The medium of film cannot be considered apart from its message—that is, apart from the multidimensional and diverse experience of viewers. Exploring the interaction of medium and viewer is one of the primary concerns of film theory. There are many aspects to what one might call the film experience. Film is an aesthetic medium that affects a viewer’s senses and judgment. In addition, we experience film in time and place: we spend ninety minutes or so in a darkened room, perceiving sounds and images almost as if their sources were present. While the perceptual experience is philosophically and psychologically central to the appeal of the movies, there are many distinctly social dimensions to film viewing that are worth considering. Film is a communicative act; filmmakers and

World War III has occurred. The earth is devastated, and the protagonist’s ability to retain visual images of the prewar past is highly prized. Subjected to time-traveling experiments, he brings back memories of encounters with a woman in concrete places and specific moments. One set of images haunts the protagonist—at the end of the film it is revealed that he has been doomed to revisit—and witness—the moment of his own death.

Synopsis of Chris Marker’s La jetée (France, 1962)
filmgoers share the particular conventions or codes that structure a movie and make it intelligible. We are not mere blank screens upon which the film's images are projected; we arrive with expectations before we enter the movie theater—expectations created by publicity, reviews, previously viewed films, genre conventions, and so forth. We arrive to sit in the dark with other people, often with popcorn in hand. Moreover, our movie-going experience does not end when the lights go on. We might continue it with the purchase of the soundtrack album, the DVD, or toy tie-ins. Finally, the images, sounds, stories, and characters we experience tend to resonate in our memories and in our vocabulary.

From the earliest commentaries on the new medium to debates about digital technology today, theorists have contemplated the essential nature of the film experience. While film is perceptually immersive—almost hallucinatory—in a way that other media are not, the social dimension, that is, the experience of a mass audience consuming a mass entertainment, cannot be ignored. The critical essays in this section address the psychological, perceptual, and social dimensions of the film experience. First, we consider the nature of perception at the cinema and how it fits with our philosophical and cultural traditions concerning presence, absence, and illusion. Next, we attend to how prominent theorists have framed the psychological and phenomenological aspects of spectatorship as a key concept in film theory. Finally, we look at social and historical dimensions of the film experience, considering, for example, how different modes of film exhibition, or different cultural contexts, shape media reception.

The film described above, Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, is a poetic, black-and-white, 16mm short that both comments on the experience of film viewing and provides a profound viewing experience itself. The jetty of the film's title refers to the airport location where its most significant scene takes place. *La Jetée* is a rare film in that it is composed almost exclusively of still images, which feel distant in space and time. This formal decision encourages the viewer to reflect on the nature of the more usual cinematic illusion, which depends on the perception of movement to make images and scenes seem like they are really taking place. From the very beginning, the film medium has been associated with a curious sensation of presence, although the scenes it depicts are in fact absent. In 1896, Maxim Gorky described a demonstration of the Lumière Cinématographe as, "Not life, but the shadow of life. Not life's movement, but a sort of mute specter." Gorky's words recall quite strikingly the scenario described in the section of Plato's *Republic* known as "The Allegory of the Cave," included as the first work in this section. In this founding text of Western philosophy, Socrates (the protagonist) tells the story of humans literally chained to their seats, mistaking a spectacle of shadows for reality. A resonant image of the viewer's bondage is offered in *La Jetée*, in which time-traveling experiments are performed on the main character while he is bound and blindfolded.

While Plato's allegory has been used to indict cinema as the most illusionist, and therefore deceptive, of art forms, it also supports film theory's more celebratory claim that cinema is the fulfillment of an age-old artistic dream of transcending space and time. For example, Harvard psychologist HUGO MÜNSTERBERG gives an enthusiastic account of the relatively young medium in our second selection, "Why We Go to the Movies." Written for the *Cosmopolitan* in 1915, the piece anticipates his 1916 full-length study, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, regarded as the earliest book of film theory. For Münsterberg, the film experience was distinct from that of other arts, including theater, because of film's ability to manipulate space and time. He asserted that cinema's purpose was not to imitate nature...
but rather to provide a new way of looking at it. This view was echoed in the debates soon to emerge between formalist and realist approaches to the movies that are presented in Part 3. Exploring analogies between such mental processes as emotion and the movies, Münsterberg suggests that the movies are in some sense an exteriorization of the mind.

Similar analogies are used by theorists writing since the 1970s, the period generally referred to as contemporary film theory. CHRISTIAN METZ, who established a reputation as one of the most influential thinkers in the field with his work on film semiology (cinema's specific forms of signification), became interested in the psychoanalytic theories of his contemporary Jacques Lacan. Metz took on the challenge of providing a "metapsychological" explanation—that is, a psychological account that transcends the individual—of the film experience. In his provocative, often poetic work *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz makes an important distinction between "the cinema institution," which for him includes our desire to attend the movies and the pleasure we get from the perceptual experience, and the specific films one might want to analyze. In *La Jetée*, for example, the protagonist feels compelled to experience the past again and again, much as we return to the movies. Metz argues that what makes us so powerfully attached to cinematic figments is their evocation of both the picture-language of dreams and the profound visual experience of recognizing one's own face in a mirror. Lacan identifies the infantile "mirror stage" as the basis of the psychic register dominated by images that he calls "the imaginary," and Metz uses this term in the same sense. He also draws on the psychoanalytic concepts of voyeurism and fetishism to preserve a sense of eroticism and transgression in his description of cinema's appeal. Certainly both terms have everyday resonance—film fans and cinephiles are often considered fetishistic in their zeal, and films like *Rear Window* (1954) indict spectators as "peeping toms." Metz argues we watch the movies with a measure of fetishistic disavowal, that is, the balance of knowledge and belief, an attitude of: "I know very well" that the image projected onscreen is not real, "but just the same, I believe it, I love it."

In a related work, the extremely influential "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," JEAN-LOUIS BAUDRY points out the striking resemblance between the physical configuration of the film projection equipment and Plato's allegorical cave. We do not crave just any illusion, but one that involves projection, immobile spectators, and a deliberate concealing of the equipment required to produce the illusion. Baudry regards this illusionism suspiciously; he feels the cinematic experience is fundamentally deceptive and its participants are ideological dupes. Certainly this view resonates with the penal and painful view of spectatorship in *La Jetée*, in which the main character is forced to produce images by the authorities. These images, at first pleasurable, are ultimately fatal for him to experience.

To an extent, Baudry's position is an exaggeration of Metz's—film form is neglected, as is the social or individual experience of the viewer—in favor of an abstract view of spectatorship understood mainly in terms of unconscious, though socially influenced, processes. The method by which movies stimulate mental functioning is of primary concern to recent writers working at the intersection of philosophy and film. Two approaches that have emerged in recent years include cognitivism and phenomenology. David Bordwell, a profound influence on the former approach as well as on contemporary film studies more generally, understands film style as affording particular cues to viewers who then, through cognitive functioning, respond to those cues by assigning meaning and forming impressions. In "Film, Reality, and Illusion," an essay that appears in *Post-Theory*, an important collection
edited by Bordwell and Noël Carroll, philosopher GREGORY CURRIE argues a very specific point of cognitive film theory: viewers perceive actual motion, not apparent motion, at the movies. The puzzle La Jetée poses about the status of the images perceived by the protagonist is of considerable interest to such a proposition.

Although cognitivism attempts to understand film experience in its specificity, it holds that viewers’ response to film stimuli is predictable. In contrast, a phenomenological approach argues that concrete perception is central to spectatorship and an experience in its fullest sense is particular to space, time, and subject. In “Phenomenology and the Film Experience” from her book The Address of the Eye, VIVIAN SOBCHACK urges us to think of the spectator’s body as directly engaged with film viewing. Sobchak draws on the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to challenge the abstract understandings connected to the Platonic tradition and the apparatus theory of Metz and Baudry. Yet, even such philosophical emphasis on the particular leaves aside some very salient, in fact obvious, aspects of spectatorship. How does social experience affect viewing, and how do we account for spectators from different backgrounds and contexts?

One important strand in recent film studies looks at modes of spectatorship historically. TOM GUNNING’S “The Cinema of Attractions” recognizes the importance of direct address and exhibitionism in early film, challenging dominant concepts of subject positioning and voyeurism, which Gunning sees as specific to later periods of film history with their more elaborated film grammars. For Gunning, the early experience of going to the cinema was much like going to the dance hall and the fairgrounds; that is, the space was public, shared, participatory, and even contestatory. While Gunning’s essay is often positioned as a turn to the historical and away from the theoretical in contemporary film studies, it is in fact very much a theoretical intervention. While advancing a hypothesis about what the film experience might have been like in the early days of the medium, it proposes that certain elements of that experience continue to inform our astonished reactions to cinema and the development of alternative cinematic techniques throughout film history.

The social positioning of a particular viewer in terms of national identity, class, gender, or generation obviously influences his or her reception of film and media. With this as a basic assumption, STUART HALL’S essay “Encoding/Decoding” considers how television’s messages are communicated. Hall insists on a cycle of producing meaning; he rejects the idea of a reflectionist process in which the spectator simply mimes the meanings already set out in the text. For Hall, viewers’ socialization and relative social power influence their reception of media texts—they might accept dominant messages, oppose them, or “negotiate” a response to them by rejecting some elements and accepting others. This conception of actual viewers interacting with preferred textual positions has had an enormous impact that we can designate more broadly as a “cultural studies” paradigm. Holding a view of culture as everyday experience as well as art and leisure, this approach urges consideration of many aspects of viewers’ interaction with the movies, including stars and fandoms, fashion, music, and subcultures. The uniqueness of the film experience in the cultural studies model lies not in the psychic impact of taking in real-seeming images on a luminous large screen while plunged in darkness, but rather in the array of shared elements—conversations, memories, home or repeat viewings, awards shows, spin-offs and spoofs—spread across the social realm. Such an approach could illuminate the social ties formed between admirers of La Jetée as a work of science fiction and source text for
cult director Terry Gilliam (12 Monkeys, 1995), or the networks of art production and critique through which its director Chris Marker and his followers travel.

In order to give as full as possible an understanding of the fundamental viewer experience that is the object of so many theories, the section concludes with Judith Mayne's “Paradoxes of Spectatorship,” which synthesizes many accounts, pointing out their uses as well as their omissions. First, she points to the discrepancy between the way a film addresses a potential viewer and how it's received by an actual one. Second, she complicates deterministic psychoanalytical explanations of film viewing with another psychoanalytic concept, fantasy; we entangle the stories of films with the stories in our heads, hence our responses are not entirely predictable. Finally, she expands on Hall's concept of negotiation, noting that the fact that we do not swallow media messages wholesale does not necessarily mean that we are engaging in something radical with our individualized “film experience.” Mayne's overview frames earlier (classical) questions of perception and links them with recent ones of reception, which advance a more social concept of human interaction with the sets of images and sounds we call “film.” While “spectatorship” is not the only word for the film experience, Mayne's overview of this topic is indicative of its defining role in the field of film studies. As the medium changes, it is experienced differently: we use new technologies and interfaces and engage new relations of time and space to encounter digital versions of cinema as it converges with other media. The philosophical questions that we outline in this section—grounded as they are in bodies, social circumstances, and different histories—bear asking repeatedly, in new ways.

PLATO

The Allegory of the Cave

FROM Republic

Classical philosopher and mathematician Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) was the founder of the Academy in Athens, considered the first institution of higher education, and established his enduring influence through his thirty-five renowned philosophical dialogues. Mentored by Socrates, he established the foundations of Western philosophy and acted, in turn, as the mentor of Aristotle (p. 446), who would become the third major foundational figure in Western thought.

Though it was conceived centuries before the advent of film technology, Plato's philosophy has influenced the way many twentieth-century film scholars understand and interpret the movie image. In the shadow of the Peloponnesian War, Plato became increasingly disillusioned with practical politics. Influenced by Socrates, he practiced a life based in philosophy rather than the vagaries of an ever-fluctuating world. His writings employed the “Socratic
method,” investigating questions of ethics and knowledge through an evolving fictional dialogue meant to refine those questions and their answers in a way that would ultimately reveal the truth. Plato’s celebrated mandate that the only life worth living is a reflective or philosophical life generated the dialogical and critical thinking that would influence much philosophy and criticism for the next two millennia. Through his twenty-six dramatic dialogues, Plato ranged over the central concerns of humanity: from justice and truth to love, beauty, and “goodness.” The concept of “mimesis,” or imitation, was central in all of Plato’s inquiries, reflecting his understanding that artists and poets create images or representations of the material world. But the concept also indicates Plato’s preoccupation with how the material world is itself a mere reflection of universal and immutable “Forms” or “Ideas.” What has become known as “The Allegory of the Cave” (from book 7 of Plato’s Republic, believed to have been written ca. 380–360 B.C.E.) is a key example of Plato’s quest for knowledge in a world of appearances.

In this dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Plato argues a fundamentally idealist perspective of the image, meaning that although we often assume we see the reality of the world, in fact we only see projections, shadows, or images of reality—we rarely look directly at it. We are like prisoners who cannot move their heads, viewing “shadows of artifacts” that have “no substance,” projected on a cave wall in front of us. If, for Plato, this predicament describes an intellectual position, modern film theorists would see in it both a physical and psychological version of how spectators view movies. Plato’s allegory became a crucial touchstone for film theory, particularly in the 1970s. For critics interested in film spectatorship and psychoanalytic and ideological issues, the allegory provides an important starting point for theorizing the complex epistemological issues surrounding how we watch movies. Writers such as Christian Metz (p. 17) and Jean-Louis Baudry (p. 34) see in “The Allegory of the Cave” an early philosophical model that helps explain a visual dynamics that blurs distinctions between reality and images, and allows films to distort the truth of our lives. Others, such as Vivian Sobchack (p. 62), suggest that Plato’s position initiates a long tradition of iconophobia, a tradition that implicitly suspects all images as incapable of providing real knowledge or truth.

READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS

- Examine and compare Plato’s allegory with the physical position of a traditional filmgoer’s experience. To what extent can we be compared to “prisoners” with “heads motionless in the dark” when we watch movies in a movie theater? In what ways does this analogy not hold up in comparison with different kinds of film viewing (i.e., watching a film in a movie theater versus watching a film on DVD at home)?

- Plato claims that images are merely a reflection of the material world and that the material world is only a reflection of a higher intelligence. Examine the notions of “reflection” and “imitation” as they apply to the movies.

- In what ways are Plato’s questions about the relation of images to reality or “truth” pertinent to debates about film images as illusions? What are the implications for a more critical engagement with films as a way of “forming judgments”? How might some filmmakers and film audiences see the “Ideas” that Plato sees as superior to film images?

- Key Concepts: Mimesis; Projections; Dialectics; Iconophobia
PLATO The Allegory of the Cave

[Socrates] Next, I said, compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

[Glaucon:] I’m imagining it.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you’d expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

It’s a strange image you’re describing, and strange prisoners.

They’re like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them?

How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life?
What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn’t the same true of them?

Of course.
And if they could talk to one another, don’t you think they’d suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?

They’d have to.

And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don’t you think they’d believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so?

I certainly do.

Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

They must surely believe that.

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before. What do you think he’d say, if we told him what he’d seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don’t you think he’d be at a loss and that he’d believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?

Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn’t his eyes hurt, and wouldn’t he turn around and flee towards the things he’s able to see, believing that they’re really clearer than the ones he’s being shown?
He would.
And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

He would be unable to see them, at least at first.
I suppose, then, that he'd need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun.

Of course.
Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.
Necessarily so.
And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see.
It's clear that would be his next step.
What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don't you think that he'd count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Certainly.
And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn't he feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to “work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,” and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?

I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.
Consider this too. If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes—coming suddenly out of the sun like that—be filled with darkness?
They certainly would.
And before his eyes had recovered—and the adjustment would not be quick—while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile to even try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

They certainly would.
This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope
to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it’s true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

NOTES
1. Reading *parionta autous nomizein anomazein*. E.g. they would think that the name “human being” applied to the shadow of a statue of a human being. [Tr.]
2. *Odyssey* 11.489–90. The shade of the dead Achilles speaks these words to Odysseus, who is visiting Hades. Plato is, therefore, likening the cave dwellers to the dead. [Tr.]

**HUGO MÜNSTERBERG**

Why We Go to the Movies

During his lifetime, Hugo Münsterberg (1863–1916) was best known for such scholarly studies of psychology as *The Activity of the Will* (1889) and *Business Psychology* (1915), books that established his reputation as one of the founding fathers of applied psychology. A Harvard University professor who taught classes in psychology and sociology, Münsterberg was also deeply interested in the movies. Combining his academic background with his interest in the movies, Münsterberg’s 1916 work, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, is often considered the first serious work of film theory. First published as an article in the *Cosmopolitan* in 1915, “Why We Go to the Movies” appears at a critical turning point in film history. In fact, Münsterberg’s use of the term “photoplay” suggests the still-novel place of the movies, situated somewhere between photography and plays, even as he works determinedly to distinguish film practice from those precedents. That D. W. Griffith’s monumental and controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Charlie Chaplin’s mythic *The Tramp* (1915) appear the same year as Münsterberg’s essay is one sign of how rapidly the movies were advancing technologically, formally, and intellectually. With these advances came questions and fears about the social effects and aesthetic value of movies: were they education, art, or entertainment?

In “Why We Go to the Movies,” Münsterberg attempts to answer these questions and anticipates the case for cinematic specificity and the antirealist position that future theorists would espouse. Münsterberg definitively states that film is a unique artistic practice—quite different from other arts like photography and drama—that profoundly influences how audiences see and understand their world. His statement foreshadows, among others, Rudolf Arnheim (p. 279) and Noël Carroll’s work on the original nature of the film medium. Münsterberg also resists common assumptions that the primary
strength of the movies is to reproduce the physical world; instead, he locates the power of movies in the psychological realm of the mind. With this argument, we see a forerunner of Christian Metz (p. 17), Laura Mulvey (p. 713), and other film theorists developing different psychoanalytical or psychological models of the movies.

READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS

According to Münsterberg, the movies “democratize” the theater. At the same time, he states that “the general public would need slowly to be educated toward the higher and higher forms of the photplayers’ art.” What does he mean by this, and how does he reconcile the two seemingly contradictory thoughts?

More than ten years before synchronous sound came to the cinema, Münsterberg argued that the “Edison scheme of connecting the camera with the graphophone . . . interfered with the chance of the moving pictures to develop their original nature.” What is the basis for his position? How might the use of sound be integrated into Münsterberg’s vision of the cinema?

For Münsterberg, the close-up is the heart of the cinema. Why?

Münsterberg states that film uniquely shapes our perception as attention, memory, imagination, and emotion. What does he mean by this? Examine a film or part of a film, and demonstrate how it reflects Münsterberg’s view.

Key Concepts: Aesthetics; Mechanical Imitation; Mental Interpretation; Photoplay; Space Reality; Thought-Effect

Why We Go to the Movies

The “movies” themselves are moving all the time. To be sure, they move on different roads. One road is that of education and instruction. How modest were the means with which the kinematoscope of fifteen years ago showed us the happenings of the world and gave us glances at current events and exhibited a little of animal life! It was a long way indeed from there to the marvelous pictures of the European war or to those fascinating moving-picture journeys to the Antarctic and to the beasts of the African desert. We all have seen the wonders of the deep sea and the splendor of foreign worlds. Whatever is worth learning in the realm of visible things, from the microscopic Infusoria in the drop of water to the most colossal works of man and of nature, all can be made interesting and stimulating in the moving films. Millions have learned in the dark houses their geography and history and natural science.

This first article appeared in The Cosmopolitan 60, no. 1 (December 15, 1915): 22–32. The original article was accompanied by several photographs both of Münsterberg and of images from movies used to illustrate the editing and dramatic principles he is explaining.
Yet this power of the moving pictures to supplement the schoolroom and the newspaper and the library is, after all, much less important than its chief task—to bring entertainment and enjoyment and happiness to the masses. The theater and the vaudeville and the novel must yield room—and ample room—to the art of the pictures.

But can we really say that the film brings us art in the higher sense of the word? Was it not for quite a while the fashion among those who love art to look down upon the tricks of the film and to despise them as inartistic? Those who could afford to visit the true theater felt it as below their level to indulge in such a cheap substitute which lacked the glory of the stage with spoken words. But that time lies far behind us. Even the most artistic public has learned to enjoy a high-class photoplay.

I may confess frankly that I was one of those snobbish late-comers. Until a year ago I had never seen a real photoplay. Although I was always a passionate lover of the theater, I should have felt it as undignified for a Harvard Professor to attend a moving-picture show, just as I should not have gone to a vaudeville performance or to a museum of wax figures or to a phonograph concert. Last year, while I was traveling a thousand miles from Boston, I and a friend risked seeing *Neptune’s Daughter*, and my conversion was rapid. I recognized at once that here marvelous possibilities were open, and I began to explore with eagerness the world which was new to me. Reel after reel moved along before my eyes—all styles, all makes. I went with the crowd to Anita Stewart and Mary Pickford and Charles Chaplin; I saw Pathé and Vitagraph, Lubin and Essanay, Paramount and Majestic, Universal and Knickerbocker. I read the books on how to write scenarios; I visited the manufacturing companies, and, finally, I began to experiment myself. Surely I am now under the spell of the “movies” and, while my case may be worse than the average, all the world is somewhat under this spell.

**A New Form of Art**

Why did this change come? Was it because the more and more improved technique brought the imitation of the theater nearer and nearer to the impression of the real stage and thus made the substitute almost as good as the original? Not at all. The real reason was just the opposite. The more the photoplays developed, the more it was felt that it was not their task simply to be an inexpensive imitation of the theater, but that they should bring us an entirely new form of art. As long as the old belief prevailed that the moving-picture performances were to give us the same art which the drama gave, their deficiencies were evident. But if they have an original task, if they offer an art of their own, different from that of the theater, as the art of the painter is different from that of the sculptor, then it is clear that the one is not to be measured by the other. Who dares to say that the marble bust is a failure because it cannot show us the colors which give charm to the portrait painting? On the contrary, we destroy the beauty of the marble statue as soon as we paint the cheeks of a Venus.

It is never the purpose of an art simply to imitate nature. The painting would not be better if the painted flowers gave us fragrance. It is the very essence of art to give us something which appeals to us with the claims of reality and yet which is entirely different from real nature and real life and is set off from them by its artistic means. For this reason we put the statue on a pedestal and the painting into a frame and the dramatic play on a stage. We do not want them to be taken as parts of the
real world, and the highest art of all, music, speaks a language which has not even similarity to the happenings of the world.

If the aim of every art were simply to come as near as possible to reality, the photoplay would stand endlessly far behind the performances of real actors on the stage. But when it is recognized that each art is a particular way of suggesting life and of awaking interest, without giving life or nature themselves, the moving pictures come into their own. They offer an entirely new approach to beauty. They give an art which must develop in paths quite separate from those of the stage. It will reach the greater height the more it learns to free itself from the shackles of the theater and to live up to its own forms.

It is only natural that it began with a mere imitation of the theater, just as the automobiles were at first simple horse-carriages moved by machinery. Any new principle finds its own form slowly. The photoplay of today is already as different from those theater imitations as a racing automobile is from a buggy. As soon as the two forms of art are recognized as belonging to two entirely different spheres, they do not disturb each other. Even the most ideal moving picture can never in the least give that particular artistic pleasure which a dramatic theater performance offers. But, on the other hand, even the best drama on the stage will not replace the photoplay as soon as this has reached its ideal perfection.

**True Meaning of the Photoplay**

What is the true meaning of the “movies”? What are their special ways of showing us the world? In the beginning, the public enjoyed simply the surprising tricks of a technique which showed actual movement in a photograph. But this purely technical interest has long since faded away. What remains, then, as the lasting source of enjoyment? The color is lacking and so is the depth of the stage; above all, the tone of the voice is absent. Yet we do not miss the color, the depth, or the words. We are fully under the spell of this silent world, and the Edison scheme of connecting the camera with the graphophone, and so to add spoken words to the moving pictures, was not successful for very good reasons. It really interfered with the chance of the moving pictures to develop their original nature. They sank back to the level of mere mechanical imitation of the theater.

But while so much was taken away from the offering of every theater stage, how much has come instead! The most evident gain of the new scheme is the reduction of expenses. One actor is now able to entertain a hundred and a thousand audiences at the same time; one stage-setting is sufficient to give pleasure to millions. The theater is thus democratized. Everybody’s purse allows him to see the greatest artists, and in every village a stage can be set up. With twenty thousand picture-theaters in this country alone, the hope that the bliss of art may come to everyone has been fulfilled.

But this mere spreading over the globe is not in itself an enrichment of the artistic means. The graphophone brings music into every cottage, but no one can claim that the musical disks have brought us a new art. Their rendering of orchestra or opera is nothing but a mechanical repetition of the free musical art and does not add anything to the symphony or the song.

With the photoplay it is entirely different. It shows us far more than any stage can show, or, rather, it shows us something fundamentally different. The first step
away from the theater was soon made. The moving pictures allow a rapidity in the change of scenes which no stage manager could imitate. At first, these possibilities were used only for humorous effects. We enjoyed the lightening quickness with which we could follow the eloper over the roofs of the town, up-stairs and down, into cellar and attic, and jump with him into the motor-car and race over the country roads, changing the background a score of times in a few minutes, until the culprit falls over a bridge into the water and is caught by the police.

This slap-stick humor has not disappeared, but the rapid change of scenes has meanwhile been put into the service of much higher aims. The true development of an artistic plot has been brought to possibilities which the real drama does not know by allowing the eye to follow the hero and heroine continuously from place to place. Now he leaves his room, now we see him passing along the street, now he enters the house of his beloved, now he is led into the parlor, now she is hurrying to the library of her father, now they all go to the garden. New stage-settings are ever sliding into one another; the limitations of space are overcome. It is as if the laws of nature were overwhelmed and, through this liberation from space, a freedom gained which gives new wings to the artistic imagination. This perfect independence from the narrow ties of space-reality gives to the photoplay a new life-chance which alone would secure it the right of a new form of art.

But with the quick change of background, the photoartist also gained the power of a rapidity of motion which leaves actual men behind. And from here it was only a step to the performance of actions which could not be carried out in nature at all. This, too, was made serviceable at first to a rather rough humor. The policeman who climbed up the solid stone front of a high building was in reality photographed creeping over a flat picture of a building spread on the floor. Every day brought us new tricks. We saw how the magician breaks one egg after another and takes out of each egg a little fairy and puts one after another on his hand and how they begin to dance. For the camera, such magical wonders are not difficult, but no theater could ever try to match them. Rich artistic effects are secured, and while on the stage every fairy-tale is clumsy and hardly able to create an illusion, in the film we really see the man transformed into a beast and the flower into a girl.

**The Close-Up**

But while, through this power to break down the barriers of space and to make the impossible actions possible, new fascinating effects could be reached, the whole still remained in the outer framework of the stage, inasmuch as everything was the presentation of an action in its successive stages. The photoplay showed a performance, however rapid or impossible, as it would go on in the outer world. An entirely new perspective was opened when the managers of the film-play introduced the “close-up” and similar new methods. The close-up, first made familiar to every friend of the photoplay by the Vitagraph artists, is indeed most characteristic of the emancipation of the moving pictures. As everybody knows, this is the scheme by which a particular part of the picture, perhaps only the face of the hero or his hand or only a ring on his finger, becomes greatly enlarged and replaces, for an instant, the whole stage.

But while everyone is familiar with the method, too few are aware that here indeed we have crossed a great aesthetic line of demarcation and have turned to a
form of expression which is entirely foreign to the real stage. Even the most wonderful creations, the great historical plays, where thousands fill the battle-fields, or the most fantastic caprices, where fairies fly over the stage, could be performed in a theater. But this close-up leaves all stagecraft behind. The stage can give us only changes in the outer world; but if we suddenly neglect everything in the room and look only at the hand which carries the dagger, the change is not one outside but inside our mind. It is a turning of our attention. We withdraw our attention from all which is unimportant and concentrate it on that one point on which the action is focussed. The photoplay is an art in which not only the outer events but our own inner actions become effective. Our own attention is projected into the life around us.

**Novel Methods of Presentation**

But attention is not the only function of our mind which becomes effective in the moving pictures. Let us think of another action of our mind, the act of memory. When we go through an experience in practical life, we are constantly remembering happenings of the past. The photoplay can overcome the limits of time just as easily as those of space. In many of the newer plays, an unusual fascination is secured by interrupting the pictures of the present events with quickly passing images of earlier scenes. It is as if a quick remembrance were flitting through our mind.

Two passengers are sitting in the smoking-room of a ship; we see them talking about their adventurous life-experiences. The one makes the gesture of speaking; in the next instant we see him climbing the glacier, and then crossing the jungle and shooting tigers, and then fighting in the Boer War, and then strolling through Paris; but every few seconds we return to the smoking-room and keep thus the background of the story before us. Yet our mind does not only combine memories; our thought wanders from one event to another which runs parallel. Here is a dancing-hall in which a man and a girl are flirting; the girl's mother sits at home in a modest attic room and waits for her anxiously; the man's wife is unhappy in her luxurious parlor. Now the three scenes are interwoven: the dancing-hall is seen for ten seconds, then the attic scene for five seconds, the parlor scene for five seconds, then the dancing-hall again, and so on. They chase one another like the tones of an orchestra.

The order of the pictures on the screen is no longer the order of events in nature, but rather that of our own mental play. Here lies the reason why this new art has such peculiar interest for the psychologist. It is the only visual art in which the whole richness of our inner life, our perceptions, our memory, and our imagination, our expectation and our attention can be made living in the outer impressions themselves. As long as the photoartist made no use of these possibilities, his play lagged far behind that of the real theater. But since he has conquered these new methods of mental interpretation, he has created an art which is a worthy rival of the drama, entirely independent from and in not a few respects superior to the theater.

As soon as the original character of the photoplay is understood, it can easily be grasped that we are only at the beginning of a great aesthetic movement. The technical development of the photo-stage and of the camera will go on, and yet that is entirely secondary to the much more essential progress of the new art toward its highest fulfillment. The producer of the photoplays must free himself more and more from the idea with which he started to imitate the stage—and must
more and more win for the new art its own rights. How reluctant as yet, for instance, are the efforts to introduce the power of the imagination! In many a photoplay the murderer sees the ghost of his victim. But such devices are, after all, not unfamiliar on the regular stage. Just here the possibilities of the camera are unlimited. The girl in her happy first love sees the whole world in a new glamour and a new radiant beauty. The poet can make her speak so; only the photoplay could show her in this new jubilant world. This is something very different from the charming plays which we already possess today in which Princess Nicotina bewitches us or Neptune's daughter arises from the waves. Such fantastic plays tell us a pretty story, but what we must expect from the photoplay of the future is that the pictures reveal to us our own imaginative play as music can do with its magic tones.

From an artistic point of view, it is entirely wrong to fancy that such imaginative molding of the world must be confined to fairy-tales because it does not correspond to the reality of the world. As long as we argue from such a point of view we have not reached true art. Even the most realistic art always gives us something different from reality. As long as the artistic means harmonizes with our inner view of an experience, it is welcome in the world of art. Even the most rapturous flights of the imagination projected on the screen may have as much inner truth as any melodramatic story. The photoartist needs only the courage to make the spectator feel that he is truly in a temple of art.

