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## **The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic "Presence"**

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## 2.1 The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic “Presence”

BY VIVIAN SOBCHACK

*The essence of technology is nothing technological.*  
—Martin Heidegger

What happens when our *expressive* technologies also become *perceptive* technologies—expressing and extending us in ways we never thought possible, radically transforming not merely our comprehension of the world but also our apprehension of ourselves? Elaine Scarry writes that “we make things so that they will in turn remake us, revising the interior of embodied consciousness” (97). Certainly, those particularly expressive technologies that are entailed in the practices of writing and the fine arts do, indeed, “remake” us as we use them—but how much more powerful a revision of our embodied consciousness occurs with the inauguration of perceptive technologies such as the telescope and the microscope or the

X-ray? Changing not only our expression of the world and ourselves, these perceptive technologies also changed our sense of ourselves in radical ways that have now become naturalized and transparent. More recently (although no longer that recently), we have been radically “remade” by the perceptive (as well as expressive) technologies of photography, cinema, and the electronic media of television and computer—these all the more transformative of “the interior of embodied consciousness” (and its exterior actions too) because they are technologies that are culturally *pervasive*. They belong not merely to scientists or doctors or an educated elite but to all of us—and all of the time.

Indeed, it almost goes without saying that during the past century photographic, cinematic, and electronic technologies of representation have had enormous impact on our means and modalities of expression and signification. Less obvious, perhaps, is the enormous impact these technologies have had on the historically particular significance or “sense” we have and make of those temporal and spatial coordinates that radically in-form and orient our social, personal, and bodily existence. At this time in the United States, whether or not we go to the movies; watch television or music videos; own camcorders, videotapes, or digital video disc recorder/players; allow our children to engage video and computer games; write our academic papers on personal computers; do our banking and shopping online—we are all part of a moving-image culture, and we live cinematic and electronic lives. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to claim that none of us can escape daily encounters—both direct and indirect—with the *objective* phenomena of photographic, cinematic, televisual, and computer technologies and the networks of communication and texts they produce. It is also not an extravagance to suggest that, in the most profound, socially pervasive, and yet personal way, these objective encounters transform us as *embodied subjects*. That is, relatively novel as materialities of human communication, photographic, cinematic, and electronic media have not only historically *symbolized* but also historically *constituted* a radical alteration of the forms of our

culture's previous temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of existential "presence" to the world, to ourselves, and to others.

This different sense of subjectively perceived and embodied presence, both signified and supported by first photographic and then cinematic and electronic media, emerges within and co-constitutes objective and material practices of representation and social existence. Thus, while certainly cooperative in creating the moving-image culture or lifeworld we now inhabit, cinematic and electronic technologies are quite different not only from photographic technologies but also from each other in their concrete materiality and particular existential significance. Each technology not only differently *mediates* our figurations of bodily existence but also *constitutes* them. That is, each offers our lived bodies radically different ways of "being-in-the-world." Each implicates us in different structures of material investment, and—because each has a particular affinity with different cultural functions, forms, and contents—each stimulates us through differing modes of presentation and representation to different aesthetic responses and ethical responsibilities. As our aesthetic forms and representations of "reality" become externally realized and then unsettled first by photography, then cinema, and now electronic media, our values and evaluative criteria of what counts in our lives are also unsettled and transformed. In sum, just as the photograph did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so in the late twentieth and early twenty-first, cinematic and electronic screens differently solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our sensibilities and responsibilities about it. Each differently and objectively alters our subjectivity while each invites our complicity in formulating space, time, and bodily investment as significant personal and social experience.

These preliminary remarks are grounded in the belief that historical changes in our sense of time, space, and existential, embodied presence cannot be considered less than a consequence of correspondent changes in our technologies. However, they also must be considered something

more—for, as Martin Heidegger reminds us in the epigraph that begins this essay, “The essence of technology is nothing technological” (317). That is, technology never comes to its particular material specificity and function in a neutral context to neutral effect. Rather, it is historically informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic, and social context, and thus it both co-constitutes and expresses not merely technological value but always also cultural values. Correlatively, technology is never merely used, never simply instrumental. It is always also incorporated and lived by the human beings who create and engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are not only cooperative and co-constitutive but are also dynamic and reversible.

It is no accident, for example, that in our now dominantly electronic (and only secondarily cinematic) culture, many people describe and understand their minds and bodies in terms of computer systems and programs (even as they still describe and understand their lives in terms of movies). Nor is it trivial that computer systems and programs are often described and understood in terms of human minds and bodies (for example, as intelligent or susceptible to viral infection) and that these new computer-generated “beings” have become the explicit cybernetic heroes of our most popular moving-image fictions (for example, *Robocop*, Paul Verhoeven, 1987; or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, James Cameron, 1991). As Elena del Río suggests, “[T]echnology springs from the very human condition of embodiment and . . . the human imaginary is of necessity a technologically drawn and grounded structure” (97). Thus, even in the few examples above we can see how a qualitatively new techno-logic begins to alter our perceptual orientation in and toward the world, ourselves, and others. Furthermore, as this new techno-logic becomes culturally pervasive and normative, it can come to inform and affect profoundly the socio-logic, psycho-logic, axio-logic, and even the bio-logic by which we daily live our lives.

Most powerful of all, in this regard, are those perceptual technologies that serve also as technologies of representation—namely, photography, cinema, television, and, most recently, computers. These technologies extend not only our senses but also our capacity to see and make sense of ourselves. Certainly, a technological artifact that extends our physical capacities like the automobile (whose technological function is neither perception nor representation but transportation) has profoundly changed the temporal and spatial shape and meaning of our lifeworld and our own bodily and symbolic sense of ourselves.<sup>[1]</sup> However, such perceptual and representational technologies as photography, motion pictures, television, video, and computers in-form us twice over: first through the specific material conditions by which they latently engage and extend our senses at the transparent and lived bodily level of what philosopher of technology Don Ihde calls our “microperception,” and then again through their manifest representational function by which they engage our senses consciously and textually at the hermeneutic level of what he calls our “macroperception” (29).<sup>[2]</sup> Most theorists and critics of cinematic and electronic media have been drawn to the latter—that is, to macroperceptual descriptions and interpretations of the hermeneutic-cultural contexts that inform and shape both the materiality and social contexts of these technologies and their textual representations. Nonetheless, we would not be able to reflect on and analyze either technologies or texts without, at some point, having engaged them *immediately*—that is, through our perceptive sensorium, through the *immanent mediation* and materiality of our own bodies. Thus, as Ihde reminds us, although “there is no microperception (sensory-bodily) without its location within a field of macroperception,” it is equally true that there is “no macroperception without its microperceptual foci.” Indeed, all macroperceptual descriptions and interpretations “find their fulfillment *only* within the range of microperceptual possibility” (Ihde 29; emphasis added). It is important to emphasize, however, that because perception is constituted and organized as a bodily and sensory *gestalt* that is always already meaningful, a microperceptual focus is *not*

reducible to a focus on physiology. That is, insofar as our senses are not only sensible but also “make sense,” the perceiving and sensible body is always also a *lived body*—immersed in, making, and responding to social as well as somatic meaning.

