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Cinema as performing affectivity: Reassessing Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Film

Abstract: Merleau-Ponty is one of the pioneers in the phenomenology of film and remains an unmissable landmark in this field of study. This paper examines Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the theory of cinema, by analysing the expressive means of film and their role in communicating emotions. Drawing on previously overlooked insights of Merleau-Ponty's reflections on moods and emotions, I argue that cinema is a genuine ally to existential phenomenology thanks to its capacity of revealing the unity between mind-body-world. Following Merleau-Ponty's thesis that the exteriority of the body (conducts, gestures, facial expressions etc.) gives us the affective interiority of the characters, I contend that cinema operates as a phenomenological laboratory of moods. Emotional attunements are not merely rendered visually, but *lived* in a chiasmic, intersubjective exchange between actor-character-film and spectator. Emotion unfolds in an intermediate space between the filmic image and the viewer's body. Because the viewer and film intertwine — we share the actor's affective dispositions — I argue that affective reversibility stands at the core of the cinematic experience. Films are not mere devices for representing subjectivity, but expressive structures that infuse our *Befindlichkeiten*. While acknowledging Merleau-Ponty's value to film phenomenology, I also highlight the ideological commitments and reductive tendencies of his externalist approach, which cannot fully grasp the complexity of film experience.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, film, experience, emotion, behaviour.

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) marks a naturalistic turn in phenomenology, that aims to synthesize the classical phenomenology of Husserl and existential accents of Heidegger with the experimental results of *Gestalt* psychology, and to give phenomenology a quasi-scientific status. Merleau-Ponty found in the arts various allies because they helped him legitimize his phenomenology grounded in a direct, embodied contact with the world. „The seventh art" caught his attention quite early in his career. As with many theorists working within psychology, Merleau-Ponty became interested in cinema given the fact that „cinema poses fundamental questions concerning the relationship between the interior and exterior,

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subject and object" (Vaughan 2012, 19). Since 1945, he published two short versions titled *Cinéma et psychologie* in *l'Écran français* and *Pages françaises*. A third and longer version appeared in 1947 with the title *Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie* (translated in English as *The Film and the New Psychology*) in *Temps Modernes* and a fourth and final version was published with the same title in 1948 in his book, *Sens et non-sens* (Albera 2013, 129). This overlaps with a lecture on arts, cinema being mentioned, commissioned by French national radio and broadcasted on its National Programme in the same year, known as *L'art et le monde perçu*, published in *Causeries* (latter translated in English as *Art and the World of Perception*). The term „psychology", present in the two versions (short and long), is an interesting choice. We wonder why Merleau-Ponty did not use „phenomenology" instead? It seems that this is a strategic option not to intimidate the nonspecialized public. Moreover, during that period, phenomenology was often presented in rather loose terms as „psychology" to the general public, an erroneous conflation encouraged by the parallels between psychology and phenomenology.

The stake of Merleau-Ponty's *Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie* is to find some intersections and internal correspondences between film and other „mediums" (in a broader sense, not limited to the artistic ones, but that includes psychology, philosophy, literature etc.). For that reason, Merleau-Ponty proceeds in an intermedial approach of what we can understand as „modernity". He tries to confront the cinema and the phenomenological tradition of philosophy and finds the film as an ally to (his) phenomenology. In other words, the novelty of Merleau-Ponty's essay lies in the fact that he finds in cinema (of that epoch) a series of confirmations of phenomenology. Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty argues, we may posit a parity between the „intuitions" of the moviemaker with the „intuitions" of modern philosophers, because „if philosophy is in harmony with the cinema, if thought and technical effort are heading in the same direction, it is because the philosopher and the moviemaker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world which belongs to a generation" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 58).

The new (*Gestalt*) psychology and the contemporary philosophy (namely, the existential phenomenology) render „consciousness thrown into the world, subject to the gaze of others and learning from them what it is" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 58). And the cinema paired well this theoretical orientation for the very fact that „the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 58). The cinema matches phenomenology because of its primacy of intuition that is given before the concept and of evidence before argumentation. Moreover, both film and (existential) phenomenology departs from a pure idealist perspective of the man by presenting him as a being

immersed in and engaged in the exchange with the world and with others; not least, both film and phenomenology seems to have a similar demarche: the two has a capacity of thinking directly through experience, manipulating its material (Ferencz-Flatz 2015, 8-9). In Merleau-Ponty's essays on film, we recognize the cinema as a laboratory in which we can „test" and confirm different aspects of our daily interlaced interactions with the world and the others and also certain theories of perception and moods/emotions, especially due to its power of making explicit experiences and moods before their crystallization into concepts.

