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Faraway, So Close: A Phenomenology of Film Spectatorship

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Abstract

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"Faraway, So Close: A Phenomenology of Film Spectatorship" attempts to rethink the role of the film spectator phenomenologically. By first articulating the difference between the *natural attitude* and the *phenomenological attitude*, this work establishes two distinct ways to understand the spectatorial disposition. The phenomenologically disposed *critical spectator*, embodied by the film critic or analyst, is removed from the purely spectatorial position and focuses her attention on describing the film object. On the other hand, the spectator in the natural attitude – the *participatory spectator* – remains fixed to the spectating position. For this reason, the following takes up the participatory spectator, hoping to understand the act of spectating, not the object (the film) corresponding to that act. This endeavor first takes the form of a Sartrean analysis of spectatorship. With Sartre we find a treatment of spectatorship fundamentally concerned with distance – the film spectator, he argues, is in a proximate relation to the cinema, resulting in an interaction that allows for the spectator to gain self-knowledge. In this way, the spectator comes to be the object of her own intending. Finally, the non-visual perceptions are taken up, similarly establishing a proximate relation between the spectator and the spectacle, and rearticulating the Sartrean notion of self-knowledge.

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To watch is not to look down
from above, but at eye level.

\- *Wings of Desire*[1]

I. INTRODUCTION

Working with the concepts and structures established by phenomenology, a phenomenological account of film spectatorship can take two forms. On the one hand, the spectator can be understood as a phenomenological spectator, performing a phenomenological analysis of a film and her[2] reaction to it. Highlighting what such an analysis might take account of, Roger Ebert, in his review of Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), writes, "So do you just sit there, friends ask, and look at the shots? Well, yes, that's what everybody does when they watch a film. But they don't always see the shots *as shots*."[3] Seeing the shots as shots, the camerawork as camerawork, the editing as editing, etc. is not only the work of the film critic, but indeed the analysis of a spectator within the *phenomenological attitude*. Though, as Ebert notes, this is not how spectators *usually* experience the cinema. This *natural attitude*, which can be given the filmic moniker *participatory spectatorship*, explains the spectator's disposition toward the cinema when not performing phenomenological analyses. Unlike the phenomenologically disposed *critical*

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[1] *Wings of Desire* (1987), directed by Wim Wenders.
[2] I use the feminine pronoun in order to draw attention to the requisite masculine spectator that pervades psychoanalytic film theory, the dominant theoretical framework on which much of film spectator theory has been based since the 1970's. A phenomenological theory of film spectatorship, oppositely, requires no presupposition regarding gender. For more on the theoretical dominance of the male gaze see Laura Mulvey's seminal text, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18.
[3] Roger Ebert, review of *Werckmeister Harmonies*, dir. Béla Tarr. *Chicago Sun-Times Online*, 8 September 2007, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070908/REVIEWS08/70909001/1023>.

spectator who can be understood as a spectator *on* the cinema, the participatory spectator is a spectator *in* the cinema. Immersed in the cinematic world, this spectator busies herself with absorbing the action on screen.

Though these two modes of film spectatorship both arise when considered from a phenomenological viewpoint, they can be differentiated by the degree of distance each establishes between spectator and spectacle. While the critical spectator is distanced from her own spectating – that is, at a critical distance from herself in relation to the cinema – the participating spectator is entrenched within the cinematic world. Because of the distance inherent in critical spectatorship, a phenomenological investigation into film spectatorship must take up the participatory disposition. For, to found such a study in critical spectatorship would be to do a phenomenology of film spectatorship twice removed insofar as the critical spectator is already once removed from herself as spectator. In order to understand film spectatorship as such, the "purest" mode of spectating must be engaged.

While participatory spectatorship is "pure" to the extent that the spectator is both immersed in the film-world and spectating from within herself (as opposed to assuming a meta-critical viewing position), the nature of film is such that, at once, the spectator is made to be conscious of things on screen that are present and absent, that are *there*, but *not really there*. Herein arises a paradoxical notion of distance, a paradox that defines the film-going experience. In the cinema our visual and even aural intendings (intentionality understood in its phenomenological application) are fulfilled because our consciousness has a present object of which to be conscious. Though, as we

will see, even the visual object on screen is itself a mixture of presence and absence. Our other, non-visual and non-aural sensory intendings are completely unfulfilled by the film itself. Because we intend toward the film-world in the same way we intend toward the real world – that is, as sentient beings – our filmic intending demands that our consciousness always have for itself an object. Unable to find fulfillment in the film-world, intentionality turns back on itself, finding its fulfillment in the spectator. Vivian Sobchack suggests that this is the phenomenon that is most often embodied by remarks suggesting that a film has "moved" the spectator.

Far away and, yet, so close, the cinema creates for the pure spectator a unique, paradoxical experience. In what follows I will argue that, to begin, given this viewer's proximity to herself and the cinema, a phenomenological study of film spectatorship must properly identify the subject of its inquiry as the participatory spectator. Next, I will call attention to the paradoxical simultaneity of presence and absence inherent in the film experience. Utilizing my own cinematic reading of Sartre's phenomenology of "the look," substantiated by the cinematic tendencies that surface in his autobiography and writings on the theater and cinema, I will argue that the spectatorial experience is akin to being caught in the act of voyeurism, bringing to light the reflective nature of pure spectatorship. Having given an account of the visual and preliminarily raised questions about unfulfilled bodily intendings, I will turn to Merleau-Ponty in order to establish the simultaneity of cinematic sensing, first giving attention to the aural and then turning to Vivian Sobchack's treatment of carnal intending to reestablish the participatory

spectator's proximate relation to the cinema. While establishing the participatory spectator as the lens through which to understand film spectatorship is founded upon the notion of proximity, her relation to the cinema in fact is paradoxical with regard to distance, and a resolution to this paradox, in the end, will refocus her intending and, therefore, our analysis within the spectator herself.

II. IN A MOVIE SEAT FAR, FAR AWAY… : THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ATTITUDE & CRITICAL SPECTATORSHIP

If understood through what Husserl calls the phenomenological attitude, one mode of film spectatorship emerges that, at its core, is a removed spectatorship, more focused on the spectator *as spectating* and the film *as perceived* and thus insufficient as a starting point for a phenomenology of film spectatorship. Disposed toward the world from within the phenomenological attitude, one distances oneself from her interaction with, and consciousness of, the object at hand. Sokolowski explains, "we become something like detached observers of the passing scene or like spectators at a game. We become onlookers. We contemplate the involvements we have with the world and with things in it."[4] Only at a distance, once removed from our interaction with the world, can we come to understand our relation to the world. *By becoming onlookers, phenomenologists cease simply to look.*

The distance at which one observes the world when in the phenomenological attitude is made more apparent when considering the phenomenological epoché, an essential feature of the phenomenological attitude by which one suspends judgments regarding the given world. The epoché, as Husserl describes it, occurs when "[w]e put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being."[5] By parenthesizing everything, the phenomenologist, in essence, is distancing

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[4] Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 48.
[5] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, trans. F. Kersten, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 61. (Hereafter cited as *Ideas*.)

herself from the world and its objects. Performing the phenomenological epoché, one becomes a detached observer and begins to see phenomena *qua* phenomena.

Experiencing the world as experienced, one comes to understand the "intentional" structure of her consciousness. Intentionality, the most foundational tenet of phenomenology, states that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. That is, all sensual perception is perception *of* something, all imaginings are imaginings *of* something, all memories are memories *of* something – in sum, *all conscious processes have an object toward which they are directed*. Facilitated by the suspension of oneself from her own consciousness, the phenomenologically disposed becomes aware of her consciousness of the object at hand.

The filmic counterpart to the phenomenological attitude – which will be labeled *critical spectatorship* – also finds itself at a distance from spectating as such, and, thus, is insufficient as the starting point for a phenomenology of film spectatorship. The insufficiencies of critical spectatorship, however, will elucidate the usefulness of the alternative mode of watching. Understood as the filmic equivalent to the phenomenological attitude, critical spectatorship positions the spectator outside of the film experience in a meta-viewing position – that is, distanced from spectating as such and conscious of the intentional relation between her consciousness of the film and the film itself. Seemingly unaware of his own phenomenological tendencies, Rudolph Arnheim, one of the earliest film theorists, writes,

> In order to understand a work of art, however, it is essential that the spectator's attention should be guided to such qualities of form, that is, that he should abandon himself to a mental attitude which is to some extent unnatural [. . .] it is no longer merely a matter of realizing that 'there stands a policeman'; but rather of realizing 'how he is standing' and to what extent this picture is characteristic of a policeman in general [. . .] and how the forcefulness of the figure is brought out by the shot being taken from below![6]

Arnheim's suggestion to enter into an "attitude" that is "unnatural" seems to be a direct reference to the phenomenological attitude, especially when considered in contrast to the Husserlian "natural attitude." From within this unnatural attitude the spectator is no longer a mere spectator, no longer merely conscious of the fact that "there stands a police officer," but now aware of her own consciousness of that police officer. The spectator's attention is now focused on matters of form - the police officer's stance, the camera angle at which the officer is captured, how the shot is lit – and the effect that these formal qualities have on her understanding of the image. These observations are distanced observations, made with reference not only to the film object, but aware of the film object's relation to the spectator. The police officer cannot be "forceful," nor can any screened object be predicated in any way, in isolation, but only when considered in its intentional relation to a spectator.

