

daniel barnett



# MOVEMENT AS MEANING IN EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

the musical poetry  
of motion pictures  
revisited



B L O O M S B U R Y

# Movement as Meaning in Experimental Cinema



# Movement as Meaning in Experimental Cinema

The Musical Poetry of  
Motion Pictures Revisited

*Daniel Barnett*

Bloomsbury Academic  
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

B L O O M S B U R Y  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Academic**

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway  
New York  
NY 10018  
USA

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

**www.bloomsbury.com**

**BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc**

First published January 2008 with Brill | Rodopi

This edition published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2017

© Brill | Rodopi, 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Barnett, Daniel, 1944– author.

Title: Movement as meaning in experimental cinema :  
the musical poetry of motion pictures revisited / Daniel Barnett.

Description: New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Includes filmography. Identifiers: LCCN 2017003378 |

ISBN 9781501329845 (alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781501329838 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Experimental films—History and criticism. |

Motion pictures—Aesthetics. | Motion pictures—Psychological aspects.

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.E96 B34 2017 | DDC 791.43/611—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017003378>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-2984-5

ePDF: 978-1-5013-2982-1

eBook: 978-1-5013-2983-8

Cover design by Louise Dugdale

Cover image © Daniel Barnett from “Endless” 1987–90

Typeset by Newgen Knowledge Works Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com). Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events, and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

*To G. C. Currey, A. Meader, E. Peters, E. S. Saslaw, K. J. Shah,  
and D. T. Vogt*

*He would set a straight course, only to look back  
and marvel at his degree of error.*

—JOHN LE CARRÉ

# CONTENTS

*Foreword: Where Does This Book Belong?* x

*Preface: Arriving at the Scene* xiii

Introduction: Two Pictures of a Rose in the Dark 1

Part I Modes of Perception and Modes of Expression 9

- 1 First ideas in a new medium: the cinematic suspension of disbelief 9
- 2 One description of how the mind may move toward understandings 11
- 3 New paradigms and new expressions 12
- 4 Theories of meaning—media, messages, and how the mind moves 13
- 5 The relevance of the mechanism—lessons to carry forward from an already obsolete medium 13
- 6 Frames versus shots, surface versus window 16
- 7 What the surface of the screen can tell us about language 17
- 8 Language integrates our perceptions as surely as the nervous system integrates our sense data—hallucination or metadata? 18
- 9 Letting the mind surround an idea: an introduction to Wittgenstein 19
- 10 Ascertaining understanding: what one language must evoke, another may stipulate (and vice versa) 24
- 11 Dynamic and static theories of meaning 26
- 12 Color, types of reference, and the inveterate narrative 28
- 13 The polyvalence of the picture 32
- 14 Meaning and mutual experience—kinds of reference redescribed 33
- 15 What has art got to do with it? 35
- 16 A whole new way of reading—the surface of the screen and the modulation of self-consciousness 36
- 17 The anteroom of meaning and our conception of space 40
- 18 Meaning and mental habits 42
- 19 Assumed and earned meaning 43



- 20 The spectrum of shared reference 44
- 21 The story sequence and the montage—prologue 45
- 22 When the editor learns about meaning 46
- 23 Montage and metaphor 47
- 24 The imitation of perception 50

## Part II Dynamic and Syntactic Universals 53

- 25 Nonverbal universals 53
- 26 The polyvalence of the picture and the omnivalence of the movie 56
- 27 The description of omnivalence as a floating target 58
- 28 Dynamic universals: beginning, middle, and end—a prologue 60
- 29 Language and the momentum of the body 62
- 30 Syntactic universals: interval, context, and repetition 64
- 31 The synergy of symmetry 70
- 32 Sidebar—another parallel model and another speculative future 70
- 33 Formal references in music and cinema 73
- 34 The developmental leap—keeping the referent a mystery 74
- 35 Resemblance and resonance 76
- 36 The subliminal pull of the flicker 78
- 37 Aural and visual cadence 79
- 38 The frame of the experience 81
- 39 Resonance among frames 84
- 40 Ancient history—the medium as the model 91
- 41 Illustration, induction, and repetition 95
- 42 The material and the medium 103
- 43 Sonics and seamlessness 105
- 44 The private language machine and the evolution of a medium 107
- 45 Illusions and ontological linchpins 111
- 46 Delimiting an audience 118
- 47 Summarizing the singular window en route to the panoramic view 122

## Part III Considering Description: Tropes, Tunes, and Moving Pictures 127

- 48 The world of description 127
- 49 Recapitulation and prospectus 128
- 50 Shades of meaning—another perspective on perspective 130

- 51 Yet another perspective on perspective: metaphors, images, and pictures—the linguistic hall of mirrors 134
- 52 Metaphor, image, and brain 145
- 53 Words are generated; image streams are wrought 159
- 54 The metrics of vectors and resonances 163
- 55 Two pictures of a nose in the dark 171
- 56 An obligatory sidebar on Eisenstein meets a structural allegory 178
- 57 Hearing the image and the inherent omnivalence of music 186
- 58 The organization of space in a model built for sound 202
- 59 The category across modalities 209
- 60 Similar to versus same as—periodicity and category 219
- 61 Description, allegory, the heuristic dialectic, and a short bridge to the future 231

#### Part IV The Moving Target 233

- 62 Digital ubiquity—the memosphere and the mediasphere 233
- 63 Compression and consciousness 239
- 64 What medium? 244
- 65 Indeterminacy of translation revisited and context reconsidered 247
- 66 The reconfigured attention span 254
- 67 The synergy of the mediasphere 256
- 68 The search engine, the barker, and the editor-in-chief 259
- 69 A sidebar on consciousness 266
- 70 So, where is the screen? 267
- 71 The moving meaning metaphor 269
- 72 Working the method 271
- 73 From the grain to the pixel 275
- 74 Beyond the pixel—an overview 279
- 75 A fond adieu 281

#### *Appendix* 285

*Acknowledgments (With a Comment about the Bibliography and Filmography)* 289

*Bibliography* 291

*Filmography* 296

*Index* 313

# FOREWORD: WHERE DOES THIS BOOK BELONG?

This book is not just about thinking of cinema as if it were a language but as if it were a growing number of distinct but related languages. So its essence is about trans-linguistic, or metalinguistic, thought. But even more essentially, it is about how a dialectical way of thinking works with multiple, conceptual perspectives. Its style of exposition is meant to encourage the habit of shifting one's perspective repeatedly and easily in order to get a fuller and more balanced look at the conceptual terrain. It is, as the cliché goes, far more about the process than the goal, the journey, more than the destination. The adroit switching of perspectives is one of the things that cinema is all about. Hopefully by the end of the book the reader will have gained a number of different perspectives on both cinema and language. Rather than proposing new theories, its goal is to foster new descriptions.

