Enactive Cinematic Perception: The Cinema as Exploration of the (Re)Presented World

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INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of cinema, film theorists have studied how spectators perceive the representations that the medium offers to our senses. Early film theorists have bent their heads over what cinema is, how cinema can be seen as art, but also over what cinema is capable of. One of the earliest film theorists, Hugo Münsterberg argued in 1916 that the uniqueness of cinema, or as he calls it *photoplay*, lies in the way it offers the possibility to represent our mental perception and organisation of the reality, or the world we live in: "the photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion" (Münsterberg [1916] 2004, 402).

Münsterberg was not the only theorist who examined how cinema functions in giving its audience representations of a recognisable world. Later theorists, like Rudolf Arnheim in 1933 and Erwin Panofsky in 1934, addressed how cinema has the possibility to *transform* the empirical world instead of replicating it. Arnheim even suggests that this transformation is connected to the human desire to explore the curiosities of our world: "by its very nature, of course, the motion picture tends to satisfy the desire for faithful reports about curious, characteristic, exciting things going on in this world of ours" (Arnheim [1933] 2004, 316).

However, the later film theorist André Bazin argued in 1958 that cinema *is* about *replicating* the empirical world instead of transforming it: "today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose. It is no longer a question of survival after

death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny" (Bazin [1958] 1960, 6).

It thus seems that many of the early film theorists looked into the question of what cinema really is and what it is capable of. In a certain way, they all address the audience's perception of that what the medium represents, namely the film itself. How could Bazin, for example, argue that cinema is attempting to replicate the empirical world without taking into account that the audience must *experience* that which cinema shows to be a replica? The same goes for the arguments of Arnheim, Münsterberg and Panofsky; the perception of cinema by the audience has been a cornerstone for making their respective arguments. The questions of how spectators perceive cinema and what cinema is capable of thus seem closely interrelated.

In the 1970's, film theorists started to focus on the ideological effects of the cinematic medium and its apparatus. Laura Mulvey, for example, argued in 1975 that cinema has the ability to control the unconscious way in which the audience has to look at women, since the medium has control over the dimensions of space and time (Mulvey [1975] 2004, 68). Therefore, she states: "in *reality* the phantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it" (61).

Mulvey, however, is not the only film theorist in the 70's who addressed the ideological effects of cinema. In 1970, Jean-Louis Baudry also suggested that cinema is capable of mobilizing the spectator's fantasies via realistic visual representations while he or she is physically "chained" to a chair in a dark theatre (Baudry [1970] 2004, 354-355). Baudry thus not only concentrates on the medium itself as what influences the spectator, but also on the whole cinematic apparatus: "the cinema can appear as a sort of psychic apparatus of substitution, corresponding to the model defined by the dominant ideology" (354). Both the medium and the apparatus are thus capable of making the audience believe in a certain ideology that is represented in cinematic representations.

To summarise: film theorists have since the emergence of the cinematic medium debated about the spectator's perception of cinema. Later, in the 1970's, theorists started to argue to what extent spectators could be influenced by a certain ideology through this medium and its apparatus while perceiving the represented cinematic images. The question, however, remains *if* cinema is capable of making us believe in an ideology through our perception. Is the human mind able to be influenced in such a way that it will easily follow an ideology that is "realistically" represented to it?

In this article, I will look into the question that was raised by the film theorists of the 1970's: how is cinema able to impose an ideology on the perception of spectators? To answer this question, I will first look into how human perception actually works; how do humans "make sense" of the world. Understanding human cognition is therefore one of the keys to

answering my research question. I will explain cognition through the enactive approach, to later show how cinema is mediating our active exploration of the world. I will then look at the writings of Baudry to examine how his film theory can be understood in conjunction with contemporary knowledge of perception. With this article, I would therefore like to show how an older film theory, like Baudry's, can still be found relevant in the light of present-day research on meaning-making.

ENACTIVE PERCEPTION

Over the last two decades, an enormous amount of research has emerged in the field of cognition. Mainly in the fields of philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence and neurology, scientists tend to be particularly interested in what human cognition is and how it works. Because this topic of cognition is shared among many fields, interdisciplinary research on cognition often occurs nowadays. This has resulted in the emergence of research fields that name themselves "cognitive neuroscience," "cognitive psychology," "comparative cognition," etc.