How the Film Expresses Emotions

But even memory, attention, and imagination do not tell the whole story of our inner mind. The core of man lies in his feelings and emotions. As soon as the photoplay moves along its own way, the expression of feelings and emotions will come to the foreground. Of course the producer would say that he shows love and hate and fear and delight and envy and disgust and hope and enthusiasm all in his reels. Certainly he shows them, but simply with the methods of the ordinary stage. The angry man clenches his fist and the frightened man shows signs of terror. We see the gestures and the actions; and yet how inferior is all that to the emotional words which the dramatist can put into the mouth of his persons on the stage! What Romeo and Juliet have to express is, after all, better said by Shakespeare's words than by any mere gestures of tenderness. As long as the photoplay works only with the methods of the theater, we must regret that we are deprived of the words.

But what a different perspective is opened if we think of the unlimited means with which the film may express feeling and sentiment through means of its own. We saw that, in the close-up, the camera can do what in our mind our attention is doing: the camera goes nearer to the object and thus concentrates everything on one point. In our feelings and emotions, the mind takes a sort of stand toward the surroundings. Again, the camera must be made to imitate such a mental action. In the excited mind, the smooth flow of impressions is interrupted. Let the camera break the flow of the pictures. Give us a thought-effect which the musician calls "staccato." We can produce it in the film by omitting certain pictures so that the action seems to jump from one stage to another. Or let the pictures vibrate. We can do this by quickly reversing the order of the pictures which follow one another with the rapidity of sixteen photograms to the second. After pictures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, we give once more 6, 5, 4, turn then from 4 to picture 9, go back from 9 to 6, then from 6 to 12, and the effect will be
that a trilling, vibrating motion goes through the surroundings. Or let the camera turn the straight lines into curves, or the rhythm slow down like a musical adagio, or become rapid like an allegro or presto. In every case effects are produced in which changes of inner excitement seem to take hold of the surrounding world.

**Imitating Mental Action**

The violinist may play one piece after another and we may see in the film the sentiments of those various pieces through the melodious movements around him. His own face may remain unchanged, but everything around him may enter into the mood of the tones and chords. It is in the spirit of the theater to express horror by the wild gestures of the body. It would be in the spirit of the photoplay to make the world around the terrified person change in a horrifying, ghastly way. The camera can do that, and the spectator would come deeply under the spell of the emotion to be expressed. It becomes his emotion, just as in the close-up it is his attention which is forced on the single detail. If a man is hypnotized in the scene, the change of his feelings can only clumsily be shown in his face, but his surroundings may take uncanny forms until a kind of hypnotic spell lies over the whole audience.

Of course the general public would need slowly to be educated toward the higher and higher forms of the photoplayers' art. The masses prefer Sousa's Band to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It needs a certain training to appreciate the highest forms of art, but nobody doubts that the symphony program, from Beethoven to Debussy, stands on a much higher artistic level than the marches and dances which the unmusical hearers love best. The straight melodrama of the film, offering nothing which the drama of the theater could not present better, will attract the "unmusical" minds more than the true high art of the photoplay. But he who believes the message of beauty for the masses of the people will not yield to such superficial desires. He will unceasingly lift the photoplay to higher and higher art, and to do so he must become conscious of the principles which are involved. But this can be done only if he breaks with the tradition of the theater and understands that the photoplay expresses the action of the mind as against the mere action of the body. Of course the drama presents this inner side of the spoken word which is missing in the pantomime of the film. The inner mind which the camera exhibits must lie in those actions of the camera itself by which space and time are overcome and attention, memory, imagination, and emotion are impressed on the bodily world.

The photoplay of the future, if it is really to rise to further heights, will thus become more than any other art the domain of the psychologist who analyzes the working of the mind. We have seen in recent years how the work of the modern psychologist has become influential and helpful in many different spheres of practical life. Education and medicine, commerce and industry, law and social reform have been greatly aided by the contact with the psychologist, who has put the results of his psychological laboratory into the service of daily life. In the film-world, the only scientist who has been consulted in the past has been the physicist, who prepared the technical devices for the work of the camera. The time seems ripe for his scientific brother, the psychologist, to enter the field and to lead the photoplay to those wonders which its progress has begun to suggest since the leaders dared to leave the paths of mere theatrical performance. The more psychology enters into the sphere of the moving pictures, the more they will be worthy of an independent place in the world.
of true art and become really a means of cultural education to young and old. The presentations of the films will never supersede those of the theater any more than sculpture can supersede painting or lyrics can supersede music, but they will bring us the noble fulfillment of an artistic desire which none of the other arts can bring.

This is truly the art of the future.

CHRISTIAN METZ

Loving the Cinema; Identification, Mirror; Disavowal, Fetishism

FROM The Imaginary Signifier

A leading film theoretician in France, Christian Metz (1931–1993) opened the way in the 1960s to the establishment of film theory as a new intellectual discipline. Metz attended the École Normale Supérieure, along with other intellectuals of his generation who were inspired by the structuralist movement (a study of human culture as a system of signs), including Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu. He received his doctorate in general linguistics at the Sorbonne. Metz’s earlier work, most notably Essais sur la signification au cinéma (1968; translated as Film Language in 1974), defined film as a language by using structural linguistics, or semiology, based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

With an awareness of language and a critical distance from the object of study that characterized many twentieth-century thinkers, Metz turned away from the classical film theory of Siegfried Kracauer (p. 289) and André Bazin (p. 309), and disengaged with then-current auteurist models that were seen as impressionistic and subjective. Instead, he focused on the question of how films in general are understood, and he investigated film as one of many structures of signification that can be decoded by the linguistic model.

By the mid-1970s, the influence of Louis Althusser’s work on ideology and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, as well as the cultural impact of the 1968 revolutions, prompted the shift in Metz’s work from structuralist and formalist analysis to theories of signification, ideology, and psychoanalysis. This shift parallels two trends in film theory and practice during this period: the filmic medium became an object of ideological analysis, and films themselves (such as François Truffaut’s Day for Night [1973] and Marguerite Duras’s India Song [1975]) offered a critique of dominant ideology through reflexivity and political engagement. Metz’s The Imaginary Signifier, the 1986 translation of essays written between 1973 and 1976, signals the theoretical impulse of this moment to identify and deconstruct the ideological structures implied in commercial narrative cinema.

In these excerpts, Metz begins (in “Loving the Cinema”) with outlining the methodological need for a film theorist to remain detached from the beloved object of study in order to analyze its objective conditions—a scientific distance he believes is lacking in most classical approaches to film, such as Bazin’s phenomenological treatment of the filmic image. He
continues with the notion of perception in cinema, drawing particularly on Lacan's conception of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real in understanding the nature of perception. Metz distinguishes cinema from other arts by saying that while it is "more perceptual" than other arts, these perceptions are marked by "unreality to an unusual degree," since what we perceive on screen are not actual objects but rather images that refer to their absence. Cinema, therefore, is an imaginary signifier, existing exclusively in the imaginary activity of the spectator. Metz connects the simultaneous perceptual wealth and absence of cinema to Lacan's notion of the absent object that grounds desire in lack and to the "mirror stage" in which the human subject (mis)recognizes itself. To explain the means by which cinema attempts to make up for this lack and create a state of wholeness for the spectator, Metz uses three fundamental psychoanalytic processes—identification, voyeurism, and fetishism—which he expands to the effects and attractions of the cinematic apparatus.

*The Imaginary Signifier* remains one of the most important works in film theory. It makes the classical question about the impression of reality inseparable from the question of spectatorial positioning, and spectatorial positioning inseparable from the question of cinema as an institution. Metz's work not only cemented the significance of psychoanalytic film theory but also became important to many key movements such as feminist and postcolonial film theory.

**READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS**

- Describing the power of cinema as an institution, Metz says that "loving the cinema and understanding film are no more than two closely mingled aspects of one vast socio-psychical machinery." At the same time, he tries to make a clear distinction between a spectator, or what he considers a "deluded subject ego," and a film theorist, someone with a distant and scientific approach to the medium. What does he mean by these two seemingly different arguments, and how does he reconcile them?
- For Metz, the meaning of film is systemic, defined within the conventions and codes of the institution. To what extent, if at all, does this position allow for subjective (and interpretative) freedom for the spectator?
- The conditions of film reception, such as the darkness of the cinema, seem integral to Metz's notions of voyeurism, fetishism, and scopic fascination. Consider the relevance of these psychoanalytic notions in the context of more recent technological changes and altered conditions of film reception.
- **Key Concepts:** The Imaginary; Fetishism; Jouissance; Primary Identification; Mirror Stage

**Loving the Cinema**

What is it in the end that I want to say about these writings whose approach is that of a love? Certainly not that their authors are "wrong" all the time, or that what they say is always false. That is not the point. Wishing to get rid of the affective
gets one nowhere, nor would it get this article anywhere. Even less is it my purpose to forget that these *assertive affects* are the reversed consequence of the opposite cultural prejudice, still alive today, that sees in the cinema a low-level distraction (and which thus starts by thinking in levels). In a history of contemporary culture the concern for the good object which I have tried to bring out can only be understood in relation to the bad-object status that society initially conferred on the cinema and to which it still confines it to some extent. In doing so it has considerably set back the possibility of a knowledge of the cinematic fact: directly (by neglect or disdain), but also by reaction (which concerns me here), by exacerbating in those concerned with the cinema the persistent drama of an adherence that sometimes becomes a kind of entanglement—the revolt against an enforced marginalization.

Discourse about the cinema is too often part of the institution, whereas it should be studying it and believes or pretends that it is doing so. It is, as I have said, its third machine: after the one that manufactures the films, and the one that consumes them, the one that vauts them, that valorizes the product. Often, by unexpected paths, unperceived by those who have quite unintentionally taken them, paths which manifest the radical exteriority of effects to conscious intentions, writings on film become another form of cinema advertising and at the same time a linguistic appendage of the institution itself. Like those alienated sociologists who unknowingly repeat the pronouncements of their society, it extends the object, it idealizes it instead of turning back on to it, it makes explicit the film's inaudible murmuring to us of “Love me”: a mirror reduplication of the film's own ideological inspiration, already based on the mirror identification of the spectator with the camera (or secondarily with the characters, if any).

Discourse about the cinema then becomes a dream: an uninterpreted dream. This is what constitutes its symptomatic value; it has already said everything. But it is also what makes it obligatory to turn it inside out like a glove, to return it like the gauntlet on accepting a challenge; it does not know what it is saying. Knowledge of the cinema is obtained via a *reprise* of the native discourse, in two senses of the word: taking it into consideration and re-establishing it.

The turning I am discussing is never anything but a return. In the cinema, too, the product presents us with a reversed image of the production, as it does in the materialist conception of ideologies, or in neurotic rationalizations, as in the camera obscura which, with its 180-degree-turned optical image, is the very starting-point of cinematic technique. The effort towards knowing is necessarily sadistic insofar as it can only grasp its object against the grain, re-ascend the slopes of the institution (whereas the latter is designed for one to “follow” them, to descend them), like the interpretation that goes back along the path of the dream-work, acting by nature in the manner of a counter-current.

To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end, taking it as the target for the very same scopic drive which had made one love it. Have broken with it, as certain relationships are broken, not in order to move on to something else, but in order to return to it at the next bend in the spiral. Carry the institution inside one still so that it is in a place accessible to self-analysis, but carry it there as a distinct instance which does not over-infiltrate the rest
of the ego with the thousand paralyzing bonds of a tender unconditionality. Not have forgotten what the cinephile one used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections, in the three dimensions of his living being, and yet no longer be invaded by him; not have lost sight of him, but be keeping an eye on him. Finally, be him and not be him, since all in all these are the two conditions on which one can speak of him.

This balance may seem a somewhat acrobatic one. It is and it is not. Of course no one can be sure to attain it perfectly, everyone is in danger of slipping off on one side or the other. And yet, in principle, considering the very possibility of maintaining such a position, it is not true that it is so very acrobatic, or rather it is no more so than the other (really very similar) mental postures required for tasks more ordinarily evoked. This is forgotten because it is not customary (it is one of the great taboos of scientism, one of its terrors) to mention the metapsychological preconditions of scientific work. But for anyone who is prepared to consider them, the kind of deliberate ambivalence I am trying to describe, this special variety of splitting, at once salutary and fragile, this minimum of flexibility in one’s relations to oneself, this economic conversion by which a strong object cathexis (here attraction to the cinema), initially molar and opaque, subsequently undergoes an instinctual vicissitude that bifidates it and arranges it like a pair of pliers, one pincer (voyeuristic sadism sublimated into epistemophilia) coming to meet the other in which the original imaginary of the dual effusion with the object is retained as a (living, surviving) witness—in short, this itinerary and the present configuration that results from it are not in the end especially exceptional or contorted (even if for some “scientists” they are among those things that must not be stated). It is itineraries and economies of the same kind (tendentiously, still, never as a finished result) that also define the objective conditions of the subjective possibility of the ethnologist’s work, or that of the analysand in the cure, ultimately of all work of interprétance in the semiotic and Peircean sense of the word (= translation from one system into another). What really is uncommon is not the thing itself, but simply the idea that cinematic studies are not in themselves blessed with any special privilege of exemption, any magical extra-territoriality, any adolescent immunity from the common requirements of knowledge and symbolic cathexis which are (sometimes) more clearly perceived in other fields.

Identification, Mirror

“W hat contribution can Freudian psychoanalysis make to the knowledge of the cinematic signifier?": that was the question-dream I posed (the scientific imaginary wishing to be symbolized), and it seems to me that I have now more or less unwound it; unwound but no more; I have not given it an answer. I have simply paid attention to what it was I wished to say (one never knows this until one has written it down), I have only questioned my question: this unanswered character is one that has to be deliberately accepted, it is constitutive of any epistemological procedure.

Since I have wished to mark the places (as empty boxes some of which are beginning to fill without waiting for me, and so much the better), the places of different directions of work, and particularly of the last, the psychoanalytic exploration of the signifier, which concerns me especially, I must now begin to inscribe something in this
last box; must take further, and more plainly in the direction of the unconscious, the
analysis of the investigator’s desire that makes me write. And to start with, of course,
this means asking a new question: among the specific features of the cinematic signi-

Perception, Imaginary

The cinema’s signifier is perceptual (visual and auditory). So is that of literature,
since the written chain has to be read, but it involves a more restricted perceptual
register: only graphemes, writing. So too are those of painting, sculpture, architec-
ture, photography, but still within limits, and different ones: absence of auditory
perception, absence in the visual itself of certain important dimensions such as
time and movement (obviously there is the time of the look, but the object looked at
is not inscribed in a precise and ordered time sequence forced on the spectator from
outside). Music’s signifier is perceptual as well, but, like the others, less “extensive”
than that of the cinema: here it is vision which is absent, and even in the auditory,
extended speech (except in song). What first strikes one then is that the cinema is
more perceptual, if the phrase is allowable, than many other means of expression;
it mobilizes a larger number of the axes of perception. (That is why the cinema has
sometimes been presented as a “synthesis of all the arts”; which does not mean very
much, but if we restrict ourselves to the quantitative tally of the registers of percep-
tion, it is true that the cinema contains within itself the signifiers of other arts: it can
present pictures to us, make us hear music, it is made of photographs, etc.)

Nevertheless, this as it were numerical “superiority” disappears if the cinema is
compared with the theater, the opera and other spectacles of the same type. The latter
too involve sight and hearing simultaneously, linguistic audition and non-linguistic
audition, movement, real temporal progression. Their difference from the cinema lies
elsewhere: they do not consist of images, the perceptions they offer to the eye and the
ear are inscribed in a true space (not a photographed one), the same one as that occu-
pied by the public during the performance; everything the audience hear and see is
actively produced in their presence, by human beings or props which are themselves
present. This is not the problem of fiction but that of the definitional characteristics
of the signifier: whether or no the theatrical play mimes a fable, its action, if need be
mimetic, is still managed by real persons evolving in real time and space, on the same
stage or “scene” as the public. The “other scene,” which is precisely not so called, is the
cinematic screen (closer to phantasy from the outset): what unfolds there may, as be-
fore, be more or less fictional, but the unfolding itself is fictive: the actor, the “décor,”
the words one hears are all absent, everything is recorded (as a memory trace which
is immediately so, without having been something else before), and this is still true if
what is recorded is not a “story” and does not aim for the fictional illusion proper. For
it is the signifier itself, and as a whole, that is recorded, that is absence: a little rolled up
perforated strip which “contains” vast landscapes, fixed battles, the melting of the ice
on the River Neva, and whole life-times, and yet can be enclosed in the familiar round
metal tin, of modest dimensions, clear proof that it does not “really” contain all that.

At the theater, Sarah Bernhardt may tell me she is Phèdre or, if the play were
from another period and rejected the figurative regime, she might say, as in a type
of modern theater, that she is Sarah Bernhardt. But at any rate, I should see Sarah Bernhardt. At the cinema, she could make the same two kinds of speeches too, but it would be her shadow that would be offering them to me (or she would be offering them in her own absence). Every film is a fiction film.

What is at issue is not just the actor. Today there are a theater and a cinema without actors, or in which they have at least ceased to take on the full and exclusive function which characterizes them in classical spectacles. But what is true of Sarah Bernhardt is just as true of an object, a prop, a chair for example. On the theater stage, this chair may, as in Chekhov, pretend to be the chair in which the melancholy Russian nobleman sits every evening; on the contrary (in Ionesco), it can explain to me that it is a theater chair. But when all is said and done it is a chair. In the cinema, it will similarly have to choose between two attitudes (and many other intermediate or more tricky ones), but it will not be there when the spectators see it, when they have to recognize the choice; it will have delegated its reflection to them.

What is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it is from the start, the imaginary that constitutes it as a signifier (the two are not unrelated; it is so well able to represent it because it is it; however it is it even when it no longer represents it). The (possible) reduplication inaugurating the intention of fiction is preceded in the cinema by a first reduplication, always-already achieved, which inaugurates the signifier. The imaginary, by definition, combines within it a certain presence and a certain absence. In the cinema it is not just the fictional signified, if there is one, that is thus made present in the mode of absence, it is from the outset the signifier.

Thus the cinema, “more perceptual” than certain arts according to the list of its sensory registers, is also “less perceptual” than others once the status of these perceptions is envisaged rather than their number or diversity; for its perceptions are all in a sense “false.” Or rather, the activity of perception which it involves is real (the cinema is not a fantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror. It will be said that literature, after all, is itself only made of replicas (written words, presenting absent objects). But at least it does not present them to us with all the really perceived detail that the screen does (giving more and taking as much, i.e. taking more). The unique position of the cinema lies in this dual character of its signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree, and from the very outset. More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present.

**The All-Perceiving Subject**

Thus film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body. In a certain emplacement, the mirror suddenly becomes clear glass.

In the mirror the child perceives the familiar household objects, and also its object par excellence, its mother, who holds it up in her arms to the glass. But above
all it perceives its own image. This is where primary identification (the formation of the ego) gets certain of its main characteristics: the child sees itself as an other, and beside an other. This other other is its guarantee that the first is really it: by her authority, her sanction, in the register of the symbolic, subsequently by the resemblance between her mirror image and the child’s (both have a human form). Thus the child’s ego is formed by identification with its like, and this in two senses simultaneously, metonymically and metaphorically: the other human being who is in the glass, the own reflection which is and is not the body, which is like it. The child identifies with itself as an object.

In the cinema, the object remains: fiction or no, there is always something on the screen. But the reflection of the own body has disappeared. The cinema spectator is not a child and the child really at the mirror stage (from around six to around eighteen months) would certainly be incapable of “following” the simplest of films. Thus, what makes possible the spectator’s absence from the screen—or rather the intelligible unfolding of the film despite that absence—is the fact that the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror (of the true mirror), and is thus able to constitute a world of objects without having first to recognize himself within it. In this respect, the cinema is already on the side of the symbolic (which is only to be expected): the spectator knows that objects exist, that he himself exists as a subject, that he becomes an object for others: he knows himself and he knows his like: it is no longer necessary that this similarity be literally depicted for him on the screen, as it was in the mirror of his childhood. Like every other broadly “secondary” activity, the practice of the cinema presupposes that the primitive undifferentiation of the ego and the non-ego has been overcome.

But with what, then, does the spectator identify during the projection of the film? For he certainly has to identify: identification in its primal form has ceased to be a current necessity for him, but he continues, in the cinema—if he did not the film would become incomprehensible, considerably more incomprehensible than the most incomprehensible films—to depend on that permanent play of identification without which there would be no social life (thus, the simplest conversation presupposes the alternation of the I and you, hence the aptitude of the two interlocutors for a mutual and reversible identification). What form does this continued identification, whose essential role Lacan has demonstrated even in the most abstract reasoning and which constituted the “social sentiment” for Freud (the sublimation of a homosexual libido, itself a reaction to the aggressive rivalry of the members of a single generation after the murder of the father), take in the special case of one social practice among others, cinematic projection?

Obviously the spectator has the opportunity to identify with the character of the fiction. But there still has to be one. This is thus only valid for the narrative-representational film, and not for the psychoanalytic constitution of the signifier of the cinema as such. The spectator can also identify with the actor, in more or less “a-fictional” films in which the latter is represented as an actor, not a character, but is still offered thereby as a human being (as a perceived human being) and thus allows identification. However this factor (even added to the previous one and thus covering a very large number of films) cannot suffice. It only designates secondary identification in certain of its forms (secondary in the cinematic process itself, since
in any other sense all identification except that of the mirror can be regarded as secondary).

An insufficient explanation, and for two reasons, the first of which is only the intermittent, anecdotal and superficial consequence of the second (but for that reason more visible, and that is why I call it the first). The cinema deviates from the theater on an important point that has often been emphasized: it often presents us with long sequences that can (literally) be called “inhuman”—the familiar theme of cinematic “cosmomorphism” developed by many film theorists—sequences in which only inanimate objects, landscapes, etc. appear and which for minutes at a time offer no human form for spectator identification: yet the latter must be supposed to remain intact in its deep structure, since at such moments the film works just as well as it does at others, and whole films (geographical documentaries, for example) unfold intelligibly in such conditions. The second, more radical reason is that identification with the human form appearing on the screen, even when it occurs, still tells us nothing about the place of the spectator’s ego in the inauguration of the signifier. As I have just pointed out, this ego is already formed. But since it exists, the question arises precisely of where it is during the projection of the film (the true primary identification, that of the mirror, forms the ego, but all other identifications presuppose, on the contrary, that it has been formed and can be “exchanged” for the object or the fellow subject). Thus when I “recognize” my like on the screen, and even more when I do not recognize it, where am I? Where is that someone who is capable of self-recognition when need be?

It is not enough to answer that the cinema, like every social practice, demands that the psychical apparatus of its participants be fully constituted, and that the question is thus the concern of general psychoanalytic theory and not that of the cinema proper. For my where is it? does not claim to go so far, or more precisely tries to go slightly further: it is a question of the point occupied by this already constituted ego, occupied during the cinema showing and not in social life in general.

The spectator is absent from the screen: contrary to the child in the mirror, he cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects which are there without him. In this sense the screen is not a mirror. The perceived, this time, is entirely on the side of the object, and there is no longer any equivalent of the own image, of that unique mix of perceived and subject (of other and I) which was precisely the figure necessary to disengage the one from the other. At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am all-perceiving. All-perceiving as one says all-powerful (this is the famous gift of “ubiquity” the film makes its spectator); all-perceiving, too, because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it, the instance, in other words, which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film). If the most extravagant spectacles and sounds or the most unlikely combination of them, the combination furthest removed from any real experience, do not prevent the constitution of meaning (and to begin with do not astonish the spectator, do not really astonish him, not intellectually: he simply judges the film as strange), that is because he knows he is at the cinema.
In the cinema the subject’s knowledge takes a very precise form without which no film would be possible. This knowledge is dual (but unique). I know I am perceiving something imaginary (and that is why its absurdities, even if they are extreme, do not seriously disturb me), and I know that it is I who am perceiving it. This second knowledge divides in turn: I know that I am really perceiving, that my sense organs are physically affected, that I am not fantasizing, that the fourth wall of the auditorium (the screen) is really different from the other three, that there is a projector facing it (and thus it is not I who am projecting, or at least not all alone), and I also know that it is I who am perceiving all this, that this perceived-imaginary material is deposited in me as if on a second screen, that it is in me that it forms up into an organized sequence, that therefore I am myself the place where this really perceived imaginary accedes to the symbolic by its inauguration as the signifier of a certain type of institutionalized social activity called the “cinema.”

In other words, the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every there is.

A strange mirror, then, very like that of childhood, and very different. Very like, as Jean-Louis Baudry has emphasized, because during the showing we are, like the child, in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state; because, like the child again, we are prey to the imaginary, the double, and are so paradoxically through a real perception. Very different, because this mirror returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside it, whereas the child is both in it and in front of it. As an arrangement (and in a very topographical sense of the word), the cinema is more involved on the flank of the symbolic, and hence of secondariness, than is the mirror of childhood. This is not surprising, since it comes long after it, but what is more important to me is the fact that it is inscribed in its wake with an incidence at once so direct and so oblique, which has no precise equivalent in other apparatuses of signification.

Identification with the Camera

The preceding analysis coincides in places with others which have already been proposed and which I shall not repeat: analyses of quattrocento painting or of the cinema itself which insist on the role of monocular perspective (hence of the camera) and the “vanishing point” that inscribes an empty emplacement for the spectator-subject, an all-powerful position which is that of God himself, or more broadly of some ultimate signified. And it is true that as he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at and whose stationing (= framing) determines the vanishing point. During the projection this camera is absent, but it has a representative consisting of another apparatus, called precisely a “projector.” An apparatus the spectator has behind him, at the back of his head, that is, precisely where fantasy locates the “focus” of all vision. All of us have experienced our own look, even outside the so-called salles obscures [= cinemas], as a kind of searchlight turning on the axis of our own necks (like a pan) and shifting when we shift (a tracking shot now): as a cone of light (without the microscopic dust scattered through it.
and streaking it in the cinema) whose vicariousness draws successive and variable slices of obscurity from nothingness wherever and whenever it comes to rest. (And in a sense that is what perception and consciousness are, a light, as Freud put it, in the double sense of an illumination and an opening, as in the arrangement of the cinema, which contains both, a limited and wandering light that only attains a small part of the real, but on the other hand possesses the gift of casting light on it.) Without this identification with the camera certain facts could not be understood, though they are constant ones: the fact, for example, that the spectator is not amazed when the image “rotates” (= a pan) and yet he knows he has not turned his head. The explanation is that he has no need to turn it really, he has turned it in his all-seeing capacity, his identification with the movement of the camera being that of a transcendental, not an empirical subject.

All vision consists of a double movement: projective (the “sweeping” search-light) and introjective: consciousness as a sensitive recording surface (as a screen). I have the impression at once that, to use a common expression, I am “casting” my eyes on things, and that the latter, thus illuminated, come to be deposited within me (we then declare that it is these things that have been “projected,” on to my retina, say). A sort of stream called the look, and explaining all the myths of magnetism, must be sent out over the world, so that objects can come back up this stream in the opposite direction (but using it to find their way), arriving at last at our perception, which is now soft wax and no longer an emitting source.

The technology of photography carefully conforms to this (banal) fantasy accompanying perception. The camera is “trained” on the object like a fire-arm (= projection) and the object arrives to make an imprint, a trace, on the receptive surface of the film-strip (= introjection). The spectator himself does not escape these pincers, for he is part of the apparatus, and also because pincers, on the imaginary plane (Melanie Klein), mark our relation to the world as a whole and are rooted in the primary figures of orality. During the performance the spectator is the searchlight I have described, duplicating the projector, which itself duplicates the camera, and he is also the sensitive surface duplicating the screen, which itself duplicates the film-strip. There are two cones in the auditorium: one ending on the screen and starting both in the projection box and in the spectator’s vision insofar as it is projective, and one starting from the screen and “deposited” in the spectator’s perception insofar as it is introjective (on the retina, a second screen). When I say that “I see” the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records.

[ ... ]

Now for looks. In a fiction film, the characters look at one another. It can happen (and this is already another “notch” in the chain of identifications) that a character looks at another who is momentarily out-of-frame, or else is looked at by him. If we have gone one notch further, this is because everything out-of-frame brings us closer to the spectator, since it is the peculiarity of the latter to be out-of-frame (the out-of-frame character thus has a point in common with him: he is looking
at the screen). In certain cases the out-of-frame character’s look is “reinforced” by recourse to another variant of the subjective image, generally christened the “character’s point of view”; the framing of the scene corresponds precisely to the angle from which the out-of-frame character looks at the screen. (The two figures are dissociable moreover: we often know that the scene is being looked at by someone other than ourselves, by a character, but it is the logic of the plot, or an element of the dialogue, or a previous image that tells us so, not the position of the camera, which may be far from the presumed emplacement of the out-of-frame onlooker.)

In all sequences of this kind, the identification that founds the signifier is twice relayed, doubly duplicated in a circuit that leads it to the heart of the film along a line which is no longer hovering, which follows the inclination of the looks and is therefore governed by the film itself: the spectator’s look (= the basic identification), before dispersing all over the surface of the screen in a variety of intersecting lines (= looks of the characters in the frame = second duplication), must first “go through”—as one goes through a town on a journey, or a mountain pass—the look of the character out-of-frame (= first duplication), himself a spectator and hence the first delegate of the true spectator, but not to be confused with the latter since he is inside, if not the frame, then at least the fiction. This invisible character, supposed (like the spectator) to be seeing, will collide obliquely with the latter’s look and play the part of an obligatory intermediary. By offering himself as a crossing for the spectator, he inflects the circuit followed by the sequence of identifications and it is only in this sense that he is himself seen: as we see through him, we see ourselves not seeing him.

Examples of this kind are much more numerous and each of them is much more complex than I have suggested here. At this point textual analysis of precise film sequences is an indispensable instrument of knowledge. I just wished to show that in the end there is no break in continuity between the child’s game with the mirror and, at the other extreme, certain localized figures of the cinematic codes. The mirror is the site of primary identification. Identification with one’s own look is secondary with respect to the mirror, i.e. for a general theory of adult activities, but it is the foundation of the cinema and hence primary when the latter is under discussion: it is primary cinematic identification proper (“primary identification” would be inaccurate from the psychoanalytic point of view; “secondary identification,” more accurate in this respect, would be ambiguous for a cinematic psychoanalysis). As for identifications with characters, with their own different levels (out-of-frame character, etc.), they are secondary, tertiary cinematic identifications, etc.; taken as a whole in opposition to the identification of the spectator with his own look, they constitute secondary cinematic identification in the singular.6

“Seeing a Film”

Freud noted, vis-à-vis the sexual act’ that the most ordinary practices depend on a large number of psychical functions which are distinct but work consecutively, so that all of them must be intact if what is regarded as a normal performance is to be
possible (it is because neurosis and psychosis dissociate them and put some of them
out of court that a kind of commutation is made possible whereby they can be listed
retrospectively by the analyst). The apparently very simple act of seeing a film is no
exception to this rule. As soon as it is subjected to analysis it reveals to us a complex,
multiply interconnected imbrication of the functions of the imaginary, the real and
the symbolic, which is also required in one form or another for every procedure of
social life, but whose cinematic manifestation is especially impressive since it is
played out on a small surface. (To this extent the theory of the cinema may some day
contribute something to psychoanalysis, even if, through force of circumstances,
this “reciprocation” remains very limited at the moment, the two disciplines being
very unevenly developed.)

In order to understand the fiction film, I must both “take myself” for the char-
acter (an imaginary procedure) so that he benefits, by analogical projection,
from all the schemata of intelligibility that I have within me, and not take myself
for him (the return to the real) so that the fiction can be established as such
(eye as symbolic): this is seeming-real. Similarly, in order to understand the film (at
all), I must perceive the photographed object as absent, its photograph as pre-
sent, and the presence of this absence as signifying. The imaginary of the cinema
presupposes the symbolic, for the spectator must first of all have known the pri-
mordial mirror. But as the latter instituted the ego very largely in the imaginary,
the second mirror of the screen, a symbolic apparatus, itself in turn depends on
reflection and lack. However, it is not fantasy, a “purely” symbolic-imaginary site,
for the absence of the object and the codes of that absence are really produced in it
by the physis of an equipment: the cinema is a body (a corpus for the semiologist),
a fetish that can be loved.