The argument about whether cinema *is* or *is not* a language is moot from the perspective of this book. I am simply asking the reader to consider what we can learn from thinking of it *as if* it were a language. My insistence on using the term “language” as a *description* (rather than a *definition*) of cinema is based on a desire to project an equivalence among verbal language, music, and cinema in order to tease out the relevant similarities and differences.

Cinema synergizes pictures, sounds, words, and music. The most *straight-forward* way of organizing these elements is to copy nature, producing a representation in which the motion of the image creates its own narrative line. If the representation one wants to create is of a story, then the arrangement of the elements must be driven by the logic of the story—usually a verbal logic. And since the presentation of stories has, so far, been the most obvious role for cinema, all of its elements have been developed to serve this verbal logic. This is a meaning style in which the conventions of cinematic logic are built upon the conventions of verbal logic, where meanings are expected to be clear and straightforward. Originally, this was the most obvious and direct approach for cinema to take. In relation to this verbal logic, the additions of musical and pictorial nicety are only illustrative. But if cinema is to give birth to new and different kinds of languages (or language-like structures), it needs to shift paradigms and adopt new forms of organization.

*Why do we need new languages? We won't know until we have them.*

There is one kind of meaning that verbal language has, there is another kind that music has, there is still another kind that pictorial representation has, and yet another that is the pure province of the kinetic—the meaning of pure motion. Within each of these separate modalities of meaning there is vast potential. Music and language are organized very differently but they both exist in order to generate cognitive states in others. Cinema makes its particular contribution to the expressive mix not only by generating unique cognitive states but also by providing rapid shifts in perspective to the overall array of cognitive generators. Once one focuses on this contribution the range of experiments in cinema, from the pragmatic to the sublime, opens up.

\* \* \*

If my library were organized, where would this book go? Is it philosophy, is it theory, is it criticism, is it art? How should one take what I'm attempting to do?

I think it could hardly be philosophy since it doesn't practice the particular kind of rigor usually demanded of philosophers. I suppose it is theory of a sort, but theories generally imply a kind of closure that these ideas have not attained; nor do I think they should. So I don't think of myself as a maker of theories. Besides, I feel like I need to distance myself from the traditions of the film theorist who automatically assumes that cinema is either a mode of representing or portraying reality on the one hand, or a way of telling stories on the other.

Within that storytelling tradition and following from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal work in linguistics, Christian Metz and others developed a semiotics of film, which made strong claims that film should not be considered a language at all. Here is where a shift in conceptual perspectives becomes very helpful and the attempt to elevate any one of these perspectives to the status of a theory, less so.

Metz points out quite rightly, within his view, that there are problems with applying the analogy of language and the methods of linguistics to the study of cinema. The first has to do with the arbitrariness of the sign that is at the root of verbal language; the second with the consideration of minimal, indivisible units of which verbal languages are universally constructed; and the third with the idea that cinema is not normally authored as an everyday occurrence by ordinary people.

In cinema it is clear that signs cannot be arbitrary because of the inherent resemblance between the lensed objects and what they represent; that a shot cannot be a minimal unit because of its inherent plasticity; and that films are made only by companies, not individuals. I am paraphrasing here, of course. I will add one more objection to this list. Films of the sort that the film theorists usually consider are parasitical on language in that they are derived from scripts or transcripts.

Eisenstein, on the other hand, recognized the fundamental kinship between ideographic languages and the art of montage: the juxtaposition of simples to produce a complex whole that is the product rather than the sum of the ideas; the combination of two depictables in a way that references an un-depictable. Buried in this thought we have the germ of arbitrariness in a potential language of cinema. Two signs, when juxtaposed, can carry meaning off into very different directions, and how we ultimately take them may be determined by a common, conventionalized usage or a unique context that will likely have an arbitrary component.

In this book, I am taking a very different series of perspectives in my approach to language and cinema from Metz. I am following a track that is somewhat closer to Eisenstein but is a good deal more radical. For me, and for the films with which I am concerned, the best description of cinema is that of **an articulated image stream** and the best description of language is simply **the meaningful articulation of elements within an overarching structure**. Under this description of cinema there is a very clear minimal unit, *the frame*.

The work of this book will be to illuminate the power of this idea, and to speculate on how this perspective can ultimately point to one possible future development of cinema, a future where verbal logic becomes secondary and articulated pictorial and musical logics become primary.

Under the spare description of language I've offered, there is no consideration of either grammar or rhetoric. I suspect that on account of the regularizing tendencies of cognition, both grammars and rhetorics of a poetic, musical, pictorial cinema will mature. But also, within the conception of cinema that this book espouses, when that happens, the most vital, vibrant, exciting, yet chaotic period in the medium's development will have ended.

Since my thinking about cinema has, for the most part, evolved from practice, I have presented my ideas largely from a first-person perspective. This perspective also welcomes and relies on the first-person perspectives of others. That is to say, it has become quite clear that 'filmmaking' is no longer solely the province of the corporation, and that the future of the medium will be determined by the collective work of many, many individuals; with meanings and idioms evolving in the free, unbounded, ad hoc rhetoric of a very public, two-way medium.

One especially exciting aspect of this future to me is that it will be determined not only by the users of alphabetic languages, but also by the users of ideographic languages.

So, getting back to our earlier question: since this book is about something that really does not exist yet, that is, the kinds of conventional, cinematic usages upon which mature grammar and rhetoric bearing languages are built, this book is so much more a work of speculation than fact that I would have to place it in the corner of my library reserved for works of the imagination.

# PREFACE: ARRIVING AT THE SCENE

One evening when I was an undergraduate philosophy student, I went to a screening of short ‘experimental’ films made by individual artists. For the most part they were pleasant enough—a couple were purely abstract animations that were more or less rigorous, some were colorfully symbolic or surreal, and some were simply, visually poetic. The last film of the evening, however, was both ugly and mystifying and ruined the feelings of light pleasure I had gotten from the other films on the program—and so I stalked angry into the night. My bullshit meter had pegged. In fact I can’t ever remember art making me so furious.

The film was called *Fire of Waters* (1965) by Stan Brakhage. It was black and white, or more accurately just all middling grays. The images, as I recall, were shot out a window at night during a lightning storm with a manic-jerky hand-held camera. Areas on the surface of the film itself had apparently been struck both by stray light and static electricity, and there were what looked like water spots as well, which gave the turbid image an even more scabrous quality. Sometimes it would be entirely imageless—dim, indistinct, indiscernible; and then there’d be a flash of lightning and for an instant you could see the panes of the window through which it was being shot. Sometimes, however, there would just be these jags of light that could only have come from a static electricity discharge on the surface of the film itself.

The sound was equally obscure—mushy, scratchy, and largely ambiguous—maybe rain, but maybe just dirt and water spots on the optical soundtrack. And then, toward the end, there was a rhythmic, higher pitched sound, one that I took to be a woman squealing under continuous sexual collision—a sound that became progressively more recognizable and as well more agonizing in its approach and failure to climax.

