



Cinema's Baroque Flesh

*Film, Phenomenology
and the Art of
Entanglement*

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SAIGE WALTON

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Introduction

This baroque world is not a concession of mind to nature; for although meaning is everywhere figurative, it is meaning which is at issue everywhere. This renewal of the world is also mind's renewal, a rediscovery of that brute mind which, untamed by any culture, is asked to create culture anew.
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty ('The Philosopher', p. 181; italics mine)

In his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze extends the formal and critical reach of the baroque beyond historic confines. Detaching the baroque from its traditional historic, geographic, and artistic origins in seventeenth-century Europe, Deleuze argues that the baroque is best understood as a restless trans-historic 'operative function, a trait. It endlessly produces folds' (*The Fold*, p. 3).¹ If the baroque can be extended into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I ask: What is the relationship between cinema and the baroque? How might it be figured and felt in film?

As we shall discover, Deleuze's philosophy of the fold is one possible means for us to engage with the baroque's vast and complex critical territory. This book explores the baroque as its own aesthetic category of film, one that generates its own cinema of the senses. Rather than the fold, it is in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that *Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* finds its titular inspiration. The baroque of art and film spurs an aesthetic concretization of what Merleau-Ponty likes to call 'flesh'. Foregrounding the baroque as a vital undercurrent of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thought, what I name baroque flesh is a productive site of analysis and it is the main film-philosophical model by which I approach all of the films examined here.

Like Deleuze's articulation of the baroque-as-fold, Merleau-Ponty also demonstrates a pliant, embodied, and suitably trans-historic appreciation of the baroque. In the quotation that begins this book, he gestures towards the possibility of a 'baroque world' in which its overall 'configurational meaning [...] is in no way indicated by its "theoretical meaning"' ('The Philosopher', p. 181). The baroque configuration of the world that he alludes to in his essay 'The Philosopher and his Shadow' involves ways of seeing that are not singularly frontal, extroverted, and projective but also mobile, multiple, and introjective (things are 'flaying our glance with their edges'); it is a world of situated, prismatic, and intrinsically variable dimensions to

our lived experience ('each thing claiming an absolute presence [...] not compossible with the absolute presence of other things'); and it involves the replenishment and regeneration of personal and cultural meaning (this 'renewal of the world is also mind's renewal') ('The Philosopher', p. 181). It is 'meaning which is at issue everywhere' in Merleau-Ponty's baroque world, where meaning must be lived at the literal level of the body as well as in and through the expressive figures and functions that belong to specific artistic and cultural formations ('The Philosopher', p. 181).

Though Merleau-Ponty rarely makes such a direct link between his philosophy and the baroque, it must be noted that he invokes the baroque throughout various essays and in his notes on film.² In his dedicated writings on art and aesthetics, however, Merleau-Ponty was predominantly concerned with modernist art and with the impressionist paintings of Cézanne in particular.³ Cézanne—like other favourites such as Picasso, Klee, and Gris—sought to recreate the sensible properties of objects so that 'the mode of their material existence [...] stand "bleeding" before us' (Merleau-Ponty, *World of Perception*, p. 93). In Cézanne's paintings of fruit, for instance, we are encouraged to apprehend apples, pears, and oranges through their light-scattered sheen, their different surface shapes and textures rather than through a more optically objective record. For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's art valuably thrusts us into 'the world of lived experience' by attempting to 'recapture the feel of perceptual experience itself' (*World of Perception*, pp. 53–54).⁴