The role of affect and feelings in Merleau-Ponty's work have been mostly overlooked (Roald et al. 2018). It is for sure striking that a philosopher so deeply engaged in philosophy of embodiment, psychology and perceptual experience as Merleau-Ponty did not articulate an explicit or systematic account of the emotions, nor dedicated several essays to their analysis (Cataldi 2008, 163). Indeed, within the horizon of phenomenological inquiry, emotional attunements are analysed to a great extent in the works of Merleau-Ponty's existential contemporaries, such as Martin Heidegger or Jean-Paul Sartre. However, Merleau-Ponty is an eccentric within the phenomenological tradition: he devotes relatively little time analysing moods explicitly and when affectivity is mentioned, it tends to be subordinated to broader investigations into the development of the child, language, behaviour, sexuality or aesthetics (Krueger 2020, 197).

Therefore, this paper aims to bring a contribution to the phenomenology of moods and bodily theories of emotion by analysing the „affective incarnations" (Roald et al. 2018) in the phenomenology of perception and cinematographic theory of Merleau-Ponty's. In light of this, the study sets out to achieve three specific objectives: first, indicate a paradigm shift in understanding moods and feelings by Merleau-Ponty, through which he transcends the dichotomies of classic philosophy and psychology; second, to emphasize the inherent affective experience that films convey; and third, to point out some ideological aspects of Merleau-Ponty essay on film by showing the limitations and shortcomings of his theory on cinema.

1. Rethinking emotion

In the history of philosophy, emotions and affects have been conceived as a hidden inner realm of mental phenomena reign of interiority, inaccessible to the perception of others and traditionally defined through an interdependent dualistic structure. Thus, emotions and affects were composed from a mental state and a physiological

aspect. Without doubt, we can say that the most symptomatic thinker for this affective paradigm is Descartes. In *Passions of the soul*, Descartes defines the passions as the „perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits" (Descartes 1989, 34). This definition relies on the distinction of the soul and body, or *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. This is what, in the tradition of philosophy, is known as *cartesian dualism*. Therefore, for Descartes the emotive dimension belongs to the „soul", ego, mind, affecting him, but the affects cannot appear without the body, which also suffers transformation due to them.

This explains why Merleau-Ponty cites a famous passage from Descartes's *Méditations*, „I say that I see men going by in the street, but what exactly do I really see? All I see are bats and coats which might equally well be covering dolls that only move by springs, and if I say that I see men, it is because I apprehend «through an inspection of the mind what I thought I beheld with my eyes»" (1964a, 50). Descartes conceives perception as *inspectio mentis* or as mind's solitary act. In this theoretical setting, the judgement of the mind organizes the sensorial data into a meaningful whole. This power of the mind over the phenomena do not apply to only what is immediately given in perception, but also to what is hidden of our individual experience: „abjects continue to exist when I no longer see them (behind my back, for example). But it is obvious that, for classical thought, these invisible abjects subsist for me only because my judgment keeps them present". (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 50). Hence, Descartes, as an exponent of the classical psychology, „made perception a real deciphering of sense data by the intelligence" (Kul-Want 2019, 97). This model assumes both an ontological split between body and mind and an epistemological separation between the cognizing subject and the cognized object.

Like the gestaltists before him, Merleau-Ponty rejects both the duality of cartesian „intellectualism" and emotivism, as well as the classical psychology that draws a distinction between inner observation (introspection) and outer observation (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 52). Phenomenology, as much as modern psychology, refute the introspection of emotions: „If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart-throbs— in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 52). Rather, intentions, moods and feelings are experienced and perceived directly in one's embodied behaviour:

> Since emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude, we cannot say that only the signs of love or anger are given to the outside observer and that we understand others indirectly by interpreting these signs: we have to say that others are directly manifest to us as behavior. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 53)
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> The love that worked out its dialectic through me and that I have just discovered is not from the outset a hidden thing in my unconsciousness, nor is it for that matter an object in front of my consciousness; rather, it is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and of my behaviors. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 400)