Immediately after the film, I stalked out of the auditorium in a huff, with the distinct sense that someone had been trying to put something over on me. Then, twenty minutes or so later (and fifty years after the fact I still remember the moment with astonishing clarity), I suddenly stopped in my tracks and felt one clear conception settle on me; one that gave me a new perspective, both on that film and on cinema in general.

The other films of the evening had all shown appreciation for the values of painting, poetry, and music, as one would expect of films made by individual artists. Ultimately though this film did also, but *how* it did worked only if you were able to conceptualize its materiality exactly as the author had: *when we are watching the screen, we are watching the shadow of a physical filmstrip!*

I suddenly realized that the *fire of Fire of Waters* consisted both of static electricity in the sky, and static electricity on the surface of the film; the water was both the rain seen on a windowpane as well as the water that had directly left visible spots on the film. The woman that I imagined was straining toward orgasm on the soundtrack was working to bring these opposing elements, fire and water, together.

At that point I recognized that the film was about the creation of new energy through a union of opposites, a union that occurs in the arms of its substrate. And a moment or so later I also recognized that because this truth hadn't been all tricked out in prettiness or superficial beauty like many of the other films of the evening, it was all the truer for it. And finally I understood that this was an ode to film, to the substrate itself.

What I had done—or perhaps what had been done to me was simply to move my frame of reference: a perspective shift. I had shifted from seeing *only the effects* of a medium that usually was *itself* invisible, to looking at the medium itself—and suddenly, therefore, I was able to reflect on it through the metaphor of its own materiality.

This happened at an especially fortuitous time in the development of my thinking because I was just encountering, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, some very astute lessons on how to look at experience reflexively—through the metaphor of another substrate—language.

This was the beginning of a chain of apparent truths for me: certain metaphors can lens experience, making new unities clear, and this constitutes a new perspective that can be compared with the old; a comparison that in turn produces new knowledge. This idea, let us call it intellectual parallax, can be applied elsewhere, in other analyses. At some time, perhaps a few months later, I realized that these analyses could actually be conducted in film as well as in language. And that's what I began to do.

The films that I made in the ensuing years are all heuristics that are thought out through the specifics of the medium. But that particular medium, 16mm film, is now obsolete. So this book is an attempt to frame out what knowledge those heuristics did yield that is not obsolete. Substrates change, but lessons can be inferred beyond them, both about motion pictures and about language.

# Introduction: Two Pictures of a Rose in the Dark

*Two pictures of a rose in the dark. One is quite black, for the rose is invisible. The other is painted in full detail and surrounded by black.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

There are philosophers of a certain stripe who are close to being artists, and artists whose pursuit is largely philosophical. Or perhaps it makes more sense to say that there are certain people whose drives and curiosities take them places that are harder to define, and ultimately they stand outside academic rubrics. The questions that both art and philosophy seek to answer are pretty much the same: “What’s really going on?” and “What do *I* have to do with it?” Their values are also pretty much the same: rigor, integrity and elegance of method, penetrating wit, and original insight. As well, both have very cozy (but distinct) relationships to analogy. The products, however, usually find very different forms, constrained by quite distinct traditions.

Sometimes though, work simply refuses to sit squarely in any tradition; and occasionally, borderline works spawn traditions of their own. But for the most part, interdisciplinary work has a current to work against.

For a time during the last few decades of the twentieth century a group of people met on a fairly regular basis in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to discuss interdisciplinary issues related to the sciences, philosophy, and the arts. They called themselves Philomorphs—the lovers of form. At the one meeting I attended, a teacher of art history from Harvard showed his very personal artwork to the group; and discussed its relationship to his professional life as a scholar.

The pieces were all pencil on paper, but it would be a touch misleading to call them drawings. They were formal explorations using only one wedge-shaped mark, millimeters long, swarming in rigorous, yet ambiguous



patterns across the surface of a page. Every piece used the same mark in an entirely new exploration of the way binocular vision assembles ad hoc patterns.

Was it art? Was it psychology? It didn't really matter to the assembled what it was called. Each discussed the work from the perspective of their peculiar background. As a filmmaker, I found it notable that the spatial ambiguity in many of the arrangements induced a visceral sense of movement even though the images were clearly static. One might call that observation aesthetic, or psychological. It could easily be taken in a philosophical direction if we were to consider how to make a judgment on what to call that motion, where to place it in phenomenological terms.

This was the first time the art history professor had ever shown his personal work to any group, though he had been doing these visual experiments for many years. He hadn't, he said, because he felt that sharing them in an art context would engender misunderstandings that would destroy the private ecstasy of their production. However, he seemed to feel that this group was protected enough that the work might simply generate a discussion that could help his investigations. After all, these were all people who understood the huge range of questions that can be approached through a formal apparatus.

I felt I understood his reticence well. He was learning something slowly in a private process, which when ripe, he might finally share with some audience or other, in some form or other. As far as he was concerned, he had embarked on a rapturous exploration, and it wasn't especially relevant to him whether it was considered art, or some other sort of thought.

At the time, I was teaching at an art school, and the work that I was doing was being attended to in the tradition of art. But as far as I was inwardly concerned, I was carrying on in another tradition entirely. The principal questions I wanted to answer grew out of an orientation I had picked up from philosophy of language—mostly the analytical philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and W. V. Quine. But I had decided that the most fruitful tack I could take in my explorations would be to switch media and so, as I began to do my work in film, I mostly thought of my films as general language explorations. But film is recognized as an art medium and not an arena for philosophical investigation, so the academic contexts I found myself in were all art related. This affiliation was emphasized by the fact that other artists seemed to have little trouble finding my film work intelligible, interesting, and useful, whereas it gave most philosophers headaches.

To this day, although I've always had trouble identifying myself as an artist, I have much more trouble thinking of myself as a philosopher, and I suspect that this book, though philosophical in both nature and intent, will be of more interest to thoughtful media-wrights than to philosophers. And though its central conceit is cinema, I suspect it will be of little or no interest to dramatic film buffs and theorists. I reference no actors or directors,

except occasionally, casually and in passing. The filmmakers and films I do talk about come, for the most part, from a tradition that eschews the labels, protocols, methods, and social circles modeled by the movie business. But the films and filmmakers that I am concerned with do share traditional affinities with other arts; arts that have a solid, albeit less central, home in the culture, and which also happen to have a history of love/hate relationships with academe. Experimental film of the past century tended to be a world of *affinities among*, rather than *affiliations of*, autonomous and unincorporated thinkers in the avant-gardes of poetry, painting, drama, dance, conceptual art, and filmmaking.

Here is where the reader may encounter a clash of protocols: Whereas academic philosophy is considered to be the result of a long and deeply interwoven tradition—a dialogue among scholars who assiduously reference and criticize each other's ideas, the avant-gardes of the arts have the opposite tendency: of breaking with tradition as radically as possible and launching out into the blue, albeit with integrity and rigor, whenever they can.<sup>1</sup> This impulse guided my initial approach to filmmaking more than forty years ago; and, to a degree, that is the protocol I will attempt to follow here—even though really it's an understanding of the nature of language I'm after and not art.

