

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack and the Materialization of Cinematic *Sense*

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ABSTRACT

For the film theorists of the 1970s, phenomenology was pejoratively classified as a form of “idealism” which failed to recognise that “natural perception” is codified and structurally determined by ideological forces. This article proposes that, for this very reason, in returning phenomenology to film theoretical discourse, Vivian Sobchack presented Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology as commensurate with materialism. Exploring both Sobchack and Merleau-Ponty’s respective conceptualizations of cinematic meaning or *sense*, I point to a subtle discrepancy between Sobchack’s theory of embodied film spectatorship and Merleau-Ponty’s writings on film and the arts, the latter of which do not identify the body as the source of artistic meaning. Through a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “sensible ideas” and a sequence from Kira Muratova’s *Long Farewells* (1971), I argue that there is an ideal component to Merleau-Ponty’s writings on cinema and the arts that locates the genesis of meaning, not in the body, but in an incorporeal elsewhere. This reconceptualization of the relation between sense and the sensible allows for a renewed appreciation of the place of idealism in film theory.

KEYWORDS

phenomenology, film theory, Sobchack, Merleau-Ponty, meaning.

[1] For Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich the lack of scholarly engagement with Casebier's "rather daring" arguments is due to this contentious reading of Husserl; they remark that "Casebier not only absurdly interprets [Husserl] as a 'realist' despite Husserl's own self-understanding of his philosophy as 'transcendental idealism,' but also addresses Husserl's image theory without taking into account his most important and detailed work on this topic: the manuscripts in *Husserliana* XXIII" (28).

[2] Both Casebier and Sobchack distance phenomenology from the tradition of metaphysical idealism associated with Plato, according to which ideas possess a greater reality than material beings. Phenomenology, however, remains indebted to a Germanic idealist tradition concerned with the ideal component of the human experience of phenomena. In Husserl, this idealism takes after Kant's transcendental idealism as it seeks to account for the transcendental structures preceding sense experience which make this experience possible. Merleau-Ponty shifts analytic focus from the transcendental to the existential, however, his phenomenology retains an element of idealism insofar as he agrees with Husserl's intuition that the world is "given" to us *as sense*.

"It is certainly no accident that the main form of idealism in cinematic theory has been phenomenology," Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (54).

Introduction

In his contribution to the landmark anthology *Opening Bazin* Tom Gunning argues that André Bazin's maligned reputation among film theorists in the 1970s was grounded in "the objection that he was an 'idealist,'" an accusation which was directed at Bazin "to label his writings as politically retrograde or naïve, a bit like the use of the terms 'terrorist' or 'socialist'" (119). As Gunning explains, for the generation of film theorists raised on Althusserian Marxism, structuralist semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis "the term 'idealist' was politically charged and a great many positions or approaches that could hardly be seen as adhering to either the German or Hellenic idealist traditions – such as phenomenology – were nonetheless denounced as idealist" (119). Given that the father of phenomenology Edmund Husserl famously described phenomenology as a form of "transcendental idealism," Gunning's suggestion that phenomenology is "hardly" indebted to German Idealism is contentious. Nevertheless, his comments shrewdly gesture at the ill repute which phenomenology would have to overcome if it were to fulfil Dudley Andrew's prophetic call for a "return to the problematic of phenomenology" in film theory (45). This explains why, when Andrew's 1978 petition was finally answered in the early 1990s, Allen Casebier and Vivian Sobchack were both eager to clear their respective phenomenological heroes of the charge of idealism. Where Sobchack's now-eulogised *The Address of the Eye* maintained that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "existential phenomenology rejects [Husserl's] idealism, his essentialism, and his notion of the transcendental ego" (*The Address of the Eye* 38), Casebier's infrequently-cited *Film and Phenomenology* defended the claim that Husserl was a *realist* and not an *idealist* [1], arguing that the German's "highly sophisticated analysis of the role of consciousness in grasping an art object such as film" (5) presented a compelling alternative to "Bazin's unfruitful realist theory" (4). Curiously enough, in anticipation of rapprochement, both scholars brazenly accused their contemporaries of idealism, with Casebier quoting Peter Wollen, Bill Nichols, Edward Branigan, Teresa de Lauretis and David Bordwell as evidence of his assertion that the entire discipline subscribes to an "idealist/nominalist account of representation" (4) and Sobchack describing the dominant film theory of the time as "Idealist in its utopian longings for a liberatory signification" (*The Address of the Eye* 17-18) [2].

Apropos of phenomenology's reputation, much has changed in the present landscape of film theory, with Daniel Yacavone noting Sobchack's role in ensuring that "phenomenology – more specifically its existential version associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – is no longer at the margins of film theory but close to its center" (159). Although it is no longer brandished as a proverbial stick with which to batter one's theoretical