In what follows, then, I want to emphasize certain microperceptual aspects of our engagement with the perceptual technologies of photographic, cinematic, and electronic representation that have been often overlooked. I also want to suggest some of the ways the respective *material* conditions of these media and their reception and use inform and transform our microperceptual experience—particularly our temporal and spatial sense of ourselves and our cultural contexts of meaning. We look at and carry around photographs or sit in a movie theater, before a television set, or in front of a computer not only as *conscious beings* engaged in the activity of perception and expression but also as *carnal beings*. Our vision is neither abstracted from our bodies nor from our other modes of perceptual access to the world. Nor does what we see merely touch the surface of our eyes. Seeing images mediated and made visible by technological vision thus enables us not only to see technological images but also to see technologically. As Ihde emphasizes, “the concreteness of [technological] ‘hardware’ in the broadest sense connects with the equal concreteness of our bodily existence”; thus “the term ‘existential’ in context refers to perceptual and bodily experience, to a kind of ‘phenomenological materiality’” (21). Insofar as the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic have each been *objectively constituted* as a new and discrete techno-logic, each also has been *subjectively incorporated*, enabling a new and discrete perceptual mode of existential and embodied presence. In sum, as they have mediated and represented our engagement with the world, with others, and with ourselves, photographic, cinematic, and electronic technologies have transformed us so that we presently see, sense, and make sense of ourselves as quite other than we were before each of them existed.

The correlation and materiality of both human subjects and their objective artifacts not only suggests some commensurability and possibilities of confusion, exchange, and reversibility between them but also suggests that any phenomenological analysis of the existential relation between human lived-body subjects and their technologies of perception and representation must be semiological and historical even at the microperceptual level. Description must attend both to the particular objective materiality and modalities through which subjective meanings are signified and to the subjective cultural and historical situations in which both objective materiality and meaning come to cohere in the praxis of everyday life. Like human vision, the materiality and modalities of photographic, cinematic, and electronic perception and representation are not abstractions. They are concretely situated and finite, particularly conventional and institutionalized. They also inform and share in the spatiotemporal structures and history of a wide range of interrelated cultural phenomena. Thus, in its attention to the broadly defined “material conditions” and “relations” of production (specifically, the conditions for and production of both technological perception and its existential meaning), existential phenomenology is compatible with certain aspects of new historicism or Marxist analysis.

In this context we might turn to Fredric Jameson’s seminal discussion of three crucial and expansive historical “moments” marked by “a technological revolution within capital itself” and the related “cultural logics” that correspondingly emerge and become dominant in each of them to radically inform three revolutions in aesthetic sensibility and its representation (77). Situating these three critical moments in the 1840s, 1890s, and 1940s, Jameson correlates the major technological changes that revolutionized the structure of capital—changing market capitalism to monopoly capitalism to multinational capitalism—with the changes wrought by the “cultural logics” identified as, respectively, realism, modernism, and postmodernism, three radically different axiological forms and norms of aesthetic representation and ethical investment.



Extrapolating from Jameson, we can also locate within this historical and logical framework three correspondent technological modes and institutions of visual (and aural) representation: respectively, the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic. Each, I would argue, has been critically complicit not only in a specific *technological revolution* within capital but also in a specific *perceptual revolution* within the culture and the subject. That is, each has been significantly co-constitutive of the particular temporal and spatial structures and phenomeno-logic that inform each of the dominant cultural logics Jameson identifies as realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

In this regard, writing about the technologically inflected and pervasive perceptual revolution in the lived experience of time and space that took place in Europe and the United States during the period between 1880 and 1918, phenomenological historian Stephen Kern demonstrates that although some major cultural changes occurred relatively independent of technology, others were “*directly* inspired by new technology” or emerged more subtly from the new technological “metaphors and analogies” that *indirectly* altered the structures of perceptual life and thought (6-7). What is suggested here is that the technologically discrete nature and phenomenological impact of new technologies or “materialities” of representation co-constitute a complex cultural gestalt—one implicated in and informing each historically specific “technological revolution in capital” and transformation of cultural logic. Thus, the technological “nature” of the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic is graspable always and only in a qualified manner—that is, less as a technological essence than as a cultural theme.

Although my most novel contributions here are, I hope, to our understanding of the technologies of cinematic and electronic representation (those two materialities that constitute our current moving-image culture), something must first be said of that culture’s grounding in the context and phenomenology of the *photographic* (which has provoked a good

deal of phenomenological description).[3] The photographic mode of perception and representation is privileged in the period of market capitalism located by Jameson as beginning in the 1840s. This was a “moment” emergent from and driven by the technological innovations of steam-powered mechanization, which both enabled unprecedented industrial expansion and informed the new cultural logic of realism. Not only did industrial expansion give rise to other modes and forms of expansion, but this expansion was itself historically unique because of its unprecedented *visibility*. As Jean-Louis Comolli points out: “The second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible. . . . [This is] the effect of the social multiplication of images. . . . [It is] the effect also, however, of something of a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable: by journies, explorations, colonisations, the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriatable” (122-23). Thus, although the cultural logic of realism has been seen as represented primarily by literature (most specifically, the bourgeois novel), it is, perhaps, even more intimately bound to the mechanically achieved, empirical, and representational “evidence” of the world constituted—and expanded—by photography.

Until very recently the photographic has been popularly and phenomenologically perceived as existing in a state of testimonial verisimilitude—the photograph’s film emulsions analogically marked with (and objectively “capturing”) material traces of the world’s concrete and “real” existence.[4] Unlike the technologies that preceded it, photography produced images of the world with an exactitude previously rivaled only by the human eye. Thus, as Comolli suggests, with the advent of photography the human eye loses its “immemorial privilege”; it is devalued in relation to “the mechanical eye of the photographic machine” that “now sees *in its place*” (123). This replacement of human with mechanical vision had its compensations, however—among them, *the material control, containment, and objective possession of time and experience*. [5] Abstracting visual experience from an ephemeral temporal flow, the

photographic both chemically and metaphorically “fixes” its ostensible subject quite literally as an *object* for vision. It concretely reproduces the visible in a *material process* that—like the most convincing of scientific experiments—produces the seemingly same results with each iteration, empirically giving weight to and proving in its iterability the relationship between the visible and the real. Furthermore, this material process results in a *material form* that can be objectively possessed, circulated, and saved, that can accrue an increasing rate of interest over time and become more *valuable* in a variety of ways. Photography is thus not only a radically new form of representation that breaks significantly with earlier forms, but it also radically changes our epistemological, social, and economic relationships to both representation and each other. As Jonathan Crary tells us: “Photography is an element of a new and homogenous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged. To understand the ‘photographic effect’ in the nineteenth century, one must see it as a crucial component of the new cultural economy of value and exchange, not as part of a continuous history of visual representation” (13). Indeed, identifying the nineteenth-century photograph as a fetish object, Comolli links it with gold and aptly calls it “the money of the ‘real’”—the photograph’s materiality assuring the possibility of its “convenient circulation and appropriation” (142).

In a phenomenological description of subjective human vision, Merleau-Ponty tells us that “to see is *to have at a distance*” (“Eye” 166). This subjective activity of *visual possession*—of having but at a distance—is objectified by the materiality of photography that makes possible both a *visible*—and closer—possession. That is, the having at a distance that is subjective vision is literalized in an object that not only replicates and fixes the visual structure of having at a distance but also allows it to be brought nearer. With a photograph, what you see is what you *get*.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, this structure of objectification and empirical possession is doubled, even tripled. Not only does the photograph materially “capture” and possess traces of the “real world,” not only can the photograph

itself be materially possessed as a real object, but the photograph's culturally defined semiotic status as a mechanical reproduction (rather than a linguistic representation) also enables an unprecedented, literal, material, and perhaps uniquely complacent form—and ethics—of, first, *self-possession* and then, at a later date when the technology is portable and cheap, of *self-proliferation*. Filled with a currency of the real that—through objectification and mortality—outlasts both its present value and its human subjects to accrue increasing interest, family albums serve as “memory banks.”<sup>[7]</sup> In sum, the photograph's existence as an object and a possession with fixed yet increasing value materializes and authenticates experience, others, and oneself as empirically real.