Disavowal, Fetishism

As can be seen, the cinema has a number of roots in the unconscious and in
the great movements illuminated by psychoanalysis, but they can all be traced
back to the specific characteristics of the institutionalized signifier. I have gone a
little way in tracing some of these roots, that of mirror identification, that of voyeur-
ism and exhibitionism. There is also a third, that of fetishism.

Since the famous article by Freud that inaugurated the problem,1 psycho-
analysis has linked fetish and fetishism closely with castration and the fear it
inspires. Castration, for Freud, and even more clearly for Lacan, is first of all the
mother’s castration, and that is why the main figures it inspires are to a certain
degree common to children of both sexes. The child who sees its mother’s body
is constrained by way of perception, by the “evidence of the senses,” to accept
that there are human beings deprived of a penis. But for a long time—and some-
where in it for ever—it will not interpret this inevitable observation in terms of
an anatomical difference between the sexes (= penis/vagina). It believes that
all human beings originally have a penis and it therefore understands what it
has seen as the effect of a mutilation which redoubles its fear that it will be subjected to a similar fate (or else, in the case of the little girl after a certain age, the fear that she has already been subjected to it). Inversely, it is this very terror that is projected on to the spectacle of the mother’s body, and invites the reading of an absence where anatomy sees a different conformation. The scenario of castration, in its broad lines, does not differ whether one understands it, like Lacan, as an essentially symbolic drama in which castration takes over in a decisive metaphor all the losses, both real and imaginary, that the child has already suffered (birth trauma, maternal breast, excrement, etc.), or whether on the contrary one tends, like Freud, to take that scenario slightly more literally. Before this unveiling of a lack (we are already close to the cinema signifier), the child, in order to avoid too strong an anxiety, will have to double up its belief (another cinematic characteristic) and from then on forever hold two contradictory opinions (proof that in spite of everything the real perception has not been without effect): “All human beings are endowed with a penis” (primal belief) and “Some human beings do not have a penis” (evidence of the senses). In other words, it will, perhaps definitively, retain its former belief beneath the new one, but it will also hold to its new perceptual observation while disavowing it on another level (= denial of perception, disavowal, Freud’s “Verleugnung”). Thus is established the lasting matrix, the affective prototype of all the splittings of belief which man will henceforth be capable of in the most varied domains, of all the infinitely complex unconscious and occasionally conscious interactions which he will allow himself between “believing” and “not believing” and which will on more than one occasion be of great assistance to him in resolving (or denying) delicate problems. (If we were all a little honest with ourselves, we would realize that a truly integral belief, without any “underside” in which the opposite is believed, would make even the most ordinary everyday life almost impossible.)

At the same time, the child, terrified by what it has seen or glimpsed, will have tried more or less successfully in different cases, to arrest its look, for all its life, at what will subsequently become the fetish: at a piece of clothing, for example, which masks the frightening discovery, or else precedes it (underwear, stockings, boots, etc.). The fixation on this “just before” is thus another form of disavowal, of retreat from the perceived, although its very existence is dialectical evidence of the fact that the perceived has been perceived. The fetishistic prop will become a precondition for the establishment of potency and access to orgasm (jouissance), sometimes an indispensable precondition (true fetishism); in other developments it will only be a favorable condition, and one whose weight will vary with respect to the other features of the erotogenic situation as a whole. (It can be observed once again that the defense against desire itself becomes erotic, as the defense against anxiety itself becomes anxiogenic; for an analogous reason: what arises “against” an affect also arises “in” it and is not easily separated from it, even if that is its aim.) Fetishism is generally regarded as the “perversion” par excellence, for it intervenes itself in the “tabulation” of the others, and above all because, they, like it (and this is what makes it their model), are based on the avoidance of castration. The fetish always represents the penis, it is always a substitute for it, whether metaphorically (= it masks its absence) or metonymically (= it is contiguous with
its empty place). To sum up, the fetish signifies the penis as absent, it is its negative signifier; supplementing it, it puts a “fullness” in place of a lack, but in doing so it also affirms that lack. It resumes within itself the structure of disavowal and multiple belief.

These few reminders are intended above all to emphasize the fact that the dossier of fetishism, before any examination of its cinematic extensions, contains two broad aspects which coincide in their depths (in childhood and by virtue of structure) but are relatively distinct in their concrete manifestations, i.e. the problems of belief (= disavowal) and that of the fetish itself, the latter more immediately linked to erotogenicity, whether direct or sublimated.

The Cinema as Technique

As for the fetish itself, in its cinematic manifestations, who could fail to see that it consists fundamentally of the equipment of the cinema (= its “technique”), or of the cinema as a whole as equipment and as technique, for fiction films and others? It is no accident that in the cinema some cameramen, some directors, some critics, some spectators demonstrate a real “fetishism of technique,” often noted or denounced as such (“fetishism” is taken here in its ordinary sense, which is rather loose but does contain within it the analytical sense that I shall attempt to disengage). As strictly defined, the fetish, like the apparatus of the cinema, is a prop, the prop that disavows a lack and in doing so affirms it without wishing to. A prop, too, which is as it were placed on the body of the object; a prop which is the penis, since it negates its absence, and hence a partial object that makes the whole object lovable and desirable. The fetish is also the point of departure for specialized practices, and as is well known, desire in its modalities is all the more “technical” the more perverse it is.

Thus with respect to the desired body—to the body of desire rather—the fetish is in the same position as the technical equipment of the cinema with respect to the cinema as a whole. A fetish, the cinema as a technical performance, as prowess, as an exploit, an exploit that underlines and denounces the lack on which the whole arrangement is based (the absence of the object, replaced by its reflection), an exploit which consists at the same time of making this absence forgotten. The cinema fetishist is the person who is enchanted at what the machine is capable of, at the theater of shadows as such. For the establishment of his full potency for cinematic enjoyment (jouissance) he must think at every moment (and above all simultaneously) of the force of presence the film has and of the absence on which this force is constructed. He must constantly compare the result with the means deployed (and hence pay attention to the technique), for his pleasure lodges in the gap between the two. Of course, this attitude appears most clearly in the “connoisseur,” the cinephile, but it also occurs, as a partial component of cinematic pleasure, in those who just go to the cinema: if they do go it is partly in order to be carried away by the film (or the fiction, if there is one), but also in order to appreciate as such the machinery that is carrying them away: they will say, precisely when they have been carried
away, that the film was a “good” one, that it was “well made” (the same thing is said in French of a harmonious body).

It is clear that fetishism, in the cinema as elsewhere, is closely linked to the good object. The function of the fetish is to restore the latter, threatened in its “goodness” (in Melanie Klein’s sense) by the terrifying discovery of the lack. Thanks to the fetish, which covers the wound and itself becomes erotogenic, the object as a whole can become desirable again without excessive fear. In a similar way, the whole cinematic Institution is as it were covered by a thin and omni-present garment, a stimulating prop through which it is consumed: the ensemble of its equipment and its tricks—and not just the celluloid strip, the “pellicule” or “little skin” which has been rightly mentioned in this connection—of the equipment which needs the lack in order to stand out in it by contrast, but which only affirms it insofar as it ensures that it is forgotten, and which lastly (its third twist) needs it also not to be forgotten, for fear that at the same stroke the fact that it caused it to be forgotten will be forgotten.

The fetish is the cinema in its physical state. A fetish is always material: insofar as one can make up for it by the power of the symbolic alone one is precisely no longer a fetishist. At this point it is important to recall that of all the arts the cinema is the one that involves the most extensive and complex equipment; the “technical” dimension is more obtrusive here than elsewhere. Along with television, it is the only art that is also an industry, or at least is so from the outset (the others become industries subsequently: music through the gramophone record or the cassette, books by mass printings and publishing trusts, etc.). In this respect only architecture is a little like it; there are “languages” that are heavier than others, more dependent on “hardware.”

At the same time as it localizes the penis, the fetish represents by synecdoche the whole body of the object as desirable. Similarly, interest in the equipment and technique is the privileged representative of love for the cinema.

The Law is what permits desire: the cinematic equipment is the instance thanks to which the imaginary turns into the symbolic, thanks to which the lost object (the absence of what is filmed) becomes the law and the principle of a specific and instituted signifier, which it is legitimate to desire.

For in the structure of the fetish there is another point on which Mannoni quite rightly insists and which directly concerns my present undertaking. Because it attempts to disavow the evidence of the senses, the fetish is evidence that this evidence has indeed been recorded (like a tape stored in the memory). The fetish is not inaugurated because the child still believes its mother has a penis (= order of the imaginary), for if it still believed it completely, as “before,” it would no longer need the fetish. It is inaugurated because the child now “knows very well” that its mother has no penis. In other words, the fetish not only has disavowal value, but also knowledge value.

That is why, as I said a moment ago, the fetishism of cinematic technique is especially well developed among the “connoisseurs” of the cinema. That is also why the theoretician of the cinema necessarily retains within him—at the cost of a new
backward turn that leads him to interrogate technique, to symbolize the fetish, and hence to maintain it as he dissolves it—an interest in the equipment without which he would not be motivated to study it.

Indeed, the equipment is not just physical (= the fetish proper); it also has its discursive imprints, its extensions in the very text of the film. Here is revealed the specific movement of theory: when it shifts from a fascination with technique to the critical study of the different codes that this equipment authorizes. Concern for the signifier in the cinema derives from a fetishism that has taken up a position as far as possible along its cognitive flank. To adapt the formula by which Octave Mannoni defines disavowal (= “I know very well, but all the same . . .”), the study of the signifier is a libidinal position which consists in weakening the “but all the same” and profiting by this saving of energy to dig deeper into the “I know very well,” which thus becomes “I know nothing at all, but I desire to know.”

**Fetish and Frame**

Just like the other psychical structures that constitute the foundation of the cinema, fetishism does not intervene only in the constitution of the signifier, but also in certain of its more particular configurations. Here we have framings and also certain camera movements (the latter can anyway be defined as progressive changes in framing).

Cinema with directly erotic subject matter deliberately plays on the edges of the frame and the progressive, if need be incomplete revelations allowed by the camera as it moves, and this is no accident. Censorship is involved here: censorship of films and censorship in Freud’s sense. Whether the form is static (framing) or dynamic (camera movements), the principle is the same; the point is to gamble simultaneously on the excitation of desire and its non-fulfillment (which is its opposite and yet favors it), by the infinite variations made possible precisely by the studios’ technique on the exact emplacement of the boundary that bars the look, that puts an end to the “seen,” that inaugurates the downward (or upward) tilt into the dark, towards the unseen, the guessed-at. The framing and its displacements (that determine the emplacement) are in themselves forms of “suspense” and are extensively used in suspense films, though they retain this function in other cases. They have an inner affinity with the mechanisms of desire, its postponements, its new impetus, and they retain this affinity in other places than erotic sequences (the only difference lies in the quantum which is sublimated and the quantum which is not). The way the cinema, with its wandering framings (wandering like the look, like the caress), finds the means to reveal space has something to do with a kind of permanent undressing, a generalized strip-tease, a less direct but more perfected strip-tease, since it also makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has previously shown, to take back as well as to retain (like the child at the moment of the birth of the fetish, the child who has already seen, but whose look beats a rapid retreat): a strip-tease pierced with “flash-backs,” inverted sequences that then give new impetus to the forward movement. These veiling-unveiling procedures can also be compared with certain cinematic
“punctuations,” especially slow ones strongly marked by a concern for control and expectation (slow fade-ins and fade-outs, irises, “drawn out” lap-dissolves like those of Sternberg).

NOTES

Identification, Mirror
4. See André Green, “L’Ecran bi-face, un œil derrière la tête,” *Psychanalyse et cinéma*, 1 January 1970 (no further issues appeared), pp. 15–22. It will be clear that in the passage that follows my analysis coincides in places with that of André Green.
5. “The Ego and the Id” (vol. xix) p. 18; *The Interpretation of Dreams* (vol. v) p. 615 (= consciousness as a sense organ) and p. 574 (= consciousness as a dual recording surface, internal and external), “The Unconscious” (vol. xiv) p. 171 (psychical processes are in themselves unconscious, consciousness is a function that perceives a small proportion of them), etc.

Disavowal, Fetishism
1. “Fetishism” (vol. xxi) pp. 152–7. See also Octave Mannoni’s important study, “Je sais bien, mais quand même…” *Clés pour l’imaginaire ou l’autre scène*.
4. Reading this article in manuscript, Thierry Kuntzel has pointed out to me that in this paragraph I perhaps lean slightly too far toward fetishism and fetishism alone in discussing filmic figures that depend just as much on cinematic perversion in general: the hypertrophy of the perceptual component drive with its *mises-en-scène*, its progressions-retentions, its calculated postponements, etc. This objection seems to me (after the event) to be correct. I shall have to come back to it. Fetishism, as is well known, is closely linked to perversion (cf. pp. 69–71), although it does not exhaust it. Hence the difficulty. For the cinematic effects I am evoking here (playing on the framing and its displacements), the properly fetishistic element seems to me to be the “bar,” the edge of the screen, the separation between the seen and the unseen, the “arrestation” of the look. Once the seen or the unseen are envisaged rather than their intersection (their edge), we are dealing with scopic perversion itself, which goes beyond the strict province of the fetish.
JEAN-LOUIS BAUDRY

Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus

Jean-Louis Baudry (b. 1930), a dentist by profession, is a “man of letters” who has published seminal essays in film theory. He was an editor of the avant-garde journal *Tel Quel*, participating in one of the most important Parisian intellectual movements to emerge out of the turmoil of the protest movements of 1968. At *Tel Quel*, Baudry worked with, and was inspired by, thinkers who linked political activism to the uses of language and avant-garde art, including poststructuralists Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Baudry’s work on cinema was heavily influenced by Louis Althusser, a French Marxist who considered ideology to be an unconscious acceptance of the status quo effected through what he calls Ideological State Apparatuses—institutions like churches and schools that seem noncoercive but nevertheless form individuals as “subjects” of dominant power. Combining Althusser’s work on ideology with Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories about subject construction, Baudry’s apparatus theory examines the ideological role of cinema as an institution—a role that is not imposed on cinema but is an integral part of its nature.

In a departure from the semiotic film theory of the late 1960s, Baudry treats not the film text itself but rather the cinematic apparatus—that is, the conditions under which cinematic effects are produced. According to Baudry, these conditions—which include the mechanics of representation, material aspects of projection (the dark, enclosed viewing conditions of the theater that for Baudry are analogous to Plato’s cave), the camera, and film editing—influence the spectator much more than an individual film itself. Baudry’s emphasis on the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus can be seen as a reaction against the then-dominant theoretical position of André Bazin (p. 309), for whom the film screen was an unmediated window to the world. For Baudry, film functions more as a metapsychological “mirror” that fulfills the spectator’s wish for fullness, transcendental unity, and meaning. It is important to note that Baudry formulated his theories on the cinematic apparatus in the early 1970s, when the economic and ideological dominance of Hollywood was asserted around the world, and before the rise of multiplexes and video, which, along with TV technologies, radically altered and expanded the experience of film viewing beyond theatrical projection.

In the 1970 essay “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” Baudry explains the ideological mechanism at work in cinema by discussing the deterministic relationship between the camera and the subject/spectator. Although the camera records a series of static and fragmented images, the projection of these images on a screen restores the illusion of continuous movement and linear succession. This, along with the material conditions of cinematographic projection, ensures the central position of the spectator, enabling the “transcendental subject” to unite the dislocated fragments into a coherent
meaning. In such a way, the cinemat apparatus conceals its work and imposes an idealist ideology, rather than producing critical awareness in a spectator. Since the instruments on which the cinematic apparatus depends have to remain hidden and repressed to maintain the illusion, Baudry argues that the only way to break through this “phantasmification” in cinema is to make its production obvious—as Baudry mentions Dziga Vertov does in his 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera*. This essay became an important source for critics like Christian Metz (p. 17) and Laura Mulvey (p. 713), who concerned themselves with exploring the relationship between ideology, the human psyche, and cinema.

**READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS**

- For Baudry, an important element in the ideology of the apparatus is its masking of the means of the illusion's production, a process which for Baudry is analogous to Plato's cave and Marxist notions of ideology. Consider the effectiveness of these analogies.

- According to Baudry, the “subject” effect in cinema is also its “reality” effect. What is the relevance of this position beyond the conditions of reception in the movie theater? Can the effects of cinema also be produced and felt in the social sphere, where other discourses come into effect?

- How does Baudry's equation of cinema with dominant ideology accommodate the notion of subversive, political cinema? Note that he does not address the content or form of films themselves.

- **Key Concepts:** Ideology; Apparatus; Renaissance Perspective; Camera Obscura; Transcendental Subject; Mirror Stage; Continuity; Impression of Reality

**Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus**

At the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he seeks to integrate dream elaboration and its particular “economy” with the psyche as a whole, Freud assigns to the latter an optical model: “Let us simply imagine the instrument which serves in psychic productions as a sort of complicated microscope or camera.” But Freud does not seem to hold strongly to this optical model, which, as Derrida has pointed out, brings out the shortcoming in graphic representation in the area earlier covered by his work on dreams. Moreover, he will later abandon the optical model in favor of a writing instrument, the “mystic writing pad.” Nonetheless this optical choice seems to prolong the tradition of Western science, whose birth coincides exactly with the development of the optical apparatus which will have as a consequence the decentering of the human universe, the end of geocentrism (Galileo).

But also, and paradoxically, the optical apparatus *camera obscura* will serve in the same period to elaborate in pictorial work a new mode of representation,
perspectiva artificialis. This system, a recentering or at least a displacement of the center (which settles itself in the eye), will assure the setting up of the “subject” as the active center and origin of meaning. One could doubtless question the privileged position which optical instruments seem to occupy on the line of intersection of science and ideological products. Does the technical nature of optical instruments, directly attached to scientific practice, serve to conceal not only their use in ideological products but also the ideological effects which they may provoke themselves? Their scientific base assures them a sort of neutrality and avoids their being questioned.

But already a question: if we are to take account of the imperfections of these instruments, their limitations, by what criteria may these be defined? If, for example, one can speak of a restricted depth of field as a limitation, doesn’t this term itself depend upon a particular conception of reality for which such a limitation would not exist? Signifying productions are particularly relevant here, to the extent that instrumentation plays a more and more important role in them and that their distribution is more and more extensive. It is strange (but is it so strange?) that emphasis has been placed almost exclusively on their influence, on the effects they have as finished products, their content, the field of what is signified, if you like; the technical bases on which these effects depend and the specific characteristics of these bases have been ignored, however. They have been protected by the inviolability that science is supposed to provide. We would like to establish for the cinema a few guidelines which will need to be completed, verified, improved.

We must first establish the place of the instrumental base in the set of operations which combine in the production of a film (we omit consideration of economic implications). Between “objective reality” and the camera, site of the inscription, and between the inscription and projection are situated certain operations, a work3 which has as its result a finished product. To the extent that it is cut off from the raw material (“objective reality”) this product does not allow us to see the transformation which has taken place. Equally distant from “objective reality” and the finished product, the camera occupies an intermediate position in the work process which leads from raw material to finished product. Though mutually dependent from other points of view, découpage [shot breakdown before shooting] and montage [editing, or final assembly] must be distinguished because of the essential difference in the signifying raw material on which each operates: language (scenario) or image. Between the two complementary stages of production a mutation of the signifying material takes place (neither translation nor transcription, obviously, for the image is not reducible to language) precisely where the camera is. Finally, between the finished product (possessing exchange value, a commodity) and its consumption (use value) is introduced another operation effected by a set of instruments. Projector and screen restore the light lost in the shooting process, and transform a succession of separate images into an unrolling which also restores, but according to another scansion, the movement seized from “objective reality.”

Cinematographic specificity (what distinguishes cinema from other systems of signification) thus refers to a work, that is, to a process of transformation. The question becomes, is the work made evident, does consumption of the product bring about a “knowledge effect” [Althusser], or is the work concealed? If the latter,
consumption of the product will obviously be accompanied by ideological surplus value. On the practical level, this poses the question of by what procedures the work can in fact be made “readable” in its inscription. These procedures must of necessity call cinematographic technique into play. But, on the other hand, going back to the first question, one may ask, do the instruments (the technical base) produce specific ideological effects, and are these effects themselves determined by the dominant ideology? In which case, concealment of the technical base will also bring about a specific ideological effect. Its inscription, its manifestation as such, on the other hand, would produce a knowledge effect, as actualization of the work process, as denunciation of ideology, and as critique of idealism.

The Eye of the Subject

Central in the process of production of the film, the camera—an assembly of optical and mechanical instrumentation—carries out a certain mode of inscription characterized by marking, by the recording of differences of light intensity (and of wavelength for color) and of differences between the frames. Fabricated on the model of the camera obscura, it permits the construction of an image analogous to the perspective projections developed during the Italian Renaissance. Of course the use of lenses of different focal lengths can alter the perspective of an image. But this much, at least, is clear in the history of cinema: it is the perspective construction of the Renaissance which originally served as model. The use of different lenses, when not dictated by technical considerations aimed at restoring the habitual perspective (such as shooting in limited or extended spaces which one wishes to expand or contract) does not destroy [traditional] perspective but rather makes it play a normative role. Departure from the norm, by means of a wide-angle or telephoto lens, is clearly marked in comparison with so-called “normal” perspective. We will see in any case that the resulting ideological effect is still defined in relation to the ideology inherent in perspective. The dimensions of the image itself, the ratio between height and width, seem clearly taken from an average drawn from Western easel painting.

The conception of space which conditions the construction of perspective in the Renaissance differs from that of the Greeks. For the latter, space is discontinuous and heterogeneous (for Aristotle, but also for Democritus, for whom space is the location of an infinity of indivisible atoms), whereas with Nicholas of Cusa will be born a conception of space formed by the relation between elements which are equally near and distant from the “source of all life.” In addition, the pictorial construction of the Greeks corresponded to the organization of their stage, based on a multiplicity of points of view, whereas the painting of the Renaissance will elaborate a centered space. (“Painting is nothing but the intersection of the visual pyramid following a given distance, a fixed center, and a certain lighting.”—Alberti.) The center of this space coincides with the eye which Jean Pellerin Viator will so justly call the “subject.” (“The principal point in perspective should be placed at eye level: this point is called fixed or subject.”) Monocular vision, which as Pleynet points out, is what the camera has, calls forth a sort of play of “reflection.” Based on the principle of a fixed point by reference to which the visualized objects are organized, it specifies in return the position of the “subject,” the very spot it must necessarily occupy.
In focusing it, the optical construct appears to be truly the projection-reflection of a “virtual image” whose hallucinatory reality it creates. It lays out the space of an ideal vision and in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence—metaphorically (by the unknown to which it appeals—here we must recall the structural place occupied by the vanishing point) and metonymically (by the displacement that it seems to carry out: a subject is both “in place of” and “a part for the whole”). Contrary to Chinese and Japanese painting, Western easel painting, presenting as it does a motionless and continuous whole, elaborates a total vision which corresponds to the idealist conception of the fullness and homogeneity of “being,” and is, so to speak, representative of this conception. In this sense it contributes in a singularly emphatic way to the ideological function of art, which is to provide the tangible representation of metaphysics. The principle of transcendence which conditions and is conditioned by the perspective construction represented in painting and in the photographic image which copies from it seems to inspire all the idealist paeans to which the cinema has given rise [such as we find in Cohen-Séat or Bazin].

Projection: The Difference Negated

Nevertheless, whatever the effects proper to optics generally, the movie camera differs from still photography by registering through its mechanical instrumentation a series of images. It might thus seem to counter the unifying and “substantializing” character of the single-perspective image, taking what would seem like instants of time or slices from “reality” (but always a reality already worked upon, elaborated, selected). This might permit the supposition, especially because the camera moves, of a multiplicity of points of view which would neutralize the fixed position of the eye-subject and even nullify it. But here we must turn to the relation between the succession of images inscribed by the camera and their projection, bypassing momentarily the place occupied by montage, which plays a decisive role in the strategy of the ideology produced.

The projection operation (projector and screen) restore continuity of movement and the temporal dimension to the sequence of static images. The relation between the individual frames and the projection would resemble the relation between points and a curve in geometry. But it is precisely this relation and the restoration of continuity to discontinuous elements which poses a problem. The meaning effect produced does not depend only on the content of the images but also on the material procedures by which an illusion of continuity, dependent on the persistence of vision, is restored from discontinuous elements. These separate frames have between them differences that are indispensable for the creation of an illusion of continuity, of a continuous passage (movement, time). But only on one condition can these differences create this illusion: they must be effaced as differences.

Thus on the technical level the question becomes one of the adoption of a very small difference between images, such that each image, in consequence of an organic factor [presumably persistence of vision] is rendered incapable of being seen as such. In this sense we could say that film—and perhaps in this respect it is exemplary—lives on the denial of difference: the difference is necessary for it to live, but it lives on its negation. This is indeed the paradox that emerges if we look directly at a strip of processed film: adjacent images are almost exactly repeated,
their divergence being verifiable only by comparison of images at a sufficient distance from each other. We should remember, moreover, the disturbing effects which result during a projection from breakdowns in the recreation of movement, when the spectator is brought abruptly back to discontinuity—that is, to the body, to the technical apparatus which he had forgotten.

We might not be far from seeing what is in play on this material basis, if we recall that the “language” of the unconscious, as it is found in dreams, slips of the tongue, or hysterical symptoms, manifests itself as continuity destroyed, broken, and as the unexpected surging forth of a marked difference. Couldn’t we thus say that cinema reconstructs and forms the mechanical model (with the simplifications that this can entail) of a system of writing constituting a material base and a counter-system (ideology, idealism) which uses this system while also concealing it? On the one hand, the optical apparatus and the film permit the marking of difference (but the marking is already negated, we have seen, in the constitution of the perspective image with its mirror effect). On the other hand, the mechanical apparatus both selects the minimal difference and represses it in projection, so that meaning can be constituted: it is at once direction, continuity, movement. The projection mechanism allows the differential elements (the discontinuity inscribed by the camera) to be suppressed, bringing only the relation into play. The individual images as such disappear so that movement and continuity can appear. But the movement and continuity are the visible expression (one might even say the projection) of their relations, derived from the tiny discontinuities between the images. Thus one may assume that what was already at work as the originating basis of the perspective image, namely the eye, the “subject,” is put forth, liberated (in the sense that a chemical reaction liberates a substance) by the operation which transforms successive, discrete images (as isolated images they have, strictly speaking, no meaning, or at least no unity of meaning) into continuity, movement, meaning; with continuity restored both meaning and consciousness are restored.

The Transcendental Subject

Meaning and consciousness, to be sure: at this point we must return to the camera. Its mechanical nature not only permits the shooting of differential images as rapidly as desired but also destines it to change position, to move. Film history shows that as a result of the combined inertia of painting, theater, and photography, it took a certain time to notice the inherent mobility of the cinematic mechanism. The ability to reconstitute movement is after all only a partial, elementary aspect of a more general capability. To seize movement is to become movement, to follow a trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning. In this way the eye-subject, the invisible base of artificial perspective (which in fact only represents a larger effort to produce an ordering, regulated transcendence) becomes absorbed in, “elevated” to a vaster function, proportional to the movement which it can perform.

And if the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement—conditions fulfilled by the possibilities of shooting and of film—the world will not only be constituted by this eye but for it. The movability of the camera seems to fulfill the most
favorable conditions for the manifestation of the “transcendental subject.” There is both fantasmatization of an objective reality (images, sounds, colors) and of an objective reality which, limiting its powers of constraint, seems equally to augment the possibilities or the power of the subject. As it is said of consciousness—and in point of fact we are concerned with nothing less—the image will always be image of something; it must result from a deliberate act of consciousness [visée intentionnelle]. “The word intentionality signifies nothing other than this peculiarity that consciousness has of being consciousness of something, of carrying in its quality of ego its cogitatum within itself.” In such a definition could perhaps be found the status of the cinematographic image, or rather of its operation, the mode of working which it carries out. For it to be an image of something, it has to constitute this something as meaning. The image seems to reflect the world but solely in the naive inversion of a founding hierarchy: “The domain of natural existence thus has only an authority of the second order, and always presupposes the domain of the transcendental.”

The world is no longer only an “open and unbounded horizon.” Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers up an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying the action of the “subject” which sights it. At the same time that the world’s transfer as image seems to accomplish this phenomenological reduction, this putting into parentheses of its real existence (a suspension necessary, we will see, to the formation of the impression of reality) provides a basis for the apodicty of the ego. The multiplicity of aspects of the object in view refers to a synthesizing operation, to the unity of this constituting subject: Husserl speaks of “‘aspects,’ sometimes of ‘proximity,’ sometimes of ‘distance,’ in variable modes of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ opposed to an absolute ‘here’ (which is located—for me—in ‘my own body’ which appears to me at the same time), the consciousness of which, though it remains unperceived, always accompanies them. [We will see moreover what happens with the body in the mise-en-scène of projection.—J. L. B.] Each ‘aspect’ which the mind grasps is revealed in turn as a unity synthesized from a multiplicity of corresponding modes of presentation. The nearby object may present itself as the same, but under one or another ‘aspect.’ There may be variation of visual perspective, but also of ‘tactile,’ ‘acoustic’ phenomena, or of other ‘modes of presentation’ as we can observe in directing our attention in the proper direction.

For Husserl, “the original operation [of intentional analysis] is to unmask the potentialities implied in present states of consciousness. And it is by this that will be carried out, from the noematic point of view, the eventual explication, definition, and elucidation of what is meant by consciousness, that is, its objective meaning.” And again in the Cartesian Meditations: “A second type of polarization now presents itself to us, another type of synthesis which embraces the particular multiplicities of cogitationes, which embraces them all and in a special manner, namely as cogitationes of an identical self which, active or passive, lives in all the lived states of consciousness and which, through them, relates to all objects.”

Thus is articulated the relation between the continuity necessary to the constitution of meaning and the “subject” which constitutes this meaning: continuity is an attribute of the subject. It supposes the subject and it circumscribes his place. It appears in the cinema in the two complementary aspects of a “formal” continuity established through a system of negated differences and narrative continuity.
in the filmic space. The latter, in any case, could not have been conquered without exercising violence against the instrumental base, as can be discovered from most of the texts by film-makers and critics: the discontinuity that had been effaced at the level of the image could have reappeared on the narrative level, giving rise to effects of rupture disturbing to the spectator (to a place which ideology must both conquer and, in the degree that it already dominates it, must also satisfy: fill). “What is important in a film is the feeling of continuity which joins shots and sequences while maintaining unity and cohesion of movements. This continuity was one of the most difficult things to obtain.” 22 Pudovkin defined montage as “the art of assembling pieces of film, shot separately, in such a way as to give the spectator the impression of continuous movement.” The search for such narrative continuity, so difficult to obtain from the material base, can only be explained by an essential ideological stake projected in this point: it is a question of preserving at any cost the synthetic unity of the locus where meaning originates [the subject]—the constituting transcendental function to which narrative continuity points back as its natural secretion.23

The Screen-Mirror: Specularization and Double Identification

But another supplementary operation (made possible by a special technical arrangement) must be added in order that the mechanism thus described can play its role effectively as an ideological machine, so that not only the reworked “objective reality” but also the specific type of identification we have described can be represented.