adversaries, the notion of idealism has not incurred a comparable change of fortune. One possible reason for this, this essay wagers, is that Sobchack chose to present Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of meaning, and her corresponding account of embodied film spectatorship, as commensurate with materialism. Indeed, in *Carnal Thoughts*, the sequel to *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack draws on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "the flesh" to develop a brand of phenomenological film criticism which "lays the concrete foundations for a *materialist* – rather than idealist – understanding of aesthetics and ethics" (*Carnal Thoughts* 3). An ensuing wave of phenomenological film theorists and critics indebted to Sobchack's work seemingly took note: in *The Tactile Eye* Jennifer M. Barker fashions her own methodology which aims to be sensitive to "the ways that materiality permeates the film experience" (25); in *Phenomenology and the Future of Film* Jenny Chamarette cites Sobchack's and Barker's "theorisations of embodiment, corporeality and materiality" as key influences on her own film phenomenology (viii); and Saige Walton's *Cinema's Baroque Flesh* follows Sobchack by grounding its account of cinema as an "art of entanglement" in the "restless, mobile, and replenishable field of materiality that is known [by Merleau-Ponty] as 'flesh'" (Walton 14, 15). Through attention to the notion of meaning or *sense* [*sens*] in the work of Sobchack and Merleau-Ponty, this essay questions the materialist leanings of contemporary phenomenological film theory by arguing that an irrevocable spectre of idealism inheres within Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology and therefore silently inheres within contemporary phenomenological film theory. In a manner analogous to Sarah Cooper's (108-22) claim that in theorising the cinematic body Sobchack and Barker (among other film theorists) neglected Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodied experience as characterised by a "fusion of body and soul" (113), by revisiting Merleau-Ponty's writings on Marcel Proust's "sensible ideas" I argue that there is an ideal component to Merleau-Ponty's writings on cinema and the arts that locates the genesis of meaning, not in the body, but in a non-phenomenal or incorporeal elsewhere. To illustrate what a "sensible idea" might look like in cinema I turn to an extraordinary sequence from Kira Muratova's melodrama *Long Farewells* (Dolgie Provody, 1971), whose epiphanic quality points to the limitations of a materialist phenomenology of cinematic meaning by enacting what Merleau-Ponty calls "a sublimation of the flesh" (*The Visible and the Invisible* 145).

Merleau-Ponty and the *Sense* of Perception

As detailed in the entry on "Sense" in Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, sense in English or *sens* in French, is a derivative of the Latin term *sensus* which bears a number of meanings including sensation or sense perception, intellection or intellectual perception, and signification – the combination of which the authors call "the three senses of 'sense'" (Cassin *et al.* 958). Although the authors observe that the relation between sense perception and intelligible concepts has been central to philosophy from the outset, where in Greek philosophy these concepts were linked to the signifiers *aisthēsis*, *nous* and *dianoia* respectively, in the Latin *sensus* they would become irrevocably entangled with one another to the effect that the notion

of sense has become indispensable to “the philosophical debate over the relations between sensation and knowledge” (952). Profoundly affected by this semantic marriage, the notion of *sens* has been integral to many of the key developments in twentieth century French thought including French Hegelianism, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics, and deconstruction. While the English philosophical tradition has preferred the word “meaning” to sense (and has thereby largely bypassed such etymological obscurities), the problematic of sense arrived in France courtesy of its role in German philosophy where discussions of *Sinn* (a term historically linked to *sens*) and/or *Bedeutung* (a synonym for *Sinn*) featured heavily in works by Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Husserl and Gottlob Frege in the nineteenth century, before playing a noteworthy role in Martin Heidegger’s once-fashionable existential analysis of *Dasein*.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that meaning or *Sinn* is a resolutely human phenomenon that takes place “[w]hen innerworldly beings are discovered along with the being of *Dasein*” to the effect that “the intelligibility of something maintains itself” within phenomenal experience in ways which “can be articulated in [a] disclosure that understands” (146). Heidegger’s claim that “all beings whose mode of being is unlike *Dasein* must be understood as *unmeaningful* [*unsinniges*]” and therefore “*absurd* [*widersinnig*]” (147) would capture the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre who reworked Heidegger’s ontological argument into a moral imperative. For Sartre, it is not only the object world but also sensation and the body that are “altogether contingent and absurd” (328). Faced with this absurdity, human consciousness must strive to transcend all “*unselbständig*” [non-self-sufficient] (455) meanings which the mind is presented with by virtue of the “brute contingency” or “facticity” of the body and introduce “*selbständig*” [self-sufficient] significations which are entirely of the mind’s own creation (457). A comparable philosophy of *sense* can be found in the work of Alexandre Kojève whose legendary Parisian lecture series on Hegel in the 1930s “decisively influenced . . . a whole generation of intellectuals” (Haase and Large 25). In “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel” Kojève memorably argues that discursive language “disengages the meaning from Being by separating essence from existence” and thereby imbues the human subject with the negative power to master their environment and other beings (43). Here, discourse is construed as an “activity” as a result of which “Man” freely “*separates* himself from this World and *opposes* himself to it” by imagining a new world which accords with his desires. In other words, in Kojève’s anthropocentric reading of Hegel, meaning, insofar as it is not only irreducible but opposed to insignificant matter, constitutes the beating heart of ontological negativity.

