

The Blind Heroine in Cinema History: Film and the Not-Visual

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Program in Literature in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

My dissertation explores non-visual experiences of film through a study of the recurring cinematic figure of the blind heroine in three periods of US cinema - late silent, classical, post-studio. My analysis of films, multi-sensory film “spectatorship” and film production critically depart from the readings offered by semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory, in favor of theories of cinematic perception and theories of genre, namely, melodrama and suspense. My approach reorients theories of film that have explained cinema as an exclusively visual culture towards a broader consideration of sensory perception and film experience.

Attention to Helen Keller, as an author and a cinematic protagonist, and to the ability of the figure of the blind heroine to reorganize the structure of the films that address her frames my discussion of modern film form. Film has attempted to represent the spatial, tactile and aural experiences of gendered blind protagonists for sighted viewers – to visually produce non-visual experiences and to move beyond the limitations of its own technologies. In each of the technological periods I examine, film uses cinematography that addresses the body, sonic and visual attention to texture and movement, and narrative and affective structures of melodrama and suspense, to create the audience’s aesthetic experience. My work explores the ways in which cinema has been multi-sensory, embodied, and “not-visual” – that is, visual but also more than visual – through critical evaluation of the dominant arguments of film theory, formal analysis of films, and historical accounts of film production.

Keller’s work and the films I examine offer a theory of the modern phenomenological subject – a subject whose senses are not, finally, located within the body of the individual but are shared with, and borrowed from, the world of human and cinematic bodies they encounter.

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## **Introduction: Three Perspectives on the Blind Heroine**

In 1909, poor, blind Bertha wanders aimlessly at the edge of the frame, with no to dance with, in the closing scene of D.W. Griffith's film adaptation of Charles Dickens' story *The Cricket on the Hearth*. In 1967, a knife-wielding Audrey Hepburn flails her way across a cramped basement apartment to kill an intruder, in *Wait Until Dark*. Between the two is a long history of the modern cinema's fascination with the blind heroine. When this figure appears, as she regularly does, in the Hollywood cinema, she marks cinema's attempts to explore the not-visual – film's multi-sensory appeals that, although they are made by its visual medium, are more than visual. Only rarely does the screen go blank (as it does at the climax of *Wait Until Dark*); more common is an elaborate combination of filmic effects: cinematography that addresses the movement of the blind heroine's hands and body, sonic and visual attention to touch and texture, and narrative and affective structures of melodrama or suspense. This dissertation is a study of moments within the history of US cinema in which the representation of blindness offers a way for cinema to explore the limitations and possibilities of its visual technologies.

My introduction will offer three perspectives on the recurrence of the blind heroine in US cinema history. The first is a survey of what I call "the perceptive other" within the discourse 20<sup>th</sup> century film theory, particularly in the work of Béla Balázs and Christian Metz. The perceptive other is a hyperbolic figure who has not yet learned to see the film properly, or to prioritize vision in the cinematic experience, and in so doing reveals the cultural, historical nature of the practice of film-going. My second approach is a study of the representation of blindness in Western visual art and the implication of the figure of the blind women in visual and literary discourses of sentiment, affect and melodrama. The third perspective is a re-evaluation of the role of phenomenology in film studies, in light of film studies' "modernity thesis," disability studies, and theories of perception developed within film studies. This last examines Vivian Sobchack's

use of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty for her theory of the film's body, and asserts the possibility of a phenomenological experience of film-going that is historically and culturally specific, and attuned to experiences of gender and disability. All three of these surveys are explorations of intellectual trajectories that run through (or alongside) theories of film and film spectatorship that have understood film as primarily visual, namely, film semiotics, psychoanalytic film theory and certain approaches to visual culture or visual studies. The work of the theorists and historians I will discuss here questions, but also at some points, echoes the priority assigned to vision in the discourses of modernity.

In 1947 Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler wrote, in *Composing for the Films*, a contrast of eye and ear: "The human ear has not adapted itself to the bourgeois rational and ultimately highly industrialized order as readily as the eye, which has become accustomed to conceiving reality as made up of separate things, commodities, objects that can be modified by practical activity. One might say that to react with the ear . . . is in a sense not in keeping with the present advanced industrial age and its cultural anthropology."<sup>1</sup> Adorno and Eisler associate the experience of vision with hegemony of industrialized modernity. And this, of course, is what makes music, for Adorno, such a politically valuable aesthetic form. But, after all, the ear is not so entirely autonomous, its resistance is, eventually "not so much overcome as it is managed and enhanced scientifically" until its pleasures amount to no more than "rationally planned irrationality . . . the very essence of the amusement industry in all its branches."<sup>2</sup> In this brief contrast of eye and ear, Adorno realizes that the priority given to vision, in the age of photography, cinema and their mechanical reproduction, is not exceptional, but rather a model for

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler, *Composing for the Films*. (1947; reprint, London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Benjamin's interest in the "haptic," which I will discuss in chapters 1 and 2 has been interpreted as similar to Adorno's brief optimism regarding the sonic, as it is expressed here.



how each and every sensory experience will be managed by industrial modernity. This particular belief about the senses in modernity – that the eye has been disciplined to conform to the needs and pleasures of industrialized modernity, but that experiences of sound and touch and embodiment have not yet been, cannot be, should not be, or must be characterizes both the film theory and films I will examine in this dissertation.

A fourth historical narrative that is both an object of study and point of reference throughout the dissertation, is the biography of Helen Keller (1880-1968) and her appearance, as herself, in two films, *Deliverance* (George Platt, 1919) and *The Unconquered* (Nancy Hamilton, 1956). There are a number of popular and academic studies of Keller that examine her biography in various cultural and historical contexts. “The world’s champion blind lady,” as Suzy Hendricks (Audrey Hepburn) in *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967) ruefully puts it, has been a controversial presence in the history of disability. But Keller’s participation in filmmaking has been little studied, if it all, and despite the exclusion from visual culture that this implies, Keller is nearly always evoked in the cinematic representations of blind heroines in US cinema history.<sup>3</sup> My work also considers Keller’s contributions to phenomenology and American psychology, in the essays in *The World I Live In*, and examines her contributions as an author and activist engaged in the very modern project of theorizing our bodies as labor technologies and as media technologies, within the industrial and industrializing United States. The public fascination with Keller, and with her blind sensorium, which lasted from her childhood at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to her death in 1968, coincides both with the history of film addressed in this

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<sup>3</sup> She has also been, recently, made present in the Hindi film *Black* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2005), which, although it is a fiction film, acknowledges Keller’s real, historical work as an author and activist through various framing devices, in ways it is not, in the other fictions discussed in this dissertation.

dissertation, and with the period of modernity, characterized by Adorno and by others, as ocularcentric.

My dissertation as a whole seeks to reorient theories of film that have explained cinema as an almost exclusively visual culture towards a broader consideration of sensory perception and film experience. Studies of film sound, and histories of sound<sup>4</sup> in the “silent” era and after the advent of sound recording and radio and film sound, for example, provide a model for thinking of film, and film narrative, as not-visual – that is, always visual, but often more than visual. My analyses of films and film experience, of audiences and spectatorship, and of film production, will critically depart from the readings offered by semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory, in favor of theories of cinematic perception and theories of genre, namely, melodrama, suspense and horror. The introduction begins this task and the unsuitability of the words “spectator” and “audience” becomes increasingly obvious. But until this introduction is able to more fully characterize the terms I suggest as replacements – the “multi-sensory spectator” and, borrowed from Vivian Sobchack, the “cinesthetic subject” – I will use the terms spectator and audience somewhat self-consciously.

### **The Perceptive Other: Modernity, Cinema and Sensory Perception**

“The birth of film art led not only to the creation of new works of art but to the emergence of new human faculties with which to perceive and understand this new art.”<sup>5</sup> So opens the fourth chapter, entitled “Visual Culture,” of Béla Balázs *Theory of the Film*, first published in 1945. Although film historians and theorists are more likely to cite the work of

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<sup>4</sup> Although Rick Altman’s history *Silent Film Sound* bears directly on my discussion of Keller’s *Deliverance*, the use of sound to structure narratives that are explicitly about perception is also theorized in Michael Chion’s *The Voice in Cinema* and James Lastra’s *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*.

<sup>5</sup> Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: The Character and Growth of a New Art*. (1945; reprint, New York: Dover, 1971), 33.

Sergei Eisenstein or the Frankfurt School on this point, Balázs too argues that an intimate relationship between film technology, human perception and technological modernity constitutes the history of cinema. As Balázs unfolds his definition of visual culture,<sup>6</sup> he explains that visual culture is not just the visual cultural product, the film itself, but the relationship between the spectator and evolving film technique, the spectators' knowledge and participation in a "language" of visual conventions. In short, Balázs proclaims, that in response to the invention of the cinema, "WE HAVE LEARNED TO SEE."

Creating an analogy between the visual experience of the cinema and the auditory experience of music, that positions music quite differently than Adorno, Balázs writes,

The evolution of the human capacity for understanding which was brought about by the art of the film, opened a new chapter in the history of human culture. Just as musical hearing and musical understanding develop under the influence of music, so the development of the material richness of film art leads to a parallel development of film vision and film appreciation. The forms of expression of the silent film developed gradually, but the rate of development was fast enough and together with it the public developed the ability to understand the new form-language. We were witnesses not only of the development of a new art but of the development of a new sensibility, a new understanding, a new culture in its public.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Balázs makes it plain that although he would claim that we have learned to "see," this sight was a metonymy for a more complex and culturally created sensibility. If music is not simply heard by the ears alone, but by "musical hearing and musical understanding," then the cinema was not simply seen by the eye, but apprehended by a cinematic vision and cinematic understanding. The "new form-language" that Balázs recognized as having become a public culture, was the narrative film form of the world's film industries.

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<sup>6</sup> Balázs used the term "visual culture" in this essay in 1945. In this early period, Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich and Rudolf Arnheim engaged in similar discussions of the aesthetic experience of Western art and US and European film form but it was not until recently that academic discourse took up the terms "visual culture" and "visual studies."

<sup>7</sup> Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 34.

Balázs, in fact, offers two, rather mythical, anecdotes that illustrate the difference between the physical act of seeing a film and the cultural act of understanding cinema. A “Siberian girl” who visits her Moscow cousins and is taken to the cinema to watch a burlesque, is unable to enjoy the spectacle and responds, in horror, “Human beings were torn to pieces and the heads thrown one way and the bodies the other and the hands somewhere else again” while an “English colonial administrator” visits the nearest metropolis to see a film, and cannot comprehend the “form-language every town-dweller already knew at that time,”<sup>8</sup> that is, the structure, or grammar, of cinematic narrative. Both of these mythical creatures, the Siberian girl and the colonial administrator, are marked by a presumed cultural isolation and while able to see, they have not been taught, by time and experience, to completely participate in spectacular or narrative film culture. This film culture Balázs equates with the pleasures of the mass audience and modern urban life, imagined in various states of industrialization.

The Siberian girl and the colonial administrator are figures imagined for the purpose of illustrating Balázs’ claims, that the spectator has been taught cinematic vision and cinematic understanding through our participation in a public film culture. As such, each of them constitutes what I will call a “perceptive other,” a figure (common to both film theory and film) who has not yet learned – or been taught – to comprehend cinematic representation and visual culture. These figures must be educated – by film and the public culture of film generally – and Balázs includes himself in this tractable audience when he explains, “The new picture language was developed, polished and differentiated to an incredible degree in the course of some twenty years. We can almost measure this process by harking back twenty years, when we ourselves

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35.

would probably not have understood films which are quite obvious to spectators to-day.”<sup>9</sup> Balázs describes not only himself, but also his reader as once upon a time perceptive others who had been taught, by experience, to see and understand the films of our own time and culture. In these anecdotes, Balázs denigrates neither the mass public, who understands and enjoys the film properly, nor the intense but misguided responses of the uneducated viewers, himself included. This attitude toward the spectator-audience contrasts markedly with Metz’s attitude towards his imaginary spectators, which I will discuss below; for Metz the perceptive other is other to the experienced film theorist, the ultimate authority on the proper sensory experience of film.

Balázs suggests that cinema has a “picture language” and although he goes on to explore the ways in which editing creates narrative and emotional meaning in film, the analogy between film form and language, for him, is less powerful than it is, for example, in Eisenstein’s exploration of film syntax in his essays on film form. The analogy between film form and language appeared not only in early film theory, but was also used, even earlier, in the era of the silent cinema, by “journalists and literary intellectuals, social workers and clergy, filmmakers, producers, and industrial apologists,” as a metaphor that, according to film historian Miriam Hansen, “emphasized connotations of egalitarianism, internationalism, and the progress of civilization through technology.”<sup>10</sup> But, to be precise, the relationship between cinema and language was not always simply a metaphor; the cinema was not just *like* a language, rather, there was a belief that the cinema *was* a universal language, a language that depended on the image and the body’s visual perception for communication. The concept of the cinema as a universal language, in both Eisenstein’s writing, and in its more popular uses, sometimes accompanied an

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. This is Balázs’ rational, historical side. He also sees cinema as a return to the archaic and the visual, the “natural” language of the face and body, to be discussed in chapter two.

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 77.

implication that this language was learned, over time and through cultural participation, that is, potentially universal, and sometimes it was presumed immediate, natural and innate, that is, already universal.

Christian Metz's essay "The Cinema: Language or Language System," written in 1964 is, in some ways, heir to the concept of the cinema as universal language, as much it is part of Metz's ambition to explore the possibility of a Saussurian semiology of cinema. On "film intellection," Metz writes,

A film is always more or less understandable. If by chance it is not at all understood, that is a result of peculiar circumstances, and not of the semiological process proper to the cinema. . . . But as "language" a film is always grasped – except by abnormal persons who would not understand any other form of discourse any better, and often not as well; except by the blind, suffering from a selective impairment blocking reception of the signifier (like the deaf with speech); except, finally, in those cases where the actual substance of the signifier is materially damaged (the old film, scratched, yellowed and undecipherable; the speaker whose voice is so hoarse he cannot be understood).<sup>11</sup>

Metz argues here that if a spectator knows cinematic language, then any given film will be more or less intelligible. His list of exceptional misunderstandings argues that cinematic language is intelligible to anyone who can immediately perceive its visual signifiers; all that is required is the image and its perception. Film, as a universal language is even, if slightly, intelligible to "abnormal persons" who are otherwise entirely outside of linguistic or cultural discourse. Film language, then, is even more transparent than spoken language or lived culture. The Siberian girl and the colonial administrator, both naïve, but capable of learning to understand the cinema, have been replaced by an audience that contains only two kinds of spectators, one who "more or less" understands the cinema immediately, and that spectator's perceptive other, a spectator who is physically and mentally incapable of ever understanding the visual signs of cinematic language. There are revisions to this, of course. In a later footnote, Metz considers the reception of

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<sup>11</sup> Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 72.

Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (Antonioni, 1960) by the "shopkeepers" of Cannes; apparently their bourgeois resistance to the film's content made the film less intelligible, though they actually understood the film's language, even as they dismissed it. Metz is quite clear, "to be sure, it was not the cinematographic language" that got in the way.<sup>12</sup>

In the essay "Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema," when Metz explains that, after all, the concept of a "cinematographic language" (cinema as parole) is preferable to "cinematographic langue" (cinema as language system) he still leaves unresolved the didactic relationship between spectator and film. Metz cites Balázs as among the early film theorists whose work shows "that the cinema was not a specific 'language' from its inception," that is, Balázs shows that cinema is an unstable language that develops diachronically. However, Metz goes on, "Before becoming the means of expression familiar to us, it was a simple means of mechanical recording, preserving and reproducing moving visual spectacles ... in short, a means of reproduction."<sup>13</sup> Metz suggests a sharply defined break, between the cinema as simple reproductive technology, in a kind of pre-linguistic phase, and the cinema in its narrative phase, which requires language and syntax. How this historical terrain was negotiated by spectators, Metz does not say. He speaks primarily from and to a present, in which a film's "means of expression" is "familiar to us."

Metz maintains, throughout his exploration of the semiotics of the cinema, figures of the perceptive other – a disabled spectator incapable of perceiving or understanding visual signs, other to the normative perceptive spectator for whom cinema is always more or less understandable, a bourgeois spectator, willfully resistant to the film's meaning, other to the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 94.

politically receptive audience, or a pre-cinemalinguistic spectator, enthralled by the “simple means of mechanical recording,” and other to the film theorist and his reader. Each of the normative spectators reinforces the assumptions, in Metz’s analyses, that the cinema is a universal language that depends upon image and perception alone; Metz, in some ways, reduces cinema to its visual images.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, each of these perceptive others – and their disabled, political or culturally specific experiences of the cinema – suggests the ways in which cinema is not simply the sum of its visual images, immediately understood through the body’s visual perceptions.

Of the unruly and troublesome audience that threatens Metz’s visual-semiotic cinema experience, the pre-cinemalinguistic spectator, enthralled by the simple means of recording is perhaps the most famous. Film theorist Andre Bazin is notorious among film scholars for being, himself, “supremely naïve to think that because the camera automatically records an element given in reality, it provides us with an objective and impartial image of that reality” as Jean Mitry described him.<sup>15</sup> Bazin, in turn, invokes, in the course of his discussion of “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage” (from 1953) the equally, if not more notorious spectators “at the first showing of Lumiere’s film [*Arrivée d’un train à La Ciotat* (1897)] who rushed to the back of the room when the train entered the station at Ciotat.”<sup>16</sup> Within the historical trajectory of film studies, from the early film theory of Balázs to the semiotic theory of Metz and the apparatus theory of Mitry and the writers of *Cahiers du Cinema*, perceptive others, naïve, inexperienced, and incapacitated are imagined to fill the cinema audience.

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<sup>14</sup> See Alan Williams, “Is Sound Recording Like an Language?” *Yale French Studies*, n. 60 (1980): 51-66.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 169; originally published as *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Groupe Mame, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1967), 45.



The “naïve spectator” has become the shorthand used to refer to this figure in the film theory of the last 20 years. But the phrase “naïve spectator” implies that such a spectator experience is primarily a misunderstanding of the essential representational status of cinema as a visual culture. A “perceptive other” can be the same naïve spectator but is also a “spectator” who engages their senses and imagination to perceive the cinema as other than, or more than, simply a visual representation. As theories of visual culture are articulated, both by film and film theory, “perceptive others” who haunt the film or written text remind us that no visual culture is immediately, transparently intelligible. Our participation as spectators requires the disciplining of bodies and perception, particularly, in the context of film and the industrialization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the organization of our body into a hierarchy of the senses, in which vision is considered our primary, most essential sensory experience, of cinema and of the world. And that, failing this, the cinema experience is, or can be, transformed by spectators and creators who do not perceive it solely as a visual representation.

In Miriam Hansen’s history of early cinema *Babel and Babylon*, she offers a detailed reading of the 1902 Edison film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* with Josh as one such perceptive other. Her primary goal in the discussion is to identify the “different components of spectatorial pleasure” revealed in the film *Uncle Josh*, and in the course of this, she also discusses the ways in which the film or, more precisely, Uncle Josh’s reaction to a series of films within the film, “demonstrate particular misconceptions about the nature of the cinematic illusion.” For Hansen, Uncle Josh is a “naïve spectator who mistakes the representations on the screen for reality.” He is one of many figures represented in the early cinema, that embody “the encounter of supposedly unsophisticated minds with city life, modern technology, and commercial

entertainment as a comic theme and a way of flaunting the marvels of that new urban world.”<sup>17</sup>

Hansen’s analysis suggests that the undisciplined spectator, marked by his prior exclusion from an urban movie-going public exists not just within written theory, but also within film, and its production and reception for and by historical audiences. Within the film *Uncle Josh at the Picture Show*, the hero attempts to dance with the star of the film within a film, *Parisian Dancer*, he flees from *The Black Diamond Express* and he (successfully, as he destroys the film screen and confronts the projectionist) disrupts the courtship of *The Country Couple*. However, in this, Uncle Josh does not simply misperceive, he also fully engages in the pleasures (not just visual) that the cinema offers – his body moves in dance and confrontation, his fear, anger and affection are aroused. If naiveté marks his mistake, there is also his excessive, embodied, multi-sensory pleasure to be accounted for.

Hansen’s analysis of *Uncle Josh* contributes to a broader argument about cinema and modernity that she, and other film theorists and historians, have developed in the past 20 years. As a perceptive other, who engages the cinema in multi-sensory and embodied ways, *Uncle Josh* represents the nascent argument that will become (as it is sometimes critically called)<sup>18</sup> “the modernity thesis,” articulated, in part, in Hansen’s influential 1999 essay “The Mass Production of the Senses.” There, she argues, citing Walter Benjamin, that if the aesthetics of “modernism encompasses a *whole range* of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity” then modernity brought “new modes of organizing vision *and* sensory perception, a new relationship with ‘things,’ different forms of mimetic experience and expression, of affectivity, temporality, and reflexivity, a

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<sup>17</sup> Hansen, *Babel*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> This dissertation also includes extensive discussion of David Bordwell and Ben Singer’s work, where this critical response is articulated.

changing fabric of everyday life, sociability and leisure.”<sup>19</sup> Here is Uncle Josh writ large: his encounter with technological modernity and its new and startling address to his vision *and* other sensory perceptions and his affective, reflexive, social engagement with the screen. Uncle Josh is a paradigmatic figure; on the one hand, he was a naïve spectator, other to the experienced film-goer who had learned to understand film’s spectacle and narrative and did not take the projected image for reality. On the other hand, Hansen recognizes that his perception of, and participation in, the cinematic experience is multi-sensory, corporeal and intensely pleasurable. Hansen (and others, including film and television historian Jan Olsson and sound historian Rick Altman) have written about the pleasures of film-going in the silent era and the ways in which audiences at urban and small-town theaters were part of a larger culture of performance and public space. Uncle Josh’s multi-sensory experience of film, that does not (yet) prioritize the experience of the eye over the experience of the body is not only fascinating, it is quite common – other only to the ideal spectator, who has learned to prioritize vision in cinematic experience.

The study of the aesthetic experience of modernity is, of course, not unique to film studies. Literary history, particularly the history of US literature, has long engaged the specific history of industrialization, while, writing from within that history, US literary authors have offered historically specific theories of perception. Technology, the “machine in the garden” of Leo Marx’s seminal work, determines for Marx and for the authors he studies the very experience of aesthetic perception. Marx describes Emerson’s sensory description of a landscape and train,

Taken by itself, what comes before we hear the train scarcely arouses our interest. Descriptions of contentment seldom do. But the disturbing shriek of the locomotive changes the texture of the entire passage. Now tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety . . . This is the sensory core of the larger

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<sup>19</sup> Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 6 no. 2 (1999): 66.

design . . . Like the focal point of a complicated visual pattern, this elemental, irreducible dissonance contains the small in the whole.<sup>20</sup>

In, this example, “contentment” and “what comes before” are a contemplative, pastoral experience, in which Emerson attends to the details of nature “metaphorically, to convey something about a human situation.” This experience of perception, in which sensuous details of nature are attended to, given meaning and shared is, broadly considered, romantic, and, more so than some studies of the aesthetic experience of cinema aesthetics, Marx is attuned to a broad range of not-visual sensory experience. But this experience, both of the author, and the reader, is suddenly interrupted, by the train’s whistle, and then replaced by a new perceptual experience. According to Marx, invasive machines structure the aesthetic experience of *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Fin*, *The Octopus*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as the work of Walt Whitman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Eugene O’Neill, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, TS Eliot, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway. Hugh Kenner continues this study of technology and perception, in his approach to US modernist poets and the (again, very broad range of) novelists, critics and editors who shared with them a “doctrine of perception” (again, with less emphasis on the visual) shaped by, he claims, the typewriter, the Wright Brothers and a familiarity with technology more generally. This doctrine emerges, in Kenner’s study, as a commitment to alter and expand the “verbal environment” in order to re-create perception<sup>21</sup> and produce an aesthetic experience that pertained to the industrialized world they knew. Given the breadth of these surveys, perception

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<sup>20</sup> Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden* (1964; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>21</sup> In a broad consideration of literary modernism, Fredric Jameson identifies an “ideology of perception” that produces both an aesthetic style and a critical approach in literary modernism. Writers (Jameson cites Conrad and Faulkner) believed in their ability “to make you see!” while critics read the literary works as phenomenologically transparent “streams of perception.” The elision of perception with sight occurs, I would argue, in Jameson’s argument, but in many studies of modernism and modernity more generally. From *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 134-144.

and technology are not simply a theme in certain works of US literature; rather, the study of US literature is the study of a history of perception in industrializing modernity.

However, unlike the treatment of the senses in film theory, literary studies, with its object of study traditionally being language (if not text on a page), has been less likely to prioritize vision as the primary sensory engagement of the medium. And Marx's emphasis on sound and Kenner's emphasis on the body are representative of a body of criticism attuned to multi-sensory experiences of literature and of modernity.

But, to return to the modernity thesis as has been explored in film studies, Hansen, frames her study of the aesthetics of modernity as part of "a larger history and economy of sensory perception."<sup>22</sup> Cinema's management of human perception – again, primarily vision – has become a significant object of study in the work of other historians of the cinema, including Anne Friedberg and Tom Gunning. Chapter two of this dissertation, "Adapting *The World I Live In*," on the adaptation of Helen Keller's literary work in the silent film *Deliverance*, explores the ways in which the cinematic story of a blind and deaf celebrity participates in, and disrupts, what film historians have established as conventional address to the eye, of the silent cinema. Keller's essays, in *The World I Live In* and her literary celebrity as a whole, should be considered in the context of US literature and its obsession with the uses of perception and technology for aesthetic effect.

Hansen's own work, particularly her interest in Frankfurt School film theorist Siegfried Kracauer and her introduction to his *Theory of Film*, actually suggest that Hansen is interested in the history of the multi-sensory experience of the cinema and in an audience of variously perceptive human bodies, each "with Skin and Hair," a description of the body of the spectator

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<sup>22</sup> Hansen, *Mass Production*, 60.

that she takes from Kracauer. Indeed, it is to Kracauer's writing (and that of Balázs), on the presence of the hand, in close-up, in the early cinema, that I turn to explore the multi-sensory appeals of the silent film *Deliverance*. In the sum of the arguments that constitute film studies' "modernity thesis," the human body, with its sight and sound perceptions, becomes, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, part of the cinematic medium, and one of the technologies of modernity that contribute to modern aesthetic experience. The perceptive other, then, is a body that mediates modern aesthetic experience as both visual and not-visual. Theories of film re-imagine this "perceptive other" again and again as film theory re-articulates, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in response to different national or industrial bodies of film, the central thesis that their audiences have learned to see. This figure reveals the ways in which perception itself is a technology and the body is a medium.

Charlie Chaplin has been, for the writers of the Frankfurt School and for critics before and since, a paradigmatic subject of modernity; his slapstick is a physical misunderstanding of the modern world. But Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) contains, not just his playful interactions with the city streets, a jazz age nightclub and a tycoon's home, but a romance with a blind girl. Although Chaplin gets the girl in the end, the girl is, at that point, no longer blind; to fully appreciate Chaplin, she must be, presumably, sighted. Her blindness precludes her ability to recognize the tramp's impoverished appearance or "get" Chaplin's physical jokes and gags, both of which the spectator-audience fully experiences, along with their awareness that the heroine has misperceived Chaplin. And when Chaplin and his heroine are finally united in romance, she sighted and he almost respectable, the film (famously) descends into a maudlin sentiment that frustrates its critical fans.

In 1918, when Keller was in Hollywood, Keller and Anne Sullivan met Charlie Chaplin and he privately screened for them *A Dog's Life* (1918) and *Shoulder Arms* (1918) which he had

just finished making. Keller noted, in her biographical work *Midstream* that “before he reeled off the pictures he let me touch his clothes and shoes and moustache that I might have a clearer idea of him on the screen.”<sup>23</sup> *Moving Picture World* reported that Anne Sullivan narrated the film to her (a process that Keller’s literary editor Nella Braddy Henney refers to repeatedly in later years, when Keller went frequently to Broadway plays) and claimed that Keller “did not miss one of the subtle bits of comedy.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, Keller describes a sympathy between Chaplin and Sullivan, based upon a shared experience of childhood poverty and a resulting “tenderness to the underprivileged” while a Chaplin biography reports that Keller’s “espousal of socialism impressed [Chaplin].”<sup>25</sup> Whether or not these claims are exaggerated, Keller was not entirely barred from a cinematic experience of Chaplin and she was able to bring to that experience tactile, narrative, affective, social and political knowledge of Chaplin and his creative persona. Keller is literally one of Metz’s perceptive others, “suffering from a selective impairment blocking reception of the signifier [both visual and sonic]” and yet she claims a cinematic experience.

This series of encounters, between Chaplin, Sullivan and Keller and between Chaplin’s “tramp” and the blind heroine of *City Lights*, suggests the disruptive, disorienting power of the blind heroine. If Chaplin is a body ill-suited to modern life, the blind heroine is presumed to be entirely excluded from the visual and cinematic pleasures of modernity. The film (to say nothing of the quote from *Moving Picture World*) reveals an anxiety that even Chaplin might be unseen and unperceived. And yet, he is not, and Keller has both perceived, and understood what many

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<sup>23</sup> Helen Keller, *Midstream: My Later Life* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc. 1930), 194.

<sup>24</sup> “Helen Keller, Sightless, Laughs at ‘Shoulder Arms’” *Moving Picture World*, 21 Dec 1918.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Keller, *Teacher* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 147 and Jeffrey Vance, *Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 104.

critics have claimed is the essence of his cinematic performances, through her not-visual, that is, social, cultural and profoundly physical experience of the cinema. In recognizing and understanding Chaplin in not-visual ways – mediated by the visual technology of the cinema, but not limited by that medium – Keller is a perceptive other. The film *City Lights* cannot imagine a meaningful not-visual of Chaplin, and its tractable heroine obligingly gains sight.

If one doubts Anne Sullivan’s abilities to “translate” Chaplin’s cinematic antics into the conversational language of the manual alphabet through which she and Keller communicated constantly, one might consider the virtual experience of film common in contemporary experience, the printed film review, or think of *Cahiers du Cinema* film critic Serge Daney sitting in front of a film screen at the Damascus cinema club in 1978, narrating for the audience films that the club had been prohibited from screening. That which is cinematic is not exclusively visual (nor sonic) and the expansive realm of the not-visual is an essential experience of the cinema. If Christian Metz’s obsession with the legibility of the material signs and signifiers of cinema, an obsession which has been profoundly influential in the development of film studies, reduces the cinema to its visual image, cinematic experience has historically struggled against the limitations of its two-dimensional audio-visual form. Film theory has only begun to account for the not-visual experiences of cinema and the multi-sensory audience-spectators that enjoy them.

### **Seeing Blindness, Feeling More**

Histories of the representation of blindness<sup>26</sup> are often framed by reference to Enlightenment studies of vision; most mention Locke’s fascination with the Molyneux problem

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<sup>26</sup> Also helpful for a long history of literary representations is Moshe Barasch’s *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought*, which addresses the appearance of blind figures in stories from classical and biblical antiquity, the middle ages and the Renaissance. In this work, and in the literature that is its object of study, blindness is most often understood as a metaphor.



– if a blind man regains sight, what will he recognize? - and Descartes speculations in *Optics*, which draw analogies between vision, blind perception and sighted perceptions of touch. In this history, blindness is an object of speculation understood in relation to vision and the value vision had, in Enlightenment thought, as the sense that established scientific knowledge of the world. Vision of the world was also, as Martin Jay explains, in his study of Enlightenment ocularcentrism,<sup>27</sup> a model for basic human consciousness; ideas were internal representations, visual images produced by the “eye of the mind.” The inability to see, then, was a terrifying object of study, as it suggested an absence of full consciousness. Attempting to imagine a human subject without vision produced a kind of intellectual anxiety present, even later, in William James’<sup>28</sup> pragmatist re-evaluation of sensationalist philosophies of mind. The presence of blindness in the cinema is informed by these interpretations of the experience of blindness and sight, but as a visual culture, film inherits a specific aesthetic tradition as well.

Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind* and Nicholas Mirzoeff’s study of blindness and visual culture explore another history, a history of the representation of blindness in visual culture, in both cases, in Western art, primarily French, after the European Renaissance. This history, of blindness and visual culture, more readily turns to speculations on form and questions of aesthetics. And in this aesthetic history, blindness is understood as contributing to visual culture and expanding a work, or an entire medium, beyond the exclusively visual. Not only does the visual representation of blindness invoke a multi-sensory experience of the not-visual,

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 84. This dissertation will claim that discourses of both the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries exhibit “ocularcentrism” – the history that unites these two periods is chronicled, in detail, in Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*.

<sup>28</sup> James’ essay on and correspondence with Keller, and her engagement with his theories of psychology in the essays in *The World I Live In*, will be discussed in chapter two.

however, but in so doing the play of imagination and the body's senses increases the affective intensity of the aesthetic experience.

Mirzoeff, in his essay "Blindness and Art" begins his survey of this history with a significant example from the "modern period," of the history of Western art, the reign of Louis XIV. He quotes the critic and painter Sébastien Bourdon on a painting *Christ Healing the Blind at Jericho* (1651) by Nicolas Poussin. Examining this painting at the Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1661, Bourdon wrote (and perhaps spoke aloud), of the blind figure in the painting,

'by his Face and his Arms one may know he is all Attention to the Voice of the Saviour . . . this attentive hearkening appears in his Forehead, which is not quite smooth; the Skin and all the other Parts of which are drawn up. He likewise discovers it, by suspending all the Motions of his Countenance, which continue in that Posture to give time to his Ear to listen more attentively, and that he may not be diverted.'<sup>29</sup>

For sighted Bourdon, the blind figure signifies his intense attention through details of the face and body that suggest the blind figure's ability to hear the voice of Christ, and feel his presence. On the one hand, Mirzoeff explains that Bourdon believes that the figure is accurately reflecting a blind person's experience of the senses; the belief in the heightened perception of the senses of the blind was as common then as now. But Mirzoeff is more interested in how this particular representation, of the super-sensitive blind figure, allowed for the investigation of "the nature and accomplishments of [visual] art" (p. 382) that occasions both Poussin's painting and Bourdon's commentary. Mirzoeff explains that Bourdon's interpretation of Poussin "envisioned blindness as a means of intensifying tactile and auditory response to the painting, rather than as a signifier of incapacity." (p. 384) The sighted spectator, who can behold the Christ figure as Poussin represents him, that is to say, visually, is also required to imagine Christ's tactile and aural presence. The visible details of gesture and face that indicate "listening" and "feeling" in the

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Blindness and Art," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis. (London: Routledge, 1997), 383. All subsequent quotations from this essay will refer to this publication.

painted figure of the blind man encourage the spectator to do so. Among the “nature and accomplishments” of painting in the *ancien regime* is the ability to invoke the multi-sensory experience of the body through the visual medium of the painting. Mirzoeff describes the painter, who can communicate only through his visual image as “mute” and analogizes the mute painter with the blind man in the painting, both are “calling a sensible world into being, while deprived of certain sensory tools.” (p. 384)

Following my discussion of the perceptive other as a multi-sensory film spectator I would like to consider other figures that populate this scenario. If the painter is mute and the blind man blind, what of the rest of us? The painting itself is silent and two-dimensional and the details of “listening” and “feeling” invoke the painting’s limitations as much as they engage the spectator’s imagination. A sighted spectator standing before the painting cannot directly perceive the sounds of the scene and is without a sense of touch, as they cannot physically interact with the figures and spaces in the painting. Mirzoeff, remarkably, gives no first hand descriptions of this painting, (though he is, himself sighted), nor does his article provide a visual image, and so the readers of Mirzoeff’s essay cannot directly see the painting, though they may be able to read printed text on the page, and imagine the painting given the descriptions of it quoted from Bourdon.

This complicated audience, the complex sensory experiences created by the painting and its descriptions, and, indeed, the figure of the “sighted spectator” reveal the limitations of the word spectator; film theorist Vivian Sobchack’s concept of the “cinesthetic subject” (minus the historically specific cinematic pun) is a more apt description of the mixed and multiple, “synesthetic” perceptions required here.<sup>30</sup> The word spectator implies that the subject only sees, while the word audience implies a collective subject that only hears. I do not want to use the

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<sup>30</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “What My Fingers Knew,” in *Carnal Thoughts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 67.

concept “cinesthetic subject” more broadly than Sobchack intended, and I will discuss her term more fully later in this introduction, so here I will use the words “multi-sensory spectator” and “multi-sensory audience.” Hopefully, the visual-centric etymology of the word “spectator” will call attention to its limitations as a term for describing the multi-sensory engagement of aesthetic experience. At the same time, the qualifier “multi-sensory” should suggest not only that a range of senses in addition to the visual are being invoked, but that in any given body, the senses that can be appealed to, directly or indirectly, may vary. The multi-sensory subject may or may not be fully sighted, hearing or otherwise perceptively-abled. Poussin’s painting also reveals, to Boudon, to Mirzoeff and to a multi-sensory audience, painting’s own abilities and disabilities as a medium. I will argue that the blind heroine functions in a similar way in the cinema, reminding the multi-sensory spectator of the possibilities and limitations of the cinema’s technologies.

In a special issue of the journal *Visual Culture*, contributor Georgina Kleege calls for “an interrogation of the binary opposition between blindness and sight” as necessary to the study of visual culture.<sup>31</sup> This request is the culmination of a series of arguments that Kleege puts forth. To begin, Western philosophers – most famously, Descartes, Diderot, Locke and William Molyneux - have deployed the trope of the “hypothetical blind man” in their investigations into the nature of vision.<sup>32</sup> Imaginary projections of the experience of blindness have informed how sighted people understood their own vision. Secondly, accounts of blindness by blind authors reveal the ways in which the world is structured for and by experiences of vision, as well as how

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<sup>31</sup> Georgina Kleege. “Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4 no. 2 (2005):179-190.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkie Collins’ novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) and the recent film *The Eye* (Oxide and Danny Pang, 2002) both reflect on the Molyneux problem via the trope of the blind heroine, as well as exploring the conventions of their genres – the 19<sup>th</sup> century sensational novel and the postmodern horror film. Kleege also explores the complex subject positions from which Helen Keller, 20<sup>th</sup> century blind philosopher Martin Milligan and 19<sup>th</sup> century French author Thérèse Adèle Husson write, when they engage philosophical debates that have investigated blindness.

the world is structured for and by experiences of sound, touch, movement and embodiment. And finally, because “the language that we speak, the literature that we read, the architecture that we inhabit, were all designed by and for the sighted” Kleege argues that visual culture is something that is inevitably shared by people of all visual abilities and that our “variation in terms of visual awareness or skill” is not ultimately determined by our physical ability to see. While Kleege objects to a history that has obscured and, ultimately, devalued lived experiences of blindness, she is, at the same time, arguing for the continued, necessary discussion of blindness (and the full range of visual abilities and disabilities) within the study of visual culture.

Mary Klages, in *Woeful Afflictions Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America*, studies the sentimental rhetoric that defined representations of blindness specifically and mediated a relationship between the blind and philanthropic work on their behalf, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and beyond. Klages understands the institutional education of deaf and blind Laura Bridgman in a broader history of blindness in Western culture, in which, she argues that the pathologizing of blindness followed from the speculative approach of the Enlightenment, as curiosity about cured blindness was transformed into a moral imperative for its cure.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the history of philosophic uses of blind figures, Klages argues, there is a history of their emotional function, in fictional and non-fictional representations.

For example, Klages cites Diderot’s second essay on blindness, which took as its object of study a blind woman and her moral nature. His first essay on blindness, the “Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See,” was primarily concerned with definitions of empirical knowledge and with Descartes’ hypothetical blind man. Influenced by the common sense

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<sup>33</sup> See also Elisabeth Gitter, *The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the original deaf-blind girl* (New York: Picador, 2001). Gitter discusses the education of Bridgman in terms of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Bostonian ideology of “the perfectibility of the soul.”

philosophers, Diderot had presumed, in the “Letter” that without access to the emotional language of “natural” visible signs, blind people were somehow less able to be sympathetic to others.

Klages understands the correction that blind woman Mlle. de Salignac offered Diderot in her rebuttal, thus,

she articulated to Diderot the two responses required of disabled people to make the transition from sign to subject within the framework of sentimental moral philosophy: they must understand their own suffering as developing and reinforcing their capacity for empathetic identification with the suffering of others, and they must respond with gratitude to the kindness that their disability, as sign, prompts in others.<sup>34</sup>

Diderot’s anxiety about the emotional experience of the blind, and Mlle. de Salignac’s emphatic reassurances on the subject mark the beginning of Klages’ history of sentimentality and disability. For Klages, the blind heroine becomes an overdetermined site for the generation of sympathetic concern from readers in the Victorian period,<sup>35</sup> be they readers of autobiography and non-fiction, of fiction or of the religiously inflected literature of philanthropic institutions for the blind.

Neither Georgina Kleege nor Mary Klages examine Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind* (which was published in English in 1993) in their critiques of the use of gendered figures of blindness within the history of Western philosophy. But Derrida invokes innumerable hypothetical blind men: in the collection of sketches “of the blind” from the Louvre that illustrate the text, in the figures employed by Descartes, Locke and Diderot to which Derrida refers, and in his broad literary history. The literary history alone includes Oedipus, Tiresias and numerous Biblical figures, as well as “Homer and Joyce, Milton and Borges,” (10) (all more or less blind in Derrida’s use of the term) and anonymous blind figures that populate the poetry of Rilke and

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>35</sup> Klages sees this 19<sup>th</sup> century history as determining the possibilities for Keller’s political significance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Keller, too, is defined, in Klages history, by her abilities as a professional fundraiser for the American Foundation for the Blind, and as a perpetual child-to-be-saved, via the film *The Miracle Worker*. Keller’s empathetic socialist politics, and her work as a lobbyist – before and during her career at the AFB – are not as fully explored here as her sentimental appeal.

Baudelaire.<sup>36</sup> As Derrida traverses this wide history, he reveals the deeply gendered conventions of the representation of blind figures. He is quite deliberately occupied with ““great blind men,”” (p. 5) ironic quotes appear in his initial use of the phrase. In his discussion of these figures, he explores the association of blindness with narratives of sons and fathers, misrecognition and error, witnessing, sin and knowledge. The ““great blind men,”” like the hypothetical blind man Kleege identifies, are an occasion speculations on the status of empirical knowledge and truth.

Feminine figures of blindness enter *Memoirs of the Blind* at (almost) exactly three moments. Derrida writes, provocatively, in a footnote, ““Sure there are blind women, but not many, and one speaks about them, it is true, but not very much.”” (p. 5) In the philosophical and classical aesthetic discourses Derrida surveys, the meaningful, symbolic figures of blindness are masculine; the women are a different trope. He lists, in the same footnote two blind saints, Saints Lucille and Odile. He also describes, later, his own mother, on her prolonged deathbed as ““walled-up,”” that is immobilized by illness, isolated by Alzheimer’s or senility, and suffering visual impairment from cataracts. Finally, he asks, ““for if there are [in the history of Western painting and literature] many great blind men, why so many weeping women?”” (p. 128) The physical vulnerability and affective powers of all of these feminine figures – tragic, sainted, motherly – are broadly representative of how gender and blindness are conventionally represented in fictionalized accounts.