No doubt the darkened room and the screen bordered with black like a letter of condolences already present privileged conditions of effectiveness—no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside. Projection and reflection take place in a closed space and those who remain there, whether they know it or not (but they do not), find themselves chained, captured, or captivated. (What might one say of the function of the head in this captivation: it suffices to recall that for Bataille materialism makes itself headless—like a wound that bleeds and thus transmutes.) And the mirror, as a reflecting surface, is framed, limited, circumscribed. An infinite mirror would no longer be a mirror. The paradoxical nature of the cinematic mirror-screen is without doubt that it reflects images but not “reality”; the word reflect, being transitive, leaves this ambiguity unresolved. In any case this “reality” comes from behind the spectator’s head and if he looked at it directly he would see nothing except the moving beams from an already veiled light source.

The arrangement of the different elements—projector, darkened hall, screen—in addition [to] reproducing in a striking way the mise-en-scène of Plato’s cave (prototypical set for all transcendence and the topological model of idealism24) reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the “mirror stage” discovered by Lacan. This psychological phase, which occurs between six and eighteen months of age, generates via the mirror image of a unified body the constitution or at least the first sketches of the “I” as an imaginary function. “It is to this unreachable image in the mirror that the specular image gives its garments.” 25 But for this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible, there must be—Lacan strongly emphasizes
this point—two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization (apparent in the first few days of life). If one considers that these two conditions are repeated during cinematographic projection—suspension of mobility and predominance of the visual function—perhaps one could suppose that this is more than a simple analogy. And possibly this very point explains the “impression of reality” so often invoked in connection with the cinema for which the various explanations proposed seem only to skirt the real problem. In order for this impression to be produced, it would be necessary that the conditions of a formative scene be reproduced. This scene would be repeated and reenacted in such a manner that the imaginary order (activated by a specularization which takes place, everything considered, in reality) fulfills its particular function of occultation or of filling the gap, the split, of the subject on the order of the signifier.26

On the other hand, it is to the extent that the child can sustain the look of another in the presence of a third party that he can find the assurance of an identification with the image of his own body. From the very fact that during the mirror stage is established a dual relationship, it constitutes, in conjunction with the formation of the self in the imaginary order, the nexus of secondary identification.27 The origin of the self, as discovered by Lacan, in pertaining to the imaginary order effectively subverts the “optical machinery” of idealism which the projection room scrupulously reproduces.28 But it is not as specifically “imaginary,” nor as a reproduction of its first configuration, that the self finds a “place” in the cinema. This occurs, rather, as a sort of proof or verification of that function, a solidification through repetition. The “reality” mimed by the cinema is thus first of all that of a “self.” But, because the reflected image is not that of the body itself but that of a world already given as meaning, one can distinguish two levels of identification. The first, attached to the image itself, derives from the character portrayed as a center of secondary identifications, carrying an identity which constantly must be seized and reestablished. The second level permits the appearance of the first and places it “in action”—this is the transcendental subject whose place is taken by the camera which constitutes and rules the objects in this “world.” Thus the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera as a sort of relay.29 Just as the mirror assembles the fragmented body in a sort of imaginary integration of the self, the transcendental self unites the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, of lived experience, into unifying meaning. Through it each fragment assumes meaning by being integrated into an “organic” unity. Between the imaginary gathering of the fragmented body into a unity and the transcendentality of the self, giver of unifying meaning, the current is indefinitely reversible.

The ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relationship between the camera and the subject. The question is whether the former will permit the latter to constitute and seize itself in a particular mode of specular reflection. Ultimately, the forms of narrative adopted, the “contents” of the image, are of little importance so long as an identification remains possible.30 What emerges here (in outline) is the specific function fulfilled by the cinema as support
and instrument of ideology. It constitutes the “subject” by the illusory delimitation of a central location—whether this be that of a god or of any other substitute. It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmatization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism.

Thus the cinema assumes the role played throughout Western history by various artistic formations. The ideology of representation (as a principal axis orienting the notion of aesthetic “creation”) and specularization (which organizes the mise-en-scène required to constitute the transcendental function) form a singularly coherent system in the cinema. Everything happens as if, the subject himself being unable—and for a reason—to account for his own situation, it was necessary to substitute secondary organs, grafted on to replace his own defective ones, instruments or ideological formations capable of filling his function as subject. In fact, this substitution is only possible on the condition that the instrumentation itself be hidden or repressed. Thus disturbing cinematic elements—similar, precisely, to those elements indicating the return of the repressed—signify without fail the arrival of the instrument “in flesh and blood,” as in Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*. Both specular tranquillity and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is of the inscription of the film-work.

The cinema can thus appear as a sort of psychic apparatus of substitution, corresponding to the model defined by the dominant ideology. The system of representation (primarily economic) has as its goal the prevention of deviations and of the active exposure of this “model.” Analogously one could say that its “unconscious” is not recognized (we speak of the apparatus and not of the content of films, which have used the unconscious in ways we know all too well). To this unconscious would be attached the mode of production of film, the process of “work” in its multiple determinations, among which must be numbered those depending on instrumentation. This is why reflections on the basic apparatus ought to be possible to integrate into a general theory of the ideology of cinema.

[Translated by Alan Williams]

NOTES
3. [*Travail*, the process—implying not only “work” in the ordinary sense but as in Freud’s usage: the dreamwork.—Tr.]
4. Obviously we are not speaking here of investment of capital in the process.
6. We understand the term “subject” here in its function as vehicle and place of intersection of ideological implications which we are attempting progressively to make clear, and not as the structural function which analytic discourse attempts to locate. It would rather take partially the place of the ego, of whose deviations little is known in the analytic field.
7. The perspective “frame” which will have such an influence on cinematographic shooting has as its role to intensify, to increase the effect of the spectacle, which no divergence may be allowed to split.


9. “We know that the spectator finds it impossible to notice that the images which succeed one another before his eyes were assembled end-to-end, because the projection of film on the screen offers an impression of continuity although the images which compose it are, in reality, distinct, and are differentiated moreover by variations in space and time.

“In a film, there can be hundreds, even thousands of cuts and intervals. But if it is shown for specialists who know the art, the spectacle will not be divulged as such. Only an error or lack of competence will permit them to seize, and this is a disagreeable sensation, the changes of time and place of action.” (Pudovkin, “Le Montage” in Cinéma d’aujourd’hui et de demain, [Moscow, 1956].)

10. [Écriture, in the French, meaning “writing” but also “schematization” at any given level of material or expression.—Tr.]

11. [Specular: a notion used by Althusser and above all by Lacan; the word refers to the “mirror” effect which by reflection (specularization) constitutes the object reflected to the viewer and for him. The body is the most important and the first of these objects.—Tr.]

12. It is thus first at the level of the apparatus that the cinema functions as a language: inscription of discontinuous elements whose effacement in the relationship instituted among them produces meaning.


14. The cinema manifests in a hallucinatory manner the belief in the omnipotence of thought, described by Freud, which plays so important a role in neurotic defense mechanisms.


16. Ibid., p. 18.

17. [Apodicity, in phenomenological terminology, indicates something of an ultimately irrefutable nature. See Husserl, op.cit.—Tr.]

18. On this point it is true that the camera is revealed as incomplete. But this is only a technical imperfection which, since the birth of cinema, has already in large measure been remedied.

19. Ibid., p. 34, emphasis added.

20. Ibid., p. 40.

21. Ibid., p. 58.


23. The lens, the “objective,” is of course only a particular location of the “subjective.” Marked by the idealist opposition interior/exterior, topologically situated at the point of meeting of the two, it corresponds, one could say, to the empirical organ of the subjective, to the opening, the fault in the organs of meaning, by which the exterior world may penetrate the interior and assume meaning. “It is the interior which commands,” says Bresson. “I know this may seem paradoxical in an art which is all exterior.” Also the use of different lenses is already conditioned by camera movement as implication and trajectory of meaning, by this transcendental function which we are
attempting to define: it is the possibility of choosing a field as accentuation or modification of the *visée intentionelle*.

No doubt this transcendental function fits in without difficulty the field of psychology. This, moreover, is insisted upon by Husserl himself, who indicates that Brentano's discovery, intentionality, "permits one truly to distinguish the method of a descriptive science of consciousness, as much philosophical and transcendental as psychological."

24. The arrangement of the cave, except that in the cinema it is already doubled in a sort of enclosure in which the camera, the darkened chamber, is enclosed in another darkened chamber, the projection hall.


26. We see that what has been defined as impression of reality refers less to the "reality" than to the apparatus which, although being of an hallucinatory order, nonetheless founds this possibility. Reality will never appear except as relative to the images which reflect it, in some way inaugurated by a reflection anterior to itself.

27. We refer here to what Lacan says of identifications in liaison with the structure determined by an optical instrument (the mirror), as they are constituted, in the prevailing figuration of the ego, as lines of resistance to the advance of the analytic work.

28. “That the ego be ‘in the right’ must be avowed, from experience, to be a function of misunderstanding.” (Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 637.)

29. “That it sustains itself as ‘subject’ means that language permits it to consider itself as the stagehand or even the director of all the imaginary capturings of which it would otherwise only be the living marionette.” (*Ibid.*, p. 637.)

30. It is on this point and in function of the elements which we are trying to put in place that a discussion of editing could be opened. We will at a later date attempt to make some remarks on this subject.

31. *Mediterranée*, by J.-D. Pollet and Phillipe Sollers (1963), which dismantles with exemplary efficiency the "transcendental specularization" which we have attempted to delineate, gives a manifest proof of this point. The film was never able to overcome the economic blockade.

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**GREGORY CURRIE**

**Film, Reality, and Illusion**

Philosopher Gregory Currie (b. 1950), currently a professor at the University of Nottingham, England, has taught in Australia and New Zealand and as visiting faculty at a number of prestigious institutions. He is primarily interested in theories of mind, imagination, and narrative. His books include *The Nature of Fiction* (1990), *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (1995), and *Arts and Minds* (2004), and he is a spirited contributor to what can broadly be characterized as the “cognitive turn” in film studies of the mid-1980s. Cognitivist film theorists draw on science and logical argument to study and explicate how viewers make sense of the film medium through rationally motivated perceptual and information/knowledge processes.
Situating himself in the tradition of Anglo-American analytic philosophy, Currie joins fellow critics in pointing out the flawed premises and overarching claims of “grand theory” (a term coined by film theorists David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, editors of the collection in which Currie’s essay appeared). Dominating film studies in the 1970s and extending its influence long after, “grand theory” drew its inspiration from continental theories of language, ideology, and subjectivity—often characterizing cinematic signification and spectatorship in abstract, monolithic terms. Cognitivist critics reject the analogy between cinema and language and between spectatorship and the imaginary found in the semiotic and psychoanalytic theories of Christian Metz (p. 17), Jean-Louis Baudry (p. 34), and others and advocate more pragmatic and rigorous research into aspects of perception, cognition, emotion, and identification experienced at the movies. The many cognitivists and analytic philosophers contributing to these debates do not share a single position; some draw on evolutionary biology and the psychology of perception, others on the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Together they have pressed the question of the relationship of film theory to the disciplines of cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy, infusing the field with lively debate.

In this 1996 essay, Currie holds that film is a realistic medium, rejecting what he calls the doctrine of “illusionism” that claimed that movies “dupe” spectators into believing what they see on screen as real. Currie argues that movement is a real, if response-dependent, property of the cinema, which viewers perceive in the same way they perceive real motion. Film viewing is neither cognitively nor perceptually illusory; that is, we don’t falsely believe the onscreen image to be real, nor do we mistake apparent motion for real motion. He calls this position “Perceptual Realism,” stating that “film watching is similar to the originary perceptual experience of the world.” Other cognitive critics extend this inquiry to include viewer perception and the processing of narrative cues or emotional responses. Such questions can be traced back to the psychological theories of Hugo Münsterberg (p. 9) and have applications beyond film to understanding interactions with new media forms like video games. Currie’s piece is interesting to consider in light of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” and it also brings a different dimension to the realist aesthetic theories of cinema covered in Part 3.

**READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS**

- What is Currie’s critique of the conflation of Perceptual Realism and Illusionism in dominant film theory?
- What is Currie’s distinction between Cognitive Illusionism and Perceptual Illusionism, and how does he argue against each?
- Currie claims that “it is realism, not illusionism, that needs to play a central role in film theory.” What kind of inquiry does this position favor?
- **Key Concepts**: Transparency; Perceptual Realism; Illusionism; Cognition; Grand Theory
Film, Reality, and Illusion

Introduction

It has been said that film is both a realistic and an illusionistic medium; indeed, these claims have often been treated as if they were indistinguishable. I wish to distinguish them, for I hold that film is a realistic medium—in a certain sense—and I deny that it is an illusionistic medium. I shall elaborate and defend a version of realism about cinema, and I shall identify two versions of illusionism, both of which I shall reject. In recent years these issues have most often been discussed within the framework of Marxist, psychoanalytic, or semiotic principles. I shall draw instead on recent Anglo-American philosophy of mind and language, within which there has been considerable debate about the nature and viability of realism. Since my concern is with cinema, I want to discuss a specifically representational form of realism that sheds light on the nature of film—and incidentally on other “pictorial” modes of representation. I do not aim at a systematic theory of cinema—not here, anyway. What I intend to do instead is to show how ways of thinking from within the broadly analytical tradition of philosophy can help us get a better grip on the issues of realism and illusion as they relate to film. I begin, in good analytic style, with some distinctions. I hope to end with something more speculative and challenging.

I shall argue that we see movement on the cinema screen in the same sense that we see colors when we look at ordinary objects in the world under normal conditions. That is, we literally see movement on the screen, just as we literally see color. Colors are real, and so is cinematic motion. There is therefore no “illusion” of movement, and it is literally true that films are moving pictures.

Transparency, Realism, and Illusionism

Let us start by distinguishing three doctrines about cinema, all of which have been called “realism.” They are, however, quite distinct, and to underline their distinctness I shall call only one of them “realism.” There is first the claim that film, because of its use of the photographic method, reproduces rather than merely represents the real world; this view is associated most notably with André Bazin. Following Kendall Walton, I shall call this the doctrine of Transparency; film is transparent in that we see “through” it to the real world, as we see through a window or a lens. Next is the idea that the experience of film watching approximates the normal experience of perceiving the real world. We might call this Perceptual Realism, since it says that film is, or can be, realistic in its recreation of the experience of the real world. We might call this Perceptual Realism, since it says that film is, or can be, realistic in its recreation of the experience of the real world. This doctrine has been asserted, again by Bazin, in connection with long-take, deep-focus style. But, as I shall argue, this kind of realism is a matter of degree, and long-take style is merely more realistic in this sense than is, say, montage style. Perceptual Realism, as a thesis about cinema, is the thesis that film is, in general, more realistic than certain other modes of representation. Finally, there is the claim that film is realistic in its capacity to engender in the viewer an illusion of the reality and presentness of fictional characters and events portrayed. Let us call this view, which seems to be held by studio
publicity writers as well as by the sternest Marxist critics of the Hollywood film, *Illusionism*.

Much of the history of film and film theory is reconstructible as a debate about the relations between these three doctrines. Some theorists—I am thinking of the early montagists and, more recently, the friends of Godard—have argued that Transparency requires us to play down the perceptual realism which film makes possible; film achieves the status of art (or subversion) when it employs mechanisms that go beyond the mere reproduction of reality. Others, like Bazin, say that film’s dependence on Transparency requires the filmmaker to exploit to the full the possibilities for perceptual realism inherent in film; film presents the real world, so it should do so in a way which approximates as closely as possible to our experience of the real world. Some theorists have agreed—at least they can be read as agreeing—that Perceptual Realism makes for Illusionism. They agree, in other words, that the closer the experience of film watching approximates to the experience of seeing the real world, the more effectively film engenders in viewer the illusion that he or she is actually watching the real world. The disagreement between these theorists has concerned the question whether this is a desirable goal. Other theorists have taken a more radical view, and have argued that the very notion of realism in film is suspect or even incoherent.

If my absurdly brief account of the history of film theory is close to being right, the discipline has been to a large extent predicated on the assumption of a close connection between these three doctrines. I, on the other hand, take these doctrines to be independent, both logically and causally. Adopting any one of them, we are free to adopt or reject the others. I reject Illusionism, I accept Perceptual Realism, and I am neutral, for present purposes, about Transparency, which I shall ignore hereafter, having had my say on it elsewhere. I want to defend Perceptual Realism, which has been under attack for a while now from those who reject the notion of likeness or resemblance between images and the things they are images of, and who stress instead the artifice, the conventionality, the “codedness” as they put it, of cinema. But I wish to avoid a misunderstanding about what I am claiming here. My defense of Perceptual Realism is a metaphysical and not an aesthetic defense. I am not advocating that filmmakers adopt styles which, like long-take, deep-focus style, attempt to exploit the possibilities for perceptual realism in film. I am arguing that Perceptual Realism is a coherent thesis, and that it is possible to achieve a considerable degree of this kind of realism in film. Whether you think that is a worthwhile project is another matter.

About Illusionism I want to say two things. First, I wish to argue that it is a mistaken doctrine. Second, I want to hazard a guess at why this doctrine, which strikes me as completely implausible, should have such a tenacious grip on the minds of many who concern themselves with film. My hypothesis is that its strength derives in part (and certainly only in part) from its being conflated with another doctrine which is even more widely believed and which has a certain plausibility. This is the thesis that the basic mechanism of film creates an illusion of *movement*. Sorting out these two doctrines will lead us to make a distinction between cognitive and perceptual illusions.

**Perceptual Realism**

Let us say that a mode of representation is realistic when, or to the degree that, we employ the same capacities in recognizing its representational content as we employ
in recognizing the (kind of) objects it represents. A good-quality, well-focused, middle-distance photograph of a horse is realistic in this sense: you employ your visual capacity to recognize horses so as to determine that this is, indeed, a photograph of a horse. Roughly speaking, you can recognize a photograph, a cinematic image, or other kind of picture of a horse if and only if you can recognize a horse. By contrast, a linguistic description of a horse is not realistic in the sense just specified, for the capacity visually to recognize horses is neither sufficient nor necessary to enable you to recognize the description as a description of a horse; recognizing the description requires a knowledge of the conventions of language. (There probably are other senses in which a description can be said to be realistic.)

Realism of the kind I am concerned with here is a matter of degree. Suppose we have a representation, \( R \), of an object, \( A \), and \( R \) represents \( A \) as having properties \( F \) and \( G \). \( R \) might represent \( F \) realistically, and \( G \) in some other way. That is, \( R \) may be such that you are able to recognize \( R \) as representing the \( F \)ness of \( A \) in virtue of your capacity visually to recognize the \( F \)ness of an \( A \) when you see one, but you recognize \( R \) as representing the \( G \)ness of \( A \) in virtue of your knowledge of some convention of language, or perhaps in virtue of your knowledge of someone's intention. In that case, when we say that this representation, or mode of representation, is realistic and that one is not we probably mean that this one is more realistic than that one. It will be important to bear this in mind in what follows.

It is in this sense of realism—the sense which I have given to the phrase “Perceptual Realism”—that film is a realistic medium, and deep-focus, long-take style is an especially realistic style within that medium. We recognize that people, houses, mountains, and cars are represented on screen by exercising the capacities we have to recognize those objects, and not by learning a set of conventions that associate cinematic representations of these objects with the objects themselves. (There is, in other words, nothing comparable in cinema to learning the vocabulary of a language.) And when objects and events are represented on screen within a single shot, we come to know what spatial and temporal relations the film represents as holding between those objects and events by using our ordinary capacities to judge the spatial and temporal relations between objects and events themselves. We judge the spatial relations between objects represented in the same shot by seeing that they are spatially related thus and so; we judge the temporal properties of and relations between events represented within the take by noting that this event took (roughly) so long to observe, while that one was experienced as occurring later than the other one. That is exactly how we judge the spatial and temporal properties of things and events as we perceive them in the real world. In that way, long-take, deep-focus style extends the possibilities for the perceptual realism of film. (Length of take and depth of focus are independent of one another and do not always go together, as David Bordwell pointed out to me. But if I am right about their capacity to enhance perceptual realism in film, the combination of these two features constitutes something like a stylistic “natural kind.”)

In montage style, on the other hand, where there is quick cutting between very distinct spatial (and sometimes temporal) perspectives, the spatial and temporal properties and relations depicted have, with greater frequency, to be judged by means of inference from the overall dramatic structure of the film. As my earlier remarks were intended to suggest, this is a matter of degree; long-take, deep-focus
style is *more* realistic than montage style, and montage style can itself be said to be more realistic than some other modes of representation: more realistic certainly than linguistic description. Unqualified claims that long-take, deep-focus style is realistic should be taken as implicitly relativized to the class of artistic styles with which it is most naturally compared, namely other cinematic styles, just as the claim that elephants are large will be understood as relativized to the class of mammals.

It is often remarked that deep-focus style is unrealistic in that it presents us with an image in which objects are simultaneously in sharp focus when they are at considerably different distances from the camera, whereas objects at comparable distances from the eye could not be seen in focus together. But this does not seriously detract from the perceptual realism of deep focus. Deep focus, particularly when used in conjunction with a wide screen, enables us to concentrate our attention on one object, and then to shift our attention at will to another object, just as we are able to do when perceiving the real world. Since we are usually not very conscious of refocusing our eyes, the similarities between viewing deep-focus style and perceiving the real world are more striking than the differences. With montage style on the other hand, we are severely limited by shot length and depth of field in our capacity to shift our attention from one object to another at will—though as I have said, this feature is not entirely absent in montage style.

Explicating the idea of perceptual realism in this way helps us avoid an error that has dogged theorizing about the cinema: that realism in film can be attacked on metaphysical grounds because it postulates an observer-independent world—an idea which is then further associated by some theorists with a politically conservative agenda of submission to prevailing conditions. But Perceptual Realism as I have explic- ited it here appeals to no such postulate of an observer-independent world (though one might argue that such a postulate is both philosophically respectable and politically neutral). The claim of Perceptual Realism is not the claim that cinema presents objects and events isomorphic to those that exist in an observer-independent world, but the claim that, in crucial respects, the experience of film watching is similar to the ordinary perceptual experience of the world, irrespective of whether and to what extent that world is itself independent of our experience of it.

When I say “the experience of film watching is similar to the ordinary perceptual experience of the world,” I mean that *our* experience of film watching is similar to *our* ordinary perceptual experience of the world. There might be creatures as intelligent and perceptually discriminating as we are but who experience the world in ways rather different from us. They might not be able to deploy their natural recognition capacities in order to grasp what is depicted in film, and in our other pictorial forms of representation. Richard Dawkins raises the possibility that bats might have visual experiences qualitatively similar to our own, but caused by their very different perceptual systems, which depend on bouncing sound waves off solid objects. I understand this is not likely to be true of bats, but we can imagine bat-like creatures complex enough for this to be a plausible story. They wouldn’t have much success detecting the spatial properties of objects as they are represented on a flat screen, and film would be a medium with little appeal for them. So there is a definite relativity about my conception of realism; what is realistic for us might not be realistic for other creatures. My concept of realism is what people these days are calling a response-dependent concept; it is a concept applicable to things in virtue
of the responses to it of a certain class of intelligent agents, namely ourselves. It is like the concept being funny or being red. Things are funny if people respond to them in certain ways (it’s not easy to say exactly what ways); things are red if they look red to normal humans in normal conditions. So it is with Perceptual Realism.

Some people will find this relativistic concept of realism jarring, perhaps oxymoronic. Among them are those who, as I mentioned earlier, object to realism because they think realism presupposes some sort of absolutist conception of the world and all its aspects. They think that realism postulates a world describable without reference to any subjective point of view. But this is a mistake. Colors are real, relational properties of things: properties they have in virtue of our responses to them. Response-dependence is going to come up again, when we discuss the supposed illusion of movement in film.

For the record, let us have a tolerably precise characterization of Perceptual Realism:

A representation \( R \) is realistic in its representation of feature \( F \) for creatures of kind \( C \) if and only if

(i) \( R \) represents something as having \( F \);

(ii) \( C \)'s have a certain perceptual capacity \( P \) to recognize instances of \( F \);

(iii) \( C \)'s recognize that \( R \) represents something as having \( F \) by deploying capacity \( P \).

This characterization of realism has important consequences when applied to film. One is that there is a sense in which film is both a spatial and a temporal medium. Film represents space by means of space, and time by means of time. It is spatial (temporal) properties of the cinematic representation that we observe and rely on in order to figure out what spatial (temporal) properties of the fictional characters and events are portrayed. It is correctly said that painting and still photography are capable of representing the temporal. They may do so in a variety of ways: by encouraging the viewer to make an inference from what is explicitly depicted to what came before and what will come after; by juxtaposition of distinct static images, as when we are shown a series of temporally related photographs; by transforming temporal properties into spatial ones (as in Filippo Lippi’s tondo in the Pitti Palace, wherein events earlier in the life of the Virgin are represented deeper within the picture space); by special techniques such as blurring and multiple exposure. But these possibilities do not constitute grounds for calling painting and still photography arts of time in the way that cinema is, for with them time is not represented by means of time.

**Illusionism**

Having said that film is realistic in that it deploys our natural recognitional capacities, it may seem as if I am thereby committed to illusionism. If a cinematic image of a horse triggers my horse recognition capacity, doesn’t that mean that I take the image to be a horse, thereby falling victim to an illusion? No. I say that my horse recognition capacity and my capacity to judge whether there is a horse in front of me (rather than, say, an image of one) are two different things. Indeed, they operate at different cognitive levels. Judging that there is a horse in front of me is something I do; it takes place at the personal level. Having my horse recognition capacity triggered—by a horse or by an image of one—is something that goes on in me, at
some level within my visual processing system; it is a subpersonal process. Once we distinguish between these capacities and the levels at which they operate, we can be perceptual realists without falling into the trap of illusionism.

So I may be a perceptual realist and deny that film is illusionistic, which I do deny. I do not deny that it is possible for film to engender this sort of an illusion on the part of a viewer; on a liberal enough view of possibility, it is possible for anything to create an illusion of anything else. But this mere possibility is not what is at issue when people claim that film is illusionistic. Rather, they claim that the standard mechanism by means of which film engages the audience is illusionistic, that the creation of an illusion of reality is a standard feature of the transaction between film and viewer. That is what I deny.

The claim that film creates an illusion of the reality of the fiction it presents can take a number of forms. So far as I can see, film theorists have tended to opt for a particularly strong version of that claim. They have tended to say that the illusion is not merely that the fictional events are real, but that the viewer is present at those events, observing them from within the world of the fiction, thinking of him- or herself as placed where the camera is, experiencing those events with the visual perspective of the camera. There are other, more moderate versions of illusionism one might hold to, but I believe that in the end we shall find no more use for them than for the strong version. Anyhow, it is the strong version I shall concentrate on here.

There are two serious objections to the idea that film induces the illusion that fictional events are real and that the viewer is directly witnessing them. The first derives from a functionalist view about the nature of beliefs: that beliefs are, essentially, states apt to cause certain kinds of behavior. Of course we know that there is no simple, invariant correlation between having a certain belief and engaging in a certain kind of behavior. But we can say this: there are certain kinds of beliefs which are such that, where they are not accompanied by the relevant behavior, their disconnection from behavior is to be explained by appeal to other, countervailing beliefs. Someone who believes herself in danger may take no evasive action, but that will be explained by reference to some other belief: that evasion will have unacceptable costs in terms of peer appraisal, that staying put will be the best way to avoid the danger, and so on. Now film watchers do not behave like people who really believe, or even suspect, that they are in the presence of ax murderers, world-destroying monsters, or nuclear explosions, which is what the films they see frequently represent. And in their cases, appeal to the sorts of countervailing beliefs just mentioned sound rather hollow. The real reasons people stay in movie theaters or in front of videos during frightening films are, for example, because they want to see the rest of the film, or because they have paid their money, or because they want to experience the sensations of fear. None of these explanations sits comfortably with the view that patrons believe, even partially or “with part of the mind,” as people sometimes say, that they are really in the presence of dangerous, catastrophic, or tragic events. Explanations of our responses to cinematic fictions in terms of belief work only so long as we do not take the notion of belief, and its connection with behavior, seriously. Of course we do need a psychological explanation of our sometimes very intense responses to film. In the absence of an explanation in other terms, an explanation that appeals to belief can seem attractive, for all its evident drawbacks. Elsewhere I have given an explanation of our
responses to fictions, in terms of imagining.\(^5\) I shall say here only that I believe this account applies as well to cinematic as to other kinds of fictions.

The second objection to Illusionism is that it is at odds with much of the experience of film watching.\(^6\) Consider what would be involved in the film viewer believing that she is watching real events. The viewer would have to suppose that her perspective is that of the camera, that she is positioned within and moves through the film space as the camera is positioned and moved. Indeed, there have been elaborate attempts to argue that the viewer does identify with the camera, and Christian Metz has gone so far as to assert that without identification there would be no comprehension of film.\(^7\) But this is psychologically implausible. Identification with the camera would frequently require us to think of ourselves in peculiar or impossible locations, undertaking movements out of keeping with the natural limitations of our bodies, and peculiarly invisible to the characters. None of this seems to be part of the ordinary experience of film watching. In the attempt to associate the camera with some observer within the world of the action with whom the viewer can in turn identify, film theorists have exaggerated the extent to which shots within a film can be thought of as point-of-view shots, and have sometimes postulated, quite ad hoc, an invisible narrator from whose position the action is displayed and with whom the viewer may identify. For example, Jacques Aumont asserts very confidently that “...the frame in narrative cinema is always more or less the representation of a gaze, the auteur’s or the characters’.”\(^8\) Here, I believe, we are in the grip of a manifestly false theory. It would be better to acknowledge that cinematic shots are only rarely from a psychological point of view, and to abandon the thesis that the viewer identifies with an intelligence whose point of view is the camera.

A variant of Illusionism, and one which might be thought to take some account of the objections just propounded, says that the situation of the film watcher approximates to that of a dreamer. During our dreams we remain physically passive, yet we are convinced of the reality of the dream. In that case the camera would correspond to a supposed “inner eye” by means of which we perceive the images of dreams. This analogy has been a powerful stimulus to the development of psychoanalytic theories of film and film experience. In fact, as Noël Carroll has shown, the analogy with dreaming proceeds by systematically failing to compare like with like.\(^9\) Dreamers, like film watchers, usually are physically passive while watching or dreaming. But the experience of dreaming is usually one that involves action—sometimes inefficacious—on the dreamer’s part, while the experience of film watching, our reflex responses aside, rarely moves us to physical action. And it is the experience of film watching and the experience of dreaming that are claimed by the advocates of the dream/film analogy to be alike. The fact that both dreaming and film watching typically take place in the dark is another irrelevant consideration often raised, since darkness is not typically part of the experience of dreaming, though it does typically accompany the experience of film watching. There are other notable dissimilarities between film watching and dreaming. In dreams, our own actions and sufferings are of central concern to us, but the experience of film watching makes us largely forgetful of ourselves while we concentrate on the fate of the characters. Perhaps in some way film watching is like dreaming; perhaps everything is in some way like everything else. There does not seem to be any substantial, systematic likeness between film experience and dreaming that holds out promise of serious explanatory gains.
Cognitive and Perceptual Illusions

The version of Illusionism I have been considering so far is a very strong one; it commits the Illusionist to saying that film viewers are systematically caused to have false beliefs. It is interesting to argue that a strong view is true, but less interesting to argue that it is false, as I have done. By definition, strong views are more likely to be false than weak ones. Might there be some weaker, apparently more plausible, version of Illusionism? If so, and if we could show that this weaker version is also wrong, that would be a result of considerable interest. I believe that there is a weaker, more plausible version of Illusionism, and I shall argue against it.

