



# FILM THEORY

an introduction through the senses

THOMAS ELSAESSER  
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senses

Thomas Elsaesser and  
Malte Hagener

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Thomas Elsaesser, Amsterdam/Malte Hagener, Hamburg  
September 2009



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# Introduction

## Film theory, cinema, the body and the senses

### I

Film theory is almost as old as the medium itself. The cinema developed at the end of the nineteenth century from advances in photography, mechanics, optics and the scientific production of serialized images (chronophotography), but also has its roots in centuries of popular entertainment, ranging from magic lantern shows and phantasmagorias, to large-scale panoramas, dioramas and optical toys. From the very beginning, inventors, manufacturers, artists, intellectuals, educators and scientists asked themselves questions about the essence of cinema: was it movement or was it interval, was it image or was it writing, was it capturing place or was it storing time? Besides its relationship to other forms of visualization and representation, the question was: was it science or was it art? And, if the latter, did it elevate and educate, or distract and corrupt? Discussions centered not just on the specificity of cinema, but also on its ontological, epistemological and anthropological relevance, and here the answers ranged from derogatory (“the cinema – an invention without a future”: Antoine Lumière) to skeptical (“the kingdom of shadows”: Maxim Gorki) or triumphal (“the Esperanto of the eye”: D.W. Griffith). The first attempts to engage with film as a new medium took place in the early twentieth century, and two representatives whose work can lay claim to the title of “the first film theory” are Vachel Lindsay and Hugo Münsterberg. Film theory reached an initial peak in the 1920s, but it did not become institutionalized (e.g. find a home as part of the university curriculum) in the English-speaking world and in France until after World War II, and on a broader scale not until the 1970s. Other countries followed suit, but the debt to France and the head start of English language theorization has been a considerable advantage, ensuring that Anglo-American film theory – often showing strong “Continental” (i.e. French) influences – has been dominant since the 1970s. It is to this transnational community of ideas that the present volume addresses itself and seeks to contribute.

This already implies a first possibility of conceiving a new introduction to film theory for the twenty-first century, namely taking geographic provenance as the primary cue. One could distinguish, for instance, a French line of thought linking Jean Epstein, André Bazin and Gilles Deleuze, from a succession of English-speaking approaches, extending from Hugo Münsterberg to Noël Carroll. Initially, German-language film theory played a significant role, as the names of Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht indicate, yet after National-Socialism and World War II, it lost its pre-eminent position in this international debate. The same could be said of Russian-language theory before and after Stalinism. Thus, the severity of certain historical breaks and political ruptures highlights two of the problems for a history of film theory based on geography and language. Moreover, a classification following national criteria would not only marginalize important positions elsewhere (Italy, the Czech Republic, Latin America and Japan, to mention just a few) and jettison the contribution of translation and migration, but it would also impose an external (national) coherence that hardly ever corresponds to the inner logic of theoretical positions, which are more often than not international in scope and universalist in intention.

On the other hand, geographic provenance can clarify the discursive logic of institutions, their strategies, their activities and publications: film theory often developed in close proximity to journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*, establishments such as the Cinémathèque française, the British Film Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, as well as in university departments and even around festivals and exhibitions. From this perspective, the translations, appropriations and transfers of film theoretical paradigms especially since the 1960s, such as semiotic, psychoanalytic or phenomenological film theory, would be subordinate to location, with so-called “creative clusters” determined by external factors, not by the internal dynamics of theory itself. Cities clearly play an important role in the formation of theory: Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s, Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, London in the 1970s, but there is also Birmingham, UK, and Melbourne, Australia (for Film and Cultural Studies), and New York (for theories of avant-garde film and of early cinema). Universities not associated with major cities and still favorable to film theory in their time were the University of Iowa in the 1970s, the so-called “New Universities” in Britain in the 1980s, the University of Madison in Wisconsin since the 1980s (for neoformalism) and the University of Chicago in the 1990s (for theoretically informed film history). Often it is a combination of personal and institutional factors, but also intellectual fashions and trends that determine why or when a particular location is able to play the role of a “cluster”-site, successfully propagating certain theories, not least thanks to sending influential students into the academic world, hosting important conferences or by producing seminal publications.<sup>1</sup>