In speaking of a fundamental division between existence and essence, the world and discourse, or being and sense, Sartre’s and Kojève’s writings form the immediate context within which Merleau-Ponty’s own commentaries on sense would appear. Predominantly inspired by Husserl’s writings on *Sinn*, Merleau-Ponty would put forth a divergent philosophical argument from that of his contemporaries by insisting that embodied existence and immaterial

sense are inextricable, synchronic, and coalescent. In his landmark 1945 monograph *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty looks to refute the idea that consciousness possesses “a ‘representation function’ or a pure power of signifying” which endows our otherwise a-signifying sensory and perceptual experiences with sense (*Phenomenology of Perception* 138). For Merleau-Ponty, this misguided conception of the relation between thought and experience is implicit in both empiricist and “intellectualist” philosophical traditions which are said to share a secret “kinship” in spite of their antagonistic history (41). In a chapter titled “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motricity” Merleau-Ponty seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of this view of consciousness by analysing the literature on a handful of “perceptually handicapped people” (Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 78) who have lost their capacity to spontaneously name quotidian objects. Whereas, for Merleau-Ponty, the conventional subject’s perception is already laden with sense such that they can “effortlessly give birth there to a wave of significations,” in such limit cases the “[ab]normal” subject’s “perceptual field has lost this plasticity” such that, when identifying an object, “the signification must be brought in from elsewhere through a genuine act of interpretation” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 133). Accordingly, by virtue of their impaired motricity, these individuals experience signification as a separate intellectual operation from perception, as Merleau-Ponty writes of one patient: “Another’s words are for him signs that he must decode one by one, whereas for the normal subject these words are the transparent envelope of a sense in which he could live” (134-35). Meaning and existence have, in this instance, become severed in ways which have deeply altered “the patient’s being and his power of existing” (136).

These cases therefore allow Merleau-Ponty to illuminate something important about the relation between language and the body that he believes we are liable to overlook, exclaiming:

What we have discovered through the study of motricity is, in short, a new sense of the word “sense.” . . . The experience of the body leads us to recognize an imposition of sense that does not come from a universal constituting consciousness, a sense that adheres to certain contents. My body is this meaningful core that behaves as a general function and that nevertheless exists and that is susceptible to illness. In the body we learn to recognize this knotting together of essence and existence that we will again meet up with in perception more generally, and that we will then have to describe more fully. (*Phenomenology of Perception* 148)

For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is thus not something imposed on experience from without by a transcendent deity or *cogito* but something *immanent to perception itself* that effortlessly and spontaneously flows from our being-in-the-world. Here, Merleau-Ponty subtly plays on an additional meaning of *sens* which also signifies “direction” or “orientation” so as to imply that within the act of perception there is a directional thrust or movement between the subject of perception and its object that “gives both direction (*sens*) and meaning (*sens*) to embodied experience (or embodied intentionality)”

(Château and Lefebvre 110). The sense of existence, for Merleau-Ponty, thus neither resides in unmediated sense perception or higher order significations but in their worldly correspondence or “commerce” (as Merleau-Ponty likes to say) “of which body and mind, or sign and signification are abstract moments” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 169).

In support of this understanding of sense, Merleau-Ponty draws a comparison between the “unity” of the body and that of the work of art, the latter of which is said to possess ideas that “cannot be communicated other than through the arrangement of colours or sounds” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 152). While Merleau-Ponty does not outright reject the notion that artworks may house “a primary signification that can be translated into prose,” such “notional signification is drawn from a larger signification” that is said to be inextricable from the existential experience of the work as “a modulation of existence” (152). Sense, as present to the body or presented by the work of art, is therefore “a knot of living significations and not the law of a certain number of covariant terms” (153), with Merleau-Ponty explaining:

A novel, a poem, a painting, and a piece of music are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact, and who send forth their signification without ever leaving their temporal and spatial place. (153)

It is this conviction that “no linguistic description is an adequate substitute for either the artwork or the direct perception of any object” (Yacavone 176) that characterises Merleau-Ponty’s writings on art more broadly including his celebrated essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” which reproaches biographical and art historical interpretations of Paul Cézanne’s paintings to argue that their sense instead stems from “a vague fever before the act of artistic expression” which strictly speaking “*does not exist* anywhere” (*Sense and Non-Sense* 19). This is why Merleau-Ponty views “the works of [Honoré de] Balzac, Proust, [Paul] Valéry, or Cézanne” to be complicit with the task of phenomenology insofar as their oeuvres are said to exhibit “the same kind of attention and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to grasp the sense of the world or of history in its nascent state” (*Phenomenology of Perception* xxxv). In other words, the philosophical value of art lies not its capacity to make cognizant pre-codified ideas, concepts, or significations but to make sensible the nascent movement through which sense spontaneously arises within the act of our being-in-the-world.

[3] On Merleau-Ponty’s lecture see also: Sobchack (*The Address of the Eye* 164-65), Yacavone (167-74), Ferencz-Flatzs and Hanich (16-19), and Carbone (9-20).

In the 1945 lecture “Film and the New Psychology” [3] Merleau-Ponty reprises this idea to explain to those present at the *l’Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* that, as with Gestalt psychology, cinema can help us overcome our outmoded understanding of perception and “rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than [the] intelligence” (*Sense and Non-Sense* 52). As a perceptual object which presents us with images in motion, Merleau-Ponty argues that cinema responds to the demands of phenomenology not by acting as “a showcase for ideas” but by making salient “the mingling of consciousness with the

world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others,” a phenomenon which he deems to be “movie material *par excellence*” (59). As with the other arts, Merleau-Ponty insists that the meaning we are met with at the cinema is inseparable from the film’s formal composition, presenting us with a particular kind of “idea” whose signified content is inextricable from the perceptual experience of cinematic sound, motion, image, montage, and gesture [4]. “The meaning of a film,” writes Merleau-Ponty,

[4] Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty clarifies the relation between the mere reproduction of motion through the cinematograph and cinematic meaning (or “expression”) as an outcome of the formal composition of cinematic artworks. Whereas cinema is said to be “initially [an] imitation of objective movement” it “becomes . . . [an] expression of man . . . that gives meaning through divergence to panning, tracking, editing, [and] cutting.” The camera therefore succeeds in “expressing something other than itself owing to the hinge [between the] perceived world [and the] perceiving body” (Merleau-Ponty *The Sensible World and the World of Expression* 31-32).