First I need to distinguish between two kinds of illusions: cognitive and perceptual illusions. I mean by a cognitive illusion a state of mind essentially involving a false belief. Thus if someone sees an oasis in the desert and there is no oasis there (at least not where it seems to be), and comes thereby falsely to believe that there is an oasis there, she is subject to a cognitive illusion. Similarly, when someone sees two lines of equal length, but provided with “arrowheads” pointing in different directions so that the lines seem to be of different lengths, she might believe the lines to be of different lengths. This person is also suffering a cognitive illusion. But not all illusions are cognitive. You may know that the two lines are of equal length and still be subject to the so-called Muller-Lyer illusion which I have just described: the lines just look as if they are of different lengths. Zenon Pylyshyn has introduced the term “cognitively impenetrable” to describe mental processes which operate independently of our beliefs. For example, if someone moves his fist quickly toward your face you will recoil even though you know he won’t hit you. Visual illusions involve processes which are cognitively impenetrable: belief doesn’t make any difference to the way the illusionary phenomenon looks.

An illusion of this kind, which is what I am going to call a perceptual illusion, occurs when experience represents the world as being a certain way, when in fact the world is not that way and the subject knows it. And experience may represent the world as being a way it isn’t, as when it represents the two lines as being of unequal length, even though the subject knows that experience is misrepresenting the world.20

Now someone might claim that cinema is illusionistic in this perceptual sense, and not in the cognitive sense I have been considering up until now. My arguments so far presented against Illusionism are ineffective against Perceptual Illusionism, because they are arguments designed to show that we lack the beliefs necessary to underwrite the claim of Cognitive Illusionism. So I need quite different arguments if I am going to oppose Perceptual Illusionism. I shall provide some. But we should bear in mind a point I have already made: that Perceptual Illusionism is a distinctly weaker thesis about cinema than Cognitive Illusionism, and one with quite different consequences. There has been, I think, a tendency to assume that the truth (the alleged truth) of Perceptual Illusionism somehow supports the claim of Cognitive Illusionism. Perhaps Perceptual Illusionism is the Trojan horse by means of which advocates of Cognitive Illusionism hope to gain their victory. It needs to be said, therefore, that Perceptual Illusionism, even if true, does not in itself provide an argument for Cognitive Illusionism, though of course it might provide such an argument in conjunction with other premises. So it is not essential to my case against
Cognitive Illusionism that I oppose Perceptual Illusionism as well. Nonetheless, I am inclined to oppose Perceptual Illusionism. I do not claim to be able to refute it; at most I shall sow the seeds of doubt about it.

What merely perceptual illusion is cinema said to create? A very common view is that the technical mechanism that film employs is itself productive of an illusion—this supposed illusion being that the viewer sees a moving image or sequence of such images, when in fact there is no moving image to be seen. All there “really” is is light projected through an aperture against which are laid, in quick succession, a series of still photographs (the standard rate of succession being 24 frames per second). So what we see is a series of projected static images, and not the moving image that we seem to see. Francis Sparshott writes that “A film is a series of motionless images projected onto a screen so fast as to create in the mind of anyone watching the screen an impression of continuous motion”—an impression Sparshott goes on to call “the basic illusion of motion.” On this view, our experience when watching a film represents the world as containing movement of a certain kind: movement of images. And this is an illusion, according to Sparshott and others, because the world in fact contains no such movement of images; there is, to repeat, only a succession of static images.

I had better clarify exactly what I mean when I speak of “moving images.” Strictly speaking, the cinematic image is the whole area of illumination on the screen during projection. We all agree, I take it, that this does not move, unless the projection equipment starts to shift around. What moves, on my account, is a part or parts of this image; if we are watching a shot of a man walking along a street, the part of the image which represents the man will move from one side of the screen to the other. Movement of this kind, which is what I am concerned with here, needs to be distinguished from the movement which occurs as a result of a continuous change in the position of the camera during a single shot. This latter kind of movement introduces some complex considerations which I shall not attempt to deal with here. Also, the movement with which I am concerned here is to be distinguished from the radically discontinuous movement which might be said to occur across shots: we see the image of the man in one place on the screen in one shot, and in another place on the screen in the next shot. All I am claiming here is that there really is movement within a single shot taken from a fixed perspective. That, obviously, is enough to contradict the claim that movement in film is an illusion produced by the juxtaposition of static images.

Someone might argue that this supposed illusion of cinematic motion is a cognitive, and not merely a perceptual illusion, because most people who watch films actually believe that they are watching moving images; it is only when one reflects on the technical mechanisms of cinema that one realizes that this is not the case. That may be true, but the fact is that the appearance of cinematic motion does not go away for those people who convince themselves that it is, indeed, an illusion. If cinematic motion is illusory, then it is essentially a perceptual illusion and only incidentally a cognitive one. That is why I shall [not] treat it simply as a cognitive illusion.

Before I consider the case for Perceptual Illusionism, a word on metaphysical background. Arguments about motion, and about change generally, sometimes raise deep questions about what motion and change actually are. There are two basic and mutually incompatible positions on this. One, which I shall call three dimensionalism, says that change takes place when a thing has a property at one time which it, that very same thing, lacks at another time. The other view, four
dimensionalism, says that change occurs when a certain temporal stage possesses a property, and another temporal stage lacks that property, where those temporal stages are so related to constitute temporal stages of the same object. I don’t myself believe that there is anything in our common belief about change which decides one way or the other between these two theories, and nothing I shall say about cinematic movement here is intended to prejudge which is correct. So while I shall speak of our cinematic experience as representing to us that an image moves from one place to the other, this is to be taken as neutral between the view that there is one thing which is in one place at one time and in another place at another time, and the view that there are distinct but suitably related temporal parts that are in different places. Obviously, both construals are inconsistent with the view that there is, literally, no movement of an image on the screen.

[····]

So my thesis is just that a certain, restricted kind of apparent motion in cinema is, in fact, not merely apparent, but real. I shall call that motion simply “cinematic motion.” But I shall not be looking for a positive argument in favor of the reality of cinematic motion. In debates over whether some type of experience is illusory, it seems to me that the burden of proof, or perhaps merely of argument, lies with the party who asserts that the experience in question is illusory, just as it does with someone who asserts that a certain belief is false. In both cases—belief and perception—we have grounds for treating veridical and nonveridical states asymmetrically, since states of belief and perception are states we have because they tend to be veridical. In that case, we should hold that cinematic experience of movement is veridical unless there is a significant weight of evidence and argument against that view.

What is the argument for saying that the experience of cinema involves a perceptual illusion of movement? I have the impression that the argument sometimes appeals to the fact that there is no movement on the cinematic film roll itself, that there is just a sequence of static images. This is true, but it does nothing to establish the unreality of cinematic movement. After all, when we listen to a tape or other kind of sound recording, there is no sound literally on the tape itself; what is on the tape is just a pattern of selective magnetization, or whatever. But we would not conclude from this that when we listen to a tape recording of music, we are subject to an auditory illusion. The claim of Perceptual Illusionism is the claim that there is no movement on the screen, for this, after all, is where we seem to see movement.

An argument which might seem to favor Perceptual Illusionism is the following: the supposed movement that there is on the screen is the product of our perceptual system, and cannot be thought to exist independent of it. Suppose you described the goings-on on the screen from the kind of objective viewpoint we try to occupy in physical science: you exhaustively describe the impact of particles or waves of light on the screen, and you therefore describe all the relevant physical goings-on at that surface. But you do not describe any movement of the kind we claim to observe there; you do not describe any object as moving from one place on the screen to another. So there simply isn’t any movement here, since the objective description comprehends all the relevant physical facts but describes no movement. It is only when you take a subjective point of view, and include in the description the viewer’s subjective experience of the screen, that movement enters your description.
I hope that by now warning bells are going off all over the place. This argument is parallel to a class of other arguments that would establish the illusory nature of all our experience of what are called secondary qualities. Consider the case of color: we describe the object from a physical point of view exhaustively, including everything about the spectral reflectance profile of its surface, but we say nothing about the way it looks; color enters our vocabulary only when we include the observer’s subjective point of view in the story. Now there are those, like Paul Boghossian and J. David Velleman, who relish this conclusion, and say that the experience of color is indeed illusory; experience represents things as having color properties when in fact they do not have them. But on the whole philosophers resist such starkly revisionist conclusions, and I go along with them. What a realist about color should say is what we have already said: colors and other secondary properties are real, response-dependent properties of things. Perhaps, then, the “apparent motion” of projected film is not merely apparent; perhaps it is real, response-dependent motion.

One common and natural thought in response to this proposal is that the proposal can succeed only at the cost of destroying the distinction between real and merely apparent phenomena, or that it will, at the very least, intolerably expand the class of phenomena we shall have to count as real. It is worth seeing that this is not so. First of all, someone might claim that, by an argument parallel to the one I have given for the reality of cinematic motion, we can establish that the experience induced by the Muller-Lyer phenomenon is veridical. Just say that in those cases of experience singled out as exemplifying the Muller-Lyer illusion, what experience represents is the holding, between two lines, of the relation being longer * than, where length * is not the metrical property of objects we measure with rigid rods, but rather a response-dependent length: a length that stands to metrical length as the response-dependent movement I have been describing stands to the movement we measure by tracking physical objects across space. In that case there is no illusion involved in the Muller-Lyer phenomenon, but merely the veridical experience of one line being longer * than another.

This objection fails. Our experience in the Muller-Lyer illusion represents the lines as standing in the relation longer than, not the relation longer * than. The visible appearance of the lines suggests that, were you to measure them in the conventional way, the result would be that one was measurably longer than the other. That is why this is genuinely a case of an illusion, rather than a veridical experience of a response-dependent property. With the experience of screen watching, however, it is doubtful whether the movement that our experience represents as taking place is of a kind that would be undermined by independent checks analogous to the measuring check we can carry out in the case of the Muller-Lyer illusion. For example, I do not think that our experience of screen watching is an experience which has as its representational content: There are reidentifiable physical objects moving in front of our eyes. Rather, its content is: There are images of reidentifiable physical objects moving in front of our eyes. In this respect the experience seems not to be undercut by information from other sources, and therefore to be crucially different from that induced by the Muller-Lyer setup.

[···]
There are a number of other apparent motions which are normally classed as merely apparent and which retain their status as mere appearances on my account. For example, psychologists speak of induced motion, a phenomenon noticeable when we see clouds drifting across the face of the moon; if the clouds drift slowly to the left, the moon appears to be drifting to the right. And tall buildings viewed from below against a background of moving clouds seem to be falling. In these and like cases we have a perceptual illusion of movement: experience represents something moving which is not moving. But these cases, I shall argue, are unlike the case of cinematic motion. And there are kinds of motion which cinema sometimes gives us and which are or can be illusory, rather than real motions. For example, films in 3-D display an illusion of depth; our experience of watching 3-D is one in which objects are represented as moving toward or away from the viewer when in fact no object is moving toward or away from the viewer. The cinematic motion I claim to be real belongs to the kind which psychologists call “motion in the frontal plane.”

[\ldots]

So I say that part of the content of cinematic experience is that there is movement of images, and there really is such movement. We see the cinematic image of a man, and we see that it is in one place on the screen, and we later see that it is in another; indeed, we see—really see—that image move from one place to another on the screen. That image is not to be identified with some particular physical object. It is not like the image in a painting which consists of a certain conglomeration of physical pigments, at least relatively stable over time. It is an image sustained by the continuous impact of light on the surface of the screen, and no particular light wave or particle is more than minutely constitutive of it. Nonetheless, that image is a particular, reidentifiable thing, and a thing which moves.

At a minimum, motion involves change over time in the position of a reidentifiable object (or, for four dimensionalists, the location of distinct temporal parts of an object at distinct places). If cinematic motion is real, it must be possible to reidentify cinematic images over time. How? One initially plausible answer is that images get their identity conditions from their causal antecedents. This image and that one are both cinematic images of the same man, so they are the same image (or on the four-dimensionalist view, they are temporal parts of the same image). But this answer strikes me as unsatisfactory. First of all, I would make the same claim for the reality of movement in animated cartoons, and there the argument from sameness of causal antecedents will not allow us to reidentify images over time: cartoon images do not have the kind of causal antecedents required to make the argument from common causal origin work. The better criterion for the identity of cinematic images across time is their relation to the mental states of the viewer. This image is the same as that one because both are identified by normal viewers in normal conditions as being images of the same individual. Here again, as with color, the concept we appeal to is response-dependent. Identity between images is itself a response-dependent concept, because questions about how to reidentify images across time are answered by appeal to facts about the psychological responses of the viewer to those images. But just as with colors, this response-dependence is perfectly compatible with the reality of the images concerned.
In arguing against perceptual illusionism, I have been insisting that cinematic motion is real, using that term to contrast, naturally enough, with “illusory.” You may think this taxonomy is insufficiently refined. After all, we commonly contrast reality with appearance; my dichotomy will then have us identify that which belongs to the realm of mere appearances with that which is illusory. That seems hard on appearances. There ought to be room for a position which says that colors and other secondary properties belong to the realm of appearances, but which denies that the experience of color is illusory. (Perhaps in the end this position will turn out to be incoherent; I just don’t want to rule it out at this stage.) On that view, the real contrasts with the illusory and with the apparent. Equivalently, we could say there are two senses of “real”: a weak sense, which has as the complement of its extension the illusory, and a stronger sense, which has as the complement of its extension the illusory and the apparent, which we can then lump together under the heading “antirealism.” If we adopt that labeling system, my view is simply that cinematic motion is real in the weak sense. I can then agree that in a strong, metaphysical sense we ought to be antirealists about cinematic motion, and perhaps about color as well. But we shall need to make a distinction between, on the one hand, antirealist concepts, for the application of which we are in the realm of mere appearances, and, on the other, antirealist concepts for the application of which we are in the realm of illusion. Whatever your view on color, there is surely a difference, for example, between ascribing blueness to a U.S. mailbox, and ascribing greenness to the (actually white) stripes displayed in a McCullough aftereffect experiment. The difference, I submit, is that in the second case but not in the first, you are subject to an illusion. So, if my parallel between cinematic motion and color does not persuade you to be a strong realist about cinematic motion, it may still be enough to undermine illusionism about cinematic motion.

To underline this last point, let us notice a feature of response-dependent concepts sometimes thought to be grounds for being an antirealist about such concepts. Realists sometimes emphasize the radical fallibility of our beliefs about a domain to which they claim realism applies; if it’s possible, even under epistemically ideal circumstances, for us to be mistaken in our beliefs about that domain, that is a sign that we are in the realm of reality. But with certain kinds of response-dependent concepts, radical fallibility is ruled out.²⁵ If a normal observer in normal circumstances judges that something is red, it is red; similarly, if a normally sighted person, sitting in a darkened cinema at the appropriate distance and attending to the screen as the projector rolls, judges that the cinematic image is moving, then it is. That, as I say, might be grounds for rejecting metaphysical realism about color, and about cinematic motion. But it cannot be grounds for thinking that cinematic movement is an illusion. Where there is no possibility of error, there can be no illusion.

**Conclusion**

Grand theories of film—like grand theories of anything else—are always prone to catastrophic error: get the basic conceptual priorities and relations wrong, and the whole system collapses. That, I believe, is how it has been with semiotically and psychoanalytically oriented film theories. These theories have simply presupposed that film is in some way or other an illusionistic medium. I have argued here that
the concept of illusion is in fact entirely irrelevant to understanding the nature and function of film. It is realism, not illusionism, that needs to play a central role in film theory. But the realism we need is not just anti-illusionistic, it is anti-absolutist as well; the realist need not believe that the world is fully describable without taking into account subjective points of view.

The conclusions of this paper go beyond film theory to embrace general metaphysics. It is traditional to regard motion as a paradigmatically primary quality, to be contrasted with those secondary qualities which are in some sense observer-dependent, like color. If what I have said here about cinematic motion is correct, we shall have to acknowledge a kind of motion which takes its place among the secondary qualities.

NOTES


3. Christian Metz, for example, discusses how film creates “a certain degree of belief in the reality of an imaginary world” (*The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 118 and 72; emphasis in the original). This view is by now more or less standard; see for example, Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 38. Metz’s formulation suggests a certain hesitancy about exactly how much belief there really is here, a hesitancy displayed in other remarks of his on the same subject: “somewhere in oneself one believes that [the events of the fiction] are genuinely true” (*Imaginary Signifier*, p. 72).

4. See my “Photography, Painting, and Perception.”


13. Functionalism in the philosophy of mind is best viewed as the successor to behaviorism. The behaviorists said that mental states are items of behavior or, on a more sophisticated conception, dispositions to behave. Functionalism rejects this idea, but holds to the idea that behavior is still constitutive of mental states. For example, a (grossly simplified) functionalist definition of pain might say that pain is the mental state which is typically caused by bodily damage and typically causes avoidance behavior.

14. Many writers on film emphasize the partial nature of the illusion that film creates, and how it competes with our knowledge that it is an illusion. Jean-Louis Comolli, for example, says that “We want to be … both fooled and not fooled [by cinema]” (“Machines of the Visible,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, p. 759). See also Metz’s qualifications, n. 4 above. But such admissions do little to make the illusionist view more plausible. Film viewers do not behave like people who even partially believe in the reality of what they see, or who are torn between belief and disbelief. See Kendall Walton, “Fearing Fictions,” *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5–27.


**VIVIAN SOBCHACK**

**Phenomenology and Film Experience**

**FROM The Address of the Eye**

Vivian Sobchack (b. 1940) is Professor Emerita of Critical Studies in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media at UCLA, where she also served as Associate Dean before her retirement. A leader in film studies throughout her career, Sobchack was the first woman elected president of the Society for Cinema Studies (the national scholarly organization in the field); she has also been a member of the American Film Institute's Board of Trustees since 1989. Sobchack's film criticism has consistently offered fresh perspectives on film genres, new media, and gender theory. In addition to The Address of the Eye (1992), Sobchack also explores film and media theory and its intersections with philosophy and cultural studies in her other work, including Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film (1987) and Carnal Thoughts: Bodies, Texts, Scenes and Screens (2004).

Concerned with the dynamics of film spectatorship and reception, Sobchack's work both parallels and engages with important trends in contemporary film practice and theory. Since the 1970s, numerous filmmakers have questioned realist and classical film traditions through analytical and reflexive strategies. The films of Jean-Luc Godard, Yvonne Rainer, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder all unsettle and distance spectators by foregrounding the "language" of cinema, albeit using very different approaches. These filmmakers “deconstruct” cinematic illusions, while provoking more active and reflective viewers. For example, Godard's films since the 1960s continually call attention to how images are being constructed as forms through which we see and understand the world; they are less about an individual, an action, or a story than about how editing and sound construct those realities. Film scholarship and criticism have also followed a similar vein in the last thirty years, promoting a comparable deconstructive criticism, underpinned by structuralist, poststructuralist, and feminist methodologies grounded in linguistic, Brechtian, and Marxist aesthetic theories.
The excerpt from “Phenomenology and Film Experience,” is clearly based on the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; in it Sobchack argues how our experience of the movies is first and foremost an “embodied” experience enacted simultaneously as a perception and an expression. For Sobchack, meaning and significance at the movies entail emotional and bodily experiences as well as intellectual and psychological ones, and her work consistently emphasizes an “embodied” relationship with films that is less analytical and distanced and more kinetic and dynamic. To some extent, Sobchack’s phenomenological film viewer recalls earlier notions of the film viewer, including the idea of spectatorial “shocks” in Sergei Eisenstein’s montage theories (p. 262) and André Bazin’s notions of the positions of “uncertainty” and “ambiguity” that viewers inhabit in some films (p. 309). Despite her clear polemic with many contemporaries, Sobchack’s position does align with recent scholarly work that has similarly considered film viewing as a more dynamic activity, such as Tom Gunning’s “The Cinema of Attractions” (p. 69) and Carol J. Clover’s arguments in “Her Body, Himself” (p. 511).

READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS

■ Sobchack notes that film theory has commonly employed three metaphors to describe the film experience: “the picture frame, the window, and the mirror.” Explain how each of these metaphors works to describe our movie experiences—and why, for Sobchack, each proves inadequate.

■ Consider Sobchack’s idea of audiences having an “embodied” relationship with a film. How might a particular movie become an embodied activity? Are there some kinds of films—such as horror movies or thrillers—in which this activity more obviously occurs?

■ One of Sobchack’s more complex formulations concerns the “intersubjective” communication of films as the simultaneous “perception of expression” and “expression of perception.” How would you explain this interaction of visual perception and expression at the movies?

■ **Key Concepts:** Phenomenology; Transcendental Idealism; Transcendental Realism; Transcendental Determinism; Intentionality; Embodied Viewing; Intersubjectivity

Phenomenology and Film Experience

*Film Theory and the Objectification of Embodied Vision*

The reversibility of cinematic perception and expression is the “enabling structure” of cinematic communication. In semiotic terms, it constitutes what Umberto Eco calls an “s-code”: the system-code that "makes a situation comprehensible and comparable to other situations, therefore preparing the way for a possible coding correlation." Without such a systemic exchange of cinematic perception and expression (one comparable to and comprehensible as such an exchange in the human situation), other secondary and more systematic cinematic coding correlations...
PART 1 EXPERIENCING FILM: FROM PERCEPTION TO RECEPTION

would not be possible and comprehensible. There could be no narrative codes, no
codes of subjective vision, no editorial codes, and their like. Nonetheless, the cin-
ematic system-code constituted by the exchange and reversibility of perception and
expression has been almost completely neglected by the respective analytic and
synthetic emphases of classical and contemporary film theory. Three metaphors have dominated film theory: the picture frame, the window, and the mirror. The first two, the frame and the window, represent the opposing
poles of classical film theory, while the third, the mirror, represents the synthetic
conflation of perception and expression that characterizes most contemporary film
theory. What is interesting to note is that all three metaphors relate directly to the
screen rectangle and to the film as a static viewed object, and only indirectly to the
dynamic activity of viewing that is engaged in by both the film and the spectator,
each as viewing subjects. The exchange and reversibility of perception and expres-
sion (both in and as the film and spectator) are suppressed, as are the intrasubject-
ive and intersubjective foundations of cinematic communication.

Most often identified with the binary poetics of a sufficiently opposed but neces-
sarily linked formalism and realism, classical film theory has argumentatively and
analytically severed expression from perception in its inquiries into the “true na-
ture” or ontology of the cinema. That is, cinematic “language” (here we might think
of montage) and cinematic being (and here of mise-en-scène) have been contrasted
categorically and set against each other as opposing poles of a single, digital, two-
valued system—each, in opposing the other, affirming it by implication and depend-
dent upon it by necessity. The formalists, seeking to transform and restructure the
“brute” referentiality and “wild” meaning of cinematic images into personally deter-
minate and expressive signification (hence the metaphor of the frame), acknowledge
the camera’s perceptive nature as they celebrate the artist’s triumph over it. On the
other side, the realists, seeking to reveal and discover the world’s expression in all
its “wild” meaning (hence the metaphor of the window), acknowledge the camera’s
expressive nature in its selective and shifting vision, even as they celebrate the me-
dium’s perceptual purity and openness. For the most part, however, this dependence
on and suppression of one of the necessary conditions for the existence of a film has
not been overtly articulated as the infrastructure that binds formalism and realism
into a single theoretical system. Instead, the emphasis has been on a dual poetics—
one valorizing cinematic expression and the other, cinematic perception.

Opposing each other, both formalist and realist arguments converge in their
assumption that meaning is located in the text as a significant object, and in their
assumption of that text’s transcendence of its origin and location either in the world
or in persons. The metaphor of the frame is emblematic of the transcendental ideal-
ism that infuses classical formalism and its belief in the film object as expression-
in-itself—subjectivity freed from worldly constraint. In contrast, the window as
metaphor is emblematic of the transcendental realism that informs realist film
theory and its belief in the film object as perception-in-itself—objectivity freed
from entailment with the prejudicial investments of human being. The first belief
leads to the formalist celebration of what phenomenology criticizes as “subjective
psychologism,” the second to the realist celebration of what it decries as “objective
empiricism.”
In an attempt to correct this tidy theoretical opposition and its contradiction by actual cinematic practice, contemporary theorists have tended to synthesize perception and expression, categorically collapsing and confusing them in an analogue relation in which they are distinguishable only by degree, not by modality. The nature of film is considered as neither perceptive nor expressive. Rather, both modalities of existential experience are conflated as a synthesis of the refractive, reflexive, and reflective (hence the metaphor of the mirror). Drawing primarily upon linguistically oriented psychoanalytic and neo-Marxist paradigms (the former already privileging the metaphor of the mirror for its own purposes), the resultant theories of cinematic communication have emerged not as a celebratory poetics, but as a critical rhetoric, charging cinematic communication with some equivalent to sophistry.

That is, contemporary theory (most of it feminist and/or neo-Marxist in approach) has focused on the essentially deceptive, illusionary, tautologically recursive, and coercive nature of the cinema, and on its psychopathological and/or ideological functions of distorting existential experience. Such theory elaborately accounts for cinematic representation but cannot account for the originary activity of cinematic signification. Thus, it is hardly surprising, if poignant, that, attempting to liberate female spectatorship and spectators of color from linguistically determined psychic structures and colonial discursive structures, psychoanalytically based feminist film theory and ideologically based film theory so often bemoan the impossibility of a “new” language to express the specificity of their excluded experience and the lack of an uncolonized “place” from which to speak. Articulated in various ways and amid a number of highly sophisticated arguments, what contemporary film theory stresses and decries in its variations on the metaphor of the mirror is the totalitarian transcendence of either psychic or ideological structures over the signifying freedom of individual viewers in their concrete, contingent, existential situation. As perception and expression are confused with each other in the deceptive processes of the cinematic apparatus and the seamless and conventional unfolding of a privileged (if reviled) “classical narrative cinema,” the possibility of dialogic and dialectical communication is suppressed and the film experience is seen as grounded in a false and sophistic rhetoric that essentially distorts the possibility of any “real” communication.

Thus, the metaphor of the mirror entails a critical judgment of the cinema that is as damning as it is descriptive. It condemns the very ontological being of cinema as substitutive (rather than expansive) and deceptive (rather than disclosing). It reflects the viewer only to point to his or her subjection to signs and meanings produced by an always already dishonest and subjugating “other.” Idealist in its utopian longings for liberatory signification while losing itself in a labyrinth of representation, contemporary film theory is informed by a transcendental determinism—based on the belief in the film object as mediation-in-itself. In the one instance, signification and significance are seen as always predetermined by apparatus and ideology; the film object as it is experienced invisibly and rhetorically interpellates the spectator and speaks the culture, producing cinematic language and its norms of usage as a given. In the other instance, signification and significance are predetermined by psychic structures; the camera’s and spectator’s vision are confused and bound
together in a false and distorted primary identification that cannot be denied, only
alaced. In sum, in most contemporary theory, viewing in the cinema leads to no
good—or, at best, to the remedial practice of demystifying the cinema's material,
structural, and ideological pathology and, at worst, to a pleasure that is guilty and
must be adjudged "perverse."

In most of its classical and contemporary articulations, then, film theory has
focused not on the whole correlational structure of the film experience, but has ab-
stracted and privileged only one of its parts at a time: expression-in-itself, perception-
in-itself, and mediation-in-itself, respectively. Although the next section of this
chapter will introduce the reader to phenomenology as the philosophy and re-
search procedure that informs the remainder of this study, film theory's abstrac-
tion and fragmentation of the correlational structure that is the film experience
can be criticized against the main phenomenological theme of intentionality: the
invariant, pervasive, and immanent correlational structure of consciousness. In-
tentionality is "the unique peculiarity of experiences 'to be the consciousness of
something.'" That is, the act of consciousness is never "empty" and "in-itself," but
rather always intending toward and in relation to an object (even when that "ob-
ject" is consciousness, reflexively intended). The invariant correlational structure
of consciousness thus necessarily entails the mediation of an activity and an ob-
ject. If we substitute the specificity of the film experience as a reversible structure
correlating the activity of perception and expression and commuting one to the
other, the whole of the structure could, and later will more elaborately, be mapped
as follows: the perception (act of consciousness) of expression (object of
consciousness) and as the expression (act of consciousness) of perception (object of
consciousness). In relation to my previous thematization of classical and con-
temporary film theory, formalist theory can be linked to a focus on the cin-
ematic expression (of perception)—perception here represented as the suppressed
part of the entire relation; realist theory to a focus on the cinematic perception (of
expression)—expression here represented as the suppressed part of the entire re-
lation; and contemporary theory to a focus on the mediating copula (perception) of
(expression)—with perception and expression represented as the suppressed part
of the entire relation.

Whatever their respectively different foci, classical and contemporary film the-
ory have pursued their inquiry into the nature of cinematic signification sharing
three crucial and largely uninterrogated presuppositions. First, film theory has pre-
supposed the act of viewing. Certainly, there have been some considerations of the
anatomical, mechanical, and psychic aspects of vision that characterize and differ-
entiate the human and camera eye. As well, a major portion of contemporary film
tory dwells on the psychoanalytic aspects of the spectator’s visual engagement
with the cinema. Nonetheless, film theory has generally assumed as given the act
of viewing in its totality, that is, as the constituting condition of the film experience
in each and all of its aspects and manifestations, and as the nexus of communication
among the filmmaker, film, and spectator.

Second, film theory has presupposed the cinema's and spectator's communi-
cative competence. Discussions of cinematic codes and their entailments are all
based on the assumption that a film is intelligible as the imaging and expression of
experience—something that "counts" and has a particular kind of significance above
the random projection and play of brute light and shadow. That is, although film theory has attempted to describe and explain cinematic signification or “language” in great detail, it has assumed the cinema’s power to signify and the spectator’s power to see this signification as significant. It has assumed the fundamental intelligibility of the film experience. Whether fragmenting its analyses of cinematic semiosis into a syntactics (primarily revealed in the formalist emphasis on structuring), a semantics (primarily revealed in the realist emphasis on content), or a pragmatics (primarily revealed in the contemporary theorist’s emphasis on relational functions), film theory has assumed rather than accounted for the film experience’s intrasubjective and intersubjective nature and its transitive function or performance.

Third, film theory has presupposed that a film is a viewed object. Whether it has been considered the aesthetic and expressive object of the formalist; the empirical and perceptive object of the realist; or the cultural, rhetorical, and reflexive object of the contemporary theorist; the film has been regarded as merely, if complexly, a vehicle through which meaning can be represented, presented, or produced; a visible object in the manner of the frame, the window, and the mirror. That a film, as it is experienced, might be engaged as something more than just an object of consciousness is a possibility that has not been entertained.

These three presuppositions have informed almost all film theory and directed its fragmented course and conclusions. That the act of viewing constitutes cinematic communication, that communication occurs, and that the communication is effected by a viewed object on a viewing subject (despite contemporary theory’s objectification of the viewing subject as the predicate of cinematic vision)—these are the givens of the film experience and the ground upon which various theories of film base themselves and from which they proceed.

However, these presuppositions are themselves open to investigation and, indeed, require it if we are to understand the original power of the cinema to signify, its genesis of meaning and ability to communicate, its “expression of experience by experience.” In this regard, both classical and contemporary theory have provided us only partial descriptions and abstract formulations that have detached cinematic signification from its origin in concrete sense and significance. As Dudley Andrew points out:

We can speak of codes and textual systems which are the results of signifying processes, yet we seem unable to discuss that mode of experience we call signification. More precisely, structuralism and academic film theory in general have been disinclined to deal with the “other-side” of signification, those realms of pre-formulation where sensory data congeals into “something that matters” and those realms of post-formulation where that “something” is experienced as mattering. Structuralism, even in its post-structural reach toward psychoanalysis and intertextuality, concerns itself only with that something and not with the process of its congealing nor with the event of its mattering.