What does cognition mean? Dale Purves and his colleagues, having a background in cognitive neuroscience, explain cognition in their book *Principles of Cognitive Neuroscience* as: "'higher-order' mental processes" (Purves et al. 2013, 568). This definition remains quite abstract and therefore requires more clarification.

A clearer definition is given by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in their book, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. In their book, Varela and his colleagues combine cognitive science's approach with mindfulness in understanding how cognition works. The authors define cognition as follows: "cognition consists in the enactment or bringing forth of a world by a viable history of structural coupling" (Varela et al. 1991, 205). Cognition is thus not simply higher-order mental processes, but it is the subjective enactment of creating a world through someone's own context. Cognition, and, consequently, 'making sense', are constituted through enactment.

What then exactly is enactment? Varela and his colleagues explain the enactive approach to cognition as follows: "the enactive approach consists of two points: 1) perception consists in perceptually guided action, and 2) cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided" (173). Human perception thus depends on the environment and on how that environment gives us specific structures to guide our perception. These structures can then become a pattern for our senses which help us to interpret what we perceive. Perception is thus an active process; it is not simply the mirroring of a pre-given environment.

To make the enactive approach clearer, I'll give two examples. Firstly, the use of inverting glasses. These glasses consist of prisms that distort the light entering the eyes in an unnatural way, namely upside-down. Everything you see is therefore upside-down. Your first

instinct would be that it would be very difficult to read a newspaper, for example. However, people who use these glasses get used to their way of perceiving the world after a few days (Taylor 1962). It is not that the upside-down world is inverted again by our minds, but we simply get used to seeing things the other way around. Our perception is thus not something that follows pre-given structures in our brain, but it is active in the sense that it is formed between the environment and the mind.

The second example is about colour perception. In 2015, a picture of a dress went viral on the Internet. The girl who posted the picture asked the question what colour the dress was: was it blue and black, or gold and white? It appeared that not everyone had the same opinion on what colour the dress exactly was. Some people simply perceived it as being blue and black, and others as gold and white. This example shows that our way of perceiving things does not just lie in the environment, since people tended to see different colours in the same picture. It shows us that our perception lies between the mind and the environment; it is an active exploration of the mind in terms of what is presented to it.

Varela, Thompson, and Rosch are not the only authors that use the enactive approach to analyse perception and cognition. Alva Noë, in his book *Action in Perception*, also uses the enactive approach to describe how we actively perceive that what is represented to us with the help of our sensorimotor skills. On visual and haptic perception, Noë argues:

> through attention, probing, and movements of the eyes, visual experience acquires content in much the same way that touch does. Vision, and touch, gain content through our skilful movements. We bring content to experience by action. We *enact* content.
>
> (Noë 2006, 100; emphasis in original)

Just like Varela and his colleagues, Noë makes the point that perception is bound to skillful structures or, in his case, movements to help to experience that which is represented. Noë's argument is therefore that phenomenological reflection on the character of that what is perceived suggests that certain features are present as *available*, rather than as represented: "The world is within reach and is present only insofar as we know (or feel) that it is" (67). We build our own "world" through the action in our perception of that world.

The following statement of Noë aptly summarises the approach: "the world we inhabit and explore as perceivers is encountered in the first instance not as housing […] facts and properties, but rather as *mediating* our active exploration" (167). Again: we must not see our empirical world as holding facts (like colours) that are mirrored in our mind, but as a mediating space for our active perception.

This is where film theory comes in. I would like to argue, with the help of Noë's argument, that films we explore as perceivers are encountered in the first instance not as housing facts

and properties, but rather as *mediating* our active exploration. The represented world of the cinema becomes the only empirical world for us because our perception is limited to the environment of the cinema. The cinema therefore becomes, just like "the big outside world," the environment which is open for active perception. Cinema is then, just like "the world," mediating our perception in the moment that we go to the cinema.

IDEOLOGY AND ENACTIVE PERCEPTION

The question that emerges is in what way cinema is able to ideologically influence someone. As stated in the introduction, film theorists like Baudry and Mulvey have already asked these questions in the 70's. However, what these authors didn't address was that filmgoers are active explorers in their perception of the world. I would argue that this is also true for a represented world: spectators are always actively exploring the environment in front of them in order to make sense of their view of a world. But what happens if the many facets of a represented world that are explored impose certain ideologies on the spectator?