[5] While cinema is seemingly primed to perform such an operation, Merleau-Ponty does not believe that films automatically achieve this philosophical accomplishment. “Motion pictures”, he writes, “are first and foremost a technical invention in which philosophy counts for nothing . . . after the technical instrument has been invented, it must be taken up by an artistic will and, as it were, re-invented before one can succeed in making real films” (*Sense and Non-Sense* 59).

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*. The idea is presented in a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the coexistence of the parts of a painting. The joy of art lies in its showing how something takes on meaning not by referring to already established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements. (57-58, emphasis added)

In an informative analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on cinema, Mauro Carbone notes that, inspired by Immanuel Kant’s writings on “aesthetic ideas,” Merleau-Ponty understands the idea in cinema to exist in a “conceptless form” which proves to be “indiscernible from its sensible manifestation” (17). In doing so, Merleau-Ponty enrolls cinema in the same project which led him to compare his favourite writers and painter to phenomenology, whose “mutual intention seems to be that of *teaching us to see the world anew*” (Carbone 17). In the case of cinema, this pedagogical task is best accomplished by works which succeed in reconciling the array of disparate perceptual objects, images and sounds that present themselves to consciousness into a singular cohesive *sense* which is at once meaningful, oriented, and embodied, thereby collapsing all distinction between existence and essence, perception and expression, or being and meaning [5].

Sobchack and Cinema’s “Wild Meaning”

In the preface to *The Address of the Eye* Sobchack defends her decision to embrace a phenomenological approach to cinema at a time where the discipline was dominated by psychoanalytic and “neo-Marxist” film theories (12). Anticipating that her work may be met with hostility, she cites the prejudices and difficulties phenomenology faced during a time in which “French theory” was being liberally imported from France to America; “little understood and even less read,” writes Sobchack,

“phenomenology” was loosely conceived and associated with a multitude of precontemporary sins. It was regarded as idealist, essentialist, and ahistorical. It was also seen as extremely naïve, making claims about “direct” experience precisely at a moment when contemporary film theory was emphasizing the inaccessibility of direct experience and focused on the constitutive process and mediating structures of language. (xiv)

For film scholars, notes Sobchack, phenomenology's defamed reputation was compounded by its association with the works of a handful of Catholic film critics who had compared the outlook of certain cinematic works to the philosophical movement in their writings. As a result, phenomenology "was [paradoxically] charged with being both a form of transcendental, religious 'mysticism' (evidenced by the work of film theorists Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel) and a form of 'naïve realism' (evidenced by the work of André Bazin)" (xiv-xv).

In the context of Francophone film theory, an enduring association between phenomenology and idealism had been cemented in the 1970s during which now-legendary works by Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry successfully sullied its reputation in France and, consequently, abroad. While Metz's earliest publications were by and large sympathetic in their treatment of phenomenological approaches to film (Château & Lefebvre), Metz's celebrated 1964 essay "Cinema: Language or Language System" voiced reservations towards what he saw as a theoretical consensus inspired by Merleau-Ponty's lecture; namely, that "[t]he cinema is the 'phenomenological' art *par excellence*, [because] the signifier is coextensive with the whole of the signified, the spectacle its own signification" (43), with Metz reminding his contemporaries that "the cinema is after all not life; it is a created spectacle" (*Film Language* 43; translation modified). By the publication of *The Imaginary Signifier* in 1977, Dominique Château and Martin Lefebvre argue that phenomenology and psychoanalysis functioned in a relationship of "negative complementarity" within Metz's film theory, with the former acting as "the alienating inverted image [of psychoanalytic spectatorial consciousness], the false consciousness or camera obscura of the spectatorial self" (121). [6] In the text in question, Metz argues that by acting as if reality were given to perception in an unmediated or "natural" form "the topographical apparatus of the cinema resembles the conceptual apparatus of phenomenology" thereby adhering to a "common illusion of *perceptual mastery* that light must be cast [on] by the real conditions of society and man" (*The Imaginary Signifier* 53). In this respect, Metz was evidently indebted to Baudry's 1970 article, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in which Baudry compares Husserl's transcendental subject to the operations through which the moving image "denies" or "negates" the fractional differences between cinematic frames – which otherwise have "no unity of meaning" – in order that a "meaning can be constituted" which is "at once direction, continuity, movement" (43). For Baudry, the mechanisms by which cinema generates the impression of temporal continuity mirror "the synthetic unity of the locus where meaning originates" (44) for Husserl's transcendental subject, and thereby "unites the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, of lived experience, into unifying meaning" (45-46). In this way, both Baudry and Metz held that cinema mimicks phenomenology by giving us the impression that "world [is] already given as meaning" (Baudry 45), thereby achieving "a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology" (46), namely the impression that there are no underlying forces (be they ideological or psychoanalytic) structuring our "natural perception" of the world.

[6] For Château and Lefebvre, in embracing a more critical stance on phenomenology Metz effectively succeeds in swapping one form of idealism for another; by endeavouring "to go behind perception . . . by way of semiological codes" which could uncover "the 'objective determinations' of subjective experience" they write "he replaces one form of idealism—that of classical phenomenology—with another form of idealism, one without a (conscious or whole, Cartesian or Husserlian) subject—that of structuralism" (130).

