Affect in Perception: Cinematic Fascination and Enactive Emotions

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[p. 16]

Introduction: "Just one of the curious"

Right after the prologue in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980), we see Doctor Treves wandering around a kind of fairground. The place is full of people and attractions: the broad shots display a crowd of curious bourgeois moving in every direction, flares, rotating spirals, and the tunnel of the freak show. The euphoric atmosphere is sharpened by the noises (clamours, bursts, whistles) and by the joyful music of a barrel organ. Treves rapturously looks around, and his attention seems to be driven by the visual and auditory attractions.

Inside the freak show, the scenery changes, vaguely contradicting the previous euphoric mood: a policeman, an uncanny "fruit of the original sin", an afflicted woman, an increasingly windy sound effect and a group of bourgeois complaining about the monstrosity of the Elephant Man. Later in the film, Treves pays the "proprietor", Mr. Bytes, for a private spectacle. Their entrance into the tunnel is accompanied by disturbing stylistic clues: the corridor is dark and narrow, an oil lamp casts distorted shadows on the walls and the string sounds we hear become increasingly profound. After Bytes gives an introduction and the curtain opens, Treves seems eagerly curious, even if initially cautious; while the film's spectators only briefly glimpse the Elephant Man in the darkness, Treves moves closer to looking at the freak.

At a certain point, a string score emphasizes Treves's close-up: his mouth is half-closed, his eyes are wide open and wet and a tear flows down his cheek (Fig. 1.1.). Is he frightened, excited, or amazed? Does he pity the Elephant Man? Is he astonished by the vision of something unimaginable?

[p. 17]

It is not easy to say definitively. Treves's facial expression is that of

astonishment or surprise (Ekman 2007), and yet his tears do not seem to fit. The juxtaposition of different expressive features and emotions may evoke the moral opacity of the character. However, this expressive ambiguity is probably due to a narrative strategy that prevents Treves's emotions from being fully shared. The narration and style do not allow full identification or allegiance with Treves: he will not be the protagonist of the film, he is only bringing forth the narrative as well as the spectator's experience. The spectator is invited to share his will to look on but not his emotional reactions or their causes.

Doctor Treves is fascinated. In a famous review of the film, Serge Daney wrote: "The spectator has entered the film like Treves, from the angle of voyeurism" (Daney 1981). Christian Metz viewed the spectator's voyeurism as a "passion for perceiving" (1982, 58); however, he emphasized the psychic and imaginary aspects of perception, relating them to a disembodied account of spectatorship. This chapter is focused on the curious "passion for perceiving" that I prefer to label "cinematic fascination". In what follows, I suggest an explanation for this aspect of the spectator's emotional engagement, drawing on insights from affective neuroscience and embracing an enactive view of emotions. At a theoretical level, this approach allows a partial overcoming of the split among analytic and continental accounts of spectatorship. References to *The Elephant Man* will be occasionally recalled in order to couple, when necessary, speculative arguments with more vivid experiential references.

[p. 18]

Fascination and cinematic emotion theories

The notion of fascination plays a role in several theories of cinematic emotion and has been both emphasized and minimized depending on the aim or theoretical background. The following review should help clarify the meaning assigned to this notion in both cognitive and continental-inspired approaches to spectatorship.

First of all, among the cognitive studies of the 90s, we should mention Ed Tan's perspective. It is inspired by Nico Frijda's psychology of emotion, and it is focused on *interest* intended as the major "empathetic emotion", namely, "an emotion which is characterized by the fact that the situational meaning structure (…) for a character is part of the meaning for the viewer" (Tan 1996, 174). From this view, fascination differs from interest inasmuch

as it refers to the appeal of the spectacle and not to the character's situation: "one is caught up in the spectacle; here the promise is represented by the continuing or intensified enjoyment of the spectacle (…); the action tendency is an urge to go on watching" (175). Even if fascination plays no major role in this basically disembodied account, we can extract the action tendency of 'go on watching' as a key feature to keep in mind.

Similarly, Carl Plantinga recently referred to fascination as a "direct emotion" that "stem[s] from the spectator's concerns about and interest in the content of the unfolding story" (2009, 72). Direct emotions include "anticipation, suspense, surprise, curiosity, interest, fascination, and excitement (…) in a wish to understand what has happened, to anticipate what will happen next, and to put new events into context" (87). Elsewhere in his book, fascination concerns film as a constructed artifact (it is an "artifact emotion"), with reference to the synaesthetic and visceral pleasures of the perceptual experience. However, Plantinga's consideration of the bodily pleasures does not lead to an alternative perspective since his "cognitive-perceptual theory" matches an embodied view of cinematic experience with a fundamentally disembodied view of cognition.

