the mind, rather than constructed by it, these are perceived directly, via a grasp of the global interrelations amongst objects and their surface appearances. Such objects include, of course, oneself as a body, and other embodied selves as mobile actors. Recognizing that meaning is often implicit in the whole of a perceptual field and is actualized via the process of prereflective attention to it, the new psychology “re-educates us in how to see this world which we touch at every point of our being,” i.e., the actually experienced “lived world.” The re-education Merleau-Ponty describes is one he regards cinema as both illustrating and potentially, at least, being able to effect in its own virtual way. The reality a cinematic work may help its viewer reconnect with through audio-visual form is part of what he calls the “aesthetic” aspect of things (FNP 58). This emerges when, as appearances, the perceptual form and structure of objects are attentionally divorced from their purely practical functions in everyday perception and use.

When considered in perceptual terms, a film is a “temporal gestalt,” as distinct from a visual percept or mere sequence of such (FNP 54). It is an intentionally organized whole that changes and moves in time, through which a meaning dimension emerges successively, and as a result of the cumulative and iterative relation between parts or elements. With reference to what Merleau-Ponty regards as a potential feature of art in general—the “joy” of which “lies in its showing how something takes on meaning”—he writes that in cinema, “the idea is presented in
a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the coexistence of the parts of a painting” (FNP 57). As a basic illustration he points to Lev Kuleshov’s famous editing experiments (mistakenly credited to V. I. Pudovkin), and the so-called Kuleshov effect, which demonstrates that the significance of a film shot “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 54). Merleau-Ponty argues further that what is most significantly unique to cinema among the arts—the “original expression for the motion picture”—is not the moving photographic image in-itself but the specific “choice and grouping” of cinematic representations (FNP 54). In other words, he assigns clear priority to creative editing, or montage, together with what is subsumed under the French term découpage as the total shooting plan or script of a film, as the foundation of film narrative. This pertains, for instance, to the order of shots and sequences and the length of time of each as calibrated by the filmmaker (FNP 55). In a sound film that uses sound in a creative way rather than as a mere appendage to the visual, the montage of visual images and sequences is interwoven with an in principle perceptually coequal auditory montage of sound and speech. More generally, the perceptual form of a sound film is profoundly audiovisual, a symbiotic union of what is seen and heard. In fact, and contrasting with the overriding, sometimes exclusive, concern with the image alone and with visual space in a good deal of contemporary phenomenology of film, more than half of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of cinema in “The Film and the New Psychology” is devoted to its auditory dimension.

The “expressive force” of montage when creatively employed is, in turn, its “ability to make us sense the coexistence, simultaneity of lives,” i.e., of fictional characters, operating in “the same world.” This is cast as analogous to the coexistence of selves in the perceived and felt life-world of actual (noncinematic) experience (FNP 55). Just like a “consciousness which is thrown into the world,” which Merleau-Ponty, following the existentialism of Heidegger, conceives as the foremost character of the human condition, a narrative film presents an interpersonal reality the meaning of which (if it is to exist at all) is strongly audio-visual, emergent, and holistic (FNP 58). Sometimes also mirroring the perceiving and interpreting activities of characters within films with respect to their represented world(s) (as we might add), each viewer must seek to understand this version of reality on the basis of what, from the standpoint of each moment in time, is limited, incomplete information. This cinematic dynamic of perception as fundamentally in search of (better) comprehension or the “sense” of appearances—including
what translates into the narrative comprehension of events as described and analyzed by numerous nonphenomenological film theorists such as David Bordwell and Edward Branigan—is seen to reflect the inherently perspectival nature of the embodied self’s always limited perceptual “take,” confined as it is to a single body and spatiotemporal vantage point. Further, and with its own similarity to perceptual and affective being in the three-dimensional life-world, the unfolding, perceptual reality of people, places, and objects a film creates in the consciousness of the viewer is powerfully rhythmic to lesser or greater degrees. In addition to the visual rhythm of composition and in-frame movement, which Merleau-Ponty does not discuss, this includes the duration of shots and sequences, supplemented by the rhythms of sound, music, and speech, all of which he singles out as characteristically cinematic and yet qualitatively unique to every film. In contrast to an imaginary or conceptual object, a cinematic work is for Merleau-Ponty a rhythmic audiovisual experience that conveys story and drama “directly” to the senses, and in this respect is “not thought; it is perceived” (FNP 58). The fiction film does not, in other words, rely wholly, or even primarily, on the audience’s imagination in order to come to concrete imagistic life, in marked contrast to a novel or poem, for example.

