# FILM THEORY

## AN INTRODUCTION THROUGH THE SENSES

THOMAS ELSAESSER AND MALTE HAGENER

SECOND EDITION

# Film Theory

What is the relationship between cinema and spectator? This is the key question for film theory, and one that Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener put at the centre of their insightful and engaging book, now revised from its popular first edition. Every kind of cinema (and every film theory) first imagines an ideal spectator, and then maps certain dynamic interactions between the screen and the spectator's mind, body, and senses. Using seven distinctive configurations of spectator and screen that move progressively from 'exterior' to 'interior' relationships, the authors retrace the most important stages of film theory from its beginnings to the present – from neorealist and modernist theories to psychoanalytic, 'apparatus,' phenomenological, and cognitivist theories, and including recent cross-overs with philosophy and neurology.

This new and updated edition of *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* has been extensively revised and rewritten throughout, incorporating discussion of contemporary films like *Her* and *Gravity* and including a greatly expanded final chapter, which brings film theory fully into the digital age.

**Thomas Elsaesser** is Professor Emeritus of Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam and since 2012 Visiting Professor at Columbia University. His recent books include: *Weimar Cinema and After* (Routledge, 2000); *Metropolis* (British Film Institute, 2000); *Studying Contemporary American Film* (Hodder, 2002, with Warren Buckland); *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005); *The Persistence of Hollywood* (Routledge, 2012); and *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma* (Routledge, 2013).

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## An Introduction Through the Senses

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Thomas Elsaesser
and Malte Hagener

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# Acknowledgments

This book originated in a series of seven lectures that were first given by Thomas Elsaesser at the University of Amsterdam in 2005–2006 to the international M.A. students in Film and Television Studies, and were subsequently expanded for an undergraduate seminar at Yale University. Commissioned by the publishing company Junius Hamburg to write an introductory guide to film theory for their series "Zur Einführung," Elsaesser asked Malte Hagener to be his co-author. Hagener not only translated Elsaesser's lectures and class notes into German, but also fleshed out the text with his own observations, arguments, and analyses.

The German version was published in November 2007, aided and abetted by the critical and constructive support of Balthasar Haussmann and Steffen Herrmann. The positive response to the German edition encouraged us to approach Routledge, where we found in Erica Wetter an enthusiastic partner. Much of the German text was revised and rewritten, and we owe thanks to Gabriele Stoicea, our initial translator, as well as to members of Elsaesser's 2009 Yale graduate class – Michael Anderson, Ryan Cook, Michael Cramer, Victor Fan, Seunghoon Jeong, Patrick Noonan, and Jeremi Szaniawski – who acted as the new version's first readers. Thanks are also due to the various anonymous Routledge readers, who made a number of insightful criticisms. Ryan Cook deserves our special gratitude for finding appropriate illustrations, while Warren Buckland, Ria Thanouli, Craig Uhlin, Damian Gorczany, and Patricia Prieto Blanco made further helpful suggestions.

The strong response to the first English edition, as well as several reprints of the German edition and translations into other European and Asian languages, have shown us that the book filled a demand bigger than originally anticipated and that the model inaugurated in the book of how to understand film theory as intimately related to each spectator's body and senses has proven productive and persuasive to both colleagues and students. Given the response we received, and in light of changes in cinema theory and practice, we felt it appropriate to prepare a new edition which corrects a number of mistakes but mainly enlarges on parts that were all too brief in the first edition or have gained in significance. We hope the new version of *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* retains the advantages of the first edition – providing a concise, yet original introduction to film theory focused on a specific question – and adds to it by giving the central argument a further reflexive turn.

While the main body of the text has not been radically changed, each chapter has been carefully revised and numerous passages rewritten, adding new references, updating the films, and incorporating theoretical issues that help to refine or cast new light on our existing arguments. The conclusion – in the first edition conceived as a tentative gesture towards an open future – has been greatly expanded and mostly rewritten. It is now a standalone eighth chapter, which brings film theory up to date in the digital age.

