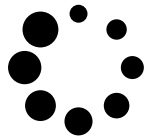


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and the senses:

Jean Mitry's approach  
to cinematic consciousness.  
Toward an idea of the virtual  
image in the cinema (I)

by Barbara Grespi

Mitry  
Husserl  
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# Between the mind and the senses: Jean Mitry's approach to cinematic consciousness.

## Toward an idea of the virtual image in the cinema (I)<sup>1</sup>



by Barbara Grespi

Abstract

Representing altered states of consciousness, even through the most phantasmal of technical images, is an inherent contradiction; once we attribute a physical body, i.e. objectivity, to mental images, we deny what Husserl considers their very essence. Jean Mitry draws from this assumption when discussing filmic access to mental states from a phenomenological perspective. The following essay reconsiders Mitry's contribution with specific reference to the role of projection, technically and metaphorically speaking, in the cinematic technique and imagination; this, with the intention of suggesting some crucial questions for the comparison between the filmic forms of the visible and those inaugurated by the technology of the virtual.

[Mitry](#)

[Husserl](#)

[Mental state](#)

[Projection](#)

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A silver visor, you would say an ancestor of a VR headset were it not for the cap that wraps around the lower part of the skull. It causes a sharp pain in the eyes and its function is not to watch images, but to record them, like an ordinary video camera. Nevertheless, it has no lens but two satin panels, one for each eye. From the outside, you can see the signal of a scanner running; from the inside, the captured images appear on two side-by-side screens. It is the device invented by Wim Wenders for *Until the End of the World* (*Bis ans Ende der Welt*, 1991) (Fig.1), in the story, a prototype which all the great world powers are hunting down in the fevered climate of the end of the millennium. Its camera captures the biochemical event of vision, that is, not only what you see but also how your brain reacts to the perceived images, collecting electrical stimuli directly from the nerves. The recorded “visual” impulses can thus be transmitted to the brain of another person, even a blind one, and this allows them to see without using the retina. Still, as the story progresses, the machine evolves into something even more complicated: a technique for extracting from the mind images which are completely independent of sight and correspond to pure imagination, dreams or memories. Sight translated into data gives birth to “artificial” images, segmented in a grid and the result of numbers; imagination, on the other hand, has pictorial qualities, strong colours and blurred borders. Sci-fi cinema provides a long list of vision machines, but Wenders’ possesses a special allure, balanced, as it is, between the old and the new.

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2 Dr. Allendy [René Allendy], “La valeur psychologique de l’image”, in AA.VV., *L’art cinématographique* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1926): 75-103, 77.



Fig. 1. Wim Wenders, *Until the End of the World* (*Bis ans Ende der Welt*), 1991. Screen capture.

Between cinema and VR: an exquisitely optical prosthesis, it creates abstract images, devoid of somatic and sensory traces, but at the same time it is a medium of intersubjectivity, which allows the exchange of visions at a neural level. It is a digital device, but also a truth machine: it records, documents, reflects even the unconscious, or the deepest levels of our psyche. It represents the cinema in its increasingly sharp juxtaposition to other technologies of the contemporary era, such as VR: the first in perpetual balance between body and mind, the second completely biased towards the sensory.

The representation of mental acts in cinema is always, as in Wenders' movie, a metafilmic moment in which the image consciousness is elaborated, together with the ways in which multiple factors, material and immaterial, contribute to it, including the gaze and its structure. In the following pages, by rediscovering Jean Mitry's reading of Husserl's thinking, we will discuss the role of projection, technically and metaphorically speaking, in filmic access to the mental; this with the intention of bringing out some crucial questions for the comparison between the cinematic forms of the visible and those inaugurated by the technology of the virtual.

## The mental image and the filmic image

Beyond what they represent, filmic images are “situated” in a space halfway between the mental and the real: the iconic stream that the spectator sees flowing would not exist outside his or her mind, which integrates and merges the perception of the single frames thus creating the movie. Even before the birth of cinema, the paradoxical nature of the moving image struck William James, who referred to it to describe consciousness in terms of a zoetrope: just as that optical toy produces effects of continuity by making discontinuous fragments flow, so the consciousness merges its sequences of scattered and uninterrupted micro-perceptions into an illusory whole.<sup>3</sup> The similarity between the film and the activity of the mind will be at the core of one of the first essays in film theory, *The Photoplay* by Hugo Münsterberg, a former student of medicine who converted to psychology under the influence of Wilhelm Wundt, and later became James’s colleague at Harvard.<sup>4</sup> The reference to James’s metaphor of the zoetrope allows us to understand what Münsterberg meant by suggesting that photographic images had been estranged from physical reality once they had achieved movement – contrary to what one might naturally think – and were brought closer to the reality of consciousness.