In the examples of Saints Lucille and Odile, and his mother, Derrida not only delineates the affective and affecting role of the blind woman (which both Klages and Elisabeth Gitter explore in the historically specific contexts of 19<sup>th</sup> century US culture) he also suggests one of the most pervasive ways in which representations of blind figures are gendered in 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the self-portrait and other ruins* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10. All subsequent quotations from this work will refer to this publication.

popular culture. Namely, the blind women of cinema history do not accrue symbolic meanings or become test subjects for epistemological problems in the same way as the masculine figures in the literary and philosophical history Derrida, and Kleege, and Klages, explore. Cinematic representations of blind women are primarily phenomenological and attempt to be (however fictionalized, and sensationalized) representations of lived, embodied experience. Of course, as Kleege mentions, Helen Keller's lived experience, as well as that of Laura Bridgman, as described by Klages and Gitter, *did* sometimes require these women to act as "hypothetical" models for philosophic and psychological investigations. However, in most of the cinematic representations of blind heroines, this element of lived experience is obscured by an emphasis on the lived experiences of the heroine's physical abilities and sensory experiences and an emphasis on the emotional effect of her disability on the audience. The allegorical abstractions explored via the "great blind men" – in stories of recognition, misrecognition,<sup>37</sup> knowledge and insight - do not dominate the cinematic narratives of blind heroines. As Derrida puts it, blind women "are saints rather than heroes."<sup>38</sup> In my own formulations, if blind women are cinematic "heroines," this designation is not simply the feminine form of the word hero; "heroines" are characterized by their saintliness, their physicality and the claims on the real, social world that they bear. Heroes, as Derrida suggests, signify in other ways.

The vulnerable, emotive, saintly blind heroines account for almost all of the feminine figures in Derrida's *Memoirs*, but there remains one more and one that returns the experience of

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<sup>37</sup> The persistence of this representation of blind men, even into 20<sup>th</sup> century film history, means that cinematic blind men appear more often in plots that hinge on misrecognitions, and, in the context of the Hollywood film industry, this means comedies. There are, however, almost no humorous representations of blind women. It would not be heroine-ic. Hence the particularly taboo pleasures of Helen Keller jokes – which are both phenomenological *and* about misrecognitions. Even Chaplin's *City Lights*, the blind woman is surrounded by pathos, the comedy is left to Chaplin alone.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Memoirs*, 5.



blindness to the center of the aesthetic concerns of visual culture. Of the hypotheses that open the *Memoirs*, the second is: “Everytime a draftsman lets himself be fascinated by the blind . . . he projects, dreams, or hallucinates a figure of a draftsman, or sometimes, more precisely, some draftswoman.”<sup>39</sup> The draftswoman is Butades, a figure that embodies the origin of drawing and is therefore intimately bound to problems of aesthetics and visual representation. Derrida tells the story of Butades thus:

[T]he origin of drawing and the origin of painting give rise to multiple representations that substitute memory for perception. First, because they are *representations*, next, because they are drawn most often from an exemplary narrative (that of Butades, the young Corinthian lover who bears the name of her father, a potter from Sicyon), and finally, because the narrative relates the origin of graphic representation to the absence or invisibility of the model. Butades does not see her lover, either because she holds her back to him – more abiding than Orpheus – or because he turns his back to her, or again, because their gazes simply cannot meet: it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one only drew on the condition of not seeing, as if the drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other . . .<sup>40</sup>

If the actual plot of this narrative or the composition of the scene is unclear, one need only refer to the image and note the temporal element, the inevitable departure of the lover. Derrida also repeatedly reminds us that in some versions of this scene, a sighted Cupid guides the hand of Butades.

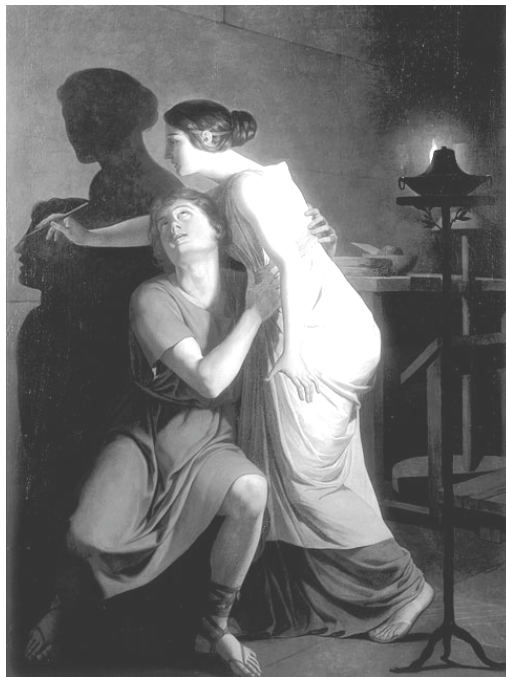
Within the history that Derrida traces, a woman devoid of immediate visual perception is placed at the origin of all visual representation. And this unseeing woman is a model for how all visual representation occurs. This figure is uniquely abstract, with one function and one function only, as opposed to the masculine “characters” of the literary and philosophic history Derrida covers. At the same time, this figure is ubiquitous, present in all visual representations. The idea that a lack structures all representation might seem like a familiar (psychoanalytic) formulation,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 51.

but Derrida's approach, here, at least, is both mythic and material. Like the sensory deprivations that structure Poussin's painting and invite the surfeit of sensory experience from the paintings viewers, the draughtswoman's blindness is compensated for by something else, a presence felt by the paintings spectator-audience. In this case, that something else is her love. The emphasis on Butades' love inscribes the significance of affect<sup>41</sup> within the history of visual representation, the love that binds Butades and her lover is as much the source of representation as anything else.



**Figure 1: “The Invention of the Art of Drawing” (Joseph Benoît Suvée, 1791)**

Connections between sensory experience, sensory deprivation and affect have been formative in the long history of aesthetics, from classical theories of the sublime to 20<sup>th</sup> century affect psychology, but they have particular relevance to film studies. In Rudolf Arnheim's 1933

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<sup>41</sup> The emphasis, in the myth and in Derrida's interpretation of it, on Butades' love, which guides the drawing hand, emphasizes the function of visual representation as a preservation of memory. Even in her lover's presence, perception of the lover directly is replaced by perception mediated by memory and love. That perception is replaced by memory pre-figures the definition of perception used by Bergson, and then by Laura Marks, and suggests the conclusion that all perception is mediated by history, cultural and subjective experience. This argument will become part of my larger discussion of historically and culturally specific phenomenology in the next section of the introduction.

reflections on “Film and Reality” he lists, not the ways in which the photographic moving image is like human visual perception, but the ways in which it is different and provides only a “partial illusion.” For Arnheim key differences include: “the projection of solids upon a plane surface,” “lighting and the absence of color,” “the absence of a space time continuum” and “the absence of the nonvisual world of the senses.”<sup>42</sup> But Arnheim also lists the ways in which film, and its technologies and conventions, compensates for each of these limitations, in “the artistic uses of the projection of solids upon a plane surface,” and so on for each. The “absence of the nonvisual world of the senses” includes the silence of early cinema and Arnheim explains, “a [pistol] shot is very clearly made visible by the sudden rising of a flock of scared birds.” This is the very essence of the not-visual, when a non-visual sense is made visible to the film spectator. Arnheim believes that the limitations of film’s technology are necessary for film’s expressiveness, for its aesthetic purpose.

In the formative study of genre *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks takes the stage melodrama, “the text of muteness,” as an exemplary form of melodrama. For Brooks, muteness is embedded in the form of melodrama by the theatrical traditions of expressive gesture and pantomime created to circumvent the theater monopolies – only a few official theaters had the “right” to use spoken language in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris. In melodrama, both within the fictions and in the history of performance, repression is confronted by the presence of silence, not by spoken words but by “other registers of the sign.”<sup>43</sup> The silent gesture was part of what Diderot

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<sup>42</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 30.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 56. To understand the power of silence, and silent gesture as a sign, Brooks cites Diderot’s belief in the natural language of gesture Brooks calls this belief “pervasive” in romantic ideologies, and it recurs in Balázs, to be sure. In Balázs, it provides a kind of counterpoint to his extremely rational discussion of the language as learned. While the introduction has discussed the rational Balázs, chapter two will discuss the romantic Balázs, or Balázs in the “romantic” context of the early cinema and its search for expressive language.

(and others) described as the language of nature and the silent gesture cannot, according to Brooks, function as a properly semiotic sign; as signified and signifier, gestured and gesture are too indeterminately related. There were statements that were deemed impossible to articulate in pantomime. But, conversely, in the absence of a precisely articulated meaning, emotional condition or spiritual experience, silent gesture offered a surfeit of possibilities and an intensity of affect.

Brooks' theory of melodrama bears a strong resemblance to Thomas Elsaesser's nearly contemporaneous theory of film melodrama, in which elements of *mise en scène* and performance take on a similarly rich sign function, creating series of substitutions that generate a film's pathos. In their theories of melodrama, both Brooks and Elsaesser emphasize the expressive potential of the visible: in Brooks, the stage gesture and the character's gesture described by the visual language of the realist novel, the prop as gesture or the actor's performance in Elsaesser. As with Mirzoeff's discussion of Poussin's visible details – gestures even – that suggest “listening” and “feeling,” Brooks and Elsaesser call attention to the technical possibilities of the sensory engagements of media they study. But in Brooks and Elsaesser's formal history of melodrama as a genre, the visible does not invoke a fuller sensory experience, but rather, a more intense emotional experience.

Poussin's painting can also be seen as a melodrama of heightened emotional experience. The attention given by the blind man is not given, finally, to the material world of the senses, it is given to the spiritual world of Christ and it is part of a narrative, *Christ Healing the Blind at Jericho*. The series *The Five Senses*, by Philip Mercier from 1744-47, as a counter-example, explores the ways in which painting can exceed its visual medium to appeal to the senses. The series, titled *Sense of Hearing*, *Sense of Sight*, *Sense of Taste*, *Sense of Smell*, and *Sense of Touch* shows groups of figures exploring musical instruments, maps and mirrors, fruits and flowers,

animals and their own bodies, in a kiss. But it does not include narrative dimensions as strong as those in Poussin's painting.; the paintings were known as "Fancy Pictures" and invoke episodes of the everyday. But the dramatic event of a blind man about to see, through the intervention of the supernatural powers of a mystical religious figure is an entirely different story, so to speak. The "Fancy Pictures" are a formal exploration of the medium, *Christ Healing the Blind* is an exploitation of that medium's potential multi-sensory appeal for a dramatic, even melodramatic, purpose.

In contemporary studies of disability and film, the connections between multi-sensory experiences of limitation or deprivation and increased affect return to the fore, particularly in the study of genre. In David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's "Body Genres and Disability Sensations," in *The Cultural Locations of Disability* the authors cite Linda Williams' theory of body genre as "a predecessor to our own deliberations" on spectators' experiences of watching disabled bodies on screen. They write,

Because body genres rely on extreme sensation, we argue that disability is a . . . primal structuring fantasy of these formulas. Body genres are so dependent on disability as a representational device that each formula can be recognized by its reliance on particular kinds of disabled bodies to produce the desired sensational extremes. [Here, they list the familiar bumbling fool of comedy, the disabled avenger of horror and the long suffering victim of melodrama] In every one of these cases we come upon a familiar body genre formula identified by Williams . . . we can also identify representations of disability in each of these cinematic scenarios as a key form of embodiment that gives shape and structure to the formulas. Quite simply put: disabled bodies have been constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences.<sup>44</sup>

For Mitchell and Snyder, Williams' melodramatic bodies on screen and in the theater, "bod[ies] in the grip of intense sensation or emotion"<sup>45</sup> are disabled bodies, in the grip of fictional experiences of disability. The wealth of examples that Mitchell and Snyder offer, from various

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<sup>44</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *The Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 162.

<sup>45</sup> Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 no. 4 (Summer 1991): 4.

periods of Hollywood filmmaking, persuasively argue that, if every film does not require a disability, disabled bodies are absolutely necessary to the affective structure of comedy, horror and melodrama genres. This revision of Williams suggests that disability is one of the most significant ways in which screen bodies become sensorially powerful. Based on their observations of the conventional representation of disabled bodies in the Hollywood cinema, Mitchell and Snyder offer a history that parallels that described by Mary Klages or Brookes or Mirzoeff or even Arnheim – disability generally, like blindness or muteness, enhances the affective relationship of spectator to text. Read together, disability history and the aesthetics of representing disability suggest that visual mediums – in the case of Mirzoeff’s study, painting, in Arnheim’s study, film – are disabled. Not just the silent cinema, but all cinema has physical, technological limitations for which it feels it must compensate.

In her 1991 essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” Linda Williams offers a model for understanding melodramatic address of film to film spectator that Mitchell and Snyder find so useful. First, she asks the reader to consider pornography, horror and melodrama as a related.<sup>46</sup> Of these she writes, each relies on “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion,” and “a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness,” all are “embodiments of pleasure, fear and pain.” (p. 4) Williams emphasis on the bodily stands in contrast to the visual vocabulary of much of film studies.

It is not just the stylistic excess of the filmic modes, the visual images on the screen, but rather, the relationship between spectator and film that unites these genres. And Williams characterizes that relationship in terms of mimicry, “what may especially mark these body genres

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<sup>46</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44 no. 4 (Summer 1991), 3.

as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female.” (p. 4) In sum, melodrama, pornography and horror, all invoke “a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (p. 5) between film and spectator. Williams’ language clearly marks her engagement with feminist film theory and, she is interested in the spectator of the woman’s picture (though whether or not this spectator still retains a rigidly female identity is questioned) yet she avoids language of psychoanalytic identification and emphasizes, instead, involvement, affect and intimacy.

Williams suggests that the spectator-audience imitates the emotions, and affects, seen on screen, in a theory that recalls Silvan Tomkins’ affect theory of the mid-century, which I will discuss in terms of classical Hollywood melodrama in the first chapter of this dissertation. Like Tomkins (and William James, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each of whom will be discussed in this dissertation) Williams emphasizes perception and sensation and their relationship to concepts of the subject. Attention to these processes, which, historically, have been understood as prior to (and necessary for) subject formation allows Williams to defer discussion of the spectator-audience’s identification with the cinematic figure on screen. In my argument, the cinematic experiences of perception and sensation displace theories of identification as well, but the blind heroine, in some ways, initiates this displacement. As film attempts to draw the spectator-audience into an intimate and mimetic relationship with its blind heroines, it cannot ask them to identify with her. Rather, a series of elaborate manipulations of the visual image, and visual experience is undertaken.

As in Brooks’ analysis of stage melodrama as a “text of muteness,” the technological limitations of the medium itself, in its representation of its subject, heightens the affective effects of the text. A film by convention is visible and the films I will consider in this dissertation adopt

a series of conventions to make blindness visible, and, more than that, to make blindness felt, both emotionally and sensorially. The films do not simply go blank to represent the experience of blindness – to do so would be an avant-garde experiment. Such experiments are part of spectrum of approaches to the aesthetic problem of the cinematic representation of blindness – Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), in which a blank, blue screen and a voice-over chronicle a man's experience of AIDS is a political and poetic variation that knowingly references the cinematic clichés of the medical melodrama. But cinema retreats, again and again, from this direct approach to the not-visual. Film turns instead to its visual, sonic, narrative and affective elements to invoke the sense of touch, and embodiment, rather than relying on a literal experience of the non-visual to represent blindness. These compensations, specific to the period of film and the development of film technology, will be examined in detail in each chapter.

In its desire for visual representation of the not-visual, Carl Dreyer's spare, but insistently visual *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) is representative, however, strikingly avant-garde it might seem (or have seemed), even though Jeanne is not, of course blind. Jeanne – characterized as illiterate and represented as practically mute – is, in Dreyer's film not a visionary, or if she is, the visions and voices she experiences are withheld from the audience spectator. In place of direct access to her sensory experience, the audience spectator encounters the image of her physical suffering under the questions and manipulations of the priests who interrogate her. The canted frames, disorienting close-ups (and even the intrusions of the inter-titles) assail the spectator and communicate Jeanne's terror. Jeanne is not blind, (though she is, I would suggest, a romantic projection, in the age of cinema, of a pre-modern perceptive other, whose sensory experience is without the modern hierarchies and organization) but her experience as a religious visionary is communicated, not through a literal representation of her sensory experience, but through the startling use of familiar techniques and technologies of the cinema.



In their discussion of the “blind ‘slasher’ film” Mitchell and Snyder identify one of the most common cinematic conventions for the making visible of blindness, a translation of blindness from a disability located in the eyes, to a disability located in the body. In a general sense, this interpretation of the experience of blindness is not entirely fictional, as many of the political issues around which visual-disability activists are organized are questions of the physical accessibility and usability of public, private and commercial spaces, as well as the accessibility of new technologies. The cinematic anxiety of an “embodied” sense of blindness should be read within the continuing history of the physical exclusion of visually disabled subjects from full citizenship. In Mary Klages’ history of the institutional education of Laura Bridgman, Klages reads in the Perkins Institute’s mission an anxiety about the exclusion of visually disabled bodies from the pool of industrial labor; the Perkins Institute (for one) at different times in its long history, saw itself as producing workers that, despite their disability, could meaningfully contribute to the industrial capitalism developing in the US. Lacking this contribution, visually disabled individuals lacked full citizenship. While access to education and under-employment are still political issues for disability activists, the domains of exclusion have changed, as well as, in some kinds of political organizing, the attitude towards what was once understood as exclusion. But the cinematic convention of the physical vulnerability of the blind heroine reveals the value of vision in modernity, for labor, for consumption and for political and cultural participation. Chapter four of this dissertation explores anxieties surrounding the priority of vision, and the technologies that mediate, reproduce and adapt vision, in late modernity.

This introduction has suggested that, through the figure of the perceptive other, film theory can imagine film and spectators, as multi-sensory despite a simultaneous priority afforded vision in theories of cinematic experience, and the experience of modernity more broadly. I have argued that the presence of blind figures in Western thought and visual culture indicates not just

the ocularcentrism of modernity, but a kind of counter-fascination with the not-visual possibilities of aesthetic experience. In recent film studies, there has been work that de-centers theories of vision and the image, and sees film experience as more cognitive, and more generally somatic.

David Bordwell, in *On the History of Film Style* is skeptical that modernity has changed the ways in which the human body and human mind function biologically.<sup>47</sup> This is a particularly strict interpretation of the relationship between the senses and modernity posed in the work of Miriam Hansen's work, and others' and Bordwell is, perhaps, most critical of Jonathan Crary's "history of vision approach." He cites the essay that would become the second chapter of *Suspensions of Perception*. In this work Crary explains his intention to provide, not a history of biological changes in human vision, but a history of the concept and category of attention. Within this history, Crary also recognizes a possibly inattentive subject, and he writes, "the articulation of a subject in terms of attentive capacities simultaneously disclosed a subject incapable of conforming to such disciplinary imperatives."<sup>48</sup> Crary's interest in the possibility of an inattentive subject, who comes into being when attention becomes an object of study, is akin to my own interest in the "multi-sensory spectator" and the perceptive other who come into being as new technologies of visual culture become objects of study in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity.

Oddly enough, David Bordwell's *On the History of Film Style* is also a history of attention, or, more precisely, a history of how film industries in the US, Europe and Asia have all sought strategies to command the attention of their spectators throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bordwell, like most film theorists, gives *his* primary attention to film's visual address. Before Bordwell begins his history of style, he asserts

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<sup>47</sup> David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 14.

The director directs not just actors and crew but also the viewer's attention ... Suitably recast, the idea of attention still offers a powerful way to explain certain patterns of stability and change across the history of film style.<sup>49</sup>

Although the word "attention" appears in no chapter headings, nor in the index, Bordwell frames nearly 100 years of film history, from the iris effects of the silent cinema, to staging in deep space, to the "eclecticism" of focus and camera techniques that marks mainstream style of the 1990s, as an address of attention. He concludes, "Guiding the viewer's attention constitutes a challenge that any narrative filmmaker anywhere must face."<sup>50</sup> For Bordwell, attention is not brought into being by the visual conventions of the cinema technology (or any other technology), but rather, it is, at least since the beginning of cinema, always present to be appealed to or guided.

The contrast between Bordwell and Crary illuminates broader questions in cognitive film theory, studies of perception and theories of affect; Bordwell suggests that attention can be appealed to but Crary argues that attention is managed only after it has been invented. Already, I have argued that film "appeals" to the human senses, and that the figure of the blind heroine "appeals" to human emotions. But this dissertation argues that for each period of film the sensorium of the "multi-sensory spectator" is constructed and organized differently. How then, can film appeal to emotion or the senses,<sup>51</sup> if these are unstable and come into being historically? The senses, I will argue, are constituted by a kind of cinematic or aesthetic interpellation – in both the Althusserian sense, of being "hailed" and in the commonsense use of the word as a synonym of question. The principles of this interpellation, however, are also historically specific and change, as film technology and film conventions change; the cinema poses a series of aesthetic

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<sup>49</sup> Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 164.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>51</sup> This is what Jameson calls the "ideology of perception," the belief that perception is there, a stable, human experience that can be appealed to by modernist literature.

questions to the sense that bring these senses into being. The claims by Benjamin (and the Benjaminian film theorists), that technological modernity has constructed our sensory experience is a theory. To prove this theory, we must investigate the ways in which the sensorium has changed and find ways to mark its changes. If the long history of cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be understood as an incomplete hegemony of the eye, how have film and film theory, attempted to both enforce and undermine a hierarchy of the senses, in which vision is given priority over sound, touch and embodiment? In sum, my dissertation suggests that the relationship between the film and spectator-audience in the silent era was instructive – the film instructed the spectator as to which senses to use, and when and how through its exploration of cinema’s technological possibilities. In the late silent era, film experimented with the potential for synchronization of sight and sound, in classical era, the relationship between film and spectator-audience functioned according to a principle of emotional and affective feedback, and in the post-studio era film attempted to enforce a particular sensory experience. These relationships between film and spectator are not just created by the films themselves, but, I will argue, by theories of perception and human consciousness articulated in the culture of modernity more broadly.

Despite very significant differences, Bordwell and Crary have both contributed to film studies a theory of the broader, more fluid, human facility of attention, a facility that, innate or historically constructed, depends on a multi-sensory, perceptive human body. Other recent work also treats the relationship between cinema and the perceptive human body in more general terms, but attention, as an object of study, is replaced by another, similarly broad and fluid human facility, “sensation.” In his 2001 book *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer, too reviews “the modernity thesis,” which, according to him,

can be summed up by two assertions by Benjamin: ‘The mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence’; and ‘Film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus.’ In other words, the urban environment of modern capitalism brought about some kind of fundamental change in the human ‘sensorium,’

creating a pervasive new ‘mode of perception’ which ultimately had a significant impact on the development of the cinema, encouraging cinema to take shape in ways that mirrored the fragmentation of urban experience.”<sup>52</sup>

But whether modernity changed biology, aesthetics, or habits of perception, Singer is more interested in reframing the question as a study of history. Singer, then examines a very specific body of film – what he calls Serial-Queen melodramas of the teens, silent serial films that replaced “blood-and-thunder” stage melodramas, were structured by lots of action, violence and dare-devil stunts, and starred plucky, often orphaned, heroines. These melodramas were thrilling adventures that invoked “certain qualities of corporeality, peril, and vulnerability associated with working class life;”<sup>53</sup> Singer studied, for example, newspaper accounts of the physical dangers of new urban and suburban transportation technologies. For Singer, the locations, the action, and the moral universe of the “sensational melodramas” did correlate with the perceived experiences of an urban public culture of capitalist modernity. Singer’s method of study, to examine the films, their industrial process of production, and the broader discourses of perception and sensation that they were part of, allows for the study of the relationship between film and the senses and has influenced the materials and methods used here to investigate the history of the senses and cinematic experience.

### **Phenomenology and The Film “Spectator”**

Film studies and historical studies of film and visual culture – from Miriam Hansen, Jonathan Crary, Susan Buck-Morss, Martin Jay, Guiliana Bruno, Ben Singer, Tom Gunning and others – have relied on, and made familiar, the critical theory of the Frankfurt school: Benjamin’s attention to cinema and photography, Kracauer’s theory of film and Adorno’s critiques of mass

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<sup>52</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

culture. But these historians do not necessarily suggest that the work of the Frankfurt School, even as it allows us to imagine the production and reception of film, for and by historical and embodied audiences *is* phenomenological. Still, the theories of perception, embodiment and technology offered in recent film studies and influenced by the work of the Frankfurt School share with 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology a theory of the human body as a technological medium.

Transcendental phenomenology has been understood to be very much at odds with Frankfurt School historical materialism. Adorno's "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism" and his *Jargon of Authenticity* are explicit critiques of the German phenomenologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional phenomenological investigations, while attending to the experience of the subject, in time and space, also posits a universalizing subject, a subject without history, gender or culture. Recently, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed and film theorists Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack, among others, have begun to describe phenomenologies attuned to specific experiences of history, culture, gender, sexuality and disabled embodiment. But is a historical-phenomenological subject impossible? Or, alternately, in what ways is a phenomenological subject materialist?

Sara Ahmed's recent essay "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" poses these questions, as she asks traditional phenomenology to attend to the historical conditions of possibility for its perceiving subjects.<sup>54</sup> She begins this with a series of pointed re-orientations of Husserl's logic; in response to his claim, in *Ideas*, that phenomenology must "bracket" and "put out of action" the everyday experiences of perception, Ahmed critiques the phenomenological convention of describing the room at hand, empty but for the writer and his pleasures. Citing Adrienne Rich, Ahmed imagines the responsibilities and pressures that might disrupt or a woman's writing space. This begins Ahmed's gendered, and, eventually, queered,

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<sup>54</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 no. 4 (2006): 543-574.

phenomenology. Her work is an investigation of the very real historical and material conditions of possibility for working, writing and consciousness that Husserl would bracket.

In her exploration of multi-sensory experiences of cinema, Laura Marks relies on the work of Henri Bergson to theorize a cinematic perception that “takes place not simply in a phenomenological present but in an engagement with individual and cultural memory.”<sup>55</sup> For Bergson, and thus, for Marks, perception is not a function of the body alone, but also of memory. The perceptive subject is formed by culture and history, as well as by their present, embodied experience of the world. Marks is working with cinema (many of her examples are experimental videos) that she describes as “intercultural” by virtue of the industries from which the videos originate, and the distribution channels through which they circulate, and her work explores the different ways in which cinema invokes and appeals to embodied experience, but embodied experiences that are always culturally textured. Both Marks and Ahmed are describing not just the cultural construction of our phenomenological experience, but, in turn, the ways in which a culturally constructed phenomenology mediates our experience of the world, and, in Marks’ work, our experience of the cinema.

Vivian Sobchack articulates the most elaborate phenomenology of film experience, and she turns to the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty to describe an embodied film spectatorship. While Sobchack writes in general terms about film form, her primary example in *The Address of the Eye* is the classical Hollywood film-noir *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1946). In this film, the camera attempts to adhere precisely to the visual perceptions of the detective-hero Marlowe, but Sobchack argues (as have others) that the experiment succeeds only in demonstrating the radical difference between the conventions of

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<sup>55</sup> Laura Marks. *The Skin of the Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 120.

human perception and the conventions of camera perception. As Sobchack explains it, “embodied spectators know and can also see the film’s body and the human body [and its conventions of visual perception] as distinct, different, and nonidentical in nature and materiality.”<sup>56</sup> This recognition of “bodily disparity”<sup>57</sup> makes the spectator aware of what is usually invisible, but felt - the presence of two bodies in the film theater. These two bodies are the film’s body and the spectator’s body, each with their own, non-identical perceptions.

Sobchack has, at this point in her argument, already explained that film has a body; the spectator’s awareness of the film’s body depends on a complex perceptual experience that she models on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of “other selves and the human world.”<sup>58</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s formulation, introception, or the awareness of one’s own body provides the foundation for inter-subjective relations, in the recognition that other seen bodies must feel, hear and exist – indeed, have a consciousness – beyond one’s perception. For Sobchack, the same inter-subjective relations govern a spectator’s relationship to film, only inside out. The evidence of intentional perception - the film’s images projected onto the screen – suggests to the spectator the presence of another sensing, moving, seeing body, the film’s body. This body is, in material reality, the camera itself, the filmmakers and technological apparatus more broadly defined - everything that produces the visual images.

But Sobchack, too, finds traditional phenomenology at a loss and takes up the work of feminist phenomenologist Iris Young. Young’s work offers, in supplement to the more universalizing assumptions of traditional phenomenology, “phenomenological descriptions of

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<sup>56</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 232.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>58</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. (London: Routledge, 2004), 403-429; originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).



lived-body experience that is gender-specific and historicized [that] qualify[y] the character of a specific body as it is marked, constrained and lived as ‘female’ in our present culture.”<sup>59</sup> A feminine body’s interaction with film and (in Sobchack’s phenomenology) the film’s body, will be phenomenologically different – a difference that will be discussed more fully in chapter four of this dissertation. Sobchack’s argument closes with thoughts that prefigure the essays in her later work, *Carnal Thoughts*, as she considers the various ways in which the bodies of film spectators may be marked and experienced.

Still, each of these writers recognizes the potential for phenomenology to explore not a universal, or normative experience of embodiment, but rather particular, culturally and historically specific experiences. And in each of these accounts, the authors find themselves drawn to the work of Merleau-Ponty; Ahmed uses Merleau-Ponty to counter Husserl, Marks uses Merleau-Ponty to supplement Bergson, and these in addition to Sobchack’s extensive use of his work. Contemporary writers (and all of these writers imagine phenomenologies of the present) find possibility in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology because it was written as an attempt to rethink the phenomenological subject in material terms. *The Phenomenology of Perception* was written to explore the relation between self and world and to mediate between idealist and empiricist theories of consciousness, which Merleau-Ponty explains as the projection of the world from consciousness, in the first tradition, and the construction of consciousness in response to the material world, in the second. Merleau-Ponty’s logic is traditionally phenomenological, and as such, it is attuned to the question of consciousness in the world, but his sensuous language emphasizes material experiences of embodiment. Using Merleau-Ponty to begin to theorize a phenomenological-historical subject makes sense.

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<sup>59</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 151.

For example, Merleau-Ponty claims that the subject is “a current [as of water or electricity] of given existence” and “it is impossible to say just where historical forces end and [the forces of the subject] begin, and strictly speaking the question is meaningless, since there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only in so far as he is historically situated.” The perceiving body of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a human body that comes into being through its sensory experience, but at the same time, “man is a historical idea and not a natural species.”<sup>60</sup> For Merleau-Ponty the phenomenological subject exists in history, a material history that shapes perceptual and sensual experience and from which the subject cannot be extracted.

In his essay on “Film and the New Psychology,” Merleau-Ponty offers, in his discussion of the historical specificity of gestalt psychology, his most explicit address of the cinema, a perceptual experience he more often invokes in passing. He notes the historically specific convergence of cinema’s technologies of perception and the role of the philosopher as a theorist of perception at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “if philosophy is in harmony with the cinema, if thought and technical effort are heading in the same direction, it is because the philosopher and the moviemaker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world which belongs to a generation” - a generation related by time, or place, or politics, or culture.<sup>61</sup> The horizon of thought and material experience are historically and culturally bound and Merleau-Ponty characterizes the particular historical moment, and the technological and aesthetic experience of its phenomenological subject. The new psychology “is largely an expression of surprise at the inherence of the self in a world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and

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<sup>60</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 198.

<sup>61</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Film and the New Psychology,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 59.

an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others [... and] the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other.”<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty presents film and philosophy as expressions of the same historical moment, a moment in which both embody a modern materiality.

This inherence between the subject and the world allows for the study of the human body and the cinema as technologies, in Merleau-Ponty’s cinematic phenomenology, and in Sobchack’s. There is, in fact, a series of mutualities that appeals to both writers, in the recognition of one body – be it human or cinematic – by another, in the experience of the subject in history, and in the “fold” of the perceptive self into and within the material world. These mutual relations bear on Sobchack’s conceptualization of the “cinesthetic subject,” a term she coins to describe the phenomenological experience of her own film-going. The term itself describes the ways in which the senses co-operate to produce the experience of cinema. But moreover, Sobchack created the term to describe the relationship between the cinema and the body, as acting towards and reacting to one another. I would like, with this dissertation, to begin a study of the historical construction of cinesthetic subjects. In each of the films that this dissertation considers, the aesthetic experience of the historically located cinesthetic subject depends upon the cinema technology of the period and the culturally, biologically, historically specific phenomenology of the subject at the cinema. Any phenomenology of film experience or theory of the cinesthetic subject is a theory of film spectatorship but in this case, “spectatorship” is an obviously an inappropriate term. The spectator-audience is decidedly multi-sensory. How

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 58.

film achieves its multi-sensory appeal is then historically, culturally and biologically specific to the cinesthetic subject.

This introduction has already claimed media technologies have limitations, in their various sensory appeals. In their abilities to perceive and to represent the world, bodies and media are *both* technologies that mediate the world. Sobchack's approach to understanding the relations of cinema technology and the body she repeatedly characterizes as nonmetaphoric; the film does not function like a body, the film functions as a body. In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack prefers Donna Haraway's "cyborg" to uses of the word "prosthesis" as a way to understand how "the film's material body also always engages us in its possibilities as a nonhuman lived-body,"<sup>63</sup> while in *Carnal Thoughts* she offers a thorough critique of the conceptualization of the word "prosthetic." Both these arguments are necessary to a phenomenology that understands mutual relationships between the human and the technological.

Sobchack's critical resistance to metaphoric uses of the word prosthetic sharpens rather than limits her formulation of technology and human mutuality. Attentive to the function of a prosthetic in medicalized modernity, Sobchack explains that a lived prosthetic functions properly only when it is invisible. This invisibility, part of technology's intimate incorporation into our own bodies, actually produces an ambivalence, or anxiety, that creates the popular discourse of prosthetics. This ambivalence and anxiety, Sobchack suggests, "exists in our relations with any technology that extends our bodily sensorium and thereby, our perception – be it a cane, a pair of eyeglasses, a prosthetic leg, a motion picture camera, or a computer."<sup>64</sup> Sobchack describes technology's abilities to sustain, provoke, amplify, extend and intend the abilities of the human

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<sup>63</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 171.

body. These technologies do not function like prosthesis. These technologies are prosthetic, they are, at least in Sobchack's historical and material world, part of what she experiences as a whole body, a whole body whose abilities are sustained by technologies that have become invisible. Sobchack does not limit the use of the word "prosthetic" to the describing of a medically proscribed device designed to allow the body to function as a medically defined whole or healthy body, rather, she insists that the lived experience of such a prosthetic be allowed to define the broader application of the term.

The mutual relations of bodies and technologies, in Sobchack's experience of prosthetics and the world – her cane, her eyeglasses, her leg, her computer and, most emphatically, a motion picture camera – are exemplified in two key examples of expressive, "human" technologies, from the phenomenologies of Martin Heidegger and, again, Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger claims in the "Question Concerning the Problem of Technology" (and Sobchack cites this), "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" – technology is a human activity.<sup>65</sup> Although there are "monstrous" forms of *techne*, for Heidegger *poesis* is also *techne*. In this form of *techne*, man does not use technology to assume complete control of a thing external to oneself, but rather, responds to some thing, in Heidegger's language, "revealing" it. For Heidegger, at least, Hoelderlin's poetic language (in, the example given, the poem *Der Rhein*) assumes a technological purpose and a transparency akin to one's eyeglasses. As the poem makes possible an aesthetic experience of the river, so Sobchack's cane and leg make possible her experience of movement, or her eyeglasses and computer make possible the experience of reading (or film-

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<sup>65</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovett. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 4; originally published as "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Vortraege und Aufsaeetze* (Pfulingen: Gunther Neske, 1954).

viewing). The relationship between the human and the technological make the aesthetic experience possible.

But what about the motion picture camera? The motion picture camera, too, is like Hoelderlin's language, or, more precisely like a (musical) organ<sup>66</sup> and organist, described by Merleau-Ponty. The organist's ability to play the organ is, first and foremost, the result of a tendency towards expression that takes place through the body. Merleau-Ponty is sitting in a church, where the organ is perhaps visible, the organist less probably so. He experiences the music, and only indirectly, the organ and the organist's body. His own body acts as a hearing, listening medium to the sound in the church. In this space, peopled by bodies and technology, "meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world."<sup>67</sup> Merleau-Ponty's example of the organist argues not only that the body itself is a medium, but that beyond its own boundaries, a body adopts instruments and technologies that exist in and create the cultural world. Merleau-Ponty's relationship to the organ is like Sobchack's to the camera, (which she does not claim to wield), or Heidegger's to Hoelderlin's poetic language: each recognizes that the interaction of bodies and technologies produce a shared, social "cultural world" and its aesthetic experiences.

If the expressive technologies of *poesis*, or of the organ, provide models for how to understand Sobchack's interaction with a moving picture camera, her theory of the film's body and our own can also be understood by its contrast to Jean Baudry's theory of the cinema apparatus, as articulated in his 1975 essay "The Cinematic Apparatus." Baudry understands the spectator and the cinematic apparatus as being separate and autonomous – in an analogic but not a

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<sup>66</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty cites philosopher of science Jacques Chevalier's *L'Habitude* as evidence for this claim regarding the organist, organs play a kind of symbolic role in this history – there is an account of Keller at the Mormon Temple organ and Andre Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale* includes an elaborate, and erotic, organ scene.

<sup>67</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 169.

metonymic relationship. The technology of the cinematic apparatus acts on the body, and mind of the spectator. In the classic description of the cinematic apparatus, Baudry writes “the cinematographic apparatus is unique in that it offers the subject perceptions ‘of a reality’ whose status seems similar to that of representations experienced as perception.”<sup>68</sup> The quotation from Baudry emphasizes not the nearness of cinematic representation to perception, which only “seems similar,” but the difference between perception and cinematic representation, a difference which depends on the presence of the apparatus outside and in opposition to the body. In Baudry’s argument, the apparatus is understood to be essentially mimetic, rather than aesthetic; the apparatus attempts to reproduce the perceptions of the body, not extend or alter those perceptions as the poem, the organ and Sobchack’s film camera do. For Baudry, the technologies of the body and the film camera are like one another, but essentially separate. In contrast, Sobchack’s film phenomenology disputes the difference between cinematic representation and perception, understanding instead both human perception and the cinematic image as mediations that, together, create our experience of the world.

That the phenomenology of the perceptive body in the movie theater<sup>69</sup> mediates the aesthetic experience of film, that film is the perceptive experience of a technological body, and that the body of the spectator and the body of the film can share and communicate this aesthetic experience is a significant frame to the dissertation that follows. The phenomenologies of film experience outlined here also bear on the theories of spectatorship I explore, particularly the affective theories that relate a cinesthetic subject to a screen image, a reader to a text and a

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<sup>68</sup> Baudry, Jean. “The Cinematic Apparatus,” in *Film Theory and Film Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 314.

<sup>69</sup> This dissertation, at least in the first two chapters, considers film experience as primarily (though not necessarily, or essentially) located in the (very different) theaters of the silent and classical eras. The experience of documentary cinema, and post-studio era suspense film are less architecturally theatrical, but the consumption environments of these types of film will be considered as well.

subject to the world. In many of the films included in this study, pairs of heroines – Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan and variations on them – function as a *mise en abyme*, reminding the multi-sensory spectator that their senses are never located only in themselves, that they rely on the perceptions of others to act as mediums for their own experience of the world. The cinesthetic subject is a historical subject, brought into being again and again by the technologies and aesthetics of the social and cultural world within which she lives.

### **Coda: Technology, Genre and the History of the Cinesthetic Subject**

Chapters 1, 2 and 4 examine the appearance of the blind heroine in three periods of technological development of the US film industry and chart a history of genre, from the sensational melodrama of the teens, to the classical melodrama of the studio era, to the horror-inflected drama of the 1960s. Theories of film melodrama were first articulated by a narrative approach to Hollywood genre in the classical period and chapter one begins at this “center” of film studies. Feminist film theory has argued that classical Hollywood cinema is structured by the presence of the masculine gaze at the feminine body, both within the visual fiction of the film, and in the ideology of the film’s production. *Dark Victory* (Goulding, 1939) is both an example of and an exception to this logic. But theories of the cinematic gaze, like much of film theory, privilege visual experiences of cinema. When this film attempts to represent blindness, the medium actually subverts its conventions of the male gaze and the woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness and relies on sound, image and a multi-sensory and affective involvement in the film’s narrative structure. Taking up arguments regarding melodrama as a “body genre” and the extra-visual and the generic experiences of melodrama I argue that classical film melodramas sought to physically imagine and communicate the experience of blindness, through and despite film’s visual medium. The blind heroine, in this case, corresponds to a cinesthetic subject of the classical era who



responded not just to the visual orchestration of gaze and star image, but to a more complicated, and conflicted, cinematic experience of performance, narrative and affect. Each chapter of the dissertation characterizes a distinct, historically specific, phenomenological film “spectator” for whom the cinema has certain sensory expectations; these expectations are articulated by the ways in which the blind heroine is represented, and the ways in which the cinema attempts to be non-visual.

Chapter two, “Adapting *The World I Live In*” returns to the period of the “silent” cinema to examine the early history of film and its sensory address; in some ways, early cinema has been misidentified as a primarily “visual” medium. The adaptation of Keller’s published literary works for the film *Deliverance* and her contributions to the making of the film reorient film experience away from the historical construction of film as a primarily visual medium. The film uses silent-era cinematic conventions of implied sound and musical effects, and close-ups and gesture, in startling ways that both adhere to and depart from Keller’s own literary descriptions of biographical events and sensory perceptions, and draw attention to the heroine’s blindness and deafness. And the kind of multi-sensory appeal practiced by the film *Deliverance* can be seen in other films from the period, fascinated by vision, blindness and sound as well. At the same time, Keller’s literary work, and the film, contribute to turn-of-the-century theories of sensory perception and imagination, as articulated by both early 20<sup>th</sup> century film theorists and theorists of consciousness. In the “silent” teens, the cinesthetic subject was taught to co-ordinate senses of sight, hearing, touch and physical embodiment to enjoy the multi-sensory pleasures of the cinema.

Melodrama in the teens, it has been argued, was not the affective, domestic genre defined by classical cinema, but a “sensational” physical genre that depended on the thrills produced by actors bodies in “real” peril. Although documentary is often seen as an alternative to the

fictionalizing strategies of Hollywood narrative film, I will argue, in chapter three, “Melodocudrama, Extraordinary Bodies and Disability Studies” that non-fictional cinematic representations (of Keller and of deaf-blind disability) rely on a sensational appeal of “real bodies” inherited from this early film genre; her appearance in media representation has had a persistent claim on the real – the social and political world in which disability is lived. I want to call attention to a melo-docu-dramatic mode of film – in the silent-era Keller film *Deliverance*, in the history and theory of documentary film, and, finally in the analysis of film from disability studies perspectives. The cinesthetic subject of documentary is one who responds to the claims on the real made by film’s body, and by the bodies on film. In this case, the blind heroine is the politically active Keller, who used her own body in cinematic (and extra-cinematic) performances of disability, and as a material metaphor in a her political work.