Notice that unlike in Sobchack’s phenomenology of film, the specific analogies Merleau-Ponty draws throughout the text between the elementary conditions of human, embodied perception and the cinema is not founded on a film’s or the camera’s, “body,” “view,” “eye,” or “vision.” Neither any of these, nor in-frame movement or mise-en-scène, specifically, are mentioned (even if attention to these last two visual-spatial aspects of film form may well have lent greater, more detailed support to the lecture’s main claims). The existential phenomenological analogies offered are wholly anchored, rather, in a film conceived of as a profoundly perceptual and temporal, as well as narrative, unity-in-multiplicity. This aesthetic unity, including an “intersubjective” perceptual and narrative integration of multiple character perspectives and represented experiences, owes its most significant meaning and expression to the creative use of montage as distinct from merely functional editing, i.e., editing sufficient for the creation of a coherent and comprehensible narrative alone.

Like Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Pudovkin, and others before him who also associate the full artistic potential of film with the combinatory spatial-temporal powers of editing—such emphasis being the defining feature of the early Soviet formalist film theory with which he appears to have been at least somewhat familiar and references approvingly—for Merleau-Ponty the essence of cinematic art is not the indexical and
iconic character of the photographic image (in C. S. Peirce’s semiotic terms) in all its life-likeness, as it is in Bazin’s realism. Nor is it to be mainly located in any visual-spatial verisimilitude or illusionism—or, indeed, any features of basic cinematographic representation, as such. As Eugene Kaelin has observed, Merleau-Ponty pointedly extends his general criticism of traditional mimetic conceptions of both literature and painting to any understanding of cinema that likewise mistakes “the resemblance relation” of visual or poetic images to the world for the primary meaning and expression of works. He instead strongly disassociates cinema from the simulation of ordinary, lived experience and _avant la lettre_ the related, problematically partial “mimetic” or “eye-witness” conception of cinematic representation and narration, which Bordwell, among other theorists, has notably critiqued. Addressing the point directly, Merleau-Ponty observes that whatever “basic realism” the medium involves, this “does not mean . . . that the movies are fated to let us see and hear what we would see and hear if we were present at the events being related” (FNP 57).

Sobchack’s _The Address of the Eye_ devotes only two pages to “The Film and the New Psychology,” specifically (AE 164–65). Following this precedent, whether intentionally or not, other prominent contemporary phenomenological studies of cinema that are to differing degrees also built upon the conceptual foundations of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology likewise—and surprisingly—either do not engage with this text at all, or do so in a cursory fashion. Moreover, when the lecture is discussed there has been a general tendency to regard it as simply and nonproblematically in keeping with contemporary views of cinematic experience partly built upon from Merleau-Ponty’s non-film- or art-focused writings (e.g. _The Phenomenology of Perception_), such as Sobchack’s.

Leaving most of the above-mentioned features of Merleau-Ponty’s characterizations of cinema as medium and as art uncommented upon, Sobchack regards his film lecture as powerfully reaffirming Merleau-Ponty’s view of the “human” and “animated” nature of “all technology” including cinema (AE 165). Yet there is little or no textual support for this reading. Even if in accord with Merleau-Ponty’s general suggestions elsewhere, as applied to cinema this appears instead to largely reflect Sobchack’s own, very different and more contemporary conception of the “embodied” nature not only of a film as a visual spectacle but also of its making and viewing technology. In fact, as a close reading of the text bears out, what is instead quite explicit is Merleau-Ponty’s recurring stress on cinematic form, and on film art as fundamentally _distinct from_, and in various ways _transcending_, firstly, the _material, technological, and most basic reproductive/representational_ conditions of the film medium, and secondly,
some widespread narrative filmmaking techniques and styles that are wedded to these conditions rather than seeking to move beyond them (both of these points are further emphasized in a later lecture, “Art and the World of Perception”). Indeed, his argument entails that artistically creative filmmakers (whose works are of phenomenological interest) may find it necessary to work against, as much as with, that which the medium and its technology alone provides or appears to encourage.