In addition to the acknowledgements due for the first edition, we wish to thank a number of colleagues who have selflessly shared their working experience with the book. Detailed classroom reports were filed by Walter Metz, David B. Olsen, Rikke Schubart, and one anonymous colleague, giving us valuable insights from different perspectives. Catherine Grant, Adrian Martin, Cristina Álvarez Lopez, and Volker Pantenburg, all champions of the video essay, have not only shaped our thinking about this emerging form but have also provided commentary and suggestions for the website, which is accompanying the release of this edition. At Routledge, Erica Wetter and Simon Jacobs have expertly guided us through the editorial process. We hope that this book will continue to provide a map for the expanding field of film theory, as well as give rise to fresh ideas and new arguments that will further invigorate a field that seems to thrive on passionate self-interrogation, as it manages to turn a crisis into an opportunity to reinvent itself.

Thomas Elsaesser, Amsterdam/Malte Hagener, Marburg
September 2014

# 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 serialised 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 single image or series? Was it capturing place or was it storing time? Besides its relationship to other forms of visualisation 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 centred 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 sceptical ("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 writers whose work can lay claim to the title of "the first film theory" are Vachel Lindsay (a poet) and Hugo Münsterberg (a psychologist). Film theory reached an initial peak in the 1920s, but it did not become institutionalised (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 not on a broader scale until the 1970s. Other countries followed suit, but the debt to France and the head start of English language theorisation has been a considerable advantage, ensuring that Anglo-American film theory – often showing strong 'Continental' (i.e. French) influences – has been dominant since the 1980s. 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 preeminent 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 marginalise important positions elsewhere (Italy, the Czech Republic, Latin America, and Japan, to mention 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 transnational in scope and universalist in intention.

On the other hand, geographic provenance can help explain the discursive logic of institutions, their strategies, film-political activities, and publications: film theory often developed in close proximity to journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Screen*, nationally prominent cultural institutions such as the *Cinémathèque française*, the British Film Institute, and the Museum of Modern Art, as well as in university departments and even around annual festivals and exhibitions. From this perspective, the translations, appropriations, and transfers of film theoretical paradigms especially since the 1960s, such as semiotic, psychoanalytic, cognitive, or phenomenological film theory, would be traceable to location, around so-called 'creative clusters.' The determining factors of a paradigm change would be external as much as due to the internal dynamics of theory itself. Cities – and the filmmaking opportunities they offer – clearly also 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 favourable 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 Wisconsin in Madison 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 determines why or when a particular location is able to play the role of a cluster-site, successfully propagating certain theories, thanks to sending influential students into the academic world, hosting important conferences, or producing seminal publications.[1]

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.[2] Whereas formalist theories look at film in terms of construction and composition, realist theories emphasise film's ability to offer a hitherto unattainable view onto (nonmediated) 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, Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim, the Russian Formalists, and the American Neoformalists 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 organised 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, one that does not evolve its own object of study but tends to adorn itself with borrowed plumes, and that seems to owe its success to a kind of methodological eclecticism, as well as to its mercurial adaptive abilities to new intellectual trends. Such an approach emphasises the contextual embeddedness of film theory in larger developments pertaining to the humanities (especially art history, literary theory, and linguistics), cultural studies, psychology, and the social sciences, but it also highlights the transdisciplinary tendencies which have characterised academic subjects in general at least since the 1980s. This explains the emergence of innovative and (for a time) highly successful fields such as (film) semiotics, feminist (film) theory, or cognitivist (film) theory.[3] Such theoretical positions both draw on and diversify the traditionally broader classifications that separate psychological approaches from sociological ones, and contextual-anthropological ones from close textual or iconological ones.

