7 Experiencing Extended Point-of-View Shots

A Film-Phenomenological Perspective on Extreme Character Subjectivity

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At the very beginning of the past century, the Hepworth Manufacturing Company released a one-minute silent film that presents us with a static shot of a sunny road in the countryside.[1] First, we see a horse-drawn carriage passing by to the right, raising white clouds of dust. Then, we perceive a fast automobile suddenly appearing from the dust, driving toward the camera with three passengers frantically gesticulating and screaming, apparently shouting out warnings. When the car "hits" the camera, the screen goes black and an insert appears, exclaiming "???! Oh! Mother *will* be pleased." This short film, entitled *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1900), is one of the earliest attempts in the history of cinema to radically suggest a person's perceptual experience from the first-person perspective.

Some twenty years later, in 1921, the director and film theorist Jean Epstein enthusiastically demands:

> When a character is going to meet another, I want to go along with him not behind or in front of him or by his side, but *in* him. I would like to look *through his eyes* and see his hand reach out from under me *as if it were my own*; interruption of opaque film would imitate the blinking of our eyelids.
>
> (Epstein 1977, 10–11, emphases added)

Hepsworth's film from 1900 and Epstein's quote from 1921 are merely two out of a myriad of possible examples demonstrating that the wish to accurately *represent* the subjective perceptual experience of a character on the screen and to intimately connect these character perceptions with the viewer's *experience* has a long history. As Julio L. Moreno pointed out in an early discussion of "subjective cinema," the original motive was to imitate first-person narration in literature and thereby to adopt one of its advantages for the film spectator: "to identify himself with the protagonist to the point of feeling himself personally involved in the action" (1953, 352).

However, the history of such extreme first-person perspectives in film—from the inside out, so to speak—is a troubled one. The attempt at strong character "identification" via the use of extended point-of-view shots often—and

rather paradoxically—leads to the opposite of what is intended (see Sobchack 1992; 2011).[2] In fact, Moreno laments that first-person films not only do *not* facilitate identification, "but rather make it impossible" (1953, 352). Instead of allowing us to lose ourselves in the character, we are continuously thrown back to our own reality. Similarly, François Truffaut, in 1968, underlines the viewer's distance and alienation from the character (see Bordwell and Thompson 1993, 243). The list of critical voices could easily be extended—from Jean Mitry to Vivian Sobchack and Murray Smith. Hence, examples of what Moreno identifies as "film in the first person," what Mitry dubs "absolute subjectivism" (2000, 208), what Edward Branigan calls "continuing point of view" (1984, 114–116), and what Markus Kuhn (2009) labels "I-camera films" were almost always considered failed aesthetic experiments.[3]

Interestingly, numerous voices are on record connecting this aesthetic failure to an experience of bodily unease when watching first-person films. James Conant finds what is still one of the most radical examples of a first-person perception film—Robert Montgomery's much-maligned *Lady in the Lake* (1947)—"unsettling" (Conant 2011, 308) to the point of causing a "state of aesthetic frustration" (323), and complains that it "systematically defeat[s] our efforts to enter into that state of absorption that ordinarily characterizes our mode of engagement with a successful movie" (298). For Sobchack, *Lady in the Lake* evokes "strange discomfort, alienation, and disbelief" (1992, 213), and is "peculiarly claustrophobic to watch" (245). And for Slavoj Žižek, it creates a "feeling of claustrophobic closure" (1992, 42), "an unbearable ... stuffiness" (43): "We continually long for release from the 'glass house' of the detective's gaze" (42).

The aim of this chapter is to discuss, from a film-phenomenological perspective, some of the limits attempts at a continuing first-person perspective have faced. Drawing predominantly on *Lady in the Lake* and Franck Khalfoun's recent horror remake *Maniac* (2012) (see Figure 7.1), it tries to amend and complement Mitry's and Sobchack's earlier phenomenological discussions of *Lady in the Lake* (see, e.g., Sobchack 1992, 230–248).

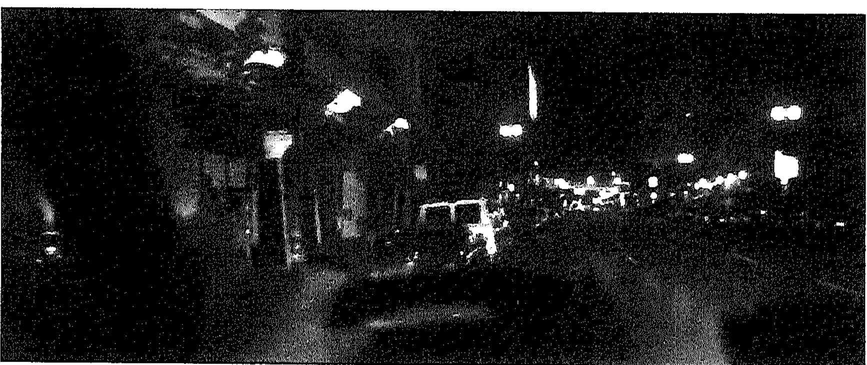

Figure 7.1 First-person perspective of protagonist Frank in *Maniac*.