These ideas are mostly directly expressed in the summary of the relation between cinema and existential phenomenology (in essence, his own philosophical program) that concludes the lecture. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between artistically good, what he calls “real films”—which build on the capacities and aspects noted above and in this way move in the “same direction” as existential phenomenology—and “bad movies,” which do not. Consistent with the form/medium distinction, the continuing importance of which has been noted, this amounts in Merleau-Ponty’s view to a clear contrast between all cinema, regarded as a “technical instrument” (“l’instrument technique”) and some films’ formal “reinvention” of “the medium” (“comme inventé une seconde fois,” in his exact words). When realized, the latter is a product and achievement of what is referred to as the specifically “artistic will” (“volonté artistique”) of the creative filmmaker as something imposed on the medium and its technology (FNP 59). What is affirmed here and throughout the lecture clearly falls under the heading of the artistic approach and style of a filmmaker that a given cinematic work instantiates, makes manifest in the consciousness of the audience through the creation of singular expressive-aesthetic form(s). Through such forms (which Merleau-Ponty describes as possessing both “musical” and “poetic” aspects), in tandem with story and character, a particularly human and “existential” representation of lived experience may be presented to viewers.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to briefly summarize the main features of the two conspicuously divergent, indeed, almost diametrically opposed, film-phenomenological positions under consideration. For Sobchack, writing in the name of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the existential phenomenological nature of cinema is in one way or another strongly associated with (a) the cinematographic image, including all its perceptual and psychological realism and lifelikeness; (b) the shooting stage of filmmaking; (c) the visual in-itself; (d) cinematographically presented space; (e) camera view and movement, together with mise-en-scène (which Sobchack equates with cinematic “being” as her primary existential phenomenological concern, in contrast to cinematic “language,” which is identified with editing); and finally (f) a film’s suggested dual experiential presence as not only a visible object but a
perceiving (“viewing”) _subject_. This last-mentioned presence does not include the viewer’s experience of the filmmaker’s artistic expression, subjectivity, personality, or style, as conveyed by a film, or attendant aesthetic realities as customarily theorized, which are bracketed out of the phenomenological equation completely (AE 17).

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, directly associates the existential phenomenological possibilities of cinema with (a) the creative and transformative use of _montage_, and thus (b) the editing stage of filmmaking; (c) a fundamentally _audiovisual_ presentation to the senses of viewers (in the case of the sound film); (d) presented and experienced _time_; and (e) overall cinematic _rhythm_—as all resulting in a highly (and necessarily) stylized presented world, “finer grained” and “more exact” than actual reality, and constituting (f) a perceptual, expressive, and distinctly _aesthetic_ object-experience as the direct product of a filmmaker’s artistic vision, choices, and intentions (including those related to narrative) (FNP 58). Thus, rather than jettisoning all substantial reference to the “artist as expressing subject” and “his or her style and manner of being through cinematic representation,” in Sobchack’s words and as she advocates in _The Address of the Eye_, Merleau-Ponty underlines their experiential reality on the part of viewers, as well as their primary existential-phenomenological relevance (AE 9). He rightly recognizes, for instance, that it is not simply the case that owing to the technological and perceptual conditions of the _medium_ (or apparatus) that cinema _automatically_ able to embody or represent processes of “lived perception” that constitute the life-world of an individual. In line with Ayfre’s ideas, expounded with reference to Rossellini’s neorealist films (and no doubt influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s lecture), this phenomenological meaning or expression is instead an aesthetic _potential_ of cinema, which certain features of the medium and its technology certainly may aid but, by definition, neither determine nor guarantee. No less than in the creative use of any media, this phenomenological capacity is regarded as a function of style and artistic intentions. Therefore when and if certain films possess such phenomenological and existential significance, they do so as a highly valuable but second-order feature.

Merleau-Ponty, like Dufrenne after him, valorizes the recognizable creative expression of individual filmmakers as intending artists not somehow at the expense of existential phenomenology but in its name. In other words, contrary to what Sobchack maintains, there is simply no necessary conflict between a conception of cinema that stresses aesthetic form, personal style, and individual expression, on the one hand, and the view held by Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, and many others that human perception (including the perception of films) is radically
perspectival and embodied, on the other. A cornerstone of many versions of the “auteur theory” of cinema, but by no means only relevant to it, such creative form, style, and authorial expression (sometimes translating into a personal “vision” of reality) is, as previously mentioned, also precisely what is acknowledged and celebrated in some first-generation French phenomenological film theory and criticism, e.g. with reference to certain neorealist directors and styles.18

Evoking Dufrenne’s metaphorical description of an aesthetic object of consciousness as a “quasi-subject”—in some ways existing halfway between the subjectivity of the artist(s) who created it and the objectivity of the artwork as an empirical reality in the physical world—both Jennifer Barker and Sobchack (who also cites Dufrenne as a precedent for her arguments [AE 142]) stress that this entails a “dialogue” and “dialectic” between the viewer and the experienced film as itself a “perceiver,” “body,” “object-subject,” and “an other.”19 Yet as both Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty correctly recognize, and reiterate, this is instead a fundamentally three-term lived relation. It exists between two (or more) actual human subjects—the viewer and the filmmaker(s)—and one symbolic and communicative, as well as also highly expressive, object, i.e., the cinematic work of art as and when experienced. The subjects in question are brought together and are profoundly invested in the work, on one side through the acts of a film’s creation (including intentions and aesthetic choices), and on the other, through the percipient and mental acts of a film’s experience. One form that the relation between the expressing filmmaker and the receptive viewer may take is the direct experience of the unique durational and affective unity-in-multiplicity Dufrenne calls the “expressed world” of a film, experienced as an integral part of its larger, creator-owned and creator-revealing “aesthetic world” (e.g. the expressive totality or “world” of Vertigo as a cinematic work, as distinct from and yet also including, the fictional world that is represented in Hitchcock’s film).20 This is the global, affective corollary of the singular formal-perceptual Gestalt that Merleau-Ponty regards some films as presenting. And it is one prominent way in which the artistic subjectivity or personality of the work’s maker (or makers) is experientially present in all that we see and hear in some films—whether or not this is the object of relatively more conscious reflection during a film’s viewing.21