More recent attempts to systematise film theories renounce these often polemical or normative classifications. Instead, they advocate a relay among successive individual standpoints.[4] As a result, film theory seems to advance towards some implicit or unstated goal, by virtue of the fact that each new theory claims to improve upon the preceding one. But 'progress' may be illusory, and instead, 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 problem or pressing question. The danger is that the individual theories exist only relative to one another, or relative to some imaginary vanishing point. Alternatively, they exist more or less independently of, in parallel with, or as swing-of-the-pendulum extremes of one another. In order to overcome some of these problems of categorisation and classification, we have decided to lay out a different trajectory; and instead of identifying schools and movements, we try to articulate film theory around a leading and persistent question. This allows us to bypass the simplistic listing of unrelated approaches, but also to avoid the evolutionary model, which projects a teleology, according to a logic that is necessarily retrospective and – given the many contingent or cluster factors we have enumerated – must in any case 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 refocusing it. In *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* we opt for making this our key concern: it provides the guiding concepts to our historical-systematic survey, and it gives the chapters their coherence and determines their succession.

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 racked seating), a temporal ordering of performances (separate sessions or continuous admission) and a specific social framing of the visit to the movie theatre (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, colour, or other primarily optical but also bodily markers. But there are additional ways the body engages with the film event, besides the senses of vision, tactility, and sound: 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 Sergei 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 periodisation of film history into early, classical, and postclassical cinema, especially where these distinctions also take account of the transformations of the cinema *as a physical site* with its interrelation of (real) reception space and (imaginary) media space within the fixed geometrical arrangement of projector, screen, and spectator, to the cinema as a more *ad hoc or virtual space*, under the fluid and informal viewing conditions in front of the television screen or the laptop monitor, and extending to the mobile screens on handheld devices, which explicitly invite new modes of bodily engagement in their hand-eye coordination. In other words, our trajectory through film theory deliberately avoids setting up a categorical distinction between the cinema experience as a theatrical event and the cinema experience as an ambient event, no more than it posits a radical break between analogue and digital film. Instead, it maps the respective (and salient) differences of various film theories around changing – new and not-so-new – configurations of the spectator's body and senses.

This is why our model also tries to rearticulate in a theoretically pertinent manner the spatio-temporal relations between the bodies and objects depicted in a film, and between the film and the spectator. Crucial in this respect are 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.[5] 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 nondiegetic (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 (US 1941, Orson Welles) that "Rosebud" is a sled – one speaks of a nondiegetic camera movement, even though the object itself is diegetic. Given that today's films also tend to carry with them extra-diegetic materials, so-called 'paratexts' such as DVD bonuses and commentary, and that spectators watching films 'on the go' increasingly inhabit two worlds (the cinematic universe, i.e. the diegesis, and their own physical environment and ambient space), alternately suspending one in favour of the other or shuttling between them, a thorough reassessment of the cinematic experience is clearly in order: one that can separate out the distinct but variable components that produce the 'effect' of cinema, but can also identify what holds them together, which is the spectator, conceived as a 'relational entity' and not only as a physical being.

The different forms that this spectatorial 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, and its tactile, affective, and sensory-motor faculties. Yet the fields of meaning thus staked out also take into account the physical properties, epistemological conditions, and even ontological foundations of the cinema itself, emphasising its specific characteristics and key elements. We have chosen seven distinct pairs that describe an arc from 'outside' to 'inside,' and at the same time retrace fairly comprehensively the most important stages of film theory roughly from 1945 to the present, from neorealist 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 reorganisation, suggesting that our outline – however schematic it might seem – can actually provide a nuanced and illuminating reclassification 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 that 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, or can find itself once more confronting the very same issues that 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 many 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 analogue to digital media again raises, albeit in a new form, Bazin's central question concerning the 'ontology of the photographic image.'[6] 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 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific treatises on the theory of motion in images and on optics and stereoscopy. Similarly, the new dialogue 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 filmmaking 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 reclassification 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 reconceptualising theory and thus of fashioning if not a new theory, then a new understanding of previous theories' possible logics.

But such a history is at this point 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 flavours and the ingredients linger. The distinctiveness, sometimes to the point of incompatibility, among theories should not disappear or be disavowed.