I will give a few hitherto overlooked arguments why, for many viewers, their *embodied experience* stands at odds with the character's subjectivity suggested in the film, leading to experiences of strangeness and even discomfort. I will point out what seems "wrong" or "missing" in comparison to actual sensorial, temporal, and social experiences, all the while presuming that a strong perceptual identification is the implicit goal of these films. I will, therefore, reject recent claims that the first-person perspective should be considered as an effective *immersive* strategy (see Rupert-Kruse 2011). For film viewers, it seems much more difficult to achieve the less problematic "identification" gamers experience with their avatars (let alone the kind of full-blown body swapping experience feasible in virtual reality applications; see Petkova and Ehrsson 2008). Against today's widespread use of the first-person perspective in video games, the strange and potentially estranging first-person perception in narrative feature films becomes particularly noteworthy. The fact that an extended or even exclusive first-person perspective is neither prevalent nor convincing in film has to be located, I argue, in the feeling of bodily unease many viewers experience.

At the end of the chapter, a look at *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* (2007, internationally released as *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) will reveal how director Julian Schnabel's extraordinary film manages to avoid some of the pitfalls thanks to its specific narrative premise as well as a number of solutions to earlier problems.

Three Preconditions for Viewing Discomfort

Note, however, that viewers will feel the kind of discomfort with which I am concerned here only when a number of preconditions are fulfilled. In the films at stake, camera and soundtrack try to express (a) *in an extended way* the (b) *ongoing sensory perception* of a (c) diegetic *flesh-and-blood human character*. As viewers in front of the screen, we are forced into a position similar to the little homunculi discussed in the philosophy of mind: We are put, as it were, inside the character's head, perceiving moving images and sounds that are supposed to signify the character's sensory experience of the diegetic world. As we shall see, knowledge that one of the parameters is *not* fulfilled will often yield a rather unproblematic viewing experience.

Take precondition (a): The film has to show us the human character's sensory experience in the filmic world via his or her senses of seeing and hearing *more than just briefly*. The interspersed, occasional use of subjective character perceptions embedded in the flow of non-subjective shots hardly poses a problem for our viewing experience. As highly conventionalized "point/object shots," they are part of most point-of-view structures, as Edward Branigan (1984, 103–121) has aptly demonstrated (see also Sobchack 1992, 229). To create uneasiness, the point-of-view shot has to be an *extended* one, it has to be part of a sequence shot. This precondition becomes particularly obvious in the Romanian film *Pescuit Sportiv*

(Adrian Sitaru, 2008) and the British television series *Peep Show* (Channel 4, 2003–present), both of which consist almost exclusively of first-person perception scenes shifting from one protagonist's perspective to the next; it is only during the more extended takes that the unease makes itself felt here. Apart from the films previously mentioned, other examples containing—or exclusively consisting of—first-person long-takes are *Der Florentiner Hut* (1939, Wolfgang Liebeneiner), *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *La femme défendue* (Philippe Harel, 1997), or *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noë, 2009).

Precondition (b) demands that the film presents us with an *ongoing subjective experience of sensory perception.*[4] This focus on first-person perception implies that I will not deal with what characters subjectively imagine, dream, hallucinate, etc. In these cases, more "lenient" criteria apply: Upon seeing representations of first-person *dreams* or *hallucinations* on screen, viewers usually do not experience discomfort as promptly as in first-person *perceptions*. However, inasmuch as characters can *project* themselves into perceiving a situation in the future or *remember* perceiving a situation in the past, we are still dealing with ongoing first-person perceptions, even if the mental acts of projecting and remembering are turned into what we might call a "first-person perception flashforward" and a "first-person perception flashback." In *Mine Own Executioner* (Anthony Kimmins, 1947), for example, traumatized British WWII pilot Adam Lucian (Kieron Moore) tells his psychiatrist Felix Milne (Burgess Meredith) in a number of flashbacks how the Japanese shot his plane, captured him in the jungle, tortured him, and how he eventually escaped his imprisonment. All of these memories are represented as ongoing first-person perceptions.

Branigan has pointed out that traditional optical point-of-view shots are connected to characters who perceive in a "normal" way according to a particular set of conventions:

> In the POV shot the image is commonly in focus and undistorted by filters or unusual focal lengths, the camera is steady, the character is invisible (i.e., we do not see his hair, eyebrows, or nose but only the objects he sees), there is no indication of the blinking of eyelids or the sound of breathing, and so forth.
>
> (Branigan 1984, 78–79)

This "normal" perception implies *minimum subjectivity*, because it merely assumes the character's point in space, representing his or her optical perception *in the same way* a non-subjective shot would, were it positioned at this point in space. The degree of subjectivity increases once the film changes to what Branigan terms "perception shots"—shots that technically alter the optical point of view through filters, superimpositions, split screens, etc. in order to indicate a mental condition such as being drunk, drugged, in tears, or almost blind (see Branigan 1984, 80). Other ways of trying to convince us that we perceive a human sensory perception from a

first-person perspective are quick pans imitating head movements, a shaky camera mimicking body movements, the appearance of hands and feet stretching out from below the camera, characters addressing the camera by talking to, kissing, beating it, etc. Paradoxically, and this will be an important thesis of this chapter, it often seems to be the case that the viewing experience turns out all the more discomforting the more the film tries to suggest that what we perceive on the screen are experiences of first-person *human perception.*