The massive outer world has lost its weight, it has been freed from space, time, and causality, and it has been clothed in the forms of our own consciousness. The mind has triumphed over matter, and the pictures roll on with the ease of musical tones.<sup>5</sup>

Münsterberg develops a precise parallel between cinema and mind, seeing the main filmic techniques

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3 “Is consciousness really discontinuous, incessantly interrupted and recommencing (from the psychologist’s point of view)? And does it only seem continuous to itself by an illusion analogous to that of the zoetrope? Or is it at most times as continuous outwardly as it inwardly seems?”. W. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Create Space, 2017): 125.

4 M. Münsterberg, *Hugo Münsterberg: His Life and Work* (New York: Appleton & Co., 1922): 21-22.

5 H. Münsterberg, “The psychology of the photoplay” (1916), in A. Langdale, ed., *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings* (New York-London: Routledge, 2002): 153-154.

as reflecting the activities of consciousness, such as attention (corresponding to the close-up and the shifting from in-focus to out-of-focus), memory (represented by flashback as enclosure of the past in the present) and emotion (in its development, according to William James, from a kinesthetic sensation).<sup>6</sup> This early conception of the mind as a movie justifies the most common visual rhetoric that complemented the representation of a character's mental acts: fading, superimposition, soft focus. Becoming consolidated precisely in the years in which Münsterberg wrote his essay, these optical effects aim at framing a segment of the visible within a zone which is not real and not certain, just as the discontinuous hyphens of the thinking bubbles in comics highlight the difference between a thought spoken out loud and one which remains unspoken in the character's mind. Transitions in classical cinema in essence produce the slow fading of the actual into the mental, evoking an idea of the mind as a place of weakening, intermingling and metamorphosing of sensory input.

These narrative fragments which interrupt the flow of the film by jumping onto a different level and moving beyond the diegetic physical reality, are thus presented and interpreted as the "contents" of a fictional consciousness; this implies believing that the human mind operates by storing impressions derived from perception in the shape of ghostly pictures to be inspected, when needed, by the mind's eye. We are familiar with this notion, its ancient roots and its points of junction with modern thinking,<sup>7</sup> as well as its confutation by phenomenology, whose intake is crucial but still difficult to integrate into studies of the imagination.<sup>8</sup> Even a thinker like Sartre who tries to get rid, precisely through Husserl, of the idea of the mind as a repository of images, was victim to the same "illusion of immanence" that

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6 Münsterberg shares the Jamesian perspective (the famous: "we do not weep because we are sad, but we are sad because we weep"). H. Münsterberg, "The psychology of the photoplay": 107-108.

7 See the ancient idea of the mind as a room furnished with images in F.A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (New York-London: Routledge, 1966).

8 See for instance J. Jansen, "Imagination: phenomenological approaches", in M. Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 430-434.



he intended to criticize once he admitted the existence of a “psychic object” (the *analogon*) and presented it as the mediator of the imaginative process.<sup>9</sup>

Sartre is very much present in *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* by Jean Mitry, the massive treatise in two volumes written by the French critic, activist and director between 1963 and 1965,<sup>10</sup> a work capable of bridging, as Dudley Andrew wrote, the formalism of classical theory with emerging semiotics.<sup>11</sup>

The second volume, centered on form and cinematic language, is the best known and most appreciated, while volume one, particularly eclectic, has suffered from an evident removal, also highlighted by the significant cuts made in current French and English editions.<sup>12</sup> Here we find the first remarkable confrontation of film theory with Husserl, an attempt recognized by the pioneers of the phenomenological approach to cinema, but never investigated, and even dismissed, in the numerous developments of this branch of study.<sup>13</sup> Mitry discusses precisely the theme of *mental images*, which Husserl brought together under the umbrella term of *Phantasie*, to indicate both the ensemble of images devoid of physical support and the act of imagination through which they “appear” (*erscheinen*).<sup>14</sup> It is an act of imagination that which gives shape to a physical image, deposited on a support and capable of

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9 Casey recognized the error. See E.S. Casey, “Sartre on imagination”, in P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court 1981): 16-27.