By far the most common way of building a classification system of theoretical approaches to the cinema has been to take the influential distinction between formalist and realist film theories as a starting point.<sup>2</sup> Whereas formalist theories look at film in terms of construction and composition, realist theories emphasize film's ability to offer a hitherto unattainable view onto (non-mediated) reality. In other words, "formalists" focus on cinema's artificiality, whereas "realists" call attention to the (semi-)transparency of the filmic medium, which ostensibly turns us into direct witnesses. According to this classification, Sergej Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim, the Russian Formalists and the American Neo-Formalists all advocate cinema's artificial construction (no matter whether they ground this construction in classical aesthetics, politics or cognitivism), whereas the opposite side would rally around Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin under the banner of an "ontological" realism. The names already suggest that the debate is international and that it can be traced back at least to the 1920s, when questions about the specificity and nature of film as a medium, as well as about cinema's legitimacy as an art-form, were high on the agenda of a film and media avant-garde committed equally to theory and practice. Other distinctions, also organized in binary pairs, have been tried, such as normative versus descriptive, or critical versus affirmative.

Another, quite common approach sees film theory as a field of knowledge, which does not evolve its own object of study, but constantly adorns itself with borrowed plumes, and seems to owe its success to a kind of methodological opportunism, as well as to its mercurial adaptive abilities to new intellectual trends. Such an approach emphasizes the contextual embeddedness of film theory in larger developments pertaining to art history, literary theory, linguistics, to Cultural Studies and the social sciences, but it also highlights the transdisciplinary tendencies, which have characterized the humanities in general at least since the 1980s. From this perspective, synchronic or diachronic schools of thought carry names like feminist (film) theory, (film) semiotics or cognitivist (film) theory.<sup>3</sup> As a further variation on this classification, one could subsume such theoretical positions under still-larger subject headings, in which case it makes sense, for instance, to separate psychological approaches from sociological ones, and contextual–anthropological ones from close textual or iconological ones.

More recent attempts to systematize film theories renounce these often polemical or normative classifications. Instead, they advocate a relay among successive individual standpoints.<sup>4</sup> As a result, film theory seems to advance teleologically toward perfection by virtue of the fact that each new theory improves upon the preceding one. At its worst, a revolving-door effect sets in, whereby one approach quickly follows another, without any of these schools or trends being put into perspective with regard to some shared or overarching

question. In the former case, the individual perspectives exist only relative to one another, or primarily relative to some imaginary vanishing point, whereas in the latter case they exist more or less independently of, in parallel with or as swing-of-the-pendulum alternatives to one another. In order to sidestep both these problems, we have decided to organize our trajectory differently and instead of identifying schools and movements, we try to articulate film theory around a leading question. This allows us to bypass the simplistic listing of unrelated approaches, but also to avoid the evolutionary model, which projects an implicit goal according to a logic that is necessarily retrospective and thus must remain provisional. By proposing an explicit framework, we not only engage and challenge the existing theoretical positions, but also expect to take a stand ourselves within the field of scholarly debate, while acknowledging the historical situatedness of our own central question.

## II

*What is the relationship between the cinema, perception and the human body?* Film theories, classical or contemporary, canonical or avant-garde, normative or transgressive, have all addressed this issue, implicitly framing it or explicitly re-focusing it. In *Film Theory: an Introduction to the Body and the Senses* we opt for making this our key concern: it provides the guiding concept to our historical-systematic survey and it gives the chapters their coherence.

Each type of cinema (as well as every film theory) imagines an ideal spectator, which means it postulates a certain relation between the (body of the) spectator and the (properties of the) image on the screen, however much at first sight the highlighted terms are “understanding” and “making sense”, “interpretation” and “comprehension”. What is called classical narrative cinema, for instance, can be defined by the way a given film engages, addresses and envelops the spectatorial body. Films furthermore presuppose a cinematic space that is both physical and discursive, one where film and spectator, cinema and body encounter one another. This includes the architectural arrangement of the spectatorial space (the auditorium with its raked seating), a temporal ordering of performances (separate sessions or continuous admission) and a specific social framing of the visit to the movie-theater (a night out with friends, or a solitary self-indulgence), the sensory envelope of sound and other perceptual stimuli, as well as the imaginary construction of filmic space through *mise-en-scène*, montage and narration. Likewise, bodies, settings and objects within the film communicate with each other (and with the spectator) through size, texture, shape, density and surface appeal, as much as they play on scale, distance, proximity, color or other primarily optical markers. But there are additional ways the body engages with the film event, besides the senses of vision, tactility and sound:

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philosophical issues of perception and temporality, of agency and consciousness are also central to the cinema, as they are to the spectator. One of the challenges of our task was to tease out from formalist and realist theories their respective conceptions of cinema's relation to the body, whether formulated normatively (as, for example, in the approaches of both Sergej Eisenstein and André Bazin, however opposed they might be in other respects) or descriptively (more typical, at least in rhetorical strategy, of phenomenological and other contemporary theories).

This *leitmotif* of body and senses also communicates productively with the by-now widely used periodization of film history into early, classical and post-classical cinema, especially where these distinctions are based on the transformations of the cinema in its interrelation of (real) reception space and (imaginary) media space, from the fixed geometrical arrangement of projector, screen and spectator, to the more fluid and informal viewing conditions in front of the television screen or the laptop monitor, and extending to the mobile screens on hand-held devices, which explicitly invite new modes of bodily engagement in their hand-eye coordination.

This is why our model also tries to re-articulate in a theoretically pertinent manner the spatio-temporal relations between the bodies and objects depicted in a film, and between film and spectator. Crucial in this respect is the dynamics connecting the diegetic and the non- and extra-diegetic levels of the "world" of the film and how they intersect with the "world" of the spectator. The concept of diegesis (derived from the Greek "diegesis", meaning narration, report or argument, as opposed to "mimesis", meaning imitation, representation) was originally used in narrative theory to distinguish between the particular time-space continuum created by narration and everything outside it. For instance, jazz music in a nightclub scene is diegetic, when the film includes shots of the musician or band, whereas the background strings heard but not seen in a romantic tête-à-tête, are usually non-diegetic (i.e. referring to elements made meaningful within the film but located outside its story world). Whenever the camera independently closes in on an object carrying considerable narrative weight (for instance the revelation at the end of *CITIZEN KANE* that "Rosebud" is a sled), one speaks of a non-diegetic camera movement, even though the object itself is diegetic. Given that today's films tend to carry with them also extra-diegetic materials, such as DVD bonuses and commentary, and that spectators watching films "on the go" increasingly inhabit two worlds (the cinematic universe, the diegesis, and their own physical environment and ambient space), suspending one in favor of the other, or shuttling between them, a new definition of the concept of diegesis will play an important part in our overall argument.<sup>5</sup>

The different forms that this relation takes between cinema, film, sensory perception, physical environment and the body might be pictured as a series of

metaphors, or paired concepts, which can be mapped on the body: its surfaces, senses and perceptive modalities, its tactile, affective and sensory-motor faculties. Yet the semantic fields thus staked out also take into account physical, epistemological and even ontological foundations of the cinema itself, emphasizing its specific properties and key elements. We have chosen seven distinct pairs that describe an arc from “outside” to “inside”, and at the same time, they retrace fairly comprehensively the most important stages of film theory roughly from 1945 to the present, from neo-realist and modernist theories to psychoanalytic, “apparatus”, phenomenological and cognitivist theories. Using the seven configurations as levels of pertinence as well as entry-points for close analysis, we noted that earlier film theories, such as those from the “classical” period during the 1920s and 1930s, also respond to such a re-organization, suggesting that our outline – however schematic or provisional at this stage – can eventually lead to a more nuanced and thorough re-classification of the cinema’s many contact points with the human senses and the body of the spectator.