In *The Address of the Eye* the conviction that phenomenology naively studies the impression of reality, without attending to the underlying ideological forces or “superstructures” that shape our perception of reality in certain ways, remains a conspicuous concern that Sobchack is eager to dispel. This is most likely the reason that Sobchack adopts what Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich describe as an “inclusive” approach to phenomenology “which blends phenomenological intentions with post-structuralist and semiotic perspectives” (12). To necessitate her theoretical intervention, Sobchack builds on Andrew’s argument that phenomenology addresses certain shortcomings in structuralist semiotics – which, by virtue of its obsession with “codes and textual systems,” is “unable to discuss that mode of experience we call signification” (45) – by taking up “the far more pressing task of describing the peculiar way meaning is experienced in cinema” (46). Accordingly, Sobchack endeavours “to describe and account for the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the experience of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity,” informing her reader that if such a task “is theoretical, it is radically – materially – so” (*The Address of the Eye* xvii). Sobchack’s text undertakes what Andrew calls “a study of the zone of pre-formulation in which the psyche confronts the visual text intended for it” (46), with Sobchack arguing that “any semiotics and hermeneutics of the cinema must return to radically reflect on the origins of cinematic communication” (*The Address of the Eye* 6) by attending to a “lived logic of signification in the cinema” the genesis of which lies “in the activity of embodied consciousness realizing itself in the world and with others . . . as both sense-making and sensible” (7). Where the prevalent semiotic film theories of the time are said to view cinema “merely as a vehicle through which meaning can be represented, presented, or produced,” thereby giving rise to “partial descriptions . . . that have detached cinematic signification from its concrete origin in sense and significance” (20), Sobchack seeks to ground her own semiotics of cinema in that domain of “primordial signifiacnce that Merleau-Ponty calls ‘wild meaning’”: a prereflective and prerational mode of meaningful experience whose “spontaneous and constitutive significance . . . grounds the specificity and intelligibility of cinematic communication” (11).

Sobchack’s first chapter lays the groundwork for an existential phenomenological theory of cinematic meaning by commencing with a commentary on Merleau-Ponty’s argument that expression and perception are “reversible” (a dynamic which Merleau-Ponty calls the *chiasmus*), comparing “the original power of the motion picture to signify” to his account of the genesis of spoken language as a “living exchange of perception and expression . . . [a] fleshly dialogue, of human beings and the world together making sense sensible” (3). For Sobchack, cinema is a particularly poignant example of the “dynamically and directionally reversible acts” through which perception expresses itself and perceives a world that is itself expressive, giving rise to a multimodal sensorium which traverses the filmmaker, the film viewer, and the film itself whose “similar modes of being-in-the-world” provide the foundations for what Sobchack calls “the *intersubjective* basis of objective cinematic communication” (5). Here, Sobchack gestures towards her idiosyncratic idea that a given cinematic work

“has perceptual and expressive capacities that are *equivalent* to that of the viewer,” thereby defending the claim that “film literally, not just metaphorically, has a perceiving and expressing body of its own” (Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich 29). Her theory is thus grounded in a conception of film not as an object but an embodied *subject* which “has the capacity and competence to signify, to not only *have* sense but also to *make* sense through a unique and systemic form of communication” (6), an argument which is central to her later description of existential film phenomenology as a “materialist” project.

While *The Address of the Eye* does not insist as overtly as *Carnal Thoughts* upon the “radically material nature” of “the lived body’s essential implication in making ‘meaning’ out of bodily ‘sense’” (*Carnal Thoughts* 1), Sobchack’s earlier defence of existential phenomenology against the charge of idealism clearly orients her later attempt to devise an embodied approach to film hermeneutics which seeks to “describe and explicate the *general* or *possible* structures and meanings” of cinema (5) by starting from her own “fleshly” or “carnal” encounters with a film. Sobchack’s argument is not simply that cinematic meaning is inextricable from perception, but that cinematic meaning has its “radical origin” in the “lived-body experience” of the spectator/film (*The Address of the Eye* 7) which is identified as the “existential ground for both a theory of sign production and a theory of meaning” (21). In this respect, all that can be said about a film can be traced back to the body as a *locus for meaning* which autonomously “makes sense” of the sensory datum with which it is presented, creating a generalized significance from which abstract linguistic statements can then be formulated. As Sobchack explains:

long before we consciously and voluntarily differentiate and abstract the world’s significance for us into “ordinary language,” long before we constrain “wild meaning” in discrete symbolic systems, we are immersed in language as an existential system. In the very movement of existence, in the very activity of perception and its bodily expression, we inaugurate language and communication. (12)

The sense of film is therefore not a product of the subjective intentions of a filmmaker, nor symptomatic of the ideological conditions of its production, but the result of “a dialogical and dialectical engagement of *two* viewing subjects,” one spectatorial the other filmic (23).

