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## Spiritual Cinema: Agel, Merleau-Ponty and the Cinematic Real

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## Spiritual Cinema: Agel, Merleau-Ponty and the Cinematic Real

### Abstract

This article seeks to retrieve the work of Henri Agel, and his collaborator Amédée Ayfre, for our theoretical understanding of film-philosophy. I explore their distinctive contribution to thinking philosophically about film and assess the relative merits of their work for the phenomenology of film. While exceptionally valuable for religious and theological interpretations of film I proceed to argue that Agel and Ayfre's work needs to be supplemented with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's film-phenomenology to adequately express the temporal and motional nature of film. Merleau-Ponty's work I contend while exceptionally valuable is brief and underdeveloped, and therefore does not fully draw out the implications of some claims about film-phenomenology. Therefore, I conclude by developing a theory of spiritual realism for film-philosophy. Spiritual realism understands the essential conditions of film-philosophy as a form of embodied perceptual experience, embedded in historical and ethical concrete reflection.

### Keywords

Sacred, Philosophy, Agel, Ayfre, Merleau-Ponty, Film, Spiritual.

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### Author Notes

Patrick O'Connor is an Associate Professor in Philosophy at Staffordshire University in the United Kingdom. His background is in Phenomenology and European Philosophy. He taught Philosophy of Religion for many years. He has published three books: *Atheism Reclaimed*, on atheism and existentialism; *Derrida: Profanations*, on phenomenology, ethics and the work of Jacques Derrida; and *Cormac McCarthy, Philosophy and the Physics of the Damned*. He has written for *The Conversation*, *Unknown Magazine*, *Open Democracy*, and *3am Magazine* as well as several academic journals. He is currently working on the Philosophy of Film.

In 1953, French film theorist, actor and priest Amédée Ayfre, and film theorist and author Henri Agel, wrote that cinema is fundamentally a profane medium due to its technological origins.<sup>1</sup> Both Ayfre and Agel argue for rescuing cinema from this secular fate. They argue films, in their optimal form, enable reflection on a sacred absolute.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, cinema is an essential art form for thinking about ethical and spiritual freedom.<sup>3</sup> Given the contemporary dissemination of film across new media and modern technologies, combined with ease of access, as well as diminishment in expense and time commitments for viewing, it has never been more important to examine Agel and Ayfre's claim about the importance of film as a vector of spiritual enrichment. Thus, if we are to hypothesise a phenomenology of film, important yet neglected reflections on film-philosophy can be found in the individual and collaborative work of Agel and Ayfre. While their work is largely untranslated into English, I will make the case herein for the importance of their ideas for film-philosophy.

The significance of Agel and Ayfre's work is found in their elucidation of a distinctly sacred style of cinema, as well as their rich and suggestive treatment of the possibilities and limitations of phenomenological analyses for films. While in agreement with Agel and Ayfre's phenomenological analysis of cinema, especially where they argue cinema is not reducible to material processes, I will ultimately argue that they do not fully account for the inherently temporal nature of film. I will first explain Agel and Ayfre's film-philosophy, outlining my primary objection to their emphasis on film as a form of spatial continuity. In contrast, I will emphasise film's temporal discontinuity as an essential prerequisite of film-philosophical reflection on ethical and spiritual freedom. To accomplish this, in the second section I will build on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of film as a 'temporal *gestalt*.' There I will show that Merleau-Ponty's transcendental account of film as a form of perceptual experience is crucial for comprehending what makes film intelligible as film,

despite Merleau-Ponty not fully drawing out the consequences of his own argument on film. Thus, this essay will contribute to film-philosophy specifically, as well as film theory generally, by outlining the conditions for thinking about film in a philosophical way.

A secondary contribution of this essay is the retrieval of Agel and Ayfre's film-phenomenology for understanding how religious style manifests in cinema. Ayfre and Agel are important firstly for offering a theory of how to engage questions of the sacred in film, and secondly, more distinctively, for articulating a distinctive phenomenological method by which to understand film. My express purpose in this essay is to build on Agel and Ayfre's work with a view to shifting their notion of sacred cinema towards what I term "spiritual realism." I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's embodied and experiential phenomenology to explain the conceptual status and import of spiritual realism, and how it frames film as a specific object: that is, as an object that constitutes, conveys, and discloses phenomenological perception. It is not that I dispute Agel and Ayfre's effort to theorise a metaphysics of cinema; it is more that I disagree with their argument, which is premised on ignoring questions of time, movement, and change. Recent scholarship on film-philosophy is premised on an opposition between film as representative of philosophical arguments and ideas, and the more radical claim that film does philosophy in its own unique way.<sup>4</sup> My aim in this essay is to offer a transcendental argument for the conditions of the intelligibility of film.<sup>5</sup>

This argument is crucial to the stakes of film-philosophy and film theory. If we are doing film-philosophy then, prior to exploring what a film is about, we need to illuminate the conditions of the intelligibility of film-thinking, to explain film as an object of philosophical significance or as meriting philosophical reflection. Therefore, it is vital to film-philosophy to explain the temporal, spatial, and embodied conditions of filmic experience before any claims are made about a film's philosophical themes, or what a film

discloses philosophically. Films are an essential object of philosophical speculation because they inherently disclose the structure of perceptual time itself – the experience of moving bodies in space – and, consequently, how human values are both at stake and contested. Thus, the primary theoretical innovation I develop in the final section will be to coin a theory of spiritual realism. Spiritual realism understands the essential conditions of film-philosophy as a form of embodied perceptual experience, embedded in historical and ethical concrete reflection. Spiritual realism implies that film is time thinking itself.<sup>6</sup> Phenomenology is the most appropriate philosophical method for contesting representational models of film as either material object or semiotic text, since phenomenology enables us to theorise cinema as a sense-making, vital and embodied medium.

### **Cinema and the Sacred**

In their 1953 book *Le Cinéma et Le Sacre*, Agel and Ayfre write in a phenomenological register, arguing that films as art-forms are irreducible to their mechanical construction, or to a film's objective causal origin.<sup>7</sup> Agel and Ayfre, following Edmund Husserl, propose a phenomenology of the sacred to overcome the opposition of immanence and transcendence. As Ayfre puts it, "A philosophy of pure immanence can make no place for the sacred. Where everything is explicable through intelligible necessities, or by objective determinisms, even if their exact nature remains provisionally unknown, nothing is sacred anymore."<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, optimal cinema is transcendent, capable of evoking a spiritual reality beyond the raw material of the object viewed or the natural constitution of a viewer. Agel and Ayfre connect the non-reducibility of filmic processes to the sacred because films, especially religious films, have the capacity to connect the spectator to divine revelation. The cinema of the sacred operates as a type of "seeing," or as a form of intuition, where our innermost

selves grasp immutable and timeless truths. The great films are sacramental portals which let spectators grasp the divine within the real. The experiences of film – its unfolding movement, editing, themes – are not exhaustive, complete documents of reality. The inherent movement of film arouses in the viewer a sense of the rich, unending and ineffable mystery of reality.