While relevant to film theory as hitherto understood, our conceptual metaphors neither amend previous theoretical models nor do they form a succession of independent or autonomous units: despite covering core arguments from very disparate and seemingly incompatible theories, the chapters – on window/frame, door/screen, mirror/face, eye/gaze, skin/touch, ear/space and brain/mind – nonetheless tightly interlace with each other. We are not proposing a Hegelian synthesis, but neither do we stand outside the fray – this would be, in a nutshell, our methodological premise on the issue of the historicity of theory itself. A new approach (implicitly or explicitly) tackles questions which a preceding theory may have brought to light but which it could not explain in a satisfactory manner. But, by the same token, each new theory creates its own questions, meaning that it can find itself once more confronting the same issues, which a previous theory had counted as resolved. For instance, one explanation for the surprising revival since the mid-1990s of André Bazin’s theories, after one thought his theory of realism had been laid to rest in the 1970s (when realism was widely seen as an ideological characteristic of bourgeois art) is the fact that the transition from analog to digital media again raises, albeit in a new form, Bazin’s central question concerning the “ontology of the photographic image”.<sup>6</sup> The revival of Bazin (but also that of Kracauer, Epstein, Balázs and Arnheim) proves that the history of film theory is not a teleological story of progress to ever-more comprehensive or elegantly reductive models. Generally speaking, a theory is never historically stable, but takes on new meanings in different contexts. If, as already indicated, film theory is almost as old as the cinema, it not only extends into the future, but also the past, as witnessed by the renewed interest in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scientific treatises on the theory of motion in images. Similarly, the new dialog between the hard

sciences and the humanities around cognitivism has given Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: a Psychological Study* (1916) a new topicality as "predecessor", which suggests that the history of film theory extends into the future, which is to say, it is liable to change, because every new present tends to rewrite its own history.

To return to our central question: the individual chapters not only stand in a particular relation to the history of film theory, but also to the forms of cinema prevalent in a given period, since the evolution of theory and the changes in film-making and cinema-going are mutually influencing factors. Besides a historical-analytical overview of many important *theoretical* positions (from André Bazin and David Bordwell, to Gilles Deleuze and Laura Mulvey), our project also involves the beginnings of a re-classification of *film history* (around pre-cinema and early cinema, but also from the 1940s to the present), based on the premise that the spectator's body in relation to the moving image constitutes a key historical variable, whose significance has been overlooked, mainly because film theory and cinema history are usually kept apart. Consequently, more is at stake than presenting film theory from an objective perspective, treating it as a closed universe of discourse that belongs to history. Rather, we want to probe the usefulness of the various theoretical projects of the past for contemporary film and media theory, in the hope of re-conceptualizing theory and thus of fashioning, if not a new theory, then a new understanding of previous theories' possible logics.

But such a history is in any case not at the forefront of our study, because diachronic overviews have never been in short supply. What we aim for is a comprehensive and systematic introduction, underpinned and guided by a specific perspective opened up when raising a different set of questions about old problems. Our mission – to condense a hundred years of history with thousands of pages of theory – necessarily involves losses, biases and omissions, but on the whole we hope to achieve an effect similar to that of a concentrate: the volume decreases, the liquid thickens, but important flavors and the ingredients linger. The distinctiveness, sometimes to the point of incompatibility, among theories should not disappear or be disavowed.

Each chapter also opens with a paradigmatic scene from a film, capturing in a nutshell a central premise, highlighting one of the levels, and introducing the main proponents (schools, concepts and theorists). The films selected combine well-known classics of the cinema, such as *REAR WINDOW* (1954, Alfred Hitchcock) and *THE SEARCHERS* (1956, John Ford) with more recent titles, such as *CRASH* (2004, Paul Haggis) and *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* (2004, Michel Gondry). The period of the films we draw on does not necessarily coincide with the date of the respective theories, for although our seven-tier model develops roughly along chronological lines, it does not purport to trace an exact

one-to-one fit between the history of cinema and film theory. Therefore, the emblematic film scenes should not be understood as “examples” or “illustrations”, but rather as an opportunity to think with a given film (not just about it), as Gilles Deleuze has so emphatically proposed and attempted to do in his cinema books.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in every chapter we return time and again to specific examples, which do not serve as evidence for independently existing theories, but rather want to offer food for thought and an opportunity to re-acquaint oneself with films and theories. We hope that readers will feel inspired to bring their own film-culture and cinema-experience to bear on this theoretical knowledge, not in the sense of “applying” one to the other, but rather as an act of inference or even interference: a meditation on the ways cinema builds on theory, and theory builds on cinema. Many contemporary films, from blockbusters to art-house fare and avant-garde statements, seem to be acquainted with advanced scholarly positions and want to be taken seriously also on a theoretical level, sharing a certain knowingness with the spectator as part of their special reflexivity.