A major aspect of all cultural life and a part of what makes us human, artistic expression, regardless of its medial and formal vehicle, is a notoriously ramified, deeply mysterious phenomenon. Yet it is quite clear that characterizations of aesthetic objects as quasi-subjects aside—and as common experiences of paintings and literary works roughly analogous to those that Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty describe with
reference to cinema also suggest—beyond the filmmaker (or makers) and the viewer, no other subjects or “bodies” of experience, literal or metaphorical, film-technological or material, are required in theory or practice for these expressive dynamics. Nor in a cinematic context do they ultimately derive from filmmaking and film viewing technology (or the cinematic “apparatus”) in and of itself, however much these may involve and emulate embodied human perception.

Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Art (and Cinema)

“The Film and the New Psychology” is closely related to the arguments of both “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945) and “Eye and Mind” (1961), two major contributions to general aesthetics and art history and theory that bookend Meleau-Ponty’s philosophical career. The film lecture also substantially overlaps with a 1948 lecture for broadcast radio, “Art and the World of Perception.” It is worth pursuing these seldom discussed intertextual connections for the further light they shed on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of art and cinema’s place within it, and as adding greater depth and detail to the specific ideas and arguments to which I have thus far drawn attention.

In “Art and the World of Perception,” cinema is discussed alongside the traditional arts, with the two notably drawn together rather than separated; for example, on the basis of what is unique to the medium and its technology. Merleau-Ponty identifies two important similarities between a visual artwork and any other object of “lived perception,” prior to any intellectual abstraction from their actual experience. Firstly, and most obviously, no linguistic description is an adequate substitute for either the artwork or the direct perception of any object, and, secondly, with respect to that direct experience, it is impossible to “separate things from their way of appearing.” Of course, in one literal sense, since a film must be played or projected in order to be experienced, it may appear differently to viewers depending on how and where it is viewed and what technologies are used in the process. But in the phenomenological and aesthetic context of Merleau-Ponty’s reflections, appearance harkens back to esthesis, in something like the original Greek sense of the term, as well as the intentional “aboutness” of phenomenological consciousness, as a matter of the concrete presencing of mental objects and their various aspects. This sense of appearance encompasses the inviolable concreteness, singularity, and self-sufficiency of artistic representations as qualities shared with other objects of perception but notably lacking from abstract and “arbitrary” linguistic signs—for example, the words of liter-
ary texts. Such immediately appearing presentations include paintings, as well as photographic and cinematic images. Like the perceptions of all sensible things in the three-dimensional world, the meanings of such artifactual compositions are also “inseparable from the sign” itself. In other words, they do not reside in signified content as wholly abstracted from their given perceptual forms.

Yet there are also crucial differences between aesthetic and nonaesthetic objects and phenomena relating to basic, experiential features of our perceptions of them. Approvingly quoting cubist painter Georges Braque, and also foreshadowing Dufrenne’s later phenomenology of artwork worlds, Merleau-Ponty observes that far more than a mimetic, visual duplication of (represented) objects in the world, a painting is a sui generis “pictorial event.” As such, it presents an artistic “world of its own” (AWP 71). In our specifically “aesthetic” encounter with a representational painting, our attention is not (only) sent back to the “natural object(s)” in the world that are represented. Rather, it is held by the canvas as a self-sufficient spectacle, the form-embodied meaning of which goes well beyond representation and visual resemblance in and of itself. This aesthetic world of a work is profoundly removed from the arena of practical action and instrumentality. Crucially, however, it is also removed from the natural, prereflective perceptual life-world of human beings. In fact, it is only by virtue of art’s reflective, physically and symbolically mediated distance from the ubiquitous perceptual processes of actual bodily experience that constitute the concrete world of three-dimensional space and time, in which we move and act, that some works are able to foreground this primary, prereflective world and its conditions.

In presenting such novel, supramimetic perceptual and affective worlds of their own by means of forms that shape the perception of their represented content, some paintings, Merleau-Ponty maintains, bring to conscious awareness a great deal that the “lazy viewer”—presumably meaning the aesthetically uninformed or interested one—fails to see or comprehend. Namely, they may bring to reflective attention the dynamic ways in which the human self concretely interacts with perceptual objects in the three-dimensional world. Included among such works are Cézanne’s paintings. In their representation of familiar objects as if seen from different positions at the same time (among other deliberate stylistic strategies), Cézanne’s paintings do not show how they look at a given moment, in a single view, but how we construct what we regard as their independent reality from an indefinite, dynamic series of perspectival, spatiotemporally distinct views. Like other modern painters following his example, Cézanne thus paints subjective phenomena, events of the
natural perception of things in the world (rendered objective) rather than things apart from, or following, this primary perception. His works thereby thrust us “into the presence of the world of lived experience” in a way not otherwise available to the intellect, which habitually moves away from concrete perception and its processes via its more abstract and abstracting symbolic modes of operation (AWP 69).