Later in the essay, I will contest the connection of filmic experience with the eternal for logical reasons, but it is important to note that Agel and Ayfre offer a valuable account of how religious film works, as well as offering conceptual resources towards a phenomenology of the sacred in cinema. Agel and Ayfre's work appeals to how cinema evokes a direct, intuitive and unmediated experience of the divine. They do not consider film to be reducible to the mechanics of its production: the editing of a roll of celluloid stills, the aggregation and selection of images, camera-positioning, technical feats of mechanical imitation. Instead, they argue, film as an art form should be considered as the singular unveiling of the world as it occurs. The malleability of film as a medium shows the things themselves in a complex interaction between filmmaker, art-object and the audience. While on the surface, film and cinema may seem a profane technological medium, Agel and Ayfre argue for film's capacity to reveal the mystery of reality.<sup>9</sup>

Agel and Ayfre would oppose Gilles Deleuze's famous metaphysics of cinema. Where Deleuze emphasises the bodily, material change and the process, Agel and Ayfre emphasise the spatial, the immobile, and the eternal.<sup>10</sup> Thus, their form of film-philosophy is based on the capacity of a film to precipitate reflection by opening viewers to a deepening reflective experience of the divine. The best cinema is thus transcendent, enabling the viewer to commune with the unity of the cosmos. Therefore cinema remains, at its best, a fundamentally spatial medium, as the eternal is impervious to the flow of images on screen. Agel thus announces a transcendental style of cinema. The aesthetics of film can engender

our reflective capacity through style and spiritual atmosphere. Sacred cinema expresses spiritual unity,<sup>11</sup> which in turn generates the drama between the struggles of humans and the cosmos.

In some sense all films point towards a sacred unity, even if some are more aesthetically accomplished in realising it. Agel and Ayfre are not talking about the functions of different film – popular, arthouse, advertising, documentarian or informational – but, instead, about the transcendent conditions of film as such. The degree to which a film might be successful in accomplishing a transcendent style depends on the style of atmosphere created. Thus, they introduce an important theoretical innovation when reflecting on the philosophical significance of film. In a phenomenological sense, all films are posed as questions of the human condition: questions which situate the human being between a historical situation and their struggles to understand the totality of the cosmos. Consequently, even the most secular film may still offer, if only in a depleted way, a yearning for sacred ecstasis.

For example, when discussing Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (1921), Agel argues that despite Lang being generally interested in communicating a seductive intoxication of death and nothingness, this only serves to remind us of a nostalgia for the eternal. The oppressive atmosphere of the film makes the viewer crave even more for spiritual freedom.<sup>12</sup> Ayfre consolidates this view, claiming that even in typically non-religious films by directors like Eisenstein, Bergman, and Renais, there is a type of minimal liminal transcendence present, particularly in filmic representations of limit-situations such as death. The point they make is that even the most secular of films is not reducible to a material reality.<sup>13</sup>

When Agel speaks of more successful versions of cinema's sacred style, he has directors in mind. Both Agel and Ayfre frequently comment on Robert Bresson. Bresson's films, such as *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), *A Man Escaped* (1956), and *Pickpocket*

(1959), are exemplars of sacred cinema because of their ability to connect the world as it appears – in Bresson’s case via social realism – to a numinous beyond, of concern to all humans. Bresson is important because his films amount to an exercise in purification. Bresson’s films strip the banal world of everyday appearances, evoking things of perennial significance beyond any pseudo-eternity of the quotidian. As Ayfre argues,

As we have just seen, the powers of imagination enable us to transcend mundane reality. Thanks to them, human awareness can reach out to all that is not currently given to it: the past, the future, the elsewhere, the non-existent, the impossible. But all these ‘beyonds’ are only in relation to well determined situations, *hic et nunc*. It would not make any sense to speak of absolute transcendence, that is to say, of a dimension radically different and out of all proportion to those we commonly experience in our human universe.<sup>14</sup>

Ayfre is careful to avoid a hubristic suggestion that films offer direct access to the divine. However, what films can do is manifest how the transcendence of the world is an ever-present possibility. The fleeting world of appearances which constitutes any film-world, once delivered in an aesthetically appropriate way, serves to amplify the consistency, durability, and density of our natural life, as well as showing that the mundane world may always be otherwise. Basically, transcendent cinema uncovers the eternal in the transient. With transcendent cinema, Ayfre argues that cinema serves as a means to transcend the banal, mundane aspects of reality, elevating the viewer’s experience to profounder, more spiritual or philosophical depths. In short, transcendent cinema is films that rise above the surface narrative of film, or the spectacle of it, to induce contemplation, wonder or a sense of the mysterious. Ayfre self-consciously shows cinema pressing up against the limits of human experience.

While I will show it is questionable to suggest cinema is an appropriate art for connecting to the eternal, Ayfre does make an innovative point about how film-philosophy invariably provokes an intuition of reality, even if that reality is ineffable and mysterious. The type of filmed-thought Agel and Ayfre both endorse, then, functions through evoking,



and coaxing, our intuition towards an essential harmony of the cosmos. Because all films are minimally spatial – they show some spatial arrangement in place, a landscape *mis-en-scène* – this element of film stands above motion. The spatial is the dimension of film that remains the same, and it is thus the element of film most proximate to the absolute, as the eternal is exempt from change. Agel and Ayfre thus demonstrate a marked preference for the spatial resonance of film, rather than a temporal one. Therefore, as Sarah Cooper notes, Agel retains a taste for the harmonious and dynamic unity of everything, but a distaste for the disjunctive cuts and edits of Eisenstein’s montage cinema.<sup>15</sup>

There are good philosophical reasons for Agel and Ayfre’s preference for connecting the sacred and space. The distinguishing feature of the sacred, or indeed of any sacred space, whether an object, building, ritual or place, is that they are spaces marked by differentiation of the sacred from the profane. Put simply, the sacred must be set apart. Here, I follow Durkheim’s definition of the sacred as expressive of the “setting apart” of the sacred from the profane.<sup>16</sup> The sacred refers to objects, totems, buildings, institutions, people or places which transcend, are in some way inviolable or wholly other than the banal, profane world of everyday life. Also relevant here is Mircea Eliade’s notion of the sacred. Eliade similarly thinks of the sacred as a separate transcendent domain to profane reality. Where Agel, Ayfre, and Eliade connect is in the notion of hierophany, a term Eliade uses to distinguish events, objects and encounters through which the sacred reveals itself within the profane world.<sup>17</sup> A hierophany is a liminal experience where the sacred and the profane are bridged: for instance, in a festival, ritual, or sacrifice enabling the sacred to manifest or become tangible. Effectively, Agel and Ayfre think a film holds the capacity to be a hierophany, detaching the spectator from their profane world by stimulating a qualitatively different experience of reality.