To see how cinema is able to transmit an ideology, I will do a close reading of the famous text 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' by Jean-Louis Baudry. This article, which was published in *Cinéthique* in 1970, is often seen as "characteristic of the attempts that have been made to criticize the ideological underpinnings of previous film thought, and to ground new work in a more self-conscious and self-critical set of assumptions" (Williams 1974, 39). Baudry's article is therefore representative of many writings on film that also focussed on the ideological effects of the medium and the apparatus.

To find out how cinema exposes a spectator to an ideology, I will analyse how Baudry spoke of the ways in which cinema creates these ideological effects. In my close reading of his text, I will focus on three sub-questions that will help to answer my research question. These questions are:

- Through what *features* is cinema able to expose filmgoers to an ideology?
- How is the *experience* that cinema creates for the spectator addressed and explained?
- How is the *perception* of film by the spectator addressed and explained?

These three questions will be used to analyse Baudry's article. The observations that I will make regarding his article, which will help me to give an answer to these questions, shall be followed by an elaboration on how these findings can be examined from the enactive approach on human perception.

This form of analysis has its limitations, of course. In answering my research question about how cinema is able to convey an ideology through perception, I am only focussing on one

text of an 'ideological film theorist'. To get a broader view on how the topic of ideology in film has been undertaken, one can also look at the works of other theorists. For the scope of this article I have limited my research to one author, namely Baudry, who is representative of a larger group of authors sharing the same arguments (Williams 1974, 39).

IDEOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE BASIC CINEMATOGRAPHIC APPARATUS

The analysis of Baudry's article is divided into two parts. The first part will focus on each of my sub-questions. In this part I will first show which features of cinema described by Baudry account for the medium's ability to ideologically influence the spectator. After having described one such feature, I will look into Baudry's description of the filmgoer's experience, after which I will examine the way he addresses and explains the perception of the spectator. The second part consists of an elaboration on these features from an enactive approach.

Features, Experience, and Perception

Baudry identifies three clear cinematic features through which meaning is given to that what the medium represents: "the mechanical apparatus both selects the minimal difference and represses it in projection, so that meaning can be constituted; it is at once direction, continuity, movement" (349). Direction, continuity, and movement appear to be elements that the medium holds which help to provide an inscribed meaning (an ideology). I will explain in more depth how Baudry describes and uses these three elements.

Direction

When Baudry addresses the concept of *direction*, he talks about "the place of the instrumental base" that film can take (346). This instrumental base is "the site of inscription," meaning that the one who holds the production of the film can ascribe a dogma to it. Baudry explains this directional approach as being twofold: it can be seen in how cinematic representations are cut off from "objective reality", and it can be observed through the way something is framed.

To elaborate on Baudry's first point on direction: if a cinematic representation is cut off from the raw material (the objective reality), the representation does not allow the spectator to see the transformation that has taken place from raw to fabricated material. The direction of the spectators is thus always focussed on something that is fabricated and they therefore have to deal with a specific perspective on the raw material. The producer of the fabricated material can thus decide a perspective and has with that a certain power over the watching subject.

Baudry's second point on direction is about the methods to which the fabricated perspective is bound to. *Découpage*, the shot breakdown before shooting a film, and *montage*, the

editing which is done after the shooting, are for Baudry two methods through which inscription in perspective takes place (346). These two practices can constitute a meaning through their apparent restoration of the objective reality from which they are fabricated. This meaning has then, of course, already been inscribed through these two methods.

But how is the experience of this feature of direction described by Baudry? Baudry states that this feature

> lays out the space of an "ideal vision" and in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence—metaphorically (by unknown to which it appeals—here we must recall the structural place occupied by the vanishing point) and metonymically (by the displacement that it seems to carry out: a subject is both "in place of" and "a part for the whole").
>
> (Baudry [1970] 2004, 348)

The cinematic experience of the spectator is thus, just like directional feature itself, twofold: it creates a metaphorical and a metonymical feeling of transcendence. Due to the cut between the represented world and the "objective reality," and because of cinema's ability to frame representations in a specific way, someone experiences being in that world. This is stimulated by cinema, which gives a spectator an ideal view of a situation in the represented world. Direction therefore gives you the feeling and experience of being in the represented world.

But how is it that we can perceive these features that create such an experience? According to Baudry, this is because the different lenses used in shooting the film give the spectator a conventional perspective on the world. This perspective is the same perspective as the one we have on the "objective reality": "the use of different lenses, when not dictated by technical considerations aimed at restoring habitual perspective [...], does not destroy (traditional) perspective but rather makes it play the role of norm" (347). Cinema is therefore not trying to create a new perspective on the world, but tries to give an ideal vision of it through representations that can be observed from a traditional perspective, namely the one we also use as the norm: our perspective on our daily reality.