10 J. Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (vol. I: *Le structure*, and vol. II: *Les formes*) (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1963, 1965). A useful rediscovery of Mitry’s contribution to film theory in: M. Lefebvre, “Revisiting Mitry’s *Esthétique et Psychologie du Cinéma* at Fifty”, *Mise au point* [online], no. 6 (2014), accessed February 20, 2021.

11 See D. Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976): 181ff.

12 The current English edition *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) was translated from the abridged French edition of 1990. We will quote from this book, unless otherwise specified.

13 Vivian Sobchack recognizes his engagement in a Husserlian phenomenology of cinema – see her *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 29 – while A. Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) prefers to lean upon Baudry. Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich dismiss Mitry’s idea of mental image as a distortion of the phenomenological arguments. See their stimulating introduction “What is film phenomenology?” to “Film and phenomenology”, *Studia Phaenomenologica* XVI (2016): 36.

14 E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).

depicting an absent entity (*Bildvorstellung*), as well as that which creates mental images (*Phantasievorstellung*), which are by no means comparable to “iconic contents” of the consciousness, but rather to be understood as intuitions based on “sensorial phantasms”.<sup>15</sup> Mitry does not refer to these precise pages of Husserl, whose essential theses are however echoed, but rather he remodels phenomenology under the influence of his experience of the cinema. *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* stems indeed from a general philosophical position – a unique case in film theory, if we exclude Deleuze’s two tomes – a thesis in which it is of primary importance to define the role of perception by mediating among Husserl’s theses, Sartre and psychology.

In Mitry’s interpretation of intentionality, perception is an act based on sensory impressions but is not reduced to them; consciousness completes them, by extracting an object from the undifferentiated continuum that constitutes matter and hence giving form, by difference, also to the subject. Consciousness is based on mental images, which are not residues of ocular perception which have survived in the absence of the object, and nor are they entities existing in themselves and of which thought could avail itself; they are rather forms through which thought became aware of itself. With this idea, Mitry gets rid of the metaphor of consciousness as a receptacle of data and substitutes it with that of consciousness as a *reflex* of perception. With perception in the absence of the object, that is *Phantasie*, the glare of consciousness is, so to speak, one-way: “the mental image is the product of a wish directed toward the object which we know to be absent [...] it is the consciousness of that wish becoming ‘known’ in the object of its volition”.<sup>16</sup>

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15 In Husserl called precisely “*Phantasmen*”. In the comment on Husserl’s theory of imagination, we follow C. Cali, “Husserl and the phenomenological description of imagery: some issues for the cognitive sciences?”, *Arhe* 4, no. 10 (2006): 25-36 and *Husserl e l’immagine* (Palermo: Aesthetica Preprint, 2002): 113-114.

16 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 35-36.



## The moving image consciousness

Mitry's starting point, therefore, is not the cinematic representation of consciousness, but the mental images that become part of the imaginative process; this process is extremely important in cinema, a medium which powerfully simulates the real but at the same time possesses a deep-rooted ghostly nature. According to Mitry, this double character of cinema is reflected by the two kinds of signs of which it is composed: linguistic and psychological signs; linguistic signs give shape to the filmic images (through a grammar of the visible), psychological signs construct mental images (with the collaboration of the spectator).

To understand how these two "signs" intersect in the beholder's experience, it is necessary to come back to Husserl and his well-known tripartition regarding *image consciousness*, which is not clearly referenced in *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, but still recognisable in many lines. Husserl's classification is based on three perceptive dimensions: the first is the "image-thing" (*Bildding*), that is, the concrete material of which the image is made, its support; the second is the "image-object" (*Bildobjekt*), that is, the immaterial object which depicts something (the *ideal* content of a series of perception);<sup>17</sup> the last is the "image-subject" (*Bildsujet*), that is, the depicted subject (the referent in the real world).<sup>18</sup> A subtle but substantial difference separates the image-thing from the image-object: if the support were damaged or destroyed (for instance, if a canvas was torn), the image-object would not be affected, because it does not possess a real existence, neither inside nor outside of consciousness (only a *complex of sensations experienced by the spectator* in front of the pigments exists, as well as the way in which he invests it with intentionality, by creating image consciousness). This component is more easily understood in the case of the mental image, which

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17 In Mitry's words, see J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 27.