Previous discussion has introduced the exchange or reversibility of perception and expression in the film experience as the commutative basis for the emergence of cinematic signification and significance. Focus on this exchange is a focus on both the process that constitutes “something that matters” and the “event of its mattering.” It points to and describes the radical and existential ground for both a
theory of sign production and a theory of meaning as they are always entailed in the lived-body experience. Thus, relative to cinema, the existential and embodied act of viewing becomes the paradigm of this exchange of perception and expression. That is, the act of viewing provides both the necessary and sufficient conditions for the commutation of perception to expression and vice-versa. It also communicatively links filmmaker, film, and spectator by means of their respective, separate, and yet homeomorphic existential performance of a shared (and possibly universal) competence: the capacity to localize and unify (or “center”) the invisible, intrasubjective commutation of perception and expression and make it visible and intersubjectively available to others.

Filmmaker, film, and spectator all concretely use the agency of visual, aural, and kinetic experience to express experience—not only to and for themselves, but also to and for others. Each engaged in the visible gesture of viewing, the filmmaker, film, and spectator are all able to commute the “language of being” into the “being of language,” and back again. Dependent upon existence and embodiment in the world for its articulation as an activity, the act of viewing as the commutation of perception and expression is both an intrasubjective and intersubjective performance equally performable by filmmaker, film, and spectator.

NOTES
3. In the following paragraphs, I thematize the work of traditional and contemporary film theorists too numerous to cite. The reader unfamiliar with the field who wishes to follow the arguments advanced here is urged to seek out specific theorists and their texts with the help, perhaps, of J. Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories: An Introduction (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976) and Concepts in Film Theory (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984).
6. For basic description and phenomenological critique of the limitations of “subjective psychologism” and “objective empiricism,” see the preface to Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, pp. vii–xxi. This preliminary discussion is deepened in Chapters 1–3, pp. 3–51.
The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde

With a vast knowledge of early film as well as avant-garde, studio, and art cinemas, Tom Gunning (b. 1949) is one of the foremost figures in cinema studies today. Gunning received his degree from NYU and currently teaches at the University of Chicago, at the center of a group of prominent scholars of the intersection of cinema and modernity in the early twentieth century. Gunning is the author of an important work on the filmic style of D. W. Griffith (1991) and a magisterial study of Fritz Lang (2008), but he may be best known for this short essay on early cinema.

Gunning’s 1989 essay “The Cinema of Attractions” combines theoretical reach and originality with well-founded, creative historical claims about how viewers encountered the cinema in its first decade. Together with Gunning’s many other pieces on early cinema, his collaborative work with André Gaudreault, and the work of other historians, his essay prompted a paradigm shift in film studies in the 1980s toward the study of film history, particularly the period before the dominance of narrative film. Such research was catalyzed after the pivotal 1978 meeting of the FIAF (Federation of International Film Archives) in Brighton, England, at which hundreds of films from the cinema’s first decade were screened. After the dominance of psychoanalytically influenced film theory in the 1970s, which tended to offer an abstract model of spectatorship, many researchers welcomed a return to the study of the concrete historical situations in which audiences responded to the cinema and to particular films. Gunning combined such detail with a theoretical challenge to the reigning story of film history in which narrative films quickly and inevitably achieved dominance.

Gunning asserts that before about 1906 films were unconcerned with storytelling; rather, they simply aimed to establish contact with the audience. The bows and gestures of such onscreen magicians as Méliès, the exotic or everyday views captured by the Lumière brothers, the wink at the camera, and the pie in the face all screamed, “look at me!” Rather than considering early films as “primitive” in technique, Gunning is interested in “the way taking account of this heterogeneity signals a new conception of film history and film form”—and, we might add, of film experience. Gunning contrasts the exhibitionism of these earlier films with later codes of cinematic storytelling that favored viewers’ voyeurism, inviting the spectator in as an invisible guest, and compares it to the responses elicited by avant-garde experimentation in film. He extends his observations to the contexts in which films were exhibited—fairgrounds, vaudeville programs, and kinetoscope parlors. Gunning’s term “cinema of attractions,” is based on Sergei Eisenstein’s proposition of cinema as a “montage of attractions” that grabs an audience, mediating the stimulating yet alienating experience of mechanical modernity. Gunning’s interpretation of the historical record is interested not only in differences in film style, but also in a fundamentally different mode
of enjoying cinema—one that resonates with audiences’ pleasure in contemporary special-effects-dominated cinema. “[E]very change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way,” Gunning claims. His essay, with its forthright style and sense of possibility, has generated several vigorous strains of research. Some of the best of the now-extensive work on early cinema extends his interest in its heterogeneity to film traditions outside the Euro-American canon.

**READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS**

- How does Gunning rethink the standard account of cinema that opposes the realist films of the Lumière brothers to the fantastical ones of Georges Méliès?
- What is Gunning’s proposed periodization of silent cinema, and what are some of the characteristics of “early cinema” as he defines it?
- How do certain features of recent blockbusters relate to Gunning’s concept of “the cinema of attractions,” and how do they differ?
- How does Gunning’s argument bridge theory and history through its focus on the avant-garde?
- **Key Concepts:** Cinema of Attractions; Exhibitionism; Early Cinema; Modernity

**The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde**

Writing in 1922, flushed with the excitement of seeing Abel Gance’s *La Roue*, Fernand Léger tried to define something of the radical possibilities of the cinema. The potential of the new art did not lie in “imitating the movements of nature” or in “the mistaken path” of its resemblance to theater. Its unique power was a “matter of making images seen.” It is precisely this harnessing of visibility, this act of showing and exhibition, which I feel cinema before 1906 displays most intensely. Its inspiration for the avant-garde of the early decades of this century needs to be re-explored.

Writings by the early modernists (Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists) on the cinema follow a pattern similar to Léger: enthusiasm for this new medium and its possibilities; and disappointment at the way it has already developed, its enslavement to traditional art forms, particularly theater and literature. This fascination with the potential of a medium (and the accompanying fantasy of rescuing the cinema from its enslavement to alien and passé forms) can be understood from a number of viewpoints. I want to use it to illuminate a topic I have also approached before, the strangely heterogeneous relation that film before 1906 (or so) bears to the films that follow, and the way a taking account of this heterogeneity signals a new conception of film history and film form. My work in this area has been pursued in collaboration with André Gaudreault.
The history of early cinema, like the history of cinema generally, has been written and theorized under the hegemony of narrative films. Early film-makers like Smith, Méliès and Porter have been studied primarily from the viewpoint of their contribution to film as a storytelling medium, particularly the evolution of narrative editing. Although such approaches are not totally misguided, they are one-sided and potentially distort both the work of these film-makers and the actual forces shaping cinema before 1906. A few observations will indicate the way that early cinema was not dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium. First there is the extremely important role that actuality films play in early film production. Investigation of the films copyrighted in the US shows that actuality films outnumbered fictional films until 1906. The Lumière tradition of “placing the world within one’s reach” through travel films and topicals did not disappear with the exit of the Cinématographe from film production. But even within non-actuality filming—what has sometimes been referred to as the “Méliès tradition”—the role narrative plays is quite different from in traditional narrative film. Méliès himself declared in discussing his working method:

As for the scenario, the “fable,” or “tale,” I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has no importance, since I use it merely as a pretext for the “stage effects,” the “tricks,” or for a nicely arranged tableau.

Whatever differences one might find between Lumière and Méliès, they should not represent the opposition between narrative and non-narrative film-making, at least as it is understood today. Rather, one can unite them in a conception that sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusionary power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière, or the magical illusion concocted by Méliès), and exoticism. In other words, I believe that the relation to the spectator set up by the films of both Lumière and Méliès (and many other film-makers before 1906) had a common basis, and one that differs from the primary spectator relations set up by narrative film after 1906. I will call this earlier conception of cinema, “the cinema of attractions.” I believe that this conception dominates cinema until about 1906–7. Although different from the fascination in storytelling exploited by the cinema from the time of Griffith, it is not necessarily opposed to it. In fact the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others.

What precisely is the cinema of attractions? First, it is a cinema that bases itself on the quality that Léger celebrated: its ability to show something. Contrasted to the voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema analyzed by Christian Metz, this is an exhibitionist cinema. An aspect of early cinema which I have written about in other articles is emblematic of this different relationship the cinema of attractions constructs with its spectator: the recurring look at the camera by actors. This action, which is later perceived as spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema, is here undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience. From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurors in magic films, this is
a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.

Exhibitionism becomes literal in the series of erotic films which play an important role in early film production (the same Pathé catalogue would advertise the Passion Play along with “scènes grivoises d’un caractère piquant,” erotic films often including full nudity), also driven underground in later years. As Noël Burch has shown in his film Correction Please: How We Got into Pictures (1979), a film like The Bride Retires (France, 1902) reveals a fundamental conflict between this exhibitionistic tendency of early film and the creation of a fictional diegesis. A woman undresses for bed while her new husband peers at her from behind a screen. However, it is to the camera and the audience that the bride addresses her erotic striptease, winking at us as she faces us, smiling in erotic display.

As the quote from Méliès points out, the trick film, perhaps the dominant non-actuality film genre before 1906, is itself a series of displays, of magical attractions, rather than a primitive sketch of narrative continuity. Many trick films are, in effect, plotless, a series of transformations strung together with little connection and certainly no characterization. But to approach even the plotted trick films, such as Voyage dans la lune (1902), simply as precursors of later narrative structures is to miss the point. The story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema.

Modes of exhibition in early cinema also reflect this lack of concern with creating a self-sufficient narrative world upon the screen. As Charles Musser has shown, the early showmen exhibitors exerted a great deal of control over the shows they presented, actually re-editing the films they had purchased and supplying a series of off-screen supplements, such as sound effects and spoken commentary. Perhaps most extreme is the Hale’s Tours, the largest chain of theaters exclusively showing films before 1906. Not only did the films consist of non-narrative sequences taken from moving vehicles (usually trains), but the theater itself was arranged as a train car with a conductor who took tickets, and sound effects simulating the click-clack of wheels and hiss of air brakes. Such viewing experiences relate more to the attractions of the fairground than to the traditions of the legitimate theater. The relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks, such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century provides rich ground for rethinking the roots of early cinema.

Nor should we ever forget that in the earliest years of exhibition the cinema itself was an attraction. Early audiences went to exhibitions to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder, following in the wake of such widely exhibited machines and marvels as X-rays or, earlier, the phonograph), rather than to view films. It was the Cinématographe, the Biograph or the Vitascope that were advertised on the variety bills in which they premièred, not Le Déjeuner de bébé or The Black Diamond Express. After the initial novelty period, this display of the possibilities of cinema continues, and not only in magic films. Many of the close-ups in early film differ from later uses of the technique precisely because they do not use enlargement for narrative punctuation, but as an attraction in its own right. The close-up cut into Porter’s The Gay Shoe Clerk (1903) may anticipate later continuity techniques, but its principal motive is again pure exhibitionism, as the lady lifts her skirt hem, exposing her ankle for all to see. Biograph films such as Photographing a Female Crook (1904) and Hooligan in Jail (1903) consist of a single shot in which the
camera is brought close to the main character, until they are in mid-shot. The enlargement is not a device expressive of narrative tension; it is in itself an attraction and the point of the film.

To summarize, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups just described, or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the film’s novelty. Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film-making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.

The term “attractions” comes, of course, from the young Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein and his attempt to find a new model and mode of analysis for the theatre. In his search for the “unit of impression” of theatrical art, the foundation of an analysis which would undermine realistic representational theater, Eisenstein hit upon the term “attraction.” An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to “sensual or psychological impact.” According to Eisenstein, theater should consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in “illusory depictions.” I pick up this term partly to underscore the relation to the spectator that this later avant-garde practice shares with early cinema: that of exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption. Of course the “experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated” montage of attractions demanded by Eisenstein differs enormously from these early films (as any conscious and oppositional mode of practice will from a popular one). However, it is important to realize the context from which Eisenstein selected the term. Then, as now, the “attraction” was a term of the fairground, and for Eisenstein and his friend Yutkevich it primarily represented their favorite fairground attraction, the roller coaster, or as it was known then in Russia, the American Mountains.

The source is significant. The enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for film was at least partly an enthusiasm for a mass culture that was emerging at the beginning of the century, offering a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts. It is important to take this enthusiasm for popular art as something more than a simple gesture to épater les bourgeois. The enormous development of the entertainment industry since the 1910s and its growing acceptance by middle-class culture (and the accommodation that made this acceptance possible) have made it difficult to understand the liberation popular entertainment offered at the beginning of the century. I believe that it was precisely the exhibitionist quality of turn-of-the-century popular art that made it attractive to the avant-garde—its freedom from the creation of a diegesis, its accent on direct stimulation.
Writing of the variety theater, Marinetti not only praised its aesthetics of astonishment and stimulation, but particularly its creation of a new spectator who contrasts with the “static,” “stupid voyeur” of traditional theater. The spectator at the variety theater feels directly addressed by the spectacle and joins in, singing along, heckling the comedians.\(^{13}\) Dealing with early cinema within the context of archive and academy, we risk missing its vital relation to vaudeville, its primary place of exhibition until around 1905. Film appeared as one attraction on the vaudeville program, surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances. Even when presented in the nickelodeons that were emerging at the end of this period, these short films always appeared in a variety format, trick films sandwiched in with farces, actualities, “illustrated songs,” and, quite frequently, cheap vaudeville acts. It was precisely this non-narrative variety that placed this form of entertainment under attack by reform groups in the early 1910s. The Russell Sage Survey of popular entertainments found vaudeville “depends upon an artificial rather than a natural human and developing interest, these acts having no necessary and as a rule, no actual connection.”\(^{14}\) In other words, no narrative. A night at the variety theater was like a ride on a streetcar or an active day in a crowded city, according to this middle-class reform group, stimulating an unhealthy nervousness. It was precisely such artificial stimulus that Marinetti and Eisenstein wished to borrow from the popular arts and inject into the theater, organizing popular energy for radical purpose.

What happened to the cinema of attractions? The period from 1907 to about 1913 represents the true narrativization of the cinema, culminating in the appearance of feature films which radically revised the variety format. Film clearly took the legitimate theater as its model, producing famous players in famous plays. The transformation of filmic discourse that D. W. Griffith typifies bound cinematic signifiers to the narration of stories and the creation of a self-enclosed diegetic universe. The look at the camera becomes taboo and the devices of cinema are transformed from playful “tricks”—cinematic attractions (Méliès gesturing at us to watch the lady vanish)—to elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology of character and the world of fiction.

However, it would be too easy to see this as a Cain and Abel story, with narrative strangling the nascent possibilities of a young iconoclastic form of entertainment. Just as the variety format in some sense survived in the movie palaces of the 20s (with newsreel, cartoon, sing-along, orchestra performance and sometimes vaudeville acts subordinated to, but still coexisting with, the narrative feature of the evening); the system of attraction remains an essential part of popular filmmaking.

The chase film shows how, towards the end of this period (basically from 1903 to 1906), a synthesis of attractions and narrative was already underway. The chase had been the original truly narrative genre of the cinema, providing a model for causality and linearity as well as a basic editing continuity. A film like Biograph’s *Personal* (1904, the model for the chase film in many ways) shows the creation of a narrative linearity, as the French nobleman runs for his life from the fiancées his personal column ad has unleashed. However, at the same time, as the group of young women pursue their prey toward the camera in each shot, they encounter
some slight obstacle (a fence, a steep slope, a stream) that slows them down for
the spectator, providing a mini-spectacle pause in the unfolding of narrative. The
Edison Company seemed particularly aware of this, since they offered their pla-

giarized version of this Biograph film (*How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through
the New York Herald “Personal” Columns*) in two forms, as a complete film or as
separate shots, so that any one image of the ladies chasing the man could be bought
without the inciting incident or narrative closure.15

As Laura Mulvey has shown in a very different context, the dialectic between
spectacle and narrative has fueled much of the classical cinema.16 Donald Crafton
in his study of slapstick comedy, “The Pie and the Chase,” has shown the way slap-
stick did a balancing act between the pure spectacle of gag and the development of
narrative.17 Likewise, the traditional spectacle film proved true to its name by high-
lighting moments of pure visual stimulation along with narrative. The 1924 version
of *Ben Hur* was in fact shown at a Boston theater with a timetable announcing the
moment of its prime attractions:

8.35  *The Star of Bethlehem*
8.40  *Jerusalem Restored*
8.59  *Fall of the House of Hur*
10.29  *The Last Supper*
10.50  *Reunion*18

The Hollywood advertising policy of enumerating the features of a film, each embla-
zoned with the command, “See!” shows this primal power of the attraction running
beneath the armature of narrative regulation.

We seem far from the avant-garde premises with which this discussion of
early cinema began. But it is important for the radical heterogeneity which I find
in early cinema not to be conceived as a truly oppositional program, one irrecon-

cilable with the growth of narrative cinema. This view is too sentimental and too
ahistorical. A film like *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) does point in both direc-
tions, toward a direct assault on the spectator (the spectacularly enlarged outlaw
unloading his pistol in our faces), and toward a linear narrative continuity. This
is early film’s ambiguous heritage. Clearly in some sense recent spectacle cinema
has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the
Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects.

But effects are tamed attractions. Marinetti and Eisenstein understood that they
were tapping into a source of energy that would need focusing and intensification to
fulfill its revolutionary possibilities. Both Eisenstein and Marinetti planned to ex-
aggerate the impact on the spectators, Marinetti proposing to literally glue them to
their seats (ruined garments paid for after the performance) and Eisenstein setting
firecrackers off beneath them. Every change in film history implies a change in its
address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way. Now
in a period of American avant-garde cinema in which the tradition of contemplative
subjectivity has perhaps run its (often glorious) course, it is possible that this earlier
carnival of the cinema, and the methods of popular entertainment, still provide an
unexhausted resource—a Coney Island of the avant-garde, whose never dominant but always sensed current can be traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien andalou* (1928), and Jack Smith.

NOTES

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8. I wish to thank Ben Brewster for his comments after the original delivery of this paper which pointed out the importance of including this aspect of the cinema of attractions here.


11. Ibid.


17. Paper delivered at the FIAF Conference on Slapstick, May 1985, New York City.

Jamaican-born and Oxford-educated, Stuart Hall (b. 1932) served as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham from 1968 to 1979. CCCS was established by sociologist Richard Hoggart, whose work, along with that of Raymond Williams and other prominent British Marxists, turned critical attention to the concept of “culture” in the postwar period amid the rapid expansion of mass media and consumer society, the breakup of colonial empires, and disillusionment with the Soviet Union. Many of the central figures in British cultural studies, including Dick Hebdige, Paul Gilroy, and Angela McRobbie, studied at the center during Hall’s tenure. Although Hall is perhaps best known for his work on race and cultural identity, essays like “Encoding/Decoding” demonstrate the centrality of film and media to his work. Hall was the recipient of an achievement award from the Society of Cinema and Media Studies in 2005.

British cultural studies challenged the nineteenth-century idea of “culture” promulgated by Matthew Arnold as “the best that is thought and known” with a more anthropological understanding of culture as a “whole way of life.” Rooted in sociology as well as the humanities, it drew on the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and focused on working class, youth, and immigrant subcultures as well as the mass media. Hall’s approach to television differs from that of sociologically oriented American communications studies in its Marxist politics, interdisciplinary methods, and the profound influence of such French theorists as Roland Barthes, whose writings on semiotics provide a model for “Encoding/Decoding” (1973).

Hall’s study of televisual discourse arises from the British context of nationalized broadcasting, which is seen as having a more “official” voice than commercially supported U.S. media. “Encoding/Decoding” reads at first like a technical article on communications, but important aspects of Hall’s argument belie this neutrality and explain the essay’s extremely influential status. Hall is concerned with how messages like television news are conveyed in the “language” of a culture’s dominant—or in Gramsci’s term, “hegemonic”—power relations. In semiotics, a “code” must be shared by senders and receivers of messages for signification to occur. Hall emphasizes that the social context in which a message is exchanged (for example social hierarchies or political events) makes the moment of decoding open to various new meanings provided by audiences—they “get the message,” but the message is influenced and may be altered by their specific situations. Thus some audiences might produce “oppositional” readings of official messages, while others might provide “negotiated” interpretations, in which some parts of the dominant message are rejected and some retained. Hall’s essay has provided the basis for several decades of work on reception as it varies among locales, generations, communities, and subcultures.
READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS

- Hall states that production and reception are two distinct but mutually determined moments in the communication process. Note his emphasis on the relative autonomy of the audience’s process of decoding and consider how it opens up room for critique of dominant meanings.

- Hall draws on the vocabulary of semiotics—codes and messages, connotation and denotation—to discuss how meaning is shaped in television. Consider his discussion of visual messages and how they are more easily taken for “reality” than verbal ones.

- The terms “dominant,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” are used by Hall to talk about different points on a spectrum of response to the media. Think of an example of a current news media event, and consider how hypothetical audience members might produce these three types of responses.

- **Key Concepts:** Code/Message; Ideology; Articulation; Discourse; Hegemony; Connotation/Denotation; Production/Reception; Determination; Polysemy; Preferred Reading; Dominant/Negotiated/Oppositional

Encoding/Decoding

Traditionally, mass-communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity—sender/message/receiver—for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. But it is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a “complex structure in dominance,” sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. This second approach, homologous to that which forms the skeleton of commodity production offered in Marx’s *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, has the added advantage of bringing out more sharply how a continuous circuit—production–distribution–production—can be sustained through a “passage of forms.” It also highlights the specificity of the forms in which the product of the process “appears” in each moment, and thus what distinguishes discursive “production” from other types of production in our society and in modern media systems.

The “object” of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse. The apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue, at a certain moment (the moment of “production/circulation”) in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of “language.” It is in this discursive form that the circulation of the “product” takes place. The process thus requires, at the production end, its material
instruments—its “means”—as well as its own sets of social (production) relations—the organization and combination of practices within media apparatuses. But it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated—transformed, again—into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no “meaning” is taken, there can be no “consumption.” If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect. The value of this approach is that while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the “passage of forms” on whose continuity the flow of effective production (that is, “reproduction”) depends.

Thus while in no way wanting to limit research to “following only those leads which emerge from content analysis,” we must recognize that the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange (from the viewpoint of circulation), and that the moments of “encoding” and “decoding,” though only “relatively autonomous” in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments. A “raw” historical event cannot, in that form, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject to all the complex formal “rules” by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a “story” before it can become a communicative event. In that moment the formal sub-rules of discourse are “in dominance,” without, of course, subordinating out of existence the historical event so signified, the social relations in which the rules are set to work or the social and political consequences of the event having been signified in this way. The “message form” is the necessary “form of appearance” of the event in its passage from source to receiver. Thus the transposition into and out of the “message form” (or the mode of symbolic exchange) is not a random “moment,” which we can take up or ignore at our convenience. The “message form” is a determinate moment; though, at another level, it comprises the surface movements of the communications system only and requires, at another stage, to be integrated into the social relations of the communication process as a whole, of which it forms only a part.

From this general perspective, we may crudely characterize the television communicative process as follows. The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Using the analogy of Capital, this is the “labour process” in the discursive mode. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its “discursive” aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of
the audience, “definitions of the situation” from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. Philip Elliott has expressed this point succinctly, within a more traditional framework, in his discussion of the way in which the audience is both the “source” and the “receiver” of the television message. Thus—to borrow Marx’s terms—circulation and reception are, indeed, “moments” of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured “feedbacks,” into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a “moment” of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is “predominant” because it is the “point of departure for the realization” of the message. Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole.

At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institution-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be “realized.” This initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance. Before this message can have an “effect” (however defined), satisfy a “need” or be put to a “use,” it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which “have an effect,” influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a “determinate” moment the structure employs a code and yields a “message”: at another determinate moment the “message,” via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. We are now fully aware that this re-entry into the practices of audience reception and “use” cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms. The typical processes identified in positivistic research on isolated elements—effects, uses, “gratifications”—are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations, which shape their “realization” at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity).

Clearly, what we have labelled in the diagram “meaning structures 1” and “meaning structures 2” may not be the same. They do not constitute an “immediate identity.” The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of “understanding” and “misunderstanding” in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the “personifications,” encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. But this in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted. The lack of fit between the codes has a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of “source” and “receiver” at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form. What are called “distortions” or “misunderstandings” arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in
the communicative exchange. Once again, this defines the “relative autonomy” but “determinateness,” of the entry and exit of the message in its discursive moments.

The application of this rudimentary paradigm has already begun to transform our understanding of the older term, television “content.” We are just beginning to see how it might also transform our understanding of audience reception, “reading” and response as well. Beginnings and endings have been announced in communications research before, so we must be cautious. But there seems some ground for thinking that a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up. At either end of the communicative chain the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviourism which has dogged mass-media research for so long, especially in its approach to content. Though we know the television programme is not a behavioural input, like a tap on the knee cap, it seems to have been almost impossible for traditional researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing into one or other variant of low-flying behaviourism. We know, as Gerbner has remarked, that representations of violence on the TV screen “are not violence but messages about violence”; but we have continued to research the question of violence, for example, as if we were unable to comprehend this epistemological distinction.

The televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural. Moreover, it is an iconic sign, in Peirce’s terminology, because “it possesses some of the properties of the thing represented.” This is a point which has led to a great deal of confusion and has provided the site of intense controversy in the study of visual language. Since the visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot, of course, be the referent or concept it signifies. The dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite! Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive “knowledge” is the product not of the transparent representation of the “real” in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions. Thus there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code. Iconic signs are therefore coded signs too—even if the codes here work differently from
those of other signs. There is no degree zero in language. Naturalism and “realism”—the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented—is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the “real.” It is the result of a discursive practice.

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be “naturally” given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a “near-universality” in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently “natural” visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly naturalized. The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and “naturalness” of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use. They produce apparently “natural” recognitions. This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present. But we must not be fooled by appearances. Actually, what naturalized codes demonstrate is the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity—an achieved equivalence—between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings. The functioning of the codes on the decoding side will frequently assume the status of naturalized perceptions. This leads us to think that the visual sign for “cow” actually is (rather than represents) the animal, cow. But if we think of the visual representation of a cow in a manual on animal husbandry—and, even more, of the linguistic sign “cow”—we can see that both, in different degrees, are arbitrary with respect to the concept of the animal they represent. The articulation of an arbitrary sign—whether visual or verbal—with the concept of a referent is the product not of nature but of convention, and the conventionalism of discourses requires the intervention, the support, of codes. Thus Eco has argued that iconic signs “look like objects in the real world because they reproduce the conditions (that is, the codes) of perception in the viewer.” These “conditions of perception” are, however, the result of a highly coded, even if virtually unconscious, set of operations—decodings. This is as true of the photographic or televisual image as it is of any other sign. Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being “read” as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign: the linguistic sign “cow” possesses none of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess some of those properties.

This may help us to clarify a confusion in current linguistic theory and to define precisely how some key terms are being used in this article. Linguistic theory frequently employs the distinction “denotation” and “connotation.” The term “denotation” is widely equated with the literal meaning of a sign: because this literal meaning is almost universally recognized, especially when visual discourse is being employed, “denotation” has often been confused with a literal transcription of “reality” in language—and thus with a “natural sign,” one produced without the intervention of a code. “Connotation,” on the other hand, is employed simply to refer to less fixed and therefore more conventionalized and changeable, associative meanings, which clearly vary from instance to instance and therefore must depend on the intervention of codes.

We do not use the distinction—denotation/connotation—in this way. From our point of view, the distinction is an analytic one only. It is useful, in analysis, to be able to apply a rough rule of thumb which distinguishes those aspects of a sign which
appear to be taken, in any language community at any point in time, as its “literal” meaning (denotation) from the more associative meanings for the sign which it is possible to generate (connotation). But analytic distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world. There will be very few instances in which signs organized in a discourse signify only their “literal” (that is, near-universally consensualized) meaning. In actual discourse most signs will combine both the denotative and the connotative aspects (as redefined above). It may, then, be asked why we retain the distinction at all. It is largely a matter of analytic value. It is because signs appear to acquire their full ideological value—appear to be open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings—at the level of their “associative” meanings (that is, at the connotative level)—for here “meanings” are not apparently fixed in natural perception (that is, they are not fully naturalized), and their fluidity of meaning and association can be more fully exploited and transformed. So it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification. At this level we can see more clearly the active intervention of ideologies in and on discourse: here, the sign is open to new accentuations and, in Vološinov’s terms, enters fully into the struggle over meanings—the class struggle in language. This does not mean that the denotative or “literal” meaning is outside ideology. Indeed, we could say that its ideological value is strongly fixed—because it has become so fully universal and “natural.” The terms “denotation” and “connotation,” then, are merely useful analytic tools for distinguishing, in particular contexts, between not the presence/absence of ideology in language but the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect.

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions. We might take an example from advertising discourse. Here, too, there is no “purely denotative,” and certainly no “natural,” representation. Every visual sign in advertising connotes a quality, situation, value or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational positioning. In Barthes’s example, the sweater always signifies a “warm garment” (denotation) and thus the activity/value of “keeping warm.” But it is also possible, at its more connotative levels, to signify “the coming of winter” or “a cold day.” And, in the specialized sub-codes of fashion, sweater may also connote a fashionable style of haute couture or, alternatively, an informal style of dress. But set against the right visual background and positioned by the romantic sub-code, it may connote “long autumn walk in the woods.” Codes of this order clearly contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society. These codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. They refer signs to the “maps of meaning” into which any culture is classified; and those “maps of social reality” have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest “written in” to them. The connotative levels of signifiers, Barthes remarked, “have a close communication with culture, knowledge, history, and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the fragments of ideology.”

The so-called denotative level of the televisual sign is fixed by certain, very complex (but limited or “closed”) codes. But its connotative level, though also bounded, is more open, subject to more active transformations, which exploit its
polysemic values. Any such already constituted sign is potentially transformable into more than one connotative configuration. Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the “structure of discourses in dominance” is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings. New, problematic or troubling events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our “common-sense constructs,” to our “taken-for-granted” knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to “make sense.” The most common way of “mapping” them is to assign the new to some domain or other of the existing “maps of problematic social reality.” We say dominant, not “determined,” because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one “mapping.” But we say “dominant” because there exists a pattern of “preferred readings”; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. The domains of “preferred meanings” have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture,” the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. Thus to clarify a “misunderstanding” at the connotative level, we must refer, through the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology. Further, since these mappings are “structured in dominance” but not closed, the communicative process consists not in the unproblematic assignment of every visual item to its given position within a set of prearranged codes, but of performative rules—rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use—which seek actively to enforce or pre-fer one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets. Formal semiology has too often neglected this practice of interpretative work, though this constitutes, in fact, the real relations of broadcast practices in television.

In speaking of dominant meanings, then, we are not talking about a one-sided process which governs how all events will be signified. It consists of the “work” required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified. Temi has remarked:

By the word reading we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment.12

Our quarrel here is with the notion of “subjective capacity,” as if the referent of a televisional discourse were an objective fact but the interpretative level were an individualized and private matter. Quite the opposite seems to be the case. The televisional practice takes “objective” (that is, systemic) responsibility precisely for the relations which disparate signs contract with one another in any discursive instance, and
thus continually rearranges, delimits and prescribes into what “awareness of one's
total environment” these items are arranged.