What Merleau-Ponty admired most about Cézanne was his ability to 'portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make *visible* how the world *touches* us' ('Cézanne's Doubt', p. 19). Similarly, in his own writings on art, film, and perception, Merleau-Ponty beautifully captures the intimate feeling and inter-sensory exchange of what phenomenology understands as the lived body, as well as the importance of the lived body in aesthetic experiences.⁵ He speaks of 'hot, cold, shrill, or hard colors, of sounds that are clear, sharp, brilliant, rough or mellow, of soft noises and penetrating fragrances' and of how Cézanne once claimed that 'one could see the velvetiness, the hardness, the softness, and even the odor of objects' (Merleau-Ponty, 'The Film', pp. 49–50).⁶ Artworks that impose the geometric precision of linear Renaissance perspective or those accounts of art that restructure its subjectively felt impact 'remain at a distance and do not involve the viewer, they are polite company' (*World of Perception*, pp. 53–54). As we will discover throughout, the baroque is anything but distant or 'polite' company when it comes to forging spatial, emotive, and sensuous connections between bodies. I take it as no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty

once called on the baroque to speak to the embodied relationality and reversibility that is at the heart of his ontology. Whereas Merleau-Ponty often called upon Cézanne as the aesthetic inspiration for his philosophy, it is in Merleau-Ponty that I find a compelling philosophical counterpart for the baroque.

In Merleau-Ponty's work, perception is vitally mobile because the roles of the seer and the seen are reversible ('Eye and Mind', p. 299). Significantly, it was in painting that he first discerned a 'figured philosophy of vision' ('Eye and Mind', p. 299). His famous example of the painter who feels themselves looked at by the objects that they are painting—of the painter who sees the trees but feels that the trees can also 'see' the painter—emblemizes the elemental reversibility of what he calls the 'flesh' ('Eye and Mind', p. 299; Dillon, *MPO*, pp. 153–176).⁷ What 'flesh' articulates is an inherent structural reversibility: 'the seer's visibility conditions vision itself [...]. To see is also the possibility of being seen' (Grosz, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 45). In the scenario of the trees and the painter, then, the philosopher extends to the domain of art the same structural reversibility that he discerns in all our embodied perception. Here, it is important to note that Merleau-Ponty is not imputing a reductive anthropomorphism to the trees such that they are sentiently 'aware' of the painter. Rather, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, his claim is really an ontological one. The 'flesh' speaks to a shared materiality that connects the subject and object of perception; as mutually 'visible, [the] trees and the painter are of the same visibility, the same flesh' ('Merleau-Ponty', p. 45).

Why might Merleau-Ponty have underscored the reversibility of perception with such specific reference to painting? According to phenomenological film scholar Vivian Sobchack, the answer lies in how the 'painter and filmmaker practice a phenomenology of vision' (*Address of the Eye*, p. 91). In her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), Sobchack draws upon Merleau-Ponty to make a polemical call for the importance of phenomenology to film studies. In Sobchack's film-phenomenological schema, cinema is embedded in similar existential structures to that of the human body. In having sense (perception) and making sense (expression), cinema is a medium that 'quite concretely returns us, as viewers and theorists, to our senses' (Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, p. 13). Here, the ontology of cinema is not approached through questions of its technological make-up (analogue or digital) or its indexical relations with the real. As such, Sobchack does not answer the recurring question of what cinema 'is' in and through its technologies. Instead, she understands cinema as analogous to our own bodies in its enworldedness

and its having and making of sense. Regardless of its particular historic era or its precise technological format, cinema relies on comparable 'modes of embodied existence' (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the main 'vehicle, the "stuff", the substance of its language' (*Address of the Eye* p. 4). For *Cinema's Baroque Flesh*, the very ontology of cinema lends itself to the art of entanglement.

Flesh and its Reversibility

Before I turn to the baroque in more depth, it is necessary to outline some of the other major theoretical influences from film and media studies that have shaped this book. In recent years, topics relating to touch and the senses, to the body, affect, and the emotions have received a considerable amount of attention across the humanities. More specifically, the work of film and new media theorist Laura U. Marks has broken new conceptual ground in prompting scholars to consider how the proximate senses (touch, taste, smell) shape the aesthetics of inter-cultural cinema, art, and experimental film and media. In books such as *The Skin of the Film* and *Touch*, Marks draws on Deleuze, Sobchack, and other thinkers to argue for cinema as a medium of sensuous contact wherein meaning is filtered through a sense of material presence as much as it is through intellectual or narrative signification.