To assess film spectatorship by way of a spectator already phenomenologically disposed would result in an analysis twice removed from the act of spectating itself. A description of film spectating, rather, should take for its subject the purely spectating spectator. A structure that supports the positing of an alternative, indeed a more pervasive mode of film spectatorship

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[6] Rodolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 43.

is to be found in Husserl's conception of the natural attitude, a disposition not busied with phenomenological concerns and, therefore, well suited to a phenomenological investigation of film spectatorship.

III. IN THE MESH: THE NATURAL ATTITUDE & PARTICIPATORY SPECTATORSHIP

Contrasted with the distance inherent in the phenomenological attitude, the natural attitude is a disposition of proximity. Similarly, the filmic equivalent to the natural attitude – *participatory spectatorship* – is a proximate mode of spectatorship, situating the spectator within the film-world and within herself as spectator. Husserl writes of one's disposition toward the world while in the natural attitude:

> I am conscious of [the world]: that signifies, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and in the different modes of sensuous perception, corporeal physical things with some spatial distribution or other are *simply there for me, "on hand."*[7]

Within the natural attitude, one is not at a distance from, but *immediately* in touch with the world and its objects. "On hand," the world presents itself as to-be-participated-in, or, better yet, as a world toward which the spectator can be *hands-on*.

Necessitating a "suspension of disbelief," fictions such as film intrinsically de-distance the spectator from the spectacle. Describing the "conviction that pervades the natural attitude," Sokolowski writes, "[t]he manner in which we accept the things in the world, and the world itself, is one of *belief*."[8] The natural attitude, therefore, is contingent on a disposition of faith, a "willing suspension of disbelief."[9] Contrasted with the distancing

[7] *Ideas*, 51.
[8] Sokolowski, 44-45.
[9] The phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" is first used by poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his volume of literary criticism, *Biographia Literaria*.

inherent in the phenomenological epoché – which one might rightfully call a bracketing or *suspension of belief* – the natural attitude establishes proximity between the perceiving subject and the objects of her perception. In this way one might ascribe to the natural attitude an epoché of its own, though an inverse epoché that, instead of taking the spectator out of the world, fixes her to it.

The nature of film is such, however, that even if considered from the position of the participatory spectator, an insurmountable distance seems to exist between her and the film-world. Though we approach the cinema knowing that Charles Foster Kane is Orson Welles in costume, that the Bates Motel is a set built on a Hollywood sound stage, that Jaws is a mechanical shark, we allow ourselves to suspend our disbeliefs so that the film can take hold, so that the film can seem real. Even the most real film, the most truthful documentary or accurately rendered biographical or historical film, is still only projected light upon a surface combined with sound effects, music, and dialogue. Disregarding the cinema's inherent "fakeness," the film-going experience is still quite distanced from what our experience would be if we were to encounter the screened action in reality. Films are flattened versions of the real, visual and aural representation of lived experience that are beyond the spectator's reach. A large gulf seems to separate even the participatory spectator from the spectacle.

Rendered phenomenologically, the paradoxical distance arising within proximate, participatory spectatorship is the consequence of the cinema's

unique blend of presences and absences. Describing the natures of presences and absences, fulfilled and empty intendings, Sokolowski writes:

> Presences and absences are the objective correlates to *filled* and *empty intentions*. An empty intention is an intention that targets something that is not there, something absent, something not present to the one who intends. A filled intention is one that targets something that is there, in its bodily presence, before the one who intends.[10]

Film, as already noted, is an exceptional case in that it exists in the liminal space between presence and absence. At once the film-world is something absent and something bodily present, however, within this paradox arises the aim of the current investigation: "phenomenology tries to spell out the blends of presences and absences, of filled and empty intentions, that belong to the object in question."[11] In what follows, a phenomenological account of the moving picture and its spectator will come to resolve the cinema's seemingly paradoxical distance from the spectator, identifying the objects of her present intendings as well as accounting for her absent intendings in such a way that relocates them in the present, in her presence, *in her very own being*.

[10] Sokolowski, 33.
[11] Ibid, 35.

IV. LOOKING CLOSER, SEEING THE SELF:
A SARTREAN THEORY OF FILM SPECTATORSHIP

> *[S]urprise, making the familiar unfamiliar . . . It is at such moments that an audience . . . recognizes itself, but in a strange guise as if it were someone else; it brings itself into being as an object before its own eyes, and it sees itself, though without playing itself as a role, and thus comes to understand itself.*
>
> \- Sartre, *The Author, the Play, and the Audience*[12]

Sartre's admiration of the cinema began during his childhood outings to Parisian movie houses with his mother at a time when the cinema was seen more as a pedestrian distraction than a medium of expression worthy of the designation of "art." Decades later, in 1931, Sartre formulated what seems to be his first theoretical statements about the cinema in a speech delivered to students at the *lyceé* in Le Havre. More than an attempt to legitimize the moving picture, that speech – originally titled "The Movies Are Not a Bad School," but reprinted under the lackluster title "Motion Picture Art" – presents Sartre's thoughts on the cinema as a *close* and *educational* experience, though these ideas were not developed fully at that point. If analyzed in tandem with Sartre's various other speeches and essays on the theater and cinema, the importance of proximity and pedagogy solidifies, forming the foundation of a Sartrean theory of film spectatorship. While these speeches and essays never make explicit Sartre's inherent phenomenological bent, the ideas that they promote neatly, if not surprisingly, map onto his

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Author, the Play, and the Audience," in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. and trans. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, 64-76 (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 74. (Hereafter cited as APA.)

thoroughly phenomenological analysis of "The Look" in his philosophical magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. Taking all of these texts together, an implicit theory of film spectator emerges that, at once, is founded upon the spectator's proximity to the cinema and results in a reflective self-knowledge that situates the spectator as the object of her own consciousness.

A. ESSAYS AND SPEECHES

Sartre's thesis regarding cinematic proximity emerges early in his speech to the students in Le Havre, at first bringing to light the distancing effect of ceremony in theater and then contrasting it with the unceremonious and, therefore, proximate characteristics of the cinema. Sartre asserts, "[the cinema] is a very familiar art, an art mixed very closely with our daily life [...] [i]t is good-natured and much closer to us."[13] Already at the fore of his discussion of the cinema, proximity informs the rest of Sartre's analysis of spectatorship. First he turns his attention away from the then-new art and takes up the theater, familiar territory for the novelist and playwright, though his treatment of staged drama acts as a critique proffered to mark the differences between the theater and the cinema.

Historically, as Sartre describes it, the theater has been held in high regard, as a ceremonial experience laden with a number of social expectations, and, for this reason, an inherently distanced experience. Sartre began his speech at the *lycée* with a quote from novelist Anatole France:

[13] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Motion Picture Art," in *Selected Prose: The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Richard McCleary, 53-59 (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1974), 54. (Hereafter cited as MPA.)

> One whole day long I lived perturbed in fear and hope, consumed by fever, waiting for that unheard-of bliss which just one blow might suddenly destroy [...] Finally we did arrive; the usher showed us into a red box [...] The solemnity of the three opening knocks on the stage and the profound silence following them moved me deeply.[14]

Herein we see what Sartre refers to as the "pomp" of the theatergoing experience. The anticipation and preparation even before going to the theater; the decorated theater with its red boxes; the three knocks on the stage signaling the beginning of the play – all of these reminders of the seriousness of the theater experience. Later Sartre will refer to the cinema as an "unpretentious art,"[15] implicitly suggesting that the theater, laden with ceremony, is inherently pretentious. Sartre writes, "[t]he social hierarchy of the theater had given my grandfather and late father, who were accustomed to second balconies, a taste for ceremonial [...] I developed a dislike for ceremonies."[16] It is precisely his dislike for ceremonies that leads Sartre to praise the cinema.

While the theater and many of its attendees relish the pomp surrounding its proceedings, Sartre describes the movie-going experience at length in order to display and celebrate its unceremonious nature. More an art of the people, the cinema trades pomp for pedagogy, ceremony for clarification. Sartre explains that we do not anticipate going to the movies as Anatole France did the theater. And we even show up late, knowing that if we missed the beginning we can wait until the next showing to have the narrative

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[14] MPA, 53.
[15] Ibid, 54.
[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Vintage, 1964), 121. (Hereafter cited as Words.)

gaps filled. He also notes that "[w]e hardly dress up to go to the movies; we don't think about going days ahead of time; we go there any time,"[17] bringing to light just how unceremonious the cinema is in relation to the theater. And of the movie house itself he notes, "[n]ot the slightest ornament: rows of flap-seats beneath which could be seen their springs, walls smeared with ochre, a floor strewn with cigarette stubs and gobs of spit."[18] It was these characteristics that led many, including Sartre's grandfather, to question the legitimacy of the cinema. Sartre recalls his grandfather lamenting with a friend: "Look here, Simonnot, you who are a serious man, do you understand it? My daughter takes my grandson to the cinema!"[19] The cinema, therefore, was seen as both unceremonious and, consequently, unserious.

The young Sartre, however, knew that the cinema was worthwhile, and precisely because of its perceived "unseriousness." As Sartre sees it, the consequence of ceremony is a distancing of the spectator from the action onstage; oppositely, a lack of ceremony – as found in the cinema – limits spectatorial distance, making the cinema "much closer to us." In the theater the stage is veiled by a red curtain, in Sartre's time the stage was struck three times to signal the play's commencement, and the orchestra begins to play as the curtain raises and the lights are lowered. All of these practices and procedures remind the spectator that he or she is at the theater, that a "show" is about to be performed. Of this distancing Sartre recalls,

[17] MPA, 54.
[18] *Words*, 120.
[19] Ibid, 119.