The fourth chapter addresses the phenomenological experience of live television drama – by way of a history of the production of the live television and film performances of *The Miracle Worker*, the story of Anne Sullivan’s early education of Keller. In the 1950s live television required specialized recording technologies, staging spaces and broadcasting practices. The confined spaces and less-mobile cameras of the television production studios created an aesthetic that foregrounded theatrical blocking and staging, and used minimal editing and long and medium shots to frame actors’ physical movement and enhance the effect of spatial unity. This aesthetic, in turn, eventually became a cinematic convention of post-studio Hollywood horror, which is haunted not only by the uncanny spaces, but by the bodies and technologies of live television. In the post-studio era, the blind heroine, and the cinesthetic subject were both vulnerable victims, confined in a claustrophobic space, in which they had to rely on the creative use of their senses.

## Chapter 1: Classical Melodrama and Multi-Sensory Narrative

### “The Cinema Offers a Number of Possible Pleasures.”

In Laura Mulvey’s influential feminist critique of Hollywood cinema, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” she writes “The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures,” and then goes on to list them, “One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking)” while others include voyeurism and a narcissistic “fascination with likeness and recognition” with the film image.<sup>1</sup> The opening statement in itself is suggestively expansive; the cinema may offer a number of possible pleasures but Mulvey has indicated that she will address only *visual* pleasure in her critique.

For Mulvey, writing in 1973 about the Hollywood cinema of the past 50 years, “the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him” (p.14) and these patterns produce, in cinema, two distinctly gendered visual experiences. The first is the spectacular “to-be-looked-at-ness” of women, made objects by a scopophilic male gaze; the second is the spectator’s experience “as the bearer of the look . . . As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.” (p. 20) Mulvey argues that iconic representations of women actually halts the narrative trajectory of film, “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.” (p. 19) Male protagonists, on the other hand, assume the “role as the active one

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 16-17. All subsequent quotations from the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” will refer to this publication of the essay.

of advancing the story, making things happen” through the use of the gaze of the fictional male character to structure both the narrative and the spectator’s experience of the film. (p. 20) All of this is quite literal and quite visual in the films, by Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg, that Mulvey takes as her examples; indeed, Mulvey’s analysis is, in a way doubly visual – her feminist analysis makes the visual structure of the films, and their editing practices, visible to a critical audience.

This dissertation takes as its object multi-sensory film, and examines the ways in which sensory experiences seen on screen such as touch, sound and embodied movement structure film narrative and the sensual experience of the “spectator.” In this approach, I am, particularly in this chapter, which looks at the highly structured narrative of classical Hollywood melodrama, following a model established by Mulvey, the examination of the role of perception – that of the characters and the spectator-audience – in the construction of cinematic narrative. But this chapter will argue that classical Hollywood cinema is not an entirely visual medium. Film, is rather, multi-sensory in its narrative and affective appeals to the bodies that mediate the cinematic experience. *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939) is a film that is overtly resistant (as is its heroine), to interpretation as a purely visual object. Its use of sonic, haptic and kinesthetic images undermines and disrupts the visual relationship between spectator and film and the relationship presumed by much of film theory. Then, there is the experience of narrative, and the quality of narrative, in this film and more generally, as visual, but also “not-visual,” that is, more than the sum of its visual parts, in its ability to produce the affective experiences of suspense and surprise.

Mulvey is not the only film theorist to emphasize the visual experiences of film, the film semiotics that introduced film as an object of academic study<sup>2</sup> constructed film as a visual object as well, but to do so ignores other sensory experiences of film-going. Mulvey's analysis, describing as it did, the spectator's identification with the male gaze, provoked feminist film theorists who wrote in the years following the publication of her essay to image subject positions for female spectators that addressed this highly structured visual terrain. But if film narrative engages senses other than the visual, are there new relationships between the spectator-audience and film that can be imagined? And if vision and the narratives it structured, created a binary between the passive feminine spectacle and the active male protagonist, what happens to gender in the absence of vision and the presence of other sensory engagements? To re-imagine the relationship of the spectator-audience to the multi-sensory film, I will turn to Silvan Tomkins' mid-century theories of consciousness, affect and subject-object relations. I will also compare the multi-sensory narrative of *Dark Victory* with the narrative and non-narrative manipulations of the senses in *Symphonie Pastorale* (Jean Delannoy, 1946) and *Magnificent Obsession* (Douglas Sirk, 1954).

### **A Perversion of the Senses**

The closing scene of *Dark Victory*, a classical-era Hollywood film directed by Edmund Goulding and starring Bette Davis, could be described as follows: In the last hours of her life, Judith Traherne aware of her imminent death, a secret she shares only with her companion Ann, pretends to be able to see for the benefit of her doctor-husband, all the while making visible to the audience her fatal, fictional blindness.

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<sup>2</sup>A critique of Christian Metz's reduction of the film to the visual signifier is part of my introduction. My return to figures like Bazin, Balázs, Arnheim and Kracauer (though they were each invested in the visual elements of the film) is part of a desire to study film theory before film was (made) visual.

This scene, and the story of a blind heroine more generally, might immediately suggest an analysis of the gaze and its gendered power. But the film, “perversely” as Mary Ann Doane puts it, “achieves heroic and tragic proportions not only in blindness, but in a blindness that mimes sight,”<sup>3</sup> a characterization of the film that invokes its reorganization of the senses, of gender and of narrative agency and authority. But how and through what “perverse” reconfigurations of the senses do the film-goers and film heroines experience this heroic and tragic narrative? The brief plot summary above is written to highlight two key elements of the film’s narrative structure: the vicissitudes of the plot which create suspense for the audience, and the function of the perceptive abilities of the double-heroine in the creation of that suspense. For much of the film, Ann constructs the film’s narrative – and the audience’s affective relation to the film, through suspense – with *her* super-sensitive perception. This narrative control, however, she cedes to Judy, who then narrates the film and its affects according to her own sonic, tactile and kinesthetic sensorium. In this narrative of the heroine’s impending blindness, the priority of sight is replaced by a heightened attention to a broader sensorium – to touch, to sound and to movement.

The film *Dark Victory*, which was made during the height of the studio era, with intentional appeal to a female audience, contains much that is not accounted for in Mulvey’s feminist analytical framework, however well an emphasis on vision describes certain tensions and problems that structure the film. Attention to the narrative structure of *Dark Victory*, as it relates to image, sound and movement, reveals that it is the heroine-pair that constructs and controls the space of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between spectator and screen is not simply visual but

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 28.

<sup>4</sup> In the essay “Narrative Space” first published in 1975, Stephen Heath writes, “The construction of space as a term of [narrative-subject] binding in classical cinema is [significant in] its implication for the spectator in the taking place of

depends on a simultaneously visual and non-visual narrative structure to create subject positions, which are not identificatory, but are otherwise emotional and affective, for the spectator. The relationship between spectator and screen in this film is, I will argue, a relationship of involvement, mutuality and feedback and is the result of the structure of narrative suspense. Moreover, the intimate “sensual” relationship between the two women – blind and sighted – becomes a model for the relationship between film and spectator.

In some ways, the first scene of *Dark Victory*, between Judith Traherne and Dr. Steele (George Brent) can and should be understood within Mulvey’s framework of the scopophilic and voyeuristic gazes. The doctor’s examination of Judy initiates both his visual authority over her, and promises the spectator-audience “direct erotic rapport”<sup>5</sup> with her body, under cover of the generic conventions of the medical melodrama and the inevitable conflation of knowledge and desire in the doctor-lover. However, rather than straightforward example of the power of the male gaze to structure the film, the scene can be read a struggle for control of the film’s structure and narrative, and as a struggle that takes place in registers including and other than the purely visual. The image of the woman or the woman as image, subject to the male gaze, is significant in this scene, but not because of the power of this structure to define the film as a whole. Rather, because that particular technique for structuring a film is being challenged by the dialog, the

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film as narrative; implication-process of a constant refinding – space regulated, orientated, continued, constituted. The use of look and point-of-view structures . . . is fundamental to this process [of narrative-subject binding] that has been described in terms of suture, a stitching . . .” (403) In the same essay, Heath offers an analysis of Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* and of a key scene structured by the gaze of a portrait of the heroine’s father, and two policemen who are interviewing the woman. Although this attention to the male gaze is clearly influenced by Mulvey’s argument, Heath argues not so much that the male gaze offers Lina as object to be looked at, but that it constructs the narrative space of the film and defines the narrative structure and the spectator’s relationship to that narrative. This distinction is important for understanding how Ann’s gaze, and, finally, Judy’s movements structure the space of *Dark Victory*. From “Narrative Space,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 379-420.

<sup>5</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 16-17.

spacing, the rhythm of the editing, and Davis' star performance. Indeed, the film can be seen as a critique of this kind of authority – seeing, knowing, masculine, and medical – altogether.

### **Pace, Parry and Performance**

The scene in which Judith Traherne and Dr. Steele meet for the first time is preceded by a scene between Dr. Steele and another doctor, unnamed. The conversation of the two men assumes the nature of a confrontation. The interrogations of Steele's colleague are marked visually, by eye-line matches that cut from the face of the unnamed doctor, eager and frustrated, with eyes focused off-screen, posing his questions to the image of the object of his interrogations, Dr. Steele. Steele moves around his office, tidying up. The rhythm of interrogation, and parry, which structures the editing of shots, is repeated when Judy Traherne and Dr. Steele meet, and in most of their subsequent interactions, as doctor and patient, or as lovers.

At their first meeting, Judy sneaks up behind Steele, introduces herself, and abruptly asks, "Or don't names matter, to that cold scientific eye we're all guinea pigs aren't we?" During his examination, Judy continues a fast-paced verbal repartee that explicitly mocks the doctor's authoritative medical gaze. Judy's dialog (and Davis' delivery) are confrontational and funny – "Do you use your eyes much?" "I generally keep them open Doctor." The editing of the images that build the conflict between Judy and Steele is structured by the pace of the dialog, where Judy has the advantage. Judy controls the rhythm of the scene, and its editing, as she moves about the office, eluding the doctor's gaze and deflecting his questions, which are delivered slowly and deliberately. The pace and rhythm with which Judy speaks and moves in this early scene are already familiar to the audience, indeed, they are not just part of Bette Davis' characterization of Judy, they are familiar from Davis' characterizations before Judy, particularly the troublesome and undisciplined Julie, in William Wyler's *Jezebel*, the year before. George Brent, rather than



being a masculine bearer of the gaze and protagonist of the narrative, is according to one critic, simply there “to look good in a vest.”<sup>6</sup>

Judy’s physical embodiment is reinforced by dialog that portrays Judy as a particular kind of woman – independent, modern, willful, “and I am said to have a sense of humor.” Rather than answering the doctor’s questions, Judy provides Steele with a complete narrative that addresses the physical, mental, social and economic factors that have constructed her experience of modern disabled femininity.<sup>7</sup> As she insists on this interpretation of her character, she simultaneously resists another, familiar from sentimental melodrama and with a different affective relationship to the spectator. Judy explains, to Steele’s surprise, that she finds talking about her health “boring.” Eventually, Judy becomes more direct, “I’m young and I’m strong and neither you nor Dr. Parsons [Judy’s old family doctor] can make an invalid out of me.” This conversation refers to a stereotype presumed familiar to the audience and to the characters in the film, of the weak, invalid woman obsessed with talking about her own, possibly imagined, illnesses. This figure has been studied in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary fictions, particularly within sentimental genres; in Diane Price Herndl’s *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in America Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* she closes her study with a mention of the film *Dark Victory* and the transformation of genre that it marks in her survey. Herndl find in the historical materials with which she works, evidence of efforts on the part of a masculinist medical and philanthropic establishment to construct the 19<sup>th</sup> century model for feminine disability.<sup>8</sup> Judy

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<sup>6</sup> Commentary, James Ursini on *Dark Victory*, 2005. Warner Home Video, DVD. This commentary is part of the 2005 Warner Home Video, Turner Entertainment Co. DVD release of the film *Dark Victory*.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast to most popular narratives about Helen Keller, particularly those that narrate her biography as a triumph over disability, this film is quite explicit about the significance of wealth and privilege in the construction of the blind heroine.

<sup>8</sup> There is a second, and possibly even more disturbing stereotype of the disabled female. As in Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964) in which a woman is cured of her kleptomania by her lover, the “horse-y” setting of *Dark Victory* allows for an

refuses this role and Davis' character initiates a new model, and one that evokes, not pity, but wonder, at her bravery and trepidation in the face of death.

### **Narrative “Focalization” and the Diegetic Narrator**

Judy is not alone in her efforts to confront Steele's authoritative medical gaze. In her companion Ann (Geraldine Fitzgerald), Judy has a second pair of eyes that are engaged in observing the doctor on her behalf. When Judy introduces herself to Steele in the doctor's waiting room, Ann appears in the center of the frame between the two lead actors, staring fixedly at Steele. If the audience's attention is focused on Judy, because of her speech and movements, the blocking of the scene includes a deliberate – but silent – attempt to call attention to Ann's vision. Ann is wearing a dark hat with a sharp brim, worn at a dramatic angle to create a visual line that reinforces the pointed, sidelong gaze she casts at Steele. Ann's attention to Steele is not confined to this scene, however. How and what and when Ann observes provide narrative structure to the entire film; her perception becomes the means by which the spectator is informed of key information in the narrative. Although Judy does not become blind until the end of the film, Ann's perception acts as a prosthesis for Judy's increasingly unreliable sight. To explore the cinematic practice of narration from within the film text, Edward Branigan, in *Narrative Comprehension in Film*, introduces, as a conceptual practice of narrative cinema, “focalization” in which “a character's role in a narrative may change from being an actual or potential focus of a

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analogy between the willful, but disabled, heroine and a spirited horse. That this is a recurring metaphor in the characterization of Helen Keller (by the press, her friends, her teacher Anne Sullivan) is one of the ways in which the conventions that are used to represent fictional Hollywood blind heroines intersect with the conventions used to represent Keller. This analogy is practically a cliché in classical Hollywood cinema (Bette Davis arrives on horseback for her entrance in *Jezebel*, amid discussions of manners and the breaking of colts) but in 1954, the biographical documentary of Keller's life, *The Unconquered* (Nancy Hamilton) premiered at New York City's Guild Theater in a double-billing with the live-action Walt Disney film *Stormy, The Thoroughbred* (Larry Lansburgh) a fictionalized account of the training of a famous polo pony. When this convention is applied to representations of Keller, the implications for education and consciousness are amplified and disturbing.

causal chain of events to being the source of knowledge of a causal chain.”<sup>9</sup> In *Dark Victory*, the character of Ann provides the focalization of the narrative. She is, at least for the first half of the film, its diegetic narrator, as her character learns, holds and imparts knowledge to the spectator-audience.



**Figure 2: Ann’s pointed stare (center), in *Dark Victory***

In a hospital scene, in which Judy is spectacularly unconscious, Ann is on the alert. She confronts Steele and asks a series of questions about Judy’s health, which he avoids. When Steele appears at a party at Judy’s house Ann confronts him again and asks about “a certain look on your face” she noticed at the hospital. She interrogates him, this time physically backing him into a corner, with her fixed stare, repeated questions and the emphatic movements of her body. Ann’s confrontations are effectively intimidating; Steele quickly admits to Ann that Judy will suffer a fatal relapse. Through Ann’s interactions with Steele, the causal chain of the film is revealed to

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<sup>9</sup>Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 101.

the audience. From the very opening of the film, the spectator-audience has depended on Ann as a key figure in the communication of Judy's illness. She describes Judy's symptoms to and for the spectator-audience, through her probing questions, to Judy and to the doctor. Indeed, Ann's character, which might, according to certain industry practices, be understood as supporting, is central to the creation of narrative suspense within the film.

But Ann provides not just prosthetic vision, to augment Judy's failing sight, and to "focalize" the attention of the spectator-audience on key narrative information. Ann's perceptive abilities are defined quite broadly. As an excuse for her persistent questioning, and in one of the only characterizations of her in the film, Ann offers, "I'm Irish. I may be psychic, or funny. I'm probably quite wrong." But she doesn't act like she sincerely doubts her powers of perception; rather, they are supernaturally keen. Ann senses, not just with her eyes and ears, but with her whole body. The audience is brought to trust Ann to narrate the film, not just because she can see, but because she can feel.

Not only is Ann central to the structure of the narrative is, she is also understood to be vital to the affective relationship of spectator and screen. *Dark Victory* was originally written as a stage play, and when Warner Brothers purchased the rights to the story and hired Edmund Goulding to direct, he added the character of Ann to the play. Geraldine Fitzgerald, who played Ann, explained the function of her character thus,

"the character of Ann was . . . to act as a sort of one person Greek chorus, so that the central doomed figure would not have to cry for herself. The friend would do it. This was a wonderful idea and strengthened the drama immeasurably (regardless of how it was going to be played or by whom). Edmund Goulding believed that it was the absence of such a character in the original . . . that forced Judith into suffering too much and made the play fail. His way, Judith could be brave and debonair, while Ann suffered."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>This description of *Dark Victory* comes from the popular and somewhat dishy biography *Edmund Goulding's Dark Victory: Hollywood's Genius Bad Boy* (Madison, WI: University of Madison Press, 2004), 178. Author Michael Kennedy emphasizes Goulding's abilities as a director and offers rich descriptions of the work Goulding and his actors

In this way, the character of Ann was designed to act as emotional narrator, who facilitates the spectator's affective relationship with the blind heroine. The women's relationship is the most meaningful of all the relationships among characters because it structures the narrative and the spectator's relationship to the film. Ann provides the narrative focalization through the communication of what she observes, but just often through the communication of what she sense and feels. When Ann worries, the music climbs in pitch, in a conventional sonic evocation of rising suspense, and the spectator-audience worries, too.

The prosthetic function of Ann's perception, on behalf of Judy, calls attention to a convention that recurs in films with blind heroines, the construction of a double-heroine pair as a single sensory subject. From the Gish sisters (playing fatefully separated twins, one sighted, one blind) in D.W. Griffith's *Orphans in the Storm* (1921), to the pairing of sighted Kathy (Catherine Deneuve) and blind Selma (Bjork) in *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000), the perceptions, emotions and sensory experiences of the double-heroine are understood to be complementary, but individually incomplete.<sup>11</sup> Each heroine pair functions slightly differently – according to the technological and historical context in which they appear. But in the case of the Ann and Judy, their ability to compensate for, and complement one another allows this pair to maintain control of the film's "focalization" from beginning to end, when narrative authority is eventually transferred from Ann's perceptions to Judy's.

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did to block movements, deliver of dialog and evoke emotion, all, arguably "non-visual" elements of film, or at least, Kennedy's analysis is less entirely visual than the emphasis placed on image in film theory.

<sup>11</sup> The convention of the double-heroine pair, and their "funny, or psychic" compensatory sensory abilities, appears in films without blind heroines as well, in *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963) in which Theo can read minds, and must communicate to others the extra-sensory perceptions that emotionally repressed Nell experiences, and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), in which a chatty nurse becomes obsessed with her charge, an actress who has ceased to speak. Further, Anne Sullivan, though she experienced visual impairment throughout her life is rarely represented as disabled, because in the conventional heroine pair, one woman must be able to compensate for the other's disability.

## Suspense and Affective Structure

Edward Branigan offers a familiar formula for suspense and surprise in cinematic narrative, “Knowledge is linked to the response [of the spectator] as follows: Spectator > Character = Suspense [suspense is produced when the spectator knows more than character;] Spectator < Character = Surprise [surprise is produced when the spectator knows less than character].” Branigan notes, “Hitchcock conceived his films in this way . . . [he] recognized that these effects can be intensified according to what we know about a character and our emotional involvement with him or her. He realized there is a close relationship between a spectator’s wish to know, and his or her wishful involvement with situations and persons in a film.”<sup>12</sup> This description of the experience of cinematic suspense (like that given for focalization) is not necessarily visual, though it can be visually produced in the medium of the cinema. Branigan uses the word spectator, but he also suggests that there is such a thing as *narrative* perception.<sup>13</sup> His approach emphasizes the narrative relationship, or, as he puts it “involvement” (but not identification) between the spectator-audience and the film, a relationship, that, though it depends on the visual experience of the film, is also more than visual. In *Dark Victory*, this involvement is facilitated by Ann and by Judy.

Steele convinces Ann that Judy should never know how soon, and suddenly, her life will end and the two consider this sad, but seemingly necessary delusion. As they are thus engaged,

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<sup>12</sup> Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> According to his own introductory plan, Branigan is attempting to develop a concept of narrative perception: “my approach will be to allow the notion of ‘perceiving’ to remain quite broad and elastic, capable of referring to any one of a range of distinct mental activities. When sharp lines must be drawn, I will use special concepts. Thus the word ‘perception’ will be used in this book to point toward any of the following: a ‘percept’ deriving from reality; a preconscious assumption being made about reality; or an acknowledged fact of a physical reality. The word ‘perception’ may also be used to refer to an intuition; or, it may refer to a propositional conclusion that a perceiver has reached about sensory perception through a process of reasoning; or, it may simply refer to an attitude we adopt when confronted by something that is a representation of something else.” (3) Although this theory of narrative perception is left here, it is suggestive in that narrative is never understood to be simply visual. Branigan’s language avoids a visual vocabulary.

the film provides a short lesson in the construction of narrative suspense. Steele and Ann are leaning over a balcony, looking out of the frame towards the film's audience, with the house and its line of French doors behind them. Judy is visible to the audience through the glass doors. She opens a door and moves onto the terrace. The spectator-audience, *seeing* she is near and *hearing* the secret Ann and Steele share, knows more than all the characters on screen, and thus, is in a position of suspense. This narrative experience depends on the spectator-audience's multi-sensory engagement with the film, their ability to coordinate sight and sound. Judy shouts, "BOO" and Steele and Ann turn quickly around. (Ann and Steele, unaware, are in turn surprised by Judy.) Ann's quick response sets everyone at ease. Everyone except the audience, who is placed back in a position of suspense, now knowing more than Judy does about her illness, and its inevitable course.

The classical Hollywood definitions of suspense and surprise, here articulated by Branigan, are related to both literary descriptions of dramatic irony, and formalist theories of narrative. But Branigan's narrative theory also has a strong affinity with theories of subject-object relations developed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Silvan Tomkins' descriptions of affect. Of the affects, interest/excitement and its dynamic of anticipation, appears somewhat analogous to the experience of film suspense. Tomkins claims that interest/excitement is a basic state of consciousness; it is both a necessary precondition for perception, and a reaction to perceptions, and, in particular, a reaction to the repetition of sensory stimuli. In itself, it is neither positive nor negative, but simply anticipatory. It produces an orientation towards further information, from visual or auditory sensory experience. Like the suspense created by the film, interest/excitement relies on, and creates, a sustained anticipation of perception and sensory information.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Silvan Tomkins. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, vol.1, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 1962), 336-369.

Tomkins has difficulty describing interest/excitement without reference to its “mutual facilitation” with and by an ancillary affect, startle/surprise. Startle/surprise is generally, “an interrupter of ongoing activity,” or, in Tomkins’ comparison, it is a “special announcement”<sup>15</sup> as on the radio, that interrupts regular programming. In general startle/change produces a change in the orientation of affective interest/excitement and an intensification of interest/excitement. Like the narrative surprise Branigan identifies, this affect depends on a sudden and abrupt disruption of habituated sensory information. But it is not just that Tomkins’ theory of interest/excitement bears an affinity with the theories of suspense that describe, and were popular in the production of, classical Hollywood filmmaking. Tomkins affect psychology articulates a theory of the subject suggests how it is that the film produces, not just interest/excitement in the form of suspense, but also produces the cinematic spectator-audience who responds to film’s sensory and narrative address.

For Tomkins, perception and feedback are two processes absolutely necessary to the formation of the subject. Interest/excitement is maintained through perception; if interest/excitement is the basic state of consciousness, this is because that state both is created by, and demands human perception. Tomkins most often writes of visual perception, but he also, especially in his later chapters, attends to the perceptions of touch. The janus-like quality of interest/excitement, as both the motivation for and result of perception, is due to the fact that it is a state within a dynamic process of feedback. Whether Tomkins is exploring the relationship of child to mother, or child to stove, or adult to adult, or adult to technology, the subject perceives, responds and perceives again, as conditions change, in a process of feedback, in which the subject learns about his environment and how to respond to it. Although Tomkins allows for the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 498-508.



substitution of inter-subjective relations with subject-technology relations, or the relationship of subjects to representations, I am not suggesting that his model of subject formation and the relationship of subject to technology was the basis for Hollywood's practices of suspense, nor that it was directly inspired by them. Rather, Tomkins' theories of the subject and the classical cinema's practices for engaging the spectator-audience, were both developed in a time and place when media technologies were increasingly used to recreate the most intimate of human experiences, the communication of affect. Both Tomkins and the structure of suspense in classical Hollywood presume an affective intimacy between bodies and technology.

### **The Haptic Suspense Narrative**

*Dark Victory's* finale depends on the experience of technologically mediated, sustained and repeated suspense, created by the manipulation of perception. The film draws the spectator-audience into an affective bond of suspense via the narrator's appeals to the spectator's perceptions. The scene of heightened perception, and surprise and suspense, on the balcony resonates through the film's conclusion, as Judy assumes control of the film's narrative, and, at the same time, abruptly alters the film's sensory address from the visual to the haptic.

The very concept of the haptic, in the work of Alois Riegl,<sup>16</sup> emphasizes the indirect, and visually mediated, experience of touch that is haptic. While there has been, historically, no sustained tradition of direct appeal by the cinema to any senses other than sight and sound, the concept of the haptic is a model for film's multi-sensory desires – film must be, first and foremost, visual or sonic, and through these sensory mediums, it makes its appeal to the multi-sensory spectator. The representation is, directly, visual, but the experience is multi-sensory.

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<sup>16</sup> Alois Riegl, "The Dutch Group Portrait," trans. Benjamin Binstock, *October* 74 (Fall 1995). See the influence of Benjamin's interpretation of Riegl in the work of Laura Marks and Jonathan Crary, among others.

To explain the use of the haptic in classical Hollywood cinema, I would like to draw attention to the compensations for color made by the black and white film *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938) when Julie (Bette Davis) makes the crucial decision to wear a red dress to a debutante ball. According to Davis,

[As Julie and her escort dance] His grip on her waist becomes tighter, his step more deliberate, his eyes never meet hers. And always the lilting music, the swirling bodies and the peripheral reaction shots of the stunned pillars of society and Auntie Belle, who suffers with Julie. It is a scene of such suspense that I never have not marveled at the direction of it.<sup>17</sup>

In this description<sup>18</sup> of *Jezebel*, Davis describes how the physical and visual registers communicate both the color of Julie's scarlet dress, and the emotional and narrative significance of that color – indeed, it is popular apocrypha that fans swear to have seen the red of Julie's dress. This film, for which Davis won an Oscar in 1938, was reportedly rushed to theaters the year before the color production *Gone With the Wind*, out of the fear that that film would eclipse *Jezebel* if they were released in the same year. This panic, described by both Davis, in her autobiography, and Kennedy, in his biography of Goulding, reveals a consciousness of the technological possibilities and limitations of the cinema on the part of its creators. While I have presented this consciousness as a theoretical reflection on the nature of cinema, it is also a response to a very material problem as well. To represent a red dress in a black and white film,

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<sup>17</sup> Bette Davis, *The Lonely Life* (New York: GP Putnam and Sons, 1961), 217.

<sup>18</sup> Like Matthew Kennedy's biography of Goulding, Davis' autobiography offers descriptions of the physical experiences of filmmaking. She mentions that she learned to walk up stairs from Martha Graham while enrolled in a drama school in New York City, "Every time I climbed a flight of stairs in films – and I spent half my life on them – it was Graham step by step." (p. 67) And she describes the very concrete dynamics of Miriam Hopkins' attempts to upstage her in *The Old Maid* (Goulding, 1939), "She kept inching her way toward the back of the couch so that I would have to turn away from the camera in order to look at her." (p. 230) In the first quote Davis describes the physicality of a melodrama convention, the scene on the stairs. In the second, she gives an explanation for the spatialization of certain scenes and the position of female bodies before the camera that offers an alternative to the psychological theorizing of the feminist film critics.

Wyler, to compensate for the missing sensory experience, the perception of color, turns to the movements of the characters in the dance.



**Figure 3: Julie's "red" dress, in *Jezebel***

The visual emphasis on the tactile, in the closing scenes of *Dark Victory* performs a similar function as it compensates for an absence of point of view shots or eyeline matches to mark the focalization. Judy's blindness and the expressive, affective, and narrative significance of the film is communicated, instead, through the movements of Judy's hands and body. *Dark Victory* displays a repeated reluctance of film to represent blindness visually through blurred vision, darkness or other point of view effects. And with an absence of direct tactile signifiers to communicate Judy's loss of vision, or mark her control of the narrative, the film supplies, as compensation, a series of haptic images. The affective and narrative significance of the film is now communicated through the movements of Judy's hands and body. Haptic signs now disclose narrative information, allowing Judy to build and manipulate the suspense of the final scene.

The transition to Judy's control of the narrative begins with Ann and Judy in the garden; Judy notes a coming storm. As she kneels next to Ann, Judy turns her hands, each holding a plant bulb, in the sunshine and notes that although, "It is getting darker every second," she can still feel the warmth of the sun. Ann is behind Judy, staring intently at her and suddenly, the two start, and embrace passionately in the shared knowledge that Judy is about to die. Steele calls the women inside, and Judy take command of the situation, telling Ann, "Come, not a word." This sequence marks an explicit transition from Judy's experience of vision (she no longer sees the sun) to her experience of touch (she feels its warmth and the rough texture of the bulbs.) The embrace in the garden signals a reorientation of the spectator's perceptions that necessarily takes the spectator by surprise. No longer required to follow Ann's troubled or inquiring gaze, or the music that follows them, the spectator-audience must now reorient their perceptions to follow Judy's expressive and communicative gestures.

Following this embrace, the two women walk to the house with Judy clinging to Ann's arm. Judy reveals to Ann her plan to deceive Steele, and send him away, as she wrings her hands on the fabric of Ann's dress and run's her fingers through Ann's thick, curling hair. The embrace, the arm-in-arm walk to the house, and Judy's caresses are all haptic signifiers that inform the spectator that Ann and Judy will deceive Steele together.

Judy explains to Steele that she will not be going with him as she helps him pack a suitcase. She moves about the bedroom reaching for the bedposts, touching and folding and moving a stack of shirts and other small articles of clothing. This physical and haptic communication makes Judy the agent of the scene's focalization and constructs the scenes suspense. The spectator-audience knows that her vision is gone and that her death is approaching. As Ann's knowledge had previously, Judy's knowledge, which she share with the spectator-audience through the physicality of her performance, structures the narrative suspense. Judy's

performance – of sight, for her husband and, simultaneously, of blindness, for the films spectators – also works affectively to emphasize her isolation.

At one point, in this performance of “a blindness that mimes sight,” Judy thrusts her arm into a sock, and pokes her finger out of a hole in the toe. This action, on the one hand, is part of the larger deception of her husband. On the other, it is a kind of sensory reminder to the audience – what the sighted spectator and Steele experience, the visual evidence of a sock with a hole in it, is entirely different from what the blind character experiences in the fiction, the feel of a wool sock and one’s own finger poking through that textured object. While the film heightens the spectator’s emotional experience, and communicates with the spectator-audience through the manipulation of the senses, here the tactile experience of the sock, the other clothing Judy touches, Ann’s hair, etc the film maintains at the same time, a sensory estrangement from the spectator; it will not facilitate identification through the reproduction of an identical sensory experience of Judy’s blindness.

Remarkably, this same experience, the cinematic experience of watching a visual representation of the tactile experience of poking a finger through a hole in a wool stocking is one that Vivian Sobchack (and the reviewer with whom she sympathizes) refer to as an “immediate tactile shock.”<sup>19</sup> It is in Sobchack’s account, the essay “What My Fingers Knew,” of her experience of the film *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) that she describes herself as a phenomenological “cinesthetic subject.” This dissertation is a study of the historical construction of the cinesthetic subject, in response to the development of melodrama and suspense genres, their affects, and film conventions. The hole in the wool stocking is, arguably, one such convention. That *The Piano* emphasizes the experiences of touch (and sound as music) is, like

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<sup>19</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 66.

the compensations described above, a technique that draws attention to the muteness of that film's heroine, while, at the same time, exploiting the technological means – sonic and visual – that film has at its disposal. Sobchack is describing a sensual surprise, in which the spectator is startled when the film suddenly engages not just the visual, but also the tactile perceptions of the body in the theater.

### **Heroic and Tragic Proportions**

The visual aesthetics of classical melodrama create an intense emotional world “pervaded by ‘meaning’ and interpretable signs.”<sup>20</sup> But the signs which close *Dark Victory* are not entirely interpretable, even as their affects gain intensity. The haptic signs that, in the suspense created by Judy's deception of Steele, continued an intelligible narrative of suspense are, in the final sequences of the film, transformed into a far more disorienting experience. The haptic signs offer narrative information, and involve the spectator-audience in the film's suspense, but they, they also serve to continually disrupt the habituated visual experience of film.

If classical Hollywood cinema has developed conventions to compensate for the sensory poverty of its visual representations, *Dark Victory*<sup>21</sup> also modifies the visual conventions of the melodrama genre to call attention to the multi-sensory appeal film makes through the use of the blind heroine. As Steele leaves Judy, they say goodbye as they stand on the staircase with faces turned towards a window. In this single composition, *Dark Victory* simultaneously employs two of Thomas Elsaesser's key visual-emotional conventions of melodrama – the woman at the window, and the woman poised on the staircase – spaces of transition and desire. But in this film,

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Elsaesser. “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” in *Film Theory and Criticism* ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 530.

<sup>21</sup> *Symphonic Pastorale* and *Magnificent Obsession* also employ the “woman at the window” convention, as does the 2007 CNN special “Autism is a World” which tells the story of an autistic girl as that of a struggle to communicate, a melodramatic text of muteness.

Judy's blank gaze towards the window serves both to deceive her husband and remind the audience, again as with the stocking, that she is no longer participating in the film's visual economy in the same way they may be. The realization that the convention of the woman, looking longingly out the window no longer means only or exactly what it has, is nothing if not startling. It is legible, but just barely. This transformation of the melodramatic conventions disrupts traditional identification, but maintains, and even heightens the affective, intimate and sensual relationship of the spectator-audience with the heroine.

The haptic narrative intensifies after Steele leaves. The women return to the garden. Suddenly, the visual *mise en scène* begins to include wind, a haptic experience of the fictional characters, registered visually in the movement of background foliage, and in the women's hair, gently blowing across their faces. At this moment, the film's sound aesthetic also changes noticeably; to reinforce the feeling of the dry rough bulbs, again, in Judy's hands, a faint crackling sound is recorded. Thus far in the film, sound has been spare and dramatic, and featured dialog and music rather than background sound or the detailed sounds of physical movements of bodies, objects and textures. Now, the exterior *mise en scène* positively vibrates – a vibration that is haptic and visually implies a sonic experience – as vines and bushes rustle in the breeze. This movement and sound if it were interpretable as “wind,” seems to indicate the storm that Judy predicted in the earlier garden sequence. But that storm, with its darkening sky was, supposedly, a misapprehension. Has it suddenly reappeared in the film's narrative?<sup>22</sup>

Inside the house, the haptic trembling continues, now obviously unmotivated by wind or storm. A vase of flowers moves slightly. On the stairs, Judy stops to pet her two cocker spaniels, who repeat the trembling haptic aesthetic, in the movement of their fluffy coats and twitching

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<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the sonic *mise en scène* sharpens to include unmotivated, ambient (though entirely fictional) sound, a sound aesthetic very different from the highly restricted, dramatic, use of sound throughout the film.

bodies. Finally, Judy climbs the stairs to her bedroom, passing another vibrating floral arrangement, to throw herself on to her bed. The vibrating, trembling, fluttering *mise en scène* is gradually emptied of any easily intelligible meaning. These images are not there to be interpreted as part of a narrative. They gesture towards Judy's experience of dimming vision, an experience that profoundly threatens the classical cinema's technological abilities.

To narrate Judy's death, and the progressive loss of her vision, the film searches for other sensory registers it can invoke, the tactile, through the visual, and the sonic. I have argued that Ann and Judy's perceptions narrate the film and I have suggested that their sensual intimacy, as a heroine pair, acts a model for the film's relationship to its spectator. When the film offers haptic (or kinesthetic) images to the spectator-audience, the film is not just compensating for its sonic and visual limitations. The film expects that the spectator-audience will use their sight, and hearing, to interpret these images. The classical Hollywood film presumes that its audience is multi-sensory and attempts to relate to that body through the senses, despite films' sonic and visual limitations. Silvan Tomkins described a relationship of complementary differences thus,

If you like to be looked at and I like to look at you, we may achieve an enjoyable interpersonal relationship. If you like to talk and I like to listen to you talk, this can be mutually rewarding. If you like to feel enclosed within a claustrum and I like to put my arms around you, we can both enjoy a particular kind of embrace. If you like to be kissed and I like to kiss you, we may enjoy each other. If you like to be sucked or bitten and I like to suck or bite you, we may enjoy each other. . . . If you like to have your skin rubbed and I like to do this to you, we can enjoy each other. . . . If you enjoy being dominated and I enjoy controlling you, we may enjoy each other.<sup>23</sup>

Not only is this description quite multi-sensory, but it describes the complementary relationship enjoyed by Ann and Judy, and by the spectator and film. However, the closing line (I have chosen, Tomkins goes on) suggests that in the enjoyment of interest/excitement or narrative suspense, the spectator-audience must, to some extent, give over control of the senses. The

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<sup>23</sup> Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness Vol.1*, 411-12.



narrative and formal significance of the heroine-pair is drawn into relief, again. Film has a desire to be multi-sensory, and uses the figure of the blind woman to explore beyond the bounds of the visual, but film understands itself to be in need of compensation, from the spectator-audience, for its limited sensory address.

### **Other Strategies**

Jean Delannoy's adaptation of Andre Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale* (1946), and Douglas Sirk's 1954 film *Magnificent Obsession* are both located, in different ways and from different perspectives, somewhat on the margins of the Hollywood industry and the classical aesthetic that defined *Dark Victory*. Delannoy's work was considered "classical," but within the history of the French national cinema, while Sirk's work has been considered to mark the fantastic tail-end of classical aesthetics in the US. Both of these films share with *Dark Victory* the problem of the blind heroine, and explore, however tentatively, the ability of this figure to reorganize the film that represents her. But both of these films, when compared to *Dark Victory*, appear reluctant to presume that they can draw the spectator-audience into such an intimate sensory relationship, and such a sustained a narrative and affective relationship with the film. Finally, they seem less confident in their ability to compensate for film's sonic and visual limitations and, perhaps, less interested in doing so.<sup>24</sup>

### **Symphonie Pastorale**

In 1946, the film *Symphonie Pastorale*, an adaptation of a short novel by Andre Gide won best picture at the first Cannes Film Festival. The director, Jean Delannoy is famous for being the object of François Truffaut's scorn in the following decades; Truffaut regularly held

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<sup>24</sup> In this more "exploratory" mode, they are akin to the silent era and live television era experiments with film form.

Delannoy as the example of the traditional, national, conventional “*cinema de papa*.” But film critic Andre Bazin’s earliest essays and reviews, collected and introduced by Truffaut in *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance* give a more nuanced account of the role of Delannoy’s realist aesthetic in French cinema before the *nouvelle vague*. And in Bazin’s later essay, “In Defense of Mixed Cinema,” on the relationship between French literary and cinematic traditions, he writes of *Symphonie Pastorale*,

The ever present snow carries with it a subtle and polyvalent symbolism that quietly modifies the action, and provides it as it were with a permanent moral coefficient the value of which is not so different after all from that which the writer was searching for by the appropriate use of tenses.<sup>25</sup>

Bazin’s emphasis on the snowy landscape<sup>26</sup> may seem obvious given this summary of the film’s narrative: in a perpetual winter in the French Alps, a young blind girl is adopted and educated by the local pastor, she becomes entirely dependent on him, but grows to resent this dependence; she falls in love with the pastor’s son, regains her sight and, overcome by her conflicting emotions for father and son, she drowns herself in an icy creek. The snow, in the film’s final sequence not only “modifies” the action, it ends it entirely. The film alternates between claustrophobic interior scenes of passion, both angry and romantic, between Gertrude and the pastor, the pastor and his wife, the pastor’s wife and Gertrude, Gertrude and the pastor’s son and scenes of these same figures marching slowly through the snowy landscape, alone or in pairs. The snowy landscape is the space, and finally, the means of Gertrude’s escape from the pastor’s suffocating love. But Bazin is also suggesting that the presence of the snow is somehow necessary for the adaptation of Gide’s literary techniques to the screen.

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<sup>25</sup> Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Snow also dominates the landscape into which the blind heroine’s brother escapes, in Nicholas Ray’s *On Dangerous Ground* (1952).

## The Narrator and the Senses, Again

After seeing the film *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), Andre Gide wrote in his journal,

If I were to make over the film, I should depict Nosferatu – whom we know to be the vampire from the start – not as terrible and fantastic, but on the contrary in the guise of an inoffensive young man, charming and most obliging. I should like it to be only on the basis of very mild indications, in the beginning, that any anxiety should be aroused, and in the spectator's mind before being aroused in the hero's. Likewise, wouldn't it be much more frightening if he were first presented to the woman in such a charming aspect?<sup>27</sup>

Gide's critique of the film is, like the narrative definitions of suspense offered by Branigan, a consideration of the spectator's affective film experience as constructed by the narrative. Gide is not a filmmaker, so the techniques for these effects in the "making over" of *Nosferatu* escape him; he is, however, familiar with narrative forms and their affective possibilities. Most studies of Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale* note the complexity with which the novel undermines the absolute control of its ostensible narrator, the pastor and diary-keeper, despite the confessional first person form.

His interest in the narrative construction of suspense in the film *Nosferatu* was not just a passing criticism, but rather, an articulation of his own literary aesthetic. Gide communicates dark undercurrents through his "inoffensive . . . charming and most obliging" narrator, the pastor. Gaps in the pastor's account, the ironic use of language – the pastor is fond of the passive voice, and writes long defenses against an imaged reader – and the pointed and suggestive use of references all throw doubt on the purity of the pastor's intentions before he begins to suspect

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<sup>27</sup> Andre Gide, "Nosferatu" in *Authors on Film*, ed. Harry M. Geduld. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972), 51.

them himself.<sup>28</sup> The entries reveal not just the pastor's repressed desires, but the growing frustrations of the family and the tragic depths of the heroine's desperation.

In Delannoy's cinematic adaptation of the novel the effects by which the pastor's moral authority is undermined, by the fictional characters and the spectator, are remarkably different. The film *Symphonie Pastorale* relies on appeal to sensory experience, to reveal the tensions of dependency and vulnerability so present in the novel's language and narrative construction. Moreover, the spectator, through the film's use of sensory effects, is placed in a relationship to the pastor analogous the subjection of the young blind girl Gertrude; their bodies are subject to the same sensory manipulations. And yet, as in DV, complete identification with her sensory experience is ultimately withheld, mediated, and indirect. We are not given a subjective image of her sensory experience and the pastor remains in control of the narrative.