In regard to the materiality of the photograph's authenticating power, it is instructive to recall one of a number of particularly relevant ironies in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), a science fiction film made within an electronic culture already hermeneutically suspicious not only of photographic realism but also of any realisms at all.<sup>[8]</sup> Given this cultural context, it is hardly surprising that the film's primary narrative focus is on the ambiguous ontological status of a “more human than human” group of genetically manufactured “replicants”—an ambiguity that also casts epistemological doubt on how one knows one is human. At a certain moment Rachel, the film's heroine and latest replicant prototype, disavows the revelation of her own manufactured status by pointing to a series of keepsake photographs that give “proof” to the existence of her mother, to her own existence as a little girl, and thus to her subjective memory of a real past. Told that both her memory and its material extroversion actually “belong to someone else,” she not only becomes distraught but also ontologically re-signed as someone who possesses no real life, no real history—although she still remembers what she remembers, and the photographs still sit on her piano. Indeed, the photographs are suddenly foregrounded in their objective materiality (for the human spectator, as well as for the narrative's replicant) as utterly suspect. That is, when interrogated, they simultaneously both reveal and lose that great material

and circulatory value they commonly hold for *all* of us as the “money of the ‘real,’” as our means of self-possession.

The structures of objectification, material possession, self-possession, and self-proliferation that constitute the photograph as both a real trace of personal experience and a concrete extroversion of experience that can “belong to someone else” give specific form to its temporal existence. In capturing aspects of life itself in a real object that can be possessed, copied, circulated, and saved as the “currency” of experience, the appropriable materiality and static form of photography accomplish a palpable intervention in what was popularly perceived in the mid-nineteenth century to be time’s linear, orderly, and teleological flow from past to present to future. The photograph freezes and preserves the homogeneous and irreversible *momentum* of this temporal stream into the abstracted, atomized, and essentialized time of a *moment*. But at a cost. A moment cannot be inhabited. It cannot entertain in the abstraction of its visible space, its single and static *point* of view, the presence of a lived and living body—so it does not really invite the spectator *into* the scene so much as it invites contemplation *of* the scene. In its conquest of temporality and its conversion of time’s dynamism into a static and essential moment, the photograph constructs a space one can hold and look at, but in its conversion to an object to behold that space becomes paradoxically thin, insubstantial, and opaque. It keeps the lived body out even as it may imaginatively catalyze—in the parallel but dynamically temporalized space of memory or desire—an animated drama.

The cinema presents us with quite a different perceptual technology and mode of representation. Through its objectively visible spatialization of a frozen point of view into dynamic and intentional trajectories of *self-displacing vision* and through its subjectively experienced temporalization of an essential moment into *lived momentum*, the cinematic radically reconstitutes the photographic. This radical difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential

momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be *contemplated* and the scene as it is *lived*, is foregrounded most dramatically in Chris Marker's remarkable short film, *La Jetée* (1962).<sup>[9]</sup> A cinematic study of desire, memory, and time, *La Jetée* is presented completely through the use of still photographs—except for one extraordinarily brief but utterly compelling sequence late in the film. Lying in bed and looking toward the camera in yet another photograph, the woman—who has through time and memory been the object of the hero's desire and whom we have only come to know in frozen and re-membered moments that mark her loss as much as her presence—suddenly blinks. Yet this is a peculiar sense of “suddenly”—one that speaks more to surprise at an unexpected and radical shift in the ontological status of the image and our relation to it than to a more superficial narrative or formal surprise. Indeed, just prior to the brief momentum and intentional revelation of the woman actively blinking, we have watched an increasingly rapid cinematic succession of stilled and dissolving photographic images of her supine in bed that increasingly approach motion but *never achieve it*. The editorial succession thus may prepare us narratologically or formally *for* motion, but, however rapid, this succession alone does not animate the woman or give her substantial presence as more than her image. Thus, even as we are seemingly prepared, and even though the photographic move to cinematic movement is extremely subtle, we are nonetheless surprised and deem the movement startling and “sudden.” And this is because everything radically changes, and we and the image are reoriented in relation to each other. The space between the camera's (and the spectator's) gaze and the woman becomes suddenly habitable, informed with the real possibility of bodily movement and engagement, informed with lived temporality rather than eternal timelessness. The image becomes “fleshed out,” and the woman turns from a posed odalisque into someone who is not merely an immortalized lost object of desire but also—and more so—a mortal and desiring subject. In sum, what in the film has been previously a mounting accumulation of nostalgic moments achieves substantial and present presence in its

sudden and brief accession to momentum and the consequent potential for effective action.

As did André Bazin, we might think of photography as primarily a form of mummification (although, unlike Bazin, I will argue that cinema is not) (9-10). Although it testifies to and preserves a sense of the world's and experience's once-real presence, it does not preserve their present. The photographic neither functions—like the cinematic—as a “coming-into-being” (a presence always presently constituting itself), nor—like the electronic—as “being-in-itself” (an absolute presence in the present). Rather, it functions to fix a “being-that-has been” (a presence in a present that is always past). Thus, and paradoxically, as it materializes, objectifies, and preserves in its acts of possession, the photographic has something to do with loss, with pastness, and with death, its meanings and value intimately bound within the structure and aesthetic and ethical investments of nostalgia.

Although dependent on the photographic, the cinematic has something more to do with life and with the *accumulation of experience*—not its loss. Cinematic technology *animates* the photographic and reconstitutes its materiality, visibility, and perceptual verisimilitude in a difference not of degree but of kind. The *moving picture* is a visible representation not of activity finished or past but of activity coming into being and being. Furthermore, and even more significant, the moving picture not only visibly represents moving objects but also—and simultaneously—presents *the very movement of vision itself*.<sup>[10]</sup> The novel materiality and techno-logic of the cinema emerges in the 1890s, the second of Jameson's transformative “moments” of “technological revolution within capital itself.” During this moment other novel technologies, particularly the internal combustion engine and electric power, literally reenergized market capitalism into the highly controlled yet much more expansive structure of monopoly capitalism. Correlatively, Jameson sees the emergence of the new cultural logic of modernism—a logic that restructures and

eventually comes to dominate the logic of realism insofar as it represents more adequately the new perceptual experience of an age marked by the strange autonomy and energetic fluidity of, among other mechanical phenomena, the motion picture. Although photographically verisimilar, the motion picture fragments, reorders, and synthesizes time and space as animation in a completely new “cinematic” mode that finds no necessity in the objective teleo-logic of realism. Thus, although modernism has found its most-remarked-on expression in the painting, photography, and sculpture of the Futurists (who attempted to represent motion and speed in static forms) and the Cubists (who privileged and represented multiple perspectives and temporal simultaneity in static forms), as well as in the novels of James Joyce (who articulated the simultaneity of objective and subjective time and the manner in which consciousness “streams”), it is in the cinema that modernism found its fullest representation.[\[11\]](#)

Philosopher Arthur Danto tells us, “With the movies, we do not just see *that* they move, we see them *moving*; and this is because the pictures themselves move” (17). While still objectifying the subjectivity of the visual into the visible, the cinematic qualitatively transforms the photographic through a materiality that not only claims the world and others as objects for vision (whether moving or static) but also signifies its own materialized agency, intentionality, and subjectivity. Neither abstract nor static, the cinematic brings the *existential activity* of vision into visibility in what is phenomenologically experienced as an *intentional stream* of moving images—its continuous and autonomous visual production and meaningful organization of these images testifying not only to the objective world but also, and more radically, to an anonymous, mobile, embodied, and ethically invested *subject* of worldly space. In this regard it is important to note that the *automatic movement* of the film through the camera and projector is overwritten and transformed by the *autonomous movement* of what is phenomenologically perceived as a visual intentionality that visibly chooses the subjects and objects of its attention, takes an attitude toward them, and accumulates them into a



meaningful aesthetically and ethically articulated experience.<sup>[12]</sup> Thus this novel and visible cinematic subject (however physically anonymous) is perceived at the microperceptual level as able to inscribe visual and bodily changes of situation, to dream, hallucinate, imagine, remember, and value its habitation and experience of the world. And, as is the case with human beings, this cinematic subject's potential motility and experience exist as both open-ended and inextricably bound by the existential finitude and material limits of its particular vision and historical and cultural coherence—that is, its narrative.