> I was irritated by that incongruous ceremonial, by that dusty pomp, the only result of which was to move the characters further away. In the balcony, in the gallery, our fathers, impressed by the chandelier and the paintings on the ceiling, neither could nor would believe that the theater belonged to them: they were received there.[20]

It is what Sartre's elders found to be virtuous about the theater that he despised the most. The decorative and, therefore, distracting environment and the constant reminders that you are at the theater produce an undesirable distance between the spectator and the spectacle.

At the cinema, the unpretentious surroundings and proceedings bring the spectator closer to the film, so close, according to Sartre, that in experiencing the film one comes to possess the cinema. "As for me," Sartre explains, "I wanted to see the film *as close as possible*. I had learned in the equalitarian discomfort of the neighborhood [movie] houses that this new art was mine, just as it was everyone else's."[21] The lack of ceremony, therefore, not only allowed Sartre to bridge the distance between himself, the spectator, and the action, but also, in doing so, revealed to him that he consequently came to possess the cinema. There is no hierarchical structure in the cinema as there is in the theater; it is for the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant.

Just as Sartre took the cinema's unceremonious nature – the central tenet of the dissenters' criticism – to be a virtue, so too did he celebrate that films, in his time at least, were not considered art. To the students at Le Havre, Sartre said, "your total disrespect for motion picture art and your offhand way of dealing with it are much more worthwhile than a mixture of frozen

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[20] *Words*, 122.
[21] Ibid, 122.

admiration, troubled feelings and sacred awe"[22] – that is, their disregard for the cinema's artistic merit is more beneficial than the reverence with which they approach "art." The fact that we do not take film as seriously as, say, literature, allows film to sneak past our analytical guards. Not expecting to encounter "art," we go to see a film and "find an unpretentious art which has not been dinned into [our] ears, which no one has dreamed of telling [us] was an art, concerning which, in a word, [we] have been left in a state of innocence. For this art will penetrate more deeply into [us] than the others."[23] The "unseriousness" that Sartre's grandfather charged the cinema with, in turn, is what makes it so serious. If we approached the cinema with the same "insidious questions"[24] that we ask of other arts, the cinema would be ineffective, it would remain at a distance, unable to penetrate the spectator and unable to unveil anything about her being.

But Sartre gives us more than the social phenomenon of ceremony to aid in our understanding of the notion of distance in relation to the theater and the cinema. Many of his later musings on the theater and cinema address questions of distance explicitly. In a 1944 lecture he reintroduces his thesis on proximity: "I shall draw a distinction between the cinema and the novel, on the one hand, and the theater, on the other, by what I may call a distancing between characters and audience in the theater, a distance of manner which exists in neither the film nor the novel."[25] In many of these later essays and

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[22] MPA, 54.
[23] Ibid, 55.
[24] Ibid, 54.
[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, "On Dramatic Style," in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. and trans. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, 6-29 (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 7. (Hereafter cited as ODS.)

lectures, Sartre expands upon his notion of distance, all the while calling and elaborating upon ideas such as participation, presence, identification, and, of course, self-knowledge.

Continuing to found his analyses on matters of distance, Sartre differentiates the theater from the cinema by contrasting their tendencies toward "presentation" and "participation," respectively. Again noting the theater's ceremonious proceedings, Sartre writes that at the theater "[t]he audience takes part in a *social event*; but for this very reason it does not take part in *the story which is being related*. This [story] is *presented* to [the audience]."[26] Whereas, Sartre goes on, "[y]ou get more participation in a film than you do in a play. You have the film directly before you."[27] To explain how the cinema prompts participation, Sartre outlines a number of its de-distancing characteristics. First, he makes use of the cinema's ability to utilize the close-up, a technique that acts as a spectatorial magnifying glass, enlarging, and thus bringing us nearer to the image. He also notes the spatial coordination of the cinematic experience. The size and elevation of the filmic image dominates the audience, giving the actors "size and weight"[28] that does not exist on the theatrical stage. Moreover, in the cinema our spectatorship is "guided," that is, "I am made to see what [the director] want[s] me to see; our perception of things is *directed*."[29] To the extent that we are busied only with what the director has chosen to show us, we become participants because we

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[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Theater and Cinema," in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. and trans. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, 59-63 (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 59. (Hereafter cited as TC.)
[27] Ibid, 59-60.
[28] Ibid, 60.
[29] Ibid, 60.

cannot, for example, be distracted with the other actors and actions on stage. In the theater our perceptions are not guided; we are merely *presented* with all of the actions and choose where to focus our attention.

In describing the differences between the theater, the novel and the cinema with regard to "presence," Sartre brings to light the paradoxical distance inherent even in the proximate cinematic experience. The closeness created by the cinema's de-distancing characteristics allows the actors and all of the objects presented on screen to be present to the spectator, though present in an ambiguous way. In each of these artistic modes, Sartre notes, we are confronted with "imaginary persons, with the absent."[30] On the one hand, the theater fails to make its images present: "[I]f you are watching Hamlet, you are not seeing Hamlet, and if you do see Hamlet, it is not Hamlet who is there [...] he's in Denmark [...] and so you cannot truly speak of his presence in the flesh."[31] On the other hand, when reading a novel, Sartre suggests,

> I usually choose a hero [...] and I identify with him to a certain degree, I see through his eyes, and his perception is my perception [...] a tree in a novel is not a tree, it is always a tree as seen by Julien Sorel[32], for instance, and consequently, if I identify with him, it is a tree as seen by me.[33]

In this way the novel's images and characters are upon us; there is no distance between the spectator and the spectacle.

Yet, with the cinema we find ourselves somewhere between the theatrical and the literary experiences. Most often we do not experience the images of a film with "my perception," but indirectly. Sartre writes, "something

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[30] ODS, 7.
[31] Ibid, 7.
[32] Julien Sorel is the main character in *The Red and the Black*, a novel by Stendhal.
[33] Ibid, 7-8.

rather ambiguous happens, because we do not see things directly, but through the camera eye, that is through an impersonal witness which has come between the spectator and the object seen."[34] The filmic images, therefore, are not always "close" to the spectator; we are detached from them at times. But, Sartre reminds us, "this eye [the camera eye] often becomes the eye of all of the characters, for instance the hero's eye. If the hero hears a sound, we first see the character turn his head and then, as the camera moves, the object which has made the sound, just as the hero can see it."[35] Just as in the novel, such point-of-view shots make the character's perceptions our perceptions and, in a way, we become merged with the character – we identify with him. Sartre values these moments of complete de-distancing so much that he suggests an entire film be shot only from the point of view of one character; this, of course, means we would never see the character, but we would *see as the character*. Along with director Henri-Georges Clouzot, Sartre attempted to adapt his *No Exit* into such a film, *Pars les chemins obscurs*, but shooting in such a way made production too difficult.[36] Nevertheless, the inclusion of totally subjective point-of-view shots alongside objective shots in which we are seeing the film through the eye of the camera, the "impersonal witness,"[37] leads to what Sartre calls the "ambiguous complicity of the film."[38] That is, our distance from the images is variable, but, insofar as we merge with a character, we are

[34] ODS, 8.
[35] Ibid, 8.
[36] Ibid, 8, fn.
[37] Ibid, 8.
[38] Ibid, 9.

complicit in their actions, participating and proximate even if mediated by the camera eye.

Of course any discussion of participation and distance is contingent on identification, and Sartre stresses the importance of identification in relation to both of these topics. "*Participating*," Sartre observes, "means, for instance, more or less identifying with the image of the hero [...] the experience of an almost carnal relationship with an image."[39] And such carnality is easier to imagine if again we consider the spectator-character merger inherent in the point-of-view shot. In perceiving the images *as* the character we come to occupy the same space as the character – we embody the character. But there is more to identification. After all, our "hero" is not always present or even clearly presented as the hero. About the choice of identifying with a character Sartre proposes that "[i]f we examine the state of mind of someone watching a film, we find that he very often identifies with the character he prefers, the strongest or the most attractive, the character who gives him the finest idea of himself."[40] That is, if no hero is clearly defined we assume the position (figuratively and literally) of that character that most accurately resembles us already, for identifying with a similar person will be easiest.

Having established the proximate relation between spectator and spectacle in the cinema, Sartre turns to explicate how this de-distanced relationship promotes self-knowledge. Again remarking on the difference between the theater and the cinema Sartre writes,

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[39] APA, 72-73.
[40] ODS, 8.

> [t]hough there is no participation [in the theater], there is at least a discovery, at times the anguished discovery, of someone beyond our reach rushing on his fate, and we can do nothing to stop him. In the film we *are* the hero, we are part of him, we rush on our own fate.[41]

By participating in a film, therefore, the discovery becomes much greater. We not only experience the hero's fate, but we experience it as our own. By identifying with the character we come to discover, to unveil, these things about ourselves. And, as Sartre accounts for, these discoveries may be discomforting. For example, assume that we have indentified with that character that is most like us. We begin to experience the film through him, with him, as him. But, all of a sudden, our character is unveiled as, to keep the example simple, the "kind of person that people do not like," or the "kind of person that has a proclivity towards violence." Since we identify with this character and, in turn, we are this character, we come to understand these things about ourselves.

B. *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS*

What is a film, after all, without voyeurism?