### III

In concluding this introduction, a brief overview of the seven following chapters can hopefully clarify our methodological aims and assumptions. The first chapter is dedicated to “window and frame”, and it deals with the framing of the filmic image as its essential element. Various approaches, such as André Bazin’s theory of filmic realism or David Bordwell’s examination of staging in depth, have promoted the concept of the cinematic image as offering a privileged outlook onto and insight into a diegetically coherent, but separate, universe. By contrast, other authors, such as Rudolf Arnheim and Sergej Eisenstein, have emphasized the principles of construction governing the image’s composition within the frame-as-frame. We argue that these two positions, often opposed as realist and formalist, resemble each other more than is generally assumed. In both cases, perception is treated as almost completely dis-embodied because of its reduction to visual perception.<sup>8</sup> This is where Chapter 2 picks up by focusing, under the heading of “door and screen”, on positions that seek to describe the transition from the spectator’s world to the world of the film. In this chapter we concentrate both on physical entry into the cinema and imaginary entry into the film, examining the approaches put forward by narrative theory, i.e. narratology, when dealing with the question of spectators’ involvement in the processes of filmic narration, such as focalization, identification, engagement and immersion. This field of research comprises formalist theories, as well as (post-)structuralist positions, but also models, which interpret the relationship between spectator and film in dialogic terms, such as those drawing on Mikhail



Bakhtin. Underlying this interpretation is the idea of the spectator as a being who enters an unfamiliar/familiar world and thereby is “alienated” from his/her own world (in the sense of the *ostranie* that Russian Formalists use), in order to better, or wiser, return to it.<sup>9</sup>

The third chapter stands under the motto of “mirror and face”, and explores the reflective and reflexive potential of cinema. On the one hand, this allows us to talk about self-referentiality as exemplified by the modernizing movements in European cinema from the 1950s through the 1970s (the so-called “New Waves”). On the other hand, the mirror has come to occupy a central position in psychoanalytic film theory, according to which looking into the mirror implies not just confronting oneself, but also turning this gaze outward, i.e. transforming it into the gaze of the Other. Cinema’s fascination with the *Doppelgänger* motif – stories of doubles and identity-switches, linking German Expressionist films from the 1920s with Japanese ghost stories of the 1970s and South Korean horror films from the 1990s – is as important in this context as questions of identification and reflexivity. An often discussed, highly ambivalent yet nonetheless theoretically still under-explained topic is the effect of mimesis and doubling between film and spectator. We ask if it is founded on similar mechanisms of confusion between Self and Other as are being discussed in the recent neurobiological literature on mirror-neurons in the human brain. We also review in this chapter those theoretical approaches that focus on the central role of the close-up and the human face, each being a version of the other, while every face-to-face is, of course, also a moment of mirroring.

The look into the mirror already implies a certain spatial arrangement, on which the cinematographic gaze might be said to have been modeled. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, dedicated to the “eye and look”, referring chiefly to a series of positions developed in film theory during the 1970s. On the one hand, these were strongly influenced by Jacques Lacan’s post-structuralist re-formulation of Freudian psychoanalysis and, on the other hand, they drew on Michel Foucault’s theory of the panopticon as a model for social relations based on vision and control. Particularly feminist theory has worked with gendered, a-symmetrical schemata of look and gaze (as they are structuring and structured in a film, circulating between the camera and the characters, as well as between spectator and film). This school of thinking implies that a certain distance is maintained between spectator and film, which manifests itself in the field of vision as a form of pathology (“voyeurism”, “fetishism”) and mistaken perception (“miscognition”, “disavowal”).