But if this is the case, introducing a *mediating camera* will eliminate the alienating effect, because we are not confronted with human perception anymore. We can see this when watching found footage horror—or first-person-camera films—such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) or *[Rec.]* (Jaume Belaguerό and Paco Plaza, 2007). Here, the film does not represent what a *character* is seeing and hearing, but what the *camera* the character carries is recording. While these films can also create bodily discomfort (for instance, nauseating motion sickness caused by a wiggly hand-held camera), they do not result in an alienation from the character's subjectivity.

Finally, in order to experience the kind of unease with which I am concerned here, we need to be confronted with the first-person perception of a *flesh-and-blood human character*, parameter (c). We can gauge this claim *ex negativo* from the comparatively easy acceptance of subjective perceptions of *non-human* subjectivities—as in Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981), where the camera temporarily assumes the subjective perception of a demon; or Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987), which represents the subjective perceptions of a cyborg (see Sobchack 1992, 226). Not knowing what it is like to be a demon or a cyborg, we can "incorporate" these shots as non-human subjective perceptions without feeling the same degree of discomfort. However, knowing how it feels to *have* and *be* a human body, it turns out to be highly problematic if we have to "take on" the body of another human being. Here, we find a reason why the ghost-like narrator of *Russkiy kovcheg* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002), who finds himself thrown back into 19th-century Russia, poses much less of a problem despite its extremely extended point-of-view shot of roughly ninety minutes—and why the limited human capacities of the protagonist in *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* are much better suited for a first-person perception film than attempts to make us "take on" a fully functional human body.

In sum, problems can arise when a film tries to convince us that what we perceive on screen is precisely the natural experience of a flesh-and-blood human character's first-person perception—because this experience often stands at odds with the one we, as embodied human beings, are accustomed to. However, this is not to claim every viewer *necessarily* experiences discomfort. It much depends on the viewer's critical and interpretive perspective or, if you want, on his or her "point of view." For instance, a very different mode of engagement would be a focus on the narrative experiments of these

films. In this case, the viewer might not experience discomfort at all. Hence, the following should not be read in normative terms, as if I was trying to prescribe what a first-person film should do or how a viewer will necessarily experience it. Rather, my arguments should be read as a phenomenological attempt to account for my own discomfort—and those of many others on record—when watching extended point-of-view shots.

Limited Perception: The Problem of the Absent Senses

First-person perception films artificially reduce the range of human consciousness, and therefore lack the variety of experiences that characterize human life. As Sobchack points out with reference to *Lady in the Lake*,

> we perceptually and expressively live the body through none of the other modalities of existence it enables: dreaming, imagining images, projecting situations, and temporarily assuming an other's situation as a subject. The fluidity, mobility, decentering, and discontinuity that are a condition of intentional existence as it is humanly embodied are extremely limited in Marlowe's visual and visible experience.
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> (Sobchack 1992, 245; see also Sobchack 1992, 248; 2011, 74)

As we have heard, for Sobchack, *Lady in the Lake* is therefore claustrophobic to watch: The film's perceptions are constrained by Marlowe's bodily existence rather than enabled by it.

Yet films based on first-person perception not only reduce the modalities of existence in general but also limit the modalities of perception more specifically. Films such as *Lady in the Lake* and *Maniac* present us with what their protagonists see and hear: This is what the audiovisual medium of film is able to express "directly" (even if we can see and hear the diegetic world merely analogously but never isomorphically to the character). However, most first-person perception films are not content with expressing the protagonist's senses of seeing and hearing—they also want to bring into play the senses of taste, smell, touch, and proprioception. If the goal is indeed to create an identity between character and viewer, attempts to represent the character's perceptual experience more holistically may open up an *experiential gap*: We cannot touch, smell, taste, or proprioceptively feel analogously to the character and thus lack the sensory experience we are supposed to have according to the explicit or implicit ideal of strong character identification.

Take the scene in which Marlowe is released from his prison cell and smoke drifts unexpectedly into the image from below his field of vision. Since we have seen Marlowe smoke before, we can *cognitively infer* that Marlowe must have lit another cigarette—an inference immediately confirmed when the policeman says, "Put out that cigarette!"—but the smoke nevertheless comes as a complete surprise. Obviously, *we* have not voluntarily initiated the act of taking out a cigarette, lighting it, and smoking it from the "inside," including the sensory experiences typical of smoking (touching the cigarette, tasting the tobacco, feeling the slightly intoxicating effect of nicotine, smelling the burning cigarette, etc.); nor have we perceived Marlowe's body movements from the "outside." This evidently contradicts the phenomenology of action, including its willful initiation, its proprioception, and the way we can observe our own bodies. As phenomenologist Dan Zahavi points out:

> One of the issues frequently emphasized in [Edmund] Husserl's phenomenological analysis of the body is … *its peculiar two-sidedness*. My body is given to me as an interiority, as a volitional structure, and as a dimension of sensing, but it is also given as a visually and tactually appearing exteriority. … When I move my own limbs, I am not merely kinaesthetically aware of them; I can also have an exteroceptive and tactile perception of the movements.
>
> (Zahavi 2014, 135–136, original emphasis)

The discrepancy between the sensory perception of the character and our own experience must be particularly strong when this experience itself is supposed to be a strong one. An utterly strange moment occurs in *Maniac* when serial killer Frank (Elijah Wood), after having murdered a female date, runs to the toilet and throws up. When the brown vomit comes flying from offscreen space into onscreen space, it feels as if someone had thrown a disgusting hodgepodge into the toilet, but certainly not as if Frank (and thus "we") had gone through an act of vomiting. Or consider the scene in which director Khalfoun—much like Hepsworth in *How It Feels to Be Run Over*—shows us his character's perception of how he is run over by a car: Our sense of touch involved in feeling the pain of the violent car hitting Frank's (and thus "our" body) is almost completely absent.

But don't we compensate for the absent senses through empathic processes? And isn't it a central insight of Sobchack's later phenomenological intervention that we are *not* reduced to our senses of seeing and hearing in the cinema, but are "cinesthetic subjects" that *synaesthetically* experience the film and, therefore, always have at least a partial experience of the other senses as well (see Sobchack 2004)? I neither want to dispute Sobchack's important findings; nor do I deny that we still empathize, to a certain degree, with Marlowe and Frank. What I do want to stress, however, is how the first-person perspective can complicate the potential to empathize and to experience synaesthetically.

Once we take over the perceptual perspective *of* the character, what disappears is our perceptual perspective *on* the character, who can no longer be seen from a third-person perspective. While, in a standard film, we perceive the character on the screen "from the *outside in*"—and thus are able to empathize with him or her affectively, somatically, and kinesthetically—there is comparatively little left to empathize with in a first-person

perception film, where we perceive with the character "from the *inside out*." We are not confronted with facial expressions and bodily postures; almost everything hinges on the voice and the content of speech as well as the character's rare looks into a mirror (see Smith 1995, 157–158, 160). But this must be an important drawback for empathy if we follow the phenomenological position. As Zahavi summarizes, phenomenologists

> take empathy to refer to our general ability to access the life of the mind of others in their expressions, expressive behavior, and meaningful actions. On their account, it is possible to empathize with the cognitive, affective, and conative experiences of the other, that is, with his or her beliefs, perceptions, feelings, passions, volitions, desires, intentions, etc.
>
> (Zahavi 2014, 151)[5]

But since we have little access to the protagonist's expressions and expressive behavior, the quality of empathy changes. Moreno puts it accurately when he writes that we are dealing with a "phantom-protagonist, who announces himself, like the spirits, by indirect means: the spectator must *infer him* continually from the conduct of the other characters, from the intermittent presence of a voice and hands wandering through the world of the narrative" (1953, 352, original emphasis).

Cognitively inferring the state of the character is different from understanding it via his or her facial expressions and bodily comportment. If the body of the other is a field of expression that, at least *to a certain degree*, reveals to us the other's experiential life, then we need access to the expression of the body to have access to the other's experience, in reality as in film. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is outspoken in this respect:

> This is why the movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his *thoughts*, ... but his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people.
>
> (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 58, original emphasis)

This is precisely what first-person films largely deny us, thus radically restricting the possibilities of empathic engagement. We only get to see what the character is looking at, and hear how he or she talks about it (see also Bruun Vaage 2013, 373). As a result, we merely have a pale and attenuated version of empathy precisely because we cannot perceive and thus intentionally relate to the other's lived body.

When Marlowe smokes or Frank vomits, the smoke and the vomit on the screen can *themselves* become the intentional object of my perception. I might synaesthetically relate to the smoke or the vomit in a pleasurable or disgusted way, having a sensory experience of smell or taste. Arguably, however, the intentional object is largely decoupled from the character who I cannot perceive at this moment. I might have a synaesthetic experience of the smell or taste of *that* vomit. But, in comparison to a scene in which I see Frank throw up, I do not experience the vomit as readily as *his* and, hence, not as *mine* (even if I cognitively infer that it must be Frank who has thrown up). The situation immediately changes once I see Frank's hand cleaning up his vomit with toilet paper: My empathizing—and thus my feeling *with him*—can immediately become more pronounced. Moreover, we should not forget to take into consideration how the protagonist's voice and his or her look into the mirror further complicate the "identification" process, even if they simultaneously allow for empathy. Seeing the protagonist look into the mirror implies a confrontation with an Other whom I may empathize with, but who is clearly not myself. Mitry captures it adequately when he writes that "these 'subjective' [mirror] images alienate me still further because they end up making me more aware than ever that the impressions I experience as mine have not actually been *experienced by* me" (2000, 210, original emphasis).