- Linda Williams, *Film Bodies*[42]

In his explicitly cinematic writings Sartre drafts an outline of his theory of film spectatorship. Those writings, considered above in at attempt to retrace this underlying spectatorial theory, span from 1931 to 1959, a period in the middle of which Sartre wrote what may be considered his greatest

[41] TC, 62.
[42] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2-13, 6.

philosophical achievement: *Being and Nothingness*. Though there is no mention of the cinema in this work, one cannot ignore Sartre's preoccupation with the moving image during this time. In "The Look," the section of *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre performs a phenomenological analysis of one's relation to the Other founded upon, as the title suggests, looking, we find not simply a phenomenologically reformulated theory of spectatorship, but one founded upon those cinematic concerns unveiled in Sartre' other writings. Keeping in mind Sartre's concern for proximity – indeed a paradoxical proximity given the cinema's inherently distanced nature – his treatment of the look takes on a new, cinematic applicability. Focusing on a select few of the illustrative examples offered by Sartre within this section – most importantly the analysis of the voyeur at the keyhole – the implicitly cinematic concepts will surface, allowing for a cinematically revised retelling of the voyeur at the keyhole. Rethinking the voyeur as film spectator and the other components of Sartre's analysis as cinematic entities (the screen, the projector, etc.), *Being and Nothingness* addresses the cinema's presence and absences. With the aid of Sartre's phenomenological analyses, the film spectator's distance from the spectacle is overcome, allowing the spectator to gain self-understanding reflectively.

Though Sartre's description of the look is essential for understanding its cinematic application, "the eye" must also be explored, for differentiating the look from the eye establishes the former as a proximate, relational apprehension and the latter as an object to be perceived only at a distance. Overturning traditional conceptions, Sartre argues that eyes need not be

thought of as organs of visual perceptions, but rather that any support for a look can be considered an eye. He writes:

> Every look directed towards me is manifested in connection with the appearance of a sensible form in our perceptive field, but contrary to what might be expected, it is not connected with any determined form. Of course what *most often* manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction.[43]

The presence of some object, therefore, is sufficient support for a look. Though physiological eyes usually manifest the look, Sartre offers a number of examples that can stand in for those two ocular globes – "rustling branches, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain."[44] Elaborating on how these non-ocular objects support the look, Sartre offers the example of a farmhouse: "During an attack men who are crawling through the brush apprehend as a *look to be avoided*, not two eyes, but a white farmhouse which is outlined against the sky at the top of a little hill."[45] Far from an eye as it is usually manifested, the farmhouse supports the potential that "behind the bush which has just moved," or the windows, doors, or eaves shrouded in darkness, "there is someone hiding who is watching me."[46]

The cinema, too, subverts normative conceptions of the eye. While the look is often represented by organic eyes – when the spectator has merged with a character and, through a point-of-view shot, is looked at directly by another character, or, more daringly, when a character "breaks the fourth wall" and addresses the audience directly – in the cinema objects stand in for the

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[43] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 346. (Hereafter cited as *BN*.)
[44] Ibid, 346.
[45] Ibid, 346.
[46] Ibed, 346.

eyes frequently. For example, in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), the darkened windows that Jefferies (the crippled photographer turned peeping tom) looks into often suggest the possibility that the murderous Mr. Thorwald is looming in the darkness, returning Jeff's unwelcomed gaze. Additionally, as Miran Božovič points out in great detail, Hitchcock used stand-ins for the eye throughout his career:

> The idea of a window functioning as an eye or a gaze was not unknown to Hitchcock – he developed it in the 1920's in *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. In a particular shot of a news van driving away, we see the heads of the driver and his mate through oval windows at the back of the car – that is, through *rear windows*. The two heads, the two dark blots, are silhouetted behind the illuminated oval windows, making them look like eyes. As the moving van sways, so do the heads in the oval windows – and since they sway more or less simultaneously, it appears as if eyeballs are moving in eye-sockets. Thus, the entire rear of the van resembles a face.[47]

Božovič's example displays an instance in which non-organic eyes are made to function as – and, making the case more explicit, even take on the appearance of – eyes. Each of these Hitchcockian examples demonstrate the cinematic possibility that a look can be supported by objects other than eyes in their traditional sense.

Explained as a support for the look, the eye remains undifferentiated from the look, a necessary distinction that brings to the fore the proximity with which the look is apprehended. Neither a function nor a characteristic of the eye, the look is a separate entity supported by the eye. "[F]ar from perceiving the look *on* the objects which manifest it, my apprehension of a look turned toward me appears on the ground of the destruction of the eyes which 'look at

[47] Miran Božovič, "The Man Behind His Own Retina," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, 161-177 (London: Verso, 1992), 167-168.

me.'"[48] While the look is dependent upon the presence of an eye, the look and the eye are never apprehended simultaneously. The apprehension of the look necessitates ignoring the eye just as perceiving the eye necessitates disregarding the look. Here Sartre's uses of "apprehension" and "perceiving" intimate his underlying thesis on distance. Taken literally, "apprehension" conveys a grasping, a sense of intimacy. Sartre goes on to address distance explicitly: "eyes as objects of my perception remain at a precise distance which unfolds from me to them [...] whereas the look is upon me without distance."[49] Therefore, if only tentatively, the connection between the look and the participatory spectator's cinematic experience is based on a shared proximity.

More than a simple relation of proximity, the look, as Sartre explains it, is apprehended only from within the natural attitude and, therefore, is an ideal structure through which to understand the immersed, participating film spectator. Calling upon Husserl and the Husserlian notions underpinning the concepts of critical and participatory spectatorship, Sartre writes of the eye and the look:

> If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes; they are there, they remain in the field of my perception as pure *presentations*, but I do not make any use of them; they are neutralized, put out of play; they are no longer the object of a thesis but remain in that state of 'disconnection' in which the world is put by a consciousness practicing the phenomenological reduction prescribed by Husserl.[50]

As "pure presentations" eye-objects have a kinship with the theatrical experience. Sartre's designation of the theatrical as presentation highlights the

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[48] *BN*, 346.
[49] Ibid, 347.
[50] Ibid, 346.

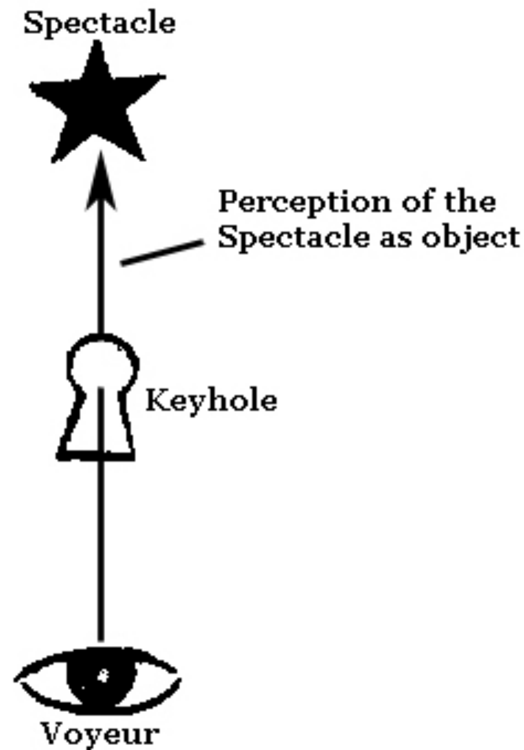
theater's inherent distance, just as here his description of the eye as "disconnected" establishes the eye-object's removal from the perceiving subject. In that state of disconnection, the eye-object can only be perceived from within the phenomenological attitude, only by the removed, critical spectator. When an eye is perceived, be it an eye proper, a farmhouse, or an apartment's rear window, it is always perceived *as an eye, farmhouse, or window*. On the other hand, the look is apprehended when one does not perceive the eye, when one is not in the phenomenological attitude, and, consequently, when one is within the natural attitude. No longer in a state of disconnection, the spectator is immersed in her apprehension of the look.

Having established the differences between the eye and the look, Sartre moves to investigate what it means to be looked at by an Other, a situation that, at first, does not mirror the cinematic experience, but contains within it the framework through which the structures of cinematic spectatorship can be explicated. In his famous example of the voyeur at the keyhole, Sartre provides the processes that, once rearranged into a more cinematic schematic – that is, a two-pole system including the spectator and the film – can be mapped onto the film experience. Once applied to the cinema, this matrix of relations spells out the components of spectatorship that make the spectator the object of her own consciousness and produce self-understanding.

Unknown to herself, the voyeur peers through the keyhole into a world in which she is immersed completely: the voyeur is a participatory spectator. Sartre explains that the voyeur is driven to eavesdropping by some disposition,

among which are "jealousy, curiosity or vice."[51] Yet, these mentalities are only a few possibilities; we can imagine one eavesdropping because of fear, a desire for pleasure, concern for herself or others, or any number of other reasons. Nevertheless, as Sartre notes, these motivations "are in no way *know*; I *am my acts*;"[52] that is, I am jealous, fearful, etc. without being aware of my jealously or fearfulness. In other words: "No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a *given* on which a judgment can be brought to bear. My consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts."[53] This version of spectatorship already resembles the participatory variety. Sartre writes, using language evocative of the natural attitude, "[m]y attitude, for example, has no 'outside'; it is [...] a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter."[54] Sartre's artistic tendencies lend themselves to precise, if at times literary, descriptions; in this case, ink being absorbed by a blotter conveys the immersion inherent in participatory spectatorship. There is no outside, for the spectator is completely immersed in the spectacle – she has lost herself, and, therefore, she is unable to know herself or her acts. (See diagram below.)