The pastor attempts to assert a kind of sensual control over Gertrude and the spectator. In Delannoy's cinematic interpretation of the novel, the still nameless child is out-of-doors when the pastor visits her dying aunt. Her absence necessitates the pastor's first appeal to the girl, and to the spectator, an orchestrated sonic, haptic, visual-olfactory and visual-gustatory address. He calls repeatedly and rhythmically, "Petite, petite, petite" as the camera pans the still, expansive, snowy landscape. The pastor finds some soup on the hearth, pours it into a bowl and stands at the doorway to the cottage knocking a spoon against the bowl, which makes a dramatically loud "clank, clank, clank." Steam rises from the bowl, and the pastor begins to scoop up the soup in a spoon and pour it, steaming and splashing back into the bowl, as if to attract the child by the smell of the soup. Finally, in an eye-line match cut, a small figure appears in the landscape,

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<sup>28</sup>Gide mobilizes a series of allusions, to Dickens' and his duped blind girl in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, to Samuel Gridley Howe and the relationship of dependence his education of Laura Bridgman engendered - a series of relationships characterized by vulnerability and deception, sexuality and religious piety, and patriarchal authority. See Gitter and Klages.

lurching through the snow towards the camera. The child approaches the doorway, and eats the soup from the bowl, crouched on hands and knees. The pastor literally calls the girl into phenomenological being; at the same time, he systematically has invoked the full range of the heroine *and* spectator's sensory experience. When the pastor decides to take the child home with him, he throws a coarse woolen blanket or sack over her head and body.

This effect of sensory control and manipulation continues as Gertrude's education begins. A voiceover imparts the information, "I taught her everything, even how to walk;" Gertrude identifies the dried flowers in the pages of the family bible, a butterfly collection, the clock, the glass of the window, where she stands, facing the snowy landscape, and each of these physical sensations of the film is imbued with emotional meaning. But Gertrude feels a strong attraction to the pastor's son, and he to her, in an emotionally and sensorially charged scene in the local church, where young Jacques is playing the church organ as Gertrude sits at his side. The music of the organ provides a lush sonic texture to the increasingly hurried movement of the bodies and the rhythm of the film's editing. Jacques also asks Gertrude to dance at a party, a thing that the pastor "never thought of teaching her." If the pastor's authority is initially established by his control over the sensory appeals of the film, it is challenged through the same effects.

However, Gertrude does not escape into the arms of Jacques rather, she returns to the snowy world from whence she emerged. The pastor wields complete control over her sensory experiences within the domestic setting of the home, but her experiences out of doors are dangerous and uniquely her own. So when the pastor looks out of his cottage door one last time, and sees a long row of tracks in the snow, leading away into the empty landscape this image marks Gertrude's final escape from the pastor's emotional and physical control over her. The pastor still pursues her, and as he bends over her frozen body, the film cuts to the only strictly point of view shot of the film, the image of the pastor, bending over, hand outstretched, and then

darkness as he closes Gertrude's eyes (she has since been cured and can see) and exerts his final control over the sensory experience of the heroine and spectator, now enforcing the mimetic sensory and emotional relationship between the two.

As an adaptation from a literary narrative to a cinematic narrative, and the experimentation with cinema that this requires, *Symphonie Pastorale* reflects some of the same cinematic problems that the adaptation of Keller's literary work in the film *Deliverance* addresses, not just the problem of the representation of the blind heroine in a sonic and visual medium, but the translation of literary language, and effects, into the cinema.<sup>29</sup> The title of the novel is ironic, this pastoral romance is, as I have suggested, dark and disturbing, to the novel's readers as well as its narrator and the characters within in. But the invocation of the musical form of the symphony is equally complex, particularly in reference to the film, rather than the novel, where it takes on a different valence; the film's narrator desires to orchestrate, and control, the sensual experience of his beloved, and the senses of the spectator-audience, but his ability to orchestrate the senses is undermined by the wayward heroine.

### **Magnificent Obsession: Non-Narrative Melodrama**

The essay that has characterized melodrama and its generic conventions for the purposes of this chapter, Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" takes as its primary textual examples the cinematic work of Douglas Sirk, directed in Hollywood during the late studio era. Elsaesser is not the first to critically examine this body of work, Sirk was granted auteur status by the attention paid him by French filmmakers and critics in the *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1960s and 1970s. But despite the reputation he has gained for directing disquieting stories of love, estrangement and repression, very little attention has

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<sup>29</sup> See chapter two.

been paid to the film *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) the story of a middle-aged woman named Helen who loses her sight and is healed by her young lover. Sirk's film explores the management of spectator-audience perception, and affect, though the figure of the blind heroine, but doesn't organize narrative form around the perceptual experiences of its characters or spectator-audience, as both *Dark Victory* and *Symphonie Pastorale* attempt to do. Instead, the film engages in a decidedly non-narrative attempt to communicate the emotional and physical experiences of its blind heroine through moments of multi-sensory pathos.

Sirk describes his reaction to the popular novel on which the film was based, as "bewilderment and discouragement . . . this was a damn crazy story if ever there was one."<sup>30</sup> Summarizing the film is difficult, but the two main characters are Bob Merrick (Rock Hudson), an irresponsible playboy who accidentally causes both the death of Helen's husband and her loss of sight, and Helen Phillips (Jane Wyman), who eventually (and perhaps accidentally) falls in love with Bob Merrick. Bob Merrick deceives her as to his identity, reforms his life, secretly becomes her benefactor and sends her to eye specialists in Switzerland. He also becomes a doctor and cures her. In the course of the film, Helen and Merrick learn of the mysterious philanthropic mission of her late husband, Merrick adopts this "magnificent obsession" as his own, and Helen disappears for many years with her companion Nancy. The film is structured as a series of many short, and somewhat temporally and logically disorienting scenes, often connected only by accident or coincidence.

Sirk argues that the fragmentation of the narrative allows for other investments in the film, at least on the part of the director, who he compares to a mason "And being a mason, a good mason, he has a chance to fall in love with each piece of brick, of well-mixed mortar, of the

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas Sirk, *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday* (London: British Film Institute, 1971), 95.

detail.”<sup>31</sup> Sirk’s descriptions suggests that during the filming of *Magnificent Obsession* he was “allowed for a moment to forget the totality” of the film, and that, under the circumstances, he fell in love with creating the look and mood of certain scenes. Elsaesser describes, in Sirk’s *Written on the Wind*, a scene with “no plot significance whatsoever” that plays, instead, on the “emotional resonance” of “a disquieting visual association”<sup>32</sup> among the colors and textures of the heroine’s dress, the leaves of a funeral wreath, a ribbon and the face of a black servant. *Magnificent Obsession* is made up a series of such “disquieting” moments, one of which happens without the rather visually “loud” trademark Sirk aesthetic.

### **Pathos and Visual Silence**

In his discussion of *Magnificent Obsession*, Sirk explains,

I have always been intrigued by the problems of blindness. . . . And one of my dearest projects was to make a picture set in a blind people’s home. There would just have been people ceaselessly tapping, trying to grasp things they could not see. What I think would be extremely interesting her would be to try and confront problems of this kind via a medium – the cinema – which itself is only concerned with things seen. It is this contrast between a world where words have only a limited importance and another world where they are nearly everything that inspires my passionate interest.<sup>33</sup>

As strikingly visual as Sirk’s own aesthetic is, even in his own estimation, he imagines here going beyond this sensory limitation of his art. Even his naïve and voyeuristic fantasy of making a film in a “blind people’s home” indicates his interest in sensory experience beyond the visual for this particular project, namely a sonic, physical and spatial aesthetic.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>32</sup> Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 521.

<sup>33</sup> Sirk, *Sirk on Sirk*, 95. More honestly and succinctly than any of the filmmakers who attempted to represent the life of Helen Keller (in the silent film, or the documentary or the highly dramatized *Miracle Worker*) Sirk articulates the profound limitations of using film to narrate the experience of the well-read and widely published Keller, who repeatedly insisted on the value of literature to her experience of the world.



In an emotionally rich scene from *Magnificent Obsession*, the film enters into a not-visual experiment, a confrontation with “a medium which itself is only concerned with things seen.” In dramatic contrast to Sirk’s garish color schemes, Helen, alone in her hotel room after she has learned that the Swiss cure she anticipated is hopeless, moves about in near darkness. The absence of light makes the scene appear as if it were filmed almost in black and white, and the darkness is so murky and cloudy that the film is actually difficult to see at all. The scene is introduced by a particularly emphatic and lengthy speech by Helen; she explains to her step-daughter, Joyce, slowly and deliberately, as if she were reciting poetry, “The night time is the worst time. It does get darker you know. And then, when I finally do get to sleep, I know that when I wake up in the morning, there won’t be any dawn.” Clichéd and maudlin as the language is (and even Helen apologizes to Joyce) the dialog calls attention to the shifting meanings of the words “darker” and “dawn” in Helen’s non-visual sensory experience. These words, instead of being visual, have become emotional signs. As Helen says these words, her own face is mostly in dark as is Joyce’s face, deeper in the shadows behind her. Sorrow cannot be read on either face, but must be experienced through the language and rising music. Joyce, in a doubly ineffectual response, turns on a small lamp and goes to find warm milk. The dialog has justified the visual darkness, and explained the emotional significance of it as well as introduced the complex irony of the formal experiment the scene is undertaking, to use a visual medium to explore the non-visual experience of its heroine.

The scene is still dark enough that Helen’s figure is difficult to determine, as it moves through shadows and light but she appears to bump into a low table, and then to grasp at a large bedpost. She slowly and deliberately leans her forehead against the post, in a gesture of anguish. The filmic representation of her movements presses the bounds of the visual, obscuring the visual image in darkness while emphasizing the physical, bodily and spatial experience of the fictional

character. Helen's movements through the room, like Judy's final ascent up the stairs and Gertrude's journey alone in the snow, is a rare moment when the blind heroine walks alone and unobserved - the physical dependency of Helen, of Judy and of Gertrude lend a physical and emotional emphasis to the scenes of their independent movement. Like Judith and Gertrude, Helen moves towards the window, touching the lace curtain as she passes out of a glass door onto a balcony, with the door frame now behind her and the balcony railing in front. The melodramatic convention of the woman at the window undergoes yet another transformation. On the balcony, moving slowly and delicately, she accidentally knocks over a potted plant which crashes to the ground at the music crescendos in loud, sorrowful piano chords.



**Figure 4: Douglas Sirk's Helen, in the dark, in *Magnificent Obsession***

Elsaesser offers a theory of pathos, in Sirk's films in particular, and it is a definition more aesthetic and affective than narrative; the production of pathos is the result of "non-communication or silence." The pathos produced by Helen's isolation in the dark is not produced

by sonic silence, the dialog and the music, in fact, strongly communicate the pathos. Rather, the effect of “non-communication or silence” is produced by the emphatic attempts of the sequence to become non-visual, in the murky, black and white image that obscures all but the most geometric and abstracted spatial configurations, it is a quiet Sirk aesthetic. On the one hand, this is facilitated by the blind heroine, whose sensory experience the film is at pains to mimic. On the other hand, the blind heroine is a medium for this particular exploration of pathos and cinematic form.

In its direct exploration of the cinema’s technological limitations, Sirk’s *Magnificent Obsession* anticipates the experiments with cinema technology used by Arthur Penn in the production of *The Miracle Worker*. The withholding and distorting of vision calls attention to film’s limitations rather than compensating for them as *Dark Victory* had. And while Sirk used film and its sensory experience to produce moments of heightened emotional intensity, these moments he does not structure, as *Dark Victory* and its heroines do into a compelling narrative that binds the spectator-audience into an affective narrative of suspense.

## Chapter 2: Adapting *The World I Live In*

In 1918, when the popular historian Francis Trevelyan Miller proposed to make a he claimed that he “had before him . . . a beautiful book by Miss Helen Keller: *The World I Live In*.”<sup>1</sup> During the making of the film *Deliverance*, based on the life and work of Keller, Miller, who became the film’s scenarist, came into conflict with his cinematic heroine regarding their political activities and beliefs,<sup>2</sup> but it is significant that the film began as an attempt to adapt Keller’s essays from *The World I Live In* to the cinema.

Relative to the episodes that make up Keller’s earlier *Story of My Life* (and the letters of Keller and Anne Sullivan that were originally published with Keller’s autobiographical text) the essays are less narrative, and have fewer distinct characters. They are primarily descriptive, as Keller reflects her perceptions of touch and smell and the ways in which these perceptions are a part of, but do not limit or determine, the breadth and depth of her experience of the world. These essays, which were originally published in the *Century Magazine*, frustrated Keller. In her preface to the collection, published in 1908, Keller explains

Mr. Gilder [the editor of the *Century Magazine*] suggested the articles, and I thank him for his kind interest and encouragement. But he must also accept the responsibility which goes with my gratitude. For it is owing to his wish and that of other editors that I talk so much about myself. Every book is in a sense autobiographical. But while other self-recording creatures are permitted at least to seem to change the subject, apparently nobody cares what I think of the tariff, the conservation of our natural resources, or the other conflicts which revolve around the name of Dreyfus. If I offer to reform the educational system of the world, my editorial friends say, ‘That’s interesting. But will you please tell us what idea you had of goodness and beauty when you were six years old?’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Trevelyan Miller to Richard W. Daly, 5 January 1918, Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind, New York, NY.

<sup>2</sup> The political meanings of the film’s rhetoric, and the political contexts in which the was created and distributed will be discussed in chapter three, on Keller’s cinematic performances of blindness.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Keller, *The World I Live In* (1908; reprint, New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003), 7.

The essays in *The World I Live In* are Keller's reflections on sensory experiences and their subjects are, indeed, Keller's pleasure in art and nature and Keller's experiences of intimate friendships and private thoughts. The apolitical nature of the work – it was, at the time, considered her most philosophical work and it has since been described as phenomenological - allowed Miller to imagine it in his own terms, and the essays were a product of the systematic censorship of Keller's public persona.

However, the silent film does attempt a faithful adaptation of the conceptual arguments from essays in *The World I Live In*, in an effort to communicate the sensory experience of their deaf and blind protagonist. Keller is the first person author of her essays, which engage with and interrogate popular philosophic and (then emerging) psychological models for human consciousness. How, then, is this first person author included in the silent, visual film? To what extent can she author the film and how is her authorship negotiated (not only with the filmmakers, as I will discuss in chapter 3) but with the medium itself? And can a film adapt philosophical or phenomenological arguments regarding the senses and consciousness?

Miller's correspondence suggests that *The World I Live In* is the text from which the film is adapted, but the first third of the film, entitled "Childhood" (chapters entitled "Maidenhood" and "Womanhood" follow) also relies heavily on the biographical episodes described in *The Story of My Life*. These biographical episodes closely follow the written texts of both *Story* and *World*, in content, but also significantly, in a formal attention to sensory experiences. Through this, Keller becomes an author of the film and the film, in turn, is radically marked by its attention to the varieties of sensory experience.

The literary and cinematic texts surrounding the production of *Deliverance* allow for an exploration of the early cinema as multi-sensory, and multi-sensory in ways that are historically specific to the late silent-film era, when filmmakers began to experiment with the synchronization

of sound and image. The film *Deliverance* and the histories that address it express a profound anxiety about the emergence of visual and audio technologies and the sensory perceptions of the spectator-audience they addressed; *Deliverance* (and other films that share some of its gestural, sonic and visual conventions) reveal a changing cinematic sensorium in the late silent era, in which touch, the hand and the gesture are beginning to be understood as archaic, expressive but, inappropriate to the cinematic experience, while sound and visual image, and the coordination of these, become the dominant sensory experience of the cinema. Keller's literary work, which explores her deaf-blind sensorium, offers a theory of the sensory subject that both frustrates and participates in the particular multi-sensory visual culture of the silent cinema. This chapter considers Keller's essays and the sensually descriptive language they use to address and critique popular constructions of the subject, Keller's autobiography, and its narrative voices and sensory appeals, the silent film *Deliverance* and its fantasies and fictions, and the sensory obsessions of other films of the period,<sup>4</sup> and film studies' histories of silent cinema.

### **Ekphrasis, Medium and Sensory Experience**

W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* opens with the essay, "The Pictorial Turn" and defines the pictorial turn thus,

a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. Most important, it is the realization that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us,

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<sup>4</sup> Jack London's *Sea Wolf*, and its terrifying anti-hero, who loses sight and hearing in the final chapter, were the subject of four cinematic adaptations between 1907-1926.

it presses inescapably now [...] the need for a global critique of visual culture seems inescapable.<sup>5</sup>

In more recent essays, Mitchell reconsiders a strict periodization marked by “the pictorial turn” and here, his expansive and complicated definition of a “picture” suggests various media which may have enjoyed hegemonic status in various periods and geographies outside of the “inescapably now.”<sup>6</sup> But the language in this passage also creates an analogy between the spectatorship of visual images and the reading of printed texts, an analogy that is immediately breached by the term “visual literacy” which implies not that the two experiences are similar but separate (i.e. analogous) but that they are always implicated within one another. Indeed, Mitchell announces, “One polemical claim of *Picture Theory* is that the interaction of pictures and texts constitutes representation as such: all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism.”<sup>7</sup> If truly “all media” are mixed media and “all representations are heterogeneous” combinations of image, text (and, he does not mention them explicitly sound, touch or movement) the study of visual culture is not limited to a study of modernity, and the study of modernity, or postmodernity, should not privilege a study of visual culture over a study of heterogeneous aesthetics.

But he closes his argument with the introduction of the term, “visual culture,” which he has positioned as a new object of study. I have discussed the term, “visual culture” as it is used in

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<sup>5</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16. All subsequent quotations from this work will be taken from this publication.

<sup>6</sup> Mirzoeff, however, in his definition of visual culture “What is Visual Culture?” resolutely argues that visual culture is “a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and function of postmodern everyday life. The disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel.” From “What is Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 5. However, to some extent, the materials in this chapter belie a history of media, modernity and postmodernity that excludes non-visual experience.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 5.

the mid-century film theory of Béla Balázs.<sup>8</sup> Mitchell's deployment of the term bears some continuity with the earlier concept, particularly as he invokes visual culture, not as a set of texts or stable objects of study but as a range of participatory practices. The visual cultures Mitchell then explores, in the essays that make up *Picture Theory* also belie a strict assignment of "now" as the only period of visual culture and trouble the relationship of text and image as separate media.

His essay "Ekphrasis and the Other," for example, traces the recurrence of ekphrasis in various technological moments, with their attendant media. Ekphrasis, in theory, is both expansive and specific, "the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art) and of a more general topic (the verbal representation of visual representation." Thus, ekphrasis also marks an intersection of different media and their formal properties, and the sensory perceptions implied in their reception,

The narrowest meanings of the word ekphrasis as a poetic mode, 'giving voice to a mute art object' or offering 'a rhetorical description of a work of art,' give way to a more general application that includes any 'set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye.'<sup>9</sup>

In this definition, the literary-poetic is assumed to be aural, "giving voice," rather than a written or printed text experienced visually, and the mute art object invoked seems three-dimensional and material, a statue rather than an image, for example. The "person, place, picture, etc" do not, really, specify the sense perceptions that may know them or the media that may represent them. Is "the mind's eye," then, assumed to be visually mimetic of the human eye, or is it only a literary metaphor for a more multi-sensory imaginative organ? The very language that Mitchell uses to

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<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of Balas in the Introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 153.



define the ekphrastic complicates any easy assumptions of adaptation from one autonomous medium and sensory appeal to another, from the visual object to the literary description.

Mitchell turns his attention to the by whom, the author, or, rather, the translator, or, perhaps, in some sense of the word, the medium:

The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who will be made to 'see' the object through the medium of the poet's voice. Ekphrasis is stationed between two 'othernesses,' and two forms of apparently impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual representation into verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader. The 'working through' of ekphrasis and the other, then, is more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be grasped fully as phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a *ménage à trois* in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed. If ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual object, it is also typically an offering of this expression as a gift for the reader.<sup>10</sup>

Mitchell actually offers a somewhat straightforward diagram – the object (A) is described by the poet (B) who produces the poem (C) which is heard by the audience (D) who imagines an image-not-necessarily-visual (E) of the object (A). So what, then, produces the “poetic anxiety” that Mitchell associates with this process of translation? Mitchell's anxiety is actually focused, not on the visual work of art or its literary translation, but on the medium and the ambiguously described “mind's eye” of the audience, or reader. In the process of describing the visual object, and imagining it, the poet and the audience-reader become estranged from their own sensory perceptions and enter into a shared aesthetic experience.

Although it might seem that accounts of adaptation in film or literary studies would provide a framework for understanding the undeniable adaptation of Keller's essays and autobiography into film (in a period and industry where literary adaptation was/is the rule rather than the exception) Mitchell's work may be more helpful here. Much of the work on adaptation

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 162.

attends primarily to cinema after 1960, and concerns itself with the adaptations of novels to feature length commercially distributed fiction films. The historically frequent “adaptation” to the cinema of biography, historical events, autobiography and even theater are less frequently discussed. This approach tends to over-simplify the process, as literary narrative simply becomes, one way or another, a visual narrative. Much more, I will argue, is at play, in the media, sensory appeals and communicative structures of the Keller “adaptation” project, and the anxieties regarding the senses and human consciousness that surround the film. Mitchell’s insistence on the long history of heterogeneous representation reorients study of the silent-film era towards the “not-visual” and literary elements of the film and highlights the film’s attempts to address the human sensorium of sight, touch, sound and embodiment through its emerging visual and sonic technologies. At the same time, Mitchell’s discussion of ekphrasis suggests that the “poetic anxiety” it engenders is constant, or perhaps recurring,. The history of *Deliverance* articulates a specific moment of this anxiety – an anxiety about the subjects relationship to its senses and the senses it shares, through cinematic, or literary experience, with others – in the period of silent film production, and at the height of Keller’s literary production.

In the first essay of the *World* collection, “The Seeing Hand” Keller explicitly positions herself as a guide,<sup>11</sup> leading her readers through the world she knows, via a written description.

She writes,

I am glad to take you by the hand and lead you along an untrodden way into a world where the hand is supreme. But at the very outset we encounter a difficulty. You are so accustomed to light, I fear you will stumble when I try to guide you through the land of silence and darkness. The blind are not supposed to be the best of guides . . . My hand is

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchell’s language depends, often, on a kind of assumed physical stasis and he rarely mentions film explicitly; more often film appears in a list of other, less mobile image technologies. Although both Mitchell and for example, Lev Manovich, are pursuing visual studies, or studies of visual cultures, the emphasis on movement in Manovich emerges from his central concern with cinema and its techno-material presence in new media technologies. Massumi and Virilio too study the technological, historical and cultural association of visual knowledge with the movement of bodies and machines.

to me what your hearing and sight together are to you. In large measure we travel the same highways, read the same books, speak the same language, yet our experiences are different. All my comings and goings turn on the hand as on a pivot. The hand is my feeler with which I reach through isolation and darkness and seize every pleasure, every activity that my fingers encounter. With the dropping of a little word from another's hand into mine, a slight flutter of the fingers, began the intelligence, the joy, the fullness of life.<sup>12</sup>

Before she even attempts to bring before her reader an object, she must orient her reader to the particular mode of sensory experience in which her encounter with the world, and its objects, takes place. She positions touch as a communicative act for both herself and her reader, who is taken “by the hand.” Keller’s task, though challenging, is comprehensible in Mitchell’s framework; the object is, in a general sense, Keller’s “world where the hand is supreme” experienced primarily through touch (she uses more specific objects and experiences as the essay continues – a horses’ neck, a rose, a ripe peach). She offers her verbal representation of her object in written prose and her audience, she presumes, reads this prose in the printed text of the *Century Magazine* and imagines, not a simple visual object, but a material object, constructed out of both the audience’s own visual experience and the tactile description of the author. If ekphrasis can be understood to be a process of sensory translation that is not confined to visual objects described by poetic voice, but applies to the sharing of other sensory registers, then Keller is engaged in a fairly straightforward, if startling and disorienting, poetic enterprise. Indeed, the central example of ekphrasis, used by Mitchell, of Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*,<sup>13</sup> confounds the claim that the object must be a visual object. Homer’s blindness, and

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<sup>12</sup> Keller, *World*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Achilles shield is a familiar example of what Erich Auerbach calls the Homeric “need for an externalization of phenomena in terms perceptible to the senses.” *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 6. This style Auerbach contrasts with Biblical narrative, in which any and all sensual detail is included to signify in narrative ways, and eventually, to teach a moral lesson. This distinction is also addressed in Lucks’ essay “Narrate or Describe” and is essential to understanding the ways in which the blind heroine is most often phenomenological, and less often metaphoric.

the shield's material beauty both invoke non-visual sensory registers and highlight the role of the poet as a medium for multiple sensory experiences.

In the adaptation of *The World I Live In* to film, Keller's literary description of "world where the hand is supreme" must become the object, the film and its filmmakers (including Keller, Sullivan, the director George Platt and the scenarist Francis Miller, among others) become the poet; the silent and visual product of the film is the gift offered to the audience, who must then imagine experience in which the sensorium is oriented to touch, texture, shape and movement. But the film undertakes this project of translation, only to abandon it; *Deliverance* is, at least in the first third of the film, structured by gesture and movement, after which the film makes an elaborate display of its potential ability to synchronize image and sound.

### **Silent Cinema, Narrative Structure and the Senses**

The film *Deliverance* includes, in a deliberate and emphatic close to an emotional scene early in the film, an image of young Helen<sup>14</sup> (here, played by an actress) with her arms around the neck of her father's horse, stroking the horse's face and neck, as the entire household surrounds her, in a helpless tableau, after they have tried to calm her and communicate with her. But it is not simply that the film adapts Keller's work by offering visual images of the very same tactile objects she has written about; rather, this tableau is part of a sustained formal effort to place tactile perceptions at the center of the film's narrative structure. In the history of melodrama, tableau were used for narrative moments of "climax and crisis"<sup>15</sup> and simultaneously, for scenes

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<sup>14</sup> I will call the author and autobiographer, Helen Keller or Keller, and the cinematic character Helen. The young child described by Helen Keller in her various memoirs I will also call Helen. Keller had difficulty with this her whole life, and in some accounts of her childhood, she names the child that lived without language before the arrival of Anne Sullivan, "Phantom." Anne Sullivan was also known as Anne Sullivan Macy, after her marriage, and Keller called her "Teacher" during their life together. I will refer to her and characterizations of her as Anne Sullivan.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 61.

in which gesture was supposed to directly indicate a sensation that heightened the narrative climax or crisis. Keller's reliance on touch is a problem the rest of the film must solve.

The first image of 7-year-old Helen is a medium close up of the child, surrounded by softly moving foliage<sup>16</sup>. She is standing with her arms outstretched, her body facing the camera, and she moves slowly towards the camera, her hands very much in the foreground. She then suddenly falls out of the frame. A match-on-action shot shows the child falling to the ground and lying next to a fallen log, on which she, it seems, had been trying to balance. She kicks her legs and beats her hands against the ground, then rises, searches briefly and finds a stick, then begins to strike the log, repeatedly and violently. She then moves from the clearing, arms extended, and appears in a new scene, framed by a house, porch and garden. She finds and smashes potted plants sitting on the stoop and then sits, relatively still.

Although constructed somewhat differently in its details, Keller's literary account of her pre-linguistic pleasures and frustrations, the opening pages of *The Story of My Life*, contains a similar emphasis on her tactile and emotional experiences outdoors. Of her family's home, she wrote,

Its old fashioned garden was the paradise of my childhood. Even in the days before my teacher came, I used to feel along the square stiff box hedges, and guided by the sense of smell, would find the first violets and lilies. There, too, after a fit of temper, I went to find comfort and to hide my hot face in that garden of cool leaves and grass.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This same convention for representing the unsocialized child's sensory experience – the movement of foliage – appears in Francois Truffaut's *L'enfant Sauvage* (1970). The movement of foliage also marks the beginning of Judy's haptic narrative in *Dark Victory*. See also Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006) for the history of this image in the context of the history of cinephilia.

<sup>17</sup> Keller, *Story*, 15. The film does not emphasize smell in the way that Keller's *Story of My Life* or the essays in *The World I Live In* do. The Keller's barn is described in terms of its sensory appeal in the essay "Smell, The Fallen Angel" and the farm, with its baby chicks and lofts of hay appears in the film as well, but the film emphasizes the tactile experience of the barn rather than the olfactory.

The film clearly borrows from Keller's own account, to present the outdoors as a familiar space that Helen navigates independently by sense of touch and where she vented frustration.<sup>18</sup> Both the film and the literary passage emphasize Keller's mobility outdoors, and the sense of release her violent gestures there provided for her. This emotional and narrative meaning, in turn, is relayed to the cinema audience via attention to Keller's gestures and movements, her outstretched arms, her searching hands and her constantly moving arms and legs. Keller's movements and explorations also establish the space of the narrative, the porch and the outdoors surrounding her childhood home.

The second character introduced in the cinematic portrayal of Keller's childhood is a young black girl, named, in the film's titles, and in Keller's written memoir, Martha Washington.<sup>19</sup> Martha runs into a shot that follows Helen sitting on the porch steps. Martha encounters a large shrub, then peers around it, her eyes dramatically wide open. The film then cuts to an eyeline-match of Helen that implies that Martha is looking at Helen on the porch steps. In a shot that includes both Martha and Helen, Martha steps behind the bush, then peeks again, her body following the movement of her eyes. Martha's exaggerated performance of vision calls attention to the more tactile and physical ways in which Helen manipulated the cinematic space around her in the preceding sequence. The actress playing young Helen keeps her eyes closed

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<sup>18</sup> In *Deliverance*, the outdoors is also the cause of her frustration. Both *Story of My Life* and, later *The Miracle Worker* suggest that Keller's pre-linguistic violence often began in the house, but *Deliverance* avoids showing this.

<sup>19</sup> The somewhat "fictional" status of Martha, as revealed in Keller's correspondence, suggests that, rather than representing any real child, Martha functions in a number of important ways. Helen's development into full subjecthood, within the film, is measured against Martha's exclusion from this privilege. In this first scene, Martha's ability to see and speak draw attention to Helen's disabilities. At the same time, Martha's body is made available for Helen's violent outbursts in a way that reinforces the instrumental use of Martha's mother's body, as a housekeeper in the Keller's southern household. Martha and Helen form a sympathetic but temporary heroine pair when Helen begins to learn to communicate, while at the same time, Martha is excluded from the schoolroom where Helen, and Nadja, are welcome. The narrative of *Deliverance* eventually leaves its southern setting, at which point, the development of the character of Martha is stopped, while Nadja and Helen grow-up to be the citizens and subjects with whom the film is concerned.

throughout the film; however, it is not Helen's eyes, but her hands and body (and the eyes of Martha) which compel the audience's attention in her first scenes and make visible Helen's blindness. Martha approaches Helen, Helen attacks her, and the two fight and chase one another as the film uses their movements to explore, and establish, the exterior of the family's home. The two girls are separated only after involving the entire household in their conflict. Helen is not calm until the shot that closes this scene, in which she strokes the horse's neck. This scene ends with an iris, closing slowly on the image of Helen, finally still again, and her moving, touching, hands. The scene has a formal trajectory; the editing is structured by Martha's sight, to begin with, but it ends with its visual attention on Keller's hands.

In the cinematic and literary accounts, Helen's education – and the use of her hands for communication – begins with the arrival of Anne Sullivan. Helen's curiosity is expressed physically and Sullivan's belongings, clothing and person are described, by both Sullivan and Keller, as an experience of tactile exploration. The film uses these episodes, again, to draw attention to Helen's restless hands. As Helen's education continues, in the film *Deliverance*, her hands become more and more important; Helen meets a young boy and runs her hands over his face and hair (and thus creates, in the film, a lifelong rivalry with the fictional Nadja, whose story is crosscut with the story of Helen's life). Helen and Martha explore the animals in the Keller's barn, and tell Anne Sullivan a long story about the baby chicks in pantomime. Helen shows physical affection for Anne Sullivan, Martha Washington and Martha's mother.

*Deliverance* has, in the biographical details of Keller's life and in her phenomenological arguments, a unique motivation to emphasize the child-actor's hands as they explore the world, show affection and navigate space, but the silent cinema has, more broadly, been understood as a medium that depended on the gestures and movements of its actors' hands to convey key narrative and emotional information. Still, the editing patterns and the construction of the

narrative space in *Deliverance* are striking, especially when compared to the treatment of other blind figures in early cinema.

Media scholar Anne Friedberg briefly mentions episodes of blindness in D.W. Griffith's Biograph films, in an essay on "vision and sanity;"<sup>20</sup> in "The Blind Daughter in Charles Dickens' *Cricket on the Hearth*" literary historian Elisabeth Gitter considers the figure of the blind heroine in various cinematic contexts and explores theories of voyeurism developed within feminist film studies. However, neither mention Griffith's 1909 version of Dickens' *Cricket on the Hearth*<sup>21</sup> perhaps because there is nothing spectacular about the blind girl, Bertha, at all. Unless the film's audience knows that she is blind (from their literary experience with the text), and identifies her by process of elimination, it is hard to recognize the figure that wanders, briefly and slightly aimlessly, at the edge of the frame, as the film does not establish or develop any techniques for making Bertha's blindness visible.

Although Bertha's blindness is nearly invisible, the plot of the literary and cinematic *Cricket on the Hearth*, like that of many of the films included in Friedberg's study, and the narratives included in Gitter's, is one of recognition and misrecognition by the sighted protagonists. Bertha's blindness is, thus, in many ways, central to Dickens' plot, but only as a point of comparison meant to draw attention to, explain or emphasize the experience of the sighted characters. Dickens' Bertha is metaphorically blind; her blindness is not an experience to be shared or communicated, but a problem to be solved by the film's narrative – in this way,

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Friedberg, "'A Properly Adjusted Window': Vision and Sanity in D. W. Griffith's 1908-1909 Biograph Films," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> This is the film briefly mentioned in Sergei Eisenstein's discussion of realist fiction, Soviet montage and Griffith, "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today," in *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1949). Eisenstein begins the essay with Dickens' opening lines from *The Cricket on the Hearth*, "The kettle begins it." This particular image, however, appears *only* in Dickens' story and does not actually appear in Griffith's film, which is entirely shot in tableau! Griffith's *Cricket on the Hearth* is an early work, before the director began to use cinematography in the ways Eisenstein found so fraught with meaning. A close up of a steaming kettle appears in Griffith's *Way Down East*.



Bertha resembles the “hypothetical” blind men of Georgina Kleege’s history even as she appears within a sentimental narrative in which she evokes the reader’s pity. A survey of films from 1907-1920 which include blind characters in their narratives indicates that blindness was often figured as a punishment for evil characters to suffer (usually male). Or, paradoxically, blindness was a mark of a character’s innocence and purity for female characters, who were rewarded by having their blindness cured – in both cases, blindness signifies metaphorically and is a kind of “narrative prosthesis,” interpreted by the audience as having a meaning determined entirely by the narrative, and on which the narrative depends.<sup>22</sup> Blindness is not yet, in the cinema, a phenomenology.

Griffith gives more sustained attention to the blind heroine of his historical epic of the French Revolution, *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), an adaptation of a popular French melodrama. In this film, the illegitimate child of a noblewoman and the daughter of peasants are raised as sisters and one of the girls, Louise, becomes blind. The action of the film does not really begin until the girls are separated (Louise, the noblewoman’s daughter, is kidnapped by beggars, while Henriette is seduced by lecherous noblemen), but the scenes which introduce the two girls and make visible Louise’s blindness depend on the girls’ physical intimacy.<sup>23</sup> When Louise becomes blind, Henriette explains Louise’s loss of vision to her through touch and expresses her own

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<sup>22</sup> See David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Molly Haskell has compared Griffith’s women generally, and the orphans in particular, to Ingmar Bergman’s erotic women, “The disturbing force and depth of sexual-familial feeling in Griffith’s films, and the erotic appeal of the women, is quite obviously generated by a dual relationship (father-daughter, lover-beloved) with his stars that is as powerful and creatively complex as Bergman’s is today. The expression, of course, is quite different – in some ways richer, in all ways less direct. The quasi-incestuous feelings of Griffith’s surrogate families are mediated by the fictions of Victorian melodrama, where they swirl and clash in a curious (and curiously American) mixture of excess, denial, and displacement. In *Orphans of the Storm*, sisters Lillian and Dorothy Gish kiss each other passionately on the lips, a gesture which transmutes sexuality into a social form that can be accepted as family affection, but that goes quite beyond it. However romantic the context in which he places his women, Griffith certainly takes them, and their emotions, as seriously as the great Swedish director.” *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54-55. Haskell seems to be ignoring the lesbian elements of the Gishes’ kisses, even as she exploring the incestuous implications of them, but, as this dissertation will argue, disturbing sexualities coincide with disturbing sensualities in the history of the heroine pair.

sympathy through touch as well. When the girls set off for Paris, Henriette dresses Louise (again, one girl's sight makes the other's blindness visible) and the two give careful, tactile attention to each other's attire. In addition, *Orphans of the Storm* also explores one of the extra-cinematic conventions for the representation of the blind (in photography, in the popular imagination, in other literary accounts), as helpless beggars performing their blindness for profit.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Louise's begging is highlighted as a performance; she is forced into the role by her captors, who take the money she makes, and she rejects this role wholeheartedly as soon as she is able; when she is reunited with Henriette, her noble birth is discovered and her sight returns. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* has, for the most part, escaped critical attention, but reviewers generally suggest Griffith wanted Louise's blindness to underscore both girls' persistent innocence, through the twists and turns of fate. The blindness of Louise becomes metaphorical (and its meaning extends even to Henriette), and more easily legible, but it begins as both physical and somewhat startling in the film. *Deliverance*, then, is attempting something quite different in its more subjective and phenomenological approach to film form, film narrative and the use of the movements and gestures of its heroine.

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Klages' history of the sentimental appeal of the blind heroine explores this convention, and she sees it continue in Keller's fundraising work for the American Foundation for the Blind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 5: Blindness made visible through gesture, in *Orphans of the Storm***

On the one hand, research suggests that *Deliverance*, with its emphasis on the phenomenological experience of blindness, expressed through the movements and gestures of Helen, is unique, particularly when compared to Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* or other films in which blindness assumes primarily narrative meanings.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, *Deliverance* may more generally represent the ways in which silent film was structured and performed, before sight became the dominant sensory engagement between film and its audience. Histories of early cinema have explored the various ways in which the spectator's senses are engaged by the cinematography and narrative form of early film and these histories, written after the advent of film semiotics, psychoanalysis and apparatus theory are interested in the origins of film as a visual medium.

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<sup>25</sup> Parts of *Deliverance* use blindness in this metaphoric way as well, but this will be discussed in the chapter on its non-fictional qualities, as Keller herself used striking bodily metaphors in her political rhetoric.

For example, Tom Gunning's study of Griffith and narrative form in early cinema offers a close examination of two short Griffith films, *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908) and *The Redman and the Child* (1908), films whose editing patterns rely on subtly different sensory appeals. *Dollie*, Gunning explains, is structured as a chase-influenced trajectory film, and as such, the film's appeal was the spectators' engagement in kind of spatial sensory participation. Gunning describes, in *Dollie*, "a spatial-temporal narrative pattern" that depended upon the editing together of the gypsies' threatening gestures and the movements of the child, more generally "loss and recovery, separation and reunion, abduction and return, easily portrayable in spatial . . . terms."<sup>26</sup> Similar cinematography characterizes the opening sequences of Helen's fall, her violent outburst, her fight with Martha, and its resolution.

*The Redman and the Child* pursues a similar narrative, but in this case, the editing of the sequences which the audience must "stitch together" to create "a larger spatial whole" is not organized by or around gesture or movement, but rather around sight, as the Red Man peers through a telescope to watch the activities of the child and the audience enjoys the exaggerated point-of-view shot inhabited by the character. Gunning explains the subjective element introduced into the film's narrative, "This narrative unit [the shots that make up the peering and the peered at] is not centered around physical movement of a character, but around his perception and emotional reaction."<sup>27</sup> The short sequence that introduces Martha is obviously quite similar. Together, the sequences that introduce Helen and Martha create the same contrast – between physical movement and sight - as that identified by Gunning between the editing styles used in *Dollie* and *The Redman*.

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

*Deliverance* was not made by Griffith, nor was it made as early as 1908, but the tension described between the two films here – between a film edited so that the characters movements are understood to produce or structure the narrative, and a film edited so that the characters’ subjective visual perceptions are understood to produce the narrative – are still at play in the film. However, *Deliverance* achieves something more than just this contrast. Gunning recognizes in *The Redman* an attempt to bind the subjectivity of the spectator to that of the Indian through their overlapping vision in the point of view shot. *Deliverance* uses movement and gesture for narrative purposes other than just action, and attempts to locate the kind of drama produced by subjective “perception and emotional reaction” in touch and movement, and not sight. Of the spectator who is, according to the history that Gunning tells, learning to privilege his vision when watching a film, *Deliverance* asks for a sensory reorientation.

### **The Hand as Many Kinds of Sign**

In a discussion of Keller’s *The World I Live In*, literary scholar Diana Fuss examines Keller’s writing within the framework of what she calls “the semiotics of touch” and “the phenomenology of touch.”<sup>28</sup> Fuss gives a detailed account of one of Sullivan’s early exercises, something Keller, in retrospect, called “object sentences,” and which Keller describes thus, “I found the slips of paper which represented [in raised print], for example, ‘doll,’ ‘is,’ ‘on,’ ‘bed’ and placed each name on its object; then I put my doll on the bed with the words is, on, bed arranged beside the doll.”<sup>29</sup> Of this, Fuss, in turn, writes,

This short passage describes three kinds of ‘sentences’: a sentence comprised of objects alone, a sentence comprised of words attached to objects, and a sentence comprised of a mix of objects and words. In the first case, objects, through their spatial placement, convey a grammar all their own. In the second case, words attached to these objects

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<sup>28</sup> Diana Fuss, *Sense of an Interior* (London: Routledge, 2004), 124.

<sup>29</sup> Keller, *Story*, 34.

point indexically to their material referents, in classic Saussurian fashion. In the third case, objects and words coexist in the same sentence. The grammatical subject of the sentence is a literal object (doll) while the rest of the sentence (is, on, bed) is comprised of raised words on a slip of paper. Keller's tactile linguistics never presupposes the alienation of subject and object . . .<sup>30</sup>

This exercise is striking; Elisabeth Gitter, in her biography of Laura Bridgman, *The Imprisoned Guest*, describes in detail the identical exercise used to teach deaf-blind Laura Bridgman and Harlan Lane's account of the education of the young boy in *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* dwells on the strengths and weaknesses of similar exercises for teaching language. The "object sentence" exercise allows writers (and filmmakers – it appears in Truffaut's *L'enfant sauvage*), including Keller herself, to speculate about the nature of language and its relationship to the world perceived by the senses. The exercise, which was somewhat formal in practice, and at odds with Sullivan's more famous methods, almost fits into the structuralist linguistic framework that Fuss recognizes. The printed word is a signifier; the object or actions, the signified. But the sign they produce is, as Fuss describes, not quite the arbitrary sign of Saussurian linguistics; it is somewhat more complicated.