Jumping in Time: The Problem of the Jarring Temporal Experience

Critical discussions of first-person perception films have concentrated predominantly on problems of visual, acoustic, and proprioceptive experience. What has not played an important role are the problems of rendering a character's subjective *temporal* experience—what Husserl (2008) has called *internal time-consciousness*. Again, we encounter a gap between human experience and the way film usually deals with time. Needless to say that film, as a temporal art form, is extremely flexible in playing with story and plot: It is able to arrange time in an a-chronological order via flashbacks and flashforwards; it can show things occurring simultaneously via split screen; it can elide time through ellipses, etc. However, if a film wanted to consistently present us with an *ongoing first-person perceptual experience*, it would have to rob itself of this freedom to play with time and re-order it at will. During extended scenes of first-person perception, I tend to experience every external act of ordering time as an unmotivated intrusion. In order to prevent me from going through this jolt, however mild, the film would have to adjust to the way humans experience time during episodes of ongoing perception.

Husserl's complex phenomenology of internal time-consciousness has told us that we follow a common misunderstanding if we describe our temporal experience as a series of "nows." Robert Sokolowski claims that, if we treat time experience as a succession of discrete presences, we deal with it precisely as if it was a *film*. Time thus turns into a series of shots that follow another, each having an individual impact on us. "But our experience of temporal duration could not be like this; if it were, we would never get the sense of a duration," Sokolowski (2000, 134) writes. We would experience unrelated events in a staccato-like way, jumping from one experience to the

next, without any temporal continuity: "nothing but momentary flashes, momentary presences, momentary exposures" (135).

Yet this is precisely what a film such as *Maniac* does. As if consciousness consisted of jolting jumps from situation to situation and not of a seamless stream or flow, the film features numerous scenes with abrupt jumps from one shot to another and from one sequence to the next. To me, these jumps feel jarring and discomforting, because they are unmotivated and illogically at odds with how we experience time. In William James's famous words:

> Consciousness ... does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described.
>
> (James 2007, 239)

The phenomenologist Christian Ferencz-Flatz has pointed out, correctly I think, that normal perceptive life is also characterized by moments when we are inattentive and act only by habit, and later on cannot recall what we have done, exactly.[6] Hence, one could claim that the cuts are accurate renderings of the episodic character of our own perceptual attention. However, in everyday life, our temporal experience does not consist of abrupt elisions; the "elisions" resulting from perceptual inattention are "filled" with other acts of consciousness—precisely those "modalities of existence" Sobchack misses: dreaming, imagining, projecting situations, etc. In their insistence on expressing a character's perceptual experience, the films under discussion do not avoid jarring jumps.

But if we experience time as a continuous stream, a first-person perception perspective must create difficulties for "hiding" time through ellipses, provided we take accurately representing a character's subjective experience to be a prime goal of the film. Eliding time is, of course, a standard practice in continuity editing, but while the use of pronounced ellipses is difficult in a first-person perception film, filmmakers can nevertheless remain faithful to human experience of time, at least in principle. The solution is a film shot in a single take, like *Russkiy kovcheg*. However, shooting a film in one go was not an alternative until the advent of light digital cameras; for the longest time in film history, the camera reels had to be changed during shooting, and therefore made a feature length film without cuts impossible. Yet, even after the introduction of very light digital cameras, shooting a first-person perception film in a single take remains extremely complicated logistically. Filmmakers therefore have to hide the necessary cuts or revert to narrative tricks to motivate editing. *Maniac* contains scenes in the dark that allow for invisible editing, a strategy reminiscent of the one Hitchcock used in his "one-shot" film *Rope* (1948). For longer ellipses, filmmakers need to revert to narrative motivations such as falling asleep, being drugged, or suffering from a loss of consciousness due to a knockout.

The problem of the jarring time experience seems much less salient when the film makes clear that we do not perceive an ongoing "live" perception (as in *Maniac*), but suggests to understand the scene as a first-person perception *flashback*. In other words, what we get to see from the first-person perspective is a *memory* of a perception. Knowledge of how it feels to *remember* something—an often much less flow-like experience—grants the filmmakers more leeway in "jumping" from one situation to the next. This is especially true if the shot transitions are smoothened by dissolves. This also goes for *Lady in the Lake*, whose main storyline consists of three long flashbacks (the main character Philip Marlowe appears not only at the beginning and at the end but also twice in the middle of the film). Knowing that Marlowe *recounts* his past experiences makes jumps from situation to situation via ellipses more acceptable than in *Maniac*, which purports that Frank's perceptions occur in the present. However, even in Montgomery's film, we find a number of unmotivated cuts in the middle of an ongoing action that come across to me as jarring and disruptive, as well—for instance, when Marlowe first visits Adrienne Fromsett (Audrey Totter) in her apartment and finds a telegram on her desk. These cuts presumably derive from problems during shooting: The complicated nature of the long take may have made it necessary to splice together different takes. Experiencing these cuts during an ongoing action as jarring, however, may be a sign that the flashback structure "allows" jumps *between* scenes but not *within* a scene.