The situation of distance is almost the opposite in the approaches discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading of “skin and touch” which – premised on proximity – could be seen as a reaction or backlash against the “scopic regime” of previous theories. There have always been attempts to conceptualize the cinema

as an encounter of sorts, as a contact space with Otherness, or as an occasion to bring faraway places closer and render them physically present. These correspond with theories based on the assumption that skin is an organ of and touch a means of perception, from which follows the understanding of cinema as a tactile experience, or conversely, one that grants the eye “haptic” faculties, besides the more common “optic” dimension. This simultaneously interpersonal, trans-cultural and – in its philosophical assumptions – phenomenological school corresponds to a fascination with the human body, its surfaces and fluids, its softness and vulnerability, but also its function as carapace or protective shield.

Such a focus on material nuance, texture and touch leads directly to the approaches presented in Chapter 6, which, under the title “ear and sound”, also emphasize the importance of the body to perception and to three-dimensional orientation, further undermining the previous theories’ almost exclusive concentration on visual perception, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional. From skin and contact we thus turn our attention to the ear as an interface between film and spectator, an organ that creates its own sonorous perceptual envelope, but also regulates the way that the human body locates itself in space. For, unlike previous understandings of the spectator as someone defined by ocular verification and cognitive data processing, these newer approaches draw attention to factors such as the sense of balance or equilibrium, organized not around the frame, but around duration, location, interval and inter-action. The spectator is no longer passively receiving optical information, but exists as a bodily being, enmeshed acoustically, senso-motorically, somatically and affectively in the film’s visual texture and soundscape. Technological developments such as the advances in audio engineering since the 1970s (the various Dolby formats) relate directly to theoretical advances in psychoanalysis, aesthetics and sound studies.

Finally, the seventh conceptual pair can best be typified with Gilles Deleuze’s motto “the brain is the screen”. On the one hand, film inscribes itself in the spectator’s innermost being, stimulating synapses and affecting brain functions. The moving image and sound modulate neuronal pathways and affect nerves, they incite bodily reactions and involuntary responses, as if it was the film that “directs” the body and mind, creating an entity (“mind”) that produces the film at the same time as it is produced by it (“body”). Such ideas of a fusion between the pre-existence of a cinema running in the mind, and mental worlds morphing into or taking shape as observable material realities, underlie numerous films from the past 15 years, where the diegesis – the spatio-temporal “world” of a film – turns out to be a figment of the protagonist’s imagination, no longer obeys the laws of nature, or is explicitly created so as to deceive or mislead the spectator. Cognitive narratologists find here a confirmation of their theses, and

films like *THE SIXTH SENSE*, *FIGHT CLUB*, *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* have elicited lively discussions around “complex storytelling” and “forking path narratives”. Deleuze, on the other hand, would regard such narratological analyses as beside the point, since for him there is no “mind” that sits in the brain and is “in control” of input and output, so that the problems these films pose to the spectator, are situated differently. The chapter on “mind and brain” addresses radical versions of constructivism and epistemic skepticism, giving the word to Deleuze, but also asking how cognitivists have responded to the challenges implied by mind-game and time-warp films, in order to understand such tendencies in contemporary film-making not just sociologically, as competing in the marketplace with video-games and computer simulations, but also epistemologically as philosophical puzzles.

The idea of the body as sensory envelope, as perceptual membrane and material–mental interface, in relation to the cinematic image and to audio-visual perception, is thus more than a heuristic device and an aesthetic metaphor: it is the ontological, epistemological and phenomenological “ground” for the respective theories of film and cinema today. This process of examining the different film theories in light of their philosophical assumptions, and evaluating both across the touchstone of the body and the senses, finds further support in the (non-teleological) progress that our conceptual metaphors chart, from the “outside” of window and door, to the “inside” of mind and brain. We could also call it a double movement: from the disembodied but observing eye, to the privileged but implicated gaze (and ear); from the presence of the image as seen, felt and touched, to sense organs that become active participants in the formation of filmic reality; from the sensory perceptual surface of film that requires the neurological brain, to the unconscious that registers deep ambivalences in the logic of the narrative, where rational choice or rational agency theories see merely an alternating succession of action and reaction. At the limit, film and spectator are like parasite and host, each occupying the other and being in turn occupied, to the point where there is only one reality that *unfolds* as it *enfolds*, and vice versa.