And the ways in which Keller regularly communicated (the above might be better described as literacy) is even less straightforward than this tidy exercise would suggest. Keller's essays in *The World I Live In* each place emphasis on a different function of the hand; she describes her own hands as she uses their sense perception to know the world, the hands of her friends in which she recognizes them and through which they express themselves, and the social and cultural meanings ascribed to the hand. Later, in an essay in which Keller narrates the changes in her consciousness as she began to use language, she describes her use of her hands for communication in language – the alphabetic hand-spelling she learned from Anne Sullivan and

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<sup>30</sup> Fuss, *Sense of an Interior*, 127. This romantic construction of touch as unalienated echoes Balázs' concept of microphysiomy, and is reflected in Adorno's desire (which he critiques as soon as he articulates it, in *Composing for the Films*) to understand the ear (relative to the eye) as pre-modern, authentic sensory experience.

relied upon her whole life. As Fuss begins to explore the range of uses Keller made of her hands, she writes, “Keller’s hands . . . grasp and caress but they also, crucially, converse. These hands are expressive hands, agents of articulation as well as exploration. They are instruments of conversation and communication, vehicles of transmission between self and other that are neither strictly materialist nor purely idealist.”<sup>31</sup> It is these hands, with their multiple uses, that the film *Deliverance* must invoke, if the film is to be an adaptation of *The World I Live In*. *Deliverance* must address itself to the meanings of Helen’s gestures and movements without confining them to any single code of signification.<sup>32</sup>

In the scenes from *Deliverance* discussed above – Helen’s gentleness towards the horse, her curiosity about Anne Sullivan, her affection for Martha, etc – Helen’s hands are expressive, but as the narrative continues, her hands are further required to do, and to signify. Charles Sanders Peirce, writing in Boston, in 1897 described three kinds of signs in his analysis of signification. The first, an icon, which “is like [the] thing and used as a sign of it,” resembled its object, though the resemblance was not necessarily visual. The second was an index “which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object” and the third, a symbol, “which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas.”<sup>33</sup> Keller’s hands, both in her descriptions of how she used them, and in their representation in the hands of Helen, in *Deliverance*, assume all of these functions, if not more.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>32</sup> The history of ASL is also the history of its recognition as a symbolic language, even as some historians, and signers, acknowledge the language’s partial iconicity, in some signs, and the mixed nature of the communication, in use of finger-spelling.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York; Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 102.

Tom Gunning's attention to the gestures and movements of the characters in *The Adventures of Dollie* reflects a critical consensus that, despite the growing importance of vision in cinematic form and experience, gesture was an important element of the earliest silent cinema's expressivity. Siegfried Kracauer and Béla Balázs, each looking back on the silent era, describe this element of silent cinema practice in particular detail. Although, or perhaps because, both are writing about the silent cinema in somewhat nostalgic retrospect, these writers address the broad range of uses and meanings physical gesture had in the silent cinema. Their descriptions of silent cinema gesture, in theoretical terms, explores the various ways it was used in the case of the character of Helen, in *Deliverance*, and the ekphrastic project of the film itself, to translate a narrative of the disciplining of the senses from literary language to cinematic form.

Miriam Hansen's recent introduction to Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* defends the work as "a theory of cinema as the aesthetic matrix of a particular historical experience,"<sup>34</sup> that particular historical experience being a reorganization of the human sensorium and a decentered mode of reception, in which traditional, or what were once understood as natural, definitions of the human were giving way to modern experiences in which the human and the technological grew intimate. Kracauer's description of this intimacy, between film and physical reality, labeled him a realist – both naïve and curious. But if realism is an effect of verisimilitude produced by the film and experienced by the spectator, Kracauer was not at all interested in it. Rather, Kracauer was interested in a very different effect on the spectator, what he called "camera-reality"; he understood film as a violent experience that removed the spectator from (or removed from the spectator) ordinary experiences of the senses. The spectator's perceptions had been, and ought to be, disturbed or destroyed by the images of film,

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<sup>34</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (1960; reprint, with introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), x.



while at the same time, the film's image would remind the spectator of what he had lost. In many ways, this is the project of the Keller film, to expand and challenge what is presumed to be normal human sensory experience in the late silent-film era, the difficulty of, as Keller put it, in the opening pages of *The World I Live In*, taking "you by the hand and lead you along an untrodden way."

Within Kracauer's sensorium, the gesture can function three ways; the first two uses of the hand are fairly familiar from studies of silent cinema and its historical context; the gesture as (a) a conventional sign indicating emotion, however arbitrarily, within a socially established system or (b) as an index of emotion, a natural sign bearing the affect of its emotional object. For Kracauer, gesture can be a highly coded conventional sign (as it was in earlier stage melodramas), invoking a specific emotion the audience is presumed to be familiar with. Mae Marsh's hands (in an extended example from *The Theory of Film*) solicit the audience's participation in the character's anguish, the conventional narrative meaning produced by "our familiarity with the characters." The images that introduce Helen in *Deliverance*, her face, constantly searching outstretched arms, could be seen as a conventional sign of blindness, identifying Keller as blind, expressing Keller's helpless frustration, and evoking pity or sympathy from the viewer. This basic posture is constantly modified, as Helen moves through and violently interacts with the film's *mise en scène*. As she does this, the original gesture, which perhaps signified, "poor Helen is blind" becomes more intimately expressive of the frustrations, limitations, abilities and pleasures of Helen's pre-linguistic blind experience. In her essay, "The Hands of the Race" Keller describes the significance of culturally familiar associations within her own experience of touch. She writes, "I read that a face is strong, gentle; that it is full of patience, of intellect; that it

is fine, sweet, noble beautiful. Have I not the same right to use these words in describing what I feel [in another's hand] as you have in describing what you see?"<sup>35</sup>

But the culturally available meanings of Helen's outstretched hands, or, according to Keller, anyone's hands at all, are only one possibility for the gesture's function; for Kracauer the gesture is also an index of emotion. To return to Kracauer on Mae Marsh,

It *almost* looks as if her huge hands with the convulsively moving fingers were inserted for the sole purpose of illustrating her anguish at the most crucial moment of the trial; *as if*, generally, speaking, the function of any such detail exhausted itself in intensifying our participation in the total situation. *But is this really its only function?* . . . No doubt it is to impress upon us her inner condition, but besides making us experience what we would in a measure have experienced anyway because of our familiarity with the characters involved, this close-up contributes something momentous and unique – it reveals how *her* hands behave under the impact of utter despair.<sup>36</sup>

As the passage continues, Kracauer suggests that the “convulsively moving fingers” are excessive to the narrative meaning; he claims that “we would in a measure have experienced [this] anyway,” and that the close-up “contributes something momentous and unique – it reveals how her hands behave under the impact of utter despair.” Kracauer's insistence on “her hands” – that is, Mae Marsh's hands (not the hands of the character she is playing) - is key. In addition to all the rest of the possibilities for the actor's gesture, Kracauer also suggests that the hands function as index, as physical result of utter despair. In the final chapter of *Deliverance*, Keller performs as the character Helen Keller, and the movements of her hands are (more or less) how her hands behave, in daily conversation. The hands of the child-actress who plays Helen too, might be understood as revealing how Helen Keller's hands behaved.

In this, as in his attention to the expressive powers of the hand more generally, Kracauer cites a concept “microphysiognomy” introduced in Béla Balázs' study of “The Face of Man” in

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<sup>35</sup> Keller, *World*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 47.

his *Theory of the Film*. If microphysiognomy is, for Balázs, “facial expression, isolated from its surroundings [able] to penetrate to a strange new dimension of the soul [and reveal that] which could not otherwise be seen with the naked eye or in everyday life,”<sup>37</sup> Kracauer, in his more multi-sensory history of the cinema, imbues the close-up of the hand with similar powers. While I have placed Béla Balázs’ concept of visual culture in a history of film studies that understands film as a medium dependent upon conventionalized signs and codes for its narrative and expressive meanings, Balázs’ *Theory of the Film* is not entirely committed to this framework. The expressiveness of the filmed face and body are more often part of an archaic and non-arbitrary language that film technology is re-discovering,

Humanity is already learning the rich and colorful language of gesture, movement and facial expression. This is not a language of signs as a substitute for words . . . it is the visual means of communication, without intermediary, of souls clothed in flesh. Man has again become visible.<sup>38</sup>

Balázs can argue that the meanings of gesture, movement and facial expression must be learned, and, accordingly, must be taught by film,<sup>39</sup> while at the same time, he implies that the meanings of gesture, movement and facial expression are somehow more powerful, or more truthful, because of their natural, timeless significance. For Balázs the “microphysiognomic,” is an index to true emotion, “we find that there are certain regions of the face which are scarcely or not at all under voluntary control and the expression of which is neither deliberate nor conscious and may often betray emotions that contradict the general expression of the rest of the face.”<sup>40</sup> Balázs cites the tell tale “lobe of the ear” of one of Eisenstein’s villains. If Balázs seems to be misidentifying

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<sup>37</sup> Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 41. See my Introduction and Bela Balázs on visual culture.

<sup>39</sup> Silent cinema has a kind of dual allegiance as well, as it presumes both the project of educating the spectator to see, and the claim of a universal language.

<sup>40</sup> Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 74.

an actor's elaborate performance as an involuntary or unconscious act, he is also exploring the combined power of cinematography's close-ups and an actor's ability to play with their own expressive features. Balázs cares less what kind of sign the face may be and more about the play of meanings it might reveal and the use of the hand, in Keller's literary work, is comparably varied. The true emotion that Balázs assigns to certain regions of the face (or head) Keller recognizes in the hand, as she explains in *The World I Live In*, "People control their countenances, but the hand is under no such restraint. It relaxes and becomes listless when the spirit is low and dejected; the muscles tighten when the mind is excited or the heart glad."<sup>41</sup> But Keller's gestures are not just conventional signs, nor indexes of emotion.

Kracauer summarizes the discoveries of film: "things normally unseen, phenomena overwhelming consciousness, and special modes of reality," this last including "extreme states of mind"<sup>42</sup> communicated among a film's objects, characters and spectators. He returns to Mae Marsh's hands,

Now suppose we look at a big close-up – say, Mae Marsh's hands. As we are watching them, something strange is bound to happen: we will forget that they are just ordinary hands. Isolated from the rest of the body and greatly enlarged, the hands we know will change into unknown organisms quivering with a life of their own. Big close-ups metamorphose their objects by magnifying them. . . Any huge close-up reveals new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures are reminiscent of aerial photographs, eyes turn into lakes or volcanic craters. Such images blow up our environment in a double sense; they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before.<sup>43</sup>

In the spectators' act of forgetting the ordinary-ness of the hands, the hands abandon both their iconicity and natural expressivity and become strange, but this estrangement is also, in Kracauer's theory of aesthetics, communicative. For Kracauer, the gestures of the actor are one of the

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<sup>41</sup> Keller, *World*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

“revealing functions”<sup>44</sup> of the cinema and one of the ways in which the cinema expands the spectators’ perception to a perception that is more than human. Kracauer repeatedly asks of specific films and film techniques, does a film or film technique “make one see and grasp things which only the cinema is privileged to communicate?”<sup>45</sup> And he opens his discussion of the camera’s “revealing functions” with a quotation from Luis Buñuel, “I ask that the film discover something for me.”<sup>46</sup> In a film’s attempt to address reveal “things normally unseen” it is engaging in ekphrasis, broadly understood as an inter-sensory, multi-sensory communication. Keller’s experience is something “normally unseen.”

There is, in *Deliverance*, as in later cinematic accounts of Keller’s education, the famous scene at the pump, where Helen begins to understand how language functions and in which she uses her hands, for the first time, to spell the letters of a word she associates with its object. In the first shot of this sequence, Anne Sullivan positions Helen’s mug, and hand, beneath the water, and without the explanation that this is part of a lesson, the spectator sees Helen’s hand functioning as a tool, a physical means of holding a cup. Anne begins to pump the well with her own hands. In the next shot, a close-up of Helen’s hand beneath the stream of water, the cup mysteriously disappears and the hand becomes simply a perceptive organ. This image is followed by a title that reads, “As the cool stream gushed over one hand, the word ‘water’ was spelled into the other, and Helen learned for the first time the name of an object.” The perception of the water becomes part of the transition to language (at the same moment that written language is used to narrate the story). In the next shot, a medium shot, Helen reaches for Anne’s hand,

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<sup>44</sup> This phrase, which was originally written in English in Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*, echoes the standard English translations of Heidegger. Kracauer’s language invokes the intellectual history that connects the Frankfurt School to Heidegger’s 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology and its interest in technology.

<sup>45</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Anne stops pumping, and leads Helen towards her. Their spelling hands gain the center of the frame. This image is immediately replaced with a series of titles that spell, one letter at a time “W – A – T – E – R!” until the phrase “W-A-T-E-R!” appears in the frame (essentially, an animated title sequence, and the only one in the film). An extreme close-up of Anne, holding Helen’s hand in hers and spelling with the other, follows. Then there is a medium shot, in which they adjust their postures and another extreme close-up, nearly identical to the first in which Helen spells into Anne’s hand. This shot ends with a tender clasp of hands, no longer spelling.



**Figure 6: Holding a cup, pumping the well, in *Deliverance***

During this sequence, it almost seems as though the two figures do not have enough hands; their hands are required to hold, to feel, to reach, to pump, to spell and to caress, while at the same time, a non-gestural systems of signification, the written text, is necessary to explain the complexity of what is occurring. Keller’s entrance into language is not signified by any single system of signification, and the startling close-up of her hands, and Anne Sullivan’s, is an

overwhelming image worthy of the event, suggesting an experience both beyond what is presumed to be normal human experience and available to it.<sup>47</sup> The scene cuts from tableau (or perhaps, better, *tableau-vivant*) shots of the two women, framed frontally and displayed beside the pump, to the frantic close-ups of their hands, producing, another scene of climax and, though Helen is finally learning language, a scene of crisis. A sense of the inadequacy of the spectator's vision is produced when the eye cannot keep up with rapid succession of images of hands, and the film's visual image is also inadequate. The film's image cannot express the entire experience, and turns to the textual inter-title. Finally, the sense of "not enough hands" is most directly invoked by the disappearance of the cup – who is holding it? - but it is a more general sensation as well, and this sensation engages the participation of the audience's hands, as a supplement to those seen in the film.

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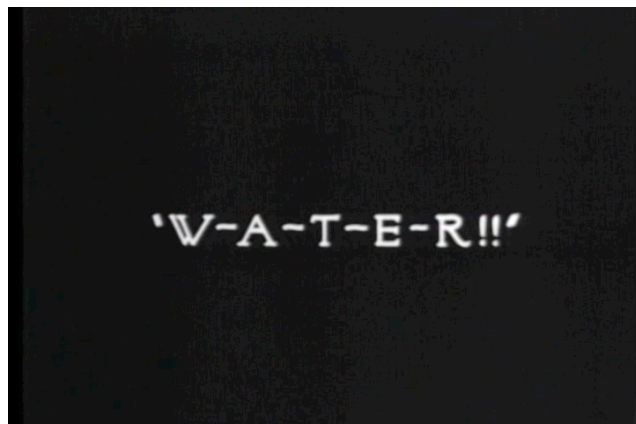
<sup>47</sup> Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* stories, first published in 1919, open with story of Wing Biddlebaum entitled "Hands" and, the narrator repeats, throughout, "The story of Wing Biddlebaum is the story of hands." This story begins with a description of Biddlebaum's more conventional uses of his hands, in conversation. But the story is actually the story of the violent censorship and self-censorship of Biddlebaum's hands, and the sexuality that is projected on to "Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird."



**Figure 7: Teacher spells “W”**



**Figure 8: Helen spells “A”**



**Figure 9: Titles spell “Water”**



## Discipline of Eyes and Hands

In the aforementioned essay “‘A Properly Adjusted Window’ Vision and Sanity in D.W. Griffith’s 1908-1909 Biograph Films” which surveys the director’s early one-reel films, Anne Friedberg addresses what she sees as a disciplining of the senses in Griffith’s early films. Following Gunning’s work, she identifies a trajectory within these early silent short films, in which the movements and gestures of Griffith’s lunatic villains give way to the curative visions of the protagonists to provide narrative and cinematographic structure of the film. To begin, Friedberg recognizes that Griffith’s racially stereotyped villains shared with his mentally disturbed characters “exaggerated, telegraphed gestures” and that these characters threatened not only “the usual vulnerable victims in Griffith’s work, the lone woman or child” but narrative form itself.<sup>48</sup>

Friedberg then addresses the film *The Drunkards Reformation*, in which Griffith’s drunkard attends a temperance play and, moved, reforms himself. This theme, she argues, inaugurates a series of films in which the protagonists’ “mental condition is determined [and, most often cured] by what they see” and “sanity is tied to vision” thus visually organizing and structuring the narrative of the cure.<sup>49</sup> In the film *The Restoration*, which involves, like *Cricket on the Hearth* and *Orphans of the Storm*, a misrecognition and recognition plot, a doctor orders the re-enactment of a domestic scene, in order to cure a husband who is paranoid that his wife has been untrue. Friedberg concludes,

Griffith changes the image of madness in his one-reel narratives. Madness is no longer a narrative device for disruption requiring containment, madness becomes a character’s reaction to an image, is a disturbance of vision, which, if properly corrected, can be cured. For Griffith, whose famous statement, “my task is above all to make you see’, meant to see through his properly adjusted window’. [H]is aspirations for the cinema

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<sup>48</sup> Friedberg, “Vision and Sanity,” 326, 331-2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

were bound to his conviction that vision was a determining factor in mental health; its regulation a potential form of mind control. From here, it would not take much to add that D.W. Griffith is often remembered as the “father” of cinema style, as patriarch in command of vision.<sup>50</sup>

Friedberg’s analysis of how the narrative forms of rescue, reform and recognition depended upon Griffith’s cinema techniques – his characters, their gestures and their perceptions - suggests not only the disciplining of the film’s characters, but also the film’s spectators. Film goers must become spectators, according to Friedberg and Gunning, and participate in the film’s visual structures, its cinematography, to make sense of the narrative of a new medium.

Friedberg mentions, in passing, Griffith’s *The Broken Locket*, in which a woman suffers hysterical blindness when her husband disappears. This film raises the question, then, how might blindness function in early cinema narratives which must enforce sanity and in which disciplined vision is the cure? Indeed, the woman’s vision is *not* cured, and when her husband returns a worthless drunk, she cannot “see” this. In Keller’s story, vision cannot cure her of her early tantrums and frustrations, but there is a cure, nonetheless which depends on the manipulation, and the command, of Keller’s senses.

In my reading above, the scene at the pump is a scene that both condenses and explores the multiple and unstable uses of the hands for signing, revealing the complexity of what might appear to be a single sense perception: touch. However, the scene at the pump, particularly in Keller’s literary account (and in Anne Sullivan’s) is constructed as a dramatic turning point, and a cure that effectively ends the film’s attention to touch and gesture.

In Keller’s literary account, as in the cinematic account, the event is marked by heightened sensory perception and emotion,

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 334.

placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand.<sup>51</sup>

The smell of the honeysuckle, the cool stream of water and a “thrill” of thought combine to mark the experience with intense sensory perception. In addition, this scene, in Keller’s account, follows an emotionally frustrating morning for her and Anne Sullivan, which, Keller has explained, began with her own confusion regarding mug, milk and water; although Keller was already able to imitate Sullivan’s finger-spelling she was unable to consistently use finger-spelled words to indicate objects. In Keller’s account, the event becomes a complex transformation of the hand from an unruly but perceptive organ to a means of communication.

My analysis of gesture and touch in *Deliverance* has focused primarily on the first chapter of the film, “Childhood.” As the film represents Keller’s “Maidenhood” and “Womanhood” it alters the ways in which it stages and uses gesture and touch. The adolescent Helen learns geometry, types, plays chess and reads Braille; the adult Helen (now played by Helen Keller) feels the vibrations of musical instruments, enjoys a flower garden and dances.<sup>52</sup> The film displays Keller’s hands, and body, as she learns to use them in highly disciplined ways. Violent uses of her hands and body, spontaneous displays of affection, playful explorations and intimate curiosity give way to academic pursuits, refined indoor pastimes and easily identifiable

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<sup>51</sup> Keller, *Story*, 27. While this passage might beg a Freudian interpretation, in terms of Freud’s theory of “screen memories” as memories of an event fabricated at a later date, I will suggest instead, a comparison of Freud’s theory of memory, here, and Keller’s theory of socially constructed perception, which I will discuss later. The mutual influence of Keller’s accounts of key episodes in her education, and Sullivan’s accounts of these same episodes suggests a memory constructed not just after the fact, but collectively.

<sup>52</sup> Chapter three explores the display of these extraordinary abilities further.

but barely visible<sup>53</sup> communication – the finger-spelling between Anne and Helen now takes place, when it is visible at all, at the edges of the frame. *Deliverance* is no longer structured by and for Helen's movements and gestures.

Through the character of Helen, *Deliverance* explores various uses of the hand - perception, involuntary emotional communication, voluntary affection, formal communication in language, participation in culture – and it experimented with various performances and techniques of cinematography that indicate these uses. In doing so, the film participates in the development of film form as a visual narrative, but also emphasizes the non-visual experiences, narrated in Keller's literary accounts, that structures Keller's literary style. Current film theory has begun to consider the presence of touch in contemporary cinema, but there has not been a history of touch in the cinema; most of the histories discussed here have emphasized movement (when they do not emphasize vision) not touch, in the early silent cinema. In the film, if not in *The World I Live In*, Helen's hands appear to have been transformed, from undisciplined organs to a means of orderly communication. However, her disordered sight has not been cured, and she is deaf as well.

### **Anxious Sounds**

Keller was blind and deaf, and *Deliverance* might be considered, more or less, silent.<sup>54</sup> But the inclusion of Martha Washington, and her dramatic ability to see made Helen's blindness visible and the story of Nadja's romance, in which she falls in love with a musician, makes Helen's deafness visible, and audible. To do this, the film includes a narrative that not only

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<sup>53</sup> Nancy Hamilton's *The Unconquered* (1954), which will also be discussed in chapter three, does not take this approach.

<sup>54</sup> In many sequences, Keller is granted speech that communicates directly to an audience; inter-titles appear with her words, some of which are even familiar turns of phrase from her own writing. But Keller and Sullivan were given a copy of the titles to edit and were, on the whole, very much displeased with them.

makes Helen's deafness visible, but attempts to unite and synchronize the sound and image of the silent film, an effect which makes the ability to see and hear appear normal and desirable.

Of the "musical effects" of "silent" nickelodeon films of the aughts, film sound theorist Rick Altman writes, in *Silent Film Sound*, "Nickel theater musicians were not consistently called upon to produce music motivated by character emotion or by narrative atmosphere – the dominant instigators of music during the teens and twenties. Instead, they were exhorted to produce sounds synchronized to on-screen sound production."<sup>55</sup> This kind of film sound, and its history, as it is available primarily through written texts from the period (trade papers, advertisements, plot summaries, etc), reveals that, in early cinema, what today might be understood as synchronized effects were more common than atmospheric musical accompaniment. In Altman's history, he understands films, in image and in narrative, to have created opportunities for synchronized musical effects. The plot summaries available "reveal the extent to which [a] film was fabricated quite specifically not just to allow, but virtually to require, sound effect accompaniment." (p. 211) In the film *Love's Sweet Melody* (1909) the plot, Altman explains, is a conventional story of the period in which a young girl falls in love with her music teacher. When she thinks of him, in various settings during their prolonged separation, she appears to hear a refrain, presumably, Altman suggests, the tune *Love's Sweet Melody*, which is mentioned in some of the press for the film. Altman identifies not only images that must be synchronized with sounds, but characters that, in repetitive sequences, assume roles of listener and producer of sound.

For Altman, sound is a significant sensory perception that structured the editing patterns of silent films,

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<sup>55</sup> Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 209. All subsequent quotations from this work refer to this publication.

Not only do the plots of many films turn on moments when listening is emphasized, but listening increasingly serves as an important role in new methods of constructing narrative space . . . Though scholars have recognized linkage of spaces and shots as cinema's single most important challenge during the period, they have usually attended to visual connections (point of view shots, eyeline matches, iris shots as implied telescope masks) while ignoring sound. As important as the gaze becomes during the late aughts, understanding of the period requires equal attention to listening and to the use of sound to establish narrative and spatial connections. (p. 214)

Altman is referring to Gunning and the general acceptance of his thesis (also reflected in Friedberg's work), that the sense of sight provided the sole appeal of a film and the perception upon which its cinematographic form was constructed. Altman's use of the term "the gaze" as an analytical term for understanding the visual structures of early cinematography is particularly interesting, in this context, as this term became most widely used in psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory of the 1970s, written about the films of classical era Hollywood. Altman invokes this term in his aural revision of early cinema history and, in a way, this suggests that the emphasis on vision (or "the gaze") in early cinema might have been produced by an academic framework that sees the earlier, silent-era cinema only through the framework of the classical period that followed it and the discourses that addressed it.

As an example of the use of sound, rather than vision, to establish narrative and spatial connections, Altman offers D.W. Griffith's *Lonely Villa* (1909). When the mother and daughters, isolated in the lonely villa, hear burglars, the mother suddenly transfers her auditory attention and answers a phone call from her husband. Altman argues that, "Instead of concentrating solely on the speaker . . . we focus instead on the act of listening, a visual reminder of an aural connection" and a visual cue to the physical distance implied between the isolated mother and the distant father. Here, the image of the phone provides the cue for the audience to experience, or imagine, sound and cinematic screen spaces it connects.

Although he does not necessarily dwell on this point, Altman has assembled a series of films, including *The Lonely Villa*, *A Cruel Revenge* (Pathé, 1908) and others, that use sound to

create and resolve suspense plots. The plot of *A Cruel Revenge*, according to Altman, “includes the stock scene where a mother recognizes her son thanks to the boy’s violin playing” (p. 213) after a suspenseful separation.<sup>56</sup> Even *Love’s Sweet Melody* uses its lovers’ tune in a plot that repeatedly delays the union of its lovers. Altman explains that in these films, implied sound designates on-screen and off-screen spaces. While this imaginary spatial structure is key for suspense plots, Altman emphasizes the construction of space to support his theory of an alternative sensory appeal, that of sound, rather than vision, in the structure of early cinema.

Although it was made a decade after the films Altman writes about, in a period in which he suggests atmospheric musical accompaniment was the more standard practice, *Deliverance*, remarkably, includes both a romance with a musician and, within this romance plot, the use of an implied tune to establish spatial and narrative relationships. When Nadja, Helen’s youthful rival in romance, reaches “Maidenhood,” she works in a garment factory. The film includes a sequence in which Nadja is shown sewing and sorting fabric pieces in a small crowded room. From this image the sequence cuts to an image of a young man, framed by a small window high in a large building, playing the violin. The film then cuts to Nadja, sewing again. She tilts her head to listen, stops her machine, then rises from her worktable and moves to the window. The next shot is an eyeline-match, implying that Nadja sees the young man across the narrow alley. The titles that introduce this sequence suggest that Nadja “faces the world alone” and the cinematography conveys an isolation in which the young man’s music appeals to her, sonically, and interrupts the visual and tactile work she is engaged in. Implied music, in this sequence, establishes both the isolated space of Nadja’s labor and a sense of escape from that space, and

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<sup>56</sup> The misrecognition and recognition plots that have already been discussed in terms of vision have counterparts whose narrative, and the cinematography that imparts that narrative, are organized by sound, not sight. This particular plot, in which a mother and son recognize one another through the device of a musical or sonic clue appears in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. His 1934 version of the same film depended, rather on the mother’s marksmanship, keen eyesight and steady hand.

from her loneliness. Her ability to enjoy this escape, however, depends upon her ability to synchronize her own sight and hearing, and to respond audio-visually to sound, to the music that motivates her to look out the window.

The entire sequence is actually a visual illustration of Nadja's implied words, as she recalls her dismissal from the factory job. She is telling this story to her boyfriend, the violinist, and his music teacher. The inter-titles identify the teacher's apartment as "A Haven of Refuge" and the teacher gently escorts Nadja to an armchair before she begins her story. A title serves as Nadja's conclusion, punctuated by her angry gestures, in which she informs them she was fired for straying from her work. In response, the violinist and the music teacher move to the piano and begin to play a duet; Nadja slowly moves towards them, and the music calms her. An iris closes the sequence. When the film returns to Nadja's story, she and the violinist are seated at the piano; Nadja is playing and the violinist is instructing her playfully. Their hands touch on the piano keys, in the only close-up of hands in the last two chapters of the film, they embrace, and the title following reads, "Yes, Josef." Again, music brings Nadja comfort, peace and love, as a musical effect linked explicitly to certain images in the film, associated with certain characters, and part of a romance narrative.

*Deliverance* employs the strategies of musical effects that Altman identifies in earlier films, including images as motivation for sounds and tunes that both establish the uses and meanings of the film's space and are central to the romance plot. However, unlike the films Altman describes, there does not seem to be much suspense created by the narrative and narrative spaces constructed by the musical effects; Nadja's romance is consummated fairly quickly and although her employment situation remains unresolved, she appears safe and secure in the music teacher's home. However, in the contrasting storylines of Nadja and Helen, a certain tension is



created through the contrasting use of the senses by, and for the narratives of, the two young women.

In the “Maidenhood” chapter, Helen announces her intention to go to Radcliffe where, if she cannot be at Harvard she “will be near the boys, anyway.” She excels at geometry, passes her exams and enters college. She and Anne Sullivan, beautifully dressed, attend a garden party, but Keller comes home alone and the inter-titles read, “Helen’s youthful heart sighs for love as other girls know it.” She enters a dark bedroom and, opening a Braille copy of Homer’s *Odyssey*, begins to read. She falls into a daydream in which she, as Circe, seduces Odysseus through dancing and music. A title reads, “At least I can dream of love – and that I can see and hear.” It is these scenes which are crosscut with Nadja’s work at the factory and her engagement to the violinist. The romance that accompanies the comfort and pleasure Nadja finds in music is missing from Helen’s biographical story, and instead, is present via a literary fantasy that substitutes for the direct experience of sound and vision.

The film *Deliverance*, in its presentation of the two women’s romantic experiences and fantasies, implies a romantic loneliness in Keller’s life that was not (yet) expressed in Keller’s own accounts of her life.<sup>57</sup> In addition, this loneliness is conveyed by the crosscut narratives in which Nadja finds and experiences love through the use of her synchronized sight and hearing, while Helen is left alone, fantasizing that she can see and hear. This desire to see and hear, too, is not necessarily part of Keller’s literary self-representations; for example, her essay “Three Days to See” written for the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 1933 is hardly a deeply felt personal desire to see. She writes, rather, “I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were

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<sup>57</sup> Keller’s biographers, however, from William Gibson and Joseph Lash to Kim Nielsen and Georgina Kleege all speculate about her romantic life and ostensible celibacy. Some of Keller’s later, private writing expresses romantic loneliness.

stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life.” In *The World I Live In* she describes, not a fantasy of sight and sound, but an anxiety dream, in which she is unable to read Braille and is therefore cut off from her social and cultural experience of the world through language.<sup>58</sup> The film does not use sound to create the same kind of suspense that the earlier films had, but the film does project an unresolved sexual anxiety, and, more generally, sensual anxiety onto Keller’s blind and deaf body through the various uses (or absences) of musical effects in the two crosscut narratives. Keller cannot participate in a conventional romance narrative and her exclusion is marked by her sensory difference.

The silent cinema, as it began to structure its cinematography with the visual perceptions of its characters, inaugurated, Gunning argued, a new perceptual relationship, primarily visual, with its spectators. Film “set up a series of well-defined narrative expectations and created a new involvement for the spectator. No longer simply observing the action or directly addressed by an attraction, the spectator now knitted together the space and time of the film following the logic of the narrative.”<sup>59</sup> Rick Altman recognized an analogous address of the cinema, but to what might be more properly called an audience, “spectators had been taught to become auditors by an explosion of sound practices dedicated to providing synchronized auditory traces of visible sound events. . . . Whether activated or not by exhibitors, the virtual sound tracks increasingly built into the period’s films were now mentally accessible to audiences sensitized to sound.”<sup>60</sup> Clearly, the early cinema, according to its historians, assumed a public that could both hear and see and simultaneously attempted to teach the spectator-audience to use these senses according to the forms and conventions developed in the cinema. But the figure of the deaf and blind Helen

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<sup>58</sup> Keller, *World*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> Gunning, *Narrative*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 216.

suggests that on some level visual and sonic synchronization might only be a fantasy and that the senses of the spectator-audience might, or could, operate quite differently.

In an essay on the phonograph and the early cinema, Gunning describes attempts to reproduce sound for the purposes of accompanying the cinema as part of “the systematic splitting, reproducing and derangement of the senses.” Gunning suggests,

the relation between the phonograph and motion pictures shows both the process of the separation of the senses that [Jonathan] Crary finds essential to nineteenth century investigations of perception and an anxiety about this separation, a desire to heal the breach.<sup>61</sup>

To explore this anxiety about the separation of senses from each other, or from a body that would organize and unify them, Gunning, strangely enough, turns to a gothic novel of the 19th century, Jules Verne’s *Carpathian Castle* in which “uncertainty [is] engendered by the separation of the human voice from the human body.”<sup>62</sup> The silent cinema, too, provides a wealth of examples in which suspense is generated by the separation of voices and bodies - *The Lonely Villa*, with the telephone at the center of its narrative space, and plot, is only one example. Synchronized sound (real or implied) and image in the cinema become, for Gunning, “a fetish designed to ward off the technological reduction of the human subject to a single strand of inscriptions of sound, the modern partitioning of the body as a technique of discipline and transformation. In opposition to this, in the popular imagination the voice demands a body, as the ear desired an eye.”<sup>63</sup> Not only does the cinema imagine that its spectator-audience can be taught to see and hear according to its new technologies and techniques, but it realizes that

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Gunning, “Doing for the Eye What the Phonograph Does for the Ear,” in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 14-16.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

experimenting with this malleability produces new, and disturbing, models of human consciousness.

For Gunning, the silent cinema and its early sound technologies produced a new model of human perception, and even human consciousness. This human being, with its malleable, changeable, senses was frightening; the senses might never again be integrated by a subject defined as human by their unified command and synthesis of sensory perception. Nadja's ability to see and hear and fall in love was assumed to be normal, but it was a fantasy, Keller's reorganization and reorientation of the senses more accurately reflected the sensorium of the cinematic subject, in which the senses were produced and managed by technology and the culture of modernity.

### **William James and the Blind and Deaf Student**

William James' psychology, with its emphasis on consciousness, perception and sensation explored, as cinema did, the various possibilities for the relationships among these. Helen Keller, familiar with his theories, and with her own experience of sensory perception, went further still and tried to allay cultural anxieties (and James' specifically) surrounding the relationship of her senses, their perceptions and her consciousness. The essays in *The World I Live In*, at their most adamant, assure her readers that even if her senses of sight and hearing cannot respond directly to the experiences and technologies of the world, she can participate in a common visual culture, the visual culture that is, and is contained in, language.

In an *Atlantic Monthly* essay from 1904 (the year Keller graduated from Radcliffe), psychologist William James speculates about two blind and deaf subjects, Laura Bridgman (1829-1889), who lived and studied at the Perkins Institute for the Blind, where her education

became the model Anne Sullivan studied in preparation for teaching Helen Keller, and Keller, who had met James when she was a child, also at the Perkins Institute. James writes,

life is full of absorbing interest to each of them, and in Helen's case, thought is free and abundant in quite exceptional measure. What clearer proof could we ask of the fact that the relations among things, far more than the things themselves, are what is intellectually interesting, and that it makes little difference what terms we think in, so long as the relations maintain their character. All sorts of terms can transport the mind with equal delight, provided they be woven into equally massive and far-reaching schemes and systems of relationship. They are then equivalent for intellectual purposes, and for yielding intellectual pleasure, for the schemes and systems are what the mind finds interesting.<sup>64</sup>

This essay suggests that James was one of those whom Keller identified, in *The World I Live In*, as “scientific men and others,” curious about the ways in which she represented to herself the world she could not see or hear. In the middle of the article titled, “Laura Bridgman” James begins discussion of his own current theories of psychology, particularly his concept of “relations.”

Although somewhat obscure, relations are at the very center of James' psychology and a sense of what he means by this term emerges from a reading *Essays in Radical Empiricism* in the context of his attention to the life and work of Helen Keller. In his essay “A World of Pure Experience” (first published in 1904) James explains his radical empiricism as grounded in “relations,”

My description of things, [like that of traditional empiricism], starts with the parts and makes of the whole being of the second order. It is essentially a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts . . . [but] To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit to its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the *relations* [my emphasis] that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> William James, “Laura Bridgman” *The Atlantic Monthly* (1904): 98.

<sup>65</sup> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longman Green and Co., 1912), 41-42.

James differentiates his empiricism from that of traditional empiricists by his attention to relations and although he accepts the Enlightenment empiricist emphasis on “the part [and] the plural facts” of direct experience, his radical empiricism is more inclusive than previous theories of consciousness. Unlike the sensationalists, who believed in the pure sensory observations of a passive mind James included in direct experience and the realm of the “real,” intuitions, deductions, memory or other active functions of the mind.

In James’ earlier *Principles of Psychology* (1890) he introduces this argument when he claims that “a pure sensation is an abstraction.”<sup>66</sup> For James, sensations, theoretically, might be more immediate than perceptions; they were “acquaintance with a fact” and did not take place in adult, human experience of the world. Perception always included within it sensation; the association of sensation with past experience of the world and its objects was, rather, “knowledge about a fact.” In the chapter titled “The Stream of Thought” in the *Principles of Psychology*, James defends the very organization of the work – which begins a discussion of perception and sensation *after* a discussion of thought – with an assertion that,

Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. But this is abandoning the empirical method of investigation [which begins from direct experience]. No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness – from our natal day – is teeming with a multiplicity of objects and relations.<sup>67</sup>

He concludes, “the only thing which psychology has a right to postulate at the outset is the fact of thinking itself, and that must first be taken up and analyzed.”<sup>68</sup> If thinking is, after all, a direct experience and an effect of perception and sensation, James’ pragmatism, which understands effects and consequences as the most real form in which anything exists, justifies an approach

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<sup>66</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

that recognizes thought before it proceeds to perception or sensation. James' skepticism regarding pure sensation accords fairly easily with his later attempts to distance himself from traditional empiricists, and his argument takes, as its most primary object of investigation, thought and not sensation, and insists that thought is a fact of direct experience.

After Keller published *The World I Live In*, James wrote her a letter, dated 1908, that restated his interest in the significance of "relations" to her thought: "evidently sensations as such form the relatively smaller part of the world we mentally live in, relations being the things of most interest there [... and] being practically quite as vast in one person as in another."<sup>69</sup> James grants Keller, then, like anyone else, meaningful relations, the structures of association that connect experiences within thought.

But some of his early positions throw into relief the "radical" character of the later essays and reveal an anxiety James, too, had about the relationship between consciousness and the senses. James' description, in *Principles*, of the difference between sensation and perception relies upon an extended consideration of a hypothetical (and well-educated) blind student,

In training-institutions for the blind they teach the pupils as much *about* light as in ordinary schools. Reflection, refraction, the spectrum, the ether-theory, etc., are all studied. But the best taught born-blind pupil of such an establishment yet lacks a knowledge which the least instructed seeing baby has [that is, sensation] and the loss of that sensible knowledge no book-learning can replace.<sup>70</sup>

Further in his discussion of sensation, he argues,

A blind man may know all *about* the sky's blueness, and I may know all *about* your toothache, . . . but so long as he has not felt the blueness, nor I the toothache [in the form of sensation], our knowledge, wide as it is, of these realities, will be hollow and inadequate. Somebody must *feel* blueness, somebody must have toothache, to make human knowledge of these matters real. Conceptual systems which neither began nor left off in sensations would be like bridges without piers. Systems about fact must plunge

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<sup>69</sup> William James to Helen Keller, 12 September 1908, Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind.

<sup>70</sup> James, *Principles* vol.2, 5.

themselves into sensation as bridges plunge their piers into the rock. Sensations are the stable rock, the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of thought.<sup>71</sup>

The argument moves away from a skepticism towards sensation and becomes a valorization of sensation as a primary and essential part of meaningful thought and its “conceptual systems.”

This attitude is also present in his *Atlantic Magazine* essay, when James worries that, without sensations of sight and sound, Bridgman and Keller’s “thought is confined to the pallidest verbal substitutes . . . the mental material of which . . . would be considered by the rest of us to be of the deadliest insipidity.”<sup>72</sup> In *Midstream* (1929), a later memoir, Keller recalls a visit from James, in her youth, “He brought me a beautiful ostrich feather. ‘I thought,’ he said, ‘you would like the feather, it is soft and light and caressing.’”<sup>73</sup> James’ interest in sensation appears contradictory and his vehemence regarding the poverty of the thought of his hypothetical (and real) blind subjects expresses a profound intellectual anxiety.

The relationship of his theories of thought to the theories of consciousness of traditional empiricists was unresolved and, to some extent, difficult for James to articulate; the example of the born-blind student reveals James’ belief in the necessity of sensation for thought, while at the same time, he was trying to develop a theory of consciousness that did not privilege indirectly theorized sensation over directly experienced thought. This intellectual ambiguity not only made him appear dismissive of Keller’s experience of thought, but is suggested by a personal paranoia; James’ many biographers frequently mention his hypochondria and often (but somewhat less frequently) refer to a recurring fear expressed in his letters, a fear that his eyesight was failing. James fears “conceptual systems” literally unmoored “like bridges without piers” from sensation.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>72</sup> James, “Laura Bridgman,” 98.

<sup>73</sup> Keller, *Midstream*, 317.



This is the inverse to the fear that Gunning recognizes in cinema's desire for synchronization of the senses, a fear of perception and sensation unmoored from a whole human consciousness.

Keller, in James' imagination, represents the possibility of a consciousness without the perceptions that James assumes to be essential, and to human consciousness.