Each chapter opens with a paradigmatic scene from a film, capturing in a nutshell a central premise, highlighting one of the levels of analysis, and introducing the main proponents of a particular theory (schools, concepts, and theorists) that will be discussed in the chapter. The films selected combine well-known classics of the cinema, such as Rear Window (US 1954, Alfred Hitchcock) and The Searchers (US 1956, John Ford), with titles such as Gravity (US 2012, Alfonso Cuaron) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (US 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.[7] Moreover, in every chapter we return time and again to specific filmic examples, which do not serve as evidence for independently existing theories, but rather want to offer food for thought and an opportunity to reacquaint oneself with films and theories. We hope that readers will feel inspired to bring their own film-culture, cinema-experience, and video essays 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 manifestoes, seem to be acquainted with advanced philosophical 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 spatiotemporally consistent, that is, diegetically coherent, but separate and self-contained universe. By contrast, other authors, such as Rudolf Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein, have emphasised 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 disembodied because of its reduction to visual perception.[8] 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, or narratology, when dealing with the question of spectators' involvement in the processes of filmic narration, such as focalisation, 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 *ostranienie* that Russian Formalists use), in order to better, or wiser, return to it.[9]

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 modernist 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, that is, 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 empathetic fusion 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, at least potentially, 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 modelled. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, which is 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 poststructuralist reformulation 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, asymmetrical schemata of look and gaze (as they are actively structuring and being 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'), power ("the gaze enfolds the look"), and mistaken perception ('miscognition,' 'disavowal'). But it can also disrupt the illusion of a consistent and coherent world, creating 'distanciation' and 'estrangement.'

This situation 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 (based on distance). There have always been attempts to conceptualise the cinema as an encounter of sorts, as a contact space with Otherness, to account for the fact that cinema brings faraway places closer and renders absent people present. These correspond with theories based on the assumption that skin is a sense organ and touch is a means of perception, from which follows an 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, transcultural, and – in its philosophical assumptions – phenomenological school corresponds to a fascination with the human skin, its surfaces and feel, 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 rubric 'sound and ear' also emphasise 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, organised not (only) around space and the frame but around duration, location, interval, and interaction. 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), but also the revival of 3-D, 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 physical being, exciting the optical nerve, stimulating synapses, and affecting brain functions. The moving image and sound modulate neuronal pathways and produce chemical changes, they incite bodily reactions and involuntary responses, as if it were 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 preexistence 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 fifteen years, where the diegesis – the spatiotemporal '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. While cognitive narratologists find here a confirmation of their theses, and films such as THE SIXTH SENSE, FIGHT CLUB, ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND, and INCEPTION elicit lively discussions around 'complex storytelling' and 'forking path narratives,' others see such films as symptoms of ontological doubt and a more radical reorientation of our bodies in time. Deleuze, for instance, 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 require us to think differently about images, movement, time, agency, and causation. The chapter on 'cinema as brain' addresses radical versions of constructivism and epistemic scepticism, presenting the thought of 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 filmmaking not just sociologically, as competing in the marketplace with video games and computer simulations, but also epistemologically and ontologically: 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 (nonteleological) 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 mind that registers ambivalences in the motives that drive characters and the narrative, while rational choice theories focus on the alternating succession of action and reaction, seeing evolutionary or hard-wired 'responses' to external threats and stimuli. 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 *un*folds as it *en*folds, and vice versa.

The focus on the body, perception, and the senses thus not only cuts across formalist and realist theories; it also tries to close the gap between theories of authorial intention and audience reception. Cautiously formulated in our concluding chapter on the cinema's transfiguration in the age of digital networks is the hope that it can also bridge the divide between photographic and post-filmic cinema, not by denying the differences but by reaffirming 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-hundred-years history.[10]

Commensurate with the importance that the moving image and recorded sound have attained by 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 of film theory to tell us how film and cinema relate to the body and the senses may thus 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 of the senses.

In this respect, it may come as no surprise that a number of key philosophers of the twentieth century, who themselves barely reflected on the existence of the cinema, have been mobilised under the heading of 'film philosophy' to help think through the implications and challenges the cinema is facing today. Bergson's vitalism, Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' and Adorno's negative dialectics can be seen as examples of how philosophical concepts developed without cinema explicitly in mind have proven useful in examining the specific form of knowledge, experience, and expression – aesthetic and otherwise – that film and cinema convey. Whether philosophy is thereby 'rescuing' the cinema as a theoretical object, or conversely, whether cinema is providing philosophy with a particularly challenging subject of study, is a question we need not decide here.