A sacred space, then, if it is to be at all sacred, must be distinguished from all other spaces. If a sacred space were not distinguished as such, it simply would not be sacred, as it would be only one profane object among any. Hence, the sacred is characterised by imperviousness to contaminants. While the profane may enter the sacred, this can only be accomplished with exercises of purification or absolution. Unto itself, a sacred space must be whole, pure, and demarcated, which enables the sacred to be an intermediary between the human and the divine. For the purposes of understanding transcendent film, films evoking the sacred operate in a structurally similar way. According to Agel, transcendent films function as a moving spotlight, purifying the viewer of their immediate world of experiences, objects and actions, whilst revealing these worldly objects as bearers of sacred significance. As Ayfre suggests, the power of cinema resides in its ability to invoke an ambience of cosmic wholeness, not in its power to provide unmediated access to the divine. For Agel, this atmosphere occurs through a dilation of temporal life:

But, at that moment, the reciprocity of the aesthetic and spiritual principle adopted is accomplished with stunning effectiveness: if the eternal has become everyday, the everyday becomes eternal. Beings, landscapes, objects, moments of history reach a supernatural level, taking on a sacred dimension. By assuming all temporality, all carnal substance of a particular human history, the spiritual dignifies and transfigures it. It irradiates most intimately and expands into timelessness.<sup>18</sup>

Any object within a film-world has the potential to transcend its own profanity. The power of film lies in its ability to act as an intermediary between the mysterious and the banal. We find a clear example of this logic in Agel's discussion of Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). What elevates Dreyer's silent film over Victor Fleming's *Joan of Arc* (1948) is how Dreyer's film affirms the sacred. Dreyer strives to express the purification of Joan's soul from her body as well as the worldly institutions that condemn her. The Hollywood version's commitment to a pseudo-documentarian aesthetic is, according to Agel, overly preoccupied with historical precision and detail.

Dreyer's mystical realism attains a deeper truth, a more profound comprehension of the real.<sup>19</sup> It achieves this truth through Dreyer's famed facial close-ups of Renée Jeanne Falconetti as Joan, stripping the film of its historical and concrete backdrop.<sup>20</sup> Joan's grimaces and expressive contortions purify the viewer's attention of the crowds, the politics, and the stratagems of her tormentors in the Church hierarchy. Dreyer's close-ups reveal the moment a particular natural phenomenon – the human face – becomes cleansed, illuminating a sacred space without contradiction; Dreyer's close-ups act as a "sacred mirror" which dematerialise the temporal unfolding of film in order to unveil eternal truths.<sup>21</sup> Agel and Ayfre's notion of film as an intermediary between the mysterious and the banal demands a form of literal transcendence, where film makes experiential the union of the soul and the eternal. This position is, as I will show, logically incoherent, due to film's inherently temporal and material structure. However, it is important to understand that this criticism is rooted in logical, not empirical, reasons. The meaning and significance of film cannot be derived from empirical facts about the type or style of film, or indeed whether a film provides an empirically demonstrable religious revelation. Rather, film is significant because it expresses the temporal conditions of experience itself. Still, Agel and Ayfre's work is worth thinking about, and not because their view of transcendent cinema is irrational or fails to prove the factual existence of God. Their work is interesting because their phenomenology of film demonstrates *that* film necessarily conveys concrete questions of human significance, not *what* specific objects – God, the sacred, eternal – are revealed. Agel's engagement with Dreyer is instructive since it helps exemplify Agel and Ayfre's position, and also demonstrates my critique of the limitations of their position, especially regarding questions of value.

Film's focusing of sacred truths also holds moral significance for Agel. Since the sacred detemporalises all experience, consequently it also has the capacity to reveal things

of lasting value. Films can be profoundly connected to human liberation, emancipating humans from being enchained to the flux of immediate experience. Transcendent cinema calls viewers towards the absolute, to the authenticity of the spiritual universe. This call consequently overcomes fatalism by equalising any human differences in experience and rank, since from the viewpoint of eternity, all vanity and hierarchy is superfluous. Overcoming fatalism reveals the moral purpose of Agel's sacred cinema. The modern world, with its pseudo-salvation of materialism and rationalism, is a world of nihilistic chaos, confusion, delusion, and a dispersal of eternal value.<sup>22</sup> For Agel, Dreyer's Joan is a searing example of the sacred. The expressive face of Joan shows that cinema, in exceptional moments, helps us glimpse the absolute: a space without anxiety, contest, or contradiction.

One can, however, plausibly make the opposing case to Agel's reading of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*: that the focus on Joan's tormented and grimacing face is anything but an expression of a person without anxiety, contest, or contradiction. The whole film depicts a very mortal struggle between Joan's personal individual conviction and the ecclesiastical scrutiny, condemnation, scorn, and ultimately the death sentence she faces. Equally, the formal devices of Dreyer's film intensify the temporal urgency of Joan's predicament. Dreyer's cinematography clearly makes intelligible the temporal structure of human perception through the famous close-ups of Joan's very mobile face, as well as panning, adoption of tilted framing for a disorientation effect, and zooming, all of which communicate action, time, movement, and urgency.<sup>23</sup> The temporality of Joan's life is ever-present due to her impending execution. Also, Dreyer draws viewers into a shared perceptual field where Joan's perspective, her subjective values and reactions (feelings, beliefs, intentions), are only meaningful in a broader embodied context; that is to say, her life, her torment, her pain, her mission, as much as the lives of her judges. Thus, on the one hand, Dreyer's aesthetic style is searingly honest in illuminating the urgency, fragility, and

transience of human life. On the other hand, Dreyer's film does exemplify Agel and Ayfre's position, that the metaphysically important elements of films express concrete experiences of value and meaning, experiences obliged to transcend temporal life. My argument is that in principle, this latter sentiment runs counter to a basic understanding of film as the art of movement, and that to understand the spiritual stakes of any film, we must begin with the temporal experience of the film itself. This all begs the question, if the most metaphysically significant moments of film are timeless, how can they be experienced or viewed?

Ayfre too, to be fair, is acutely aware of the conceptual problems attached to detemporalising cinema: "It has been claimed that cinema, being an art of movement, finds itself radically incapable of creating an atmosphere of eternity and mystery."<sup>24</sup> How he attends to this problem is interesting. Ayfre argues that films are sacred through and through. Cinema operates on a continuum of both the immanent and the transcendent. Immanence holds that the world is entirely explicable in natural terms. In the immanent, all that is inherently valuable is equated within physical laws, rationalism, and empirical realism, or laws of psychological experience internally. The transcendent is extra-sensory, beyond the flux of immanent everyday sense-experience. That Ayfre places these two mutually contradictory notions – the immanent and the transcendent – on a continuum is revealing. While Ayfre thinks the transcendent is cinema's ultimate mission, in the immanent, we still find degraded forms of secular ecstasis. It is thus possible to think, cinematically, forms of diluted transcendence. Ultimately, this is a question of cinematic style. The aesthetic execution of all films exists on a transcendent continuum, either leading upward towards more liberating modes of existence beyond brute experience, or in the case of the immanent, leading downward, to the body, blood, matter, sex, and death. The clever thing about this downward spiral is that it remains spiritual, albeit in Satanic or demonic form: in other words, the nihilistic atmosphere of a dark secular ecstasy. The style of the downward path

is utterly sordid, driven by darkness, illness, nightmarish aggression, harassment, and relentless masochism.<sup>25</sup> It is a closed world with no opening, since the immanent is only wholly self-sufficient, with neither exit nor escape.