A more embodied view supports Torben Grodal's approach, in which fascination is regarded "as the mental-affective propensity to seek out information that is, or is felt to be, highly relevant to our lives, irrespective of whether we experience pain or pleasure in the process" (2009, 141). This is a crucial definition, as it introduces an involuntary and affective feature, even if it specifically concerns narrative processing. The reward of this process is inherent in the processing itself, and this is another key feature to emphasize: "even if coping in film as in real life is goal-oriented, part of the pleasure is derived from the process leading to the goal" (2009, 125). This can explain how, when confronted by fearful or sad films, we may

[p. 19]

experience positive affects, since "goal-oriented coping releases dopamine (…) to support the coping effort" (125). Therefore, from this neurocognitive view, the experience of being fascinated relates to the spectator's submission and the experience of the sublime.

In doing so, Grodal assigns to fascination an aura of passivity that has been traditionally emphasized by continental-inspired film theories. For example, from Raymond Bellour's (2009) perspective, cinematic

fascination implies a kind of passivity, again associated with terms like "submission" and "sublime". Obviously, this continental approach differs considerably from Grodal's, even if both frequently refer to contemporary psychology and neuroscience. In Bellour's embodied theory of cinematic emotion, fascination can be regarded as a kind of "middle term" between hypnoses and intensive emotion: the spectator is "willingly trapped by the apparatus", and he is defined as a "*spectateur pensif*", translated as "thoughtful" and "passive" or "active and passive at the same time" (2009, 179). Following a continental line of the French theory (from Epstein to Blanchot and Deleuze), Bellour assumes the autonomy of affect and sensation from narrative concerns, and he emphasizes the spectator's discrete loss of mastery in confronting the "body of the cinema". In sum, the spectator is regarded not as a master but rather is dominated by the film and caught by the dispositive in the experience of cinematic attendance (see Casetti 2009).

With reference to the French theory but also to the American gender studies, Steven Shaviro accentuates this passivity of cinematic fascination. From his perspective, fascination is the fundamental attitude within the frame of an embodied and affective spectatorship. Shaviro accentuates the interaction between excitement and passivity, with an emphasis on the spectator's affective-perceptual experience: "visual fascination is a passive, irresistible compulsion, and not an assertion of the active mastery of the gaze (…). I am drawn into a condition of excessive, undischargeable excitation. I am depositioned and dispossessed by the film's incessant modulations of visibility" (1993, 9). Here, fascination is related to the visual shock caused by the instability of cinematic appearances; the spectator is more or less constantly forced to redirect his gaze: "This new perception is multiple and anarchic, nonintentional and asubjective. (…) It is not the gaze that demands images, but images that solicit and sustain – while remaining indifferent to – the gaze" (1993, 31, 20). This masochistic view is focused on a paradoxically *unintentional passivity that is compulsively sought*.

As mentioned above, these perspectives are founded on different, and sometimes conflicting, theoretical frames. However, the notion of "fascination" that emerges from the comparison seems related to some

[p. 20]

distinct, and apparently opposite, features. On the one hand, fascination is

related to active anticipation, compulsive expectancy, and curious exploration. On the other hand, it is related to a kind of passivity, or helplessness, alongside the feeling of being overwhelmed by the spectacle's situational and sensory inputs. Moreover, fascination is part of our conscious experience, and yet it is not an entirely intentional experience. Finally, it is related to both narrative and perceptual processing. The explanation that follows will attempt to integrate these different key features with the aim of understanding them within a neuroaffective framework.

Cinematic fascination and the *seeking* impulse

Jaak Panksepp's affective neuroscience approach is based on animal Brain research studies, and it is focused on the affective/emotional dynamics that take place in deep subcortical areas that are homologous in all mammals. The focus on these "primary-process emotions" is particularly relevant to our purposes for both its scientific and theoretical implications. It is important to clarify that, in Panksepp's taxonomy, the instinctual primary processes are distinct from secondary processes (connected to learning and memory) and from tertiary processes (i.e., thought and cognition). Primary processes are purely affective and independent of higher cognitive abilities; nevertheless, in our everyday experiences, the two are inevitably intertwined.