Sobchack’s film theory, it would appear, is thus “materialist” in sense that the origin of cinematic meaning can and must be traced back to a certain “commerce” between the living, expressive, and organically constituted bodies of spectator and film alike. Of profound importance to this postulation is Sobchack’s account of the way Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology compensates for the “idealism” and “essentialism” of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology by rethinking “the subject of consciousness and [phenomenal] experience as [an] existence in the world . . . [which] is *embodied, situated, and finite*” (*The Address of the Eye* 38). As Sobchack explains, through the phenomenological concept of intentionality, Husserl

sets himself the goal of understanding the way we experience phenomena “*within the context of the world of our lived experience (Lebenswelt)*” (33), wherein, instead of experiencing itself as an “empty” subject which reflects external objects, our consciousness finds itself “directed” towards an object to the effect that it is “always *consciousness of something*” (34). Thus, in Sobchack’s words, “[i]ntentionality is this invariant correlation that structures and directs our experience and, from the first, infuses it with meaning” (34). As a generalized structure through which the world presents itself to us as meaningful, Husserl’s transcendental ego becomes “an abstraction from the *Lebenswelt*” (38) which it seeks to describe, an issue which Merleau-Ponty rectifies by taking Husserl’s “static correlational structure” and turning it into a “dynamic structure” which is sensitive to “the lived-body that actualizes intentionality in the very gesture of being alive in and present to the world and others” (39). Instead of attempting to “stand ‘behind’ existential meaning,” Merleau-Ponty holds that “consciousness is only meaningful *as* it is existential” thereby rethinking the body as the “agent and agency of engagement with the world” whose perceptual and expressive capacities belong to a “*unity of meaningful experience*” (40). Sobchack’s film theory is therefore critical of what she perceives as a “transcendental” impulse (comparable to Husserl’s transcendentalism) in film theory which in attempting to circumscribe the meaning of a given film has turned its back upon the existential world within which meaning *in general* is made manifest. In other words, in seeking to establish itself as a science of signs film theory turned its back on the “radically material condition of the human being” as a result of which “we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought” (*Carnal Thoughts* 4).

The Sensible Ideas of Cinema

Without doubt, Sobchack’s most widespread contribution to film theory is this understanding of spectatorship as “embodied” and her associated conceptualization of cinematic meaning as something “not solely communicated through signs but experienced in the body” (Marks 149). Here, in challenging the then prevailing semiotic perception of cinematic meaning as a largely codified process, Sobchack’s work has steered the discipline towards a more complex understanding of cinematic meaning which is divided in two levels or strata: one existential and one syntactic; as Sobchack writes in *Carnal Thoughts*: “the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the ‘carnal thoughts’ that ground and inform more conscious analysis” (60). One potential issue with this conception of meaning, however, is that by presenting the body as the source or origin of worldly significations one is liable to find oneself in a “vicious circle of sense” where, given that experience is always already meaningful, it is difficult to say why one carnal thought might appear as more or less intelligible, electrifying or profound than another without recourse to one’s own subjectivity as an evaluative criterion. Indeed, for Malin Warlberg, in her readiness to take her own embodied experience as the starting point for film hermeneutics Sobchack

adopts an “excessively subjective” stance towards her object of study thereby making a “problematic move toward a solipsistic position” (20). Rather than adding to the existing critiques of Sobchack’s work, with the remainder of this paper I wish to return to the writings of Merleau-Ponty where the body is arguably less the source of worldly meaning than one of several participants in a broader ontological movement or *sense* through which meaning comes into being. Indeed, by rejecting what Merleau-Ponty calls the “empiricist genesis of thought” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 145) – i.e. the “vulgar” idea that “all mental and spiritual phenomena was to be found in matter and material processes” (Fromm 8) – *The Visible and the Invisible* sketches out an alternative thesis on the ideality of art as bound to what Merleau-Ponty calls “sensible ideas” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 151).

The notion of sensible ideas appears in “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” the same chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* where Merleau-Ponty elaborates the celebrated notion of “the flesh” (139). Having, in the previous chapter made passing reference to a “thickness of flesh” that separates the human subject from “the ‘hard core’ of Being,” Merleau-Ponty defines the flesh as a “sheath of non-being that subjectivity always carries about itself” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 127; translation modified). This fleshly sheath is described, in accordance with Sobchack’s account of embodied spectatorship, as a modality of “carnal being,” however, it is also given a more abstract formulation by Merleau-Ponty who adds that carnal being is “a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence . . . of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant” (136). Associated with a peculiar kind of reflexive “visibility” wherein vision “turns back upon the whole of the visible . . . of which it is a part” (139), Merleau-Ponty is quick to dismiss the impression that the flesh should be understood as a form of matter, writing:

[Vision] is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh . . . The flesh is not matter, in the sense of the corpuscles of being which would add up or continue of one another to form beings. Nor is the visible . . . “psychic” material that would be . . . brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body . . . The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. (139)

Rather than matter or substance, Merleau-Ponty understands the fleshly body as “an *exemplar sensible*” (135) which emblemizes “the whole of the sensible of which it is a part” (138); the flesh is therefore “not itself a thing, an interstitial matter, a connective tissue, but a *sensible for itself*.” (135) [7]

Although Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is primarily concerned with tracing the “*chiasmus*” of the flesh as it incarnates bodies and the world as part of a sensible whole, questions of intelligibility, thought and “incorporeal” ideas cast an elongated shadow over the entire chapter. Having introduced the notion of “the flesh as expression” as a “reversible” structure which collapses all distinction between “speech and what it means to say,” Merleau-Ponty explains that “we reach a second or figurative meaning of vision, which will

[7] The term *sensible* in French carries a rather different set of associations to its English false friend. Encompassing both perception and sensation, the adjective *sensible* relates to the domain of *sensibilité* [sensibility] which *Le Petit Robert* describes as the capacity of human beings to perceive and sense their surroundings. The noun *le sensible*, in the passive sense, therefore, describes the totality of ‘palpable,’ ‘tangible,’ and ‘visible’ things which may be subject to our *sensibilité*.