Keller's *The World I Live In* reveals an engagement with the competing significance of the concepts of sensation, perception and thought that compelled James, but her arguments are clearly organized as a defense of her claims to human consciousness. In some passages, Keller appears to address James' theories, and their implications, directly.<sup>74</sup> The passages cited at the beginning of this chapter reveal that Keller begins her account of "a world where the hand is supreme" with emphasis on touch as sensation,

My world is built of touch sensations, devoid of physical color and sound; but without color and sound it breathes and throbs with life. Every object is associated in my mind with tactual qualities which, combined in countless ways, give me a sense of power, of beauty, or of incongruity: for with my hands I can feel the comic as well as the beautiful in the outward appearance of things. Remember that you, dependent on your sight, do not realize how many things are tangible. All palpable things are mobile or rigid, solid or liquid, big or small, warm or cold . . .<sup>75</sup>

Keller begins with sensation; her introduction acknowledges, as James did, that traditional theories of consciousness "start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts and proceed

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<sup>74</sup> Although Keller took no classes with James when she attended Radcliffe, it seems that she very much respected him and knew him informally. She wrote, in *Midstream*, "He said . . . when I sent him a copy of *The World I Live In*, that our problems and processes of thought we do not greatly differ from one another. He was not surprised to find my world so much like that of everyone else . . . His body, like his mind, was quick and alert. In argument his tongue was like a rapier, but he was always ready to listen to the other side, and always made me ashamed about my cocksureness about many things." (p. 317) When she refused a fellowship from the Carnegie Fund in 1909, a personal friend, piqued, asked, "Does Helen know that Professor William James was on Mr. Carnegie's pension list?" See Joseph Lash, *Helen and Teacher* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1980), 317. James, when he was trying to find a regular income for C.S. Peirce, appealed to Helen's longtime friend and mentor, Alexander Graham Bell. James also appealed to Bell regarding their possible mutual interest in a project to develop a universal language! See Eugene Taylor, "William James and Helen Keller" (1980), 6-7. Unpublished manuscript held in the Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind.

<sup>75</sup> Keller, *World*, 11.

synthetically.”<sup>76</sup> However, Keller moves quickly through sensation to experiences of perception – of power, of beauty, of incongruity, of comedy - and, then, back to sensation and on to the experience of imagination, which she describes as more significant in her life, and more intense in its experience, than any other. Although, on the one hand, Keller wishes to reorient her readers to the sensations and perceptions of touch, she also will not pretend that she, or anyone, can separate abstract sensations from the more complex qualities she now perceives.

For Keller imagination is not fantasy, but closer to thought and knowledge. On imagination, she writes, “The bulk of the world’s knowledge is an imaginary construction. History is but a mode of imagining, of making us see civilizations that no longer appear on the earth.”<sup>77</sup> For Keller, imagination is a kind of informed, but virtual knowledge. James offers a similar characterization of knowledge, in the example of Memorial Hall, which runs through several of the *Essays*; James asks the reader to imagine him, imagining Memorial Hall, then to imagine him walking, with the reader, towards the hall and finding in its location, uses and appearance confirmation of his knowledge of the hall. Although neither established nor confirmed before we arrived at the hall, “the knowing really was there . . . we were *virtual* knowers of the Hall long before we were certified to have been its actual knowers . . . [and] the immensely greater part of all our knowledge never gets beyond this virtual stage.”<sup>78</sup> Both James and Keller agree that an individual need not have even perception of a thing to know it, much less sensation. However, Keller is less ambiguous about relative insignificance of sensation and perception to thought and knowledge, and, of course, there is more at stake for her in her argument.

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<sup>76</sup> James, *Principles* vol. 2, 225.

<sup>77</sup> Keller, *World*, 59.

<sup>78</sup> James, *Essays*, 68.

*The World I Live In* reiterates again and again Keller's defense of her claims to knowledge of the world. Although her sensations may be, or may once upon a time have been unique to her deaf and blind body, she argues that she now perceives, and knows, a world that she shares with anyone sighted, hearing or otherwise. On the question of what James might call "blueness," she is quite clear,

I have talked so much and read so much about colors that through no will of my own I attach meanings to them, just as all people attach certain meanings to abstract terms like hope, idealism, monotheism, intellect, which cannot be represented truly by visible objects, but which are understood from analogies.<sup>79</sup>

Keller does not claim to have experienced color sensations (although, it would seem, she must have in the first months of her life), but, just as James would to do, she displaces the significance of sensation with the experience of her lived perceptions and knowledge.

When Keller is discussing the meanings of color, she explains, "I have always had things described to me with their colors and sounds by one with keen senses and a fine feeling."<sup>80</sup> When she claims perception, Keller does not claim it as solely her own,

It might seem that the five senses would work intelligently only when resident in the same body. Yet when two or three are left unaided, they reach out for their complements in another body, and find that they yoke easily with the borrowed team. When my hand aches from overtouching, I find relief in the sight of another. When my mind lags, wearied from the strain of forcing out thoughts about dark, musicless, colorless, detached substance, it recovers its elasticity as soon as I resort to the powers of another mind which commands light, harmony, color. Now, if the five senses will not remain disassociated, the life of the deaf-blind cannot be severed from the life of the seeing, hearing race.<sup>81</sup>

Here, James and Keller seem to diverge significantly; in the lectures collected in James'

*Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* he suggests that abstractions like truth and right are consensually articulated and defined. He does not seem to go as far as this with

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<sup>79</sup> Keller, *World*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

perception. But in *The World I Live In*, Keller describes her relationship with Anne Sullivan in suggestive and sophisticated ways that bear profoundly on the theory of consciousness Keller explores. When James explores “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing” he sees the perceptions of two minds as two separate acts, coterminous in the same world, or upon the same object, like skew lines. For Keller, perceptions can be shared, and taught, from one person to another. This argument, that perceptions can be taught and shared, is, finally, what allows Keller to explain the richness of her consciousness, while James is left wondering how to reconcile the “insipidity” of Keller’s mental material with the brilliancy of her thought. In his letter of 1908 he concludes, like so many, that she is simply “a wonder.”

Keller, however, has a ready explanation, “Every object that I think of is stained with the hue that belongs to it by association and memory.” So far as this goes, James makes very similar claims for consciousness in general. However, for Keller, the “association and memory” that color the objects of the mind are always social and never hers alone, nor even shared only by herself and Anne Sullivan. She continues,

The experience of the deaf-blind person, in a world of seeing, hearing people, is like that of a sailor on an island where the inhabitants speak a language unknown to him, whose life is unlike that he has lived. He is one, they are many; there is no chance of compromise. He must learn to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears, to think their thoughts, to follow their ideals.<sup>82</sup>

In a metaphor that verges on cliché, Keller invokes the promise, and violence, of her participation in the visual language and culture of modernity. Her efforts to re-orient the reader to the sense of touch are striking, but in the translation of the senses, she has an advantage; she has, in many ways, already been taught to see.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 78.

## The Literary Imagination

In Elaine Scarry's wide-ranging study of literary aesthetics, *Dreaming by the Book*, she writes,

Verbal art, especially narrative, is almost bereft of any sensuous content. Its visual features, as has often been observed, consist of monotonous small black marks on a white page. It has no acoustical features. Its tactile features are limited . . . The attributes it has that are directly apprehensible by perception are, then, meager in number. More important, these attributes are utterly irrelevant, sometimes even antagonistic, to the mental images that a poem or novel seeks to produce (steam rising across a windowpane, the sound of a stone dropped in a pool, the feel of dry August grass underfoot), the ones whose vivacity is under investigation here.<sup>83</sup>

The question, then for Scarry is how - without the actual sensual content Scarry believes other arts (painting, music, film) employ - does literary work produce vivid imaginary scenes and experiences? For Scarry vivacity is visual, tactile, less frequently sonic and most often material. It is the sight and texture of a flower, a fabric, a character's face (an extended example is Catherine's face, in *Wuthering Heights*), the feeling of weather or the movements of a bird, called into being in the mind of the reader, by the efforts of the authorial instruction. Vivacity (or enargia) is a variant of ekphrasis in which the medium is specifically literary (whether poetic, or a descriptive passage within narrative prose) and the object described by the author, and imagined by the reader is explicitly multi-sensory.

Scarry eventually argues that authorial instruction produces vivacity "by reproducing the deep structure of perception."<sup>84</sup> Like W.J.T. Mitchell, she takes as an exemplar of literary description the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, and argues that to reproduce the deep structure of perception, an author will offer step-by-step specifications for the creation of an object. But not only objects, Scarry explains, "Admittedly, it seems odd to argue that in order to produce a vivid

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<sup>83</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

image of lightening, we must first specify humidity . . . [but] the display of the material antecedents provides the imagination with a sequence of coherent steps for constructing the image.”<sup>85</sup> This, essentially, is what is meant by “dreaming by the book” – Scarry argues that perception can be produced, and shared, through language.

This argument is similar to an argument that Keller makes too, in *The Story of My Life*. In the midst of a biography that was based on memory, her own, and Sullivan’s, as Sullivan’s letters have always been published with Keller’s narrative account, Keller includes lists of her favorite literary works and the environments in which she encountered them. She writes,

I have thus far sketched the events of my life, but I have not shown how much I have depended on books not only for pleasure and for the wisdom they bring to all who read, but also for the knowledge which comes to others through their eyes and their ears. Indeed, books have meant so much more in my education than in that of others, that I shall go back to the time when I began to read. (88)

For Keller, literature was capable of producing experiences of vision and sound even without her own previous experience of them. Literature produced, and did not only reproduce perception.

From this perspective, then, it might appear that Scarry assumes a normative phenomenology, one that can see and hear and touch and move, and also imagine these prior experiences when literary language instructs them to. Not only that, but Scarry’s phenomenology and that of her reader, seems particularly attuned to flowers, birds, domestic articles of furniture or clothing, and parts of the body. But Scarry’s reader is a reader and this suggests another possibility. Scarry’s reader is familiar with Homer, with Sophocles and Euripides, with Plato and Aristotle, with Ovid, with Donne and Shakespeare, with Locke and Rousseau, with Keats and Wordsworth and the Brontes and Darwin and Hardy and Whitman. This bibliography reflects Keller’s classical education, in preparatory school and at Radcliffe, her more radical post-college

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 20.

explorations, and works that were mentioned in her letters and her literary work.<sup>86</sup> This coincidence of canons is, of course, not one. If Scarry is arguing for the possible communication of a sensorium through literary language, she is also suggesting the construction of the literary sensorium by language. Keller was educated to share that sensorium and could claim the consciousness, and imagination, she did claim by right of her participation in the visual (and tactile and sonic) but also social and cultural imaginary established by this aesthetic history. The implication of a social, cultural sensorium was disturbing, to William James who described it in his psychology, and to the cinema that was, in this period, experimenting with the sensorium and learning to manage it.

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<sup>86</sup> Scarry's reader is also familiar with Flaubert, Tolstoy, Proust, Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, writers I feel less sure claiming Keller's familiarity with, at least at in 1919. And with Sartre, John Ashbery, Hayao Miyazaki, Seamus Heaney and Louis Glueck.

## Chapter 3: Melodocudrama

### Non-Fiction Film and its Political Uses, Before the Invention of Documentary

When Keller agreed to make a motion picture based on her life, she wrote to the filmmakers, “the interest of our life-drama will not be confined to the events of my life, but will be spread out all round the world . . . and bring many vital truths home to the hearts of the people, truths that shall hasten the deliverance of the human race.”<sup>1</sup> This lofty and rather vague rhetoric becomes more pointed in the context of Keller’s public life; she had been a politically active Socialist since 1912.

But, in its representations of Keller’s political work and ideals, the film *Deliverance* was ultimately a failure. To cite Keller’s own, critical account of the film,

Towards the end we seem to have fallen down somehow. For instance, there is a scene called ‘The Council Chamber,’ where all the great generals, kings and statesmen are assembled in a sort of peace conference. I enter in a queer medieval costume and proclaim the Rights of Man rather feebly. There is no foundation in fact for such a scene, and the symbolism is not apparent. We want it omitted. This scene is followed by a Pageant with me on horseback, leading all the peoples of the world to freedom – or something. It is altogether too hilarious to typify the struggles of mankind . . . According to our contract, we have the right to reject the picture if it does not satisfy us.<sup>2</sup>

Essentially, in this correspondence with an influential friend, Keller is requesting that the film’s financiers apply pressure to the filmmakers who have “sadly disappointed” her. Despite Keller’s efforts, the extant version of the film includes much of the footage that Keller found objectionable and it actually opens with the scene in “The Council Chamber.” The pageant with her on horseback provides the film’s finale.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Keller to Francis Trevelyan Miller, 10 April 1918, Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Keller to Mrs. Thaw, 16 April 1919, Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind.



In addition to these scenes, *Deliverance* introduces at least one fictional character into Keller's Alabama childhood, a young immigrant girl named Nadja.<sup>3</sup> Scenes from Nadja's life, a story of poverty and hardship, are cross-cut with scenes from Keller's biography. The women reunite after Nadja's son returns from war blinded and she seeks Keller's aid – Keller, in her final scene on horseback does not ride alone, Nadja's son is at her side. The film includes no direct representations of Keller's political work or speeches – “Act Three [of the film, entitled] Womanhood” focuses instead on Keller's sensory experiences and domestic arrangements – but Nadja's story carries an explicitly patriotic, pro-war message. In a scene at the sweatshop where poor, widowed Nadja works, the other workers chide Nadja for refusing to send her son to war and the crowd insists on the patriotic duty of mothers in wartime.

In the world outside the film, Keller made her views on US involvement in the first World War quite clear. In a speech entitled “Strike Against War” given at New York City's Carnegie Hall for the Women's Peace Party and Labor Forum in 1916, she argued that “the few who profit from the labor of the masses want to organize the workers into an army that will protect the interests of the capitalists. . . . Congress is not preparing to defend the people of the United States. It is planning to protect the capital of American speculators and investors in Mexico, South America, China, and the Philippine Islands. Incidentally this preparation will benefit the manufacturers of munitions and war machines.”<sup>4</sup> She urged Americans to refuse the draft.

What is at stake is not simply that the film *Deliverance* fails to accurately represent Keller's anti-militarist, Socialist politics. The historical record reveals that the filmmakers did

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<sup>3</sup> The story of Nadja and Helen is discussed in chapter two with reference to their contrasting sense perceptions, and fictional narrative trajectories. Here I will discuss the political rhetoric within and surrounding the film.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Keller, “Strike Against War,” in *Helen Keller: Her Socialist Years, Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip Foner, (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 75.

not intend to honestly represent Keller's politics; the filmmakers complained to Keller that her extra-cinematic political activities threatened the film's commercial success, and among themselves the filmmakers finally agreed that they wanted the film's message to support the US entry into the war. Rather, my argument attempts to address how the film negotiates authority with Keller as its non-fictional celebrity subject. I will explore the power of Keller's performances to complicate film's relationship to the social world in which it would make a political intervention, and the Keller's authority to contradict the film in her own extra-cinematic literary and political performances. But Keller's performance as a cinematic and political "actor" is important to the history of non-fiction and documentary film more generally as well. Keller's performance of her own disability, in *Deliverance* and in the later biographical documentary, *The Unconquered* (Hamilton, 1954) draw attention to the performances that documentary film has historically demanded of its subjects.

The history of Keller's cinematic and political performances of disability suggests that documentary film's appearance of authenticity and its potential to intervene into the social world – the traditional claims on the real of documentary film – have historically been made, in part, by an appeal to the sensations of the body of the spectator by the bodies on screen – a generic element of fictional film melodrama discussed already in terms of classical Hollywood (fictional) cinema. I want to call attention to a melo-docu-dramatic mode of film – in the silent-era Keller film *Deliverance*, in the history and theory of documentary film, and in the analysis of documentary film from disability studies perspectives. Keller used her celebrity for political purposes, and her privileged position to assume this authority is exceptional, but the very power she had to contradict the politics of the film *Deliverance*, and to influence the production of *The Unconquered*, illuminates the politics, and the long history, of the documentary representation of disability and extraordinary bodies, more generally.

## Sensational Melodrama and “Thrilling Realism” in the Silent-Era

*Deliverance* includes a biographical narrative of Keller’s childhood in which actors play the parts of Keller and Anne Sullivan. But the film also includes footage of Keller and Sullivan playing themselves, engaged in both day to day domestic activities and elaborate stunts, and the biographical scenes the film includes in its fictional segments reflect not just the events of Keller’s personal life, but invoke broader political issues of the period, namely, the conditions of industrialized labor and the opposition to the US entry into WWI. Nadja is an impoverished immigrant sweatshop worker, her son is a wounded veteran of the first World War and Keller is their champion.

In many ways, the film *Deliverance* is a fairly conventional film of the silent era; the fantasy sequences, motivated by scenes of Keller reading and daydreaming, and the scenes of historical pageantry (however frustrating they were to Keller) would have been familiar to audiences of the period. The fictional story of Nadja relies on many of the popular narrative elements Miriam Hansen recognizes in the patriotic and pedagogical “Ghetto films” of the period – including “family separation and reunification,” and “conflicts between traditional values and American customs and attitudes.”<sup>5</sup> If Lewis Jacob’s 1939 description of the ideological work of silent-era Hollywood film seems overly simplistic, that is, to give “the newcomers a respect for American law and order, an understanding of civic organization, pride in citizenship and in the American commonwealth”<sup>6</sup> it would appear that *Deliverance* attempted to do exactly that, and more, in the parallel narratives of the intractable Nadja and the heroic, disabled Helen. In both the play between its fictional and a non-fictional narratives, the film had political ambitions. But

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<sup>5</sup> Hansen, *Babel*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (1939; reprint, New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 12.

to be historically accurate, it is not the dramatically cross-cut and pathos-filled narrative of Helen and Nadja (whose encounters highlight Helen's spiritual triumphs and Nadja's romantic and maternal tragedies) that qualifies this silent-era film as a melodrama of the teens.

Ben Singer's work on the meaning of melodrama in the silent-era argues that tales of love, loss and redemption, despite their narrative and affective similarities to what came to be understood as melodrama in the classical studio period, weren't generally considered melodramas in silent-era Hollywood. They were "Tear Drenched Dramas" and sentimental stories, but they were not called – in the press or within the industry - melodramas. Melodramas, or, as Singer more precisely calls them, "sensational melodramas" were, by and large, films structured by lots of action, violence and dare-devil stunts, starring plucky, resourceful, often orphaned heroines whose adventures invoked "certain qualities of corporeality, peril and vulnerability associated with working class life."<sup>7</sup> The bodies of the daring and extraordinarily skilled heroines are intimately bound (if not identical) to the imperiled, vulnerable bodies of the modern filmgoers that attend the theaters. For Singer, the locations – the train tracks, the western mine and the city streets; the action - "insensible" girls (blindfolded, etc) in peril who triumph by their wits; and the entire moral and phenomenal universe of the "sensational melodramas" correlated with perceived experiences of an urban public culture of capitalist modernity. Keller's own, literally, "insensible" body, her heroic triumphs of the spirit, her presumed vulnerabilities and her fascinating sensational experiences are an extreme production of the same industry that produced the generic sensational melodramas. The heroines of the sensational melodramas triumphed in a physically dangerous world, despite their vulnerabilities and brushes with danger and death.

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<sup>7</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 53.

The “Serial Queen Melodramas” that Singer investigates have attracted further study, and Jennifer Bean’s essay “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body” makes it particularly clear how *Deliverance* might be considered one of the “sensational melodramas” of the period and Keller one of its phenomenal heroines. Jennifer Bean’s study of the same serial films addresses the indexical appeal of a particular kind of celebrity performance in the silent cinema of the teens, the very physical, active “stunting” of the girl heroines in the serial films. Considering the work of such “daredevils” as Pearl White, Helen Gibson, Anita King, Marie Dressler and even Mabel Normand, Bean writes, “Each of these star personae stood for a particular synthesis of femininity, athletic virility, and effortless mobility.”<sup>8</sup> Stars of the serials scaled mountains, plummeted into bodies of water, flew airplanes and handled wild horses, lions and other untamed creatures as part of what Bean identifies as “phenomenology of performance” (13) that depended on the “believability of real peril to the players body” (p. 21) to produce a “thrilling realism.” (19) While it may not be literally true that a film like *The Race* (George Melford, 1916), which followed Miss Anita King’s cross country motor trip, was, in Bean’s words, “billed as quasi-documentary” (p. 24) (documentary as film was not a common a usage in this context) the films depended on a fascination with the extra-cinematic, ostensibly real – with the perilous event, with the physical setting, with the extraordinary celebrity body - for their appeal.

But Bean explores a twist in the logic of “thrilling realism;” the stars, and the star discourse, make the strongest claims for the genre’s believability, not the film’s visible images. Their star personae collapsed distinctions between actress and character, as actresses assumed their character’s names as stage names, and characters were named after actresses. In addition,

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” *Camera Obscura* 16 no. 3 (2001), 11-12.

Bean argues that the star system displays a “remarkably skeptical stance toward visual faculties” (p. 24) and cites as evidence, an article from the fan magazine *Photoplay* that assured its readers that “the magazine possesses documentary proof, in the form of statements by witnesses, that the flying figure shown in this picture is the slim form of Irene Castle” (p. 25) Here, *Photoplay* uses the term “documentary” as it *would* have been commonly understood in the period, to refer to written evidence that could verify the truth of a claim, here the claims of the visible images of the film. The star discourse, namely, the press, produced other documents as well, significantly, something Bean calls “star testimonials” that offered “meaning unavailable to or [...] occluded by sight” in the “contradiction between image and experience.” (p. 26) These testimonials followed a formula in which the star denied the actual danger of certain stunts that might look dangerous in the film, while emphasizing the danger of other scenes.

*Deliverance* participates in this genre of “thrilling realism” and “extraordinary bodies” in a number of ways: Publicity for the film billed Keller’s celebrity and her appearance as herself in the film above all else, calling audiences to “See HELEN KELLER in this Photoplay of Photoplays and Be Convinced” adding, “Miss Keller will be present at the OPENING PERFORMANCE.”<sup>9</sup> Within the film, Keller’s body was ostensibly put into “real peril” in, what, according to Bean’s account of the serials, were fairly conventional ways; *Deliverance* includes sequences of Keller on horseback and taking her first plane ride.

And like the serial daredevils, Keller assumes the responsibility, in the press and in her own published accounts of the filmmaking, of, as Bean puts it, “resignify[ing] the visual referents”<sup>10</sup> that is, describing her own experience of the making of the film and its stunts. Of the

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times* (advertisement) 17 August 1919.

<sup>10</sup> Bean, “Extraordinary Body,” 27.

plane ride, Keller wrote, in her biography *Midstream*, “The pilot told me afterwards that I myself was in danger for a few minutes in what was to me the most thrilling event connected with the picture – my ride in an aeroplane.”<sup>11</sup> (199) Here, Keller insists on the status of the plane ride as the “most thrilling event” but not at all frightening, while she simultaneously reveals the extra-cinematic “danger” vouched for by the pilot. She tells a similar story about the scene on horseback. But the “contradiction between image and experience” revealed by the star discourse in the case of Keller’s extraordinary body is somewhat more complicated than even this example allows.

Keller’s account of the studio filming, described similarly in publicity pieces in the *New York Times* and *Moving Picture World*, is as follows:

[The director George Platt] devised a signal system of taps that I could follow. . . . After general directions had been spelled into my hand, I was supposed to go through the action with the help of signal taps. “Tap, tap, tap” – walk toward the window on your right. “Tap, tap, tap” – hold up your hands to the sun (a blaze of heat from the big lamps). “Tap, tap, tap” – discover the bird’s cage; (I had already discovered the cage five times). “Tap, tap, tap” – express surprise, feel for the bird, express pleasure. “Tap, tap, tap” – be natural. In my hand impatiently: “There’s nothing to be afraid of; it isn’t a lion in the cage – it’s a canary.”<sup>12</sup>

Here, Keller provides a testimonial to the physical challenges of performing and filming everyday actions, rather than daredevil stunts. Some of the gestures and movements she describes, and others like them, appear in “Act Three Womanhood” of the film, when the film’s biographical narrative (and the fictional Nadja story) are temporarily halted to incorporate scenes that explore Keller’s sensory experiences. She describes other scenes, “I danced for the camera, I poured tea for callers and after the last guest was sped, there came the ‘tap, tap, tap’ from the director: ‘Lift up your hands and let them fall, express relief that the last bore has left.’ There was a bedroom

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<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Midstream*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

scene in which I was directed to show the curious public that I could dress and undress myself alone and that I closed my eyes when I went to sleep.”<sup>13</sup> Keller’s account suggests that at least part of the film’s appeal, like that of the serials, was intended to be the effortless mobility of an extraordinary body. But, as Keller’s joke<sup>14</sup> about the confusion between lion and canary implies, her disabled body becomes extraordinary in the competent performance of what might otherwise be seen as ordinary actions – dancing, pouring tea, moving through a room, touching a bird. Her disability transforms them into daredevil feats.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 10: Extraordinary Stunts, in *Deliverance***

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>14</sup> Although the joke is, in Keller’s account, made by the director, I attribute it, here, to Keller herself. It is characteristic of her literary style – she often makes dry jokes at her own expense about her perceptions and misperceptions.

<sup>15</sup> The comparison between Keller and serial queens illuminates what my seminar group at the Dartmouth American Studies Institute called a “Horatio Alger” disability story, the story of the heroic triumph over disability. Keller is often cited, in disability studies, as a particularly extreme example of this kind of mythology. One might also consider the “disciplining” role of illness in the body of literature Leslie Fiedler calls “Good Good Girl” stories, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1966). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *What Katy Did*, for example, Katy’s illness transforms her, through “The School of Pain” from a tomboy to a perfect lady.



The film's attention to Keller's sensory experiences grants her authority through the extraordinary body. Throughout her life, and to her own frustration, Keller was repeatedly asked to describe her sensory experiences and narrate her biography. This celebrity, it would seem, gives Keller authority only over her subjective, physical and sensory experience as a disabled body. But Keller assumed the responsibility of speaking on issues she understood to be related to the experience of disability (though not, actually her own) - poverty, education and women's health - as well as issues that she felt strongly about because she spoke as an informed citizen. Keller's political celebrity eclipsed the political message of *Deliverance* at the time of the film's release, but it is not, again, simply a question of righting the film's misrepresentations of her. The film exploited the public's fascination with Keller's sensory disability, but Keller did too, and used her celebrity to attract attention to the political causes she supported. She not only had the authority to "re-signify" the images of the film, but she also assumed the authority to "re-signify" her disabled body within her own political rhetoric.

### **Extra-Cinematic Performances**

And so, I would like to return to Keller's political writings and speeches, as an example of the ability of Keller's extra-cinematic performances to confront her cinematic representation. During the period of the filmmaking project, and throughout her life, Keller used language and metaphors that invoked her "extraordinary body." If part of the appeal of *Deliverance* is Keller's extraordinary disabled body, Keller exploited the fascination of the public with this body for her own political purposes. Her strategic use of bodily metaphors did not limit her to a personal, experiential discourse, but rather allowed her to make expansive political appeals that critiqued the very ideologies supported by the film's narrative.

Despite the wealth of writing Keller produced, in her thirties and after, on political themes – on women’s health and suffrage, in addition to Socialism and anti-militarism - I would like to continue exploring the rhetoric of the political body in the speech cited earlier, “Strike Against War.” The speech closes with a call,

Strike against all ordinances and laws and institutions that continue the slaughter of peace and the butcheries of war. Strike against war, for without you no battles can be fought. Strike against manufacturing scrapnel and gas bombs and all other tools of murder. Strike against preparedness that means death and misery to millions of human beings. Be not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction.<sup>16</sup>

The call for a strike is in itself an acknowledgement of the power of using ones body for a particular political cause, resistance. Keller’s description of the very nature of a strike, “for without you no battles can be fought,” draws attention to the way in which bodily participation in strikes was widely understood by activists, workers and all manner of audiences of the period to be the very basis of political participation in a struggle against a military industrialism that assumed and depended upon the physical exploitation of their bodies. Keller deployed not just her own body, in its presence (or, as it turns out absence) at the film’s premiere, but the metaphorical figure of the body, in support of her politics.

Keller’s right to participate in the political rhetoric of US Socialism of the period was widely contested (by skeptical newspaper editors and activists alike) and her exclusion was justified, in her critic’s accounts, by the disabilities of her body. At the same time, her bodily experience of disability was often considered the only legitimate topic on which she should publicly speak or write. Keller’s speech “Strike Against War” addresses her critics assumptions and defends her right to participate in broader political discourse,

To begin with, I have a word to say to my good friends, the editors, and others who are moved to pity me. Some people are grieved because they imagine I am in the hands of unscrupulous persons who lead me astray and persuade me to espouse unpopular causes

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<sup>16</sup> Keller, “Strike,” 81.

and make me the mouthpiece of their propaganda. Now, let it be understood once and for all that I do not want their pity; I would not change places with one of them. I know what I am talking about. My sources of information are as good and reliable as anybody else's. I have papers and magazines from England, France, Germany and Austria that I can read myself. . . . Let them remember, though, that if I cannot see the fire at the end of their cigarettes, neither can they thread a needle in the dark. All I ask, gentlemen, is a fair field and no favor. I have entered the fight against preparedness and against the economic system under which we live. It is to be a fight to the finish, and I ask no quarter.<sup>17</sup>

Again, Keller's extraordinary body is the site of a great deal of attention, both from her own language, and from her critics. The implication of her critics is that her disabled body excluded her from meaningful knowledge of the political world. Keller, in her rebuttal, insists that her ability to read Braille and Brailled foreign language papers, gives her equal agency to those who might make political claims based on visible evidence or accessibility to traditional print or visual media. Keller does not avoid metaphors of the body, here, the metaphor of her own dexterity, rather she relies on them again and again to assert her political arguments. Keller exploits the fascination of the public for her effortlessly mobile, exceedingly tactile disabled body, as she uses this body to discuss the world beyond that of her own sensory experience.

In the close of "Strike Against War" Keller invokes "dumb, obedient slaves" as apolitical subjects; often she equates "blindness" with folly, and "deafness" with insularity. Keller invokes the abilities and disabilities of her body, while at the same time denying, or rather, reassigning the cultural meanings that might label that body. She insists on the metaphorical use of the terms "deaf," "blind," and, here, dumb, as opposed to the use of these terms as a literal description of disability. Instead of identifying her own body as disabled, Keller describes the epistemological experience of all politically active subjects - herself and the newspaper editors alike - in a mediated world, informed by representations which are none the less politically compelling as representations. When Keller does acknowledge, elsewhere, the restricted access she has to print

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<sup>17</sup> Keller, "Strike," 75.

media, she refuses to locate disability within her own body. Instead, she shames the US for being “woefully behind Europe” in the field of media accessibility, in that period, the production of current news periodicals in Braille and raised print.

That Keller should have thought her radical politics might be able to be shared with the public by a Hollywood film is not actually surprising, given the cinema history of the period. Kay Sloan’s *Loud Silents* is a history of the ways in which many commercial films, in the period before WWI were “vehicles for overtly presenting social problems to the public.”<sup>18</sup> Films were sponsored by the National Child Labor Committee and the National American Women Suffrage Association, Progressive reformers like Upton Sinclair and Jane Addams participated in filmmaking projects, and there were even film companies – the American Women Film Company and the Motive Motion Picture Company – that were created expressly for the purpose of making films that advanced women’s rights and labor rights, respectively.

A particularly interesting tension surrounded the release of a film, *Birth Control* (1917) in which women’s rights advocate Margaret Sanger appears as herself, in a contemporary critic’s words a “placid, clear-eyed, rather young and certainly attractive propagandist,” in a film that used flashbacks, fictional scenarios and re-enactments of Sanger’s trial to make “an emotional as well as a reasoned case for birth control.”<sup>19</sup> Historians of the social problem films of silent era Hollywood have various ways of accounting for the censorship of that film, which coincided with the less controversial distribution of screenwriter Lois Weber’s fictional films on the same subjects, *Where Are My Children?* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, a fictional account based more

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<sup>18</sup> Kay Sloan, *Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. The first quotation comes from the 1917 *Variety* film review, the second comes from Sloan.

obliquely on Sanger's life and work. My argument suggests the presence of an extra-cinematic political subjectivity – Sanger's "attractive" and persuasive celebrity body – within the film's diegesis was what was particularly threatening to censors.

Indeed, the threat of the extra-cinematic performance of a film's actors is very real. In the production of the film, Keller and Sullivan had repeatedly requested that the film include footage of hospitals for blinded veterans, where Keller and Sullivan had been working to raise money and draw attention to the difficulties returning veterans faced in finding rehabilitation and employment. This kind of representation would have been more in tune with Keller's political views, of a war that would take "the lives of millions of young men; other millions crippled and blinded for life; existence made hideous for still more millions of human beings."<sup>20</sup> ("Strike," 79) While the film does contain a fictional blinded veteran, triumphant in the scene on horseback, the reality of injured soldiers would have been far more disruptive to the patriotic fiction, or at least the filmmakers thought so, and resolutely excluded such footage.<sup>21</sup>

The replacement of Keller's heroism and Nadja's sacrifice for a story in which the injured soldier (real or fictionalized) is a protagonist can also be understood as conventional in the period; in Bean's argument, the "nervy movie lady" is not just part of an exciting "fantasy of a body revised" in technological modernity, but she has an army of dark, vulnerable doubles, the

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<sup>20</sup> Keller, "Strike," 79.

<sup>21</sup> One might also consider, here, two films from the classical Hollywood cinema: *The Men* (Fred Zinneman, 1950) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946). These films represent two different approaches to "real" disability and the injuries caused by combat. In *The Men*, the collective hospital setting is the historical real – the film was made at the Birmingham Paraplegic Hospital in Los Angeles and was based on individual accounts of post-WWII injuries, trauma and therapies and the work of the Paralyzed Veterans Association. It stars Marlon Brando and Theresa Wright. The use of non-professional, disabled actor, Harold Russel, in *Best Years of Our Lives* places a historically real individual subjectivity, and one with an extraordinary body, at the center of a cinematic fiction set in the post WWII period. Russel also plays opposite Theresa Wright.

“mutilated male bodies and psyches” of the “battlefields of the First World War.”<sup>22</sup> These figures are not directly represented (nor studied) in either Bean’s work, or Singer’s, but they provide, there, as in *Deliverance*, a suggestion of the politics of the body in the real, social world outside the sensational melodrama. The disabled soldiers’ bodies are displaced by the extraordinary body of the serial queen, or the extraordinary body of heroic Keller. In this, the early films exhibit both a fascination with the range of extraordinary bodies and a faith in their politically signifying potential.

When Keller’s attempt to control the financing, content and release of the film (which opened this paper) ultimately failed, she boycotted the premiere and her extraordinary body was not, in fact, present at the Lyric Theater in New York on the opening night to vouch for the film’s thrilling realism. According to Keller’s correspondence, she refused tickets to the premiere because the screening coincided with an Actors’ Strike and she understood her picture to be acting as a technological strike breaker. *New York Times* coverage included both reviews of the film and reports of Keller’s participation in the parades and meetings of the strikers. The *Times* report, characteristically, suggests her physical presence among the strikers, and an extant photograph of Keller, surrounded by striking actors holding a strike banner provides some visual evidence for this.<sup>23</sup>

Keller’s extraordinary body, and its ordinary-extraordinary dare-devil stunts (as well as a plot in which independent, accomplished Keller saves the day), suggest *Deliverance’s* affinity with the silent-era genre of sensational melodrama. But Keller’s cinematic performance of her own disability, the “thrilling realism” it produces, and the political arguments both she and the

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<sup>22</sup> Bean, “Extraordinary Body,” 76.

<sup>23</sup> “Hint at Closing All the Theatres,” *New York Times*, 18 August, 1919 and “Stage Hands and Musicians Strike; 16 Theatres Dark,” *New York Times*, 17 August 1919. Photograph is at Helen Keller Archives, American Foundation for the Blind.

film make, also inform the history of documentary and non-fiction film. The word documentary, as I have suggested, was not widely used to refer to film until the 1930s when it took on a specific, political meaning that has, in some ways, persisted. Although various kinds of non-fiction film, from the earliest actualities to contemporary bio-pics, evince a strong fascination with raced, gendered, national and/or extraordinarily talented bodies, documentary proper has been limited to the “sober-discourse” political definitions of documentary. The thrills of *Deliverance* depend on Keller’s performance of her disability, but, I will argue, this kind of bodily performance and the sensational fictions it engenders are essential to many forms of non-fiction and documentary film, including, but not limited to, documentaries of disability.

### **Disability and Visuality**

Disability historian and literary scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson has claimed that photography (but not, explicitly, film, either fictional or non-fictional) has allowed for the continuation, and transformation, of a 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination with “a spectacle of bodily otherness.” This spectacle depends on the confrontation between “real people with extraordinary bodies” and real people whose bodies are defined in opposition to those seen through the medium of the photograph and its encounter. For Garland Thomson, the 19<sup>th</sup> century defined normative and non-normative bodies through the live spectacle of the freak show, while 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic representations of extraordinary bodies continue to enable the social ritual of staring at disability, in new cultural contexts in which the audience can literally see disabled bodies displayed in photographs.

It seems to be coincidence that Garland Thomson and Bean both use the exact same term, “the extraordinary body” to describe bodies made visible by photographic technology at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; their bibliographies do not substantially overlap. But Keller’s

appearance in *Deliverance* suggests a series of historical connections between silent-era sensational melodrama, its indexical fascination with super-abled bodies and its invisible fascination with disabled bodies, and photography (assumed, by Thomson to be non-fictional, though sensational) and its construction of disabled bodies in the social world. Rather than understanding a “normal” body to exist between an opposition of super-abled and disabled, however, I find that the term “extraordinary body” describes a broad variation of human bodies brought into being by film. The use of the term in non-fictional and fictional contexts, and in cinematic and photographic territory that is both and neither, also justifies the term “extraordinary.”

Garland Thomson identified four “visual rhetorics” that frame the relationship between photographer, photographed and audience: the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic and the realistic. These categories are familiar too, and, from a critical perspectives, have characterized documentary film’s representations of bodies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Brian Winston and Fatima Tobing Rony (among others) have examined the history of documentary film as a history of the cinematic creation of categories of “other” that the audience, or, more often the filmmakers relate to as such. In their work, Rony and Winston argue that bodies are visually marked by the cinema to signify class and race in narratives structured by romantic nostalgia or ethnographic spectacle, respectively, more or less. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have persuasively argued that disabled bodies are necessary for the affective experience of Hollywood’s genre films (I cite their work in my introduction) but I would argue that extraordinary bodies – marked by their phenomenal abilities and disabilities - have also been necessary for documentary’s empirical and political claims. In cinematic representations of Keller, the non-fiction film turns, not to the nameless but very much embodied working class or ethnographic other, but to an extraordinary celebrity body.



In the case of *Deliverance*, the film exploits Keller's extraordinary body for the production of silent-era thrills and the political message of the film. Keller's celebrity was defined by this tension throughout her life. A fascination with her disability was, again and again, used, by herself and others, to engage audiences in a political project: her Socialist message, her political advocacy for the education of the deaf and blind and her philanthropic fundraising on behalf of the American Foundation for the Blind. The filmmakers who made *Deliverance* were frustrated by Keller's ability, as a celebrity, to "resignify" her extraordinary body in extra-cinematic political contexts, even as they depended on that body for the sensational appeal of their film.

### **Extraordinary Bodies and Documentary**

In the film *Deliverance*, the brave and resourceful heroine that reconciles the fictional Nadja and her son to their sacrifice is Helen Keller, played by Helen Keller. To provide historical precedent for the genre of celebrity bio-pic, film historian Lucy Fischer, in her recent study of Maximilian Schell's film *Marlene* (1983), calls attention to the "biographical impulse" of early non-fiction films, "Significantly, along with recording the arrival of trains (or exotic locales and everyday scene) [...] the early documentary captured the lives of 'stars': politicians like William McKinley 'at home'; actors like Mary Irwin, John Rice, and Sarah Bernhardt in performance [...]. In this respect, the documentary forged an early link between cinema and celebrity, one that the biopic later translated into fiction/dramatic form . . ." <sup>24</sup> Fischer must insist on this "early link between [nonfiction] cinema and celebrity" because although the *actualitie* in its many variations has been explored by scholars of early film, the appeal of celebrities, performing their celebrity in

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<sup>24</sup> Lucy Fischer, "Marlene, Mortality and the Bio-pic," *Biography* 23 no. 1 (2000), 195.

silent era non-fiction footage, has been somewhat outside the traditional political and aesthetic definitions of documentary.

In 1973 film historian Richard Barsam could claim that the post WWII period “marked the introduction of the nonfiction film biography, a genre that was to become extremely popular in the following years”<sup>25</sup> as if film biography were an invention of the 1950s. As examples of this supposedly new fascination, Barsam offers, “such early films” as Richard Leacock’s *Bernstein in Israel* (1956), Dave Butler and Barnaby Conrad’s *The Day Manolete Was Killed* (1957) and Nancy Hamilton’s 1955 biography of Helen Keller; the subjects of these films were an American-Jewish conductor visiting Israel, a Spanish bullfighter’s controversial death, and a retrospective of the life and work of a now elderly blind and deaf author and activist. Barsam notes, but only in passing that in the early years of cinema popular non-fiction “[s]ubjects included the visit of the Czar to Paris [and] such ceremonies as Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and her funeral in 1901, Gladstone’s funeral in 1898, and the funeral of martyred British Feminist, Emily Davison, in 1913” among others.<sup>26</sup> Barsam positions both the early celebrity *actualities* and the later biographical films as exceptional to the history of political documentary that is his primary focus. But the appeal of extraordinary bodies – dead or alive, creative, athletic, disabled, feminist, ethnic and/or national is undeniable in the earliest history of nonfiction film. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult to consider the films that address such bodies as apolitical or simply “biographical.” Like Keller, the figures that people these non-fictions were sensationally embodied and they fascinated filmmakers and audiences with their difference, while at the same time, these differences signified in political ways.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (1973; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 296.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## Documentary and Performance

The fascination with extraordinary celebrity bodies is, I want to argue, one of two ways that documentary film, even in its strictest, political definitions, has induced the performances that are essential to it. As documentary theorist Bill Nichols explores the structures of narrative and rhetoric that make documentary a “fiction (un)like any other” documentary, in his argument, becomes intimately bound to its human (or one might consider, anthropomorphized) subjects; documentary film “prefers,” “favors” and turns “impulsively towards” a particular construction of subjectivity, the subjectivity expressed by “social actors” who visibly and aurally perform for the film.<sup>27</sup> The subjectivity towards which the documentary turns, indeed, on which a film documentary depends for its visible image or sound track, is a “social actor” who is performative in body, voice and facial expression. These performers, then, become responsible, in the absence of (or in supplement to) the narrative techniques of fiction, for narrating documentary film’s emotional story or making its appeal to the audience.

Nichols redeploys his theory of the performative mode of documentary to account specifically for US documentary film aesthetics in the late 80s and 90s. But if intimacy with performative figures is now, in documentary studies, generally recognized as a popular contemporary aesthetic and political choice for structuring documentary film,<sup>28</sup> the emergence of a theory of documentary subject as performer followed the production, and popularity, of the

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 120. On the one hand, the language Nichols uses to describe documentary film – with its preferences and impulses – imparts a living, feeling, subjectivity to film and its filmmakers, implying a mutual relationship between subjects. This is an idealized description of the interaction between documentarist and subject, and one that is, I would argue, most nearly achieved when the filmmaker recognizes and negotiates the subjects performance.

<sup>28</sup> In the current mainstream documentaries, it seems to have become the only strategy; documentaries have recently been structured almost entirely around celebrities and performances of one’s own extraordinary body, from Errol Morris’ *Fog of War*, an interview with Robert McNamara, to Morgan Spurlock’s use of his own body, in *Supersize Me*, to Micheal Moore’s obsessive exploitation of his personae.

direct-cinema documentaries of the 60s and 70s. The “virtual performances,” as Nichols calls them, of Frederick Wiseman’s semi-anonymous subjects, and the celebrity subjects of the *Maylises*, Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker, drew critical attention to the significance of performative subjectivity in US documentary film.