18 I use this expression, although I am aware that between the image and the subject there is not properly a semiotic relationship. See C. Rozzoni, *Nell'immagine: Realtà, fantasia, esperienza estetica* (Milan: Le Monnier, 2017): 9.

lacks a material support, in contrast to the physical image. Still, there is a minor difference between the two, because what matters is their common capacity of *actualizing absent objects* (that is to say, making them present). The illusion of presence is based on the production of *sensorial phantasms* that allow us to guess how an object would be if it fell under the sphere of our senses, for instance touch or hearing, but first and foremost sight.<sup>19</sup> An “optical” phantasm makes us intuit how a specific object would appear to our gaze within a particular environment, and this imaginative act covers our perception, albeit not totally. Indeed, the mental image as well as the physical image insert themselves into the perception in a *contrastive* way, that is, not fully covering and substituting our reality, but allowing us to keep it alive. It is not a question of greater or lesser illusionistic power (some images could appear so real to be mistaken for reality), and neither of frames (a more or less marked discontinuity in the space where they are situated), rather it is a matter of time: Husserl points out that this is more the contrast between the time of the image-object and the actual present,<sup>20</sup> to which our body belongs above all (but also the *Bildding*, if we are talking about physical images). Here below, the echo of these concepts in Mitry:

We have seen that the mental image presents a reality both visualized and recognized as absent. If, as I write these lines, I think of my car in the garage, I can see it perfectly well, mentally – or, at least, I can see a certain aspect of it – but I am seeing it as not present. It appears to my consciousness as an image certifying the absence of what I am thinking about – more especially since,

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19 This is what was brightly called an “artificial presence”. See L. Wiesing, *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

20 “[The image-thing] bears within itself the characteristic of unreality, of conflict with the actual present. The perception of the surroundings, the perception in which the actual present becomes constituted for us, continues on through the frame and then signifies ‘printed paper’ or ‘painted canvas’”. E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*: 51 (emphasis in the original). On this base, I suspect that we should abandon the optical idea of the frame when we face an environmental image (like VR), and rethink it in corporeal terms, considering the spectator’s real body as the border; indeed, you always have the possibility to leave the artificially present world not by *seeing* outside of the image, but certainly by *touching* the surrounding space and objects (or people), that is, paradoxically, becoming aware of the unreal in the very moment in which we get the chance to *imagine* the real *through* our body (thus in a perfect inversion of the cinematic relationship between reality and imagination).

in so doing, I do not stop perceiving the world impinging on me from all sides. The *mental image is therefore a product of the will standing in opposition to our normal perception of the world and its objects and which, though coexisting with it, becomes more isolated the more directly in opposition it stands.*<sup>21</sup>

Mitry realises that these ideas are of great importance for the analysis of cinematic images, which had also attracted Husserl's attention, albeit fleetingly. The great philosopher's reflections about the art of the twenty-century concern the repeatability of cinematic screenings such as to leave the image-object unaltered,<sup>22</sup> and the intensity of the actualization produced by filmic images, so high as to reduce the perception of the image-thing to the minimum. "Deception and sensory illusion of the sort belonging to panorama images, cinematographic images, and the like", he wrote, "depend on the fact that the appearing objects in their whole appearing state are slightly or imperceptibly different from the objects appearing in normal perception. One can know in these cases that these are mere image objects, though one cannot vitally sense this".<sup>23</sup> His germinal reflection on cinema has been taken up by some important contributions, mainly centered on the relationship between consciousness and true believing and on the interplay between actor and character;<sup>24</sup> but the path indicated by Mitry is just as interesting and perhaps more in line with Husserl's suggestions. Mitry wrote:

Stuck to a cellulose base, projected onto a screen [...] the film image, in contrast with the mental image, is objectively present; but, like the mental image, it is the image of an absent reality, a past reality of which it is merely the image. Its concrete reality is that it is

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21 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 82-83.

22 "If I let a cinematographic presentation run off repeatedly, then (in relation to the subject) the image object in the How of its modes of appearance and each of these modes of appearance itself is given as identically the same image object or as identically the same mode of appearance". E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*: 646.