Moods are our responses to our exchange with the world and to our relations with others. Thus, an analysis of our interior feelings would be pointless, since the „essence" of the dispositions (like love, jealousy, envy, anger etc.) emerges only in our relations with the others:

> Each time I find something worth saying [about feelings] it is […] because I have succeeded in studying it as a way of behaving, as a modification of my relations with others and with the world. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 52)

Therefore Merleau-Ponty proposes a new paradigm to conceive the emotions – as *expressive conducts*[2] [fr. *conduite*] (Merleau-Ponty 1996), which he understands as ways of acting, responding and being affected by the world. For Merleau-Ponty moods and emotions are fundamentally behavioural, realized both *in* and *across* body's „expressive space" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147), which means that they are public, expressed in the world, addressed to and perceptible by the others. For Merleau-Ponty, there are no strictly defined thresholds between „our interior emotions or feelings and our outward expression of them. We do not show signs of fear that must then be cognitively interpreted by someone else. Rather, we embody fear and this fear is perceived by others precisely because it is a way of behaving, of comporting ourselves, our gestures; it is visible in our bearing" (Colman 2009, 85). When we theorize emotions, we are tempted to believe that our access to the inner life of the other is always mediated through myself, either through ways of inference (the others body is sending me signs which I have to interpret to find his inner feelings), or through analogy (in which we filter the others body signs through our own experience: what do I feel when I am jealous or when I hear confession of someone who is jealous?) from their public display (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 53; 2004, 84). Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the direct readability of moods and emotions in our human interactions. Subsequently, for Merleau-Ponty, interiority is already exteriority, since „there is no «inner» life that is not a first attempt to relate to another person" (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 88). For Merleau-Ponty, the „lived body" (the

body felt from within or „introceptively") „is also visible from «outside» as the «visual body»" (Sobchack 1992, 165) and quotes Goethe as a precedent of his argument: „What is inside is also outside." (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 59). Exteriority is not a mere translation of interiority, but is its *locus* and, thus, moods permeate and are inscribed in the body.

This new paradigm assesses that moods are ways of behaving, conducts readable (from „outside") in our gestures because the affects and emotions pervades the body. If the affects are readable conducts in our gestures, then it means that moods already have an immanent sense which is given in our facial expressions, speech, the type of our posture, tapping fingers, fidgeting, or fiddling with hair and so on. To better understand the Merleau-Ponty's standpoint to emotions we can make an analogy with (saussurean) semiotics, an analogy between emotions and signs: if we try to study moods as private mental states (passions of the soul or mental states) or as physiological states (measuring body signs: pangs, palpitations, contractions etc.), as the classical paradigm does, it is like we would want to understand the sense of a word only through its graphical or sound dimension (signifier); in this last case, we would lose the concept and, through analogy, we would lose the content (signified) of the moods. In fact, emotional experiences are bodily grasped – they „touch" and „move" us, we feel their sense and, thus, they are not confined only to oneself, but are expressed intersubjectively (Cataldi 2008, 166).

To support this thesis of the universality of emotions as conducts, Merleau-Ponty revisits psychological experiments that echoes Jean Piaget analysis of the child's ontogenetic stages, showing that affects and feelings are grasped from external behaviour „of the others (namely significant caregivers) before or even without verbal self-report:

> [...] young children understand gestures and facial expressions long before they can reproduce them on their own. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 52)
> An infant of a few months is already very good at differentiating between goodwill, anger and fear on the face of another person, at a stage when he could not have learned the physical signs of these emotions by examining his own body. This is because the body of the other and its various movements appear to the infant to have been invested from the outset with an emotional significance; this is because the infant learns to know mind as visible behaviour just as much as in familiarity with its own mind. (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 86)

That means that we don't have a split anymore between „mind" and „body", „inside" and „outside", which came with the idea of an interior life that is first private and only then expressed externally. Emotions as conducts are our primary pre-linguistic way of being in the world. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty conceives the man as a dynamic and affective body-subject[3]. By describing the body and mind as a unified (in its immediacy) mode of being makes the experience of the „exteriority"

primordial to any such theoretical distinctions. The features of the embodied human existence are neither purely physical, nor purely mental, but a synthesis in which both aspects are entangled and, therefore, the dichotomies that grounded classical philosophy and psychology become irrelevant. Once we understand that „a man's body and «soul» are but two aspects of his way of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 53) and, thus, the body is the medium for the subjectivity, the whole jargon of „inner" and „outside" becomes inapposite.