In this book, it will be my goal to explore how a simplified attitude toward the idea of meaning can convey, with some equivalence, how words, pictures, music, and motion make meaning happen; and cinema is merely the kettle in which I brewed this thinking. My motivations are not just to understand what the various offspring of this almost brand new medium (in art historical terms) has to offer, but I also want to explore how having new intellectual tools can influence the way we come to learn and understand in general.

In the late nineteenth century, when our ability to create a flow of quickly articulated pictures opened a new expressive domain, it actually opened a new analytic domain as well—new domains from which we could not only learn to communicate with one another in a novel way, but also make more sense of the world. It is the analytic domain more than the expressive that

---

<sup>1</sup> Gene Youngblood's manifesto, *Expanded Cinema*, carried the rhetoric of the era when much of the work I discuss was made. The following quotation is a bit polemical for me, but it uncovers a popular and influential sentiment of the times: "All art is experimental or it isn't art. Art is research, whereas entertainment is a game or conflict. We have learned from cybernetics that in research one's work is governed by one's strongest points, whereas in conflicts or games one's work is governed by its weakest moments. We have defined the difference between art and entertainment in scientific terms and have found entertainment to be inherently entropic, opposed to change, and art to be inherently negentropic, a catalyst to change. The artist is always an anarchist, a revolutionary, and a creator of new worlds imperceptibly gaining on reality." (This section was reprinted in *Video Culture, a Critical Investigation*, edited by John G. Hanhardt, 1970: 230.)

I wish to explore in this book, though they are closely connected and there will be a lot of straying back and forth.

As the particular conceptual/cinematic tradition of which I write was gathering steam in the United States in the 1960s, the films and filmmakers were called variously, avant-garde, underground, experimental, art, or personal. Other names work as well or better, depending on where we want to go with them. For now though, I'd just like to specify that I use the term "avant-garde" to refer to the protocol of leaping into the blue wherever possible, "experimental" to refer to works whose main reason for being is to learn something more or less particular, and "personal" to refer to those works that focus on film as an individual and autonomous medium, as distinct from collaborative and corporate work—that is, film used for the idiosyncratic expression of a kind of poetry, or of a kind of intimate discourse or two-way communication. If this cinema is a public medium at all, it barely is one. What makes it cinema is the machine it uses.

This book focuses mostly on the work I consider to be experimental and whose experiments and implications are in two areas usually considered to be in philosophy's precinct: ontology and epistemology: How can the machine of cinema inform us about the nature of being; and what can it tell us about how, and how much, we know the world? Personal film however, film as both *poetic expression* and *intimate discourse*, provides the social context for what I have to say, as well as having major implications for the intimate world of digital motion pictures.

All communications have audiences, even if only the speaker. The audience<sup>2</sup> is one way of defining the work, so it might be helpful if I describe (in a somewhat roundabout sort of way) the situation in which the audience for personal/experimental films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s dwelled (we're pretty much talking past tense here) and as well, some characteristic attitudes that the makers held toward the users.

I'll begin by describing one of my most recent experiences of extremist cinema and then move further back into my personal history.

I had just arrived at the place in writing this book where it was finally time for me to tackle the complex and multifaceted role of repetition, both in film and in other communication acts. To refresh my memory and get some inspiration, I put a DVD containing several super-8mm films ported over to digital into my laptop.

The act of transferring work that was built on the premise of an analog/mechanical medium from a plastic filmstrip over to a digital/magnetic medium is, at least from the point of view of ontology, a shockingly complex process, one which to me has always been sodden with counterintuitive

---

<sup>2</sup> The subject of *audience* is complex. Here I don't mean the general population toward which a film may be directed, but more specifically those individuals who feel they have received a clear communication from it.

compromise. So, I was not particularly looking forward to the *experience*—it was *information* I was after. I had last seen most of these films many years ago in their original incarnation and was pretty sure, while I waited for the disc to load, that they wouldn't captivate me while playing back on the screen of my computer as they originally had in a theater.

I was wrong; and it was very useful and important for me to understand why I was wrong.

The movies I was about to look at were among the most eccentric I have ever seen. They were made by the American filmmaker Saul Levine in an era when eccentricity was considered a prime value unto itself. That was in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it appeared world culture was coming apart at the seams, and many people considered that giving birth to out-looks diametrically opposed to the status quo was, ipso facto, noble work.

There was the Cultural Revolution in China, the riots on the streets of Paris, the revolt against the War in Vietnam, and perhaps most important for the arts, the explosion in the use of consciousness-altering drugs. Also, the thrust of thinking was definitely away from the markets of culture (though weirdly enough those markets turned and followed—for a time).

I began to make films in the late 1960s; and in the 1970s and 1980s, for almost a dozen years, I worked alongside Levine, first when we both taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton, sharing a studio, then for eight years at Massachusetts College of Art, where we taught together and, broadly speaking, shared an approach. Since the substance of what I am writing here comprises what I learned mostly from the process of making and thinking about my own films, and since I am constrained, for the most part, from using my film work as direct examples in this book, I will often use Levine's as a stand-in. Not only is he clearer from my point of view, but also, more important, he's not me. And of course, I use the work of many other filmmakers from whom I've learned as well.

One thing that was not only a given, but a very fundamental given for many workers in our tradition, was that with film, images can be articulated in ways that are both surprisingly musical and 'lingual'—that is, like the fine-grain (phoneme-level) articulations of language. This realization, arrived at independently by many people, and developed as a cultural collaboration, opened vast new latitudes and longitudes for exploration.

While Levine did (and still does) experiment widely and freely, he largely saw film as a medium for intimate communication and expression, and chose to work in the smallest, handiest, and least expensive gauge possible for reasons that were aesthetic, but also political.

This mutually identified group of personal filmmakers all shared a dream back then. That dream has finally, ironically, and no thanks to any of us, come true: the dream of capturing in moving imagery, those personal sentiments one might otherwise jot on a note, either to oneself or someone else; casual, off-hand, immediate, person-to-person, yet intimate and explicit in

the ways that only moving pictures can be, touching on those happenstances in life that are fundamentally ineffable; either keeping them for future reference or passing them around the world—and doing it as easily as we might do it in words. Many of Levine's films are in fact called "notes," a reference both to their offhand character and to their musical awareness.

One of the films I looked at that afternoon, sliding it into the DVD slot in my laptop, was called *Notes of an Early Fall* (1976), punning, as Levine loved to do, on his having been prematurely "offed" from the faculty of the first university where we taught together.

By then, the late 1990s, it was clear that the particular dream of universal access to the production of cinema had nearly been fulfilled, but I hadn't actually experienced it for myself as a purely aesthetic event. That is, I had never before seen one of these media self-conscious films in a digital rendition until the afternoon when I put that DVD into my laptop and the screen was taken over by a long-lost sight: The first image on the screen was that of the red Kodak logo-stripe running vertically through the white background of the super-8 film leader—an artifact almost always edited out of films. This, for many years, was the beginning of any experience of watching 'home movies.' This film leader, which always announced the start of an individual three-minute roll of film, was often, in Levine's films, the signal of the start of an idea.