Here, again, *La Jetée* is exemplary. Despite the fact that the film is made up of what strikes us as a series of discrete and still photographs rather than the “live” and animated action of human actors, even as it foregrounds the transcendental status and atemporal nonbecoming of the photograph, *La Jetée* nonetheless phenomenologically *projects* as a temporal flow and an existential becoming. That is, *as a whole* the film organizes, synthesizes, and enunciates the discrete photographic images into animated and intentional coherence and, indeed, makes this temporal synthesis and animation its explicit narrative theme. What *La Jetée* allegorizes in its explicit narrative, however, is the transformation of the moment to momentum that constitutes the ontology of the cinematic and the latent background of *every* film.

Although the technology of the cinematic is grounded, in part, in the technology of the photographic, we need to again remember that “the essence of technology is nothing technological.” The fact that the technology of the cinematic *necessarily* depends on the discrete and still photographic frame moving intermittently (rather than continuously) through the shutters of both camera and projector does not *sufficiently* account for the materiality of the cinematic as we experience it. Unlike the photograph, a film is semiotically engaged in experience not merely as its mechanical objectification—or material reproduction—that is, as merely an object for vision. Rather, the moving picture, however mechanical and

photographic its origin, is semiotically experienced as also subjective and intentional, as presenting representation of the objective world. Thus, perceived as the *subject of its own vision*, as well as an *object for our vision*, a moving picture is not precisely a *thing* that (like a photograph) can be easily controlled, contained, or materially possessed—at least, not until the relatively recent advent of electronic culture. Certainly before videotape and DVDs the spectator could share in and thereby, to a degree, interpretively alter a film’s presentation and representation of embodied and enworlded experience, but the spectator could not control or contain its autonomous and ephemeral flow and rhythm or materially possess its animated experience. Now, of course, with the help of consumer electronics the spectator can both alter the film’s temporality and materially possess its inanimate “body.” However, this new ability to control the autonomy and flow of the film’s experience through fast-forwarding, replaying, and pausing[13] and the ability to possess the film’s “body” so as to animate it at will and at home are not functions of the material and technological ontology of the cinematic; rather, they are functions of the material and technological ontology of the electronic, which has come to increasingly dominate, appropriate, and transform the cinematic and our phenomenological experience of its perceptual and representational modalities.

In its pre-electronic state and original materiality, however, the cinema mechanically projected and made visible *for the very first time* not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision—hitherto only directly available to human beings as an invisible and private structure that each of us experiences as “our own.” That is, the novel materiality and techno-logic of the cinema gives us concrete and empirical insight and makes objectively visible the reversible, dialectical, and social nature of our own subjective vision. Writing of human vision and our understanding that others also see as we do, Merleau-Ponty tells us: “As soon as we see other seers . . . henceforth, through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible. . . . For the first time, the seeing that I am

is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes” (143-44). Prior to the cinema this visual reflexivity in which we see ourselves seeing through other eyes was accomplished only indirectly: that is, we understood the vision of others as structured similarly to our own only through looking at—not through—the intentional light in their eyes and the investments of their objective behavior. The cinema, however, uniquely materialized this visual reflexivity and philosophical turning *directly*—that is, in an objectively visible but subjectively structured vision we not only looked *at* but also looked *through*. In sum, the cinema provided—quite literally—*objective insight* into the subjective structure of vision and thus into oneself and others as always both viewing subjects and visible objects.

Again, the paradoxical status of the more-human-than-human replicants in *Blade Runner* is instructive. Speaking to the biotechnologist who genetically manufactured his eyes with an ironic literality that not only resonates in the narrative but also describes the audience of the film, replicant Roy Batty says, “If you could only see what I’ve seen with your eyes.” The perceptive and expressive materiality of the cinematic through which we engage this ironic articulation of the desire for a supposedly “impossible” form of intersubjectivity is the very materiality through which this desire is objectively and visibly fulfilled.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus, rather than merely replacing human vision with mechanical vision, the cinema functions mechanically to bring to visibility the reversible structure of human vision: this structure emerges in the lived body as systemically both a subject and an object, as both visual (seeing) and visible (seen), and as simultaneously productive of both an activity of seeing (a “viewing view”) and an image of the seen (a “viewed view”).

Indeed, through its motor and organizational agency (achieved by the spatial immediacy of the mobile camera inhabiting a world and the reflective and temporalizing editorial re-membering of that primary spatial experience), the cinema inscribes and provokes a sense of

existential presence that is at once subjectively introverted and objectively extroverted; centered synoptically and synthetically yet also decentered and split, mobile and self-displacing. Thus, the cinematic does not evoke the same sense of self-possession generated by the photographic. Indeed, the cinematic subject is sensed as never completely self-possessed, for it is always partially and visibly given over to the vision of others at the same time that it visually appropriates only part of what it sees and also cannot entirely see itself. Furthermore, the very mobility of its vision structures the cinematic subject (both film and spectator) as always in the act of displacing itself in time, space, and the world; thus, despite its existence as materially embodied and synoptically centered (on the screen or as the spectator's lived body), it is always eluding its own (as well as our) containment.

The cinema's visible inscription of the dual, reversible, and animated visual structure of embodied and mobile vision radically transforms the temporal and spatial structure of the photograph. Consonant with what Jameson calls the "high-modernist thematics of time and temporality," the cinematic thickens the photographic with "the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory" (64). Although its visible structure of unfolding does not challenge the dominant realist perception of *objective* time as an irreversible and forwardly directed stream (even flashbacks are contained by the film's vision in a forwardly directed momentum of experience), the intentional temporal and spatial fluidity of the cinema expresses and makes visible as well—and for the first time—the nonlinear and multidirectional movements of *subjectivity* as it imagines, remembers, projects forward. In this way the cinematic makes time visibly *heterogeneous*. That is, we visibly perceive time as structured differently in its subjective and objective modes, and we understand that these two structures exist *simultaneously* in a demonstrable state of *discontinuity* as they are, nonetheless, actively and constantly *synthesized as coherent* in a specific lived-body experience (that is, a particular, concrete, and spatialized history and a particularly temporalized narrative).