Logically implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that as profound, revolutionary, and influential as Cézanne’s achievement may be, it represents but one way, by one artist, and through one style of painting—and in one art form and media—of drawing attention to often-overlooked aspects of the perceptual world in which we live but which are often hidden “beneath all the sediment of knowledge and social living” (AWP 69). Through deliberate artistic strategies resulting in an individual style, Cézanne’s art, like Picasso’s and Braque’s, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, accomplishes this revelation only via a process of distancing itself and its viewers from the over-familiar quotidian world, as the product of the abstracting intellect, practical intentions and functions, and attendant habitual modes of perception. More conventional artistic representations, on the other hand, merely mirror and reaffirm this abstract reality rather than challenging it. The defamiliarization Merleau-Ponty speaks of, to evoke a generally similar idea in the theory of art and literature, allows genuine visual artworks to “return” its viewers in virtual fashion to the world of lived appearances itself. Of course, this always occurs, as it must, on a higher or second-order aesthetic and symbolic level occasioned by the work’s formal and artistic transformation of quotidian reality and requiring relevant knowledge on the part of the viewer to recognize it. In other words, the dynamic in question surpasses what may be grasped by perception alone, whether for these purposes perception is defined in existential phenomenological terms as “embodied perception,” or any others.

To extend a clear line of thought present in Merleau-Ponty’s cinema lecture: if more conventional mimetic and perspectival painting both begins with and remains an abstraction from lived, perceptual experience, so too are many conventional films, including those that emulate traditional pictorial conventions in the aid of visual illusionism, content to offer a highly rationalized and idealized two-dimensional semblance or replica of three-dimensional reality as already familiar and known. Other, more ambitious cinematic works, in contrast, highlight the dynamic ways in which the natural environment is prerationally perceptually and bodily experienced, and thus comes to be known (in human terms) at all. All this may be understood as a matter of creative filmmakers achieving in cinema something akin to philosophers’ and theorists’ highly conscious
application of the so-called phenomenological reduction of conscious experience to its actual, prereflective constituents in the interest of attempting to better describe it. In so doing, the artistic filmmaker, like the painter, may present “what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness,” as Merleau-Ponty writes in “Cézanne’s Doubt.”

The main message here is that, rather than constituting an exception, narrative cinema made and experienced as art largely shares in these same dynamics as modern painting. Films, on this view, may also create, by different means, such an artificial model—in effect, a single complex artistic symbol (rather than communicative sign)—for fundamental processes of “lived perception.” In working to the same end as some paintings, a film can achieve a return of consciousness to a more fundamental, prerational, and basic perception-forming level of experience. But, as must be stressed, the consciousness that is thereby returned to prereflective consciousness and perceptual experience through cinematic art is (and must be) a reflective, knowledgeable, and sensitive consciousness, capable of recognizing and appreciating this dynamic and its significance. On the filmmaker’s part this return is accomplished through the innovative formal treatment of represented objects in ways that the medium allows. But of course the medium does not itself either provide or dictate this treatment: since, if it did, all paintings and films would automatically subserve this function, whereas of course, and as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, they are only a select minority of all the films (and paintings) made.

As also discussed in the late-published essay “Eye and Mind,” in any medium and art form, creating such a phenomenologically relevant and lived perception-reflecting symbolization (as part and parcel of a work’s larger aesthetically meaningful, expressive significance) requires a great deal of creative effort, intuition, and imagination on the part of artists. To find an artistic means of presenting a represented content, i.e., an object, an event, a story, that challenges the abstraction from perceptual experience characterizing the so-called natural but in fact highly abstract(ing) attitude of much practical and intellectual activity—and simultaneously to overturn many of the conventional forms and techniques of illusionistic representation that replicate and further reify this attitude—requires strenuous labor in the field of the aesthetic. Such is the labor that Merleau-Ponty chronicles so effectively in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” rightly regarded as among the most illuminating explorations of the hard-won development of modern (post-impressionist) painting.