This brings us to the question of misunderstandings. Television producers who
find their message “failing to get across” are frequently concerned to straighten out
the kinks in the communication chain, thus facilitating the “effectiveness” of their
communication. Much research which claims the objectivity of “policy-oriented
analysis” reproaches this administrative goal by attempting to discover how much
of a message the audience recalls and to improve the extent of understanding. No
doubt misunderstandings of a literal kind do exist. The viewer does not know the
terms employed, cannot follow the complex logic of argument or exposition, is
unfamiliar with the language, finds the concepts too alien or difficult or is foxed by
the expository narrative. But more often broadcasters are concerned that the au-
dience has failed to take the meaning as they—the broadcasters—intended. What
they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the “dominant” or
“preferred” code. Their ideal is “perfectly transparent communication.” Instead,
what they have to confront is “systematically distorted communication.”

In recent years discrepancies of this kind have usually been explained by refer-
ence to “selective perception.” This is the door via which a residual pluralism evades
the compulsions of a highly structured, asymmetrical and non-equivalent process.
Of course, there will always be private, individual, variant readings. But “selective
perception” is almost never as selective, random or privatized as the concept sug-
gests. The patterns exhibit, across individual variants, significant clusterings. Any
new approach to audience studies will therefore have to begin with a critique of
“selective perception” theory.

It was argued earlier that since there is no necessary correspondence between
encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to “pre-fer” but cannot prescribe
or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence. Unless they are
wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits
and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audi-
ences could simply read whatever they liked into any message. No doubt some total
misunderstandings of this kind do exist. But the vast range must contain some de-
gree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments, otherwise we could
not speak of an effective communicative exchange at all. Nevertheless, this “cor-
respondence” is not given but constructed. It is not “natural” but the product of an
articulation between two distinct moments. And the former cannot determine or
guarantee, in a simple sense, which decoding codes will be employed. Otherwise
communication would be a perfectly equivalent circuit, and every message would
be an instance of “perfectly transparent communication.” We must think, then, of
the variant articulations in which encoding/decoding can be combined. To elabo-
rate on this, we offer a hypothetical analysis of some possible decoding positions,
in order to reinforce the point of “no necessary correspondence.”

We identify three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual
discourse may be constructed. These need to be empirically tested and refined. But
the argument that decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings, that they are
not identical, reinforces the argument of “no necessary correspondence.” It also
helps to deconstruct the common-sense meaning of “misunderstanding” in terms
of a theory of “systematically distorted communication.”
The first hypothetical position is that of the dominant-hegemonic position. When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code. This is the ideal-typical case of “perfectly transparent communication”—or as close as we are likely to come to it “for all practical purposes.” Within this we can distinguish the positions produced by the professional code. This is the position (produced by what we perhaps ought to identify as the operation of a “metacode”) which the professional broadcasters assume when encoding a message which has already been signified in a hegemonic manner. The professional code is “relatively independent” of the dominant code, in that it applies criteria and transformational operations of its own, especially those of a technico-practical nature. The professional code, however, operates within the “hegemony” of the dominant code. Indeed, it serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality and operating instead with displaced professional codings which foreground such apparently-neutral-technical questions as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, “professionalism” and so on. The hegemonic interpretations of, say, the politics of Northern Ireland, or the Chilean coup or the Industrial Relations Bill are principally generated by political and military elites: the particular choice of presentational occasions and formats, the selection of personnel, the choice of images, the staging of debates are selected and combined through the operation of the professional code. How the broadcasting professionals are able both to operate with “relatively autonomous” codes of their own and to act in such a way as to reproduce (not without contradiction) the hegemonic signification of events is a complex matter which cannot be further spelled out here. It must suffice to say that the professionals are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an “ideological apparatus,” but also by the structure of access (that is, the systematic “over-accessing” of selective elite personnel and their “definition of the situation” in television). It may even be said that the professional codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by not overtly biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, “behind men’s backs.” Of course, conflicts, contradictions and even misunderstandings regularly arise between the dominant and the professional significations and their signifying agencies.

The second position we would identify is that of the negotiated code or position. Majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified. The dominant definitions, however, are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events which are “in dominance” (global). Dominant definitions connect events, implicitly or explicitly, to grand totalizations, to the great syntagmatic views-of-the-world: they take “large views” of issues: they relate events to the “national interest” or to the level of geo-politics, even if they make these connections in truncated, inverted or mystified ways. The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy—it appears coterminous with what is “natural,” “inevitable,” “taken for granted” about
the social order. Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to “local conditions,” to its own more *corporate* positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. The simplest example of a negotiated code is that which governs the response of a worker to the notion of an Industrial Relations Bill limiting the right to strike or to arguments for a wages freeze. At the level of the “national interest” economic debate the decoder may adopt the hegemonic definition, agreeing that “we must all pay ourselves less in order to combat inflation.” This, however, may have little or no relation to his/her willingness to go on strike for better pay and conditions or to oppose the Industrial Relations Bill at the level of shop-floor or union organization. We suspect that the great majority of so-called “misunderstandings” arise from the contradictions and disjunctures between hegemonic-dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings. It is just these mismatches in the levels which most provoke defining elites and professionals to identify a “failure in communications.”

Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but “reads” every mention of the “national interest” as “class interest.” He/she is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*. One of the most significant political moments (they also coincide with crisis points within the broadcasting organizations themselves, for obvious reasons) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the “politics of signification”—the struggle in discourse—is joined.

### NOTES

This article is an edited extract from “Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse,” CCCS Stencilled Paper no. 7.

8. For a similar clarification, see Marina Camargo Heck, “Ideological dimensions of media messages.”
10. Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology (Cape 1967).
11. For an extended critique of “preferred reading,” see Alan O’Shea, “Preferred reading” (unpublished paper, CCCS, University of Birmingham).
13. The phrase is Habermas’s, in “Systematically distorted communications,” in P. Dretzel (ed.), Recent Sociology 2 (Collier-Macmillan 1970). It is used here, however, in a different way.
14. For a sociological formulation which is close, in some ways, to the positions outlined here but which does not parallel the argument about the theory of discourse, see Frank Parkin, Class Inequality and Political Order (Macgibbon and Kee 1971).
16. For an expansion of this argument, see Stuart Hall, “The external/internal dialectic in broadcasting,” 4th Symposium on Broadcasting (University of Manchester 1972), and “Broadcasting and the state: the independence/impartiality couplet,” AMCR Symposium, University of Leicester 1976 (CCCS unpublished paper).

JUDITH MAYNE

Paradoxes of Spectatorship

The lucid writing of Judith Mayne (b. 1948), Distinguished Professor of Cinema Studies at the Ohio State University and recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, helps make even the most difficult concepts in film theory accessible. A specialist in French cinema and feminist film theory, she is the author of eight books, including Kino and the Woman Question (1989); Private Novels, Public Films (1988); Directed by Dorothy Arzner (1994); Claire Denis (2005); and The Woman at the Keyhole (1990), a selection from which appears in Part 4 of this volume.

The reception of French film theory during the 1970s and 1980s in England and the United States was enthusiastic, with critics in the emerging discipline especially attracted to the linkage of new ideas about subjectivity and ideology to the influential cultural institution of the cinema. These ideas were articulated most forcefully in the concept of spectatorship, through which individual viewers experience a film’s unfolding. As the seminal essays by Christian Metz (p. 17) and Jean-Louis Baudry (p. 34) demonstrate, theories of spectatorship apply the insights of psychoanalysis and Marxist ideological critique to the cinematic apparatus or institution, positing an ideal viewer who is receptive to the psychic and social messages propagated by classical Hollywood films and the dominant
theatrical viewing situation. Such feminist theorists as Laura Mulvey (p. 713) explored this interaction further, making explicit the operation of male privilege in matters of the gaze, identification, and narrative centrality that was implicit in this model.

Mayne wrote *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993), from which this selection is drawn, to introduce and explicate the concept of spectatorship as it was developed in the often-dense essays of the 1970s and elaborated thereafter. In this book, Mayne both synthesizes theories of the interaction between spectator and film and presents the many subsequent critiques of, as well as departures from, these theories. In “Paradoxes of Spectatorship,” she synthesizes three different alternatives and correctives to earlier models of spectatorship, organizing them under the three categories of “address/reception,” “fantasy,” and “negotiation.” Each of these alternatives challenges the homogeneous conceptualization of the cinema and its spectator.

Without abandoning ideological critique or psychoanalysis, the models Mayne discusses offer more flexible approaches to the film experience.

**READING CUES & KEY CONCEPTS**

- Mayne positions each of the models she introduces as a way of introducing heterogeneity to the understanding of spectatorship that prevailed in the 1970s. What are the risks associated with homogeneity?
- Mayne differentiates between the *reception* of films and a particular film’s *address* to a spectator. What different conceptualizations of the viewer do these terms imply?
- How does the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy complicate previous understandings of the psychic process of identification and desire in spectatorship? Consider how gender and sexuality come into play in this new model.
- **Key Concepts:** Subject; Spectatorship; 1970s Film Theory; Oedipal Desire; Apparatus; Cinematic Institution; Dominant Ideology; Address/Reception; Fantasy; Negotiation

**Paradoxes of Spectatorship**

No matter how controversial and contested theories of the cinematic institution have been, few would argue with their basic premise that the capacity of the cinema to seduce, entertain, or otherwise appeal to its audiences needs to be understood in ideological and psychic terms. The trick, however, is not only in understanding the relationship between the two realms of psychic and social life—a rather large undertaking in any case—but in defining with precision the ways in which the cinema is describable in terms of ideological and psychoanalytic theory, and the extent to which different types of cinema and varied contexts articulate spectatorship in different ways. Even the cognitive approach, which departs most sharply from the assumptions of 1970s film theory, is concerned with conditions of coherence and intelligibility which relate to the kind of ideological analysis central to 1970s film theory.
Does the analysis of the cinematic institution as a staging and restaging of the crises of male oedipal desire, as a regressive plenitude, apply only to a specific historical mode of the cinema—i.e., the classical, narrative Hollywood film? Or, rather, given that the emergence of the cinema is so closely linked to the fictions of Western patriarchal culture, is the cinematic apparatus as theorized in film theory bound to be the condition of all cinematic representation? Even within the classical Hollywood cinema, are female spectators thus bound by the Scylla of male spectatorial desire and the Charybdis of exclusion from cinematic fantasies? Given the extent to which analysis of spectatorship has focused on sexual difference (whether foregrounded or so blatantly ignored as to function as a symptom, as in Baudry’s case), are other forms of spectator identity—race, class, sexual identity other than gendered identity, age, etc.—always built upon the model of sexual difference, or are they potentially formative in their own right? And to what extent is identity a misleading route toward understanding spectatorship, particularly if it is limited by literalist assumptions, i.e., that black audiences can only “identify” with black characters, female audiences with female ones, etc.? If apparatus theory displaced character identification as the central dynamic in understanding spectatorship, this does not mean that questions of identity have been in any way resolved. For the displacement of identification, however necessary and valuable to the project of 1970s film theory, was nonetheless accomplished at a price—a too easy equation between the “subject” and the attributes of dominance.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of contemporary film studies is that the obsessive attention devoted to the cinematic institution occurred at a time when there has perhaps existed more diversity than ever before insofar as modes of cinematic representation and address are concerned. In the United States alone, independent film and video, specifically addressed to a variety of markets—gay and lesbian, feminist, black, hispanic—continues to grow. One of the largest problems confronting spectatorship studies is the simultaneous affirmation of diversity and the recognition that “diversity” can easily function as a ploy, a way of perpetuating the illusions of mainstream cinema rather than challenging them. Put another way, there is no simple division between the cinema which functions as an instrument of dominant ideology, and the cinema which facilitates challenges to it. Now if you assume, as some theorists of the 1970s did, that there is nothing about cinema that is not saturated with ideology, then the radical or contestatory powers of the cinema were limited to those films which functioned to demonstrate the ideological complicity of film.

The most promising and influential work on spectatorship assumes the necessity for understanding cinema as ideologically influenced, but not necessarily monolithically so. Linda Gordon speaks of the necessity to hold competing claims of domination and resistance in unwavering tension, refusing to collapse one into the other (1986). In spectatorship studies, several concepts have emerged to engage with the tension between cinema as monolithic institution and cinema as heterogeneous diversity. The competing claims of homogeneity (of the cinematic apparatus) and heterogeneity (of the spectator and therefore of the different ways in which the apparatus can be understood) frame this chapter.

If the cinematic apparatus is as fully saturated with the ideology of idealism and oedipal desire as 1970s film theory would suggest, then there can be no real history of the cinema, except as variations on a common theme. Or rather, there can be no
history within the cinema, if all cinema is ideological in the same way. We have already encountered criticisms of models of the cinematic apparatus for establishing a monolithic role for the spectator, and for literalizing whatever analogy was articulated, from Plato’s cave to the Lacanian imaginary. An opposition between homogeneity and heterogeneity underscores these criticisms, since most alternatives to 1970s film theory take the spectator, not as the effect of the cinema institution, but as a point of departure; and not the ideal spectator as theorized by the cinematic apparatus, but the socially defined spectator who is necessarily heterogeneous—i.e., addressed through a variety of discourses. In other words, responses to apparatus theory are founded on a gap between the ideal subject postulated by the apparatus and the spectator who is always in an imperfect relation to that ideal.

I will examine three terms which have emerged in spectatorship studies to conceptualize the competing claims of the homogeneous cinematic institution and heterogeneous responses to it: the gap between “address” and “reception”; fantasy; and negotiation. Linda Gordon speaks of the need to find a method “in between” the claims of domination and resistance, and the terms I will examine in this chapter are precisely that, concepts meant to convey the contradictory ways in which spectatorship functions. First, the relationship between cinematic address and cinematic reception opens up a space between the “ideal” viewer and the “real” viewer. Address refers to the ways in which a text assumes certain responses, which may or may not be operative in different reception conditions. Central to this apparent paradox is the role of the cinematic “text,” whether defined as the individual film or as a set of operations which situate the spectator in certain ways. If spectators can and do respond to films in ways that contradict, reject, or otherwise problematize the presumably “ideal” spectator structured into the text, then the value of textual analysis—arguably the most significant methodological direction undertaken by 1970s film theory—needs to be seriously rethought or re-evaluated.

I noted previously that the version of psychoanalysis promoted within theories of the cinematic subject tends toward a uniform and totalizing version of the unconscious, almost always understood as the resurgence of various crises of (male) oedipal identity. The advantage of such a view, of course, is that the psychic foundations of the cultural order are open to investigation, but the disadvantages far outnumber such advantages. For the unconscious thus defined becomes one more totalizing system, and the work of the psychoanalytically inspired critic becomes just as framed by a master code as any other application of a method. In the context of these problems with psychoanalytic theory and criticism, the notion of fantasy has received increasing attention and is the second concept to be discussed in this chapter. An exploration of fantasy allows a far more radical exploration of psychic investment in the cinema, and suggests, as well, intersections between the psychic and the political. Yet it is not altogether clear whether the implications of fantasy for the cinema allow for an understanding of the social in terms that exceed the family romance so central to any psychoanalytic understanding of culture.

It is one thing to compare the claims that can be made for cinema as a homogeneous and homogenizing, versus a heterogeneous institution, and another thing to valorize heterogeneity as necessarily contestatory. The third concept I will discuss is the term “negotiation,” which is used frequently to suggest that different texts can be “used,” “interpreted,” or “appropriated” in a variety of ways. Sometimes the
diversity thus postulated by “negotiated” readings or viewings is assumed to challenge the power of the institution. The sheer fact that a spectator or group of spectators makes unauthorized uses of the cinema is no guarantee that such uses are contestatory. Here, the central question has less to do with the status of the text, than with the value one assigns to differing modes of response—how those responses are assessed, and how film-going is “read” in relationship to other social, cultural, and psychic formations. Indeed, the emphasis on “negotiation” de-emphasizes the primacy of the cinematic text, focusing rather on how different responses can be read, whether critically, symptomatically, or otherwise.

**Address and Reception**

A common characteristic of textual theories of the spectator was the assumption that the cinematic apparatus “situates,” “positions,” or otherwise assigns a position of coherence to the implied spectator. Now however much this implied spectator position functioned as something of a phantom, and not a person to be confused with real viewers, it nonetheless managed to marginalize any consideration of how real viewers might view films in ways considerably more various than any monolithic conception of the cinematic apparatus could imply. It is one thing to assume that cinema is determined in ideological ways, to assume that cinema is a discourse (or a variety of discourses), to assume, that is, that the various institutions of the cinema do project an ideal viewer, and another thing to assume that those projections work. One of the most significant directions in spectatorship studies has investigated the gap opened up between the ways in which texts construct viewers, and how those texts may be read or used in ways that depart from what the institution valorizes.

The operative assumption here is that apparatus theories are not completely wrong, but rather incomplete. The issue is one of flexibility, of recognizing that an apparatus can have unexpected effects, and that no apparatus can function quite so smoothly and efficiently as most film theory of the 1970s would suggest. That theory was most obviously lacking and problematic in the kinds of hypotheses it led to concerning any kind of alternative cinematic practice, particularly insofar as a deconstruction of so-called dominant modes and a presumable re-positioning of the spectator are concerned. Both assume a fairly stable, fixed, one-way, top-down model of agent and object, with a spectator still locked into a program of representation defined romantically and mechanistically according to the agenda of the filmmaker or the institution—an “active” viewer is still one “positioned” to be so by textual constructs.

Yet to go to the other extreme, and to define texts as only offering the positions that viewers create for them, and thereby to mediate any notion of the cinematic institution out of existence, substitutes one monolithic political notion for another. The challenge, then, is to understand the complicated ways in which meanings are both assigned and created. If apparatus theorists were overly zealous in defining all meanings as assigned ones, there has been considerable zeal at the other end of the spectrum as well, by virtually disavowing any power of institutions and conceptualizing readers/viewers as completely free and autonomous agents—a tendency that has been particularly marked, for instance, in some versions of reader-response theory and cultural studies (especially in the United States) (see Budd, Entman, and Steinman 1990). Since dominant ideology is neither a person nor a one-dimensional
set of concepts, it is virtually impossible to say with certainty that a particular effect is
complicit with or resistant to the force of an institution. But one can assess the differ-
et effects of cinema in relationship to other discourses in order to assess the com-
licated ways in which the cinema functions, for instance.

One of the great difficulties here is a fairly obvious one. Individual films lend
themselves to far neater and easier hypotheses about structure and excess than
individual viewers or groups of viewers do. A mistrust of sociological surveys has
been one of the most ingrained features of contemporary theoretical work, and so
it is perhaps something of a surprise to see the analysis of “real viewers” return, in
recent years, as a theoretically credible exercise. The influence of cultural studies,
specifically as defined through the work of Stuart Hall and the Centre for Contem-
porary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, and more generally by
analyses of the ways different specific audiences respond to instances of mass cul-
ture, has been enormous.

In a series of interviews with teenage girls, for instance, Angela McRobbie con-
cluded that their passion for a film like *Flashdance* had far more to do with their
own desire for physical autonomy than with any simple notion of acculturation to
a patriarchal definition of feminine desirability (1984). Now it seems to me that one
can only be stunned by these tentative conclusions if the model of the cinematic
institution one had in the first place corresponded to the “conspiracy theory” view
of capitalism popular in some New Left circles in the 1960s. While I find McRobbie’s
study intriguing, and will turn to it in more detail later in this chapter, I am not con-
vinced that her hypotheses lead necessarily to a dismissal of the power of the cin-
ematic institution. Unfortunately, this type of work has led to a peculiar reading of
the reception of mass culture, whereby any and all responses are critical ones. Some
sort of understanding of the non-coincidence of address and reception is required
in which power is analyzed rather than taken for granted.

One of the most influential studies along these lines is Janice Radway’s *Reading
the Romance*, an analysis of romance novels as they are read by a group of devoted
women fans (1984). Because many of the issues that Radway raises have equal rele-
vance to film studies, and in particular because her book has been cited many times
as a model of how film researchers might rethink many of the theoretical assump-
tions that have been seen increasingly as limitations, her book merits examination
for the questions it raises for film spectatorship (Bergstrom and Doane 1989). While
Radway examines the structural and ideological features of the romance novel as
a genre, she situates that analysis alongside of what is perhaps the most notewor-
thy achievement of the book, a complex profile of a group of eager and committed
romance readers. The advantage of Radway’s analysis is that she acknowledges the
persuasive power of the romance novel as a genre, at the same time that she re-
fuses to reduce the genre to a series of ideological complicities. Put another way, one
senses throughout *Reading the Romance* that the textual evidence is put to the test of
Radway’s sample audience, and vice versa.

Radway’s study focuses on a group of women fictitiously referred to as the
“Smithton women,” all of whom bought the majority of their romance-reading ma-
terial from a salesclerk named Dorothy Evans (“Dot”), an expert on romance fic-
tion. Radway’s study of this group of women took the form of group and individual
interviews (with sixteen women), as well as a lengthy questionnaire distributed to
forty-two women. Radway describes her sample as consisting for the most part of “married, middle-class mothers,” and she notes that while “not representative of all women who read romances, the group appears to be demographically similar to a sizable segment of that audience as it has been mapped by several very secretive publishing houses” (12). Much of the force of Radway’s analysis comes from a variety of juxtapositions of differing notions of the “ideal”—from the ideal reader as posited in much narrative analysis, to the “ideal romance” as postulated by the Smithton women, to a feminist ideal which seems to characterize much of how Radway approaches the women’s responses to romance fiction.

Radway echoes much feminist analysis of mass cultural forms when she argues that romance novels function as “compensatory fiction,” that is, “the act of reading them fulfills certain basic psychological needs for women that have been induced by the culture and its social structures but that often remain unmet in day-to-day existence as the result of concomitant restrictions on female activity” (112–13). Like Vladimir Propp in his famous analysis of the Russian folktale, Radway notes that romance fiction is composed of certain unchanging elements—notably patriarchy, heterosexuality, and male personality (143). But within those unchanging rules, romances offer the possibility of fantasizing solutions that are otherwise unavailable. Throughout Reading the Romance, the reading of romance fiction is portrayed as emblematic of the ambivalence which these particular women feel about themselves, not just in relationship to patriarchy, but in relationship to feminism as well. Indeed, the emphasis on female autonomy within a passionate relationship and the simultaneity of dependence and independence suggest that—to reiterate a phrase that appears frequently in Radway’s analysis—romance readers want to have it both ways.

That Radway herself is ambivalent about how to read the results of her analysis is evident, especially in her conclusion. She says, “the question of whether the activity of romance reading does, in reality, deflect such change [i.e., the restructuring of sexual relations] by successfully defusing or recontaining this protest must remain unanswered for the moment” (213). I find it curious that such a dualistic political framework should be erected in this book, but in some ways this either/or—the either/or, that is, of a conservative status quo versus radical change, of celebration versus critique—remains as a stubborn reminder that the theoretical problem raised by the apparatus (cinematic or otherwise) has not been wished away. For the very notion of a cinematic apparatus suggests a rigid distinction between what is contaminated by dominant ideology and what is not, suggests the possibility of knowing with certainty whether an activity is contestatory or conservative. What always seems to happen with such dualisms is the hardening of one abstraction or another—only a deconstruction of the apparatus is genuinely revolutionary! Readers and viewers are always active producers of meaning!—before it has been possible to consider in more depth the complexity of the issues at hand.

The major problem in Radway’s analysis is that for all of the criticism offered of theoretical modes which ignore real readers in favor of the critic’s own projections, there is a fair share of projection and idealization going on here, as well. For the white, heterosexual, middle-class women that Radway discusses may well be complex agents who live the contradictions of middle-class patriarchal culture in equally complex ways, but they are also projections of American, middle-class, academic feminism. This is not meant in any way as a condemnation; far from it. But the desire to name “real readers” is neither transparent nor innocent, for the
women readers who appear in Radway’s analysis are mediated by her questions, her analyses, and her narrative. It is inevitable that such projections exist in this kind of analysis, and unless those projections are analyzed, then we are left with an ideal reader who seems more real because she is quoted and referred to, but who is every bit as problematic as the ideal reader constructed by abstract theories of an apparatus positioning passive vessels.

It would, of course, be presumptuous of me to hypothesize what function the Smithton women have in Radway’s imagination, but I can say what her analysis suggests quite strongly to me—a desire, on the part of feminists like myself, to see my mother and by extension members of my mother’s generation as not so invested in patriarchy, as pre-feminist or proto-feminist, as a figure who nurtured feminism even while she argued otherwise, as someone who was really a feminist but didn’t know it yet. Lest a particularly literal-minded soul wants to remind me that not all mothers of middle-class feminists fit this bill, I would say that this is precisely the point. For regardless of whether we are talking about literal mothers (as I am here), or mothers in the sense of a generation of women from whom the contemporary feminist movement developed and against whom it reacted, or a group of women who function as a horizon against which much feminist activity operates, we are talking about a construction. I doubt seriously, for instance, if the Smithton women would agree with the necessity of understanding the reading of romance fiction in the categorical terms of critique or celebration.

If analyses such as Radway’s are to be based on taking other readers seriously then they must also mean taking ourselves seriously as readers—and by “seriously” here, I mean putting our own constructions to the test. Tania Modleski has argued that with the turn to ethnography as a revitalized strategy for the analysis of mass culture, a curious assumption has been made that critics and researchers are not valid readers or viewers of mass culture, but rather detached observers (1989). I think Modleski is correct in assuming that the analysis of spectatorship is an analysis of one’s own fascination and passion. Unless this is acknowledged, then we are left with a series of fuzzily defined “ideal readers” in whom it is difficult to know how much of their responses are displaced representations of the critic’s own.

From another perspective, it could be argued that the “ideal reader” has not been challenged so much as displaced from one realm, that of the textual properties of address, to another, that of the empirically observable woman. One of the most important strategies of Radway’s analysis is, as I’ve indicated, the juxtaposition of the ideal reader assumed by the romance-fiction industry with women who do fit that profile, who are therefore the desired audience for romance novels, but who are also at the same time irreducible to structure, formula, or cliché. Unfortunately, however, this challenge to the presumed homogeneity of the ideal reader does not go quite far enough. One of Radway’s most important sources is Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering*, a study of the asymmetrical gender patterns whereby men learn to be mothered and nurtured and women learn to provide mothering and nurturing (1978). Whereas Chodorow argues that women are socialized into mothering precisely through the (often unfulfilled) promise that the pre-oedipal patterns so central to their own development will be recreated, Radway argues that romance fiction provides precisely the kind of nurturance otherwise absent or largely missing from these women’s lives.
In the appeal to Chodorow’s analysis I sense most strongly the need to specify the particular nature of the needs being fulfilled. To what extent are we talking about white women whose lives are missing the kind of community network and patterns often characteristic of the lives of black women, for instance? What kind of “middle-class” identity is at stake—the kind of precarious middle-class life characteristic of many white-collar workers? Or rather an economic identity defined largely by lifestyle? Is the heterosexual identity of the women as stable as they, and Radway as well, seem to take great pains to stress? I am aware that these questions will strike some readers as the kind of checklist of accountability that characterizes some holier-than-thou political criticism. But my goal here is not some kind of standard of inclusivity. Rather, it is the notion of an “ideal” reader—no matter who defines it as “ideal”—that I think is severely limiting.

Radway’s study remains the most influential example of an analysis that attempts to account, simultaneously, for the power of institutions (what she calls an “institutional matrix”) and the complex ways in which real women accomplish the “construction of texts” (11–12). The positive critical reception that Radway’s book has received suggests at the very least enormous dissatisfaction with just those limitations of exclusive textually based theories of readership. I am wary, however, of some of this positive critical reception, since I am not convinced that the notion of the “ideal reader” has been problematized or undone so much as it has been displaced. What this suggests to me is the need to be careful of the appeals that are made in the name of empirical audiences or ethnography as the truth that will set us free from the overly abstract theorization of the past. I suspect that it may be impossible to do away entirely with the notion of an ideal reader, since we all live this culture’s fictions and institutions and participate in them to some extent. I do not say this in order to imply cynically that no alternative positions of spectatorship are possible, but rather to suggest that one of the most persistent myths of spectatorship (and of theory) that has perturbed and in many ways hindered the analysis of spectatorship is the belief that it is not only possible, but necessary, to separate the truly radical spectator from the merely complicitous one. The recognition that we are all complicitous to some extent (and the “some” is clearly what needs to be investigated) does not mean that alternative positions are impossible. Rather, that recognition would make it possible to speak of readership or spectatorship not as the knowledge the elite academic brings to the people, nor as a coded language that can only be deciphered by experts, but as a mode of encounter—between, say, Radway and the women whose responses she collected and studied.

**Fantasy**

While I share many of the criticisms of psychoanalytic theory that have been made in film studies in the past twenty years, the failure to take seriously psychoanalytic investigation can only lead to spectatorship studies that posit one limited definition of the subject in place of another. It is mistaken to assume, however, that all psychoanalytic film theorists subscribe to all aspects of apparatus theory, or that psychoanalytic investigations have remained unchanged in orientation since the early to mid–1970s. Indeed, one of the most significant rethinkings of psychoanalytic film theory has been in the area of fantasy, which Constance Penley specifically claims
as an alternative to the “bachelor machines” characteristic of Metz’s and Baudry’s approaches to the cinema. “The formulation of fantasy,” she writes, “which provides a complex and exhaustive account of the staging and imaging of the subject and its desire, is a model that very closely approximates the primary aims of the apparatus theory: to describe not only the subject’s desire for the film image and its reproduction, but also the structure of the fantasmatic relation to that image, including the subject’s belief in its reality” (1985: 54).

Two essays in particular have been extremely influential in the development of a model of spectatorship which draws upon the psychoanalytic definition of fantasy. Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten” (1919) has been read as offering a theory of multiple masculine and feminine positions, thereby lending itself to a definition of spectatorship as oscillation rather than “identification” in a univocal sense (Rodowick 1982, 1991; Doane 1984; Hansen 1986). The specific definition of fantasy upon which Penley draws is located in an extremely influential essay by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality” (1964/1986). Elaborating upon their claim that “fantasy is the fundamental object of psychoanalysis” (1967/1973: 317), in this essay the authors explore a variety of components of fantasy which suggest, even more forcefully than the dream analogy so often claimed as the basis for psychoanalytic exploration of the cinema, a situation which is embodied in the cinema.

Laplanche and Pontalis distinguish three “original” fantasies, original in the sense that they are bound up with the individual’s history and origins: “Like myths, they claim to provide a representation of, and a solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child. Whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory, is dramatized as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history.” Hence, Laplanche and Pontalis define three such fantasies of origins: “the primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, the origin and upsurge of sexuality; fantasies of castration, the origin of the difference between the sexes” (1964/1986: 19). These fantasies are “original” not in the sense that they always “produce” or “cause” a given scenario, but that they form the structure of fantasy which is activated in a variety of ways.