Acting Strange: The Problem of Direct Address and Conversational Interaction

The final problem I deal with is the unusual conversational interactions taking place in first-person perception films. In her discussion of *Lady in the Lake*, Sobchack notes that, although invisible, Marlowe is constantly implicated as an embodied being, "because *visible human others address him as he sees them* and they act to him and address him in his act of vision as having a *human character* and being a *human being*" (1992, 230, original emphases). As Sobchack is quick to point out, these interactions with the protagonist do not at all resemble usual addresses of the camera. Just think of the direct camera address in documentary films and television shows, where the camera is an often openly acknowledged apparatus through which the filmmaker or the viewers are addressed. Here, the camera is a medium that connects. In regular fiction films, although less prevalent, the direct address also exists. It is often claimed to break the "fourth wall" and thus to destroy the alleged illusionary effect of the diegesis (see Brown 2012). In this case, the characters do not address a camera but aim to address an audience outside of their filmic world. The effect is paradoxical, as the character establishes a (one-sided) communicative connection, and at the same time instigates the viewer's distanciation from the fictional world. In his scathing critique of *Lady in the Lake*, James Conant (2011, 318) identifies precisely the direct address as the major problem: The viewer feels acknowledged by the characters, which results in a "profoundly disruptive" experience that inhibits an absorption in the filmic world. Yet a direct camera address of the *actors* is by no means always shattering the illusion of worldhood, as Conant (2011, 320) claims, simply because it does not always imply a

character acknowledging the viewer. The example of first-person-camera films such as *The Blair Witch Project* proves that we can easily accept a direct camera address without feeling looked at by the characters.

In films such as *Lady in the Lake* and *Maniac*, we face a different situation as the direct address neither acknowledges the camera nor does it aim to destroy the "fourth wall" by acknowledging the audience. Instead, we remain *within* the diegesis and are directly addressed nonetheless as the camera takes on the role of—and disguises itself as—a human character. Conant is right when he claims that "we" are acknowledged; but he is also imprecise. We are not addressed as *viewers*, but as part of the character; we are *observers*, but at the same time we are also directly addressed as viewers-*inside*-a-character and, hence, are supposedly involved as *participants* in the social interaction. This curious place in-between has an odd effect: Although somehow implicated in the social relationship, we cannot talk back. We are in a face-to-*no*-face interaction, as the other person (i.e., the character) seems to address "us" but also not *us*. Thus, the feeling of claustrophobia and stuffiness that Sobchack and Žižek describe results not only from the very limited diegetic world of first-person perception films but also from the circumscribed interaction potential the films put us in. Silenced and shut in, we may feel captivated in Žižek's glass house. Or, to use a different simile, we are like homunculi trapped in an anechoic chamber that lets in sound from outside but does not allow sound to leave from inside. What is more, since Marlowe and Frank always take over "our" talking, there is constantly someone else interfering. It is as if, in real life, a person was talking to us, but instead of entering a communication with this person, *another* person would always come first and answer *for* us.

To further explain the unease the interaction constellation of extended point-of-view shots may evoke in viewers, including Conant and myself, we should also consider the acting. Conant writes:

> One common criticism of *Lady in the Lake* is to say that it involves a great deal of bad acting. This fails, I suspect, to put a finger on what it is that really unsettles one when subjected to the performances of the actors in this film. I do not think the acting is worse than that in many a mediocre Hollywood film that is far less disruptive of our capacities for cinematic enjoyment.
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> (Conant 2011, 319)

Indeed, it is not the *quality* of the acting that is at stake here, but the way the first-person perspective makes us perceive the actors, who use the same tricks of the trade as in regular fiction films. I claim that the viewer's unease also derives from not being used to a confrontation with the common conventions of acting in such a frontal way. In other words, the direct address has a defamiliarization effect, rendering the usual acting conventions strange.

The most unsettling of the foregrounded conventions are the extended stares right into "our" eyes with hardly any blinking. In an article entitled

"Who Blinked First?," David Bordwell claims that the eye behavior of film actors and, hence, fictional characters differs substantially from our regular conversational counterparts. In everyday face-to-face interactions, "the two parties seldom share a look for very long. It appears that stretches of mutual gaze, with eyes locked, are infrequent and brief" (2007, 328). We constantly switch between shared looks, gaze avoidance, and other eye movements, for instance, when people look to recall something or glance sideways to monitor the environment. In contrast, characters in films often make mutual eye contact, staring at each other with eyes wide open. For the audience of a regular fiction film, this is hardly unsettling, not least because of the conventions viewers are habituated to. The situation changes, however, in first-person perception films: In *Lady in the Lake*, Adrienne rarely looks away, but extensively *stares* at Marlowe—and thus also at "us" (see Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2 Adrienne Fromsett in *Lady in the Lake*.

When she walks away, she turns her head to keep eye contact. She even walks backward in order to hold the interlocked gaze, all the while keeping the number of blinks to a minimum. What this foregrounding of acting conventions amounts to is a lack of distance between viewer and character. It is hardly surprising that Žižek experiences "an aggressive intervention into the sphere of our intimacy" (1992, 42). In comparison, the extended stares into the camera in films such as *The Blair Witch Project* are not experienced as an intrusion, because the gazes are not directed at "us."