Ayfre coins two terms to express this dual movement of the sacred in cinema: “transascendance” and “transdescendance.”<sup>26</sup> Both lead to the absolute: one to “nothingness,” the other to God. However, these dark twins are closer than Ayfre suspects. There are two logical problems inherent to his claim. Firstly, if the sacred is that which is distinct, set apart, and distinguished, then to argue that the sacred in cinema is a global apparition, relevant as much to the holy as to the secular, would mean it can no longer be sacred, since if the sacred is everywhere then it is nowhere. Secondly, if the purpose of transcendent cinema is to elevate the viewer’s awareness of the eternally absolute, it is hard to reconcile the eternal with the basic principles of movement and time as the necessary conditions of any film being screened. If the eternal is made present in any moment, exceptional or otherwise, it therefore becomes temporalised and thus is no longer eternal. No matter how many faces Joan pulls, there is necessarily the face before and the one after. It is therefore important to delineate a more rigorous account of the necessary conditions of film as a philosophical art that is, as a medium, both temporal *and* spatial.

There are some other predictable criticisms of Agel and Ayfre. For example, Vivian Sobchack places Agel’s ideas within the tradition of religious mysticism and naïve realism.<sup>27</sup> This is unsurprising as Sobchack’s film-phenomenology is devoted to establishing the importance of the material body for film theory. Sobchack also emphasises the particular over the universal. As she puts it, she aims to “...cry out my inherent qualification of the world of essences and universals, to allow for my existential particularity in a world I engage and share with others.”<sup>28</sup> Dudley Andrew also argues that Agel’s attention to the beyond ignores the ordinary circumstances, material processes, and labour

of film-production.<sup>29</sup> Both Andrew and Sobchack are right to emphasise the materiality of film as process and as an object as this is important for explaining the rich, sensuous range of cinematic experience. These criticisms, however, do not get to heart of the matter, since for Agel and Ayfre, the origin of value, aesthetic and moral, stems from eternal stasis and the detemporalising of experience itself.<sup>30</sup>

What is at stake is the conditions of intelligibility of metaphysical cinema. If the source of a film's aesthetic and moral value is derived from the eternal, then it becomes impossible for film to reveal historical, mortal, and temporal reality. If we are to do film-philosophy, it requires making clear the necessary conditions of any film, whether a film relates to ethics, logic, aesthetics, or politics. As with any art, the task of philosophy is to reveal the historical import, significance, and value of the relevant art form for its times. Agel and Ayfre do go some way towards beginning this. For those who want to understand the aesthetic sensibility of religious cinema, their work is indispensable. However, their theory needs to be adjusted if we are to grasp how film is uniquely placed for expressing the material embodiment of human experience and practices.

Attending to Agel's concept of co-birth (*co-naissance*) helps us distinguish his atemporal phenomenology from Merleau-Ponty's temporal form. This notion of the co-birth of the world is instructive for comprehending the metaphysical status of cinema, although as we will see, Agel resorts to using temporal language to explain the atemporal. More specifically, with co-birth, Agel is referring to the duality of the everyday. Cinema, in exceptional moments, reveals the doubleness of everyday experience. Concurrently, the bodies, sounds, sights, dialogue, scenery that constitute a film-narrative are knowable and unknowable. Film as co-birth mixes knowledge and recognition with ignorance, the knowable with the ineffable. Film, as a co-birth of the world, is a form of knowledge, as well as the miraculous emergence of the world in film.<sup>31</sup>

The Catholic background of Agel and Ayfre is also relevant here. The backdrop of their work is an incarnational understanding of how the eternal and transcendent relate to temporal reality. The doctrine of the incarnation of Christ is of paramount importance to Catholic theology, where the fleshy and suffering Christ mediates between the world and the divine. With the incarnation, the world, the desecrated, and the impure fall under the aspect of eternity. However, the incarnation remains derived from the eternal; the historical, fleshy, crucified Jesus is only meaningful because he is of an eternal Holy Trinity. The incarnation is also relevant to Merleau-Ponty, although as we will see, he resolves the opposition of time and the eternal more satisfactorily. Merleau-Ponty recognises that historical, temporal, and embodied practices are temporal in a primary sense, and thus are the condition of experience in general. Agel and Ayfre, in contrast and understandably, recognise that the soul of cinema, its essence, operates at the limits of the body and the divine. In conjunction with the previous description of the upwards and downwards motion of the transcendent cinema, the soul of cinema as co-birth is the essential condition of any film, whether good or bad, popular or elitist, comedic or high-minded.

From Agel's perspective, the most complete films affect a harmonious experience in the viewer, with antagonism and contradiction becoming reconciled. Thus, Agel remains within the phenomenological tradition. The co-birth of the world transcends the material expression of film as a medium as well as the genesis of its production. Cinema ought not to be concerned merely with its mode of expression, but with what *is*. The problem is, though, that Agel appeals to temporal expression when describing the absolute:

More profoundly, cinema introduces us through its own processes to a veritable co-birth in the world: the slow motion and magnification of shots allow us to participate in the very palpitation of the cosmos: the birth of a flower, the twinkling of a star, the infinitely small and the infinitely large, are no longer outside the field of our perception ... The screen opens up indefinitely our astonished entrancement: we go into interplanetary space beyond what our mind can conceive, we see the fantastic world of crystals – a dazzling and secret microcosm.<sup>32</sup>



Once we get past the gushing tone, Agel defines the absolute as a “palpitation.” “Birth” also implies a beginning. Whether tremulous or the beat of a heart, birth and palpitation are inherently temporal terms. Agel is using temporal terms to explain the sacred. In some moments, Agel discerns the transformational nature of motion pictures. For example he notes, “through its transfigural magic, cinema triumphs over the effects of habit,” and he observes how cinema has, “the enchanting power to recreate the everyday universe in some way.”<sup>33</sup> This assignation of the temporal to the sacred absolute indicates a fundamental confusion.