Three characteristics of fantasy as read by Laplanche and Pontalis are particularly crucial for an understanding of the cinema as fantasy, and toward a revision of theories of the apparatus whereby the subject of the cinematic fantasy can only always be male. First, the distinction between what is conscious and what is unconscious is less important in fantasy than the distinction between those original fantasies described above, and secondary fantasies. Laplanche and Pontalis stress what they describe as the “profound continuity between the various fantasy scenarios—the stage-setting of desire—ranging from the daydream to the fantasies recovered or reconstructed by the analytic investigation” (1964/1986: 28). As we have seen, one of the problems with much apparatus theory is a mechanistic notion of the unconscious, due largely to the fact that the desire for regression is always postulated as the repetition of the same oedipal scenario. The three original fantasies of which Laplanche and Pontalis speak are not so regimented. And given that fantasy occupies such a distinct place in psychoanalysis insofar as it extends across the boundaries of conscious and unconscious desires, then the analysis of the cinema as a form of fantasy does not require what almost inevitably amounts
to a decoding approach, a rigid distinction between manifest and latent content. The area of fantasy is one where the notion of homology operates quite differently than is the case with the cinematic apparatus, since here the homology is between different types of fantasy, of which cinematic spectatorship is one example (21). Put another way, fantasy is more useful for its implications than for its possible status as equivalent to or anticipatory of the cinema.

Second, it is the very nature of fantasy to exist for the subject across many possible positions. Noting that “A father seduces a daughter” is the skeletal version of the seduction fantasy, Laplanche and Pontalis describe this function as follows: “The indication here of the primary process is not the absence of organization, as is sometimes suggested, but the peculiar character of the structure, in that it is a scenario with multiple entries, in which nothing shows whether the subject will be immediately located as daughter; it can as well be fixed as father, or even in the term seduces” (22–3). Despite the claims to anti-essentialism of many apparatus theorists, there is a consistent tendency to conflate literal gender and address; to assume, that is, that if the film addresses its subject as male, then it is the male viewer who is thus addressed. The reading of cinematic fantasy allows no such reduction. Indeed, the notion of fantasy gives psychoanalytic grounding not only to the possibility, but to the inevitability and necessity, of the cinema as a form of fantasy wherein the boundaries of biological sex or cultural gender, as well as sexual preference, are not fixed.

Finally, emphasis is placed throughout Laplanche and Pontalis’s discussion on fantasy as the staging of desire, fantasy as a form of mise-en-scène. “Fantasy . . . is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images” (26). Elizabeth Cowie has noted that the importance of the emphasis on fantasy as a scene “cannot be overestimated, for it enables the consideration of film as fantasy in the most fundamental sense of this term in psychoanalysis” (1984: 77). While I am somewhat suspicious of any mimetic analogy, the understanding of film as fantasy does open the door to some questions and issues about spectatorship which apparatus theory tended to shut out. In any case, I think the value of fantasy for psychoanalytic readings of the cinema needs to be seen less in terms of a “better” analogy than dreams, the mirror stage, or the imaginary, and more in terms of the series of questions it can engender.

In Cowie’s reading of fantasy in film which relies extensively on the Laplanche and Pontalis essay, two such questions are raised: “if fantasy is the mise-en-scène of desire, whose desire is figured in the film, who is the subject for and of the scenario? No longer just, if ever, the so-called ‘author.’ But how does the spectator come into place as desiring subject of the film? Secondly, what is the relation of the contingent, everyday material drawn from real life, i.e. from the social, to the primal or original fantasies?” (1984: 87). Cowie notes how, in *Now, Voyager*, there is an oedipal fantasy, “but where the subject positions are not fixed or completed, Charlotte is both mother and daughter, Mrs. Vale and Tina.” In partial response to her first question, then, Cowie says that it is not enough to define the fantasy as Charlotte Vale’s; rather, it must be defined as the spectator’s:

This is not Charlotte’s fantasy, but the “film’s” fantasy. It is an effect of its narration (of its énonciation). If we identify simply with Charlotte’s desires, that series of social and erotic successes, then the final object, the child Tina, will be
unsatisfactory. But if our identification is with the playing out of a desiring, in relation to the opposition (phallic) mother/child, the ending is very much more satisfying. I would suggest. A series of “day-dream” fantasies enfold an Oedipal, original fantasy. The subject of this fantasy is then the spectator; inasmuch as we have been captured by the film's narration, its énonciation, we are the only place in which all the terms of the fantasy come to rest.

(1984: 91)

Cowie's response to her second question—concerning the relationship between the psychic and the social which the analysis of fantasy can comprehend—focuses on the illicit desires which the subject’s pleasure in the fantasy fulfills. In Now, Voyager, this concerns the evacuation of the father; in another film discussed by Cowie, The Reckless Moment, what she describes as an “unstoppable sliding of positions” results in pairings and oppositions whereby a set of equivalences is set up, and an inference is made “which is an attack on the family as imprisoning” (1984: 101). These claims are reminiscent of the kinds of implications in “reading against the grain” arguments about the classical cinema—i.e., that what appears to be a smooth ideological surface is marred, rather, by rebellion, critique, or even implicit rejection of those norms. What the reading of fantasy brings to such claims, however, is the insistence that investment and pleasure in film watching involve a range of subject positions. Apparatus theory tends to pose a spectator so aligned with one subject position that anything departing from that position would have to seem radical or contestatory by definition. The exploration of the classical cinema in terms of fantasy enlarges considerably what possibilities are contained within the fantasy structures engaged by film viewing, and in so doing inflects differently the notion of a “reading against the grain.” For from the vantage point of fantasy, the distinction between “with” and “against” the grain of the film becomes somewhat moot.

Constance Penley assesses the importance of Cowie’s approach to fantasy in terms of its assumption that positions of sexual identification are not fixed: “Cowie’s model of identification involves a continual construction of looks, ceaselessly varied through the organization of the narrative and the work of narration. The value of such a model is that it leaves open the question of the production of sexual difference in the film rather than assuming in advance the sexuality of the character or the spectator” (1988: 11). However, while it may be a matter of indifference in psychoanalytic terms whether the spectator encouraged or enabled to adopt a variety of positions is male or female, it is a matter of crucial importance within the context of spectatorship, to the extent that spectatorship involves a spectator who always brings with her or him a history, and whose experience of spectatorship is determined in part by the ways in which spectatorship is defined outside of the movie theater.

Cowie emphasizes that whatever shifting of positions occurs in the fantasies of the cinema, they “do so always in terms of sexual difference” (1984: 102). It is one thing to assume “sexual difference” to refer to the way in which any definition of “femininity” is inevitably bound to accompanying definitions of “masculinity,” and another thing to assume that the only possible relationship between the two is in some version of heterosexuality. Put another way, the insistence upon sexual difference has had a curious history in film studies, by collapsing the shifting terms of masculinity and femininity into a heterosexual master code. Interestingly, the
model of fantasy elaborated by Laplanche and Pontalis has the potential to challenge film theory’s own compulsory heterosexuality. In a study of Sheila McLaughlin’s film *She Must Be Seeing Things*, for instance, Teresa de Lauretis argues that the film articulates a *lesbian* version of the primal scene, where the positions of onlooker and participant are occupied by women (1989).

Barbara Creed has observed that despite the fact that the castration scenario is but one of three originary fantasies in Laplanche and Pontalis’s account, it has been the near-exclusive focus of 1970s film theory (1990: 135). Creed suggests that perhaps “the fantasy of castration marks all three primal fantasies to some degree” (135). The same could be said of any of the three fantasies. What might rather be the case is that the classical Hollywood cinema is made to the measure of the fantasy of sexual difference, which is of course what 1970s film theory claimed. It is unclear, in other words, just how much of a critical advantage the fantasy model offers, if it emerges as just another way of affirming the primacy of one particular configuration of desire. Alternatively, it could be argued that this is precisely where fantasy offers an understanding of the tension between the demands for regulation and homogeneity, on the one hand, and the mobility of spectatorial investment, on the other. The positions offered the spectator may be multiple, but the multiplicity finds its most cohesive articulation in the fantasy of sexual difference.

Jacqueline Rose has made a more pointed observation about the current interest in fantasy, particularly insofar as it functions as a “saving device” against the “depressing implications” of the psychoanalytic position that the classical cinema offers the female spectator only an impossible relation to its fictions (1990: 275).

Unconscious fantasy can . . . be read in terms of a multiplicity of available positions for women (and men), but the way these positions work against and defensively exclude each other gets lost. . . . [W]hile we undoubtedly need to recognize the instability of unconscious fantasy and the range of identifications offered by any one spectator of film, this can easily lead to an idealization of psychic processes and cinema at one and the same time (something for everyone both in the unconscious and on the screen).

(275)

Rose’s warning echoes an earlier debate in film studies concerning the monolithic quality of film narrative, with psychoanalysis functioning as a nagging reminder that the “resistance” of the unconscious cannot in any easy or simple way be equated with “resistance” understood in political terms.

Fantasy does offer the possibility of engaging different desires, contradictory effects, and multiple stagings. A certain version of the scenario of sexual difference emerges again and again in film theory as obsessive structure and point of return, and it is not always clear when the obsession and return are an effect of the cinema or of the theorist. In any case, it appears as though the homogeneous effects of the cinematic apparatus are understood in limited terms in the fantasy model—limited to the extent that they have only one point of reference, a notion of sexual difference which assumes the kind of essentialist quality otherwise so disavowed by psychoanalytic critics. I have no intention of reviving the political fantasy of “integrating” Marxism and/or feminism and/or psychoanalysis; rather, it is psychoanalysis on its
own terms that requires investigation, not “rescue” by some other discourse. For it is questionable whether fantasy can engage with the complex effects of spectatorship without some understanding of how its own categories—of sexual difference, the couple, and desire—are themselves historically determined and culturally variable.

**Negotiation**

To put this problem a bit differently, as well as to make the transition to the next tension I want to address, the institutional models of spectatorship have been read as so rigid that there has been a real temptation to see any response that differs slightly from what is assumed to be the norm or the ideal as necessarily radical and contestatory. Such claims to alternatives require that the theory of the institution that gave rise to it be challenged simultaneously. What remains nonetheless peculiar about many theories of the cinematic institution is that they give particular and sometimes exclusive signifying possibilities to the individual film. That is to say, the individual film is taken to be a well-functioning instance of the larger effects of the cinematic institution. When other practices are taken into account, like advertising or consumer tie-ins, they are assumed to create a narrative flow every bit as seamless as that of the classical scenario itself.

Once the cinematic institution is defined and analyzed as consisting of a number of different forms of address, however, it should be possible to unpack and question the excessive monolithic quality of the apparatus. But as I suggest above, I think it is crucial to resist the temptation to see difference or multiplicity as liberatory or contestatory qualities in themselves. This attention to difference (and simultaneous inquiry into the difference that difference makes) can be understood in a variety of ways, both in terms of a single film within which a variety of not necessarily harmonious discourses collide, and in terms of the various components that define film-going in a cultural and psychic sense.

One of the key terms that has emerged in this context is negotiation. In an influential essay associated with cultural studies, Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding,” three decoding strategies—that is, practices of reading and making sense of cultural texts—are proposed. The dominant reading is one fully of a piece with the ideology of the text, while the negotiated reading is more ambivalent; that is, the ideological stance of a product is adjusted to specific social conditions of the viewers. The oppositional reading is, then, one totally opposed to the ideology in question (Hall 1980).

As influential as this model has been, particularly in the foregrounding of reception contexts, it raises some problems of its own, particularly insofar as the “dominant” and “oppositional” readings are concerned. What is the relationship between activity and passivity in the reader/viewer, whether the reading is dominant or oppositional? If a reader/viewer occupies an oppositional stance, how does this square with the process of interpellation necessary for any response to a text? Dominant and oppositional readings may be more usefully understood, perhaps, as horizons of possibility, as tendencies rather than actual practices of reading. However, in order to foreground the activity of reading, viewing, and consuming mass culture, what Hall’s model leaves relatively intact is the notion of a text’s dominant ideology. This is peculiar insofar as the activity/passivity of the apparatus model
appears to be reversed in favor of an active reader/viewer and a relatively stable, if not completely passive, text.

It may well be more useful to designate all readings as negotiated ones, to the extent that it is highly unlikely that one will find any "pure" instances of dominant or oppositional readings. In other words, a purely dominant reading would presume no active intervention at all on the part of the decoder, while a purely oppositional reading would assume no identification at all with the structures of interpellation of the text. In that case, some notion of textual determination must still be necessary in order for the negotiation model to be useful.

I stress this because there is a tendency to assume that because the model of negotiation posits both the activity of the reader/viewer and the heterogeneity of the different elements of social formations, it conceives of a variety of readings, and that very heterogeneity, that very activity, is then taken to be indicative of a resistance to dominant ideology. Since I do not think that individual texts can be any more easily categorized as purely "dominant" than spectators or readers can, I find it difficult to be quite so enthused about different or unauthorized readings as necessarily contestatory. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, one of the problems in spectatorship studies is the desire to categorize texts and readings/responses as either conservative or radical, as celebratory of the dominant order or critical of it. This duality forecloses the far more difficult task of questioning what is served by the continued insistence upon this either/or, and more radically, of examining what it is in conceptions of spectators’ responses and film texts that produces this ambiguity in the first place.

One of the severe limitations of much apparatus theory is the assumption that certain textual strategies will necessarily produce desired reassignations of dominant subject/object relationships and subject positions. A textual strategy does not necessarily produce anything. But if, consequently, there is no such thing as an inherently radical technique, then there is no such thing either as an inherently conservative one. While I think most contemporary film scholars would agree with the former—would agree, that is, that this particular aspect of 1970s film theory is in need of severe revision—I am not sure that the latter will meet with such agreement, since the notion of a dominant narrative structure still appears with great regularity.

I am alluding to two extreme positions which can be sketched as follows. For many textual theorists of the 1970s, Raymond Bellour and the editors of Camera Obscura in particular, the value of textual analysis was to demonstrate that classical narrative produces a variety of ruptures, deviations, and crises only to recuperate them in the name of a hierarchical closure or resolution. From this point of view, any validation of those ruptures is at best naive voluntarism and at worst a refusal to acknowledge what one does not want to know—that the cinematic apparatus works with great efficiency to channel all desire into male, oedipal desire. The apparatus works; closure and resolution are achieved. Inspired in many cases by the work of Hall and cultural studies, others, like John Fiske (1987), insist upon the social formations of audiences as the only ultimately determining factors. Both positions ascribe an unqualified power to the text, on the one hand, and socially defined readers/viewers on the other. The problem in each case is that the activity of making meaning is assumed to reside in one single source—either the cinematic apparatus, or the socially contextualized viewer. To be sure, variations are allowed in either case, but they are never significant enough to challenge the basic determinism of the model in question.
While there are advantages to both of these positions, I do not want to suggest that one can take what is most appealing about two different sets of assumptions and put them together in a happy integration. Unfortunately, while the notion of negotiation is potentially quite useful, it can inspire precisely a kind of Pollyanna dialectics—the institution remains monolithic, but never so monolithic that readers cannot be actively oppositional. Now I do think that spectatorship studies are most useful when “local,” that is, when examined—as I suggest in the critique of Radway’s book—insofar as they problematize the ideal reader or viewer. But there still needs to be some recognition of the theoretical questions at stake. There is no necessary discontinuity between theory and local analysis. Indeed, theory becomes much more challenging when contradiction and tension, for instance, exist not as textual abstractions but as complex entities which do not always lend themselves easily to one reading or another. Film theory of the 1970s erred in attempting to account for a cinematic subject in categories that are absolute. (Even when labeled “Western,” this usually amounts to the same thing—e.g., some will confess that they speak only of the “Western” [white, male, etc.] subject and then proceed as if “Western” and “universal” were still fully commensurate terms.) But surely the conclusion is not that all theorizing is doomed to such levels of abstraction.

One particularly influential invocation of negotiation is instructive in this context, since it sets out the issues that the concept is meant to address. Indeed, in Angela McRobbie’s essay “Dance and Social Fantasy,” a study of how teenage girls respond to dance and how those responses read in relationship to the films *Flashdance* and *Fame*, negotiation seems to describe not only the teenage girls but McRobbie herself as a researcher (1984). Noting that the significance of extra-textual codes and knowledge in the reception of mass culture leads to the necessity for the researcher to “limit strictly the range of his or her analysis,” McRobbie continues.

It also means working with a consciously loose rather than tight relation in mind, one where an inter-discursive notion of meaning structures and textual experience leads to a different working practice or methodology. Instead of seeking direct causal links or chains, the emphasis is placed on establishing loose sets of relations, capillary actions and movement, spilling out among and between different fields: work and leisure, fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, individual and social experience.

Several negotiations form the core of McRobbie’s analysis, not least of which is the juxtaposition of the responses of teenage girls to dancing as both a social and an individual activity, and the textual forms that seem to encourage such fantasies in two dance films, *Flashdance* and *Fame*. Within the two films, there are several processes of negotiation at work. In *Flashdance*, McRobbie notes that while the dance scenes are very much directed at that ubiquitous entity, the male spectator within the film, other narrative elements of the film are drawn so clearly from the woman’s film that it is impossible to say with certainty that the address of the film is directed toward the woman defined unambiguously as the object of the male gaze (138). The process of negotiation here concerns, then, two different genres—the musical and the woman’s film—the conventions of which may rub against each other rather than function compatibly. McRobbie also notes that in both films, there is a sometimes
peculiar juxtaposition of old and new elements; the films “place together images and moments of overwhelming conformity with those which seem to indicate a break with Hollywood’s usual treatment of women” (150). In other words, the classical formulae of both films could be said to acknowledge and retreat from their own limitations insofar as representations of women are concerned.

McRobbie also insists upon the importance of understanding films like these in an intertextual network, and in the case of these two films, the expectations of dance culture can inflect the readings of the films, and vice versa. Thus the process of “negotiation” refers to how the films are structured as cinematic texts, as well as to how the meanings of these films are “negotiated” in relationship to one’s knowledge of the dance scene outside of the movie theater. Noting that the dance-hall or disco shares some similarities with the movie theater (a “darkened space” where the spectator/dancer “can retain some degree of anonymity or absorption”), McRobbie notes as well a significant difference: “Where the cinema offers a one-way fantasy which is directed solely through the gaze of the spectator toward the screen, the fantasy of dancing is more social, more reciprocated” (144). Such a mapping of one context onto the other may account for a reception of these films that departs sharply from the pronouncements of film theory about the inevitability of the colonization of the female body.

Two particular points of reference recur in McRobbie’s essay, and they echo some of the questions I raised in relation to Radway’s Reading the Romance. Richard Dyer has suggested that one of the basic appeals of the movie musical is the utopian dimension, a way of providing pleasures and satisfactions that are otherwise unavailable in the culture at hand, and yet which are defined in such a way as to suggest that they can only be satisfied within capitalism (1977). Radway suggests that this utopianism—defined within the context of Nancy Chodorow’s reading of women’s desires for re-creation of their pre-oedipal bond—is a function of the reading of romance novels, and McRobbie’s reading of dance and dance films is equally suggestive of a utopian impulse.

I do not wish to evoke a traditional and moralistic Marxism, whereby art provides us with a glimpse of the truly integrated human beings we will all become in the communist future. But I find that sometimes the utopian dimension becomes clouded by the understanding of desire as always in conflict with the dominant culture. McRobbie notes, for instance, that Fame presents a desire for community and family as necessarily intertwined (158), and certainly an interesting area of research is the way in which films articulate definitions which both reflect dominant ideology (the family is the basis for all community) and challenge them (communities provide what families do not, or cannot, in our culture). What makes me somewhat suspicious is the way that the discussion of utopianism seems to fall into exactly the kind of large abstractions—having to do with the “human subject under capitalism and/or patriarchy”—that McRobbie sets out (specifically in the passage cited earlier) to challenge. In case I sound as if I am contradicting myself as far as the necessity of combining “local” analyses with theoretical reflection is concerned, let me say that I do not think that theory means falling back into large clichés about the human subject—or the female subject.

The second recurring point of reference in McRobbie’s essay is an illustration of the first. Noting that dance “carries a range of often contradictory strands within
it,” she affirms the conformity of dance with conventional definitions of femininity, but says that at the same time the pleasures of dance “seem to suggest a displaced, shared and nebulous eroticism rather than a straightforwardly romantic, heavily heterosexual ‘goal-oriented’ drive” (134). In another context, McRobbie describes the dance scene and suggests that as it offers a “suspension of categories, there is not such a rigid demarcation along age, class, ethnic terms. Gender is blurred and sexual preference less homogenously heterosexual” (146). Curiously, this “suspension of categories” is itself suspended when McRobbie reports that her sources on the pleasures of dance are “predominantly heterosexual;” hence “these fantasy scenarios make no claim to represent gay or lesbian experience” (145). While gay and lesbian experiences of dance may well be different, this disclaimer erects the categories of sexual preference just when the analysis of dance seems to put them into question.

I suspect that since the question of sexual preference is far more controversial than, say, the desire for a community (whether based on the family or not), and is perhaps threatening to those very viewers/participants whose desires one is attempting to take seriously, then the temptation is to shelve a consideration of it for some future analysis, or to open the question about the permeability of sexual boundaries without really pursuing it in any depth. But the deployment of gay and lesbian identities in popular culture, and the complicated responses the viewers bring to homosexuality as a moral, sexual, and political issue, seem to me just the kind of specific area of inquiry for investigation into the utopian impulse that desires for community avoid.

Film theory has been so bound by the heterosexual symmetry that supposedly governs Hollywood cinema that it has ignored the possibility, for instance, that one of the distinct pleasures of the cinema may well be a “safe zone” in which homosexual as well as heterosexual desires can be fantasized and acted out. I am not speaking here of an innate capacity to “read against the grain,” but rather of the way in which desire and pleasure in the cinema may well function to problematize the categories of heterosexual versus homosexual. To be sure, this “safety zone” can also be read as a displacement, insurance that the happy ending is a distinctly heterosexual one. But as has been noted many times, the buddy film, if it affirms any kind of sexual identity aside from a narcissistic one, is as drawn to a homosexual connection as it is repelled by it.

Taking into account the complexity of the range of responses to the stability of sexual identities and sexual categories would require an approach to negotiation that specifies the psychic stakes in such a process, rather than just stating that the psychic remains significant or important. I am not referring here to the kind of psychoanalytic theorizing typical of much 1970s film theory, where the “unconscious” usually meant a master plot repeated again and again, an inevitable source of meaning and comprehensibility. What has been surprisingly absent from much psychoanalytic film theory is an investigation of the ways in which the unconscious refuses the stability of any categorization. The example of heterosexuality and its various "others" seems to me a particularly crucial one to take into account, since so much of the ideology of the cinematic institution is built simultaneously on the heterosexual couple as the common denominator, on the promise of romantic fulfillment, at the same time that that couple seems constantly in crisis, constantly in need of reassurance. One would have thought this an area where the concept of negotiation would provide a useful corrective.
To take this in a somewhat different direction: The notion of negotiation is only useful if one is attentive to the problematic as well as "utopian" uses to which negotiation can be put by both the subjects one is investigating and the researchers themselves. While I have not seen this spelled out in any detail, negotiation seems to be a variation of the Marxist notion of mediation—the notion, that is, of a variety of instances that complicate or "mediate" in various ways the relationship between individuals and the economic structure of capitalism. Raymond Williams has noted that while the concept of mediation has the advantage of complicating significantly the cause-and-effect notion of "reflection" so typical of a traditional Marxism, and of indicating an active process, it remains limited in its own way. Williams notes that "it is virtually impossible to sustain the metaphor of 'mediation' . . . without some sense of separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality. . . . Within the inheritance of idealist philosophy the process is usually, in practice, seen as a mediation between categories, which have been assumed to be distinct" (1977: 99).

Negotiation can replicate the problems that inhere in the notion of mediation by replacing the language of "subjection" and "imposition" with that of "agency" and "contradiction" but without significantly exploring how the notion of an active subject can be just as open to projections and subjections as a passive subject can. While the field of cultural studies, with its emphasis on "negotiation" as the way readers/viewers shape mass culture to their own needs, has had an enormous impact on film studies, another direction in literary studies also makes persistent use of "negotiation" in a rather different way. The so-called "new historicism" has had only a limited relationship with film studies, yet some of the ways in which the concept of negotiation has emerged in new historicist studies offer a useful counterpoint to the inflection offered by cultural studies.

New historicism is most immediately associated with English Renaissance studies. But the problems new-historicist work addresses are not so different than those central to film studies, particularly insofar as a reckoning with both the advances and the limitations of 1970s film theory are concerned. Louis A. Montrose, for instance, has said that "the terms in which the problem of ideology has been posed and is now circulating in Renaissance literary studies—namely as an opposition between 'containment' and 'subversion'—are so reductive, polarized, and undynamic as to be of little or no conceptual value" (1989: 22). That this assessment "applies" to film studies, particularly in relation to spectatorship, may have less to do with a striking coincidence between film studies and the new historicism, and more to do with questions central to virtually all forms of cultural analysis in the 1980s and 1990s which attempt to develop new forms of criticism and theory at the same time that they engage with their own historical legacies, particularly insofar as the 1960s and 1970s are concerned in their status as simultaneous political turning points and mythological burden.

While it is not my purpose either to align myself with a new-historicist project or to provide an extended introduction to this field, it is noteworthy that the term negotiation in its new historicist usage tends more toward questioning those very possibilities of radical agency that the cultural-studies approach finds in its negotiations. Stephen Greenblatt notes that capitalism "has characteristically generated neither regimes in which all discourses seem coordinated, nor regimes in which they seem radically isolated or discontinuous, but regimes in which the drive toward
differentiation and the drive toward monological organization operate simultaneously, or at least oscillate so rapidly as to create the impression of simultaneity” (1989: 6). From the vantage point of this simultaneity, then, the immediate assumption that all unauthorized uses of films, and therefore spectatorial positions that depart from the presumed ideal of capitalist ideology, are virtually or potentially radical is a reading of the nature of discourse and power in our culture as more dualistic than it is.

A large part of the problem here is that the analysis of spectatorship in film studies has as a significant part of its legacy a commitment to the creation of alternative cultures and political identities which refuse to comply with dominant ideology. Phrases like “alternative cultures” and “refusal to comply” can of course mean a variety of things, including contradictory things. The reactions of black male spectators to the filmed popularization of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* cannot be squared in any easy or even complex way with the feminist critique of the “woman as object of the male look,” yet both constitute claims to validation by marginalized groups (see Bobo 1988). Part of the 1960s/1970s legacy of film studies is a romanticized vision of the politicized past, based on the assumption (erroneous and inaccurate) that the common denominator “socialist” could account for any and all kind of radical and progressive social change—a utopian definition of socialism which was quickly enough put to rest by feminism and gay and lesbian liberation movements. Curiously, what seems to have persisted is a vague discourse of “subversion” and “alternative scenarios,” amidst conceptual confusion about just what is being subverted and for what.

Catherine Gallagher says—in what could easily function as a critique of the tendencies present in much writing about spectatorship—that new historicists have attempted to show “that under certain historical circumstances, the display of ideological contradictions is completely consonant with the maintenance of oppressive social relations” (1989: 44). It has been crucial to spectatorship studies to understand that visions of the cinema as the inflexible apparatus of the ideological subject are as much projections of theorists’ own desires as they are hypothetically interesting and useful and also historically conditioned postulates about going to the cinema. But it is equally important for such an inquiry to take place in what amounts to a new “stage” of spectatorship studies, where the model is no longer the passive, manipulated (and inevitably white and heterosexual) spectator, but rather the contradictory, divided and fragmented subject.

The new-historicist reminder that “negotiation” is a marketplace term tempers too quick an enthusiasm about what may ultimately be strategies of consumerism. But it is too easy to assume the cynical route (which is, after all, only the reverse of romanticism), that is, to assume in a kind of more-Foucauldian-than-thou posture that there are no alternative positions, only fictions of them. What remains vital, in the critical examination of spectatorship, is the recognition that no “negotiation” is inherently or purely oppositional, but that the desire for anything “inherent” or “pure” is itself a fiction that must be contested.

What I am suggesting, in this extremely schematic encounter between new historicism and cultural studies, is that a desire for unproblematized agency—whether that of the critic or of the imaginary or real spectator(s) under investigation—persists. Even though McRobbie does question the notion of the “ideal viewer” which, as I suggest above, is one of the limitations of Radway’s analysis, there remain some
echoes of an idealized female subject in her account. In an extremely provocative essay on the status of negotiation as a critical concept in studies on female spectatorship, Christine Gledhill sees negotiation as providing a possible way out of the limitations of the implications of feminist/psychoanalytic film theory and the attendant split between text and reception, particularly insofar as texts were seen as capable of situating alternative subjective positions. "The value of 'negotiation' . . . as an analytical concept is that it allows space to the subjectivities, identities and pleasures of audiences," writes Gledhill (1988: 72). But "subjectivity," "identity," and "pleasure" are here defined in a way that acknowledges the critique of the fictions of bourgeois identity that has been central to Lacanian-inspired film theory. At the same time, those critiques are fictions, too, in supposing that any notion of identity may supposedly be "done away with."

In a move somewhat reminiscent of Jane Gallop's claim that "identity must be continually assumed and immediately put into question" (1982: xii), Gledhill says that the concept of negotiation stops short at the dissolution of identity suggested by avant-garde aesthetics. For if arguments about the non-identity of self and language, words and meaning, desire and its objects challenge bourgeois notions of the centrality and stability of the ego and the transparency of language, the political consequence is not to abandon the search for identity . . . . The object of attack should not be identity as such but its dominant construction as total, non-contradictory and unchanging.

I am suggesting, as is perhaps obvious by now, that this "dominant construction" enters into the ways in which researchers themselves construct their audiences. This should not, of course, come as startling news to anyone familiar with the dynamics of transference and counter-transference. But in order for studies of spectatorship to engage fully with the complex dynamics that define the process of negotiation, such constructions need to be accounted for.

As Gledhill's comments suggest, one of the key issues at stake here is the competing claims of "identity," which have been associated with some of the most fervent debates in film studies and related fields in the past two decades. Studies of reception and negotiation are often meant to challenge the ways in which post-structuralist theorists are seen to critique any notion of the self as an agent as an inevitable fiction of bourgeois/patriarchal/idealist culture. What becomes quite difficult in that process of challenge is acknowledging the necessity of the critique of the fictions of the self without resurrecting them yourself. Somewhat curiously, the challenges to apparatus theory described in this chapter return to the problem of identification, as if to suggest that however mobile and multiple subject positions may be, spectatorship still engages some notion of identity. But then theorists of the cinematic apparatus never banished identification from film theory, but rather redefined its terms beyond those of character or a one-to-one correspondence between viewer and screen. In any case, the current visibility of identity as a problem in film studies—whether as specter, curse, or positive value—speaks to the continued friction between subjects and viewers.

A colleague of mine once commented that much of what passes for film theory is a finger-wagging list of everything that is "wrong" with a given position or argument.
I recognize that I have indulged in some of that syndrome in this chapter, since I have focused critically on address/reception, fantasy, and negotiation as important concepts for spectatorship studies; that is, I have attempted to examine the concepts closely, in a symptomatic way, without simply assigning them positive or negative marks. Two criticisms have consistently emerged in my discussion of these concepts. First, I have suggested that there is a considerable reluctance on the part of theorists to acknowledge their own investment in the process of spectatorship analysis. I do not mean by this that all critics should write in a confessional mode, or impose a first-person account in every discussion of spectatorship. I see theoretical self-consciousness, rather, as an attention to how and why certain modes of theoretical discourse, certain tropes, certain preoccupations, are foregrounded in specific critical and cultural contexts.

Second, I return frequently in this chapter to the need for more specific, local studies, where the focus would be less on large theories that can account for everything, and more on the play and variation that exist at particular junctures between the competing claims of film spectatorship—as the function of an apparatus, as a means of ideological control, on the one hand, and as a series of discontinuous, heterogeneous, and sometimes empowering responses, on the other.

[...]

The point is not to construct yet another theory or concept of “the” cinematic spectator, but to suggest areas of inquiry which reveal both the importance of conceptualizing spectators, and some directions these conceptualizations can now take.

WORKS CITED