[51] *BN*, 347.
[52] Ibid, 347.
[53] Ibid 348.
[54] Ibid, 348.



"But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me!"[55] The introduction of this third party tears the voyeur out of the natural, participatory position, and, in doing so, throws her into a mode of self-awareness and phenomenological, critical spectatorship. Before, it was explained that one could either apprehend the eye *or* the look, but not both; in this case the voyeur cannot perceive the eye belonging to those footsteps because her gaze is fixed upon the spectacle behind the door. Thus, she apprehends the look, but the Other's look is a look directed upon her and, in a sense, a circular apprehension of the self transpires. Sartre explains:

> Therefore for the unreflective consciousness the self exists on the level of objects in the world; this role which devolved only on the

[55] *BN*, 349.

> reflective consciousness – the making-present of the self – belongs now to the unreflective consciousness. Only the reflective consciousness has the self directly for an object. The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the *person* directly or as *its* object; the person is presented to consciousness *in so far as the person is an object for the Other* . . . I *am that Ego*; I do not reject it as a strange image, but it is present to me as a self which I *am* without *knowing* it; for I discover it in shame and, in other instances, in pride. It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look.[56]

What is usually reserved for the reflective consciousness – consciousness as its own object for itself – is now experienced by the unreflective consciousness. Yet for the unreflective consciousness (we might call this the projected consciousness towards/of the look) the self is not an object, but the Other's object, the Other's apprehension of *this* self. The voyeur witnesses herself as processed through the look of the Other. If she discovers herself as "voyeur," "pervert," "criminal," she discovers herself in shame; if she comes to see herself as "guardian" or "protector," she will discover herself in pride. Shame or pride, Sartre says, "[reveal] to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look."[57] No longer is she absorbed or lost in the spectacle beyond the keyhole; now she understands herself and her relation to that spectacle. She sees the spectacle as seen by herself (as seen by the Other) and, therefore, she stops objectifying the spectacle and enters the phenomenological attitude. Having assumed, in a certain sense, the spectatorial position of the intervening Other, the voyeur, like the critical spectator, has assumed a spectating position once-removed from spectating as such. (See diagram below.)

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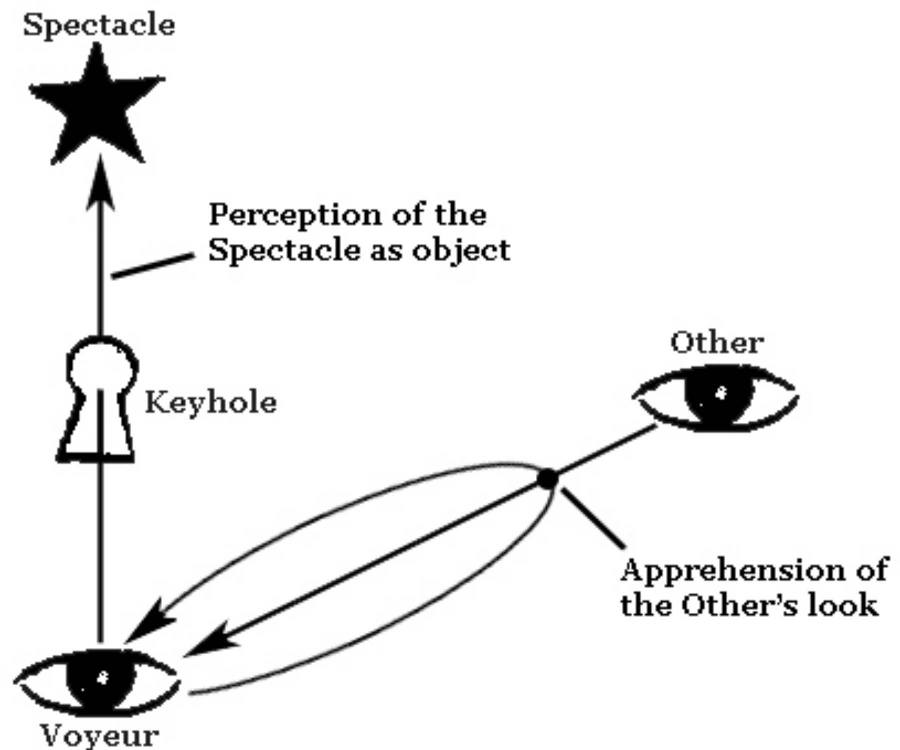
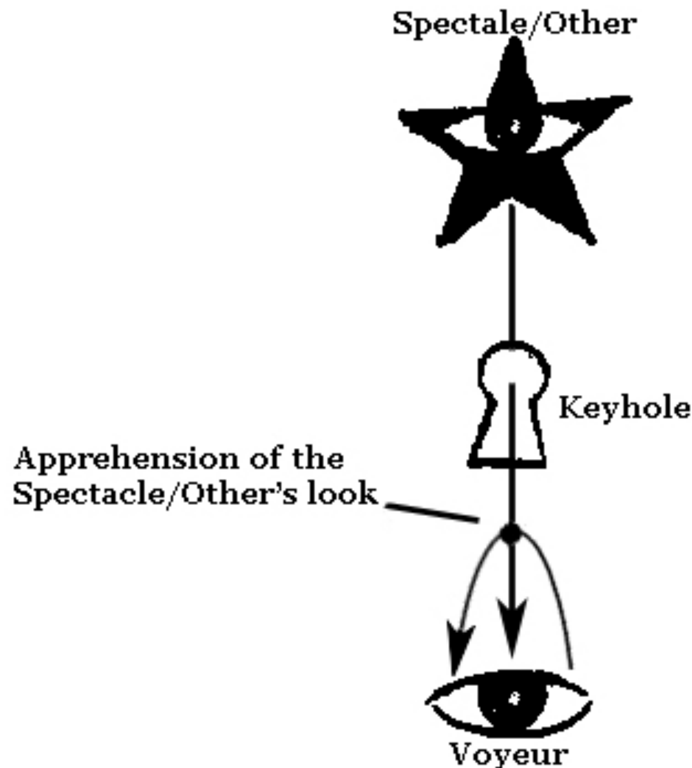
[56] *BN*, 349-350.
[57] Ibid, 350.



The forced move from participatory to critical spectatorship caused by the intervening Other troubles the current analysis of the former. The voyeur/keyhole scenario is unfit for understanding the cinema as it is in Sartre's account. The usefulness of this situation only arises when the structure of the scenario is modified so that the three poles (the voyeur/the spectacle/the intervening Other) are reduced to two, as is the case in the cinema (the spectator/the film). Performing such a modification will allow for a more accurate appraisal of the cinema within the Sartrean framework and will bring to the fore the applicability of the film-as-look model.

As Sartre formulated it, the voyeur is bent over with her eye to the keyhole, disposed toward the spectacle in some way. As noted above, she is

immersed in this world – she is her acts and has no understanding of them. But, all of a sudden, the spectacle, the man or woman on the other side of the door, turns toward her. The spectacle is looking at her! Now the spectacle has become the Other as well; now there are two poles: the spectator and the spectacle/Other.



With this basic structure in place the cinema can be taken up once again.

While the connection between the voyeur and the cinematic spectator needs no elaboration, the spectacle/Other and the mediating keyhole also have their own cinematic counterparts whose similarities need to be spelled out. Recognizing the spectacle/Other as a duality, this pole encompasses two roles, the first of which is that of the eye. In Sartre's example the Other is not described as the eye only because the voyeur does not perceive the Other

directly. Rather, having only heard his or her approach, the voyeur apprehends the Other's look immediately, never turning away from the spectacle. Similarly in the modified situation, once the Other and the spectacle have merged and turned to return the voyeur's gaze, the voyeur still does not perceive the eye because, instead, she apprehends the spectacle/Other's look. In the cinema, the object supporting the film's projection toward the spectator is *the projector*. Conveniently located above and behind the spectator, the projector-eye cannot be perceived.

Supported and produced by the projector, the film (soon to be understood as the look) is mediated by the screen just as the keyhole mediates between the voyeur and the spectacle. Sartre writes that the keyhole at once is an instrument and an obstacle, a portal allowing for the exchange between the voyeur and the spectacle while, at the same time, limiting that exchange based on its shape, size, and bounds.[58] Mirroring the keyhole's role, the movie screen allows the spectacle to access the spectator (and the spectator to access the spectacle), but also limits such access with its bounds, the frame.