Conceiving the man as body-subject, our emotions are „existential significations" (Cataldi 2008, 169). Rather, emotions are not known, but lived bodily, as affective tonus, in our gestures. Thus, the „body incarnates significance" (Cataldi 2008, 169), is visible to oneself, given and perceived by others. This perceiving goes faraway: „«That's so typical of him», we say when we hear something about a friend, or, conversely, «That surprises me coming from him»" (Merleau-Ponty, 132). Many aspects of the human being entwines, yet having a coherence or a *gestalt*: gestures, facial expressions, the tone of the voice, accents, idiosyncratic mannerisms, poses, habitual gait or handwriting – all this „variations of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372) can be ascribed to someone because they constitute a singular form, a person's particular „affective style". An argument for the coherence of the various ways of conduct of a person is the empirical data that, in most cases, we can (re)construct the stylistic coherence of a person in his absence. This is the reason for which we can attribute the provenance, the authorship to old (anonymous, forgotten, lost or stolen) masterpieces, such as paintings, diaries or manuscripts. This field of study is called stylometry. Here, Merleau-Ponty makes an analogy between the singular style of a person and the author's style of creating (painter, composer, novelist):

> When unbiased subjects are confronted with photographs of several faces, copies of several kinds of handwriting, and recordings of several voices and are asked to put together a face, a silhouette, a voice, and a handwriting, it has been shown that the elements are usually put together correctly or that, in any event, the correct matchings greatly outnumber the incorrect ones. Michelangelo's handwriting is attributed to Raphael in 36 cases, but in 221 instances it is correctly identified, which means that we recognize a certain common structure in each person's voice, face, gestures and bearing and that each person is nothing more nor less to us than this structure or way of being in the world. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 53)

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty draws a comparison between novels and films. A novel can tell us by *saying* what a character feels and thinks while interacting with the world and the others. In contrast to novelists, who can elect an interior approach to his characters by presenting us

their stream of thoughts, personal undergoings, moods and feelings, either from a first person or third person view, the cinema shows us all aspects of inner life in and through exterior conducts. For Merleau-Ponty, the cinema shall requite the behavioural way of being of a character. In spite of prose, the cinema works best when moods and thoughts are readable in gestures, when we, as viewers, apprehend the thoughts and feelings of a character through his conduct:

> Movies, likewise, always have a story and often an idea (for example, in *l'Etrange sursis* the idea that death is terrible only for the man who has not consented to it), but the function of the film is not to make these facts or ideas known to us. […] The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 57)

Through this comparison between prose and cinema, Merleau-Ponty addresses the problem of the antagonism between „subjective" and „objective shot". The „subjective shot", that is to say „a shot seen through a character's eyes" (Aumont et al. 1992, 28), entails a specific grammatical dispositive of filmic dispositive in which a certain sight is attributed to a character through visual cues within or prior to the shot itself; *i.e.* the camera films a landscape, then films a „zoom shot" on a characters face, suggesting that the protagonist sees the landscape which I saw earlier, that I can relate it to him, recognizing it as *his*. Nevertheless, the „objective shot" represents something from „outside", without attempting to attribute inner experience, personal visual images, thoughts or feelings to characters. For that reason, Merleau-Ponty opts for an objective shot that can give us the moods and thoughts of a character through external gestures.

Moviemakers had tried to show the emotions „from within", but, Merleau-Ponty argues, with less or no success. Let us analyse these examples one by one. *Premier de cordée* (dir. Louis Daquin) presents us a climbing scene, where a man is hanging on a cliff. Merleau-Ponty argues that we would feel the vertigo more vividly if the film portrayed the character losing his balance and performing confused gestures with his body (a hand clutching terrified the rope, a „ foot scrabbling at the slippery rock-face, the rope quivering" (Mitry 1997, 208), fluttering his hands frantically, etc.), indicating that the character is panicking, loses self-control or his consciousness, and not by filming the „*the cliff below swaying and out of focus*". In this first filmic example, the movie tries to achieve the dizziness by camera movement itself, but in fact fails to induce us the mood of giddiness. Despite *Premier de cordée*, Malraux's *Sierra de Teruel* (*L'Espoir*) presents us a pilot who just got out of the cockpit; we perceive more intensely that the pilot loses its sight because the film presents him clumsy and frail after leaving the plane. But the