In this context, affects and cognitions are distinguished from each other only in that they reflect different features of brain organization: "Cognition involves the neocortical processing of information gleaned largely from environmental inputs via exteroceptive senses. Affects are not encoded as information. They are diffuse global states generated by deep subcortical brain structures, interacting with primitive viscerosomatic body (core self) representations" (Panksepp 2008, 48). A major philosophical implication of this view is the hypothesis of an affective, anoetic and trans-species "core self" located in deep brain areas. Even in humans, the foundation of the self may be at this very basic level of motor coherence, a seeming bodily and ego-centred action readiness and "affective consciousness" that precedes any sensory processing (Panksepp 2005).

Panksepp's most relevant empirical finding is the identification of seven fundamental emotional brain substrates, which evoke distinct behavioural patterns: SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, PANIC, PLAY, LUST and CARE (the capitalization means that they are "emotional affects", i.e., primary-process impulses). These emotional systems are the most fundamental motivations

in our mind, and they function as latent urges to act. Every system generates action tendencies and raw feelings, and we only have a non-conscious,

[p. 21]
implicit and affective “awareness” of their arousals. Moreover, each system entails a kind of pre-cognitive intentionality, where emotional affects are intentional without being propositional (Panksepp *et al.* 2012).

The SEEKING system (see Wright and Panksepp 2012) is particularly relevant to understanding cinematic fascination. The activation of this system is characterized by an exploratory inquisitiveness, and it “holds a special place among emotional systems, because to some extent it plays a dynamic supporting role for all of the other emotions” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, 34). Indeed, it upholds a basic level of incessant activity and presents a kind of compulsive and anticipatory predisposition. The action tendency is related to approaching, anticipative, appetitive and explorative behaviours; in humans, it also motivates the impulse to affective engagement with the environment and the search for the meaning of events. It is fuelled by the mesolimbic dopaminergic system (it is rewarding, regardless of the pleasantness of the stimulus), and it is aroused rapidly and typically by novel stimuli. It generates raw feelings of “‘intense interest’, ‘engaged curiosity’ and ‘eager anticipation’” (Panksepp 1998a, 149), and therefore can be considered to be the affective foundation of interest or expectancy. It may also be regarded as “a major foundational substrate for Spinoza’s concept of *conatus*—a system that energizes our “‘intentions in actions’” (Panksepp 2009, 9). Only secondary and tertiary processes can give “objects” and informational value within this impulse, which is, in itself, just an incessant disposition to be drawn into appetitive engagement, a “wanting” state that controls the environmental stimuli’s incentive salience.

The SEEKING system is an affective motivational impulse, and not a tertiary, cognitively intentional process. In our everyday experiences, it interacts with higher-level processes, but it is also continuously aroused by novel stimuli in the environment, independent of conscious awareness and intentionality. It is possible to consider it as the affective foundation of cinematic fascination, which is understood, as seen above, as a kind of involuntary (passive) and still compulsive (active) tendency toward exploration and expectation.

When we are in a movie theatre, the screen is the most meaningful area

of our environment. In this context, our embedded mind incessantly interacts with the narrative situations, with an ongoing integration of our emotional life with the present, past and future represented events (in this regard, we could speak about a “mind-screen system”). Narrative situations can trigger our anticipatory impulse, sometimes with a surprisingly intense excitement. (This is the case with cinematic suspense, which is an involuntary and affective phenomenon. Indeed, it can be activated even during a second or third viewing of the film, irrespective of our knowledge

[p. 22]

of the outcome of the story). The film’s low-level sensory features, with its elements of novelty and mutability that fuel narrative processing, activate our instinctual and spontaneous exploration of the audio-visual field. Moreover, its cognitive processing allows for narrative comprehension (see Brunick, Cutting, and DeLong 2013).