Being Successfully Locked in Another Body: *Le Scaphandre et le papillon*

In conclusion, I want to turn to a film whose subjective camera works astonishingly well: Due to the specific narrative premise of *Le Scaphandre et*

le papillon—as well as some important developments in camera technology—director Julian Schnabel goes a long way to decrease the viewer's discomfort with regard to the representation of character subjectivity. But it is only fair to say that, unlike *Lady in the Lake* and *Maniac*, Schnabel's film limits the expression of first-person perception. Comparable to, say, *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), it contains extended sequences, interspersed with conventional non-subjective passages. I have claimed that it crucially influences our bodily experience of a film if the narrative asks us to experience what we see on the screen as the perception of a human or a non-human character. Hence, our knowledge plays a central role in our bodily relation to the perception and expression of the camera. The same goes for different types of human bodies: It makes a great difference whether we are to assume a healthy body of a hard-boiled private detective, or the body of a completely paralyzed man who can merely move his eyes. As the audience will soon find out at the beginning of *Le Scaphandre et le papillon*, the main character Jean-Dominique Bauby (Mathieu Amalric) has suffered from a stroke, as a consequence of which he is paralyzed with the locked-in syndrome. This leaves him claustrophobically immobile, and robs him of almost all his agency.

Due to this extreme bodily impairment, the film largely eliminates the striking *lack of agency* we experience in a film such as *Lady in the Lake*, especially in moments when Marlowe acts differently than we want him to. Feeling a lack of agency is particularly salient in Montgomery's film, because the movie, through paratextual and intratextual cues, strongly urges us to put ourselves in the position of Marlowe. Hence, much more than in other films, the character functions as the viewer's "avatar," as a stand-in for the audience in the filmic world. However, in contrast to avatars in first-person video games or virtual reality technology, the viewer has no control over the character. Whenever the viewer would actually like to explore something in order to solve the murder mystery, he or she has to realize a frustrating lack of agency, which includes the impossibility to speak out and to ask questions. The "avatar" Marlowe becomes a stranger. In contrast, *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* lets the viewer *share* a lack of agency with Bauby, precisely because Bauby has hardly any agency left: He cannot move, nor can he talk.

In addition, Bauby's locked-in syndrome relieves Schnabel's film of a much-decried disadvantage of other first-person perception films: Even in recent movies shot with highly mobile cameras, one may feel a *strain* between the ease, swiftness, and fluidity with which we move our bodies, heads, and eyes, on the one hand, and the relative sluggishness of the camera, on the other. How immobile the film "looks" out into the world becomes less of a problem, of course, when the protagonist himself is completely immobile. Again, the immobile viewer in front of the screen and the immobile character on the screen *share* an impediment. Hence, the viewer may, in fact, feel close to Bauby, rather than alienated from him. At the same time, Schnabel elegantly circumnavigates the limited range of human consciousness pointed out above. Even though Bauby's body is completely

paralyzed, and the film therefore remains very static in its perception shots at the beginning, *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* knows how to break out of the paralyzed material body's "prison" and finds a way to escape into the idealized world of other modes of consciousness. When Bauby's inner voice over exclaims that he still has his memory and his imagination to cling to, the film merely underlines verbally what it had demonstrated visually before. Unlike *Lady in the Lake*, Schnabel's film does not tie itself slavishly to the senses of seeing and hearing—and thus manages to become more fluid and mobile.

This heightened fluidity and mobility also pertains to the protagonist's shifting visual attention. Consider how smoothly a change in attention restructures our field of consciousness in everyday life, how easily visual things we concentrate on move from the margins to the center of our field of consciousness, and thereby relegate other visual elements to the fringe. A film such as *Lady in the Lake* is much less flexible here. In fact, it hardly ever manages to represent a hierarchy of attention. As Sobchack notes,

> one of the things that is sensed as "wrong" in the perceptual conduct we see as Marlowe lights a cigarette is the visible equivalence of his vision. As he is supposedly directing his primary attention toward the people in the room, his hands and the cigarette loom large in his (and our) presence.
>
> (Sobchack 1992, 240)

This is different in human perception: Attention toward other people in a room would subordinate the hand and the cigarette in our visual field.

> When I light a cigarette or sip a drink as I talk intently to another, my hands, the cigarette, the match, the glass, don't insist on their visibility as they enter my visual field. Rather, they are seen through and beyond without strain or effort or deliberation.
>
> (Sobchack 1992, 241)

Although far from perfect, the way Schnabel and his cinematographer Janusz Kamiński use cinematographic techniques at least shows a strong awareness of this problematic shift of focus in human perception that comes with a change of attention. The first scene of the film is a case in point: It reveals an impressive use of constantly shifting focus, change of depth and sharpness, fades to black, overexposure, extreme close ups, lens flare, etc. (see Figure 7.3).

Moreover, when Bauby's right eye is stitched up later in the film, the film motivates an approximation of the *monoscopic* vision of the character and the *monocular* vision of the camera. As David Bordwell (2005, 60) reminds us, the film camera is generally cyclops-like; monocular vision is inherent to 2D films. When Bauby's right eye is sutured—and, hence, the character can only look through his left eye—the film gives ample motivation to accept the monocular vision of the camera as an approximation of human vision.