next shot shows us a hazy landscape. In these first two examples, the film shows us what the camera „sees" from its perspective, namely a swayed and blurred or misty shot. We infer the mountaineer dizziness or the pilot's failing vision by associating the camera shots with the interiority of characters. Both films attempt to put us in the shoes of the character by reducing their experience, reducing it to a visual sign of dizziness or clumsiness rather than an embodied emotional attunement. In *Falbalas* (dir. Jacques Becker) the delirium of Clereance would be more striking if it appeared „as if incarnated in his own" gazes and gestures, but not so much when the film shows us what Clereance sees: a whimsical hallucination of a mannequin becoming a woman. For that reason, these are „poor" filmic examples for Merleau-Ponty since „people feeling dizzy never see the world swaying and out of focus" (Mitry 1997, 208). Consequently, Merleau-Ponty concludes that „«internal life» is more forcefully presented if it is treated strictly as a pattern of behavior and if it appears in the world with which it remains connected, however distantly or closely" (Mitry 1997, 208).

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, interiority is not an occult psychic domain that only subsequently is signified or expressed in the world through the body, but an expressive fold of corporeality itself. The conducts and gestures are not symptoms of a hidden, inner content of the interior life, but the very incarnation of the affects and feelings. The cinema, as art that is able to capture the visible weave of behaviors, exposes this fundamental truth: moods and emotions are the most intimate and profound expressed through the exteriority.

As a result, the modern aspect of the new psychology and existential phenomenology consists in a methodological turn from an introspectionist approach to man „from within" (emotions as passions of the soul, mental or physiological states), which pretends to have an access to interiority through inner observation (or *inspectio mentis*) to an externalist approach, which considers man as the unity between subjectivity and objectivity. Challenging the traditional assumptions about the ontology of emotions, Merleau-Ponty praises cinema and its visual possibilities as a proper illustration of this turn: the cinema is an suitable medium to exhibit the epistemic potential of this turn to an externalist approach.

2. „And…Action!": Performing emotions

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty radicalizes his theory of perception first outlined in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which the classical dualisms had been only destabilized, and rethinks the perception framework within an ontology of the flesh in which the sensory and the affective overlap. As Cataldi noted, „these chiasmic

interminglings help explain how sights and sound have the power to touch us emotionally, move us to laughter or tears. They account for why we might describe ourselves as freezing in terror or having «blue» moods, or how words and phrases can also have their emotional tones or content, how even verbal expressions can be colourful, or cutting" (Cataldi 2008, 169). Once again, we can see here a convergence between phenomenology and cinema: in the lived experience of watching films, the sensory and affective overlap by means of the expressive methods of the cinema (moving picture, sound and montage). Defining film as a „temporal gestalt" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 54), whose shots, duration and order cause moods to arise, emotional attunements emerge in the space between the viewer and the screen.

Before tackling the problem of how a film's spectator gets the dispositions of film protagonists, I will highlight certain aspects of affective incarnations as they unfold within intersubjective experience. First and foremost, it must be pointed out the fact that an unequivocally or ideal intersubjective expression of moods remains only a dream. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges an emotional asymmetry regarding intersubjectivity: the other's dispositions remain transcendent, but an affective reciprocity and reversibility is still possible, with the emphasis on preserving the structural asymmetry of the chiasm. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty writes that when Paul grieves the death of his wife, „I suffer because Paul is grieving" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372). Although I may "perceive the other's grief or anger in his behavior, for example, I perceive the other's grief or anger in his behavior, on his face and in his hands, without any borrowing from an "inner" experience of suffering or of anger", but "the other's grief or anger never has precisely the same sense for him and for me. For him, these are lived situations; for me, they are appresented" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372).