## Notes

1 It might be a sign of the further institutionalisation of film studies that recently the history of the discipline itself has become an object of study; see for example, Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), and Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

2 We find this juxtaposition already in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960). Dudley Andrew popularised this distinction in *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

3 See for example the chapters in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), bearing titles such as "Film and Psychoanalysis" or "Marxism and Film."

4 See the two most comprehensive and complete overviews in English to date: Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945–1995* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999; originally *Teorie del cinema 1945–1990*, Milano: Bompiani, 1993), and Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

5 On the topic of diegesis see Etienne Souriau, "La structure de l'univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie," in *Revue internationale de la filmologie* 2, 7–8, 1951: 231–240. David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985) is an influential formulation of the distinction in English. For further considerations see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

6 See, in recent years, Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), Phil Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), and Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006). The question is also addressed by Warren Buckland, "Realism in the Photographic and Digital Image (JURASSIC PARK and THE LOST WORLD)," in Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (London: Arnold, 2002), 195–219.

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, both trans. Hugh Tomlinson, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 and 1989).

8 A case can be made that Bazin, with his emphasis on Egyptian mummies and the Turin shroud, had a theory of photography that already included a critique of ocular-centric perception.

9 See Iurii Tynianov, Viktor Shklovskii, and Boris Eikhenbaum, *Poetika Kino* (Berkeley, CA: Slavic Specialties, 1984).

10 Writers who have similarly tried to address these film-philosophical continuities across the 'digital divide' include Lev Manovich, Sean Cubitt, David Rodowick, and Garrett Stewart. Some of their texts will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

## Chapter 1

# Cinema as Window and Frame

A man, immobilised in a wheelchair, observes through a rectangular frame – as a way to pass the time and entertain himself – 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 summarise 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 premise is often held to figuratively re-enact the specific viewing situation of classical cinema:[1] 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: first, 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 to this book – whether the film is outside or inside in relation to the spectator: As long as Jefferies maintains 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 a 'window on the world.'[2]

These and some other key aspects of our 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 theatre) 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, and his/her body is neither acknowledged in the space nor directly addressed).

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

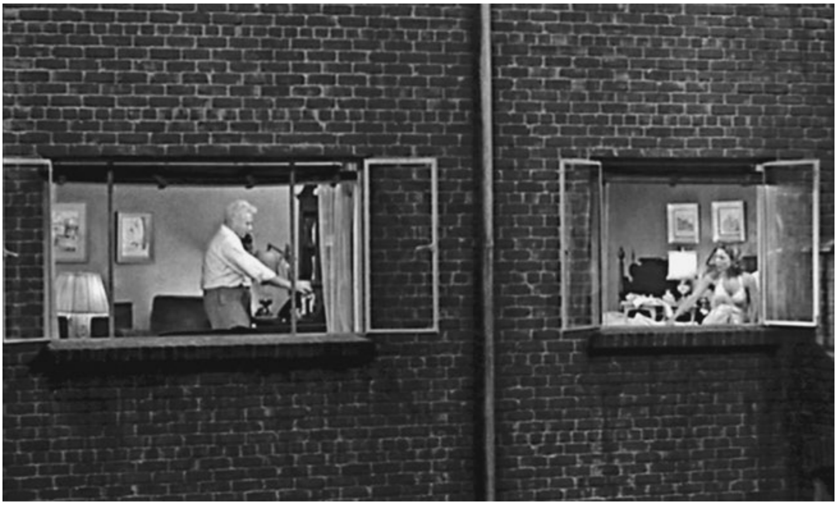

*Figure 1.1* Rear Window: space cropped and at a safe distance.

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 completely vanishes in the act of looking – the frame draws attention both to the status of the arrangement as artefact 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 elaborated it in his *Theory of Film*, and as taken up and refined by Dudley Andrew, it has proven to be widely influential.[3] 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 colour 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, that is, to put 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 – theatre 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 conceptualise 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.[4]