Finally, it can be posited that the film is the look. According to Sartre's analysis, apprehension of the look is apprehension of the self insofar as the look is a look directed toward self. This, of course, is in line with Sartre's notion that the cinema provides the spectator access to herself, new knowledge about her own being. Reformulated in the phenomenological language of *Being and Nothingness*, we might say that our apprehension of a film causes our unreflective consciousness to turn around onto itself, understanding itself

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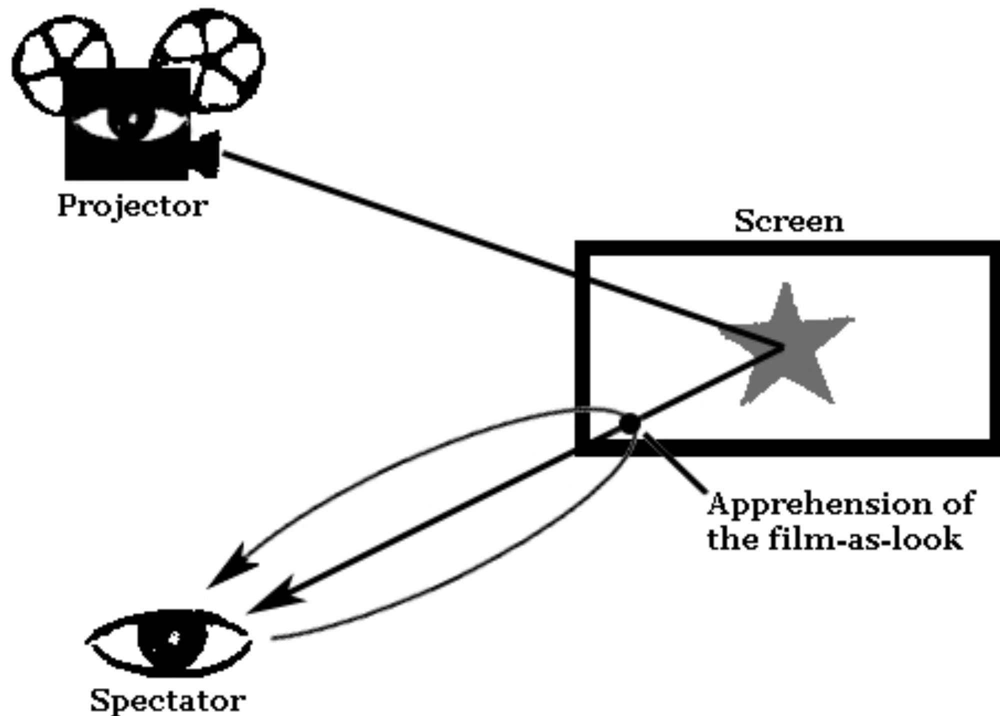
[58] *BN*, 348.

through the film's projection towards the self. Therefore, we come to introspection only by way of extrospection.



Clarifying this rather convoluted system of reflective self-understanding predicated upon the apprehension of the film-as-look, Michel Henry, a contemporary phenomenologist, elaborates on what reflective knowledge entails. Calling upon the work of Maine de Biran, Henry writes:

> [T]here are two kinds of knowledge and *consequently two kinds of beings*. In the first form of knowledge, being is given us through the mediation of a phenomenological distance, it is transcendent being. Maine de Biran calls this knowledge 'exterior knowledge.' In the second form of knowledge, being is given to us immediately, in the absence of all distance; and this being is no longer any being whatever, it is the ego, whose *being* is uniquely determined according to the manner in which it is given us. *Maine de Biran calls this second form of knowledge 'reflection'* and the system of ideas founded on it a 'reflective system.' *The term reflection, under the pen of Maine de Biran, signifies exactly the opposite of what we habitually understand by*

> *reflection*, because the latter designates for us the operation whereby that which was immediately give to us withdraws from us and, through the mediation of its phenomenological distance, falls under the jurisdiction of the transcendental horizon of being.[59]

Understood through the lens of Sartre's analyses, exterior knowledge is the knowledge of oneself found in apprehending the look of the intervening Other. In apprehending this look, the voyeur is at a phenomenological distance from herself and, therefore, has *exterior* knowledge, knowledge at a distance. When the Other and the spectacle merge, however, as is the case in the cinema, the spectator's absorption in the spectacle eliminates this distance. Simultaneously acting as the Other's look, the film is apprehended by the spectator, resulting in reflective knowledge that, unlike normative conceptions of reflection, does not require a removed spectatorial position.

[59] Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 12.

V. MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE:
MERLEAU-PONTY, LINDA WILLIAMS & VIVIAN SOBCHACK

> *[W]e do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium. Normatively, however, the easy givenness of things for us to see at the movies and vision's overarching mastery and comprehension of its objects and its historically hierarchical sway over our other senses tend to occlude our awareness of our body's other ways of taking up and making meaning of the world - and its representation.*
>
> - Vivian Sobchack, *What My Fingers Knew*[60]

According to cinematic myth, Auguste and Louis Lumière's late 19th century film, *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Coitat*) (1896), elicited a response from audiences that might seem unbelievable to modern day moviegoers. The legend holds that as the train approached the station, and since this early short was filmed only from one angle – an angle such that the train appeared to be approaching the camera almost head-on – audience members, scared for their lives, rose from their seats and ran away from what they believed to be an approaching locomotive. In short, the audience was moved. Thus far we have considered the film-going experience from a strictly visual viewpoint; however, one selling point for phenomenology's proliferation in film theory is its ability to think beyond the visual experience. In the remainder of this investigation the aim is not only to account for the non-visual, sensual experience of the cinema, but in doing so to

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[60] Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 53-84 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 63-64. (Hereafter cited as WMFK.)

offer insight into the numerous possibilities that phenomenology creates for the film theorist. To begin we will consider the pervasiveness of ocularcentric language in everyday discourse as well as within film criticism and theory. Having accounted for our biases towards vision, we will turn to the language specific to film writing that employs non-visual, embodied accounts of film-going and from there enter into an analysis of aural and tactile perceptions of the cinema. Along the way we will call upon various theorists that have contributed to the discussion of the non-visual film experience. Phenomenologists and theorists such as Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack, and Linda Williams have each contributed to the discussion of the non-visual in singular and important ways. Finally, in Sobchack's phenomenological account of the spectatorial body, the investigation will conveniently merge with Sartre's implicit account of cinema-inspired introspection, forming a phenomenological understanding of spectatorship that accounts for all of the senses and reestablishes the spectator's proximate relation to herself and the cinema.

A. EYES WIDE SHUT

The opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* already establish the ocularcentrism inherent in our treatment of perception:

> All human beings by nature desire to know. A sign of this is our liking for the senses; for even apart from their usefulness we like them for themselves especially the sense of sight, since we choose seeing above practically all the others, not only as an aid to action, but also when we have no intention of acting. The reason is that sight, more than any of the other senses, gives us

> knowledge of things and clarifies many differences between them.[61]

Likewise, the first sentence of Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* playfully notes this bias: "Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors."[62] We make use of visual vocabulary so often that it seems as if we have forgotten we use it at all. For one, we often call upon vision and light when speaking of knowledge or intelligence. To name only a few of these words: insight, enlightenment, visionary, clairvoyant. And, to be sure, this current investigation into film spectatorship has made use of ocularcentric language. The use of the term "spectatorship" already establishes a predisposition towards favoring the visual, as does our central argument in discussing Sartre's implicit theory of film spectatorship. To equate self-knowledge or understanding (intro*spection*) with one's ability to see oneself epitomizes the partiality we have towards the visual sense.

And just as everyday discourse makes use of visual metaphors, so does cinematic discourse, criticism, and theory. We have already mentioned that "spectator" denotes only the visual component of the film experience, but much more of our filmic language tends toward the optical. Most obviously, we "watch" or "view" movies; we will almost never hear someone say that they "heard," "felt," or "experienced" a film. And a cursory list of other ocularcentric film terms might include "gaze," "film image," "camera-eye," and "spectacle."

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[61] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *Aristotle: Selections*, ed. and trans. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 221 (980a21-27).
[62] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 1.

Many of the films that would be consider meta-cinematic – dealing, explicitly or implicitly, with filmmaking or the film experience generally – also have focused on the visual. *Rear Window*, *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), and *Blow-Up* (Antonioni, 1966) are all classic examples of meta-cinematic films that deal largely with the sense of sight. Highlighting the visual, each of these films' main characters is either a photographer or videographer, and uses his profession as a means to acquire knowledge (usually about a murder). Therefore, it is not only film critics and theorists that sensationalize the visual, but filmmakers as well.

But of course there are exceptions – and occasionally remarkable exceptions – to the ocularcentric tendencies in filmmaking and theory. *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974) and *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) stand out as films that celebrate the aural aspect of the film experience, while *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983) and *The Piano* (Campion, 1993) represent some of the most daring engagements with our tactile, bodily interactions with the cinema. And, looking back, Sartre offered descriptions that embodied the non-visual components of the film experience:

> [W]henever I inhale a certain smell of disinfectant in the toilet of a provincial hotel, whenever I see the violet bulb on the ceiling of a night-train, my eyes, nostrils, and tongue recapture the lights and odors of those bygone [movie] halls; four years ago, in rough weather off the coast of Fingal's Cave, I heard a piano in the wind.[63]

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[63] *Words*, 123.