And yet, the salience of situational and audio-visual stimuli grabs our attention differently than our ordinary interactions; in a movie theatre, our explorative, anticipatory and interactive routines get suspended. The spectator’s seeking euphoria arises without other external affordances, and this excitation can be regarded as an action readiness that remains undischarged through actual actions. In this respect, an interesting argument can be borrowed from Freyberg and Blühm’s explanation of the phenomenon of “pictorial agency”: in our everyday interactions, “the expected outcome of a movement is continually compared with what is actually perceived”, but in the face of pictures, “the life-world mode of encounter gets ruled out by pictures” (2014, 60-61). Indeed, when we are looking at a picture, ‘we fall (…) in an unspecified mode of appetitive approach that works without a pre-existing goal or intention. The active role determining the direction of the perceptual process thus shifts to the picture, as “(…) *One cannot be fascinated deliberately*”’ (2014, 61; my emphasis). The same argument applies to cinematic attendance, even though the mind-screen interactions are guided by both narrative and perceptual features.

The spectator’s seeking impulse is out of conscious control since it starts as an unintended activity. It can be regulated and mentalized (it always is), so the process of film viewing is clearly opened to cognitive interventions. However, the consideration of the role of the dopaminergic SEEKING system may explain the aforementioned sense of loss of agency under the right

cinematic circumstances. Indeed, a movie can continuously reactivate our innate seeking impulse, irrespective of our intentional curiosity. Occasionally, film studies take this activation into account, referring to the narrative level (Grodal 2009) or to the perceptual level (Badt 2015; see also Eidsvik 2007).

Doctor Treves' close-up can be envisioned as a powerful figure of cinematic fascination. On one hand, the doctor's astonished facial expression may be a clue to the immeasurability of the spectacle, but also to his urge to go on watching. On the other hand, his compassionate, dismayed or submissive tear declares a less precise empathic or sympathetic reaction to the object of the spectacle. In other words, that close-up detaches the expression of fascination from the empathic or sympathetic reaction to the spectacle. Unlike Treves, the spectator cannot see the spectacle; therefore, the movie maintains him or her in a kind of lightly curious

[p. 23]

euphoria, which is distinct from any response to the characters' circumstances. Since a strong character engagement is still missing at that point in the film, the spectator is kept in a mildly suspenseful state in which the fascination that typically accompanies the focus on characters' emotions emerges in almost pure form.

The consideration of Panksepp's SEEKING system can explain the Intense perceptual excitement accompanied by the sense of loss of agency emphasized in Shaviro's or Bellour's descriptions. It includes the pleasure derived from the narrative process leading to a goal, as explained in Grodal's account. It generates a reflexive pleasure related to active anticipation and excitement, like in Plantinga's taxonomy. Finally, as expected in Tan's system, it fuels the continuing enjoyment of the spectacle, independently from any empathic interest. Moreover, in cinematic fascination, seeking arousal accompanies perception and affectively colours it: it is an appetitive affect-in-perception, and it does not depend on the perception of an emotional expression.

In this respect, I must briefly deal with the issue of empathy. In the experience of cinematic attendance, even if we cannot interact with moving images, we remain capable of perceiving gestural or emotional expressions. In this context, "empathy" is typically related to the ability to make sense of the others' actions and emotions through sensorimotor resonance or

mechanisms of embodied simulation (see Gallese and Guerra 2012). In film studies, the issue of the sometimes overwhelming power of films is typically addressed with reference to theories of empathy and their eventual interactions with the notion of "sympathy" (Coplan and Goldie 2011; D'Aloia 2012). However, it is important to underscore that "empathy" refers to a phenomenon, or a range of phenomena, related to the *content* of perception. In contrast, what we labelled as "fascination" is more related to the activity of perception. Both empathy and fascination have a role in the experience of cinematic immersive experience, and both indicate processes that give flesh to our engagement (which can be described as an ongoing cycle of emotional anticipations and reactions). The interactions between the two can be manifold. Nevertheless, these two aspects of the cinematic emotional experience are distinct in principle, as summarized in Table 1 (modified from Freyberg and Blühm 2014).

[p. 24]