The performative mode was brought to critical attention both by the performances of “social actors” whose celebrity exceeded the time and space of a given a film – John F. Kennedy, Bob Dylan, Christo, to name only a few examples - *and* the performances of “social actors” whose might remain relatively anonymous in the extra-filmic world – high school students, hospital patients, Bible salesmen, criminal lawyers, and, inevitably, the deaf and blind students at the Helen Keller Institute in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Nichols explains, “The paradoxical nature of [documentary film’s] tendency is the desire for performance that is not performance, for a form of self-presentation that approximates a person’s normal self-presentation.”<sup>29</sup> Although it might be now granted that identity, before the camera or otherwise, is always a performance, some performances, according to the critics, play better in front of the camera. The documentary subject is asked overcome her own consciousness of being seen and recorded, and create a performance that does not acknowledge itself as such, but rather appears to allow the camera, and audience, privileged access to the emotions and narrative that a performance conveys. Performance becomes the essential material of the films sound and image, the medium through which a film’s argument or appeal is made. That performance can either be achieved by a celebrity “social actor,” or an anonymous, naïve “social actor.”

In the case of the performance of the naïve “social actor,” two technologies for eliciting performance mark 20<sup>th</sup> century image technology at the century’s beginning and end. The early,

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<sup>29</sup> Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 121.

“realist” work of photographer Paul Strand and the recent, commercial-political work of celebrated experimental and “postmodern” documentarist Errol Morris both rely on a technological manipulation of the social actor to produce the appropriate performance for the camera and appeal to the audience. Strand developed a kind of trick camera with mirrors and false lenses that would deceive human subjects into believing that they were outside of the camera’s frame, that they were not being photographed. Morris’s Interrotron - an interview device that allows subjects to look directly into the lens of the camera, instead of off to one side at an interviewer - which he used in his MoveOn commercials in support of John Kerry in the 2004 US election, elicits a similar representation of the subject.

Although the images produced differ slightly – Strand’s subjects look away, while Morris’ look directly at the camera – both images attempt to convince the audience that the performer is unconscious of the presence of the camera. Strand’s image is a sensational appeal to charity that creates distance between photographer, subject and audience. Morris’ commercials are an emotional appeal to sympathetic outrage that uses the naïve performance as a kind of reality effect; the subjects appear to be making a direct appeal to the television audience, even as their verbal argument is a personal narrative and does not directly address a viewer to be persuaded. The unselfconscious quality, produced by Morris’ technology, of the subjects’ articulation of their political anger is an indirect solicitation of the viewer’s support for the Kerry campaign.



**Figure 11: “Blind Woman” (Paul Strand, 1916)**

But the use of celebrities also elicits this un-self-and-camera-conscious performance from social actors who physically confront the camera in experienced, expressive and exaggerated ways. Celebrities, as “social actors” perform not just for the camera but for the world at large; their performances carry with them a consciousness of being seen, reproduced and seen again and a simultaneous disavowal of this consciousness. I have tried to suggest that the celebrity performance has been a necessary and fascinating element of non-fiction film, and, more recently been accepted as part of documentary aesthetics. The presence of Keller, performing her extraordinary disability, engages the political rhetorics cited by Garland Thomson, just as Strand’s *Blind Woman*, or Wiseman’s institutionalized deaf-blind subjects<sup>30</sup> do; in both

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<sup>30</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder praise Frederick Wiseman’s 1986 series of 4 films (each film over 2 hours long – *Blind, Deaf, Multi-Handicapped, Work and Adjustment*, the third and fourth filmed at the Helen Keller School of Alabama) for the films’ attention to the ways in which the schools, as institutions, construct their pupils as dependent and disabled. In Wiseman’s four films Mitchell and Snyder recognize a disturbing expose of the institutional life presumed necessary for the disciplining of disabled bodies. Mitchell and Snyder acknowledge the controversial reception of Wiseman’s films – most vividly represented in the opposition to *Titicut Follies* as exploitative of the

*Deliverance* and in the 1954 film *The Unconquered*, there are elements of the realistic, the wondrous, the exotic and the sentimental. But documentary filmmakers have had a choice in the kind of performances they use to structure their films – naïve performances enabled by the filmmaker’s technological prowess or celebrity performances in which the subject more actively participates in the definition of the films political rhetoric – and the choice to engage a celebrity performance, or, at least, Keller’s celebrity performance, makes a difference. Keller, as I argued in the case of *Deliverance*, uses her own performance of disability for political purposes and both *Deliverance* and the 1954 film *The Unconquered*, were forced to negotiate Keller’s authority.

### **Performance, Celebrity and *The Unconquered***

Keller had more success in influencing the form and content of the film *The Unconquered*, and it was her celebrity that granted her this privilege. When, late in Keller’s life, her friends wanted to have a film made to honor her life and work, filmmakers no less renowned than Robert Flaherty and Francois Truffaut both expressed interest in directing it. However, Keller and her circle were not comfortable with either – both seemed more interested in their own vision (or careers) than in creating a meaningful representation of Keller’s life and work. Keller’s celebrity and the respect afforded her by her friends, prevented her from becoming the subject of a film like Truffaut’s *L’enfant Sauvage* (1970) (which treats its non-fictional subject primarily as a philosophical and aesthetic problem) or Flaherty’s portraits of exoticized and infantilized “primitive” cultures. *The Unconquered* was finally made on a tiny budget, and directed by

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patients at the Massachusetts hospital. However, for them, the Wiseman disability films offer a strong indictment of the institutions they represent. Wiseman’s “observational” aesthetic allows for this kind of interpretation, but his use of dramatic narrative structure and his emotional use of close up also engage a sentimental discourse akin to that of Strand.

Keller's personal friend and neighbor, a woman named Nancy Hamilton, for whom *The Unconquered* was her first and only film.

The non-professional production allowed for a number of decisions that constructed a very different, but none the less extraordinary body in the later film: Keller edited the text of the voice-over narration, and most of her edits were reflected in final version of the film. In addition to the voice-over, read by Hamilton's close friend, the actress Katherine Cornell, the film also includes Keller's own voice, speaking directly to the film's audience, as well as footage, with original sound, of public speeches made with Polly Thompson, Keller's companion after the death of Anne Sullivan. Polly, who had a Scottish accent and precise elocution, served as Keller's interpreter, following her words, sentence by sentence, when Keller gave public speeches for the fundraising and advocacy work of her later life. The film also includes earlier footage of Keller and Sullivan together, again with original sound, performing (during their vaudeville period)<sup>31</sup> a demonstration of how Keller learned to enunciate words through touch. The film does not deny Keller a voice, either literally, or figuratively, but instead explores the ways in which her eloquence was spoken with and through her relationships with others. While Keller's participation in "oralism" – the use of speech by the deaf – has long been controversial in Deaf communities,<sup>32</sup> the film adheres to Keller's own perspective on her speech education, that the ability to communicate directly to a hearing audience was, for her, politically empowering.

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<sup>31</sup> After the commercial failure of *Deliverance*, Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan performed on the vaudeville stage, which Keller preferred to film performance. And Keller continued to give speeches for AFB fundraising purposes until she was in her seventies.

<sup>32</sup> Keller is particularly unpopular figure in Deaf culture. In addition to sharing a broad dissatisfaction (from many perspectives within disability studies) with Keller as an impossibly "heroic" figure, writers and activists within Deaf culture are critical of Keller's participation in "oralism." Keller's support of this practice allowed this pedagogical approach to persist in the education of the hearing-impaired, despite opposition from Deaf activists. However, it is important to remember that Keller was not Deaf, in as much as Deaf culture, and sign language, allow hearing-impaired signers to self-identify as "the visual people."



Although *Deliverance* shows a fictional sequence of the child Helen (suddenly and quickly) learning speech, it does not show Keller giving a public speech, much less a political speech.

*The Unconquered* also has a very different representation of touch than *Deliverance*. The story of *Deliverance*, in part, reveals the ways in which Keller's touch is disciplined to become language. At the same time, however, the use of touch as language, in *Deliverance*, becomes nearly invisible in the film's representation of Keller's adulthood. The use of the manual alphabet by Keller, Sullivan and their friends appears only at the margins of the screen. In *The Unconquered*, however, Keller's communicative touch appears in the center of the frame. She touches the faces and hands of her friends and acquaintances, she follows conversations by touching her acquaintances moving lips, and the film shows her communicating, quickly and efficiently (but never invisibly) via the manual alphabet with Polly Thompson and their friends. *The Unconquered* includes footage not just of the community of friends that were comfortable with this touch, but also includes footage of Keller startling a visiting celebrity (an opera singer)<sup>33</sup> who strains to look unconcerned, when Keller places her hands on the singer's throat.

In her study of Keller, Mary Klages suggests that Keller's celebrity depended upon her participation in very specific forms of representation: her literary biographical work, and still photography. In both of these forms of representation, Klages suggests, Keller could pass as "normal," because of her use of visual and aural language, presented through text, and her disciplined body. However, Klages notes, "when she spoke, of course, her speech patterns (as well as her sign language) marked her incontrovertibly as deaf, just as her movements and her need for a guide marked her physically as blind."<sup>34</sup> Keller's ability to appear more or less

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<sup>33</sup> See Smith College Archives.

<sup>34</sup> Klages, *Woeful Afflictions*, 193.

disabled is quite striking, when the rich archive of photographs of her life is examined. And many of these photographs were taken by (and preserved by) and for purposes of fundraising and publicity by the philanthropic institution the American Foundation for the Blind. But Keller never restricted herself to a life of literary work or hid from public view. *The Unconquered* includes footage of Keller sitting on the floor of her library, with Braille books spread around her. In the film, this is left unexplained, but elsewhere, Keller explains that this is the most comfortable and stable way for her to manipulate the large, unwieldy volumes.<sup>35</sup> *The Unconquered* is a particularly intimate portrayal of her incontrovertible, physical, extraordinary blind and deafness.

Not only does *The Unconquered* explore the ways in which a politically and socially active Keller uses her unique sensory abilities and disabilities to communicate, the filmmaking project reveals the ways in which Keller's celebrity depended upon her participation in a visual culture from which she was often assumed to be excluded. Most biographies of Keller (including the academic work by Mary Klages and Kim Nielsen) give slight attention to Keller's participation in the making of *The Unconquered* and *Deliverance*. This disinterest in the filmmaking events reinforces a presumption that Keller would not have been able to understand or meaningfully participate in a visual medium. However, Keller's celebrity, as Klages noted, depended very much on the circulation and reproduction of her photographed image. A letter from Radcliffe to one of Keller's benefactors reflects Keller's canny participation in the visual culture of turn of the century celebrity. She writes,

I have just had some pictures taken, and if they are good, I would like to send one to [another benefactor] Mr. Rogers, if you think he would like to have it. I would like so much to show him in some way how deeply I appreciate all that he is doing for me, and I

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<sup>35</sup> Throughout her life, as the quote from her admonishment of editors shows, Keller foregrounded the difficulties she had in obtaining timely reading material, revealing that print culture, as much as film culture, can be an exclusive visual culture, if it is apprehended from only a sighted perspective.

cannot think of anything better to do. Every one here is talking about the Sargent pictures. It is a wonderful exhibition of portraits, they say. How I wish I had eyes to see them! How I should delight in their beauty and color! However, I am glad that I am not debarred from all pleasure in the pictures. I have at least the satisfaction of seeing them through the eyes of my friends, which is a real pleasure.<sup>36</sup>

Keller moves from reflection about her own uses of her image, to her right to claim the pleasures afforded by the popular and public visual culture of the day. Keller's correspondence throughout her life reveals her attention to her public appearance, and to her dress. In the revisions to *The Unconquered* script, Keller changed the text of the narration from "she begrudges the labor of choosing and buying. However, she knows it is part of her job to look well in public" to "she enjoys the labor of choosing and buying. She and Polly must shop with economy, but as they know it is part of Helen's job to look well in public, they must also shop with a good deal of care." This narration accompanied images of Keller and Thompson at Bendel's, trying on hats. Her literary agent, Nella Braddy Henney, describes the effort Keller and Thompson made to coordinate their wardrobes for their public appearances, so that they might complement one another visually. Despite her inability to see, Keller was perfectly able to present herself before the camera in flattering, attractive clothing and to appreciate the significance of her doing so. *The Unconquered* acknowledges that this ability is not made impossible, or inappropriate simply because Keller cannot see.

Hamilton and her cameraman shared responsibility for most of the "direction" of *The Unconquered*, but the non-professional, noncommercial production required, and allowed, participation on all sides. Keller and Thompson made a trip to Paris, where Keller was giving a public speech. They were accompanied by the cameraman, who filmed the event. But the three were also given responsibility for filming Keller on the streets of Paris, and Keller's ability to "direct" this footage herself – she wanted to express her enjoyment of Paris street-life, was, at that

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<sup>36</sup> Helen Keller to Mrs. Lawrence Hutton, 5 March 1899, Helen Keller Papers, American Foundation for the Blind.

time, unprecedented in filmmaking. Hamilton, also out of necessity, appealed to a visually-impaired Keller “fan,” Rebecca Mack, for rare photos of Keller to use in the film. Mack had, throughout her own lifetime, created an extensive series of scrapbooks of newspaper and magazine coverage of Keller’s childhood, her education and her political work. Mack had met Keller on various occasions, and she often wrote to Keller for current photographs of herself, her household and her home. For the film production, Hamilton had precise desires and expectations for photographs she wanted Mack to find, have re-photographed, and then sent to her; Hamilton made requests of Mack that, in another filmmaking context, would have earned Mack a research credit, because Mack had an exhaustive knowledge Keller’s celebrity image and press coverage at various stages in her life. Hamilton did not include the participation of Keller and Mack in imagining and planning the film’s images because of the women’s self identification as “blind,” or their desire to create an authentic, subjective, self-representation. Rather, she deferred to their authority for a number of complicated reasons – the low-budget, noncommercial, nonprofessional character of the production, Keller’s routine authority over the construction of her own visual appearance, Mack’s undisputed expertise as a Keller archivist.

This is not to say that *The Unconquered* is a particularly radical, or sophisticated political project. Indeed, it was made at a time when Keller put aside her own, deeply felt Socialist politics, to represent the mission of the American Foundation for the Blind and to serve as their spokesperson and fundraiser, a position that Keller felt ambiguous about her whole life. Rather, it is to say that like *Deliverance* and the trajectory of non-fiction and documentary films discussed here, *The Unconquered* relies on a sensational body, and its performance for the film’s structure. And that because this body is a celebrity body, the film and filmmakers must negotiate with that body and its politics, rather than simply represent it.

## Chapter 4: Live Television Drama and the history of *The Miracle Worker*

In the 1950s, New York television studios produced live television drama, a form of programming that required specialized recording technologies, staging spaces and broadcasting practices. The confined spaces and less-mobile cameras of the television production studios created an aesthetic that foregrounded theatrical blocking and staging, and used minimal editing and long and medium shots to frame actors' physical movement and enhance the effect of spatial unity. Television historian Lynn Spigel's "ideology of liveness,"<sup>1</sup> which she recognized in the vaudevillian elements of television's domestic comedies, had a more dramatic counterpart in the live television plays. The technologies of television production captured and transmitted tensions between the physicality of the actors' performances, the cramped studio sets and the enclosed, often interior, diegetic spaces of the narrative. This is what I am calling television's "intense phenomenology," a physical sensation of intimacy and suspense created by the material conditions of television production (but not limited to that medium) and shared with an audience.

This chapter examines the development of *The Miracle Worker*, directed by Arthur Penn, from its original performance for the television program Playhouse 90 (1957) to the feature film produced by Playfilm Productions for United Artists (1962).<sup>2</sup> Television's "intense" phenomenology contributed to the startling physicality of *The Miracle Worker*, in all its performances, and offered an aesthetic that not only challenged the visual conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, but was attuned to the story of a deaf and blind girl and her visually-impaired teacher. In the violent struggles between student and teacher, in the domestic *mise en scène* that

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Spigel. "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourse on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 16.

<sup>2</sup> The Playhouse 90 performance of *The Miracle Worker* can be seen at the Paley Center for Media, New York, NY.

they physically destroy, and in the constrictive cinematography that attempts to visually represent them, the heroines of *The Miracle Worker* communicate through television's intense phenomenology. This phenomenological effect, in turn, eventually became a convention of post-studio Hollywood horror, which is haunted not only by the uncanny spaces, but by the bodies and technologies of the history of live television.

### **The Virtues and Limitations of Television Aesthetics**

In "Installing the Television," an essay that became part of Lynn Spigel's groundbreaking study of the social spaces defined by television in mid-century America, she suggests that a formal history of the medium should include attention to "an ideology of liveness" produced by the television and experienced by the audience. In television's direct address, in its blocking and staging inheritances from vaudeville, burlesque and the legitimate stage and, of course, in its frequent performance, in front of a live studio audience, television was a broadcast medium that was experienced quite differently from the studio-era cinema. Spigel claims,

[M]ore than presenting an illusion of resemblances – the spectator's imaginary sense of being placed in a scene – early television attempted to present a reproduction of the entire sensation of being at the theater – the spectator's imaginary sense of being placed on the scene.<sup>3</sup>

In short, television attempted to produce, for its audience, the sensation of being at a live performance. Spigel finds evidence for this sensual experience of theatrical "liveness" in the domestic comedies of the late 1950s, but this ideology pertained to television experience more generally. Television *was* a performance in real time, but without real presence; the history of television in the 1950s includes the history of live television drama, a form of broadcasting that demanded and exploited specialized television recording technologies, staging spaces and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 16.

broadcasting practices, and all for dramatic, rather than comic effect. Live television drama also required modes of writing, acting, directing and producing that were developing with a certain freedom in the new medium, at a time when networks (and their advertisers) were desperate for content to attract viewers. Television was not just experienced as live, it was produced, as live.

The development of *The Miracle Worker*, first as a television play for Playhouse 90, in 1957, then as a Broadway play (1959-61), and finally, as a film in 1963, was a product of the live television era. The original television play script for *The Miracle Worker* was written by William Gibson for Playhouse 90, and he adapted that script for the stage, and then, as he explained to Helen Keller's literary agent Nella Braddy Henney, he "blended" the two versions to create the film script. Arthur Penn, who directed all three versions, had been working in live television with producer Fred Coe since 1953; Coe, who produced the Broadway and film version, had been the producer for Philco-Goodyear Television Playhouse, Producers Showcase, Playrights '56 and finally Playhouse '90. Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke played the parts of Anne and Helen in both the stage and film versions and Coe, Gibson, Bancroft and Penn worked together on the Broadway production of *Two for the Seesaw*. Both Henney, in the accounts she kept of the *Miracle Worker* productions, and Penn, in his retrospective interviews, emphasize that the creative team managed (because of their early success and growing reputations) to maintain control over the production throughout its transitions from TV stage, to Broadway stage, to Hollywood set.

For Henney and Keller, this insured that the "love and imagination and skill" towards the subject matter shown in the original script continued.<sup>4</sup> In the production itself, this control insured the gradual evolution of work from one medium to the next, with both continuities and

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<sup>4</sup> Nella Braddy Henney to Helen Keller, 25 September 1958, Nella Braddy Henney Collection, Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA.

changes in its dramatic effects. The film had a kind of liveness-effect; the film version intentionally exaggerated various elements of the television aesthetic for dramatic effect, what I will call an “intense phenomenology.”

Of the technological apparatus of television production, Penn (in a 1992-3 interview) said,

It was a tough time. I mean you had to get on the air and go live and you didn't know if you were going to time out right or if a camera went wrong...it was such an ungainly medium when we first started. There were no zoom lenses, which meant you had to get off that camera to another camera to be able to change lenses here. You carried that sort of thing in your head, plus all the tension, plus trying to remain open to a certain sensibility about what was coming off between the actors, which was very vital. This required levels of consciousness or unconsciousness that were multiple and very complicated. It was a tough training ground.<sup>5</sup>

The process sounds fast-paced and kinetic, despite the emphasis on the television cameras' technical ungainliness, or rather, because of it. The experience of working in television, Penn, and others (including director John Frankenheimer) have said was one of working on tight budgets, in cramped studios and struggling with the visual limitations of the medium.<sup>6</sup> Penn's television play shares with Spigel's domestic dramas an emphasis on minimal editing, minimal camera movement and an absence of facial close-ups and point-of-view editing between characters. And yet, the intensity of the interaction between the technology, space and performance is communicated from the performance to its television audience, in the live television Playhouse 90 version of *The Miracle Worker*, and in much else of the TV era. So how do the technologies, spaces and performances of live TV, and the kinetic experience of production create this intense phenomenology for the audience?

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<sup>5</sup> Gorham Kindem, *The Live Television Generation of Hollywood Film Directors: Interviews with seven Directors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994), 102.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dynamics of Live Television: A Conversation with three Prominent Directors (John Frankenheimer, Robert Mulligan, Arthur Penn)*, 1994. Video recording. The Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series, Paley Center for Media.



Spigel argues that television technology creates a visual narrative with remarkably different emotional and affective appeals than those of the classical Hollywood cinema. She suggests that, in the domestic comedy, close-ups are motivated by a desire to give the home audience “a perfect view”<sup>7</sup> of a gag or action, rather than by classical cinematic motivations, like character psychology. Television was oriented towards capturing and displaying action for an audience, rather than using conventionally cinematic methods to engage spectator psychology. Where the classical Hollywood cinema and its psychologically motivated close-ups create a space of fantasy, Spigel argues, television’s carefully framed gags and actions contribute to a new way of relating to the experience of the television screen, the effect of presence, liveness and being on the scene, a primarily phenomenological effect, rather than a psychological relationship.

*The Miracle Worker*, in its live television Playhouse 90 production (perhaps more so than the film) relies heavily on extreme close-ups, but not of the face. As Spigel’s history suggests, the live television play is less oriented towards the expressive face, and more towards the expressive gesture. The close-ups of the heroines’ hands are often extremely careful, the audience is intended to see each letter and to recognize Annie’s systematic approach to using everyday language with Helen.<sup>8</sup> There are also framings of their struggle to communicate, that obscure the language Annie is teaching and express, instead, the physical difficulty of touching her pupil and gaining her attention. In addition to many close-ups of the heroines’ hands, there are also a fair number of oddly framed, obscured and partial close-ups of the back of Annie’s head, or other parts of her moving body. She is too intent in conversation, or confrontation, with Helen or her well meaning

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<sup>7</sup> Spigel, “Installing the Television Set,” 23.

<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I will refer to the film, stage and television characters as Helen and Annie, the historical figures, as Keller and Anne Sullivan. There is little evidence that Anne Sullivan was ever called Annie – her nickname among friends was Teacher. Anne Bancroft, who eventually played the part of Annie in the film, was called Annie by Penn, Gibson, etc. The actors I will call Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft.

but misguided parents to remain still and centered in the frame. The close-ups of Annie serve to communicate the difficulty of her struggle with Helen and her family, a struggle that is communicated, not by her eyes, but by her actions.<sup>9</sup>

In the television production, Penn reserves some of his most expressive close ups for objects. One of the final confrontations between Annie and her pupil, (just before the famous pump scene, in which Helen “learns” to associate the word and object WATER) opens with an extreme, almost abstracted close-up of a pitcher of water, carried in the arms of the Keller’s black housekeeper, Viney. After the pitcher lands on the table, Helen eventually uses it to throw water into Annie’s face, and Annie and Helen carry it to the pump to be refilled. The camera, more or less, follows the pitcher through this sequence, though it is roughly handled and moves in and out of the frame as the violence of the scene increases. The *mise en scène* of the television production is a kind of crowded “kitchen-sink” realism, but Penn’s camera isolates the meaningful objects and engages them in the violence that erupts. This strategy, as well as the attention to physical action, and the intense phenomenology produced by the cramped spaces and ungainliness of the camera were formative to Penn’s cinema aesthetic.

### **Television Aesthetics at the Movie Theater**

If attention to physical action defined television – both comedic and dramatic – in the 1950s, this aesthetic was not actually confined to the small screen. Penn describes his transition to Hollywood as technologically easy, but politically difficult. In retrospect, Penn saw himself, as a television director entering feature filmmaking, as

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<sup>9</sup> This framing is one of the most nuanced representation of the story of Sullivan; Gibson insisted that his scripts were the story of Anne Sullivan as *The Miracle Worker*, but he was frustrated, as Sullivan and her biographer Henney were before him with the ability of the public’s fascination with Helen Keller to eclipse the story of Sullivan.

[B]usting the medium open a little bit... we took the lock off the top of the medium. There was a lock that belonged to the old cameramen because the technology was theirs and they possessed it and they did things with a certain orthodoxy. And we who had come out of a medium that was much more sort of finger popping and because we were locked into that thing I described earlier, that visual limitation [of television's technologies], we began to kick it open in other ways . . . we began to do kind of nutty stuff, all of us . . . we trained ourselves to be audacious . . .<sup>10</sup>

Here, Penn understands that the “limitations” of television production created a new aesthetic and one that, when its artists were no longer in the television studios, offered a creative challenge to classical Hollywood cinema.

While Penn disparages the static camera of the film version of *The Miracle Worker*, as a relic of the staginess of the Broadway drama and the live television production, he also has said that, if he had made the film version of *The Miracle Worker* later in his film career, he “would have had the same physical actions.”<sup>11</sup> The film is famous for the dining room sequence, a physical fight between Annie and Helen, and in the interview with *Cineaste*, the interviewers mention the relatively long takes that create that scene. Penn responds,

Yes, because I didn't see the need to cut until certain events needed to be punctuated or you needed another view on them. I thought the film should really resemble those early silent two- or three-reelers where they just kept the camera grinding. Those films were usually comedies, but there's also a basic humor underlying this scene which is really a little battle. You know, "You do that, I'll do this. You do this, I'll do that." It was sort of *mano a mano*, in that regard. . . . That's why in *The Miracle Worker*, when I filmed that long fight scene, I covered it every possible way because I wanted to be able to control the rhythm. You see, that's a nine minute scene, so it's gotta start, it's gotta pick up tempo, it's gotta move, it's gotta pick up hostility, you have to take it up the line, up the line, UP THE LINE, to a point, finally, of capitulation. I can do that in the theatre . . .<sup>12</sup>

The consequences of Penn's theater and television experience were not all bad. The scene begins with a full 20 seconds of Helen kicking and screaming on the floor as Annie sits in the middle-ground, observing and eating. This may not sound “long” but it feels long, and this

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<sup>10</sup> Gary Crowdon and Richard Porton, “The Importance of a Singular, Guiding Vision: An Interview with Arthur Penn,” *Cineaste* 20 no. 2 (Dec 1993): 4-17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

shot inaugurates a sequence in which the frame rarely separates Annie's body from Helen's. The two are literally locked in struggle for almost 10 minutes. The dining room sequence sustains rising action in a unified, confined space. This action is unrelenting, violent and intense.

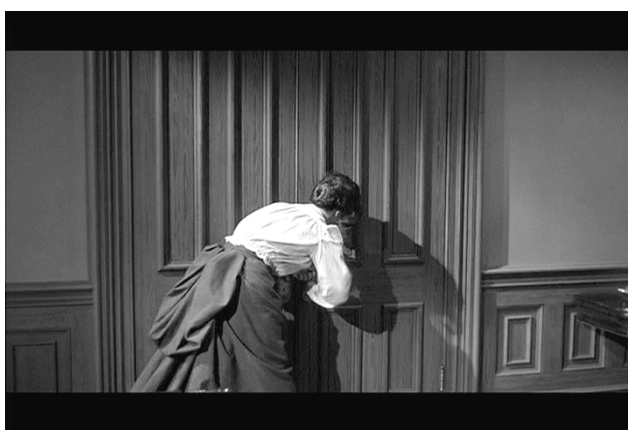
In addition to his casual comment about immobile "grinding" camera of the silent cinema, Penn invokes the early silent cinema, again, in descriptions of the dining room sequence. When he regrets the film's more obvious dialog, he says, "I think there should have been an almost silent film eloquence about the impact of Helen's affliction on the family... The big fight scene at the table, for instance, is a wonderful scene. It's a good piece of cinema because there was no dialog and no need for it."<sup>13</sup> Nella Braddy Henney's records of the preparations for the television production of *The Miracle Worker* mention that William Gibson was invited to see *Deliverance* but whether or not Gibson, or Penn, did see the film is unclear. Yet, the dining room sequence in the Playhouse 90 *Miracle Worker* bears a remarkable similarity to that in *Deliverance*. Both scenes emphasize Anne and Helen's isolation in the dining room, when Annie asks the family to leave. Both scenes deliberately capture Annie's hands when she locks the dining room door. Both scenes "break" from their shots of the action within the dining room to show Helen's mother, outside the dining room, physically excluded and, in a temporary way, visually and physically disabled, listening to the sounds of the fight as evidence of the battle in which she cannot intervene. And the contrast serves to foil the intense, physical experience within the dining room.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 12: Teacher locks the dining room door, *Deliverance***



**Figure 13: Annie locks the dining room door, *The Miracle Worker***

Each of these elements is explicitly mentioned in Sullivan's written account of that day; *Deliverance* and the live television Playhouse 90 *Miracle Worker* both adhere to her direction quite literally. Each performance of this scene finds ways to include – explicitly or implicitly - the violence and physicality of Sullivan's original literary version. In her letters she wrote,

This morning I would not let her put her hand in my plate. She persisted, and a contest of wills followed. Naturally the family was much disturbed, and left the room. I locked the dining-room door, and proceeded to eat my breakfast, though the food almost choked me. Helen was lying on the floor, kicking and screaming and trying to pull my chair from under me. She kept this up for half an hour, then she got up to see what I was doing. I let her see that I was eating, but did not let her put her hand in the plate. She pinched me, and I slapped her every time she did it. Then she went all round the table to see who was there, and finding no one but me, she seemed bewildered. After a few minutes she came

back to her place and began to eat her breakfast with her fingers. I gave her a spoon, which she threw on the floor. I forced her out of the chair and made her pick it up. Finally I succeeded in getting her back in her chair again, and held the spoon in her hand, compelling her to take up the food with it and put it in her mouth. In a few minutes she yielded and finished her breakfast peaceably. Then we had another tussle over folding her napkin. When she had finished, she threw it on the floor and ran for the door. Finding it locked, she began to kick and scream all over again. It was another hour before I succeeded in getting her napkin folded. Then I let her out into the warm sunshine and went up to my room and threw myself on the bed exhausted.<sup>14</sup>

Sullivan's construction of the dramatic scene, the isolation of herself and Keller, and the eventual release are present in the film versions of *The Miracle Worker*. Sullivan's use of parallel structure suggests the repetitive and exhausting physical confrontation and her ironic understatement marks the passage of time and implies the duration of the struggle. All this is present in the film, and in the television production, and the film *Deliverance* as well. However, *Deliverance*, the live television Playhouse 90 version and Sullivan's account all rely more heavily on implication and ellipses. The film version of *The Miracle Worker* finally places Annie, Helen and the space of the dining room in a long, drawn-out and violent conflict with each other.

If the less-mobile camera and confined space of the television production were a limitation on the dramatic action in the Playhouse 90 production, they are an intentional, exaggerated effect in the film version. Indeed, Penn deploys the effect of the television space more dramatically in the film than he did in the actual television version of the story. Rather, the television version includes elements of the intense phenomenology - attention to bodies, actions and space in tension with the camera's limited mobility - that are refined and more fully exploited in the film version.

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<sup>14</sup> Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life with supplementary accounts by Anne Sullivan and John Albert Macy* (1903; reprint, with foreword, etc by Roger Shattuck and Dorothy Herrmann, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.), 143. Sullivan's letters to mentors in Boston, written during her stay with the Kellers, have, since their original publication as part of Keller's *Story of My Life*, been published with that narrative.



**Figure 14: Intense Phenomenology, in *The Miracle Worker***

In the film *The Miracle Worker*, the camera calls attention to its limited mobility; it appears as if it can barely contain or keep up with the figures of the two women as they give physical embodiment to the sense of frustration present in Sullivan's literary account. In their struggle, Helen and Annie engage in repetitive physical movements. When Helen throws her spoon, Annie grabs a handful of spoons from the sideboard and thrusts them, one by one, into Helen's hand. She immediately throws each spoon across the room. Annie catches Helen as she darts from her chair and wrestles her into an upright sitting position, again and again. The camera follows this with jerky repetitive motions that keep both figures in the frame. But when Helen darts in the opposite direction, the camera belatedly follows her, its pattern broken. A more fluidly moving camera would disguise the effort of following the two figures. Instead, the camera calls attention to its limited mobility. Throughout the scene the camera is periodically hand-held, the shaky frame again suggesting the camera's inability to keep pace with the figures in the

frame. While Penn attributes some of the less-mobile quality of the camera work to his own cinematic inexperience, the camera is also deliberately less-mobile than the two women. Penn's description of the construction of the dining room scenes, in which the rhythm of the acting determines the rest of the director's decisions reveals this. The violence appears to be barely contained; the actor's bodies appear to be straining against the space in which their actions are confined, and against the technologies that are trying to visually represent them.<sup>15</sup>

### **Horror, Suspense and Andre Bazin**

In the 1960s Penn enjoyed a tremendous critical reputation as a director, particularly in Europe; Andre Bazin reviewed Penn's first feature-length film *The Left-Handed Gun* in 1964, and Penn was interviewed 3 times for *Cahiers du Cinema* between 1963 and 1967. He was also interviewed by Jean-Louis Comolli in 1968, and a special series of four issues of *Screen*, in 1969, included a survey of Penn's critical reputation by Jim Hillier and essays on *The Miracle Worker*, *Mickey One* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. This last film, and its physical violence, created an incredible controversy, when New York Times critic Bosley Crowther described the film as "a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy" and a new generation of film critics and fans came to Penn's defense.<sup>16</sup>

But Andre Bazin was Penn's first critical champion. Bazin's reputation as the theorist of cinematic realism depends on his appreciation of *mise en scène* and the long take, an enthusiasm

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<sup>15</sup> This element, of the blind heroines' bodies straining against the medium that represents them, is repeated in the Dogma film *Dancer in the Dark* (von Trier, 2000). Not only does Selma react violently to the world around her, the famous Dogma strictures designed to limit the filmmakers use of various cinema techniques and effects – color, music, etc – are broken in the representation of Selma's musical relationship to the world.

<sup>16</sup> Bosley Crowther, "Bonnie and Clyde Arrives," *New York Times*, 14 August 1967. Robin Wood's 1969 survey of Penn's work mentions Jean Luc Godard's "well-known strictures on Bonnie and Clyde" but describes them as "irrational – so lacking in even the rudiments of critical objectivity – that one looks for some ulterior motive whereby to account for them" in *Arthur Penn* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1970), 93.



articulated in the essay “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage” (1953) and its revisions. In the context of Penn’s work, Bazin’s most compelling statement against montage comes in a footnote to that essay, added in 1957. Frustrated with the original example he had given in the essay for the “limitations of montage,” he offers another example, one that more aptly reveals the virtues of the long take and shot composition in deep space. In *Where No Vultures Fly* (Harry Watt, 1951),<sup>17</sup> a child has carried a lion cub away from its mother. Bazin continues his description,

Up to this point everything has been shown in parallel montage and the somewhat naïve attempt at suspense has seemed quite conventional. Then suddenly, to our horror, the director abandons his montage of separate shots that has kept the protagonists apart and gives us instead parents, child and lioness all in the same full shot. The single frame in which trickery is out of the question gives immediate and retroactive authenticity to the very banal montage that has preceded it. From then on, and always in the same full shot, we see the father order his son to stand still – the lion has halted a few yards away – then to put the cub down on the ground to start forward again without hurrying.<sup>18</sup>

Bazin goes on to say that the dramatic value created by the adherence to spatial unity in the “full shot” and “single frame” provides “the impact of a real event” within the cinematic fiction. But of course, there *is* trickery outside the frame, “the lioness was half tamed” and besides, whether the child ran any real risk “is not the point.”<sup>19</sup> The way in which the “single frame” and “full shot” lend the effect of authenticity to the scene is the point. Bazin’s position has been understood as defense of the long take and an fascination with *profondeur de champ* but it is not just the shot’s duration in time that creates this cinematic reality effect, nor just the staging in depth. Rather, it is the fact that the take is long enough to include the extended action, and that the shot is composed to include *all* the figures previously put in tension with one another: the child and his parents and the cub and its mother.

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<sup>17</sup> Harry Watt directed the British documentary *Night Mail* (1936). He was a documentarist for the GPO Film Unit and worked with Grierson and Flaherty.

<sup>18</sup> Andre Bazin. *What is Cinema? Volume I*, trans. Hugh Gray. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1967), 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Penn's dining room sequence, from the film version of *The Miracle Worker* exploits the powerful suspense effects of the "full shot" and "single frame" when it confines the bodies of the heroines, locked in struggle, within the restricted frame of the dining room for a prolonged period of time. The sequence is not without cuts, but there are relatively few. In the physical confrontation between Annie and Helen, who will be the victor? Tables and chairs are overturned, food is thrown and smeared on bodies, furniture and surfaces. Not only does the "full shot" contain the key figures of the drama, in violent tension with one another, but, in the film version, the *mise en scène* is pared down to include only the most startling objects – a pitcher of water, a generic substance identifiable as "food," chairs, table, plate and spoons, just as in Sullivan's account. And Sullivan finally exerts her authority over Helen, in body and mind and begins to win the family's trust and confidence. Penn creates, and communicates to the audience, an embodied sensation of being present at a struggle, and confined in the space of that struggle, with its violent, impassioned participants. An intense phenomenology is not only possible on television, but television's technology and the conditions of its production, inspired the cinematic adaptation of the intense phenomenology for the cinema.

Although Bazin is not a genre critic, he is deeply concerned with the phenomenological effect of the cinema on the spectator-audience and in this short description of the reality effect of the "full shot" and "single frame" he uses two terms – horror and suspense – that have become increasingly associated with genre studies. Genre, in film studies generally, has historically been understood in terms of audience expectations for convention; the significance of audience experience in the definition of genre continues in Linda Williams' phenomenological theory of genre, which has been formative to this study of genre and sensory perception. Bazin is describing here a very particular kind of suspense, in which the spectator-audience's experience of space contributes to the affective relationship of suspense. Confined in a cinematic space, the

frame of the image, with the vulnerable child (in Bazin's example) and the lion, or the violent child and the frustrated teacher, the spectator-audience waits in suspense for what it will witness next. The image will change, the figures within it will be reorganized and the spectator will be there to watch it happen.

### **Ghosts and Other Unsightly Heroines**

But if Penn's cinematography in *The Miracle Worker*, assaults the body of the spectator-audience by confining it to the experience of the limited mobility and cramped spaces of television aesthetics, *The Miracle Worker* also disrupts the vision of the spectator-audience. So far, this chapter has not directly addressed the film's blind heroines, but to do so, horror and suspense are the genre terms, again, most relevant. *The Miracle Worker* is deliberately presented as a horror film<sup>20</sup> and the opening sequences of the film contribute significantly to the film's appearance as a horror film.

A doctor informs Kate Keller that her infant daughter will live through her illness, but the scene closes with the mother's realization that baby Helen cannot see (or hear, though the emphasis in this scene is on sight). Kate screams and the camera frames her open mouth between the bars of a baby's crib, and slowly reverse-zooms away from her. The next shot, which opens the credit sequence, is framed by bars as well, now the rungs of a stairway banister, and the harsh shadows they throw on the wall behind. Behind these bars the silhouette of a small child's shadow appears, with arms outstretched, zombie-like, before her. These images suggest that the blind child terrifies her parents, and is an uncanny figure in the home. Sound reinforces this, as

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<sup>20</sup> In the live television Playhouse 90 version, the scene of Kate Keller's "horror" is almost identical and the part of Helen is played by Patty McCormack, who is known for her uncanny performance in *The Bad Seed* (LeRoy, 1956). Wright actually plays the part of Helen as "spooky" while Patty Duke manages a more "blank" performance. The history of horror and suspense on television is only beginning to be addressed by media studies, see Jan Olsson, *Good Evening: Alfred Hitchcock and Television* (forthcoming).

spare, high-pitched tones accompany the child's stalking and Kate Keller's scream is the conventional sonic equivalent of the visual iconography of her horrified face. The film version (as well as the television version) was made in black and white and Penn explains that the cinematographer suggested, part-way through the filming, that they make dramatic use of contrasting light and dark. Together, the black and white film stock, and the dramatic chiaroscuro also contribute to the horror conventions.



**Figure 15: Her mother's horror, *The Miracle Worker***



**Figure 16: Helen as Zombie, *The Miracle Worker***

But what is so unsettling about Helen is that she cannot see – though that is essential to the film's narrative. It is that she cannot be seen, in conventional ways, by the film or its spectator-audience. In the next shot of the credit sequence, Helen's silhouette, again, is seen

casting a shadow through a bright white sheet hung on a line. Her distorted image is reflected in a glass Christmas bulb; she staggers along through a field of grass, face turned towards the sky. Each of these sequences partially obscures the child's face; Helen does not face the camera and the camera cannot make eye contact with its subject. These distorted and withheld images of the film's heroine remind the viewer how accustomed they are to engaging with the eyes and face of the filmed subject.

Helen and Annie share this disorienting cinematic appearance. In the film version (more so than in the television performance) Annie's dark glasses, which mark Sullivan's rarely represented visual impairment, create a similar disruption. The heroine of the film's title, the miracle worker, is visually obscured from the spectator's view. Captain Keller, in one of his many moments of frustration with the teacher remarks, "I'm used to seeing a woman's face when I speak to her." The film is a horror film because its central characters cannot be seen and within the narrative, both are a threatening presence in the family home. Keller approved of Gibson's representation of her, saying that she "was just such a little monster as presented only worse."<sup>21</sup> In her accounts of early childhood, Keller often resorts to uncanny imagery; she actually calls her pre-linguistic self "Phantom," a name that both Sullivan and Keller's editor Henney found extremely disturbing. In this particular horror film, the blind heroines are also the monsters, though highly sympathetic villains, terrorizing the household with their violent confrontations; they must both learn to live, and communicate, within the Keller family and in the Keller home. In the film's narrative version of a very short span of the life of Keller and Sullivan, Helen must be taught to behave, and to learn language, and Annie must learn to face her own troubles.

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<sup>21</sup> Nella Braddy Henney Journal, 18 April 1960, Nella Braddy Henney Collection, Samuel P. Hayes Library, Perkins School for the Blind.

Penn also describes a particular special effect used in the film to represent Annie's visual and psychological world, in which he blew up a small piece of film until the image "disintegrated"; this is used for Annie's flashbacks. While this might sound gimmicky, these distorted flashbacks are the way in which we know Annie in the film, and understand that her mysterious, tragic past motivates her to care for Helen. (In the live television Playhouse 90 *Miracle Worker*, the spectator-audience is given an image, with an iris frame, of baby Helen's disintegrating vision, as well.) Penn describes the spare set of the film version of *The Miracle Worker* as "a house that has lost its faith in sight and sound... we don't ever see a picture or part of picture at the edge of the frame." In this decision to pare down the *mise en scène* from the cluttered television set to near abstraction, Penn articulates his deliberate effort to structure the film through an absence of conventional visual cues. Throughout the film, he disrupts the conventional visual culture of the classical Hollywood cinema – the faciality of the image-spectator relationship, the use of the vision of the characters to structure the film space – and replaces these conventions with disruptions to what was presumed, by the classical cinema, to be a normal visual relationship of spectator and film.