Cinema's animated presentation of representation constitutes its "presence" as always presently engaged in the experiential process of coming into being and signifying. Thus the significant value of the streaming forward that informs the cinematic with its specific form of temporality (and differentiates it from the atemporality of the photographic) is intimately bound to a structure not of possession, loss, pastness, and nostalgia but of accumulation, ephemerality, presentness, and anticipation—to a presence in the present informed by its connection to a collective past and an expansive future. Visually (and aurally) presenting the subjective temporality of memory, desire, and mood through the editorial expansion and contraction of experience, as well as through flashbacks, flash-forwards, freeze-framing, pixilation, reverse motion, slow motion, and fast motion, the cinema's visible (and audible) activity of *retention* and *protension* constructs a subjective temporality other than—yet simultaneous with—the irreversible direction and forward momentum of objective time. This temporal simultaneity not only "thickens" the cinematic present but also extends cinematic presence spatially—both expanding the space in every image between the here, where the enabling and embodied cinematic eye is situated, and the there, where its gaze locates itself in its objects, and embracing a multiplicity of situations in such visual/visible cinematic articulations as double exposure, superimposition, montage, and parallel editing.

The cinematic also radically transforms the spatial phenomeno-logic of the photographic. Simultaneously presentational and representational, viewing subject and visible object, present presence informed by past and future, continuous becoming that synthesizes temporal heterogeneity as the coherence of embodied experience, the cinematic thickens the thin abstracted space of the photograph into a concrete and habitable *world*. We might remember here the sudden animated blinking of a woman's eyes in *La Jetée* and how this visible motion transformed the photographic into the cinematic, the flat surface of a possessed picture into the lived space and active possibility of a lover's bedroom. In its capacity for movement the cinema's material agency (embodied as the camera) thus constitutes

visual/visible space as always also motor and tactile space—a space that is deep and textural, that can be materially inhabited, that provides not merely an abstract ground for the visual/visible but also its particular *situation*. Thus, although it is a favored term in film theory, there is no such abstraction as *point of view* in the cinema. Rather, there are concrete *situations of viewing*—specific, mobile, and invested engagements of embodied, enworlded, and situated subjects/objects whose visual/visible activity prospects and articulates a shifting field of vision from a world whose horizons always exceed it. Furthermore, informed by cinematic temporality, the space of the cinematic is also experienced as heterogeneous—both discontiguous and contiguous, lived and remembered from within and without. Cinematic presence is thus multiply located—simultaneously displacing itself in the there of past and future situations yet orienting these displacements from the here where the body is at present. As the multiplicity and discontinuity of time are synthesized and centered and cohere as the *experience* of a specific lived body, so are multiple and discontiguous spaces synopsisized and located in the spatial and material *synthesis* of a particular body. That is, articulated as separate shots and scenes, discontiguous spaces and discontinuous times are synthetically gathered together in a coherence that is the cinematic lived body: the camera its perceptive organ, the projector its expressive organ, the screen its discrete and material center of meaningful experience. In sum, the cinematic exists as an objective and visible *performance* of the perceptive and expressive structure of subjective lived-body experience.

Not so the electronic, whose materiality and various forms engage its spectators and “users” in a phenomenological structure of sensual and psychological experience that, in comparison with the cinematic, seems so diffused as to belong to *no-body*. Emerging culturally in the 1940s in television (a technology that seemed a domestically benign conjunction and extension of radio and cinema) and in supercomputers (a more arcane technology driven by a less benign military-industrial complex), the electronic can be seen as the third “technological revolution within

capital itself.” Both television and computers radically transformed not only capital but also the culture, insofar as both in-formed what was, according to Jameson, an unprecedented and “prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas,” including “a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious” (78). Subsequently, the electronic has increasingly come to dominate not only the photographic and cinematic but also our lives; indeed, as Brooks Landon writes, it has “saturated all forms of experience and become an inescapable environment, a ‘technosphere’” (27). Beginning in the 1940s, this expansive and totalizing incorporation of what was perceived to be natural by what seemed a totally mediated culture, and the electronically specular production, proliferation, and commodification of the unconscious (globally transmitted as visible and marketable desire) restructures monopoly capitalism as multinational capitalism. Correlatively, Jameson (famously) identifies postmodernism as a new cultural logic that begins to dominate modernism and to alter our sense of existential (and, I would add, cinematic) presence.

A function of technological (and televisual) pervasion and (World-Wide-Web) dispersion, this new electronic sense of presence is intimately bound up in a centerless, network-like structure of the *present*, of instant stimulation and impatient desire, rather than in photographic nostalgia for the past or cinematic anticipation of a future. Digital electronic technology atomizes and abstractly schematizes the analogic quality of the photographic and cinematic into discrete pixels and bits of information that are then transmitted serially, each bit discontinuous, discontiguous, and absolute—each bit “being-in-itself” even as it is part of a system.[\[15\]](#) Television, videocassettes and digital discs, VCR and DVD recorder/players, electronic games, personal computers with Internet access, and pocket electronics of all kinds form an encompassing perceptual and representational system whose various forms “interface” to constitute an alternative and absolute electronic world of immaterialized—if materially consequential—experience. And this electronic world incorporates the

spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state.

Once again we can turn to *Blade Runner* to provide illustration of how the electronic is neither photographic nor cinematic. Tracking Leon, one of the rebellious replicants, the human protagonist, Deckard, searches the replicant's empty room plus bath and discovers a photograph that seems to reveal nothing but the empty room itself. Using a science fictional device that resembles a television and DVD player, Deckard directs (by voice) its electronic eye to zoom in, close up, isolate, and enlarge to impossible detail various portions of the photograph in which he finally discovers a vital clue to the renegade replicant's whereabouts. On the one hand, it might seem that Deckard functions here like a photographer, working in his darkroom to make, through optical discovery, past experience significantly visible. (Indeed, this sequence recalls the photographic blow-ups of an ambiguously "revealed" murder in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 cinematic classic, *Blow-Up*.) On the other hand, Deckard can be likened to a film director, using the electronic eye to prospect and probe photographic space and thus to animate through diacritical action an eventually "discovered" narrative. Deckard's electronic eye, however, is neither photographic nor cinematic. Although it constitutes a series of moving images from the static singularity of Leon's photograph and reveals to Deckard the stuff of which narrative can be made, it does so serially and in static, discrete bits. The moving images that we see do not move themselves, and they reveal no animated and intentional vision to us or to Deckard. Transmitted to the television screen, the moving images no longer quite retain the concrete, material, and objective "thingness" of the photograph, but they also do not achieve the subjective animation of the intentional and prospective vision objectively projected by the cinema. In sum, they exist less as Leon's experience than as Deckard's information.

Indeed, the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space



but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience. Electronic representation and presence thus asserts neither an objective and material possession of the world and self (as does the photographic) nor a centered and subjective spatiotemporal engagement with the materiality of the world and others accumulated and projected as materially embodied and intentional experience (as does the cinematic). Digital and schematic, abstracted from materially *reproducing* the empirical objectivity of nature that informs the photographic and from *presenting a representation* of embodied subjectivity and the unconscious that informs the cinematic, the electronic constructs a metaworld where aesthetic value and ethical investment tend to be located in *representation-in-itself*. That is, the electronic semiotically—and significantly—constitutes a system of *simulation*, a system that constitutes copies that seem lacking an original ground. And, when there is a thinned or absent connection phenomenologically perceived between signification and its original or “real” referent, when, as Guy Debord tells us, “everything that was lived directly has moved away into a representation,” referentiality becomes not only *intertextual* but also *metaphysical*. Living in such a formally schematized and intertextual metaworld unprecedented in its degree of remove from the materiality of the real world has a significant tendency to liberate the engaged spectator/user from the pull of what might be termed moral and physical *gravity*—and, at least in the euphoria of the moment, the weight of its real-world consequences. (Indeed, not only do the wanton use of credit cards and electronic shopping seem mundane and pervasive evidence of this, but so, too, does the less pervasive and overly optimistic exuberance of easily “discharging” one’s civic responsibility by sending and circulating electronic petitions to save, for example, the National Endowment for the Arts.)[\[16\]](#)

The immateriality and gravitational release of the electronic also digitizes “the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory” and of human situation.