Continuity

The second element, which holds the power to inscribe an ideology in a film, is *continuity*. According to Baudry, the cinema is able to create an illusion of continuity. Baudry explains this illusion in one of his footnotes as follows:

> we know that the spectator finds it impossible to notice that the images which succeed one another before his eyes were assembled end to end, because the projection of film on the screen offers an impression of continuity although the

images which compose it are, in reality, distinct, and are differentiated, moreover, by variations in space and time.

(Baudry [1970] 2004, 349)

Baudry thus tries to make clear that film is nothing more than detached pictures that follow each other in a certain flow. The representations in these pictures are, however, different from the real world, since they are in a different space and time. However, film "lives on the denial of difference": it constantly seems to suggest being in the 'real world' and therefore in "real space and time" (349). These differences must be effaced if an illusion of continuity wants to be maintained.

What the spectator experiences in the cinema is thus, according to Baudry, a feeling of continuity: a logical flow of successive relations in a space and time. The spectator experiences this spatiality and temporality as the same space and time of objective reality. Baudry therefore argues that a filmgoer experiences film as being real because of its continuity, although it unreal in fact (351).

The perception of this continuity is dependent on the persistence of vision. Our sight is structured in such a way that it restores the discontinuous elements (the static images of which a film consists) so that we are able to see coherence (349). It therefore seems that Baudry is suggesting that humans have an inbuilt structure which makes them already able to perceive a flow; it is in our nature. Baudry even suggests that having this ability gives rise to human consciousness (350). To summarise: seeing flow creates consciousness, and consciousness attributes meaning to that which is seen in the flow.

Movement

The last element of ideological inscription in film is *movement*. This feature is explained by Baudry with the help of the concept of *the transcendental subject*: the hallucinatory belief in the omnipotence of thought by a spectator (350). The manifestation of this belief seems to be fed by the mobility of the camera:

> if the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable limits to its displacement— conditions fulfilled by the possibilities of shooting and of film—the world will be constituted not only by this eye but for it.

(Baudry [1970] 2004, 350)

The displacement caused by the mobility of the camera can generate in the spectator a feeling of being omnipotent. However, the fantasy of this created reality is a manifestation of power over the subject: the mobility of the camera, which allows us to see many facets of

a scene, is still formatted in space and time. This mobility can therefore generate an ideology.

But how does Baudry describe the experience of the spectator that is associated with this movement feature? Baudry states that "to seize movement is to become movement" (350). Filmgoers become absorbed in the movement that is given to them in the many facets of a scene. According to Baudry, you simply become the movement of the camera; you are "the eye subject," meaning that the artificial perspective of the camera becomes your sight (350). You thus experience the movement as something natural, while at the same time you seem to hold the power to change the movement, but actually you don't.

Humans are able to perceive this movement, just as with continuity, because of their natural dependence on vision. In fact, our sight can adopt the position of a camera because of its mobility, which will create coherence and meaning:

> one may presume that what was already at work as the originating basis of the perspective image, namely the eye, the "subject," is put forth, liberated (in the sense that a chemical reaction liberates a substance) by the operation which transforms successive, discrete images (as isolated images they have, strictly speaking, no meaning, or at least no unity of meaning) into continuity, movement, meaning.
>
> (Baudry [1970] 2004, 354)

A spectator has the ability to "become" the camera, and with that to become the perspective. Movements in this perspective and motion in the representations of the successive images may then create a sense of being transcendent.

Enactive Cinematic Perception

How then can these three cinematic features, that are able to impose an ideology, be read from an enactive approach on perception? According to Baudry, it is possible for cinema to expose an ideology through these features to the spectator, but is it still possible if we see this spectator as an active perceiver?

Let's first observe how this works with respect to the *direction* feature. It is of course true that cinematic representations are cut off from the raw material, which causes the representations to be only fabricated versions of the objective reality. An active perceiver is therefore always perceiving these representations as a world, since this represented world is the *only available* world for the perceiver: in a dark cinema, the attention of the spectator is drawn to the screen which becomes a window to a world; a world becomes available. It doesn't matter for the spectators if this world is real or fabricated; they are simply satisfied when they are able to make sense of what they perceive.