be the *intuitus mentis* or idea, a sublimation of the flesh, which will be mind or thought” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 145). In clarifying this “bond between the flesh and the idea” (149), Merleau-Ponty draws attention to a famous passage from Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* which reflects on several “little phrases” from the fictitious Vinteuil sonata, comparing them to a select group of things “without equivalents” including love, literary ideas, sound and touch. Invoking this passage Merleau-Ponty asserts that “[n]o one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, [but] that is its lining and its depth” (149). As “the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas” (149), such phenomena are said to correspond with a certain variety of truth which is not to be understood as a “hidden” facet of “physical reality which we have not been able to discover” but as grounded in *sensible ideas* which “could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience” (150). Subject to the impression that our “explication does not give us the idea itself . . . but a second version of it, a more manageable derivative,” Merleau-Ponty contends through reference to Proust, that such ideas are necessarily “veiled with shadows,” comparing their uncanny “presence” to “the presence of someone in the dark” (150). “Their Carnal texture,” explains Merleau-Ponty, “presents to us what is absent from all flesh . . . a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing” (150-51).

Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of cinematic meaning as imminent to perception and therefore inseparable from the “the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements” (*Sense and Non-Sense* 58), Proust’s sensible ideas refuse to distinguish between the sign (i.e. the musical phrase) and its significance. However, by describing the sensible idea as a kind of negativity, Merleau-Ponty gives the ideal aspect of this experience a salience that is less conspicuous in his prior analyses of the arts which, he stressed, should not be viewed as mere “vehicles” for ideas; as Merleau-Ponty has it: “We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; *they possess us*” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 151; emphasis added). In this respect, adds Merleau-Ponty:

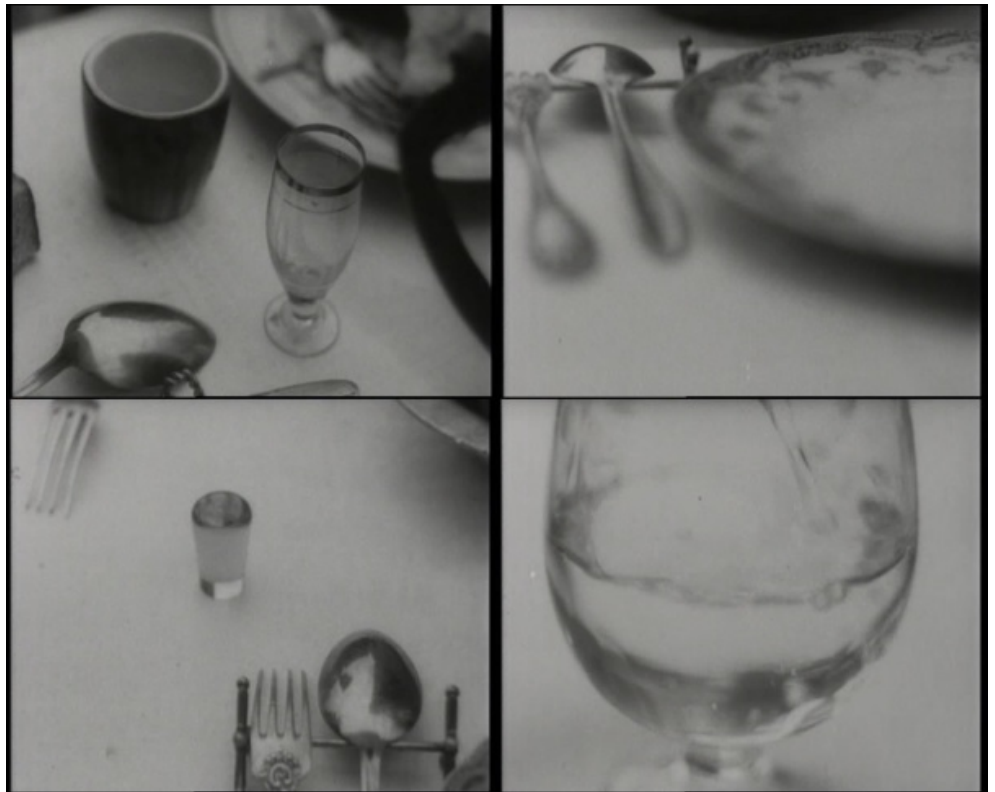
There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body or the cohesion of my body with the world. (152)

As a kind of meaning or *sens* that is without concept, the genesis of such ideas is not the body but the visible as it “folds back” upon itself and “streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the counters of sensible things” (152), to the effect that they “lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world” (152-53). It is a meaning which, strictly speaking, arrives from nowhere and pierces or “sublimates” the flesh. This allows Merleau-Ponty to end “The Intertwining — The Chiasm” by addressing the relation between *sens* and language, arguing that “meaning is

not on the phrase like the butter on the bread” but a “totality of what is said” whose existence owes to a prior “power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning” (155).