23 E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*: 146.

24 See C. Rozzoni, "Cinema Consciousness: Elements of a Husserlian Approach to Film Image", *Studia Phaenomenologica*, XVI (2016): 294-324; J. Brough, "Showing and Seeing: Film as Phenomenology", in J. D. Parry, ed., *Art and Phenomenology* (New York-London: Routledge, 2010): 192-214.

fixed to a support and is thus objectively present and analyzable. The reality recorded on the celluloid strip is at all times capable of being projected. In this sense, projection is a kind of “actualization” in the same way as the mental image.<sup>25</sup>

In these lines, a central question arises: in cinema, the act of making something present (“actualization”, he writes, alluding specifically to Husserl) takes place in the very moment of projection, because the strip of film is only a “latent movie”; according to Mitry, the celluloid is the main support (the image-thing), while the screen unbalances perception *from the thing to the object*, allowing movement to be seen. Neither the destruction of the film, nor even a scratch in the screen cancels the object-film, which, as we said, is that ideal content which, though created during the projection, survives it – as Orson Welles’ *Don Quixote* never ceases to teach us, a foolish spectator who stabs the white screen with his sword in an attempt to heroically oppose his enemies of light and shadow. Welles shows that the screen is not the canvas, is not one and the same with the image, which resists its destruction, both because it is anchored to another, more real support, and because it lives in the mind, paradigmatically in that of the visionary Don Quixote. The celluloid is more similar to the concrete materials of the painter, so much so that the director selects carefully its size and sensitivity, while he can do nothing with the surface of the screen. But if we look back at the origins, we find the two supports imploded into each other: in pre-cinema, frame and screen coincide, because the illusion of movement, for instance in Mutoscope, depends on the flow of photographs bound one on top of the other, within the screen format created by their borders: the “book”.

Do we have thus a double “thingness” in the filmic image? And if so, is it not a fundamental property of all technical images,<sup>26</sup> even in the many variants

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25 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 31, 83.

26 This is perhaps another way to interpret the idea of technical images as proposed by V. Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).



of the analogue, but also digital system? The material cinematic film behaves like photosensitive paper in photography, or data code in the digital system, while the shadows projected on the screen correspond to the photographic positive, and to the extraction of the mpeg file on the display. From photography onwards,<sup>27</sup> to codify an image and to visualize it, that is to render it accessible to the human eye, became two different and not necessarily concurrent processes; obviously, with the transition to digital, the gap between the two moments widens, because there the matrix is no more a first, far-fetched or incomplete visualization of the subject, but its translation into a numerical language, not accessible to the senses, and thus potentially shared only by machines.<sup>28</sup> But the point is: to develop a theory of cinematic image anchored to the process of *visualization* instead of that of encoding – focusing at the same time on the spectator because, as Münsterberg said, without him the image in motion simply does not exist – we have to work on the intersection between the physical and the mental.

By a different route, Tom Gunning drew similar conclusions, when he re-launched the theory of realism moving from Metz's brief incursion into phenomenological territory;<sup>29</sup> Gunning is not a supporter of the deviation toward the mental, but certainly an adversary of Peirce's indexicality when used to reduce the impression of reality in cinema to the sole photographic base. Thomas Elsaesser, on the other hand, is not a phenomenologist but he rediscovered the "mental side" of cinema when he drew the distinction between the transmission of the image to the human senses and its recording through traces, rather than optical geometry. Indeed, he saw the model of this process in the human memory, as Freud had conceived it (that is like a Mystic Writing Pad), and proposed to re-start

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27 But not in its daguerreotype version, which did not use the positive-negative reverse process: the metal film plate in the camera was developed as a positive and as a unique copy.

28 On this topic see: F. Casetti, A. Pinotti, "Post-cinema ecology", in D. Chateau, J. Moure, eds., *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post Art Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020): 193-218.

29 C. Metz, "On the impression of reality in the cinema", in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 3-28, discussed by T. Gunning, "Moving away from the index: cinema and the impression of reality", *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 29-52.



the theoretical discourse about cinema from its nature of interface between data and the human senses, in the key of an archaeology of the digital.<sup>30</sup>

These excellent contributions are perfectly in tune with Mitry's emphasis on projection as a Husserlian moment of *actualization*, an effect in which the perception of physical image intersects with mental envisioning; in it "the film frame merely takes the place of the mental image with all the force of its credible reality".<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Metz quoted by Gunning builds on Mitry in his analysis of the "filmic mode", which he defines "the mode of presence",<sup>32</sup> thinking not of a state of sensory overwhelming, but of an active consciousness made up of the mental reflexes of perception. Nevertheless, the mental, though it is a reflex and a logic of the images, is precisely what the film could never make visible. "It is completely impossible to represent a mental image", Mitry wrote, "since, having become visual, it ceases to be mental".<sup>33</sup>