This can also be said for the *continuity* feature: the constant denial of differences between the space and time of reality and those of the distinct cinematic images. Again, it doesn't matter for the spectator if the represented space and time are different from those in objective reality. What matters is that this space and time are the only available spatiality and temporality, and therefore become a world. However, Baudry states that this denial of the difference in spatiality and temporality is something which can structure an ideology through the belief that someone is observing the objective world in a cinematic representation. This is, however, not completely true: the spectators don't recognise the representations in the continuity as being part of objective reality, nor do they recognise them as fabrications of that reality. What they recognise is simply an *available* world. Spectator don't have to be familiar with the objective world to understand what is happening in it, but what is important is that they have senses through which they can perceive this world to bring forth a world by a viable history of structural coupling (Varela et al. 1991, 205).

For the last of Baudry's features, *movement*, a similar argument can be made: the feeling of the spectators that they are omnipotent, because of the mobility of the camera. The mobility of the camera causes displacements to happen, and the spectator can do nothing more than simply follow those movements. These formatted movements are therefore the only available movements for a spectator to perceive. It is then somewhat true that a spectator gets a feeling of omnipotence, since they get the same feeling of perceiving this available world as any other world, namely just like objective reality. It is however wrong to see a hierarchy between different sorts of worlds that can be available for a perceiver: it is not important if the world is as "real" as in "objective reality." It is important that someone is able to perceive an available world. Becoming omnipotent through created mobility in the cinema is thus not an illusion; it *is* the available reality.

It seems that, like what happens when humans put on inverting glasses, spectators adapt their way of perceiving to the reality that is made available to them. The power of putting an ideology in certain features therefore lies in what is made available for the spectator and what is not. Baudry however argues that it is more a question of *how* features are made available, because these features are in their availability structured by an ideology, which can then be exposed to a spectator. This is of course a way of interpreting how an ideology can be imposed on a filmgoer, but what must be taken into consideration here is that this person is always an active perceiver. That means that this perceiver is also a *vulnerable* perceiver: he or she can't put something in the perspective of another world, but only in the perspective of the same world. But this is no less the case for the same perceiver in objective reality: this "objective reality" is in that case the only available world through which things can be put in perspective. Seeing a hierarchy of a raw and a fabricated world, and how an ideology is manifested in "objective reality" or in a fabricated form of this reality, is therefore wrong: the world that someone perceives is the only world in that moment, and the ideology that is disseminated in this world can therefore logically be

perceived and taken over by the perceiver to make sense of the available world. However, when we leave the cinema, we are exposed to another available world with other ideologies. The point is that perceivers only get influenced by ideological features in the world that is available to them, but not necessarily in another world that is made available to them in the past or future.

CONCLUSION

In the above I have shown how humans use their enactive perception to make sense of the world that is represented to them. I have closely analysed how Baudry uses three features to describe how the cinema is capable of giving its spectators an ideology. What must be kept in mind here however is that a filmgoer is always an active perceiver. The represented world in the cinema therefore always becomes something like a "real world" for the spectator, since it is the only "world" that is available to be explored at the moment.

Let us come back to the question raised by Baudry and Mulvey in the 1970's: how is cinema able to ideologically influence its spectator through perception? It has become clear that cinema is only a mediator of our active exploration of the represented world in the cinema, which has become the only world for us to perceive there. If a film holds a specific ideology in the (showing of) its very own representations, then it would be logical that the spectators would take over this ideology since they *become* part of the film.

However, I would like to argue here that when the film is over, and the lights are turned back on, we are able to reflect on what we have lived through. People are in this moment able to choose if they go with an ideology or not. This is because this is the only moment where we can see things in the perspective of two worlds: the represented world and the "objective world." Seeing things in perspective becomes possible in exactly that one moment where the two worlds are still available for the spectator. One can then choose to go with a represented ideology or not. Being active in our perception, and thus having a constant changing state of cognition, implies that the structural and patterned thinking with an ideology is incompatible with the ability of active perception.

Cinema is, I would suggest, the medium *par excellence* in training new cognitive skills. By going to the cinema, we can test and train our active perception in a represented world; we have the ability to make mistakes in our observations and to learn from them. The cinema is able to train our ways of exploring the world, while we, at the same time, can reflect on the ideology that a film assumes implicitly. Baudry and Mulvey were thus right when they stated that cinema has the power to make us believe in a certain ideology. It is, however, up to us to actively explore the possibilities of such an ideology in one world, and to reflect on it with the help of another world.

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