Despite the phenomenological impetus of his film-philosophy, Agel remains ultimately voluntarist: that is, he retains an unacknowledged preference for the primacy of the will in determining reality. His analysis of cinema amounts to a stylistic preference and assertion of film’s sacred style; as such, a taste for the eternal. In contrast, to understand cinema philosophically, it is necessary to explain how what appears on screen is inherently motional and temporal. This is an argument about the *form* of cinema; while film is certainly organised spatially in its *mis-en-scène*, this does not preclude the necessary fact that what appears on film is not devoid of motion or transformation. For a film to be intelligible as a film, it necessarily must be understood as a form of activity. Irrespective of Agel and Ayfre’s overall aesthetic emphasis on how cinema may be a gateway to an atemporal beyond, the positive constitution of any film, as it inherently requires movement and change, logically prohibits its nexus with the absolute. This does not mean one cannot make films with a religious sensibility or pursue themes of a religious nature on screen, but it does mean that cinematic representations of the religious are stylistic rather than ontological.

## **Merleau-Ponty and Film-Form**

Although I think Agel and Ayfre are correct to argue a philosophical appreciation of film is not strictly reducible to the basic material processes of its production nor its mechanical arrangement, such repudiation of materialism does not necessarily entail film, or indeed any art-form, being explicable in terms of the eternity of art. While a film is not reducible to any specific material elements, it does require explanation of the activity of that material. What distinguishes film as an art-form is its arrangement of temporal sequences, either via editing, shot selection, pacing and tone, or soundtrack composition. Basically, film is the art of the rhythm. Film is not intelligible without the transitional flow of cuts, edits, and demarcations.

As Andrei Tarkovsky argues:

The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame. The actual passage of time is also made clear in the characters' behavior, the visual treatment and the sound—but these are all accompanying features, the absence of which, theoretically, would in no way affect the existence of the film. One cannot conceive of a cinematic work with no sense of time passing through the shot, but one can easily imagine a film with no actors, music, decor or even editing.<sup>34</sup>

What is interesting about Tarkovsky's observations is that he makes a transcendental argument on the conditions of film as art. He is describing the essential conditions of the intelligibility of film being film. Irrespective of the genre of film and irrespective of actors, editing, dialogue, music, and visual style, the condition of film is the framing of a "sense of time passing." Similarly, Alfred Hitchcock in interview with François Truffaut explains that contracting and dilating time is the primary task of the filmmaker.<sup>35</sup> Films rely on changes through time to be perceived in the first place. While it could be said a sense of time passing is relevant to any perceptual experience, artistic or otherwise, what is distinctive about film as an art-form is its creation of, attention to, and appreciation of temporal life. How, though, might we build on Tarkovsky's argument to articulate a film-philosophy?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides the conceptual resources to understand the inherently temporal status of cinema. In the essay “The Film and the New Psychology” – based on a lecture delivered the same year *Phenomenology of Perception* was published – Merleau-Ponty sketches a tentative outline of a phenomenology of film. “The Film and the New Psychology” functions very much in tandem with *Phenomenology of Perception*. There, Merleau-Ponty explains the pre-reflective origin of embodied thought. Repudiating rationalist and empirical approaches to explaining consciousness, Merleau-Ponty subverts conventional subject-object forms of epistemological justification, instead arguing for a form of embodied consciousness where subject and world permeate each other.<sup>36</sup> The reason *Phenomenology of Perception* is phenomenological is because it explains the immediacy of any experience. From a first-person perspective, Merleau-Ponty explains our immediate entwining of subject and world. However, although it is from a first-person perspective, this does not imply that the first-person is the origin itself of our experience, and for good reason too, as this would equate to solipsism. Instead, for Merleau-Ponty, the only real way to explain the coexistence of subject and world is through the body and the way it structures both experience *and* thought.

The variety of concepts Merleau-Ponty draws on in *Phenomenology of Perception* – body, body intentionality, sexuality, expression, habit – all testify to his goal of making explicable a “body-subject” in the world. For example, if we look at his explanation of habit, Merleau-Ponty does two specific things. Firstly, he uses habit to explain the temporal and spatial functioning of embodiment. Secondly, he shows how habit implicates subjectivity, experience, and thinking. Habits are an essential condition of embodied-consciousness because they enable a body to maintain a relative unity over time.<sup>37</sup> If we were just Cartesian minds, according to Merleau-Ponty, we would be disembodied and unable to experience anything in the first place. Alternatively, if we were mere passive recipients of an incoming

stream of impressions, there would be no identity over and above the flux of experience. Therefore, it is necessary that we have a habituated body uniting the flux of experience and subjective thoughts.

The body is effectively a nexus of habits, with habits understood as powers, dispositions, and tendencies. The habituated body remains spatially located and temporally adaptive; the body's tendency to seek equilibrium is what allows thoughts, actions and perceptions to respond to the world as it comes to meet us: that is, through repetition, imitation, and adaptation.<sup>38</sup> The body is characterised by activity; its orientation to the world we inhabit maintains an active synthesis of retained past activities and the changes we are exposed to as we live in an environment. What is of interest for my argument is that in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty provides a transcendental argument for direct and immediate phenomenological experience, which in turn enables us to understand the temporal, spatial, and embodied conditions of filmic experience. Merleau-Ponty is less interested in explaining the content of experience, or what this or that specific body is like, but that we *are* a body. This transcendental insight is significant to any discussion of film-philosophy because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied experience means clear meaning is thinkable only as a form of active embodiment over time. Hence, we must understand film similarly. Films are structured as a form of temporal continuity, and what they make intelligible is not simply the content of a film, but the temporally embodied form of lived experience itself. These insights are largely continued in "The Film and the New Psychology."

In "The Film and the New Psychology," Merleau-Ponty continues his critique of the rationalist and empirical strains of classical psychology. Merleau-Ponty accuses classical psychology of abandoning the lived world.<sup>39</sup> Where classical psychology considered the visual field to be a discrete "sum or mosaic of sensations," the new psychology, or

phenomenological and existential philosophy, reveals humans not as “an understanding which constructs the world but as a being thrown into the world and attached to it by a natural bond.”<sup>40</sup> Our “being thrown into the world” is precisely what cinema is uniquely placed to make manifest. A film as it unfolds manifests our concrete embodiment as temporally expressed. Our lived experience is not made up of discrete moments: rather, it is the palpable experience of life as past, present, and future. Merleau-Ponty extends the transcendental conditions of perception to perception of film. Similarly to the way a body is understood as a *gestalt* rather than an aggregate of discrete isolated perceptions, film is not a sum of isolated images and sounds. Quite decisively, a film is a “temporal *gestalt*.”<sup>41</sup>

Like Tarkovsky, Merleau-Ponty considers time passing as an essential condition of film. *Gestalt* implies a unity of parts. Therefore, a film is a moving unity, or as such, a motion-picture. Irrespective of the quantitative duration and order of shots, montage, or editorial cutting, all comprise a complex moving “whole.” The ensemble of sounds, words, and images constituting a film are not to be thought of as material for generating ideas, reminding us of past experiences, making facts and ideas known to us, or a didactic exposition of things. Instead, the “ensemble tells us something very precise which is neither a thought nor a reminder of sentiments we have felt in our own lives.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the meaning of a film *is* its temporal rhythm. As Merleau-Ponty clearly suggests, “The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the art of cinema is derived not from “referring to already established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements.”<sup>44</sup> The reason film works is because it draws on the transcendental logic of perception. What is important is *how* a film shows things taking on meaning, not that the film communicates pre-existent ideas, values, or subjective thoughts. Film is also not a psychological *gestalt*, but a perceived spatio-temporal flow that directly

presents to us the form of being in the world. In contradistinction to Agel and Ayfre founding the value of cinema on a sacred absolute, Merleau-Ponty argues that a film has meaning in an emergent sense. It is because the temporal flow of its shapes, places, dialogue, and sounds relate to each other that a film is more fully enabled to have meaning. What are we to make of this?