Narrative, history, and a centered (and central) investment in the human lived body and its mortality become atomized and dispersed across a system that constitutes temporality not as a coherent flow of mordantly conscious experience but as the eruption of ephemeral desire and the transmission of random, unevaluated, and endless information. (Here we might think, in the first instance, of online merchandising catalogs and the rise of Internet auctions; and, in the second instance, of one's generally disappointing experience of searching the Internet for things more meaningful than cheap airline tickets.)<sup>[17]</sup> Unlike photographic or cinematic temporality, the primary value of electronic temporality is the discrete temporal bit of *instant present*—that (thanks to television, videotape, digital disc, and computer memory and software) can be selected, combined, and instantly replayed and rerun by the spectator/user to such a degree that the previously irreversible direction and stream of objective time seems not only overcome but also recast as the creation of a *recursive temporal network*.<sup>[18]</sup> That is, on the one hand, the temporal cohesion of history and narrative gives way to the *temporal discretion* of chronicle and episode, to music videos once narratologically shocking in their discontinuities and discontiguities, and to the kinds of narratives that find both causality and the realizations of intentional agency multiple, random, or comic.<sup>[19]</sup> On the other hand, however, temporality is also *dispersed* and finds resolution not in the intelligibility of narrative coherence or in the stream of interior consciousness that used to temporally “co-here” as one's subjective identity but rather in a literal network of instants and instances that literally “call” it into being. It is thus not surprising that today what seems, for many, to hold identity together is coherence of another kind: the ongoing *affirmation* of constant cell phone calls, electronic pages, “palm pilot” messaging—these standing less as significant communication than as the exterior, objective proof of one's existence, of one's “being-in-the-world.”

The once dominant cultural logic of modernism and its cinematic techno-logic phenomenologically informed and transformed an earlier

moment's primarily objective and linear sense of temporality with the material realization of time as *heterogeneous*. That is, it re-cognized and representationally realized that objective and subjective time were lived simultaneously but structured quite differently. By means of a perverse turn, the now dominant cultural logic of postmodernism (and, perhaps, post-postmodernism) and its electronic techno-logic phenomenologically informs—and transforms—modernist and cinematic temporality with a sense of subjective and objective time as once again *homogeneous*. However, this is a radical transformation rather than a return to an older phenomeno-logic in which the sense of objective time as constitutively streaming forward in a linear progression that marked past, present, and future was dominant, and subjective time was subordinated to this movement and thus transparently sensed as homogenous with it. The modernist period marked by the technological shifts of which cinema was primary split our sense of time in two and made visible—and sensible—the difference between the linearity of objective time and the nonlinearity of subjective time and thus constituted our sense of these as heterogeneous. What is novel—and radical—about temporality as it has been transformed by electronic culture is that while our sense of subjective time has retained its modernist nonlinear structure, our sense of objective time has been reconstituted from its previous constancy as streaming forward in a linear progression into a nonlinear and discontinuous structure that is, to a great degree, now *homologous* with the nonlinear and discontinuous structure of subjective time. Thus, objective time is no longer at odds with the nonlinear and discontinuous structure of subjective time, and most of the clear distinctions that marked them as separate modalities of temporality have faded. Temporality is now constituted and lived paradoxically as a *homogeneous experience of discontinuity*. The distinctive subjective nature of high modernist (and cinematic) “durée” is also extroverted into the objective temporality of “read-only” and “random-access” computer—and cultural—memory, and the regulative strictures and linear teleology of objective time now seem to turn back in on themselves recursively in a nonlinear structure of equivalence and reversibility. (Where the railroads

once ran to “on time,” we need only look to the airlines and our general disbelief in the “reality” of their schedules—and, then, of course, there’s TiVo.) This temporal transformation is a radical one—and it shifts our sensibilities from *Remembrance of Things Past*, a modernist, elegiac, and grave re-membling of experience, to the postmodernist, comic, and flighty recursivity of a *Back to the Future*.[\[20\]](#)

Again the genre of science fiction film is illuminating.[\[21\]](#) The *Back to the Future* films are certainly apposite, and Alex Cox’s postmodern, parodic, and deadpan *Repo Man* (1984) manifests even more clearly the phenomenologically experienced homogeneity of postmodern heterogeneity. The film is a picaresque, loose, strung-out, episodic, and irresolute tale about an affectless and dissolute young man involved with car repossessions, aliens from outer space, Los Angeles punks, government agents, and others, but it is also constructed as a complexly bound and chaotic system of coincidences.[\[22\]](#) At the local and human level of narrative coherence, individual scenes are connected not through narrative causality or psychological motivations but through literally material signifiers. A dangling dashboard ornament, for example, provides the acausal and material motivation between two of the film’s otherwise disparate episodes. However, at a transcendently global level the film resolves its acausal and chaotic structure by a narrative recursivity that links what seem random characters and events together in the complex relationship and order of what one spaced-out character describes as both the “cosmic unconsciousness” and a “lattice of coincidence.”[\[23\]](#) Emplotment and identity in *Repo Man* become diffused across a vast relational “lattice of coincidence”—a “network,” a “worldwide web” constituted by nodular and transient encounters and events. It is thus no accident that the car culture of Los Angeles figures prominently in *Repo Man*—not only fragmenting individual experience at the local level into separate segments and discrete and chaotic bits lived only, and incoherently, through the windows of an automobile but also enabling such experience’s transcendent coherence in that literal but global “lattice

of coincidence,” the “network” and “web” of the Los Angeles freeway system, which reconnects experience as intelligible at another and less grounded and human order of magnitude.

The postmodern and electronic instant, in its break from the modernist and cinematic temporal structures of retention and protension, constitutes a form of *absolute presence* (one abstracted from the objective and subjective discontinuity that gives meaning to the temporal system past/present/future). Correlatively, this transformation of temporality changes the nature and qualities of the space it occupies. As subjective time becomes experienced as unprecedentedly extroverted and is homogenized with a transformed sense of objective time as less irrefutably linear than directionally mutable, space becomes correlatively experienced as abstract, ungrounded, and flat—a site (or screen) for play and display rather than an invested situation in which action counts rather than computes. Such a superficial space can no longer precisely hold the interest of the spectator/user but has to constantly stimulate it. Its flatness—a function of its lack of temporal thickness and bodily investment—has to attract spectator interest at the surface. To achieve this, electronic space constructs objective and superficial equivalents to depth, texture, and invested bodily movement. Saturation of color and hyperbolic attention to detail replace depth and texture at the surface of the image, and constant action and the simultaneous and busy multiplicity of screens and images replace the gravity that grounds and orients the movement of the lived body with a purely spectacular, kinetically exciting, often dizzying sense of bodily freedom (and freedom from the body). Thus, along with this transformation of aesthetic characteristics and sensibility emerges a significant transformation of ethical investments. Whether negative or positive in effect, the dominant cultural techno-logic of the electronic and its attendant sense of electronic “freedom” have a tendency to *diffuse* and/or *disembody* the lived body’s material and moral gravity.[\[24\]](#)