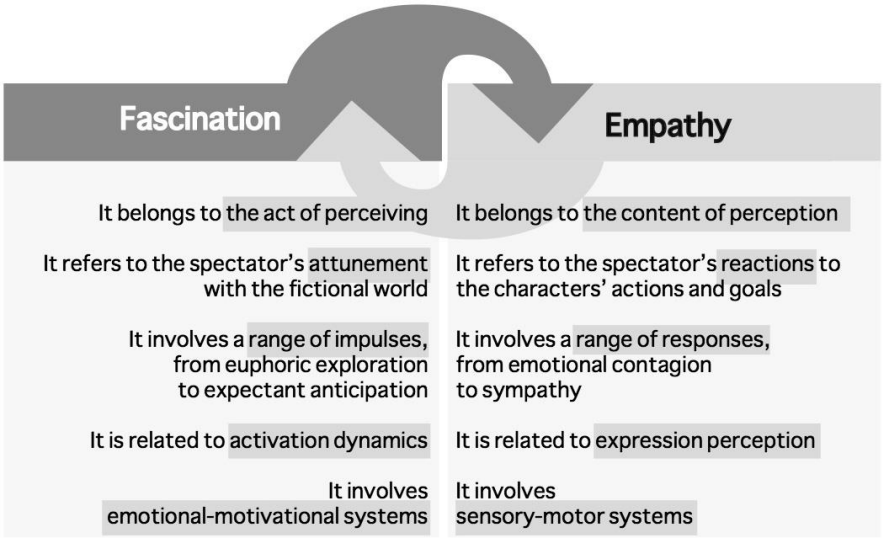

Fig 1.2. Table 1

Enactive emotions and cinematic engagement

The expectant/anticipatory features of the spectator's engagement make it clear how emotions may *precede* sensory inputs. Indeed, the encounter with a perceptual stimulus affects a mind that is always already motivated and purposeful toward its environment (in a movie theatre, what we see and hear is made valuable by the situational value determined by the narrative). An enactive view of emotion can account for how our emotional experience may be addressed independently from sensory experience. Emotions are

always intentional, even if in a visceral and non-cognitive manner (see Colombetti 2014); they find objects and triggers in actual situations, but they usually refer to a more general existential meaning. Moreover, emotions are “curious”, and the SEEKING system works as the impulse that drives perceptual experience. Without such an affective motivation, we could not be engaged, given that engagement is mainly an emotional, non-perceptual, phenomenon.

The idea of such an autonomy of the emotional life is also supported, for example, in Ralph Ellis’s enactive view, according to which “emotions are not merely responses to given stimuli, but actively seek out usable environmental affordances. (…) Objects and events do not so much cause affective responses as they are used by the organism for its own emotional purposes” (2005, 47, 17). From Ellis’s perspective, emotions are part of an

[p. 25]

organism’s *self-organizational* activity, a kind of preconscious activity inferred from the idea that consciousness is active. Moreover, emotional experience is characterized by *extropy*, “the tendency of some complex self-organizing systems to prefer higher- over lower-energy basins of attraction in some contexts” (2005, 79). Indeed, besides homeostasis, we continuously need extropy, namely, novelty. This implies that “we need to find ways to further concretely *embody* our conscious states so as to *amplify* them, which entails *symbolization*” (2005, 124).

The notion of “extropy” also entails that emotions are experienced as intrinsically valuable, regardless of their goals. Indeed, emotions are non-consummatory motivations, and they fundamentally contribute to the quest for the meaning of our experiences: “There are entire categories of human activity whose purpose is not to attain that which we value, but to intensify our sense that whatever it is we value is valuable, through a feeling of inspiration. Religion, love, and the arts are examples of such ‘valueaffirming’ as opposed to ‘value achieving’ activities” (124). Besides, this need for intensification can explain our enjoyment of painful, sad or disturbing movies. Indeed, they may allow for the exploration of existential emotions, such as the search for human dignity, the wish for social

acceptance, or the need for maternal care in *The Elephant Man*.

This approach also leads to a crucial distinction among aims, objects, triggers and symbolization-vehicles of emotions. It is possible that a person or thing, at first regarded as the object of an emotion (i.e., what the emotion is about), reveals itself to be only the trigger, or the environmental event, used by our emotional activity for its purposes. Otherwise, that person or thing may be a symbolization-vehicle, the image that "help[s] me make conscious contact with the preconscious felt sense" (2005, 34).

In sum, from Ellis's enactive view, the "aboutness" of emotions is always complex and holistic: "whether an object is helpful or hurtful will have to be assessed in terms of the body's holistic sense of its total life situation, not just in terms of what is going on in the environment at the immediate present moment" (2005, 32). We usually find "triggers" but not "causes" of emotions in the environment, as there is no one-to-one correspondence between a perceived object and a felt quality. As such, the analysis of film style cannot ignore this feature of our emotional life.

I believe that such an enactive approach may offer a new understanding of the cinematic emotional experience. If fascination designates the background emotional regime of the spectator's "extropic" attitude toward exploration and anticipation, then the film narrative and style should be regarded as key features of cinematic engagement: they should be seen not

[p. 26]

only as something that determines the spectator's reaction, but as something he or she can use for emotional purposes.