Consequently, beyond the chiasmic structure of seeing and being seen (regarded as two sides of the same subjectivity) that occurs in the cinematic experience (and the act of seeing in general), I argue that we can extend his thesis regarding emotion reversibility to explain the manner in which cinema strives to evoke moods. Firstly, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, in cinema the internal dynamics of moods becomes external and legible: „the inside" (namely the affects) becomes „the outside" (namely the conducts, gestures), being available for our intersubjective apprehension. Since cinema is a „medium" that provides an accurate illustration of our perceptual apparatus, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the cinema shall make us feel the affects and the feelings of the actor in a sort of entanglement, chiasmic (ap)perception, since I can recognize the affects and feelings of the others „as if the other person's intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 191). For Merleau-Ponty perception is not a transcendental, alienated activity, but an embodied and enworlded

phenomenon, thus watching a movie is a synesthetic perception that can recall moods and emotions. Beyond the fact of the haptic dimension of the „gaze" during the perception or the experience of watching a movie, a film shall be accompanied by an affective dimension/atmosphere. Just as in visual perception, the chiasmic structure presupposes seeing from inside and a structural reference to being seen from the outside, likewise the cinema shall stage moods for a formal or supposed viewer that shall feel those emotions. The cinema has the role to „colour" up our *Befindlichkeiten* with a certain affective tonality. For this reason, for Merleau-Ponty, the film should not work towards translating the interiority, but towards giving an external expression to those dispositions in order to take existence in our bodies as a mediated experience of being in the world. In other words, conceiving the cinema as an experiential event, the mood of the actor becomes my (the viewer) own mood to a greater or lesser extent. Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, the film should not be comprehended (thought) but lived (perceived) through certain emotional attunements. Emotion unfolds in an intermediate zone, the space between the screen and my own body. Because the viewer and the film are intertwined (i.e. we share the moods of the actor), I claim that affective reversibility is at the heart of the cinema from Merleau-Ponty's point of view. A film is not a static object of perception, nor the viewer is an independent viewing subject, but the two interweave each other in the intentional act of viewing by mutually transforming the dispositions of their being in the world. Such a motor affective intentionality is congealed and enacted by the actor and appresented to the affective engaged viewer. Therefore, a film presents us „an emotional world" (Colman 2009, 85) that we can feel, as embodied beings that we are.

The cinema has the capacity to show us *how* a character sees and behaves in the world when in a certain mood or emotional state. Merleau-Ponty argues that in cinema, as within our dynamics of everyday life, the inner world of a character is inextricable from his behaviours, conducts, gestures. As the French sociologist and historian of cinema Christian Metz remarked in retrospect on Merleau-Ponty's essay, „a sequence of film, like a spectacle from life, carries its meaning within itself. The signifier is not easily distinguished from the significate" (Metz 1990, 43). Indeed, everyday experience gives us evidence that the body is *expressive*. Thus:

> We must reject that prejudice which makes „inner realities" out of love, hate, or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts, hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 52-53).

Given the privileged position granted to the embodiment in the work of Merleau-Ponty, the body becomes the *locus* in which affects and feelings are „incarnated" and, thus, the cinema becomes the privileged medium to express them. Perhaps, this could explain the curious fact that cinema can convey the „inner life" of a character just by spending barely a few hours with him or her.

Moreover, if the cinema wishes to capture the lived world (*Lebenswelt*), then it has to „return to the world", to the exteriority, by reduction of the pre-given knowledge about the world. The phenomenological *epoché* seeks to disclose the pure life of consciousness, the flow of its *cogitationes* and their *cogitata*, and posits it as an absolute source of experience; Merleau-Ponty relocates this source within our body, which, as a sensory and corporeal being-in-the-world, resists any reduction:

> Far from being, as was believed, the formula for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy: Heidegger's „In-der-Welt-Sein" [being-in-the-world] only appears against the background of the phenomenological reduction. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxviii)

Extending Merleau-Ponty's understanding on phenomenological reduction to the type of film that he outlines, we can say that cinema (or more adequately, the film-director) has to operate a kind of bracketing, in order to escape of a pre-fabricated subjective shot, which claims to take us into the protagonist's inner perspective.