### **Film as Spiritual Realism**

In order to understand film philosophy, there are four elements with which I will supplement Merleau-Ponty's on film-philosophy. The first is what I call spiritual realism.<sup>45</sup> The term "spiritual realism" comes directly from Agel.<sup>46</sup> However, I draw out very different consequences to Agel's spiritual realism as a reflection of the absolute. Merleau-Ponty, and Agel and Ayfre, all argue that film is not reducible to its material components. Agel and Ayfre's approach is unsatisfactory because a film's significance is not derivable from an atemporal absolute, due to motion-pictures' inherently motional nature. Merleau-Ponty takes us further by acknowledging time, space, and movement as essential conditions of thinking film. However, Merleau-Ponty too only gets us so far.

While "The Film and the New Psychology" is, I hope to have argued convincingly, profoundly important for understanding the conditions of film as an art, Merleau-Ponty does not draw out the full implications of his own argument. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the unity of film's "temporal *gestalt*" is effectively a call for film to provide communion with the world. By emphasising the *gestalt* of film, Merleau-Ponty resorts to characterising the duration of a film as a unity defined by temporal and spatial integrity. Instead, spiritual realism asserts the disjunctive nature of film. Merleau-Ponty's appeal to a background "whole" or phenomenologically coherent situation on screen is valuable; however, the blend of sound, vision, and editing which makes a film is only rendered meaningful when the

*gestalt* is infringed upon. It is thus an essential condition of film that the viewer recognises the *gestalt* as disrupted.

This is especially the case for a medium that can utilise an array of sound and images, as well as being drawn together through editing multiple shots of varying duration. Shot-perceptions are certainly phenomenologically coherent situations, but that “whole” is only intelligible *because* of the disjunctive edits, movements, and images that bring it into relief. When Merleau-Ponty stresses the temporal *gestalt* of film, his argument is important because he makes clear that film is really not about a self-conscious observer passively watching a work of art. However, he does not illuminate the structural instability inherent to any form of perceptual experience. A film does not present itself as an object to be evaluated by an insular mental act inspecting perceptions, but by *being* the experience of embodied disjunction itself. Hence, film, irrespective of its content, is minimally committed to expressing the reality of temporal experience.

Thus, the realism side of spiritual realism accords with the conventional phenomenological sense of the term. As Herbert Spiegelberg puts it, what is real is dependent on an object standing “on its own feet,” independent of the cognitive activities of a subject.<sup>47</sup> If films are to take their meaning from the inherent contingency of reality, then the reality with which film concerns itself is always a question of how its objects sustain, maintain, and transform themselves over time. By spiritual, I do not mean thinking of film, as Agel and Ayfre do, as a form of mystical supernaturalism. Nor do I make the same claim as André Bazin, that the image is a direct imprint of the objective world.<sup>48</sup> Instead, when I talk of spiritual realism, I am making a transcendental argument about the essential conditions of thinking film, and consequently film-philosophy, more broadly. If a film is to be intelligible, then any philosophical thought or discussion of cinema must be premised on the fact that film is a form of perceptual spatio-temporal activity. For any film

to be intelligible as a meaningful experience, its condition of possibility *qua* film must be thought as structured, as the self-transformation of perception itself. To be clear, a film is not a living object, nor do films think themselves, as some have argued.<sup>49</sup> This is largely due to a film's lack of a nervous system. Spiritual realism understands film as explicating the world emergent, not as an autonomous living being in itself. By spiritual, I thus specifically mean a deeper sense of materialisation emerging from the transcendental cinematic logic Merleau-Ponty lays out.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to Agel, who defines cinema as “everything that dematerialises the world,” I take spiritual as not derivable from an abstract, immaterial or ahistorical entity, but rather as irreducibly implicated in historical, embodied, and concrete practices.<sup>51</sup> This is the case whether or not a film depicts humans, and whether a film is a documentary, animation, fantasy, horror, or science fiction. Irrespective of genre, a film's *sine qua non* is the status of human perception which, as I have argued, is inherently transformational. Therefore, all films are not separable from, nor reducible to, the historically material conditions engendering them.

The second element of spiritual realism we can build out of Merleau-Ponty's film-phenomenology is his repudiation of representational understandings of cinema. Spiritual realism implies that film as an art form is an intuitive and sensible form of intelligibility. As Merleau-Ponty emphatically proposes, “film is not thought; it is perceived.”<sup>52</sup> We might read this to suggest film cannot be a form of thinking. Nothing could be more erroneous. Film is a form of perceptual thinking. While a film itself cannot perceive, the art of cinema invokes meaning in structurally the same way in which perception does. Sobchack underlines this point; a film is “an expression of experience by experience.”<sup>53</sup> Film works as a form of meta-reflection on embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty shows how, rather than seeing film as representation for cognitive reflection, or as a spectated experience



passively consumed, films are formally perceptual, which is to say they derive their meaning through the temporal flow of their aesthetic arrangement.

The third element of Merleau-Ponty's film-phenomenology which enables us to build a theory of spiritual realism is in the way film is significant as a form of temporal life. Films become meaningful not by representing situations for reflective consideration, but as expressing the form of embodied temporal and spatial relations.<sup>54</sup> Because of film's inherent "temporal *gestalt*," film's aesthetic arrangements are particularly suited to invoking our temporal and spatial embodiment in the world. Merleau-Ponty is careful to explain that film as a technical invention is not the origin of philosophy, nor that philosophy develops out of cinema.<sup>55</sup> However, the upshot of Merleau-Ponty's analysis, from a perspective of film-philosophy, is that we can see how the filmmaker and the philosopher share a disposition towards temporal perception. Cinema is significant and powerful because it inaugurates a meta-reflection on experience, where the viewing of film provokes an experience of how we experience generally. This form of meta-reflection is important because it equips us to grasp that the perception of film itself, from its inception, makes explicit our general temporal and embodied experience. To think about film, it is necessary to think about time. The implication of this for film-philosophy is that film cannot but present the inherent transformational nature of embodied practices. A film – for an audience or individual spectator – is a meaningful experience because it is organised temporally and spatially as perception itself. Films entrance us precisely because they immediately invoke that temporal being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty's great contribution to film-philosophy is his articulation of a transcendental argument for film as the eminent art of spatio-temporal embodiment. From this, all else follows: questions of ethics, value, genre, aesthetic style, faith, sacrality, or political motivation, are intelligible only as the experience of an embodied temporal life.