The filmic image is helpless in the face of what is not accessible to the sight or at least what no one has ever seen; for this reason, Mitry would probably have appreciated the frameless film by Douglas Gordon (*Feature Film*, 1999), a video installation that basically consists of an orchestra performing the full soundtrack written by composer Bernard Hermann for the film *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). On the two walls of the exhibition room, only the conductor appears in large mirror projections. However, the real images filling the room are not the physical ones on the walls, but those which flow in the viewer's mind in correspondence with the musical notes: the sequence where Kim Novak jumps into the bay under San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, or when she comes back in her green suit like a ghost. The spectator experiences a kind of vision

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30 T. Elsaesser, "Freud as media theorist: mystic writing pads and the matter of memory", *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 100-113. Kuntzel already worked on the similarities between Freudian model of memory and the cinema, see: T. Kuntzel, "A note upon the filmic apparatus", *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, no. 1 (1976): 266-271.

31 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 86.

32 C. Metz, "On the impression of reality in the cinema": 4.

33 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 209.

not based on retina, as the director himself reports, referring to interviews with spectators coming out of the gallery: *Vertigo* is projected through the ears into the mind of the person listening to Hermann's notes.

### States of mind and self projection

Are we to think, then, that only the absence of images triggers imagination? And if it is totally impossible to simulate the mental with the means of cinema, how shall we construe the numerous attempts, since the origins of the medium, to simulate altered states of consciousness? Mitry argues that dream sequences, hallucinations and premonitions are not the most mental but the most subjective,<sup>34</sup> and in this he joins Wenders, whose machine will show that the mental could be translated into the visible only by sharing subjectivity. Therefore, the result of the cinematic simulation of altered states depends on the ways in which the movie makes the viewer slip into the consciousness of a character, articulating his or her seeing and feeling through the "subjective shot".

Film theory has always juxtaposed two forms of the cinematic gaze: the so-called *objective shot*, corresponding to the simulation of a world that is completely independent from every perception, be this human, animal or belonging to other living and non-living species, and the *subjective shot*, the simulation of a perceived world, thus filtered at a sensorial and cognitive level through a specific fictional identity. The analysis of these two modes, together with other more nuanced ones, are part of the glorious problem of the point of view in the cinema, a protagonist of the semiotic-narratological debate of the Eighties and Nineties, also discussed towards the end of the season in Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology, which takes up precisely Mitry's contribution. The chapters about the point of view in *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* are indeed the best known and most discussed, even if, before

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34 Ibid.

Sobchack, perhaps not fully understood. Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), was published only a year after Metz's *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (1991),<sup>35</sup> and thus criticizes the positions of the great semiologist, especially Metz reading Mitry;<sup>36</sup> but in reality, *Impersonal Enunciation* is a point of encounter between the two authors.

Mitry is among the first to study in depth *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1946), the film noir shot almost entirely in subjective mode. Here we spectators investigate in the shoes of the detective Philip Marlowe, who is framed frontally only at the beginning and at the end of the movie, while for the rest his eyes are our eyes and our body is disguised in his. Mitry knows how to wonderfully describe the way in which the spectators' gaze follows the character's gait from the inside, striving to consider his feet as their own, or the way in which they hold onto the railing with him, trying to see their own hands in Marlowe's. But this attempt fails. They cannot recognize the image of their own body. Rather they imagine themselves accompanying the body of an Other, *objectified*, as all the rest is.

It is obviously not me climbing the stairs and acting like this, even though I am feeling sensations similar to those I might feel if I were climbing the stairs. I am, therefore, walking with someone, sharing his impressions.<sup>37</sup>

Then when the famous sequence of the mirror arrives, during which the face of Marlowe is reflected (always from the character's view), spectators are slightly disappointed, Mitry apparently suggests. They have to admit that the impressions that they tried to embody were not theirs. Or rather: this is true for all the viewers except for the director, because he, Robert Montgomery, played Marlowe; thus, for him, and for him only, the subjective shot

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35 C. Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

36 C. Metz, "Problèmes actuels de théorie du cinéma" (1967), in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, 2 vol. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972): 35-86.