And then, across thirty years of time and three thousand miles of space, I was plunged into the semi-deranged and wickedly astute consciousness of one Saul Levine.

There once was a time when the motion picture image was held captive in a dark room. Now it's both out in the light and all over the place. Not only are moving images everywhere but the spectrum of potential audiences and potential uses has become both sharper on one hand and more diffuse on an other. Sharper because the medium has become far less expensive and easier to use which has made it ubiquitous, so 'target markets' can be much more highly defined. More diffuse because moving images can now proliferate in the most surprising ways and show up in the most surprising places.

The dream Saul Levine and many others shared included the idea that, like speech and writing, film could be a two-way medium: people could make films to one another, and therefore film could be as living a language as any other. Well now, digital-cinema can be, and is. Yet before I put that DVD in the laptop, I had considered that the differences between a film seen in a theater and movies loose in the ambient light of the world was so huge, intellectually and perceptually, that I was shocked to discover how effective my experience of the work was, as seen in the ambient light of my office.

Context is king when it comes to making meaning as far as I'm concerned. The historical context in which these films were made was one where conversations about levels of consciousness were commonplace, and in many ways you could think of these particular films as descriptions of

discreet (more or less) levels of consciousness. Well, ‘description’ isn’t really the right word—‘inducement’ is a little more like it. Unlike the big screen “movies,” which seduce their necessarily wider audiences into the alternate realities proposed by their authors, these films often simply manifest the state of mind, the level of consciousness *inhabited* by the author, and it is up to the viewer to hitch a ride.

As I’ve indicated, I always considered that I was doing a kind of philosophical exploration with my filmmaking, especially in the most experimental phases of my work where my audience was explicitly and only myself. This was well before there was an online special interest group for film-philosophy, a subspecialty with a journal and a bibliography. So, instead of reading a lot of books and articles, I was mostly looking at the work of like-minded filmmakers.

Philosophers love to declare and debate whether an *x* really is a *y*, or is only pretending to be. Two of those kind of debates in which this book will become entangled have to do with whether or not any particular film can actually *do* philosophy, as they say, and if so, what are the criteria for this. The second and more fundamental question is whether or not *cinema* is *another kind of language*. I will not attempt to recount the short history of those battles here; I’ll just let the rest of this book clarify my position.

They are both interesting questions. As to whether or not film can *do* philosophy I provide examples that will allow readers better purchase on making their own decision. The answer to the second, I believe, is colored by two things: whether we are talking about films that are driven by a script, a narration, or some other verbal framework; or are we talking about films that are primarily picture-driven.

But my answers are also colored by my attitude toward this kind of question in general, and in this book you’ll see that I take a very distinct position on the questions of definition and distinction that philosophers characteristically ask. Rather than attempting to *define* the subject with some wall of exclusion, it is my goal to *describe* the subjects in ways that are interesting and fruitful: What happens when we think of cinema as if it were a language? What would a cinema that is a language look, feel, and taste like? What sort of tasks would it approach and accomplish? What kind of progress can we make by teasing out this analogy in thought experiments? What about those films that set out self-consciously to explore these questions? Finally, besides the new perspectives we gain when we consider film as if it were a language, I want to explore what confusions this consideration might lead us into.

My prejudice is to say that considering films which are word-driven as a language engenders more confusion than it’s worth; and, on the other hand, considering films which are picture-driven can engender some distinct and broad illuminations—especially if handled with care, consideration, and a semblance of precision. And so I will not treat “narrative films” at all and

let them remain in the locker of my own prejudice. Therefore, what follows is my consideration of a *picture-driven cinema* thought of as some kind of analog to music and poetic, verbal language, with the hope of extracting lessons about the nature of all three media.

The interaction between the two predominant methods I'll use can be illustrated by the following thought experiment: *Imagine that instead of having two eyes that are side by side and aimed, more or less, in the same direction, we have one eye that is stationed off at some arbitrary distance and positioned so that the center-of-gaze can be directed back toward the other eye. Would we then have the kind of parallax that not only gave us a very different kind of depth perception, but also made it easy to hold opposing intellectual perspectives in our mind simultaneously?*

The idea of shifting perspective in order to gain insight, as a model of how to treat inquiry, has great appeal to artists, and tends to worry philosophers, given as they are to the 'necessary and sufficient,' 'is or is not' style of analysis. From this philosophical point of view, the analyses in this book might well seem specious. After all, can we really specify *how* the views from our separate eyes sum, any more than how the two terms in a metaphor manage to yield a third perspective? These are things we appreciate more than we understand.

\* \* \*

After this book was originally published and I read it over some years later I realized that not only could I have made many of my arguments and explanations clearer but that there were two aspects of these questions that I had completely ignored and into which I had new and I believe original insights: the relationship between the different ways that cinema and natural language relate to the idea of tropes and their descriptions; and the relationships among musical form, cinematic form, and memory. Over the subsequent years I not only explored these two ideas but tied them together, integrating these important questions throughout the original text and restructuring the entire book.

# Part I

## Modes of Perception and Modes of Expression

### 1. First ideas in a new medium: the cinematic suspension of disbelief

Here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it's easy to think that movies have been with us forever, but in fact they've just popped over the historical horizon. Not only that but movies have been followed so quickly by other still newer ways of moving ideas around—using some combination of words, moving pictures, and music—that the original cinematic paradigms have become the stuff of archaeology. With movies, the acquisition and dissemination of new kinds of knowledge and entertainment entered a very new kind of flow. And with the World Wide Web that flow has taken on the flux and interactivity of an atmosphere, influencing and influenced by everyone. As a result of these new media, language has crossed a threshold, and communication has taken off in a way that we've not experienced since the development of writing. These new media may ultimately be nearly as important to the overhaul of the way we parse life, as was the origin of speech itself.

A bit of speculative history, and of somewhat less speculative cine-archaeology might be useful in order to get a handle on the nature of that threshold, with the hope of taking a peek beyond; but also (and this is a very powerful undercurrent in my motivation) with the hope of gaining a deeper understanding into how the nature of language itself influences perception. That is, what is the relationship between language and epistemology—the theory of knowing; and language and ontology—the consideration of states of being? Another way of asking this most fundamental of all questions: How does the language we use influence the way we perceive reality and how much we can know?



We can bring this hazy and abstract question into focus on one level with a simple example that I am stealing from W. V. Quine's essay *Speaking of Objects* (1969: 1) wherein he imagines a language in which every manifestation of a rabbit is followed by a vocalization: *gavangai*. He asks us how we are to translate the utterance, if we are in our very first encounters with the speakers. Does it mean rabbit, the way *we* think of rabbit: that is, the manifestation of an individual member of a species that English speakers call 'rabbits'? Or does it perhaps mean rabbit the way we use the word 'rain,' as in the local manifestation of a general condition, for example, what we might translate as "it now rabbiteth" (3)?