With specific reference to cinema, “Art and the World of Perception” offers further detail and support for this view, since a great deal of stress
is placed on what is common to potentially all forms of artistic creation and aesthetic perception. Here, yet again, we find the strong suggestion that film art is marked by a number of the same transmedial features and work-occasioned modes of perception/attention to be found in some modern painting, poetry, and music, as these pertain to form, rhythm, feeling, etc. Merleau-Ponty observes that owing to first the demands of the star system, resulting in a general over-reliance on plot and dialogue, secondly, a relatively empty “sensationalism” of visual technique, e.g. merely showing off certain capacities of the camera and lenses, and thirdly, the prevalent motivation to achieve popular and commercial success as opposed to the encouragement of genuine artistic and life-world-revealing form and expression, few films deserve to be regarded as “works of art from start to finish” (AWP 73). Yet it remains possible (even if institutionally difficult) to create such meritorious works, he argues, the goals of which are to reconnect viewers with relatively less abstract, rationalized, and utilitarian modes of seeing and feeling.

In an obvious echo of his earlier film lecture, Merleau-Ponty argues that well beyond any a priori, inherent conditions of the film medium, including specific technological ones, the primary criterion for cinematic art consists in the successful creation of a distinctly aesthetic cohesiveness and expressive holism of formal and temporal (rhythmic) structure (AWP 73–74). Like Eisenstein (especially in his later writings), together with Dufrenne, Merleau-Ponty suggests that what distinguishes genuine artistic films from nonartistic ones is the creation of a total, original, and compelling “rhythm.” Both perceived and powerfully felt, this rhythm serves as a conduit for a specifically aesthetic expression that defines the work in question. In Merleau-Ponty’s chosen, and rather general terms, the choice of shots, their ordering, and the variable length of a film’s episodes as aesthetic elements manipulated by filmmakers helps to create a “radiant image” rooted in a particular, total “cinematographical rhythm,” itself founded upon, and expressed through, a felt “unity and necessity of the temporal progression” (AWP 73). As in all art, there is no recipe for creating this perceptual and expressive unity and sense of formal necessity, which resists rational definition, and depends upon the experimentation and intuition of filmmakers. Here it is worth noting that although Sobchack continually stresses what a film “is doing in the world and what it is making of space,” and rightly suggests that a film exists for the viewer in an “act of becoming,” there is little discussion in her treatise of what a film “makes of” time and rhythm (AE 60). Indeed, with some recent exceptions, the experience of cinematic time per se is notably and surprisingly under-analyzed in the contemporary phenomenology of film. Yet if cinema is a profoundly, even paradig-
matically, temporal art, as many critics, theorists, and filmmakers have long suggested, it is a major and proper subject of any phenomenology of film, including an aesthetically focused one. This is certainly not lost on Merleau-Ponty, who puts both temporal duration and rhythm at the center of his phenomenological reflections on cinema.

The expressive cohesion and integration of different elements in the film work, with respect to montage, rhythm, and part-whole relations of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, is quite similar to the so-called organic form as well as beauty that has been traditionally regarded as partly constitutive of aesthetic interest and value since at least the eighteenth century. It is central in Kant’s model of the interlinked relations amongst aesthetic form, perception, and judgment, for instance, and a prominent part of various post-Kantian and Romantic conceptions of art. In a cinematic context, specifically, these ideas concerning form, temporality, and literal and represented rhythm as defining aspects of aesthetic experience forwarded in “Art and the World of Perception” clearly overlap with descriptions of film as art found in both classical formalist film theory (including in Eisentein’s later writings, as already noted, and in the theories of Rudolf Arnheim and Hugo Münsterberg), as well some aesthetically focused postclassical accounts of cinema, such as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Sculpting in Time* (as the title alone of the Russian director’s book on cinema indicates). Merleau-Ponty undoubtedly gives a new, existential-phenomenological inflection to these traditional, form-centered ideas. But he embraces rather than repudiates them, for example as being out of keeping with his broader philosophical positions.

Evaluating Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Film
Art in a Contemporary Context

In the preceding interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s relevant texts—which in the case of “The Film and the New Psychology” may also be regarded as a substantial reinterpretation, in the ways I have suggested—I have endeavored to lay out some of his main ideas and arguments concerning cinematic art. I have done so in a more linear and systematic fashion than these originally appear in order to make what I consider the strongest case for them. In the last section of this essay, I wish to address some of these ideas in a more critical, evaluative way.

The brevity of the writings and lectures under consideration, intended primarily for a nonspecialist audience, limit and constrain Merleau-Ponty’s account of cinema as art. Written prior to major developments in film theory as well as film practice, it is conspicuously lacking reference
and attention to other, clearly phenomenologically relevant features of films, including framings, camera movements, in-frame movement, lighting, staging, and various aspects of performance and the (re)presentations of faces and bodies on screen, as all of these are perceived. More conceptually damaging to his arguments, however, is Merleau-Ponty’s unequivocal equation of all successful cinematic art with the revelation of the conditions of lived-perception, as construed in the specific terms of existential phenomenology and his own version of it. In this sense it is not always clear, as Paul Crowther also legitimately wonders, if Merleau-Ponty is “engaged in the philosophy of art” or “merely looking for [his] philosophy in art,” including in cinema.28 Clearly, many genuinely artistic and also philosophically interesting films (or indeed paintings) appear to do and offer relatively little in this, or perhaps any, distinctly existential phenomenological direction. Some films instead actively build upon cinema’s capacity to suppress or surpass basic conditions of natural, embodied human perception and its representation.