The focus on the body, perception and the senses thus not only cuts across formalist and realist theories, or tries to close the gap between theories of authorship and reception. Cautiously formulated in our concluding chapter is the hope that it can also bridge the divide between photographic and post-filmic cinema, not by denying the differences, but by re-affirming both the persistence of the cinema experience and reminding ourselves of the sometimes surprising and unexpected, but welcome complementarity among the seemingly contending theoretical approaches across the cinema’s first 100-year history.<sup>10</sup>

Commensurate with the importance that the moving image and recorded sound have attained in the twenty-first century, there is, finally, another possible

consequence of concentrating on the body and the senses: the cinema seems poised to leave behind its function as a “medium” (for the representation of reality) in order to become a “life form” (and thus a reality in its own right). Our initial premise of asking film theory to tell us how film and cinema relate to the body and the senses thus may well lead to another question (which we shall not answer here), namely whether – when putting the body and the senses at the centre of film theory – the cinema is not proposing to us, besides a new way of knowing the world, also a new way of “being in the world”, and thus demanding from film theory, next to a new epistemology also a new ontology. This, one could argue, is quite an achievement, when one considers how film theory might be said to have “started” in the seventeenth century as a technical description of movement in/of images, and now – provisionally – ends as a form of film philosophy and in this respect as a general theory of movement: of bodies, of affect, of the mind and the senses.

# Cinema as window and frame

A man, immobilized in a wheelchair, observes, as a way to pass the time and entertain himself, through a rectangular frame the human dramas that unfold before his eyes. He is capable of alternating his visual field between a wide panorama and a closer view for detail. His position is elevated and privileged, while the events seem to unfold independently of his gaze, yet without making him feel excluded. This is one way to summarize the basic tenets of Alfred Hitchcock's *REAR WINDOW* (US, 1954), which has become an exemplary case study in film theory precisely because the film's point of departure is often held to figuratively re-enact the specific viewing situation of classical cinema:<sup>1</sup> Having suffered an accident, photographer L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) is confined to a wheelchair with his leg in a cast. A pair of binoculars, as well as the telephoto lenses of his camera, allow him to switch between long shots of the back yard onto which his window opens and close shots of individual apartments and their residents. Two basic principles, according to the school of theory that considers the cinema as window/frame, can be derived from this situation: Jefferies' *seemingly* privileged perspective as onlooker and (to a lesser degree) as listener, and second, his distance from the events. The film even provides an answer to the question formulated in the introduction – whether the film is outside or inside in relation to the spectator: as long as Jefferies keeps his distanced role of observer, the events cannot harm him. Not until he – or, rather, his girlfriend Lisa Carol Fremont (Grace Kelly), instigated by him – transgresses this threshold does the world “outside” pose a threat to the one “inside”. However, *REAR WINDOW* does not resonate in film-theoretical space solely through its emphasis on visibility and distance:

The title *REAR WINDOW*, apart from the literalness of its denotation, evokes the diverse “windows” of the cinema: the cinema/lens of camera and projector, the window in the projection booth, the eye as window, and film as “window on the world.”<sup>2</sup>

These and some other key aspects of the first ontological metaphor will be examined and discussed in this chapter.

As we will be arguing, the concepts of window and frame share several fundamental premises, but also exhibit significant differences. Let us start with the similarities: first of all, the cinema as window and frame offers *special, ocular access* to an event (whether fictional or not) – usually a rectangular view that accommodates the spectator’s visual curiosity. Second, the (real) two-dimensional screen transforms in the act of looking into an (imaginary) three-dimensional space which seems to open up beyond the screen. And, third (real and metaphorical) distance from the events depicted in the film renders the act of looking safe for the spectator, sheltered as s/he is by the darkness inside the auditorium. The spectator is completely cut off from the film events, so that s/he does not have to fear his/her direct involvement in the action (as in modern theater) nor does s/he feel any moral obligation to intervene (as in real life). In other words, the cinema as window and frame – the first of our seven *modes of being (in the cinema/world)* – is ocular–specular (i.e. conditioned by optical access), transitive (one looks at something) and disembodied (the spectator maintains a safe distance).