This perhaps, oh-so-subtle distinction actually underlies something quite grand—how does the language we use influence how we divide the world into pieces: How do we parse reality?

Let us imagine a past so remote that there is almost no evidence to help us in our imaginings. Let us try to imagine what the origins of language itself might have been like, and how our grasp of reality might have changed around that new tool for organizing perceptions. Let us imagine that the development of specific vocalizations combined with ostention, or pointing at things, was the beginning of both description and reference. Words would, for the first time, allow us to relate to one another about things that are not present to be pointed at, and to relate about where they were when we saw them last and as we might see them again. With words, the ability to reference the *not here* and *not now* would begin our current conception of space and time.

As the making of marks evolved (possibly hand in hand with speech), including bent branches, cairns made of piles of rock, blazes cut into tree trunks; then, perhaps, diagrams, maps, pictures, and ultimately pictograms and alphabets, it seems obvious, but still interesting to note, that of the above systems, it's the maps, diagrams, and drawings, the imitative markings rather than the learned writing systems or the stipulative markings, that have a greater universality and therefore can be read pretty equivalently by people of different languages and cultures. As the stipulated and learned marks ultimately became translatable from culture to culture, and language to language, and then became mechanically reproducible, the nature of culture and the spread of ideas took incremental but immense leaps.

When the first movie of a train approaching a station caused viewers to bolt from its path, a brand new level of reference came into being and the "cinematic suspension of disbelief" was born. This level so accurately caught the action dimension that it transcended the *imitations* of diagrams and the *stipulations* of language systems in immediacy and universality, giving cinema the unique referential boost of an *illusion* as well as the greatest instantaneous cross-cultural range of all media. This medium doesn't just entrain the nervous system, it tricks it. But, like the evolution of the mark, there are other paths besides the telling of stories for the articulation of

pictures to take—en route to referencing a world of which we have not yet dreamed.

Such a powerful new medium bursting on the scene opens lots of questions about both the past and the future of our media. Did music and speech evolve together? Was the beginning of time, that is, our ability to refer to the “not now,” also the beginning of rhythm as a way of carrying information? Or was it the other way round? Did the use of rhythm for marking time initiate the language process? Does the fact that we can now articulate pictures, inflecting them in time, giving them rhythm, mean that their referential power can synergize with the inflections of music, and speech—not just sum, but synergize? Can our new ability to reference the world by articulating pictures tell us anything about the way speech and music each refer to both our shared external and our otherwise private internal experiences? What can we learn about ourselves, about the nature of perception, and the nature of meaning, from the optical illusions that power the transcendence at the heart of cinema?

## 2. One description of how the mind may move toward understandings

You could say that with language, we parse experience, using the ‘parts of speech,’ into objects, actions, qualities, and relationships. But, given the complexities and subtleties of life, we know there is more to experience than that. With the quantifiable, we parse experience in ways that are more precisely analytic with mathematics, binary codes, or other logical schema. Beyond that, many of our experiences are not parsed at all, but absorbed, ridden with, meditated upon, stewed over. We allude to what we can’t parse in words with labels like the unconscious, the subliminal, the gut, the infinite, the sublime, the divine and collectively as the ineffable. The ineffable, we parse in ways that tend to be more private and personal: with music, pictures, gestures, other body language, and so on. But throughout history more and more previously unparsed experience has been solved, so to speak, as each of the great paradigm inventors (Zeno, Euclid, Giotto, Brunelleschi, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, Cage, etc.) have changed the ratio of the unparsed to the pars-able and served up new, discreet gobs of an up-till-then un-sharable aspect of the universe. How does parsing the world connect us to it? At this point I will revert to an almost unbearably simple description of what happens when we feel that we’ve made sense of something: *Where the mind can move, there’s meaning.* If we *get it*, we can *move on*; if not, we *get stuck*.

A grammar describes how words are assembled to make meaning, but describing *how* our minds move (metaphorically speaking, of course) under

the influence of words, or for that matter music, pictures, and expressions of other kinds, could not only show us the *how* of meaning in general, it could also show us the many structural similarities, or homologies, in the ways that all language-like structures reference our shared experience of the world; ways that lie beyond the instruction manuals of grammar. This comparison among modalities is not meant as an equation or prescription, just as a *way of looking at* the problem of meaning—a scaffold or heuristic rather than the foundation of a theory.

I'm suggesting that our perception of the orderly (meaningful) flow of sound that is speech is analogous in a simple and discussable way to those symptoms of meaning that allow us to follow music: rhythm, melody, harmony, and form; it is also analogous, in the visual realm in the same rich but simple way, to the associations that power the path of the wandering eye and produce the sense of meaning we derive from the space we're in, or the pictures we look at.

In each case, if we move with it, it makes sense. If it makes sense, we can move with it. We can not only ask: "Where are we going?" but also: "Why are we able to go with something?" Most of all we can *examine* the vectors, and *characterize* the qualities and implications of the movement.

### 3. New paradigms and new expressions

Whenever a new paradigm, for example, the invention of calendars and clocks, the heliocentric view of the heavens, Euclidian Geometry, Cartesian Coordinates; or a new medium, like alphabetic writing; or a serious evolution of an extant medium like the development of perspective in painting emerges, there's the possibility for a new style of mental movement, new kinds of meanings and the parsing of revolutionary new knowledge. These are not just meanings that have been ported over from a previous paradigm or medium, those that are able to address old experiences with more accuracy, cleaner analysis, or more resonant exposition, but meanings of a whole new kind, able to open realms of new experience and knowledge; knowledge that is only sharable under the light of the new paradigm or in the voice of the new medium.

This doesn't happen easily or directly. In order to bring new realms into shared meaning, a context needs to be created for the participants. With new paradigms there is often a struggle to integrate them into our extant worldview. With new media we usually port over the meaning-laden strategies from close relatives in old media first, a familiarity that helps the mind move into the new flow. So motion pictures first adopted and combined the idioms and methods of documentary photography on the one hand and stagecraft on the other.

## 4. Theories of meaning—media, messages, and how the mind moves

The attempt to analyze meaning in language has a rich and checkered history, and the threshing floor is littered with examples of partial and broken theories. Each might seem to satisfy a different picture and cover a particular case of reference, but all break down in the transition from the specialized worlds of scientific or philosophical inquiry into the general world of “ordinary language” and break down even further as we move toward the ineffable—meanings that cannot be put into words: meaning in art. The failure of some of the most powerful philosophers of the past century to reduce the meaningful vectors of ordinary language to logic and mathematics reflects a mistaken impression among some that ordinary language is a looser subset of a system of precise relationships, rather than the other way around—that logic and mathematics are in fact tighter subsets of what is actually and operationally a very loose and somewhat ad hoc system of relationships. Therefore I am approaching the problem of how human beings create referential relationships from the perspective of *meaning as an ad hoc occurrence*, within a highly structured, but utterly elastic context: everyday speech and action.