37 J. Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*: 210.

works. Put another way, in the subjective shots, Montgomery would experience himself as another, by again embodying the sensorial phantasms of his previous experience; most of the time, he would live through an experience of partial mirroring: proprioceptive but not optical.<sup>38</sup>

Sobchack addresses this analysis on two levels. On one level, she expands Mitry's critique by adding the argument of the difficulties of simulating a proprioceptive act. It is not just a matter of noticing the difference between the spectator's hands and the actor's, but also the fact of being forced to perceive differently from the way in which the character would probably do so in reality. Indeed, the subjective shots serve two simultaneous purposes: they show the clues necessary to solve the mystery and at the same time they show Marlowe's perception in a believable fashion. However, the fictional Marlowe would be interested only in the inquiries, and not in his percipient self; for this reason, Sobchack speaks of a difference in the *intentional focus* that detaches the viewer from the character. In addition, our way of directing attention consists in moving our eyes inside a visual field in which everything remains equally sharp, even what we are not focusing on; on the contrary, classical cinema deploys a marked in-focus and out-of-focus procedure, it constructs clear and blurred zones of visibility by regulating the focal point. So, the analogy between cinema and mind in Münsterberg's theory (movie techniques as metaphors of the processes of attention), becomes for Sobchack an element which unmasks the difference between man and machine. This is indeed the second and more radical level on which Sobchack's line of argument is based, and it is so important that it overturns, at least formally, Mitry's reasoning.

Building on a Merleau-Pontyan version of phenomenology, Sobchack challenged the semiotic distinction between subjective and objective gaze and introduced the

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38 I suggest something similar to the inspiring idea of the shot/counter-shot relationship in terms of specular reflection without a mirror, as proposed by A.C. Dalmasso, "Le plan subjectif réversible: Sur le point de vue au cinéma à partir des écrits de Merleau-Ponty", *Studia Phaenomenologica*, XVI (2016): 135-162.

concept of the *film's body*, meaning “an intentional instrument able to perceive and express perception”.<sup>39</sup> From this standpoint, the film's materially nonhuman (but percipient) body presents the world *subjectively* to the spectator's eye. Consequently, the movie camera sees a character and sees him/her seeing with the same degree of subjectivity (its own). It can disguise itself totally as them, by attributing to them a temporary responsibility for the visible perception, but not without a great effort.<sup>40</sup> This is indeed the true unbridgeable difference between bodies in the subjective structure of the gaze: not between the body of the spectator and the body of the character, but between the machine's body (“the non-human embodied film”) and the actor's, and even more so, the spectator's body. On the surface, we are dealing with an inversion of perspective, but in reality, it is a convergence: the film's gaze overwrites that of the character whether we define the machine as an object (but always from a phenomenological perspective: Mitry), or as a subject (a sentient body: Sobchack).

In the years between Mitry's volume and Sobchack's, the supporters of the subjective gaze proliferated, with some epochal contributions;<sup>41</sup> but when Metz closes that chapter with his *Impersonal Enunciation*, we come back, in a sense, to the beginning. Metz comes from his book on cinema and psychoanalysis, where he differentiated a form of primary identification (with the camera) from a secondary one (with the character), so he is already inclined to elaborate on the reflexive role of the apparatus. But *Impersonal Enunciation* starts by arguing, exactly as Sobchack does, that the “semi-subjective shot” discovered by Mitry – an over-the-shoulder shot directed along an axis which more or less aligns with the character's point of view – is the best form of subjectivity; firstly, because it also shows, even if partially, the body of the perceiver, a necessary

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39 V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*: 247.

40 *Ibid.*: 231.

41 See the still indispensable F. Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator* (1986) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).



factor to encourage identification,<sup>42</sup> and secondly, because it makes you sense the presence of a second gaze that perceives the percipient. In conclusion, even leaving phenomenology and remaining in the sphere of semiotics, the point is this: the subjective shot is not an empty mould for the spectator's gaze and body, it is rather a place for redoubling: it "performs above all a *double doubling* of the enunciative moment [...] it doubles *at a stroke* the site [*foyer*] that shows via him, and the spectator, who sees via him [...] subjective image is reflexive but not a mirror. It does not reflect itself; rather, it reflects the source and the spectator".<sup>43</sup>

From this standpoint, the subjective shot becomes a reproduction *en abyme* of the projection: we could probably rethink also the idea of the *first person shot* in VR (and XR) along this line; there the beholder's body-gaze, apparently implied at every level, is rather to be construed in its radical coincidence with the machine of visibility.