What I am suggesting is that, ungrounded and nonhierarchical as it is,

electronic presence has neither a point of view nor a visual situation, such as we experience, respectively, with the photograph and the cinema. Rather, electronic presence randomly disperses its being *across* a network, its kinetic gestures describing and lighting on the surface of the screen rather than inscribing it with bodily dimension (a function of centered and intentional projection). Images on television screens and computer terminals seem neither projected nor deep. Phenomenologically they seem, rather, somehow “just there” as we (inter)face them. This two-dimensional, binary superficiality of electronic space at once disorients and liberates the activity of consciousness from the gravitational pull and orientation of its hitherto embodied and grounded existence in a material world. All surface, electronic space cannot be inhabited by any body that is not also an electronic body. Such space both denies and prosthetically transforms the spectator’s physical human body so that subjectivity and affect free-float or free-fall or free-flow across a horizontal/vertical grid or, as is the case with all our electronic pocket communication devices, disappear into thin air. Subjectivity is at once decentered, dispersed, and completely extroverted—again erasing the modernist (and cinematic) dialectic between inside and outside and its synthesis of discontinuous time and discontinuous space in the coherence of conscious and embodied experience. As Jameson explains this novel state of being:

[T]he liberation . . . from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it might be better and more accurate to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria. (64)

Co-constituted and brought to visibility by the cultural and techno-logic of the electronic, this kind of euphoric presence is not merely novel and

peculiar. At the risk of sounding reactionary I would suggest that it also can be dangerous—and this not merely because its abstraction tends to cause car accidents. At a much deeper level its lack of specific and explicit interest and grounded investment in the human body and enworlded action, its free-floating leveling of value, and its saturation with the present instant could well cost us all a future.

In “The Body as Foundation of the Screen” Elena del Río points out that a phenomenological and existential description of technologically produced images must insist “on the structuring role of the body in the production and reception of images, but more importantly, on *the reconfiguration of the body itself*—one that extends limits beyond the objective frames of visibility and presence” (95). In the context of discussing the singular films of Atom Egoyan, who explores human relationships as they are lived negatively and positively within multiple—and primarily electronic—modes of technologically mediated perception and expression, del Río describes the reconfiguration of the lived-body subject in a similar yet much more positive way than does Jameson. Pointing to our experience of the multiplicity of screens and the simultaneity of heterogeneous spaces in electronically mediated image culture, she writes: “Such coexistence of images has the effect of dispersing the punctual and self-possessed body into a multiplicity of bodies inhabiting different temporal and spatial sites. Thus, rather than sustaining the illusion of a narcissistic ego-logical identity, the electronic screen is able to provide a symbolic paradigm of impermanence and insubstantiality” (109). Nonetheless, she also notes that the more positive aspects of this electronic dispersal and reconfiguration of the lived-body subject are hardly normative—and indeed contradict the dominant logic of recent cybernetic environments that, however futilely, attempt “to shun and erase the body as if its existential and organic weight could simply be wished away” (97). Thus, Egoyan’s “use of the electronic screen” as a new mode of humanization capable of articulating and representing substance and value is “radical” and “does not contradict the effects normatively produced by electronic media.” And, it is worth noting,

this electronic reconfiguration of the lived-body subject occurs through the *cinematic*—Egoyan’s films incorporating the electronic (rather than the other way round) so that his cinema constitutes, as del Río describes it, “a self-conscious representational process that is absent in the majority of mainstream uses of electronic technologies” (112).

Phenomenological analysis does not end with the “thick” description and thematization of the phenomenon under investigation. It aims also for an interpretation of the phenomenon that discloses, however partially, the lived meaning, significance, and nonneutral value it has for those who engage it. In terms of contemporary moving-image culture, however much they both engage and contest each other and however much they borrow on each other’s figures and metaphors, the material differences between cinematic and electronic representation emerge as significant differences in their historically lived meaning and value. Cinema is an objective technology of perception and expression that comes—and becomes—before us in a structure that implicates both a sensible body and a sensual and sense-making subject. In its visual address and movement it allows us to see objectively for the first time what was once a visible impossibility: that we are at once both intentional subjects and material objects in the world, both the seer and the seen. Thus, it shows us and affirms the embodied being of consciousness as it materially and intentionally engages the substantial world. It also affirms and shows us that, sharing materiality and the world through vision and action, we are intersubjective beings.

Now, historically, it is the techno-logic of the electronic—and not the residual logic of the cinematic—that dominates the form and in-forms the content of our cultural representations. And, unlike cinematic representation, electronic representation by its very structure phenomenologically diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body and the dimensions of that body’s material world. However significant and positive its values in some regards, however much its very inventions and



use emerge from lived-body subjects, the electronic tends to marginalize or trivialize the human body. Indeed, at this historical moment in our particular society and culture, we can see all around us that the lived body is in crisis. Its struggle to assert its gravity, its differential existence, status, and situation, its vulnerability and mortality, its vital and social investment in a concrete lifeworld inhabited by others, is now marked in hysterical and hyperbolic responses to the disembodiment effects of electronic representation. On the one hand, contemporary moving images show us the human body (its mortal “meat”) relentlessly and fatally interrogated, “riddled with holes” and “blown away,” unable to maintain material integrity or moral gravity. If the Terminator doesn’t finish it off, then electronic smart bombs will. On the other hand, the current popular obsession with physical fitness and cosmetic surgery manifests the wish to reconfigure the human body into something more invulnerable—a “hard body”; a lean, mean, and immortal “machine”; a cyborg that can physically interface with the electronic network and maintain a significant—if altered—material presence in the current digitized lifeworld of the subject. Thus, it is no historical accident that, earlier in our electronic existence, bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger played the invulnerable, hard-body cyborg Terminator, whereas, much more recently and more in tune with the lived body’s dematerialization, the slightly built Keanu Reeves flexibly dispersed and diffused what little meat he had across *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003).

Within the context of this material and technological crisis of the flesh, one can only hope that the hysteria and hyperbole surrounding it are strategic responses—and that through this crisis the lived body has, in fact, managed to reclaim our attention sufficiently so as to forcefully argue for its existence and against its simulation or erasure. For, within the dominant cultural and techno-logic of the electronic there are those out there who prefer the simulated body and a virtual world. Indeed, they

have forgotten that “technology springs from the very human condition of embodiment” and actually believe the body (contemptuously called “meat” or “wetware”) is best lived only as an image or as information. Indeed, they suggest that the only possibility for negotiating one’s presence in our electronic lifeworld is to reconfigure the body through disembodiment, to digitize and download our consciousness into the neural nets and memory and onto the screens of a solely electronic existence.<sup>[25]</sup> Such an insubstantial electronic presence can ignore AIDS, homelessness, hunger, torture, the bloody consequences of war, and all the other ills the flesh is heir to outside the image and the datascape. It can ignore the lived body that not only once imagined its technologic but gave it substantial grounding, gravity, and value. It can ignore its own history. Indeed, devaluing the physically lived body and the concrete materiality of the world, the dominant cultural and technologic informing our contemporary electronic “presence” suggests that—if we do not take great care—we are all in danger of soon becoming merely ghosts in the machine.

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### Notes

This chapter reprints “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence,’” as it appeared in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, by Vivian Sobchack. © 2005 by the Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press. Reprinted with permission from the author and from the publisher.

[1] Reference here is not only to the way in which automotive transportation has extended the capacity for movement of our physical bodies and thus our lived sense of distance and space, the rhythms of our temporality, and the hard currency that creates and expresses our cultural values relative to such things as class and style but also to the way in which it has changed the very sense we have of our bodies. The vernacular expression of regret for “being without wheels” speaks ontologically to our very real incorporation of the automobile, as well as to its incorporation of us.

[2] Ihde distinguishes two forms of perception: “What is usually taken as sensory perception (what is immediate and focused bodily in actual seeing, hearing, etc.), I shall call *microperception*. But there is also what might be called a cultural, or hermeneutic, perception, which I shall call *macroperception*. Both belong equally to the lifeworld. And both dimensions of perception are closely linked and intertwined” (29: emphasis added).