The final element we can develop out of Merleau-Ponty's argument to configure a theory of spiritual realism, is how films are vehicles for reflecting ethical and inter-subjective embodiment. The ethical force of a film emerges from its ability to make us sense our coexistence with others, the sharing of our lives in the same world, rendering experiential the possibilities and projects of a shared mortal life. We should be clear here. Film is not necessarily ethical. The point is that film, as a form of perceptual experience, is inherently inter-corporeal with all the contested ethical, unethical, and political experiences that stem from the fact of that inter-corporeality. However, ethical prescription is not a necessary condition of film-thought. In contrast, ethical film-philosophy necessitates thinking how films provide the form any ethical experience can take. This is a meta-ethical point that runs deeper than didactic prescriptions.

Ethics as film-philosophy works not by recounting representations of ethical life, or by offering prescriptions on what we ought to do, but rather renders experiential how the assumptions and commitments of our ethical thinking are actively in question. If film is essentially a form of perceptual "temporal *gestalt*," it follows that any ethical consideration of film is limited to expressing ethical life as a form of temporal life.<sup>56</sup> The ethical element of spiritual realism shows that film necessarily entertains the possibility of overturning, transforming, contesting, and dissenting against our understanding of who we are. Ethical film-philosophy makes intelligible how our and others' normative self-understandings are inherently contested. If a film renders experiential our temporal embodied life, then it must necessarily be the case that a film's understanding of what we are is entwined with a question of what we should do in relation to what we are. Spiritual realism works by showing that what we are is necessarily implicated in questions of whether we should stay the same or whether we should change, what projects we ought to adopt or discard. The point is not to make moral prescriptions, but to demonstrate that humans are the beings for

whom moral prescriptions are invariably at stake, as well as beings who must live in light of the possibility and implications of contested norms. Merleau-Ponty writes that perceptual “...form is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a norm...”<sup>57</sup> As such, there are no transcendent norms or “oughts.” Instead, film discloses how norms and oughts take shape, and continue to be shaped, within specific, mutable, historical, and social situations. In contrast to Agel and Ayfre, who view the sacred absolute as the essential condition of spiritual enrichment, Merleau-Ponty enables us to think film ethically as the experience of how moral principles, commitments, and self-interrogation are at work in all activities, and not derived from an ahistorical absolute. Merleau-Ponty, in his short essay “The Film and the New Psychology,” precipitates a remarkable innovation for film-philosophy. He offers the conceptual resources to begin to think how film is a form of spiritual realism.

## **Conclusion**

Films can have no meaning if cinema is premised on a sacred absolute, as both Agel and Ayfre propose. Motion-pictures are fundamentally temporal: if a film admits the sacred it becomes fundamentally static, and therefore is not intelligible as a film. As I have argued herein, following Merleau-Ponty, film-meaning is only thinkable within a spatio-temporal register, or the “temporal *gestalt*” Merleau-Ponty theorises. Ironically, Agel and Ayfre’s position is fundamentally nihilistic, since their fixation on the sacred prohibits an ethical life in question manifesting onscreen in the first place. While acknowledging the value of Agel and Ayfre’s appreciation of film style, and agreeing with their phenomenological impetus of not explaining cinema in reductive materialist terms, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty provides a more satisfactory account of film-philosophy due to his transcendental account of perception. What makes a film thinkable is precisely the way it is structurally organised

as perception itself. Films matter, enchant, convince, and absorb, as they invoke our contingent being-in-the-world. From this assertion I have developed a theory of the cinematic spiritual realism of film. I have taken spiritual cinema as entailing how films necessarily imply historical, embodied, and concrete practices.

Considering film in this way consequently enables us to understand other philosophical questions. If film is structured as perceptually transformational, then film reveals the question of what we are, as well as what we should be, as being palpably at stake. While I focused on ethical questions in this essay, this argument is extendable to other philosophical domains of film such as politics, style, and aesthetics. For example, when thinking of film as a vehicle of political reflection, film renders experiential the question of freedom. Not that a film is spontaneous and self-determining in itself; films as objects in themselves are not free, as they cannot be other than what they are. Films, though, are especially apt for rendering meaningful how the question of emancipation is always at stake in film. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's essay "The Film and the New Psychology" shows film as deeper than common representations of self-actualisation, but as an art-form apprehending the question of human freedom in a deindividualised and historicised way. Also, political questions arise where films expose collective questions of justice. Ultimately, the task of film-philosophy as spiritual realism is for comprehending film as rendering intelligible our own time in thought. If spiritual cinema is to mean anything, it is that. Film is a distinct mode of making sense of what we are, where we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. The spiritual realism of cinema shows film as the art of time, depersonalisation, world-disclosure, and freedom. Therefore, film matters as the paradigmatic democratic art.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952), 111. [All translations mine.] Henri Agel (1911-2008) was a French film critic, actor, film theorist, curator, and educator. He was a key figure in the development of film theory and criticism in France during the mid- to late-20th century, as well as for promoting the study of cinema as an art form. A prolific writer, some of his more notable works are the collaboration with Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952) as well as *Le Cinema A-t-il une Ame?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952), and *Poétique du Cinéma: Manifeste Essentialiste* (Paris: Éditions du Signe, 1973). Amédée Ayfre (1922-1963) was a Jesuit Catholic priest, theologian, critic, and film theorist who expounded a theory of cinematic realism drawn from phenomenological analysis. He was a friend of Gabriel Marcel and a student of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Tragically, Ayfre died in a car accident in 1963. His major works are *Le Cinéma et le Foi Chrétienne* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960), *Conversion aux images?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1965), *Le Cinéma et sa vérité* (Paris: Cerf, 1969). Collectively, Agel and Ayfre's work is crucial for understanding any phenomenological engagement with film. For a good summary of the respective work of Ayfre and Agel see J. Dudley, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 242–53. For a fuller critical engagement see Sarah Cooper's excellent *The Soul of Film Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 69-76.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term “sacred” in its broader sense as naming the divinity or mysticality of an object considered both whole and set apart from the mundane world. That it is set apart does not preclude a sacred object being *of* the world and thus may refer to plants, animals, objects, humans, nature, gods, or even forces.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted I am deploying the term “spiritual” in a specific way. I am not using the term as synonymous with supernatural. While I can appreciate the term is conceptually “loaded,” I do think it is important to reclaim the term from crude materialist understandings of it, that is to say those that suggest “spiritual” means ghostly, spooky, immaterial or expressing a type of “woo.” When I use the term “spiritual” I am using it in a phenomenological sense, denoting the reality of human existence. As I use the term, spiritual means any practices or dispositions humans adopt in an effort to resolve, transcend or overcome any structural contradictions inherent to the concrete experience of human life. This can come in the form of embodiment, goals, projects, aspirations, ideas, knowledge, contested values, death, and meaning. I also submit that “spiritual” holds a historical facet, naming how different generations reinvent and transform themselves and their self-understanding in light of efforts to resolve those contradictions which constitute their lived experiences. The “realism” of “spiritual realism” addresses the latter, where film gives expression to the experience of how different humans of different generations reinvent themselves, their humanity, even the project of spirituality itself.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Mulhall offers the most succinct summary of this debate: “I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers ... Such films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation. They are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing.” Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4. The most creative version of this sentiment is found with Daniel Frampton. See Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 2-6.