Even though both concepts meet in the compound “window frame”, the metaphors also suggest somewhat different qualities: one looks *through* a window, but one looks *at* a frame. The notion of the window implies that one loses sight of the framing rectangle as it denotes transparency, while the frame highlights the content of the (opaque) surface and its constructed nature, effectively implying composition and artificiality. While the window directs the viewer to something behind or beyond itself – ideally, the separating glass pane



Figure 1.1 REAR WINDOW: space cropped and at a safe distance.

completely vanishes in the act of looking – the frame draws attention both to the status of the arrangement as artifact and to the image support itself: one only has to think of classical picture frames and their opulence and ornaments, their conspicuousness and ostentatious display. On the one hand, the window as a medium effaces itself completely and becomes invisible, and on the other, the frame exhibits the medium in its material specificity.

Both window and frame are well-established notions within film theory, yet when seen in historical context, their differences become more pronounced. Traditionally, the frame corresponded to film theories called *formalist* or *constructivist*, while the model of the window held sway in *realist* film theories. For a long time, the distinction between constructivist (or formalist and formative) and realist (or mimetic and phenomenological) theories was believed to be a fundamental distinction. Siegfried Kracauer's elaborated it in his *Theory of Film* and as taken up and refined by Dudley Andrew in *The Major Film Theories*, it has proven to be widely influential.<sup>3</sup> In such a classificatory scheme Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim and the Russian montage theorists stand on one side, contrasted with Bazin and Kracauer on the other. The first group focuses on the alteration and manipulation of filmic perception, distinct from everyday perception by means such as montage, framing or the absence of color and language. The second group defines the essence of cinema in terms of its ability to record and reproduce reality and its phenomena, including aspects which are invisible to the naked human eye.

There exist, however, a series of links between these two seemingly opposed poles. Both tendencies aim at enhancing the cultural value of cinema, i.e. to put



Figure 1.2 REAR WINDOW : Jefferies as spectator.

it on a par with the established arts. The idea of window and frame is helpful in this respect because historically it answered to a felt inferiority complex of film vis-à-vis its older and more established siblings – theater and painting – that rely upon the assumption of a spectator distanced from the object and scene. The humanistic, Renaissance ideal of art appreciation – marked by individual immersion and contemplation of the work as opposed to the collective and distracted experience of early cinema – requires distance and therefore framing. For constructivists as well as for realists, perception is limited to the visual dimension, the sense and data processing are thought of as highly rational while the primary goal is to consciously work through what is being perceived. In this respect Balázs and Bazin, Eisenstein and Kracauer all conceptualize the spectator–film relationship along similar lines, even though Kracauer and Eisenstein were sensitive to the “shock” value and somatic dimension of the film experience.<sup>4</sup>

A further affinity between the metaphors of window and frame has been identified by Charles F. Altman: “Though the window and frame metaphors appear diametrically opposed, they actually share an assumption of the screen’s fundamental independence from the processes of production and consumption.”<sup>5</sup> Both models, frame and window, postulate the image as given and view the spectator as concentrating on how most fully to engage with the work and its structures, making wholeness and (assumed) coherence the focus of the analysis. If only by default, they tend to overlook the potentially contradictory processes of production (be they technological or institutional) that are also leaving traces on the films; nor do they give due weight to the freedom but also constraints which differences in human perception, cultural conditioning and cognition bring to the reception of films. The spectator thus conceptualized is not only disembodied, but exists mostly for the benefit of the theory he or she is supposed to exemplify.

The distinction between “open” and “closed” forms of cinema allows for another perspective on the window/frame divide.<sup>6</sup> Following Leo Braudy,<sup>7</sup> the term “closed” refers to films in which the universe depicted in the film (its diegesis) closes in upon itself in the sense that it contains only elements which are necessary because internally motivated: Georges Méliès’ films, which experiment with cinematic techniques and trick shots while constantly referring back to themselves, belong in this category, as do the carefully constructed worlds of Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock and David Fincher, in which everything seems to have its predetermined place following the dictates of some invisible, but omnipresent hand or elaborate master plan. Furthermore, whatever exists “on-screen” stands in a relationship of mutual dependence but also tension with what lies outside the frame, creating a potent dynamic between on-screen and off-screen space. By contrast, open films offer a segment, a snapshot, or a fragment from a constantly flowing and evolving reality. The films of the Lumière



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