3. A cinematographical program and its limits

With respect to aforementioned fact that Merleau-Ponty's essay on film highlights a convergence point in the development of film and existential philosophy, Andrew Dudley and Christian Metz have noted that a distinctly phenomenological approach to narrative cinema (Amédée Ayfre, Henri Agel, André Bazin) – shaped by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – emerged partly as response to the stylistic and thematic innovations of postwar Italian neorealism (Yacavone 2016, 161). Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and reflections on film, many contemporary phenomenological studies of cinema built upon his philosophical legacy, but surprisingly neither of them engage with his text at all „or do so in a cursory fashion" (Yacavone 2016, 170). When Merleau-Ponty's lecture is discussed, there „has been a general tendency to regard it as simply and nonproblematically in keeping with contemporary views of cinematic experience" (Yacavone 2016, 170). Although, Merleau-Ponty's on cinema provided a promising framework for a phenomenological inquiry into cinematic art, the filmic desiderata of Merleau-Ponty do not encompass the

full range of our experience of film, nor the manifold features by which films may be considered "artistic" or "aesthetic", even for that epoch.

Within this framework analysed so far, it becomes evident the ideological dimension of Merleau-Ponty's essay on film. He advocates for a specific form of filmmaking, for a certain stylistic program of the cinema and for a specific cinematographic syntax that can express affects such as pleasure, grief, anger, love and hate through the actor's behaviour. Hence, Merleau-Ponty introduces a judgement of taste and projects a prescriptive frame of what ought to be considered „real films" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 59). In the first two French versions of *Cinéma et psychologie* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that his remarks on cinema should not be understand as mere value judgements: the approach of man from the exterior, or the „objective method", as he puts it there, already has a tradition in the great classical works and, thus, „If cinema, psychology and literature agree on expressing man from exterior, this is not a whim of fashion, but an exigency of the human condition that classical art itself has not ignored" (Merleau-Ponty in Albera 2013, 137). However, in the revised versions (1947 and 1948), Merleau-Ponty maintains the externalist approach to man, but he no longer mentions the existence of an agreement between literature, psychology and cinema, only an agreement of cinema with the philosophy he represents. Along with the last versions of *The Film and the New Psychology*, Merleau-Ponty also delivered a lecture for broadcast radio in 1948, *Art and the World of Perception*, in which cinema is discussed parallel to traditional arts. In this lecture Merleau-Ponty keep the intermedial account, emphasises the expressive procedures of cinema and advances a normative stylistic program once more:

> Cinema has yet to provide us with many films that are works of art from start to finish: its infatuation with stars, the sensationalism of the zoom, the twists and turns of plot and the intrusion of pretty pictures and witty dialogue, are all tempting pitfalls for films which chase success and, in so doing, eschew properly cinematic means of expression. (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 98)

The answer to what Merleau-Ponty considers artistically good or „real films", as he says, lies in a cinema that is built upon „describing the mingling of consciousness with the world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others, and […] this is movie material *par excellence*" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 59). Hence, the predilect form of cinema for Merleau-Ponty is that which always shows us the thoughts, moods, feelings in patterns of behaviours, conducts, gestures. For Merleau-Ponty, is better for cinema to render the interior life through the exteriority (incrusted in its „flesh"), without pretending an access from the „inside" and, as a result, the preference for „objective shot" that thematize the human experience from an external point of view. This proclivity to „objective" or „external" appears to be a rigorous way of conceiving the cinema, congenial with the

developments of modern psychology and existential phenomenology to which Merleau-Ponty adds a naturalist tone. Those two theoretical frameworks attempt to dispel the dualistic view on emotion, as states that remain private, discrete and inaccessible.

Merleau-Ponty emphasis on the expressive methods of film (image, sound, especially acting, montage) and clearly prioritize certain aesthetics choices, such in case of emotions as conducts that echoes Pudovkin adaptation of Stanislavski's system (and the latter, but simplified, *method-acting*). The normative standard of Merleau-Ponty's account on film gives us an excellent corrective and existential-phenomenological touch against a filmic naive inwardness, but also undermines a range of devices that moviemakers use precisely to communicate interiority (i.e. emotions): subjective camera, expressionist lighting techniques, dissonant soundscapes, narrative instance and certain types of montage that produce associative, symbolic, fantastical or irrational syntheses. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems to privilege editing rhythms that preserve temporal continuity, rather than a montage that deliberately fractures continuity such as in a case of dreamlike sequence.