The extremely simple model of meaning as mental movement (referential movement) will be my way of getting closer to understanding a central process in cognition, in a way that allows broader and clearer equivalence across those realms where philosophy of language, semiotics, and art criticism jockey for understanding. I choose cinema as my paradigm because it combines meaning vectors from language, music, and pictures simultaneously, and also because it capitalizes on the inherent meaningfulness of pure movement.

My approach is embedded in the belief that an analysis must pinpoint and then penetrate the essence of any medium if we’re to understand what possible referential relationships that medium has to offer.

## 5. The relevance of the mechanism—lessons to carry forward from an already obsolete medium

When the very early filmmakers Lumière, Griffith, and Méliès picked up the new motion picture medium, they each analyzed certain aspects of its potential to accommodate their own particular ends and came up with distinctly different strategies for making meaning. Of the three, only Méliès, a magician by trade, looked to the essence of the *mechanism* for his inspiration. Méliès realized, like the others, that the foundation of cinema lay in

its ability to generate an illusion that conjures certain aspects of experience. He also realized, as did the others, that out of our innate predisposition to promote the suspension of disbelief, we simply filter out the aspects of experience that cinema fails to mimic. This predisposition gives us an experience of a *world*, not just an experience of *pictures that seem to move*.

But Méliès had a further realization: that if the camera exposed only one frame at a time the capacity for creating illusions would be greatly enhanced. Méliès understood what lived between the frames.

Our nervous systems process visual information relatively slowly compared to the cinema machine's rate of articulation, and that allows two separate illusions to power our experience of cinema. When we are in a movie theater we don't notice that we are really sitting in darkness a majority of the time, a darkness punctuated by the brief<sup>1</sup> flashes of light that carry the shadows of a filmstrip to the screen. We don't realize this because when light gets painted on our retinas, the excitation persists for longer than the actual stimulus. It's a phenomenon called *persistence of vision* and it prevents us from seeing the dark between the frames. Analog movies, after all, originally consisted of a stream of still images sequentially replaced in the gate of a projector where the closing of the projector's shutter hides the process of replacement from us. This is the first part of the basic illusion—the illusion of *continuity* in an experience that is actually *intermittent*.

Another illusion, which psychologists call the phi phenomenon, has to do with our tendency under some circumstances to see two sequential images as a modification of one image rather than as a comparison or disjunction between two. So, under the right conditions, we read *spatial displacement* as *motion*. Persistence of vision and the *phi phenomenon* are the two most prominent, linked, fundamental features of our visual system that empower cinema.

Méliès was a magician by trade, and so he deeply understood the cinema machine's latent power for deception. The illusionist's craft depends on the eye being relatively slow. He recognized that by photographing one frame at a time, he could make substitutions in the content of images at his leisure, making his "hand" very much faster than the eye of the beholder.

The same essential understanding of cinema's capacity for high-speed image replacement that gave Méliès and his followers (like the workers at movie special effects companies) a tool for making entertaining illusions can also create relationships of a very different kind, changing entirely the way that meaning seems to course from object to subject through the medium.

We can think of *persistence of vision* as a measure of the time it takes a packet of light to get processed in the brain, allowing the image to remain

---

<sup>1</sup> Actually, each film frame is projected three times for 8.5 milliseconds each, plus 5.4 milliseconds of darkness between each burst, for a total of 42 milliseconds for a single film frame (a TV frame lasts 33 milliseconds) (Dennett 1991: 103).

with us while the shutter of the projector is closed and the screen is actually dark. The *phi phenomenon* is simply the expression we use for our still mysterious perceptual tendency to read substitutions as modifications under certain conditions. If the length of the interruption that's required to substitute one picture for another and its accompanying darkness were any longer, we'd perceive those brief moments of darkness as a flicker. If the images being substituted exceed certain spatial or content parameters, we perceive them as a cut between two distinct images or as a comparison between two distinct states of affairs, rather than as a transition between different states of one affair: that is, the 'same' image, moving.

If we want to do some intermodal stretching, we can think of these basics of the cinema experience as having analogs in grammar, with the phi phenomenon providing a kind of benchmark: That is, if there is a perceptible difference (but one that's not too extreme) between frames, we perceive motion—the province of the verb, and if we see no perceptible difference between frames or if the differences are insignificant, we read stasis—objects—the world of the noun. If the difference is barely palpable, not quite perceptible or not a featured aspect of the image, then perhaps we have something like an *adjective*, another expression of quality beyond those described by the words 'color,' 'texture,' 'composition,' and so on, one that includes a moving image's *character* of movement or repose.

If we want to carry on with this comparison between parts of speech and components of cinema, a truly risky but riotously informative exercise, we might want to think that where the phi phenomenon characterizes the object, action, and quality rooms, persistence of vision characterizes the existential state—the experience of a continuous existence assembled from a precisely fractured stimulus; we see a continuum, where there really is a discreet series of pulses—persistence of vision as the existential qualifier, TO BE.

Persistence of vision demands we ask: Is reality itself seamless (as it seems), or is consciousness the seamless representation of a reality that actually consists of discreet packets that are too small or subtle for our senses? Cinema explores the existential flip side of Merleau-Ponty's famous observation that the ability to perceive similarity in difference underlies all perception.<sup>2</sup> Each new frame continues our expectations of coherent space and time so long as there are significant similarities. We expect that the space and time within the frame will obey the same rules of coherence as the space and time outside the frame. But it doesn't have to.

In a cinema that is self-aware of its mechanisms of illusion, the existential qualifier, *certainty of being*, is itself articulable.

---

<sup>2</sup> Many of the underlying themes in my thinking come from the general mind-set Merleau-Ponty outlines in his extraordinarily influential and comprehensive book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962).

## 6. Frames versus shots, surface versus window

If we take cinema (as most people do) primarily as an extension or illustration of verbal media, that is, a potentially fuller and richer way of telling stories, then regarding it as composed of a sequence of still frames holds virtually no interest for the dramatic filmmakers that followed D. W. Griffith and no meaning potential for almost all of the documentary films that followed in the tradition of the Lumière Bros. Beyond animators and special effects artists, the individuality of the frame harbors values few narrative filmmakers care to articulate.

However, there is an alternative view of cinema that has at least three distinctive perspectives: This view honors and mines the sequence of frames as prior to the sequence of shots; it recognizes the screen as a surface upon which light is projected before seeming to become a window into another world; and it also places extreme value on continuous reinvention and self-reflection at the same time as it eschews the escapism and unreflective seduction of the dramatic cine-narrative. But although this tradition will never usurp the mainstream cultural momentum of narrative cinema, narrative cinema itself continues to slowly absorb some of these same artistic values and insights; insights that ultimately amplify its unique storytelling power.