Of the limitations of the aesthetic impact of television's technology, Penn says, again,

[T]here were a lot of limitations built into live TV, not the least of which was simply that the cameras have to be in a position, relative to each other, where they don't photograph each other. Which means that you're looking at something from a kind of oblique angle, and there is a kind of obliquity that prevails in live TV that is inherent in the medium. When I look back now on some of the old shows, I see that sense that you cannot do what you can do in film, which is go right into the soul through the eyes, you know.<sup>22</sup>

Penn is describing the technological fact that television cannot frame an image in the same ways that film could, or did. Traditional cinematic techniques, such as the emotional close-up, intimate shot-reverse-shot dialog, and eye-line matches, all of which sutured the spectator to the film and

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<sup>22</sup> Kindem, *Live Television Generation*, 129.

its characters in an identificatory mode, were less prominent in Penn's television experience, and in his film aesthetics. That TV technologies at the time prohibited knowing "the soul through the eyes" actually produced the innovations and strategies that created the startling appearance of *The Miracle Worker*. This visually disorienting style was an aesthetic suited to the exploration of Keller and Sullivan's "not-visual" world, but it was also a product of the changing film industry and the workers it employed. Penn's productions of *The Miracle Worker* were influenced by television production technology and exploited it – in the limited mobility of the camera and the enforced attention to action, in the long take, in the full shot composition of the figures and actions in the frame, and in the difficulties of the facial close-up, and the techniques that circumvented it and replaced it. In addition to the cinematic adaptation of television's intense phenomenology, *The Miracle Worker* also benefited from a disruption of visual convention enforced by television production technology and aesthetics.

In 1966, after making *The Miracle Worker* (and before making *Bonnie and Clyde*) Arthur Penn directed the play *Wait Until Dark* on Broadway, where it too, was produced by Fred Coe. That play was adapted for film, and directed by Terence Young, who had previously directed Sean Connery as James Bond in *From Russia with Love*, and other films. *Wait Until Dark* (1967) is a suspense film and a horror film whose formula, a blind woman, alone in her home, persecuted by unknown assailants, was repeated throughout the 60s and 70s. In *Wait Until Dark*, the heroine is a victim, her sighted persecutors are villains, and the audience can, for the most part, easily identify each over the course of the film. If *Wait Until Dark* does not inaugurate the sub-genre, identified by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder as "the blind 'slasher' film"<sup>23</sup> it may be one of the most obvious exploitations of that sub-genre's horror and suspense possibilities.

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<sup>23</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, 164.

Like *The Miracle Worker*, *Wait Until Dark* creates an intense phenomenology, in the liveness-effects retained from its Broadway performance, in the cramped interior of the basement apartment in which almost all of the action is set, and in the limited movements of the camera within this interior. Although they discuss the fictional “vulnerability” of the blind heroine, Mitchell and Snyder do not mention the experience of immobility that is a convention of many of the films they list in the “blind ‘slasher’” sub-genre, but there is often a house, an apartment or even a city in which the blind woman is contained. In *Wait Until Dark*, Suzy is actually characterized as learning to use her cane, and the limited mobility that is a result of her recent blindness is a dramatic element of the film. At the same time, her violent (and resourceful) interactions with the space of her basement apartment are also part of the film’s phenomenological attraction. Mid-way through the film, Suzy changes from jeans and a heavy sweater into a pale pink blouse and pleated skirt and pink tinted hosiery. She is costumed like a ballet dancer, and this underscores the physicality of her graceful, yet dramatic movements and gestures, as the film reaches its climax and she murders her assailant.

Mitchell and Snyder, in their larger discussion of melodrama, horror and disability, suggest that the “blind ‘slasher’ film”<sup>24</sup> is a sub-genre related to both melodrama and horror, or, more to the point, that horror and melodrama are related. In this, as in their larger argument regarding disabled bodies on screen, Mitchell and Snyder are following Linda Williams, who sees the “body genres” of melodrama and horror as related in their affective appeal to the body of the

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<sup>24</sup> Although they have called the sub-genre the “blind ‘slasher’ film,” with quote marks around the word “slasher” Mitchell and Snyder are not suggesting that the blind character is the slasher, but rather that there are a series of slasher films with blind victims. There are; *Wait Until Dark* was preceded by *Peeping Tom* (1960) and, for that matter, *Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney* (Pabst, 1927) and followed by *Blind Terror* (1971) with Mia Farrow, and many, many others. But the ambiguity of the phrase “blind ‘slasher’ film” becomes ironic when one realizes that Suzy becomes a killer, in *Wait Until Dark*, as does Selma, in *Dancer in the Dark*, and Meg in *Panic Room* (2002). There is a series of horror and suspense blind slasher films, in which the role of victim and villain is (at least) as complicated as that in *The Miracle Worker*.



spectator by the bodies on screen. For Mitchell and Snyder, the spectator's interaction with the disabled body on screen is governed by an anxiety about "the degree to which one commands the behaviors and capacities of one's own body." In the case of the "blind 'slasher' film," the films "promote identification with visually impaired, disabled female bodies in order to induce intense feelings of vulnerability in an audience. The genre consistently associates femininity with visual impairment and with the sensation of extreme vulnerability."<sup>25</sup> Whether or not the spectator "identifies" with the blind heroine, *Wait Until Dark* produces a sensation of limited mobility and threatens the film-goer (and the theater-goer) with the possibility of sightlessness. At the climax of the play (or film) the theater goes dark. Trailers for the film warned spectators, but why is this so frightening? Especially if the spectator has been warned?

Both *Wait Until Dark* and *The Miracle Worker* share an intense phenomenology produced by cinematography and effects that include not just visual disruptions to the facial and ocularcentric conventions of classical cinema, but also a physical, embodied sensation of limited mobility. Both of these films engage in a departure from what was established by the aesthetic ideology of the classical cinema – to see and to move freely – as phenomenologically normal. As Penn has suggested, certain capacities to see and to move freely - on the part of the film's camera and the spectator's body - were assumed in classical Hollywood cinema. Indeed, I have argued that the classical Hollywood cinema thought it could be multi-sensory, and could compensate for its sonic and visual limitations with the inclusion of haptic images. Film in the era of live television, at least, Penn's film and films like it, dwelt on, and exaggerated a sense of visual disruption and limited mobility, to produce a new generic experience of horror and suspense.

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<sup>25</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, 163-5.

## Phenomenology of Suspense

Although Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as discussed in my introduction, attends to an embodied multi-sensory experience, his work articulates a very traditional relationship between the body, sight and the mind. He is writing about sensory experience in the culturally determined phenomenological world, in which the eyes have historically been the sense with which we establish knowledge. Thus, Merleau-Ponty often takes for granted the coordinated experience of the eyes and the body. In Merleau-Ponty's later work, an awareness of the unreliability of our eyes, combined with the changing temporal and spatial experiences of our bodies, makes this knowledge less certain.

In Merleau-Ponty's last published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, the body's perception depends on its movement in the world, and the body perceives and perceives again as it moves.

I thought I saw on the sands a piece of wood polished by the sea and it was a clayey rock. For when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first . . . The breakup and the destruction of the first appearance do not authorize me to define henceforth the "real" as a simple probable, since they are only another name for the new apparition, which must therefore figure in our analysis of the dis-illusion.<sup>26</sup>

Merleau-Ponty describes a process in which one visual illusion, based on a set of perceived evidence, dissipates into another appearance or illusion. And the conclusion Merleau-Ponty draws is not the certainty of rock or driftwood but "that perhaps "reality" does not belong definitively to any particular perception," or, in other words, "each perception is mutable and only probable."<sup>27</sup> The body's perception depends on its movement in the world, and it perceives

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<sup>26</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 40-41.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

and perceives again as it moves, gathering evidence for the limitless possibilities of the world. Suspense is a constant, ever-present force that provides every apparition and illusion and fills every space left by the “dissipation” of every illusion. Suspense, in phenomenological terms, defines the state of the world and the perceiver, awaiting the next apparition, illusion or set of evidence.

Suspense, as defined by narrative theory and discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, also relies on sensory information – the film imparts images, sounds and, as I argued, haptic cues that the spectator-audience responds to. The spectator-audience gains knowledge, this knowledge becomes imbalanced with the knowledge of the characters on screen, and, according to the classical, narrative, definitions of suspense, suspense is created. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological discussion of suspense, suspense is created by the absolute uncertainty of sensory knowledge and by the state of anticipation with which we live in the world. In the phenomenological world Merleau-Ponty sees, suspense is a state of sensory being determined by our senses and our movement through the world. Anything can happen and our ability to know it – which depends upon our sight and our mobility – is uncertain.

In Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of successive appearances and dis-illusions, the relationship between movement and the perceiving subject is only suggested. But throughout *The Phenomenology of Perception* the perceiver’s moving body establishes space, the depth and limits of what is seen. As the body moves through space and time, its perceptions, and, specifically, its visual perception’s, appearance and illusion, are mutable, and changeable. For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship of the moving body, sight and mind is culturally determined – Merleau-Ponty describes no sensory or mobility disabilities of his own,<sup>28</sup> and, to some extent, he imagines the senses in ways that reflect the historically and culturally determined uses of the

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<sup>28</sup> Though one might imagine that as he aged, both his visual acuity and mobility decreased.

senses, and the priority given to vision. Although Merleau-Ponty is, in this example, exploring the “mutable” and “probable” nature of the real, it is the eyes that establish this, however tenuous knowledge of the world. Merleau-Ponty’s study of the “invisible,” more generally, suggests that the priority he placed on vision is found to be false, but this priority is at the same time, present in his work.

If sight and movement of the body are, at least to begin with, presumed necessary for the experience of, if not definite knowledge of the world, they are absolutely presumed necessary for cinematic experience. In *The Address of the Eye*, film theorist Vivian Sobchack addresses the relationship between the flat screen of the projected film and the embodied body, the world-film relationship, through movement and vision. Sobchack begins,

The film’s body, then, is radically distinguished by its motility. Its viewing-view is always in motion, even if that motion is expressed introspectively and appears to the body-subject of an ‘other’ as non-movement. The most ‘static’ of films is not static at all. Thus Arthur Danto rightly tells us: ‘Moving pictures are just that: pictures which move, not just (or necessarily at all) pictures of moving things . . . Before the advent of moving pictures, it would not have been necessary to characterize nonmoving pictures as nonmoving; there would have been no other sort.’ Except, of course, [Sobchack reminds us] for those ‘moving pictures’ accomplished and projected without reel changes by our own lived-bodies.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Sobchack compares the constant movement of a film’s body – as evident in the moving picture – to the constant movement of the lived-body in the world. The lived-body’s motility is achieved by its feet, and, according to Sobchack the camera creates the motility of the film’s body, “The camera is the enabling instrument that allows perceptual access to the world. The camera is itself substantial and thus can inhabit and move about in that world among other substantial and sensible phenomena with which it can relate existentially.”<sup>30</sup> Sobchack’s phenomenology of film experience depends upon the spectator’s body recognizing the

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<sup>29</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

perceptions – the “moving” vision – of the film as evidence of the film’s body. Thanks to the camera, the film’s body and the viewer’s body share, presumably, both motility and vision and the viewer’s body recognizes these in the film. In both Merleau-Ponty, and in the phenomenology of film experience that Sobchack develops based on his work, the body and its vision produce the experience of the world.

### **The Disabled Body and Post-Studio Film**

In Merleau-Ponty and in Sobchack (and in Bazin) much depends on the ability to see and to move. Although knowledge is no longer the ultimate goal of sensory experience, experience of the world, or the cinematic world, depend upon a seeing, moving body. Both the spectator-audience and the film are presumed to have vision and mobility and in the act of film viewing, particularly the theater-centric film viewing of the studio era, the embodied spectator-audience gives over their bodies’ mobility, and sight, to that of the film. The spectator-audience is presumed to have the experience of vision and mobility, a vision and mobility that they recognize as similar to the vision and mobility of the film. But if film assumes responsibility for the spectator-audience’s sight and mobility in the classical era, in the post-studio era, film, or at least Penn’s films and others that share its aesthetic, begin to change; the film threatens to withhold vision and to limit the spectator’s mobility.

The attraction of post-studio film is its disabilities, or limitations, made visible and not compensated for, as they were in the classical era. Film begins to explore and exploit its technological and sensory limitations and to confront the spectator with its phenomenological difference. The preceding discussion of the cramped, intense television aesthetic is the first of the phenomenological threats made to the spectator-audience. The presence, at the very center of this space, of a blind heroine, suggests the second threat – sightlessness.

The significance of these particular phenomenological threats is not ahistorical, no matter how much resonance these threats may have had in the long history of vision and cinema. The anxiety produced by the threat of sightlessness has been present in various historical contexts I have discussed, and particularly present in the transitional era of late silent film. But the “horror” produced by the possibility of sightlessness, in the era of live television and post-studio Hollywood, I would argue, is now part of an anxiety produced by the changing film industry, new television technologies and their effects on the spectator-audience. Lynn Spigel’s study, and others, suggest that neither television producers, nor consumers knew exactly who would be watching, nor where, nor how to watch television.

In 1953, Arthur Penn directed a performance for Gulf Playhouse’s series *First Person*, entitled *Crip*.<sup>31</sup> *First Person* was a series produced by Fred Coe, and intended to be an experimental project that explored the possibilities of first person narratives, including the adaptation of modern short stories, for live television. The entire series (Penn directed four performances) was shot with a subjective, first person camera, just as *The Lady in the Lake* a classic film noir, had been. *The Lady in the Lake* is a key example for Vivian Sobchack, in *The Address of the Eye*, and for *Cahiers du Cinema* critic Pascal Bonitzer, in his essay “Partial Vision and the Labyrinth.” While Sobchack sees the first person camera as a failure because it makes obvious the perceptual disparities between the spectator’s body and the film’s body in a cinematic context – the classical Hollywood cinema – in which this disparity is usually hidden, Bonitzer sees the film as the ultimate “thriller” and “suspense” film precisely because of the terrifying “partial vision,” experienced “as if by force” by the spectator.<sup>32</sup> *The Lady in the Lake* carries out

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<sup>31</sup> *Crip* is available for viewing at the Paley Center for Media.

<sup>32</sup> Pascal Bonitzer, “Film and the Labyrinth,” trans. Fabrice Ziolkowski, *Wide Angle* 4 no. 4 (1981): 58.

the phenomenological threats already discussed – the extreme, subjective camera limits the film’s mobility and vision in ways that are noticeable to a sighted and mobile spectator-audience.

Within the framework of Sobchack’s phenomenological experience of classical Hollywood cinema, in *The Address of the Eye*, *The Lady in the Lake* is a failure; in Bonitzer’s discussion of suspense and horror film, the same film is, though awkward, the paradigmatic example of the creation of cinematic “blind space” in which horror resides.<sup>33</sup>

In Penn’s *Crip*, the show introduces an extremely disabled body to its television audience – the hero, a teenage boy named Alan, cannot move or speak, he can only see. And, given the entirely subjective camera perspective, the audience is forced to assume this disabled body as their own and to recognize the bodily disparity between their usual vision and mobility, and that which they experience while watching. The shots are extremely long in duration, as the hero’s mother and the lonely girl next door ask him questions and come and go as they please. The show is uncanny: part *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), in the controlling and infantilizing figure of the mother, who seems to enforce Alan’s silent immobility, and part *Rear Window* (1954), in the pleasure and excitement Alan (and the spectator-audience) derive from watching Jane reach out to him. The desires of Alan’s mother, in particular, seem to reflect the changing conditions of media consumption in the live television era; she wants Alan to sit still and watch the world through the picture window that frames much of the show, and his ability to get up and leave so frightens her that she denies and prevents this possibility. In the course of the narrative, Jane teaches Alan to speak (the audience can hear his interior monologue throughout), and to walk, but the spectator-audience sees none of this.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Penn's *Crip*, and the threats of *The Miracle Worker*, and *Wait Until Dark* – to withhold vision and mobility – reflect anxieties about the phenomenological experience of the live television and post-studio spectator-audience. Where are they? Can they be made to sit still in the movie theater for an entire film? Can a visual medium still engage their senses as completely, as it did, or tried to do, during the classical studio era? Penn saw his work on *The Miracle Worker* as innovative, according to his interviews, and it still appears remarkably different, in style, tone and content, from the studio films produced only 5 years before. But Penn and other filmmakers of his generation were also part of the process by which the film industry sustained its commercial viability in the post-studio era of live television. The filmmakers' experimentations with technology, and its limitations and possibilities, were not simply aesthetic practices, they were the effects of a changing commercial industry.

Reflections from Penn, Frankenheimer and Robert Mulligan on live television production, and on the Playhouse 90 performance *The Comedian*, a drama set in the world of live television, reveal one of the most startling technological limitations of television production, at least from the retrospective perspective of its creators. The three directors described, again and again, the phenomenological strangeness of the division of labor between the floor manager and the director in live television production. The floor manager, who could physically move about the television studio set, directed the actors and cameras, but he only transmitted the directions. The show's director, who, immobilized in the booth, watched the show as it was assembled (for broadcast, either live, or with a few seconds delay) on monitors, gave the directions, via microphone, to the floor manager, who listened on headphones. Penn, Frankenheimer and Mulligan each began as floor managers, and described episodes of "taking over" direction from the floor – effectively "blind" as to the product they were creating – when the director passed out,



suddenly became ill, etc.<sup>34</sup> These stories express a frustration, not just at the division of power, but the division of labor, and the division of sensory abilities – to see, to move, to direct, to speak – between the floor manager and director. There is the implication, too, that the directors were ex-Hollywood and therefore, less well adapted, themselves, to the new technological medium, while the floor managers became television directors, and, eventually, new Hollywood directors themselves. The television floor manager and the ex-Hollywood studio director, working, or not working, together make up a fragmented, uncoordinated sensory being at the heart of media production in the live television era. And the frustration and anxiety caused by this mode of production, is articulated through the cripp, the blind heroine, the heroine pair and the shared, social sensorium these figures invoke.

### **Resolution: Shared Sensoria and Fragmented Selves**

If sightlessness and immobility are frightening, so is the concept of a shared, social sensorium, and the attendant suggestion that no one is in complete control of their senses. What *Crip* leaves out, when we do not see Alan and Jane's actual efforts, *The Miracle Worker* and *Wait Until Dark* dwell on, that is, the process by which the disabled heroine pair is rescued from their isolation. *The Miracle Worker* narrates not just Helen's initial acquisition of language, but also her growing consciousness of affection and standards for behavior, and Annie's fulfilling sense of authority and accomplishment. *Wait Until Dark* also features a heroine pair; Suzy Hendricks has her young neighbor, Gloria, to help her thwart the villains. Awkward Gloria tells Suzy, with a hopeless shrug, "I wanna be gorgeous" and Suzy wants to be "a good blind lady" and as independent as plucky Gloria; they begin the film teasing and fighting with one another. But they, quite literally, learn to communicate; and devise a code of taps that allows them to piece together

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<sup>34</sup> *The Dynamics of Live Television*. Video recording previously cited in full.

the plot of the assailants, using Gloria's powers of observation, and Suzy's perceptive response to the lies and deceptions of the gang of thieves. It is this sensory teamwork that allows them to, rather violently, regain control of Suzy's basement apartment.



**Figure 17: Heroine Pair, *Wait Until Dark***

Patricia White's study of classical Hollywood cinema *Uninvited* provides a survey of the significance of domestic space, and sensory teamwork, to the sub-genre of gothic horror. White cites literary historians Norman Holland and Leona Sherman on the literary gothic formula, which depends on "the image" of "woman-plus-habitation" and a narrative of "mysterious and supernatural threats."<sup>35</sup> In the case of the film *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), "a door, a staircase, a mirror, a portrait are never simply what they appear to be," and, White continues, "visitors become lost and disoriented, doors left ajar close unnoticed."<sup>36</sup> In the gothic horror film, the haunted house is known, or felt to be haunted by the spatial experience of its guests, and

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<sup>35</sup> Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 76. Actually, she cites Mary Ann Doane who cites Holland and Sherman.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

this spatial, kinesthetic experience is conveyed to the audience by the film's cinematography.

While the threats in *The Miracle Worker* and *Wait Until Dark* are not supernatural, they are certainly domestic<sup>37</sup> and difficult to see, and they are negotiated, like the house in *The Haunting*,<sup>38</sup> by perceptive heroine pairs.

But the psychically linked heroines of *The Haunting*, who feel the houses ghostly presences, are, like the house, not simply what they appear to be. White continues,

As a ghost film, *The Haunting* dramatizes not only the woman's 'deficiency in relation to vision' . . . but a deficiency in relation to visibility or visualization. In *The Haunting* we never see the ghost, though we do see the lesbian. Which is not to say that we 'see' lesbian sexuality. *The Haunting* is 'not a film about lesbians,' the common disavowal of mainstream producers [...] It is (pretends to be) about something else. I would consider 'something else' to be a useful working definition of lesbianism in classical cinema. It is precisely the fact that the 'haunting' is unseen, that there are no special effects, that renders *The Haunting* the ultimate ghost film.<sup>39</sup>

In a film so perceptive as *The Haunting*, an emphasis on the deficiency of vision, visibility or visuality is frustrating. The "something else" that is "lesbianism in classical cinema" is also characterized, in *The Haunting*, by a super-sensitivity, and, specifically, a shared, non-visual super-sensitivity on the part of its heroines. Nell feels the haunted presence, but does not see it directly, nor do the film's spectators. But this sensitivity is not Nell's alone; it is shared and created by the relationship between two women. Theo can read minds, and must communicate to the spectator audience and the other characters in the film, the extra-sensory perceptions that emotionally repressed Nell experiences. Without them both, the spectator's experience of the

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<sup>37</sup> When the *Cineaste* interviewers describe the house as ominous, Penn reflects, "on the danger to a child like that of a Christmas tree ball or of laundry hanging on a clothesline--because she had to be watched all the time ... Years afterward, when I had my own children, I thought, gee, how that house must have resonated with the silence of that child, just moving as a presence, and people not being able to talk about her, even to each other, but just having to watch, with the child as the focus of all the behavior of the family." (Gary Crowdon and Richard Porton, previously cited.) The house is threat to its small heroine, while at the same time, the child's silent presence is disturbing to the house and to the family.

<sup>38</sup> Like *The Miracle Worker*, *The Haunting* is black and white and, compared to the studio-films of the previous decade, innovative and cheap.

<sup>39</sup> White, *Uninvited*, 80.

house's haunting would be incomplete, and the film would essentially not exist. If *The Haunting* is a case of the invisibility of lesbian sexuality, enforced by mainstream producers, it is also an example of the ways in which something supposedly non-visible becomes seen, or, rather, felt and experienced by a pair of heroines and the film's spectator-audience.



**Figure 18: Heroine Pair, *The Haunting***

Although White brings various Freudian and Lacanian models to bear on her interpretation of Wise's horror film, these do not eclipse the spatial and sensory attention she pays to the film *The Haunting*. The phenomenological bent of White's approach can also be understood in contrast to the majority of writing about horror, which is obsessed with psychological questions leaves questions of space, embodied sexuality and the senses to the side. In its phenomenological attention, White's interpretation of *The Haunting* resembles Pascal Bonitzer's more formal analyses of the unseen spaces that define the horror film. *The Haunting*, a film supremely concerned with representing the invisible, creates, in the space of the haunted house and in the bodily experiences of its characters (and spectators) a queered phenomenology.

Here, it is illustrative to consider the history of sexuality that attends to Helen Keller herself. Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller, like Theo and Eleanor, are understood to make a complete pair; their touching hands allowed Sullivan's eyes and ears to supplement Keller's sensorium, while Keller's perceptions changed the way Sullivan experienced the world. This representation is particularly strong in Keller's essays in *The World I Live In*, in her memoir *Teacher*, in Nella Braddy Henney's biography *Anne Sullivan Macy* and in many of the photographs that show the pair, together, experiencing some sensory element of daily life. Anne Sullivan, though she experienced visual impairment throughout her life is rarely represented as disabled, because in the conventional heroine pair, one woman must be able to compensate for the other's disability.



**Figure 19: Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, c. 1920**

This hyper-visible, public, representation of the two women as a super-sensitive pair, is not, in this case, a displacement, or a distraction from a heavily coded lesbian relationship. Or rather, it is not simply that. The photos and essays do represent the ways in which the women

experienced the world through their complement of shared senses, thoughts and experience. However, Keller and Sullivan's emotional and sexual relationship has, from their youth, attracted a public fascination equal to that given to their sensory relationship. The history of speculation surrounding Keller and Sullivan's romantic and sexual lives (or life) combined with the conventional representation of sensory female pairs – in Theo and Eleanor,<sup>40</sup> in “funny,” perceptive Ann and blind Judy in *Dark Victory*, in Henriette and Louise in *Orphans of the Storm*, in Suzy and Gloria in *Wait Until Dark*, in Helen and her companion Nancy in *Magnificent Obsession* – suggest that these pairs of women must simultaneously embody anxieties about both sensory *and* sexual experiences.

White explains that her lesbian reading of *The Haunting* is not, of course, the first of such interpretations. Shirley Jackson, the author of the novel on which the film was based has what White describes as a “paranoid reaction” to the queer interpretation of her story. Even Jackson's biographer insists on the heroine pair as “separate personalities – separate women – who are actually one . . . The relations among these splintered parts, familiar, affectionate, cozy, intimate, where meant to be the relations among parts of one single mind.”<sup>41</sup> In this, the biographer denies not just the lesbian interpretation of the women's relationship, but, simultaneously the possibility of incomplete phenomenologies working together as well. Neither is really acceptable, or preferable to the figure of a single subject, however fragmented,<sup>42</sup> and the unnaturalness of the

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<sup>40</sup> See also Kathy and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark*, Meg and Sarah in *Panic Room* and Alma and Elisabeth in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, in which a chatty nurse becomes obsessed with her charge, an actress who has ceased to speak.

<sup>41</sup> White, *Uninvited*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> After her performances in *The Miracle Worker*, the Patty Duke went on to become both halves of the most popular heroine pair of the 1960s. “The Patty Duke Show,” aired 1963-66 and was the story of identical cousins Patty and Cathy. Television historian Moya Luckett has written, “These shows suggest that female partners might complete each other, compensating for each other's deficiencies. Patty Duke, for example, proposes that together its two ordinary but opposite girls could be something special, a premise clearly voiced by Patty Lane in the show's unaired pilot... (106)” At the same time, Luckett's argument privileges the interpretation of this heroine pair as “a disruption of identity,” a

lesbian couple implicates the unnaturalness of the disabled pair. That the appearance of a shared sensorium and the implication of lesbianism appear, again and again, together, reveals just how disruptive and disturbing the idea of a shared, social sensorium, and the disabled phenomenological bodies that contribute to it, is.

And it is, after all a disabled phenomenology that film offers, particularly in the historical moment of live television and post-studio Hollywood. The limited mobility and unconventional, partial vision of the television film and the films it inspired were new, disturbing experiences after the apparently flawless seeing, moving and multi-sensory phenomenology of the classical Hollywood film. For Robin Wood, the American horror film of the 1970s was the return of the repressed, a revolt against social repression that crossed the fine line between what considered “basic repression” that “makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming and convulsions” and “surplus repression [that] makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists.”<sup>43</sup> While Wood cites Freud repeatedly, the image of the violent child-animal, uncoordinated in its sensory perceptions, is strikingly phenomenological, and familiar. The films included in this chapter – *The Miracle Worker*, *Wait Until Dark* and *Crip*, but also *The Haunting* – all explore the possibility that other phenomenological subjects besides the “monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalist” *individual* might be produced by the cinema.

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“fragmentation” of identity and “the difficulty, unpredictability, and protean nature” of teenage behavior that is, in Luckett’s argument, eventually left behind in normal adulthood.

<sup>43</sup> Robin Wood, “The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s,” in *Horror, The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 25. Elements of Wood’s argument here appear in his earlier essay “Introduction to the American Horror Film” from *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979).

## Conclusion

“It might seem that the five senses would work intelligently only when resident in the same body. Yet when two or three are left unaided, they reach out for their complements in another body, and find that they yoke easily with the borrowed team.”

- Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*

This quotation is taken from Helen Keller’s essay “The Five Sensed World” in *The World I Live In* and describes the ways in which Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller shared their perceptual experience of the world with each other. *The World I Live In* and the theories of consciousness Keller articulates within it, I have already examined in the context of the late silent-era film *Deliverance*. *Deliverance* was not just an adaptation of Keller’s autobiography, it was a cinematic adaptation of the phenomenology she described in *The World I Live In*.

But Keller’s “borrowed team” is part of a particularly rich, and strange, metaphor that addresses both the experience of the shared, social sensorium and the changing, but intimate relationship of human perception and technological perception in the age of cinema. Invoking two teams of horses, her own and the borrowed team, both, presumably hitched to something, it is a distinctly (early)19<sup>th</sup> century image, and thus is part Keller’s Victorian prose style. At the same time, the image unites the biological bodies, of horses or humans, with the mechanical technology of the presumed carriage. It is also not a visual image, but a kinesthetic, material, embodied experience invoked for metaphoric use. One does not see the horses and carriage, one imagines them, and senses the physical co-operation about which Keller is writing. Finally, this metaphor of the borrowed team contrasts remarkably with the popular 20<sup>th</sup> century cliché of perception, present in film history, film theory and in phenomenology – the image of the passenger on the train.

In Mary Ann Doane’s 1985 essay “‘When the direction of the force acting on the body is changed’: The Moving Image” she opens with a reference to “the persistent fascination of the



classical cinema with trains and railroad stations” and she considers one “frequently singled out metacinematic moment” that obliquely foregrounds the convergence of cinematic and locomotive technology.<sup>1</sup> Although she does not offer a list of citations for where this scene from *Letters from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948) is “frequently singled out,” Doane is right. The cinema has a persistent fascination with the locomotive; Ophuls’ film is one of many that foregrounds its cinematic medium, and its production of moving visual images, by including a train in its *mise en scène*. Almost as often in cinema history, a train’s windows structure the frame of the moving image, or a train’s movement creates the moving image. From the “primitive” early cinema to the post-classical period, in which the experience of a train has become far less common, for the spectator-audience, than the *cinematic* experience of a train, a locomotive fascination persists.<sup>2</sup>

As part of her argument regarding the “more than” analogous perceptual experiences of the classical cinema and train travel, Doane cites Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in *Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, who draws the comparison between locomotive travel and cinematic experience himself, to illuminate his concept of “panoramic perception.” Panoramic perception, produced by the experience of train travel, compresses and fragments space and time, “Panoramic perception, in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belongs to the same space as the perceived objects: the traveler sees the objects, landscapes, etc., through the apparatus which moves him through the world.”<sup>3</sup> Schivelbusch actually contrasts the experience of train

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<sup>1</sup> Doane, *Femme Fatales*, 188. Actually, it is a convergence of cinematic and locomotive technology, and memory. Doane’s essay goes on to discuss psychoanalytic subjects, and thus her attention to memory.

<sup>2</sup> Doane is interested in emphasizing the presence of the locomotive in “classical” cinema because she is comparing classical, narrative cinemas and avant-garde cinemas; I think the locomotive effect is more cinematically pervasive than that. The film blog “The Art of Memory” recently posted an extensive three part “trains in cinema” list of titles and images.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Urizen, 1977), 66.

travel with the experience of travel by horse drawn coach, which he characterizes by a fullness of sensual experience that included the “smells and sounds, not to mention the synesthetic perceptions that were part of travel” in a pre-locomotive past.

For Schivelbusch (and for Doane, following him) vision has, in the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century become detached, dissociated, destabilized, fundamentally altered and so on, by the technologies of modernity. Doane continues, in an argument that is now quite familiar within film studies,

The cinema (and in fact, all systems for the reproduction of images, photography and television included) introduces a separation between vision and the individual subject through mechanization and the easy collusion of science and technique. It allows for the possibility of thinking vision through structures which exceed but nevertheless corroborate individual subjectivity. Vision, which had formerly quite clearly belonged to the individual subject is expropriated by the machine.<sup>4</sup>

In 1983, this is an early articulation of what would become film studies’ modernity thesis, which, in its central assumption – that human perception and technology change, together, over time – has been foundational to this dissertation. The blind heroine is a figure of expropriated vision, appearing within the medium, cinema, that is most often understood to have created the dissociation of subject and perception; this is particularly clear in the contrast drawn between Helen’s imagination and Nadja’s sensual pleasures, for instance, in *Deliverance*. At the same time, the blind heroine also embodies the fullness of multi-sensory perception, as in Judy’s experience of the haptic and sonic *mise en scène* of *Dark Victory*.

While the multi-sensory quality of Keller’s metaphor of the borrowed team and horse drawn buggy agrees with the fullness of sensory experience Schivelbusch assigns to pre-locomotive travel, it is, however also, in her use of it description of the dispersed sensorium and the un-whole body. Schivelbusch has invoked the “traditional perception” of a pre-locomotive era

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<sup>4</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 193.

and Doane has insisted that vision “formerly quite clearly belonged to the individual subject.”

Both imagine a whole sensory subject, without expropriated vision, and with a full sensory experience located in the individual body. It is this particular construction, of the history of perception and the individual phenomenological subject, that Keller’s metaphor disrupts.

Although Keller’s horse-and-buggy metaphor is antiquated, I would like to explore the ways in which it disrupts Doane and Schivelbusch’s presumed timeline of perception, and reveals the illusory nature of the prelapsarian subject they imagine.

The quotation from Keller I have already examined in the context of Keller’s discussion of the social and cultural experiences of perception that she knew. Keller’s emphasis on the mediated experiences of vision (and sound) available to her through literature reveal the possible breadth of Doane’s claim that “all systems for the reproduction of images . . . introduce a separation between vision and the individual subject.” Keller’s arguments in *The World I Live In*, add to photography, cinema and television, the system of language, particularly literary language.<sup>5</sup> Vision, from Keller’s perspective, did not belong to an individual subject. The mediating power of literary language, which was not a machine, but is, in Heidegger’s sense of the term, *techne*, had granted mediated vision to her, and to anyone who read.

The “borrowed team” with whom Keller’s senses are yoked, is literally, in this case, Anne Sullivan.<sup>6</sup> In chapters two and three I hope I have given a sense of how Keller understood her senses to be complemented, and supplemented, by the people with which she was most

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<sup>5</sup> And, even more particularly, the literary language of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that literature’s investment in the reproduction of images. Or, rather, the reading practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century – Keller read literature in Greek and Latin for the production and reproduction of images (not always visual) that they offered her as a reader.

<sup>6</sup> Keller’s writing was, in itself, a collaborative, social process, in which she typed on a traditional typewriter, her work was read back to her via the manual alphabet, by Sullivan, Macy or Henney, and she edited and organized her work based on these readings.

intimate. In her public and private writing, Keller describes the influential and collaborative presences in her life: the editor of *The Story of My Life*, John Macy (briefly Anne Sullivan's husband), later, her literary editor at Doubleday Nella Braddy Henney, Polly Thompson, her personal assistant and interpreter during her years of fundraising for the American Foundation for the Blind, and countless others with whom she lived, worked, traveled, shared books and ideas, and argued. This emphasis on a community (which changed in composition throughout the years) is rarely foregrounded in popular representations of Keller, as it suggests that she was, as we all ultimately are, dependent on others for our experience of the world and our life in it.

Keller's comfort with the "borrowed team," the shared, social sensorium, are in marked contrast to William James' personal paranoia about the loss of his sight and his intellectual anxiety about possibility of a consciousness unmoored from its own, autonomous, sensory perceptions, "like bridges without piers" as he put it, in *The Principles of Psychology*. The possibility that our senses are not located within our own bodies, but are brought into being through our social, cultural and technological environment has been, I argue, frequently disturbing. The heroine pair has represented this disruption, in a wide range of cinematic contexts, from D.W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* to Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. In Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) the heroine pair becomes explicitly cinematic in the relationship of sighted Kathy and blind Selma. Selma's love of musicals is facilitated by Kathy's willingness to dance the actors movements across her palm in the darkened movie theater.

But Keller's horse drawn coach invokes yet another pair, for whom the heroine pair is a model – the film and its spectator, whose bodies relate, in the phenomenological experience of film, through their sensory differences and their similarities. Whether film has limitations and disabilities, or is capable of seeing and revealing more than the spectator, the spectator becomes engaged with the film's perception. Keller embraced the prosthetic relationship of the biological

and the technological; she was enthusiastic, for instance, about the development of robotics scientist Norbert Wiener's hearing machine, which amplified the physical vibrations of sound so that they could be felt by the deaf. This ability to recognize the human body as extensive with other bodies, and with the technologies it has created is the basis for the various "new psychologies" discussed in this dissertation; William James, Silvan Tomkins and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Each articulate definitions of the human, and human perception, that depend on their intimacy with the technologies with which they live. We could say that each of these writers understood perception, human perception, broadly, as "the apparatus which moves [the subject] through the world" – this is Schivelbusch's description of the train. For each of these writers, perception is a technology through which the world is mediated.

Schivelbusch and his locomotive "panoramic perception" have, since Doane's use of the work, gained a certain currency; Christian Keathley relies on Schivelbusch for his argument, for "the return of sensuous experience" in the experience of film and photography.<sup>7</sup> For Keathley, in moments of bodily "revelation" "the cinema achieves that doubling effect" that Keathley associates with Walter Benjamin's concept of mimesis. But in Benjamin's work, the mimetic faculty is not an achievement of the cinema, but rather, "The highest capacity for producing similarities is man's." It is man who imitates the shopkeeper, the teacher, the windmill and the train.<sup>8</sup> It is man who imitates and doubles the cinema, not cinema which mimics human perception. This distinction is significant. If the cinematic apparatus were always mimetic of

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, 52. For Keathley's purposes, his interpretation of Schivelbusch is almost entirely counter to Doane's. Schivelbusch's dissociated vision allows for an experience of detail that brings a "return of sensuous experience" not an "institutionalization" of it, as Doane once argued.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986). This list has also become quite famous. I cite it here because Benjamin includes the train.

human perception, cinema would be, as per Jean-Louis Baudry's argument, in "The Cinematic Apparatus," inevitably defined by a perceptual verisimilitude. And human perception would never learn, or mutate, or change. The fact that the cinema can share as Kracauer expressed it, "that which *only* the cinema is privileged to reveal" confounds this. In the cinematic narrative of the blind heroine, film (almost) never attempts to reproduce the blind heroine's perception, which would be the blank screen, but instead exaggerates, accentuates and experiments with vision. The film offers images that emphasize the disparities between human perception and film perception and solicit, through this imbalance, our sensory participation in the medium.

If this dissertation seems to cast about for theories of the subject as it takes up and critiques the work of James, Tomkins, Merleau-Ponty and the Frankfurt School figures, this is because no one theory – and, I have suggested, certainly not theories of the cine-semiotic or psychoanalytic subject – can describe the historical subjects brought into being by the distinct technological moments of cinema history. To account for current characterizations of "new" media as immersive, addictive or virtual, media studies must re-examine the sensory history of film and its technologies. But in that history we will not find the multi-sensory subject of modernity. Instead, we will find a series of historical phenomenologies and the technologies with which these phenomenological subjects have been intimate.

For Doane, writing about cinema's locomotive modernity, the expropriation of the sense from the individual has libratory potential which is, unfortunately, curtailed by the reorganization of vision effected in the classical, narrative cinema, in which "a regularization of vision and the subject's relation to the screen reasserts and institutionalizes the despatialization of subjectivity."<sup>9</sup> The presence of the blind heroine in cinema is part of a similar history, of an awareness of the dissociation of the senses and an exploration of the cinema's potential to transform this

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<sup>9</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 190.

dissociation into aesthetic experience. But, when examined through the recurring figure of the blind heroine, the reorganization of the spectator-audiences' perception follows a less linear trajectory through the early cinema, the classical period and the post-studio live television era.

Keller's *Deliverance* was the product of a moment in cinema history when the film industry was exploring the potential that the cinematic medium, and its technology, had for addressing film audiences through the senses – sight, sound and the “sense” of embodied gesture. Late silent film had, in its aesthetic repertoire, the tableau and the expressive gestures of the stage melodrama, which, indirectly addressed the audience's sense of touch and embodied emotion. Filmmakers had begun to edit separate shots together to structure narrative, and the filmgoer's attention, according to the longing glances and pointed stares of the film's actors. And films of the late silent era, when seen in theaters and movie-houses, had live musical accompaniment that allowed filmmakers to supplement the moving picture with sounds that re-enforced the films' visual narratives. Although the film object that has been preserved, images on celluloid, has been, retrospectively, understood as visual, the film experience, calling as it did, on the cultural experiences of live theater, and live music, produced a multi-sensory cinema experience.

When a film makes a blind heroine its protagonist, that film is forced to explore the possibilities and limitations of its own aesthetic resources in representing her. This is the cinematic history of the “not-visual” – film's ability to be visual but also more than visual and to mediate through the moving image, the sense of touch and the sense of embodiment. In the late silent-era, the film *Deliverance* explored its technological possibilities, performance techniques and cinematic conventions, in a film that, even by the standards of that time, seems to include a surfeit of conflicting representational strategies, as if the film were desperate to accommodate its heroine and prove its own multi-sensory abilities.

In the post-studio live television era, the blind heroine and a host of extraordinary bodies return to motivate the exploration of film's limitations. The difficulty of representing a blind heroine, a wheelchair bound adolescent, or a psychic lesbian couple offered challenges to the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema, which new filmmakers were technologically incapable of reproducing after the demise of the studio-system, and with which they were aesthetically frustrated. Using live television staging and filming practices, Arthur Penn's television (and, later, film) adaptation of Sullivan and Keller's biography emphasized a sense of limited mobility, physical confrontation and distorted vision.

If post-studio filmmaking practices experimented with the poverty of film's technological capabilities, the classical Hollywood cinema attempted to compensate for its sonic and visual limitations in its representations of the blind heroine. In *Dark Victory*, the suspense narrative is not just told through the internal structure of the characters' vision, the conventional eye-line matches and point-of-view shots that have been understood to characterize much of classical Hollywood cinema. Rather, the story is told in the sonic and haptic perceptions of the film's characters, and its spectators as well. The film body moves confidently from one perceptive register to the next, exploiting each for narrative and affective purposes, as if to persuade the audience-spectator that the film has the same complement of senses that it assumes they have, and that the film and the spectator could relate to one another without a sense of physical disparity.

In the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century film, the figure of the blind heroine reveals a disruptive non-visual imagination and a persistent desire to engage multi-sensory experience within the modern visual culture of which both film and written literature are a part. But whose desire and whose imagination? Located where? Neither in the film, nor in its filmmakers, nor in the spectator-audience, but shared among them.





**Figure 20: Heroine Pair, *Persona***

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*All other media cited in this paper is widely available on DVD or VHS.*



## **Biography**

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