A well-known critic of phenomenological conceptions of cinema, Gilles Deleuze raises this general point with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s film lecture. Yet it is as much if not more of a problem for the validity of Sobchack’s phenomenology of film in its implicit claim to speak to all cinematic experience.29 Evoking Henri Bergson’s nonphenomenological philosophy of perception, Deleuze aptly observes that cinema is not confined to emulating or embodying “natural subjective perception” defined in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenological terms. Such perception is a limited, partial view of things “uncentered” on and by the embodied subject of perception—the “I” moving in space and oriented toward a perceptual horizon. For Deleuze, here paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, this entails the world as a “sensible form (Gestalt) which organizes the perceptive field as a function of situated intentional consciousness.”30 Films, however, frequently oscillate between this sort of human perception (or its representation) and a nonhuman, “objective” yet diffuse and “acentered” appearance of things.31 The latter is not a matter of a subjective perspective or point of view, but the view itself, as seen by no one, as it were. As viewers sit immobile before the screen, cinema can “bring us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them” and hence suppresses “both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world.”32 For this reason among others, by virtue of the creative capacities of editing, camera movement, framing, and mise-en-scène in their narrative and extranarrative dimensions, cinema is eminently capable not only of making “the world itself something unreal” and of turning it into “its own image” as Deleuze continues.33 But also of both representing and
expressing the great “cognitive shift in human mental life,” that in philosopher Thomas Nagel’s words, is “an expansion of consciousness from the perspectival form contained in the lives of particular creatures to an objective, world-encompassing form that exists both individually and intersubjectively.”34 The experience of films as meaningful perceptual and affective but also broadly speaking symbolic realities always entails both “subjective” and “objective” perspectives vis-à-vis what is happening on screen and the viewers’ attitudes toward it.

If, as Merleau-Ponty and subsequent theorists stress, films may present (or simulate) prereflective sensory-perceptual engagements with the concrete life-world—and thereby return our conscious awareness to it—they are equally, if not in some ways more, adept at taking us out of and away from this world. That is, they may show us other, equally artistic and in some ways uniquely cinematic forms of perceiving and being, however abstract these may be from the standpoint of embodied perceptual experience and its conditions. (This fact calls to mind philosopher and film theorist Noël Carroll’s suggestion via thought experiment that to the extent that films are clearly modeled on not just the experience of the body but human mental, psychological processes, they may be said to “liberate viewers” from “sheer bodily” experience. They thus avoid the “mindless realism” that a hypothetical “alien” mode of filmmaking wholly and literally devoted to pure bodily existence in lived space and time might conceivably entail).35 More generally, the comprehension, perceptual and otherwise, of films as works of art is not confined to a one-directional movement from basic “non-sense” to “sense,” in Merleau-Ponty’s terms. Since, in the case of films as inescapably cultural-symbolic realities rather than merely natural and perceptual ones, lived, embodied perception on the one hand, and all meaning that notably transcends it (logical, narrative, artistic, sociocultural) on the other, are inseparably conjoined and conditioned. Moreover, such meaning is always as much a starting point in the perception of films, a precondition or background, as an end point or goal.

In sum, while singling out one highly significant aspect of some interesting and valuable cinematic works (narrative and nonnarrative alike), the phenomenological desiderata Merleau-Ponty celebrates do not reflect all relevant experience of films as perceptual objects. Nor do they speak to the full, highly variable, aesthetic meaning and value of cinema as a whole (or, for that matter, of artworks in any form), and certainly not to all potential features of films properly regarded as “artistic” or “aesthetic.” Nonetheless—and bracketing the larger, vexed question of whether the perception of anything let alone a film or other kind of art work can ever be wholly divorced from cultural reality and
symbolically informed thought on any level—the notable capacities of film art that Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to transcend these and other (onto)logical difficulties and limitations. They provide one useful starting point for a phenomenology of cinematic art that moves beyond the recent emphasis on only the most general, wholly medium-specific and determinate dynamics of cinematic experience and related features of films qua films.