With the illusion-producing draw of cinema's window being so powerful, we normally pass right through the medium to the message. We reassemble the world of the well-made film on the other side of the screen and we do it with the same effortless ease with which we put together the world around us. In this process, the *screen itself* winds up being apparent to us as rarely as is the assembly of our personal experience. The qualities of the *surface*, those photographic values like brightness, contrast, color saturation, color balance, palette, and the general modulation of light across the frame, are usually subtle qualifiers of the story-illusion we're watching and almost never center stage. We're rarely aware of them, almost never really tuned to them.

So what happens when the surface of the screen *itself* is worked to encode meaning, without the immediate seduction of a window into the escapism of the story? What can we learn from a cinema where the meaning-laden gestures live closer to us than the far side of the screen and where the world beyond the screen has the same oblique relationship to the point of the film as the purely pictorial qualities of the image do in the story-cinema of transparent illusion?

One of the first things we realize is that one often has to learn *and relearn* how to read—how to *see*—a non-seductive cinema, a cinema that is not transparently depictive.

## 7. What the surface of the screen can tell us about language

Music and abstract painting move us in ways and touch us in places that stories can't reach. Their powers are unique and rooted in the nature of their respective media. We might, however, envision a purely pictorial cinema, a cinema with only passing reference, if any, to verbal structure, that by virtue of its *a-literal* nature might ultimately develop an emotional power and reach equivalent to that of music and the subtlety of visual discrimination characteristic of abstract painting.

I've always found this aspect of cinema's potential enticing. However, a primarily pictorial cinema can also be a tool for linguistic analysis. It can, through the mechanisms of comparison and contrast, give us some insight into the workings of natural language—allowing us, through the stream of *images qua images*, to examine the lens of verbal language through which we normally see the world, and to do it with less than the Kantian gyrations required when using verbal language itself.

Also, thinking first about the *surface* of the screen allows us to undramatize cinema, to lose the obligatory flow of a story, and use the screen to explore larger questions of epistemology and ontology rather than just those foibles of humanity that the cinema of transparent illusion illuminates so well.

These two perspectives on the movie screen, as either a *surface* or a *window*, are soul mates and occupy two lobes of a very powerful and moving dialectic, but my own motivation for exploring the medium suggested the many possibilities I saw in their ontological differences—the difference in their degree of reality. Recognizing the *priority* of the surface became, for me, both more honest and more tenable. The suspension of disbelief came to seem to be a denial of the obvious.

As a voracious reader and lover of the way words tell stories, I saw the cinema of seduction and illusion as usurping the imagination of the reader. But more important, I was excited by the potential of an *articulatable surface* to stand as a tabula rasa of expressive possibility; a plane of articulation that had been well prepared by the evolutions of music, painting, poetry, and conceptual art. Unlike the cinema of the window—which was already constrained by the imbedded narrative grammars of speech, theater, and photographic exposition, the cinema of the surface, as well as being nearly drama free, is nearly grammar free. This almost untouched surface, this barely explored machine, seemed a really spectacular lab for scoping out what a new way of parsing the world might reveal.



Perhaps above all, the approach from the surface of cinema invites the serious consideration of phenomenology and the psychology of perception as they impact the creation of meaning.

## 8. Language integrates our perceptions as surely as the nervous system integrates our sense data—hallucination or metadata?

We can think of grammar as the analysis of a habit—our habitual way of putting things together and sharing them in words. Our embedded grammar is so habitual we normally can't remotely come close to any experience that's unfiltered by it. What would we learn, however, if we could look at the world like the 'enfants suavage,' who supposedly have not heard human speech? Or, better yet, what would we learn if we could experience the unmediated and as-yet-unorganized sensory stimuli from the external world—before they are fed by the senses and lower brain to the cortex and its playmates? This has been a driving question for philosophy, science, religion, and art as well as direct chemical tinkering.

It's easy enough to make a superficial inventory of what's required for sensory experience—that is, the sensory precursors of consciousness: light reflects off objects, enters the eyes, goes to various places in the brain to be organized, along with other sensory cues as a representation of a body in a space that contains objects. Sound emanates in air pressure differentials that drum in the ear and then various places in the brain; similarly with taste, smell, touch, and body position, along with who knows what others. The unmediated stimuli, the light waves, sound waves, and so on, as they interface with the relevant body parts, are turned into nerve impulses, a raw something we call 'sense data' on the way to being processed and integrated with stimuli from the other senses and with our accumulated sensory database—so that, organized around what we regard as "the moment," we simply have *the world*, as a whole, in a glance. It's not perceived as a world fabricated from synchronous sensory processing; it's just the world as we know it, with a sensory coherence that's usually only challenged by tricks, trauma, hallucinogens, or pathology.<sup>3</sup>

And here's the root of my obsession with the idea of parsing the universe: Except under these extraordinary conditions we don't get to parse experience *experientially*. We can scrutinize the process at some remove

---

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Sacks writes in his essay "To See and Not to See" in his novel *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995) how the purely sequential sensory world of the blind makes the simultaneous perception of objects in space foreign to the point of incomprehensibility.

with analytical and technological tools. We can even isolate our separate sense impressions to a degree, but we normally have no access to the raw sense data. All it takes to change one's perspective on existence and for consciousness to somehow extend outward toward our sensory surfaces is to get some raw sense data in the face.

The so-called consciousness expanding aspect of LSD refers to its potential to make accessible to consciousness many things that our nervous system usually handles completely behind the scenes. Depending on dosage, the experience of a unified external world can dissolve in a confusion of progressive synesthesia. Sight and sound become confused first; smell and touch, seemingly more primally wired, became confused later. As the disintegrative effects of synesthesia continue, one moves into a realm where stimuli of all kinds are not quite raw, but the ability to decode which stimulus comes through which portal seems to be at the level of deduction or guesswork, not knowledge. Finally, if the dose is high enough, some people have reported experiencing a universe without the screen of self at all, lending credence to Aldous Huxley's notorious and seemingly ridiculous assertion that the brain's first function is as a filter that protects us and allows us to operate selectively in the outrageous noise of the universe.

At any rate, experiencing progressive synesthesia throws into relief the various and particular mechanisms required to construct experience from an unmediated universe, and provides a painfully sharp glimpse into at least some of the nervous system's mechanisms of mediation.

But something else gets thrown into relief as well: *the mediating force of language*. Not only can one see how the brain might be thought of as a filter, it becomes much clearer, amid the unparsed swarm of sense data, just how pervasive a filter *language* is: *sense data have no names*. In the analysis that follows, cinema stands as one possible way to get beyond the filter of language as regards existence, while keeping the filter of the brain more or less intact.

## 9. Letting the mind surround an idea: an introduction to Wittgenstein

When I first became interested in these questions I was lucky enough to find a teacher who introduced me to Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) great posthumous work, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Among the many things that appealed to me about it was the plasticity implied by the fact that Wittgenstein himself never felt it complete enough to publish and so it was compiled from his notes by his students Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach after he died.