[3] Seminal phenomenological works in this regard are Bazin; Sontag; and Barthes.

[4] Contemporary erosion of faith in the photographic as evidence of the real in popular consciousness has been the result of the development of the seamless electronic manipulation of the photographic image—a possible manipulation that now transparently informs our reception and inflects and transforms the photograph’s “realism.” Although air-brushing

and other forms of image manipulation have been practiced for a long while, they have generally left a discernible trace on the image; such is not the case with digital computer alterations of the photographic image. For an overview of this issue see Grundberg; for lengthier and more rigorous explication and discussion of the radical shift from the photographic to the digital, see both Mitchell and Lunenfeld.

[5] Most media theorists point out that photographic (and cinematic) optics are structured according to a norm of perception based on Renaissance theories of perspective; such perspective represented the visible as originating in, organized, and mastered by an individual and centered subject. This form of painterly representation is naturalized by the optics of photography and the cinema. Comolli, in “Machines of the Visible,” says, “The mechanical eye, the photographic lens, . . . functions . . . as a guarantor of the identity of the visible with the normality of vision . . . with the norm of visual perception” (123-24).

[6] Jean-Luc Godard plays with this notion of photography as an objectified and literalized possession of vision’s “having at a distance” in major sequences of his witty *Les Carabiniers* (1963). In the film two conscripts—dumb and dumber—come back from a war “rich” with material loot in their possession: suitcases full of picture postcards they perceive as quite literally capturing the national monuments and treasures they now (re)present.

[7] It must be noted that the expression *memory bank* is connected to electronic (not photographic) culture. It nonetheless serves us as a way of reading backward that recognizes a literal as well as metaphorical economy of representation and suggests that any attempts to understand the photographic in its “originality” are pervasively informed by contemporary electronic consciousness.

[8] Suspension of belief in “realism” is not the same as disbelief in the real. It is, however, a rejection of the transparency of such belief in “realism” and a recognition that our access to the real is always mediated and epistemologically partial.

[9] For readers unfamiliar with the film, *La Jetée* is a narrative articulated

in a recursive structure. A survivor of World War III has a recurrent memory of a woman's face and a scene at Orly airport, where, as a child, he has seen a man killed. Because of his vivid memory scientists in his postapocalyptic culture—now living underground with minimal power and without hope—attempt experiments to send him back into his vivid past so that he can, perhaps, eventually time-travel to the future to get help for his present. After many experiments, the man is able to live briefly in his past images and actually meet and start a sporadic relationship with the woman he remembers, as well as to briefly visit the future. Aware, however, that he has no future in his own present, with the assistance of those in the future the protagonist chooses to return to his past and the woman he now loves. But this final return to the scene of his original childhood memory at Orly airport ultimately reveals, first, that what he watched as a child was himself as an adult being pursued by people from his own present, and, second, that his original memory was, in fact, the vision of his own adult death.

[10] For extended phenomenological description and interpretation of the various movements of cinematic vision see my “The Active Eye: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Vision.”

[11] Here it is worth noting that James Joyce, in 1909, was “instrumental in introducing the first motion picture theater in Dublin” (Kern 76-77).

[12] This overriding and transformation of automatic movement by autonomous movement can be understood as a phenomenon that is not merely brought about as mere technological “illusion” if we consider that our relation to our own lived bodies is precisely similar: that is, our automatic physiological operations are constantly overwritten and transformed by our autonomous and intentional actions unless these operations are foregrounded because, in a particular instance, they trouble us and we specifically attend to them.

[13] With the electronic and the advent of the VCR and DVD player, a pause is indeed a pause. However, in the cinema, an image can appear “frozen” on the screen only if it is replicated many times over so that it can *continue moving* through the projector; unlike the still photograph,

the film always has to actively work at “arresting” its gaze. For further elaboration, see my “The Active Eye.”

[14] This statement encapsulates the major argument and supporting demonstration of my *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*.

[15] Although all moving images follow each other serially, each photographic and cinematic image (or frame) is developed or projected analogically rather than digitally. That is, the image is developed or projected as a whole and its elements are differentiated by gradation rather than by the on/off discretion of absolute numerical values.

[16] I am speaking here of a *dominant* cultural and techno-logic. Obviously, electronic communication (including such things as petition circulation) can and does entail more significant degrees of moral gravity with correlatively significant material consequences. This, however, tends to be the case in circumstances and for people in cultures in which electronic and postmodern logic is *not* a dominant and in which embodied being is truly at referential stake and cannot be forgotten or so easily “liberated.”

[17] Although it may undermine my argument here, I do admit that there may not be anything more meaningful than cheap airline tickets.

[18] Michael Heim’s *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* is apposite here. He writes:

Though it may have identical content, the film viewed through personal videocassette technology is not really the same film projected on the . . . silver screen. There is a profound change in the experience, . . . in the sense of what is being seen, when the projected images are no longer bigger than life and are manipulable through fast-forward, freeze-frame, and every kind of fingertip control. Such viewing is no longer an occasion to which you must adjust your attention. With it, cinema culture comes to be on tap, manipulable at will. The videocassette provides a different psychic framework for the film.” (118)

[19] See, e.g., *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998), in which a character lives



out two dramatically different existential possibilities; *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), in which a character literally runs through several iterations of a situation where—following chaos theory—small changes in initial conditions have major existential consequences; *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), in which time seems to move linearly backwards toward the inauguration of a past event but is actually full of gaps and overlaps and also moves ambiguously forward in relation to another of the film's narrative foci; and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), in which there seems only local temporal cohesion and subjectivities and agency free-floats among the characters.

[20] The *Back to the Future* films—a trilogy—were all directed by Robert Zemeckis: *Back to the Future* (1985), *Back to the Future Part II* (1989), and *Back to the Future Part III* (1990).

[21] Of all narrative film genres, science fiction has been most concerned with poetically mapping those transformations of spatiality, temporality, and subjectivity informed and/or constituted by new technologies. As well, SF cinema, in its particular materiality, has made these new poetic maps concretely visible. For elaboration see my *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (223-305).

[22] My references to chaos in terms of complex systems are both specific and purposeful and derive from new circumscriptions of the complex relations between chaos and order in what were formerly seen as random and coincidental phenomena. For the most readable elaboration see Gleick; for an application to cultural issues related to contemporary representations of chaos see also my own “A Theory of Everything: Meditations on Total Chaos.”

[23] This character, Miller, is both the film's most far-sighted “seer” and the narrative's most spaced-out “loony.” He is prone to articulating disjointed yet strangely logical systems of relation in which connections between UFOs and South America explain where all the people on Earth have come from and where they are going. He demonstrates his notions of the “cosmic unconsciousness” and the “lattice of coincidence” by pointing out how “you'll be thinking of a plate of shrimp and suddenly someone

will say ‘plate’ or ‘shrimp’ or ‘plate of shrimp.’”

[24] Since this essay was originally published, I have been confronted by arguments about this assertion, particularly in relation to virtual reality and various attempts to mobilize the human sensorium in electronic space. The argument is that electronic space “reembodies” rather than “disembodies” us. Although, to some extent, this is true, the dominant cultural logic of the electronic tends to elide or devalue the bodies that we are in physical space—not only as they suffer their flesh and mortality but also as they ground such fantasies of reembodiment.

[25] Since this essay was first written, it is interesting to note that the rhetoric of *downloading* one’s consciousness into the computer has become further dispersed and “transcendentalized.” Now, the rhetoric speaks of *uploading* one’s consciousness onto the World Wide Web.