<sup>5</sup> When deploying the term “transcendental” I am doing so in a more Kantian register, rather than, say, the mystical sense we might attach to terms like “transcendental meditation” or “transcendental yoga.” We should note Kant held that no knowledge of the transcendent is possible. His transcendental analysis enabled us to ascertain knowledge about the conditions of experience, but famously, not of any object experienced in itself. However, the distinction between “transcendent” and “transcendental” does not always hold fast. See, for example, the work of Paul Schrader who develops a valuable theory of the transcendental style of cinema. Schrader describes the effects of a cinematic style that make possible filmic expression of something beyond immediate sense experience. Schrader's work also draws on and develops Agel's theoretical commitments. See Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 37, 189n.10. In this essay, where using “transcendent” I am referring specifically to Agel and Ayfre's efforts to theorise a sacred cinema, and where I use “transcendental” I am generally referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's application of Kant's transcendental concepts to the bodily experience of cinema.

<sup>6</sup> This follows Hegel's point that art forms historically as sensuous expression. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1975), 279. Also, this point reflects Hegel's depiction of the task of philosophy as apprehending its own time in thought. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, rev. and ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008), 15.

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Cinéma et Le Sacre* comprises two long essays with overlapping themes. Agel's "Le Cinéma et Le Sacre" is succeeded by Ayfre's extended afterword "Cinéma et Transcendance."

<sup>8</sup> Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952), 117.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>10</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 82-85.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré*, 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Foi Chrétienne* (Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1960), 87.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Cooper, "Henri Agel's Cinema of Contemplation: Renoir and Philosophy," in *A Companion to Jean Renoir*, eds. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 315. Although primarily about Jean Renoir, Cooper's article also provides an informative summary of Agel's film-philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. Joseph Ward Swain (New York, Free Press 1965), 28.

<sup>17</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. William R. Trask, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Agel and Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Agel, *Poétique du Cinéma: Manifeste Essentialiste*, (Paris: Éditions du Signe, 1973), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Agel and Ayfre, *Le Cinéma et le Sacré*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Schrader makes this exact point regarding Dreyer's version of Joan of Arc, although he contrasts Dreyer's forgoing of stasis – at least in *Joan of Arc* (1948) – with Robert Bresson's achievement of a transcendental style through the use of stasis in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962). Dreyer's concrete close-ups, panning, oblique tilting, and depiction of the psychological struggles of mortal life do not meet the conditions for Schrader's transcendental style, namely static cameras, no panning or tilting, no closeups. See Schrader, 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1992), xiv-v, 29n.35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

<sup>29</sup> "Agel reduces filmmaking and viewing to a gateway to the beyond, erasing from focus all the ordinary conditions and work involved in the process of cinema." Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1976), 248.

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<sup>30</sup> Sobchack also privileges presence and the spatial: “Neither reifying temporality as “past” or “present” (except in theory), the cinema’s own meaning originates not in time, but in space and movement—in its being as an always emergent, dynamic, evanescent, embodied...”. Sobchack, 217.

<sup>31</sup> I have clumsily translated ‘*co-naissance*’ as co-birth. This does not do full justice to the range of Agel’s meaning. ‘*Co-naissance*’ also implies ‘*connaissance*’ or ‘knowledge.’ See Agel, *Le Cinema A-t-il une Ame?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952), 21-28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 6, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 113.

<sup>35</sup> See François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), 72, 196.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kenan Paul, 1962), 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 142, 149-153.

<sup>38</sup> For a good explanation of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the transcendental conditions of embodied habit see Taylor Carmen, “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty,” *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (Fall 1999), 219.

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Film and The New Psychology,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern U.P, 1964), 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 48, 53.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 56-57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> By realism I am not pursuing other forms of philosophical realism, for example, direct or indirect realism, representative realism or speculative realism. I follow the conventional phenomenological insight that the existence or non-existence of the external world is not a problem.

<sup>46</sup> Agel, *Le Cinema A-t-il une Ame?*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Spiegelberg, *Doing Phenomenology: Essays on and in Phenomenology* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 133.

<sup>48</sup> See André Bazin, *Qu’est-ce que le Cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2011), 16. I acknowledge Bazin’s theory of film is more sophisticated than a basic argument of verisimilitude. A full elaboration of Bazin’s account of temporal realism would be required to flesh out the stakes of spiritual realism, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>49</sup> I am thinking here primarily of Deleuze in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, where Deleuze, albeit in a very idiosyncratic way, argues for film thinking for itself.

<sup>50</sup> I appreciate the term “materialism” may conventionally mean the opposite of “spiritual.” When I use an expression like “deeper sense of materialisation,” my point is to enrich the register by which we can think of materialism. It would be an exceptionally limited and deformed form of materialism which thinks only in the reductive sense of material properties and functions. I am happy to extend the term “spiritual” to ways we are

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materially embodied in our practices. Following Merleau-Ponty, film is exceptionally well-placed to give expression to the transformational nature of material practices.

<sup>51</sup> Agel, *Le Cinema A-t-il une Ame?*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and The New Psychology," 58.

<sup>53</sup> Sobchack, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Certainly, films can represent things. They can re-present events in history, experiences, contemporary life, narratives, fantasy. However, when we experience the film we are also inevitably experiencing more than the representation in the film. Film is not just a replica of reality; film affords a tangible embodied experience which equips us with an experience of the form of embodied beings we are.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and The New Psychology," 59.

<sup>56</sup> Speaking of ethical film-philosophy begs the question as to whether specific films are consonant with spiritual realism, or whether a specific film provides a counterpoint "profane ecstasis" to Agel's sacred cinema. This may well be the case. There are several directors who work in the space between the secular and the religious, such as the Dardenne brothers, Chantal Akerman, Lars Von Trier, Michael Hanake and John Michael MacDonagh. For a good summary of this intellectual terrain see John Caruana and Mark Cauchi, "What is Postsecular Cinema? An Introduction," in *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and Von Trier*, eds. John Caruana and Mark Cauchi (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 1-28. I will be investigating this in a forthcoming project entitled "Spiritual Realism: The Dardennes and the Burdens of Freedom."

<sup>57</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 61.

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