Figure 7.3 Distorted and blurred first-person perspective of Bauby's hospital room in *Le Scaphandre et le papillon*.

Furthermore, due to Bauby's locked-in syndrome, the film can largely eliminate the usual problems of misguided self-perception. As has often been pointed out, there are considerable discrepancies in form and size of the respective fields of vision between humans and the camera. Watching a film such as *Maniac*, one therefore constantly has a feeling of a wrong exterior perception of "oneself": When Frank drives his car through the streets of Los Angeles, his hands seem artificially cut off at the wrists by camera framing. Thus, showing the protagonist's hands and feet on screen gives us both too little and too much: On the one hand (pun intended), the film usually shows us too little, because in reality we tend to see more than what is shown on screen. On the other hand, the film gives us too much once hands and feet are shown, because only when they are shown do we become aware of what is actually lacking.

Finally, consider what I have called the problem of the absent senses. Early on in *Le Scaphandre et le papillon*, we realize that Bauby cannot smell, taste, or touch; nor does he have a proper sense of proprioception. He is all eyes and ears. Since Bauby relies exclusively on the senses of seeing and hearing, his sensory access to the world coincides with precisely those senses the audiovisual medium of film can address "directly." To be sure, accurate perceptual subjectivity is impossible: A film can never reach a complete expression of human perception. However, Schnabel's film achieves an approximation of human perception like no other movie before. Still, even though the film has a very humanist message of the triumph of imagination and memory over the material limitations of the body, the approximation of human perception and camera expression comes at the prize of a certain "dehumanization." It is only because the unfortunate Bauby has lost many facets of human experience that *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* can approach Bauby's subjective experience and succeed as a first-person perception film. This lends evidence to the core argument put forward above. I have claimed

that, paradoxically, it often seems that the viewing experience turns out all the more discomforting the more the film tries to suggest that what we perceive on the screen are experiences of first-person human perception. Inversely, examples such as the disembodied narrator in *Russkiy kovcheg* and the disabled protagonist in *Le Scaphandre et le papillon* suggest that, the bigger the "dehumanization," the easier it is to accept a first-person perception in film.

Notes

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2. The term "identification"—especially in its psychoanalytic usage—has been heavily criticized by cognitivist film scholars like Noël Carroll (1990) and Murray Smith (1995). When I use the term in the following, I do not intend to ignore their pertinent arguments. Rather, I presume that an implicit, if wrong-headed, goal of first-person perception films is precisely what Carroll and Smith argue against: to make the viewer think of him- or herself as identical with the protagonist.
3. Other terms used are "camera-I," "first-person camera," or "subjective camera." For a critique of the term "subjective," see Mitry 2000, 207. For literature on the "identification" problem in *Lady in the Lake*, see Metz 1973.
4. This is not to say, by the way, that (extended) point-of-view shots necessarily imply strong character subjectivity (see Dagrada 1986; Smith 1995, 161).
5. In the phenomenological tradition, Max Scheler (1954) and Maurice Ponty (1964) are the most prominent philosophers who understand empathy as a *perception*-based process that can make us directly acquainted with the emotions of others.
6. Email correspondence, July 17, 2015; quoted with permission.

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8 Color and Subjectivity in Film

Barbara Flueckiger

When contemporary spectators watch movies, they usually do not pay attention to colors, unless the color scheme becomes very ostentatious. However, in the early days of cinema, color was one of the main attractions of the new medium, and thus an end in itself. Beautifully hand-colored or stencil-colored scenes were presented as visual attractions (see Yumibe 2012). When the *mimetic colors* were introduced to capture profilmic colors by an immanent process—be it chemical, physical, or by a combination of both—the amazement was even more pronounced. These so-called "natural" colors generated a vivid discourse in fan magazines as well as in the trade press (see Hanssen 2006; Layton et al. 2015).[1]

One of the recurring topics of this discourse centered on the notion of reality, whether or not color films were more real and more immediate or whether—on the contrary—colors distracted the audience. This discourse is torn between two poles: On the one hand, realism called for transparent representation of the outside world, as proposed by the notion of the indexical developed, for example, by André Bazin (1975). On the other hand, the concept of verisimilitude often referred to a basic, ideologically charged norm of Hollywood's continuity system (see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985). Our collective memory profoundly associates the exploitation or critiques of film color's notorious shift to artificiality and stylization with Technicolor's spectacular display of saturated hues.

Most of the early film color processes such as tinting and toning[2] primarily served the purpose of structuring the narrative, indicating locations and time, or marking narrative highlights. Starting in the first decade of the 20th century, the new mimetic processes were displaying constant changes in hues, color schemes, and patches of colors, often referred to as "color bombardment" causing "eye strain." In a broader context, the color discourse was embedded in a heated debate about the use of colors in art, interior design, fashion, and other strands of consumer culture. Famously, David Batchelor proposed the term "chromophobia" (2006, 64) for Western culture's reluctance toward color. According to Batchelor, color was perceived as "the Other," associated with the vulgar, the female, the oriental, or the superficial. Batchelor's statement, however, is contested by an intense preoccupation with color by artistic movements in modernity, such

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