Here, the discrepancy between Sobchack’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty and my own concerns the question of whether the body should be understood as the locus of wild meaning or simply a state of “thickness” through which sensible or incorporeal ideas pass before impressing themselves upon the psyche. If the body, one might question, is the source of all existential meaning, then what is it that makes certain ideas feel more inexplicable, more allusive, more profound than others? As was the case for Merleau-Ponty I can propose no definitive answer to question, however, I hope that a brief discussion of a fleeting film sequence that left an indelible mark on my consciousness might illuminate the limitations of understanding cinematic meaning as a material phenomenon. This sequence appears in Kira Muratova’s *Long Farewells*, a now-coveted film banned by the Soviet authorities for nearly two decades due to its excessively “personal” and formally unconventional exploration of the complex relationship of a middle-aged single mother Evgeniia and her reticent teenaged son Sasha. It acts as the conclusion of a remarkable scene in which Evgeniia and Sasha visit the coastal residence of some family friends. Throughout most of the scene, Evgeniia flirts openly with their host, while Sasha’s infatuation with his childhood crush Masha is established through several mesmerizing cutaways, including a shot of Sasha running his hand through Masha’s hair with all environmental noise absented except for the now amplified sound of breaking waves. The lengthy scene then culminates in an animated conversation over lunch where the charged dynamics between the mother and son become a focal point. Much to the embarrassment of her son, Evgeniia openly laments Sasha’s lack of application to his studies and generally impassive and uninterested attitude, becoming vividly distressed as she speaks. In response to this, Sasha, who has remained silent for most of the conversation, proceeds to drink a glass of vodka during a toast, quelling his mother’s disapproval by claiming that it was only water. Following this moment of dramatic intensity, Muratova’s editor, Valentina Oleynik, inserts a short montage comprised of four shots of various objects on the table, with no characters in view (figs. 1-4). What makes this moment so distinctive and striking is the fact that, without any apparent motivation, all sound (both diegetic and non-diegetic) is cut – including the atmospheric track – thereby sequestering these objects from diegesis and raising the question of *to whom* they appear.

Figs. 1-4 Stills from *Long Farewells* (1971).



I find this sequence an exemplary cinematic manifestation of what Merleau-Ponty calls sensible ideas for several reasons. Firstly, this sequence clearly carries a *sense*, however, precisely what it “signifies” (both with respect to its diegetic function and symbolic connotations) remains an enigma. It does not “mean” anything in the sense that it facilitates an exchange of concepts through the encoding and decoding of signs and yet it presents itself as pregnant or charged with meaning, leaving us with the impression that it *must be read*. In other words, it pertains to a kind of ideality – a kind of *thinking* – that is not itself reducible to any particular expressible and yet which seemingly heralds “the disclosure of a universe of ideas” (*The Invisible and the Invisible* 149); this is what I take Merleau-Ponty to mean by “cohesion without concept” (152): it is significant precisely because it orients us towards *sense*. Secondly, it must be noted, the sense of the sequence is striking on an aesthetic level because of its formal composition, or spatiotemporal arrangement, as well as the rhythm that is created by Oleynik’s edits. In this respect, its meaning is *carnal* in that it is inseparable from our sensible experience of the film as an aesthetic object and that our senses clearly partake in the process through which it is recognised as significant, standing apart from the rest of the scene. However, in attributing the genesis of this sense to the materiality of own bodies, as well as the material body of the film, one is liable to overlook the importance of the context within which the sequence appears *as significant*: namely, at the end of a dramatic episode which plays an important role in our evolving understanding of the two central characters. Indeed, the power of this “sensible idea” is partly a product of its failure to conform with our expectations regarding narrative cohesion, or put differently, its challenge to our prevailing conception of what kind of film we are watching, as nothing in the film (not even the seemingly subjective shots

which express Sasha's yearning for Masha) anticipates this moment. To merely attribute the meaningfulness of this sequence to the corporeal rapport between film and spectator would be to mistake the carnal texture of the flesh itself for its sublimation, the sheer existence of the sensible for that which it gives depth, or the sound of the sonata for the epiphany it produces within us. This brings me to my final reason, which is that this moment is characterized by a certain absence, negativity, or alterity in accordance with which it offers us a perception of the world unlike our quotidian perception of things that seems to have arrived from "elsewhere," and which provokes thought by instilling us with the desire to illuminate the impenetrable shadow that it casts upon our consciousness. Wrapped within the folds of corporeal being its sense is seemingly of an *incorporeal* nature, radiating from beyond the threshold of the visible world to confront us with "what is absent from all flesh . . . a negativity that is not nothing" (150-51).

Conclusion

This essay has sought to better understand how and why contemporary phenomenological film theory and criticism has repeatedly sought to understand itself as a *materialist* critical practice in spite of phenomenology's historical link to transcendental idealism. I have maintained that, in order to create a robust phenomenological account of film that is immune to the charge of idealism, *The Address of the Eye* locates the genesis of cinematic meaning in the carnal bodies of the film and spectator alike, laying the foundations for the overtly materialist approach to film hermeneutics further developed in *Carnal Thoughts*. Through a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's commentary on Proust's sensible ideas, and a sequence from Muratova's *Long Farewells*, I have offered a subtle alternative to Sobchack's influential phenomenological account of cinematic meaning by reframing sense not as something which is born of the body, but as something which passes through the body, impressing itself upon us in significant ways which provoke a certain kind of non-conceptual thought. This is not to say that we must dispense with cinematic materialism and embrace an 'idealist' approach to cinematic meaning: for it is the very tension between the material and the ideal, being and thought, or words and things, that is arguably most critical to our continued attempts to grapple with the meaning of cinema and perhaps the meaning of being more broadly. Such a dialectic is only possible, however, once the notion of the ideality of sense, and more generally that of philosophical *idealism*, is no longer construed as the bad other of the material which must be negated, but as an operative and necessary part of thought itself [8].

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