And later Sartre goes on: "Chopin's funeral march; no more was needed for her tears to wet my eyes,"[64] and then, recalling a film that ends in a dramatic duel, Sartre says, "I had felt their victory in my bones."[65] Yet such descriptions are not limited to the novelistic and existential style of someone like Sartre. Vivian Sobchack, whom one might consider the pioneer of phenomenological film theory, catalogues similar non-visual descriptions of films. She begins her essay, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, of Vision in the Flesh," by recalling reviews for films such as *The Piano*, *Speed* (de Bont, 1994), and *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995): "What impresses most is the tactile force of the images. The salt air can almost be tasted, the wind's furious bite felt;" "Viscerally, it's a breath-taking trip;" "This white knuckle, edge-of-your-seat action opus is the real thing;" "A Tyrannosaurus rex doll is so glossy and tactile you feel as if you could reach out and stroke its hard, shiny head."[66]

In light of such sensuous descriptions we must ask, along side Sobchack, why such a "gap . . . exists between our actual *experience* of the cinema and the *theory* that we academic film scholars construct to explain it."[67] It is clear that whatever has kept theorists from recognizing our non-visual interaction with cinema (or, rather, what has stopped them from theorizing about those experiences that are so evident) has not hindered filmmakers from cinematically representing those interactions. While each of the films enumerated so far is in dialogue with our sensuous involvement with the cinema, we can look back to the beginning of the medium, at what might be

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[64] *Words*, 124.
[65] Ibid, 125.
[66] WMFK, 53-54.
[67] Ibid, 53.

the first meta-cinematic film, in order to demonstrate the cinema's own awareness of its non-visual engagement with its audience. An early Thomas Edison short, *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Porter, 1902), demonstrates the numerous ways in which the cinema can "move" the audience. The Edison film catalog's summary of the film describes the short in its entirety, using language that perfectly conveys the films engagement of the film-going experience:

> Here we present a *side-splitter*. Uncle Josh occupies a box at a vaudeville theatre, and a moving picture show is going on. First there appears upon the screen a dancer. Uncle Josh *jumps* to the stage and *endeavors to make love to her*, but she flits away, and immediately there appears upon the screen the picture of an express train running at sixty miles an hour. Uncle Josh here *becomes panic stricken* and fearing to be struck by the train, *makes a dash* for his box. He is no sooner seated than a country couple appear upon the screen at a well. Before they pump the pail full of water they indulge in a love-making scene. Uncle Josh evidently thinks he recognizes his own daughter, and *jumping again* upon the stage he *removes his coat and prepares to chastise the lover*, and *grabbing the moving picture screen* he hauls it down, and to his great surprise finds a kinetoscope operator in the rear. The operator is made furious by Uncle Josh interrupting his show, and grappling with him they roll over and over upon the stage in an exciting encounter.[68] [emphasis added]

Uncle Josh's exciting encounter with the cinema, even during the cinema's earliest stages, is indicative of our exciting encounters with the cinema. Now, with the inclusion of sound, color, and other advancements within the medium, we would not be jumping to any conclusions to submit that our encounters are even more exciting, more sensuous. Edison and Porter's film clearly portrays a number of ways in which Uncle Josh is "moved." Physically

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[68] The Library of Congress American Memory, "Uncle John at the moving picture show/ Thomas A. Edison, Inc.; producer and camera, Edwin S. Porter," The Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/papr:@filreq%28@field%28NUMBER +@band%28edmp+1917%29%29+@field%28COLLID+edison%29%29.

he is moved out of his seat, caused to jump, run, and even tear down the movie screen. Emotionally, he is aroused to wanting to make love, stirred into a panic, and angered at the sight of his "daughter" and her country lover. From this description of this very primitive film it has become clear that filmmakers have not shied away from film's multi-sensory effectiveness.

Even with the cinema itself celebrating our holistic experience at the cinema, theorists historically have been touchy about our non-visual interactions with film. Sobchack writes, "[a]t worst, then, contemporary film theory has not taken bodily being at the movies very seriously – and, at best, it has generally not known how to respond to and describe how it is that movies 'move' and 'touch' us bodily."[69]

B. SOUNDBRIDGE

As we look away from vision, first we turn our ears toward sound. This move follows a logical progression: moving pictures were created with the inclusion of sound in mind, and since sound films have become a reality there have been no advancements within the medium that so drastically altered our experience of it. But we cannot consider the aural aspect of the cinema in isolation, for the cinematic experience is a multi-sensory experience, and to examine sound alone would be to neglect the mingling of the senses inherent in film-going. Merleau-Ponty writes, "[m]y perception is [...] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which

[69] WMFK, 59.

speaks to all of my senses at once."[70] Sound, however, is unique among the cinematic senses; that is, our aural perception of film is not differentiable from our aural perception of "reality." And, moreover, we will find that sound functions as a bridge, a conduit between the image and the spectator insofar as sound informs and enlivens the images and, at the same time, is upon the spectator without distance. In this way we can understand sound as a bridge between the images and the audience, but also as a bridge into further discussions of the senses and, most importantly, touch.

In first considering sound we can note that our perception of sound in the cinema does not require a new or specialized form of intending as our visual apprehension of the cinema does. While our everyday visual intending of the world is founded on our understanding of angles and sides – that is, as we reposition ourselves in relation to an object our view of it changes – our pictorial intending of filmic images is altogether different given the two-dimensionality of the screen. The aural aspect of the cinema, however, requires no special mode of intending. We hear Charles Foster Kane speak on screen just as we would hear Orson Welles speak in person. While three-dimensional objects are rendered in only two-dimensions on screen, sound does not undergo any noticeable or structural transformation, and thus we might say that the relation between our perception of cinematic sound and "real" sound is closer than the relation between the filmic image and the actuality of the filmed object.

[70] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and the New Psychology," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, ed. and trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, 48-59 (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964), 50. (Hereafter cited as F&NP.)

It is the simultaneity of image and sound, however, which we must move to explicate. As Merleau-Ponty notes, all of our senses work together – "make sense" together – and, together, form meaning greater than the sum of each sense's individual content. In his essay, "The Film and the New Psychology," he considers vision and sound individually, but ultimately recognizes their inseparability within the cinema: "the way [sight and sound] are put together makes another new whole, which cannot be reduced to its component parts."[71] Therefore, in an attempt to uncover how sight and sound coexist in film, Merleau-Ponty, in the same vein as Sartre, makes use of distance, drawing out how sound enhances the images in a way that brings the film closer to the spectator. He writes,

> A sound movie is not a silent film embellished with words and sounds whose only function is to complete the cinematographic illusion. The bond between sound and image is much closer, and the image is transformed by the proximity of sound.[72]

Again, this formulation highlights the inseparability of sight and sound in the cinema. Sound is not simply an additional component that supplements the image, but a characteristic that is integrally coexistent with the image. This integrality is made clear in the appeal to proximity. In suggesting that the relation between sound and image is "close," Mearleau-Ponty is making use of more than synchronicity, though synchronicity is crucial. The proximity of sound and image, he notes,

> is readily apparent in the case of dubbed films, where thin people are made to speak with the voices of fat people, the young have the voices of the old, and tall people the voices of tiny ones – all

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[71] F&NP, 55.
[72] Ibid, 55.

> of which is absurd if what we have said is true – namely, that voice, profile, and character form an indivisible unity.[73]

So while much of the relation between sound and image is defined by synchronicity or "completing the cinematographic illusion," the relation is also based upon the spectator's perception of the "unity" of sound and image. The voice of an old person dubbed over the image of a younger person may be done in a way such that the movement of the mouth and the utterance of the words are in perfect synchronization, yet our expectations are such that a unity of image and sound may not be created. Beyond synchronization, Mearleau-Ponty is identifying what is essential to fidelity. As he notes, a lack of fidelity creates the effect of absurdity, a fact easily observed in comedies. We laugh at an over-weight person that has the voice of a child or a woman that has the voice of a man because the unity that we expect to exist between image and sound has been undermined. In this way, Merleau-Ponty highlights how our perceptions mingle so that our total perception is greater than the sum of our perceptual parts.

And still there is another way in which we can understand sound in its relation to the image and the spectator by way of proximity. Sound, one might argue, is "upon" the spectator in a way that the image is not. Whereas images (as particles and waves) are projected toward us and, in a sense, come into contact with our eyes, sound "touches" us in a more explicit and forceful way. As Elsaesser and Hagener argue:

> In order to produce or emit a sound, an object must be touched (the stings of an instrument, the vocal chords, the wind in the

[73] F&NP, 55.

> trees), and sound in turn makes bodies vibrate. Sound covers and uncovers, touches and enfolds even the spectator's body (in this way, sound is closely related to the paradigm of skin and contact).[74]

Sound, understood as touching the body insofar as it vibrates the eardrum, is in direct contact with the spectator. This closeness is not limited to aural perception, for, as we demonstrated, sound and sight are integrally united. Therefore, we can understand sound as a bridge of another sort, a bridge from the image to the spectator constructed upon sound's unity with the image on one side, and, on the other, upon sound's literal contact with the spectator. This understanding of sound not only illustrates the inseparability of the senses in the cinema, but raises yet another question regarding our sensory perception of film: how, and in what other ways, does film "touch" the spectator?

C. THE TOUCHY SUBJECT

Supplementing Sobchack's assessment that "most film theorists still seem either embarrassed or bemused by bodies that often act wantonly and crudely at the movies,"[75] Linda Williams, in her essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," makes use of the inseparability of sight and sound and spectatorial proximity in order to explicate how "gross" genres move the spectatorial body. Though the designation of a genre as "gross" is disputable "along lines of gender, age, [and] sexual orientation," Williams suggests that the proliferation of these genres is predicated upon their "display of sensations

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[74] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An introduction through the senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 137.
[75] WMFK, 56.

that are on the edge of respectable."[76] These gross genres or, as Williams moves to label them, "body genres," are epitomized by the horror film, the melodrama, and the hardcore pornographic film. Aligned with Sobchack, Williams' hopes to subvert the cultural and critical touchiness that has produced the gap between our bodily experience of film and our theoretical analysis of it, in favor of a reading of body genres in touch with the structures at work within these films and their effect upon the spectator's body.

The first features Williams identifies as ingredient in body genres inevitably leads her to consider the effectiveness of the unity of the visual and the aural. "First, there is the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion," she writes, directing our attention to the screened bodies before considering the spectator's body. We can imagine numerous ways in which a screened body might be presented in a pornographic, melodramatic, or horror film; ecstasy, Williams notes, in both its classical meanings ("insanity and bewilderment") and contemporary usages ("direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture") is another feature of these films and, moreover, a category through which we can better understand the "grip" in which the screened body is held.[77] Williams, however, goes on to explain that the presentation of an ecstatic body is not simply a visual presentation, but a co-presentation of the visual and the aural:

> Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion of spasm – of the body 'beside itself' with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness. Aurally, excess is marked by recourse not

[76] Williams, 2.
[77] Ibid, 4.