Therefore, another shortcoming of Merleau-Ponty's externalist approach lies in the problem of representation of unconscious material. Indeed, his account can accommodate some filmic dream sequences if they remain bound to bodily comportment and the film's temporal *gestalt* but makes it harder to read films that deliberately depict associative chains or symbolic imagery that point to unconscious structures. Buñuel's surrealist scenes to Hitchcock's dream sequences or many modern arthouse uses of nightmarish montage, subjects the viewer to undergo through associative chains of symbolization. Adding to that, the classical style of representation of dreams in films assumed the commonly accepted distinction between „the «subjectivity» of the dream and the «objectivity» of the rest of the film" (Sharot 2015, 69). This means that the representational devices of dreams in films resist the literal "externalization" and rational imagery, since its expressive force depends on the opacity, deviation and substitution of the everyday world and conscious.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty operates with the cinema of the 1940s and with a preferential cinematographically theory of gestural realism. Yet the contemporary moviemakers (Antonioni, Haneke and Tsai Ming-liang) systematically challenge Merleau-Ponty's externalist affective account on film by deliberately rendering the body as opaque, vacant, or inert. These experimental practices undermine Merleau-Ponty's emotional behavioural legibility. The aforementioned filmmakers show that bodies can be intentionally non-expressive, cultivating withdrawal and dissimulation rather than transparent affective incarnations.

Conclusions

To sum up, this paper has investigated Merleau-Ponty's intermedial approach to film, with emphasis on his essay *The Film and the New Psychology*, and his contributions to interpersonal understanding concerning moods and feelings in cinema. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, together with his reconceptualization of the human being as body-subject, allows him to elaborate an externalist emotive paradigm. Merleau-Ponty's methodological turn from understanding man from within to conceiving human emotions as a „bodily-affective style" (Krueger 2020, 203) allow him to overcome the rigid opposition between „inner" versus „outer" life.

Subsequently, I argued that this new ontological account on emotions and moods is powerfully present at the core of the expressive means of cinema. Merleau-Ponty sees film as an ideal medium that depicts with success the naturalist turn in phenomenology. For Merleau-Ponty, film presents us certain emotional attunements, how they are embodied in the film itself, conveyed and experienced by the bodily engaged viewers. Construing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, I argued that his approach to emotional attunements as embodied conducts, whose meaning is given directly in our intersubjective relations and in our exchange with the world around us, can explain the manner in which cinema arise and convey moods and feelings to the spectator. The cinema creates and conveys emotions through a certain form of montage, being appresented to the affectively engaged viewer. By this means, I argued that we can talk about an affective reversibility in the experience of watching a film, a chiasmic intermingling between emotional worlds (that of the film, and that of the spectator). Moreover, if the cinema wishes to represent the *Lebenswelt*, I claimed that the movie director has to operate a kind of bracketing to dispense from the desire for access to the subjective image, to the interiority of the protagonist, as we can deduct from Merleau-Ponty's vision on film.

Not least, I critically examined the ideological aspects that lie in Merleau-Ponty's view on film by pointing out what kind of cinematographical code he favours. Indeed, his view advocates for a certain „objective" filmic style capable of showing every behavioural detail of acting that constitutes emotions. This cinematographic formula appears to be a rigorous one, being in accordance with recent developments in the area of psychology and phenomenology of its time. His methodological turn from an introspectionist to an externalist approach celebrates a return to the prereflective immediacy of perceptual appearances of emotional attunements as already laden with meaning. Although, his normative trope of realism concerning the means of cinema comprise a tendency to underplay montage used expressively and experimentally to create non-behavioural, dreamlike, symbolic meaning, or to deconstruct the temporality of the usual chronology of events.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on cinema as art remain an important starting point to an phenomenological account on film and

anticipated the newer phenomenologies of film, that considers the film as a body which can be seen and can see, acquiring the feature of the mutability of subjective and objective, such as theory of film-body of Vivian Sobchack (*The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, 1992), film's skin of Laura U. Marks (*The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, 1999) or film as a three-dimensional tactile being of Jennifer M. Barker (The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience, 2009).

Notes

[1] In *Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man*, Merleau-Ponty praises that the modern psychology made the same methodological turn to an externalist approach of emotion as existential phenomenology: „psychology held that a great victory had been won on the day when James reversed the traditional order in saying «I am sorry because I weep» instead of «I weep because I am sorry»." (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 61)

[2] Ponty uses this term almost in a behavioural sense. This does not have anything to do with moral implications, namely kantian deontology.

[3] Ponty criticizes the ocularcentrism rooted in cartesianism by conceiving the film as a lived, embodied experience, both for the viewer and for the expressive methods and possibilities of the cinema.

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