To this end, one of the main merits of Merleau-Ponty’s framing of cinema as art is that it is not wedded to celluloid film and the oft-discussed reality effect its highly indexical-iconic images. Thus it has no difficulty in accommodating digital filmmaking and viewing. A phenomenological aesthetics taking its tone from these suggestions is also better capable of addressing transmedial aesthetic features and capacities. As some of Merleau-Ponty’s comparative examples highlight, it may thus lead to new, enlightening comparisons between the perceptual and affective experience of films, paintings, plays, and other forms of visual, dramatic, and narrative art. Finally, it may also serve to bring to the fore perceptual-affective realities unique to particular filmmakers and styles as associated with distinct yet potentially converging artistic intentions and goals. Certainly, the works of those past and present narrative film auteurs who have been seen as especially “phenomenologically” inclined—including Krzysztof Kieślowski, Agnès Varda, Terrence Malick, Claire Denis, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, to single out but a few—as well as of some notable nonnarrative documentary filmmakers (e.g. Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, creators of the viscerally sensorial ethnographic-cum-experimental film *Leviathan*), may be revealingly described and interpreted through the prism of some of the perceptual, formal, and aesthetic dynamics that Merleau-Ponty, together with Dufrenne describes; dynamics which may be considerably expanded upon and fleshed out in a number of theoretical and film-critical directions.

On a more methodological note, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s description of cinema, like Sobchack’s phenomenology of film, is presented in a priori terms as if following from the truth of more general, phenomenological premises, there is also ample room for a rather more inductive approach. Already adopted by some film critics and theorists—if often not under the banner of existential phenomenology, phenomenological aesthetics, or Merleau-Ponty’s views—this begins with certain films or styles that may exemplify a notable return to those immediately given, prereflective perceptual appearances that precede the common life-world and attempts to describe and analyze it. Of course, to complete the full aesthetic and experiential picture in a narrative film context, we must also seek to understand what this reconnection of viewers with their own
bodily, sensory-affective experience of the world via cinematic art may
mean and represent—not just as an admirable goal in itself, but with
respect to the overall experience, comprehension, and interpretation
of individual films as narrative and extranarrative wholes. This involves
consideration of work-(and sometimes style-)defining relations between
and among not just perceptual features and acts (sometimes on the
part of film characters, as well as viewers) but extra- or nonperceptual
narrative, emotional, imaginative, and conceptual ones. Here any phe-
nomenology of film experience reaches its outermost descriptive and
explanatory boundaries and must cede part of the stage to semiotic,
narratological, cognitive, and Deleuzian insights, for instance.37

In conclusion, I do not maintain that the alternative reading of
Merleau-Ponty’s “The Film and the New Psychology” that I have offered
is the only valid one. I do hope, however, that by looking at it through
another lens, as it were, and attending to both textual nuance and a
wider aesthetics and film theory context, I have shown why and how
Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about cinema are very much of a piece with his
reflections on art in general. And also how for this reason and others,
these reflections diverge from some more contemporary phenomeno-
logical understandings of cinema anchored in his philosophy of general
rather than specifically aesthetic perception. Finally, I have sought to
highlight, albeit in brief compass, some of the ways in which, despite its
notable shortcomings, Merleau-Ponty’s account of cinema as art (still)
speaks to issues surrounding filmic perception, affect, authorship, and
intentionality that are surely no less relevant to film theory and film
practice today than they were either in the 1940s or at the start of the
resurgence of interest in the phenomenology of film beginning in the
late twentieth century and showing no signs of abating.

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NOTES


13 The notion of a film as “body,” explicated in terms appropriated from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of natural perception, has been subsequently adopted by other theorists, including Barker, who extends it in cataloging features of a film’s “skin,” “musculature,” “viscera,” etc.

14 For similar reasons Sobchack also takes “realist” and “cultural” approaches to task for positing films as “empirical” and “cultural” objects, respectively.


16 David Bordwell sees this anthropomorphic understanding of the camera’s view and action as the root cause of a number of confusions besetting structuralist-narratological accounts of cinema. See *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 10–11.

17 To cite the example of two significant studies of film that engage with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, including by way of Sobchack’s interpretations of it: in Stadler’s *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*, there is no mention of the film lecture and it is briefly cited only once in Barker’s *The Tactile Eye*.

18 See Ayfre, “Néo Réalism et Phénoménologie.”


20 For more on this world-of and world-in distinction, see Yacavone, *Film Worlds*.

21 For a much more detailed discussion of Dufrenne’s ideas, including the previously mentioned characterization of the aesthetic object as a “quasi-subject,” see *Film Worlds*, esp. 190–227.
23 Eugene F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic: The Theories of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 303. This is Kaelin’s translation from the French Preface to *Sens et non-sens*, and much closer to the original French than the standard English (Dreyfus) translation.
25 “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, 18.
26 See Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic*, 275.
29 Sobchack briefly discusses Gilles Deleuze’s objections. See *AE* 29.
31 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 64.
32 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 57.
33 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 57.
37 For more on the relation between a phenomenology of cinematic art and these approaches, see Yacavone, *Film Worlds*. 