A filmmaker like Lynch always relies on the aforementioned natural interaction between emotion and perception. Indeed, he knows that our emotional activity has a great impact on what we perceive, and that affective patterns of expectation determine the affordances we will perceive (the motivational pull precedes the sensory-motor contingencies; see also Bower and Gallagher 2013). Within this context, let us return to *The Elephant Man*, after Merrick's escape from Bytes. The station's structures—smoky corridors and stairs, oppressive ceilings and obstructive walls—seem increasingly oppressive. Using perceptual cues, the scene evokes a

suffocating mood—harrowing sounds and limited visual affordances—and, just like the character, the spectator cannot find the expected way out. However, the naughty kids (Fig. 1.3.) and the outraged bourgeois are not the objects of Merrick's fearful shame; they just *trigger* his excessive reaction, and they *symbolize* all that oppress the protagonist. Indeed, the whole sequence symbolizes Merrick's feeling of being rejected and misjudged by society. Even the spectator, for his part, can use as a symbolization-vehicle the events that trigger or amplify the understanding of the character's emotion.

During the scene where Merrick, Treves and Mr. Carr Gomm first encounter each other, the latter believes that Merrick's words are learned by rote and this jeopardizes Merrick's right to remain at the London Hospital. After the conversation, Carr Gomm, who is affable but evidently perplexed, leaves Merrick's room. Treves, trying to reassure Merrick, tells him that he has made a good impression. At this point, Merrick's point-of-view shot

[p. 27]

suggests that he is not at all proud of himself; while Treves speaks, addressing the camera, Carr Gomm's figure stands blurry in the background (Fig. 1.4.). We cannot see his facial expression, but his pure presence in the frame is attention-grabbing. The spectator, who is allied with Merrick (and, to a certain extent, with Treves), is ultimately encouraged to use this silent perceptual feature in order to simulate Merrick's anxiety about the verdict, maybe even intensifying and symbolizing his emotions. The intensity of Merrick's anxiety is due to the fact that its object is not just the verdict; his anxiety is about social acceptance and the need for maternal care, two topics that affect his "total life situation". A character's mood finds a cinematic sensory form, and this form affects the spectator's experience: the structure of this point-of-view shot is particularly effective in suggesting the content of Merrick's mind through a visual trigger and a symbolization-vehicle.

Conclusion: the sensory-affective integration

The cinematic sensorium is always charged with an affective tone and meaning, even more than in real-life experiences. For this reason, the

philosopher Colin McGinn recently re-covered the classic analogy between film and dream: both are characterized by a manifold “sensory-affective fusion” since, like the cinema, “the dream machinery’s prime purpose is to find a sensory expression for whatever emotions are seething within – to transmute feeling into sensation” (2005, 103). This is not only true about dream scenes or oneiric atmospheres: “the distinctive technique of cinema – as opposed, say, to the stage – greatly aid this process of sensory and affective integration” (2005, 104-105). Both the dream and the filmmaker construct images for emotional aims, and both may “suggest the mind in

[p. 28]

visual terms” through an “*emotional seeing* – the seeing *of* emotions *with* emotions” (2005, 105). Coming from a different theoretical background, Pia Tikka equates cinema with the dreaming mind, as they both “exemplify characteristics of an emotionally situated consciousness” (2008, 232). It could be also mentioned a neuroaffective suggestion, considering that Solms and Turnbull (2002) underline the links between the dreaming brain and the emotional brain, with particular reference to the role of the SEEKING system.

The film’s machinery designs a sensory-affective experience that the spectator complements with his or her affective-sensory activity. The cinema can be regarded as a “synaesthetic machine” (Bertetto 2012), and many recent phenomenological approaches address the synaesthetic and even “tactile” features of the embodied spectatorship (see Elsaesser and Hagener 2015). However, as we have seen in this chapter, it is crucial to foreground the cinematic integration of senses and affects.

A movie plays not only with the spectator’s reactions but also with his or her instinctual expectations that affect the value of his or her perceptual experience (Eugeni 2008). For this reason, an enactive framework may explain the spectator’s emotional engagement better that cognitive or perceptual approaches do. And, in this regard, the classic dream metaphor reminds us of the fundamental affective/emotional quality of the cinematic sensory experience.

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