> to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama.[78]

For Williams, body genres are marked by this, their visual and aural presentations of excess, but, more importantly they are differentiated from other genres by their ability to affect the viewer's body as well. As outlined above, it is the co-presentation of the visual and the aural that allows for the viewer to be affected; the bridge to the viewer is built upon the mingling of these two sense perceptions. Williams concludes that, at the simplest level, body genres are defined by their ability to "display bodies on the screen and register effects in the bodies of spectators."[79]

In Williams, however, we find a limited engagement with the body, more concerned with mimicry – a specific subset of bodily engagement – than embodied spectatorship in general. For, as Williams notes, "what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen."[80] Here Williams uses "low" to denote the low cultural status ascribed to these genres, and, more importantly, she explains that this status is a result of the mimetic quality particular to them. Mimicry, however important it is to Williams' study, is not essential to our current investigation. She concedes that "thrillers, musicals, [and] comedies"[81] also move the spectatorial body, however, since the spectator's movement does not mime the screened body, these genres fall outside the scope of her project.

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[78] Williams, 4.
[79] Ibid, 4.
[80] Ibid, 4.
[81] Ibid, 4.

Sobchack, on the other hand, is less concerned with mimicry, and aims to establish a theory of embodied spectatorship that accounts for all of our bodily reactions to the cinema. Acknowledging Williams' dismissal of the thriller (alongside other non-mimetic genres), Sobchack writes, "[h]owever hard I may hold my breath of grasp my theater seat, I don't have precisely the same wild ride watching *Speed* that I would were I actually on that runaway bus."[82] And, for Sobchack, such mimicry is not needed. The fact that one holds her breath and grasps her seat is enough to warrant an investigation into our cinematic sensation of touch. William's is right to identify the mimetic component within "body genres," indeed this component seems to beg a higher order question within the realm of cinematic touch. To begin, however, we must establish a foundational understanding of how our bodies are moved when watching a film.

Sobchack, if only implicitly, establishes proximity as the notion underpinning her theory of spectatorial embodiment and touch. Quoting Carol Jacobs' essay on *The Piano*, Sobchack writes, "[y]et it is nearly no view at all – an almost blindness, with distance so minimal between eye and object that what we see is an unrecognizable blur."[83] Even taken out of context this assertion makes sense; there is "no view," "almost blindness," in short, the cinema's ocularcentric tendencies are subverted in Campion's film. And yet, as the title of Sobchack's essay makes clear, it is "what her fingers knew" that made sense of the "unrecognizable blur." That is, the distance between the eye

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[82] WMFK, 72.
[83] Ibid, 62.

and the object is so minimal that vision fails to inform our cinematic understanding. Rather, the distance is diminished to such an extent that touch becomes the prevailing form of sensuous intelligibility.

Williams too is in touch with this more foundational relationship between the cinema and the body despite her overriding concern for mimicry. Though she still attributes the characteristic of proximity only to her three body genres, Williams strikes upon the basal tenet of cinematic touch: "an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion."[84] Though the notion of propriety is a reminder of the low cultural status of body genres, the rest of Williams' observation highlights the proximity with which the cinema is upon the spectator. Cleverly choosing her words in order to highlight the cinema's touch, she continues, "[w]e feel *manipulated* by these texts" [emphasis added].[85] Though Williams ultimately is addressing what we have called a higher order concern within the real of embodied spectatorship, the fundamental notion of distance informing any theory of cinematic touch informs her project.

Having established that a lack of distance lies at the root of embodied cinematic spectatorship, we can begin to understand how the viewing subject and the screened object collide, or, better yet, come to occupy the same sensorial space. Returning to Campion's *The Piano* – namely, the two opening shots, the first of which presents "[l]ong, uneven shafts of reddish-pink light"[86] and the second which reveals these shafts to be fingers – Sobchack submits

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[84] Williams, 5.
[85] Ibid, 5.
[86] WMFK, 62.

that she "did not understand those fingers as 'those' fingers – that is, at a distance from [her] own fingers and objective in their 'thereness.'"[87] Rather, she suggests, that that distance was diminished, reduced to nothing, and "those fingers" were seen or, more appropriately, *felt* to be "these fingers." Formulated differently, the fingers were "located ambiguously both offscreen and on – subjectively 'here' as well as objectively 'there.'"[88]

Yet the de-distanced and co-present "here" and "there" is still troubled by the actual distance between the spectator and screen. Recalling Sobchack's description of *Speed*, even if one is short of breath, exhilarated, and on the edge of her seat, the cinema, in the most literal sense, has not touched that spectator. There is a distance between the screen and the audience if we give a purely physical account of the cinema. In what way, we must ask, are the fingers in the opening shots of *The Piano*, or anything cinematic image for that matter, both "here" and "there," and, moreover, how does this structure of co-presence articulate that inherently phenomenological nature of the cinematic experience?

Cognizant of the lack of literal or physical touch, Sobchack moves to work within the cinematic realm to explicate the paradoxical "hereness" and "thereness" of the screened and spectatorial bodies. She explains:

> [E]ven if the intentional objects of my experience at the movies are not wholly realized by me and are grasped in a sensual distribution that would be differently structured were I outside the theater, I nonetheless do have a *real* sensual experience that is not reducible either to the satisfaction of merely two of my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only

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[87] WMFK, 63.
[88] Ibid, 63.

> 'after the fact' through the cognitive operations of conscious thought. The pressing question is, of course, what kind of 'different' sensual fulfillment do we experience at the movies?[89]

Therefore, in our attempt to understand cinematic touch we must understand touch as the proximity of the film to the spectator, but not as the purely physical proximity that we commonly understand touch to be when outside of the theater. That is, we must understand cinematic touch differently if we are to overcome the paradox inherent in thinking touch as de-distancing and also as a permanent physical distance.

Though reliant upon the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack's analysis of cinematic touch is aligned seamlessly with the abovementioned Sartrean formulation of reflection in which the spectator is the perceptual object for herself. Sobchack writes:

> [I]nsofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body's intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjectively felt lived body*.[90]

Unfulfilled in the film-world, the spectator's intending is reflected back toward her own objective being. Sobchack's spectator becomes conscious of herself in the same way that Sartre's voyeur became conscious of herself and, consequently, in the same way the spectator came to see herself in the Sartrean model of film spectatorship. Cast upon the spectator, the film creates expectations in the spectator (for example, that the sight of food be

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[89] WMFK, 76.
[90] Ibid, 76.

accompanied by the appropriate aroma) that can be fulfilled only if the spectator's intendings assume the same directionality as the film – that is, toward the spectator. The Sartrean spectator, in apprehending the film-as-look, reflectively sees herself as a seeing object; similarly, the Sobchackian spectator finds herself to "feel [herself] feeling."[91]

In this formulation of the tactile cinematic experience, however, Sobchack supplements reflectivity with reflexivity, reestablishing the immediacy and proximity of participatory film spectatorship. Reformulating her concept of reflectivity, she writes: "Thus, 'on the rebound' from the screen – and without a reflective thought – I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual and sensible being."[92] To think reflectively – to be conscious of one's consciousness – is the role of the phenomenologist and critical spectator. Rather, immersed in the film-world, the participatory spectator reflexively directs her intentionality back toward herself. The absence of touch, smell, and taste in the cinema, the distance between the spectator and the spectacle, is overcome by the spectator's redirected intentionality. Intentionality holds that all consciousness is consciousness of something; in the cinema, the spectator is as conscious of herself as she is of the images upon the screen.

[91] WMFK, 77.
[92] Ibid, 76-77.

VI. CONCLUSION

In what has been said, the paradox of participatory spectatorship has been spelled out and, if only partially, explained away. Husserl's notions of the phenomenological and natural attitudes have informed the foundation of this investigation. The establishment of these two dispositions allowed for the creation of equivalent modes of film spectatorship: critical and participatory spectatorship. By definition a removed viewpoint, critical spectatorship does not allow for a phenomenological description of spectatorship *qua* spectatorship. For this reason participatory spectatorship had to be taken up, as it allows for an understanding, as Roger Ebert put it, of "what everybody does when they watch a film." As the proximate, immersed version of spectating, however, participatory spectatorship seems troubled by the distance inherent in the film-going experience. This distance, the "not-really-thereness" of the cinema, ultimately is overcome by, indeed *within*, the spectator herself. Sartre's analysis of the voyeur understood in light of his cinematic theorizing provided the framework for relocating the film experience within the spectator. Though not in direct dialogue with Sartrean phenomenology, Sobchack's analysis of cinematic touch (as well as taste and smell) builds upon this version of Sartrean spectatorship. Always at a physical distance from the spectator, the cinema is unable to fulfill all aspects of the spectator's intending. By turning back toward the spectator these intendings find an object in which they reach fulfillment. The spectator's role in the cinema is more than a passive immersion into a world created by a director, a

cinematographer, an editor, and actors. At the cinema, the spectator is an active participant countering the absences inherent in the film-world with her own being. The spectator is as much a part of creating the film-world as anyone *behind the scenes*, for the spectator is on the scene – *in the scene* – and, though in a sense faraway, she remains so close to herself and to that world.

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