In conclusion, when we talk about subjectivity in the image, we talk about a reflexive form in which the movie *makes itself visible*<sup>44</sup> (through the character's eye or through other stylistic strategies and non-human bodies, so-called "enunciating entities"). Still, exploiting a fictional identity not to access the physical world but some form of *Phantasie*, to re-use a Husserlian word, means to introduce a further enunciative level in which the character, unquestionably, mediates the visible with its Self, that is to say, its own human and fictional subjectivity. This is what Mitry meant, probably, when he maintained that mental images plead the cause not so much of the mental but of subjectivity.

However, movies about people with supernatural faculties offer a range of fictional representations of mental states more in tune with this idea of "impersonal subjectivity"; in those cases, indeed, the character's altered states

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42 Mitry argued first that to adopt a gaze, one must have seen the body of this gaze; see the development of this idea in E. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Amsterdam-New York-Berlin: Mouton, 1984).

43 C. Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or The Place of Film*: 106.

44 Unless you think of the distribution of knowledge and the positioning of the narrator towards the diegetic universe (Genette's focalization).

are not to be explained through psychology, but through their function as human machines of vision (symmetrical to Sobchack's cinematic machine as non-human body).



Fig. 2. David Cronenberg, *The Dead Zone*, 1983. Screen capture.

In *The Dead Zone* (David Cronenberg, 1983) (Fig. 2), the visions of John, who awakens from a coma lasting nearly five years, traverse his body and materialize around him. There is a physical support (an *image-thing*) where the “data” of the events that John is able to “hallucinate” are stored, and it is the body of the person who experienced them: each vision is generated by the contact between John's hand and that of the subject, whose past or future is in question; the handshake produces tremors, signals travelling through the clairvoyant's body and reaching his eyes, which at this point “project”<sup>45</sup> the images (*images-objects*) into the environment, and not without pain (the same consumption suffered by the protagonists of *Until the End of the World*). John becomes a visitor to these virtual spaces, which he experiences with his body, while the spectators experience his hallucination as their own not by virtue of an unconditioned adhesion of gazes (the subjective shot), but rather by virtue of a plurality of subjectivisations

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45 See the idea of *divination as projection* in one of the figures who inspired Jean Mitry's thinking, known as Dr. Allendy: “The fortune tellers [...] do nothing but project on reality something which doesn't possess in itself any determination, a latent image that is inscribed in it — and therefore we can understand all the *techniques of divination as projection on reality* of an inner and obscure sense” (our translation and emphasis). See Dr. Allendy [René Allendy], “La valeur psychologique de l'image”: 99-100.

which renders the visible a place for the emergence of the gaze.<sup>46</sup> In his first vision, John hallucinates the fire in which the daughter of his nurse could die: the hospital room is transformed into the child's bedroom, including John's bed, suddenly surrounded by toys, teddy bears and flames. The vision is subjectified in a complex and multiple fashion: a rightward gaze opens the imaginary field with a classic subjective shot, and a leftward gaze brings the field back to reality; however, between the two gestures, the camera starts to wander in a mental space-time until it includes John, whose eyes have ceased to bear the sight of the images, while his voice remained altered as it is in his state of hallucination. In the most memorable of the visions, which concerns the young victim of a serial killer, John's subjective shot projects the imaginary gazebo in which the murder took place; but his close-up was already "subjectified" before his visions, because his face no longer immersed in the darkness of the night (the actual present), but surrounded by a diffused glow, the one that was there at the moment of the crime (the virtual past); this abrupt change of illumination intimates that John is already part of his hallucination. His entrance into the virtual world, his artificial presence on the scene of the crime, right behind the victim, but invisible, is a quintessential cinematic scene. John ends up in the image almost accidentally: a dolly starts moving slowly and brings into the frame his figure, almost by chance; it is thanks to a slightly excessive movement that we can see our vision together with its source. And it is precisely this *ghostly, casual and plural presence* that characterizes the cinematic experience; it is difficult to think that it could be replicated in immersive media, like VR, where there is, at least for the moment, no possibility of detaching the spectator's gaze from the "projector".

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46 See the idea of "plan subjective réversible" and of the film as a "visible surface cracked by different gazes" from the Merleau-Pontyan perspective adopted by A.C. Dalmasso, "Le plan subjectif réversible": 140 (our translation).

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DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA  
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



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