For Marks, spectatorship is best viewed (or, more precisely, experienced) as a bodily, mnemonic, and contagious exchange that occurs between different selves, objects, and others rather than through the mind alone. This exchange is synopsized by her carnally loaded metaphor of the 'skin of the film', whereby 'the circulation of a film among different viewers is like a series of skin contacts that leave mutual traces' (*Skin of the Film*, pp. 121, xii). Marks' considered emphases on the proximate relations that connect film and viewer and on the inter-permeation of touch and vision that can occur therein have influenced my own thoughts as to what a baroque cinema of the senses might involve. In addition, the more explicitly film-phenomenological work of Sobchack and Jennifer M. Barker prompted me to delve more deeply into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (Barker, *Tactile Eye*).⁸ In doing so, I was led to discover the striking but still strikingly neglected parallels that connect his philosophy to the baroque. As we will discover, distanced and disembodied accounts of vision or bodily being cannot be reconciled with baroque flesh. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy strongly resonates with the art of entanglement because he

argues for our shared participation in a restless, mobile, and replenishable field of materiality that is known as ‘flesh’ (Grosz, ‘Merleau-Ponty’, p. 45).

In his final unfinished work—published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*—Merleau-Ponty outlined his ontology of the ‘flesh’. Cut short by the philosopher’s death, *The Visible and the Invisible* with its fragmentary working notes can make for a somewhat elliptical read. The text has spurred much debate as to whether or not it marks a radical departure from Merleau-Ponty’s earlier phenomenological investigations, as these investigations relied on the intentionality of a subjective consciousness.⁹ While this book will not retread these debates, it is useful for us to turn briefly to critics such as M.C. Dillon who have argued for the underlying continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought as well as an important conceptual shift in his terminology. According to Dillon, the philosopher’s intentions remained the same throughout his career: to ‘carry Western philosophy beyond the dualism of subject and object’ (*MPO*, p. 155). The ‘flesh’ therefore needs to be understood as a modification of Merleau-Ponty’s lifelong interest in embodied being and perception rather than as a wholly new take upon them (*MPO*, p. 85).¹⁰

For Dillon, there are definite antecedents to *The Visible and the Invisible* that indicate that Merleau-Ponty had been progressively moving towards this later ontology. Let us examine that continuity more closely. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty encapsulates the subjective and objective dimensions of embodiment through one of his favourite examples—one hand of the body touching the other. The figure of the two hands touching represents our lived capacity to function as both a perceiving subject in the world and as an object of perception. In the example of the two hands touching, each of the hands is felt from within while functioning as a tangible object for the other from without. As Merleau-Ponty is careful to observe, however, whenever I touch one hand to the other these ‘two hands are never *simultaneously* in the relationship of touched and touching to each other’ (*PP*, p. 106; italics mine).

While my body holds the capacity for touching and for tangible being I cannot experience both of these potentialities at the same time. Whenever I focus on this doubled sensation, either one hand will pass over into the role of the touched object (so that, correspondingly, I cease to touch with it) or *vice versa*. Our intentional focus is therefore forced to move back and forth between the subjective and objective dynamics of embodiment. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty returns to the figure of the two hands touching. This time, however, he explicitly links this doubling of sensation to the ontology of ‘flesh’. Reflecting upon the sensible, he

asserts that 'every reflection is after the model of the reflection of the one hand of the body touched' (VI, p. 204). The example of two hands touching resurfaces throughout this text and in its working notes (VI, pp. 9, 123, 133–134, 147–148, 254, 261). This is because self-touching emblemizes a 'crisscrossing [...] of the touching and the tangible, [as] its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it' (VI, p. 133). This crisscrossing is extended to the relationship between the visual and the visible and to sensibility in general (Merleau-Ponty, VI, p. 133).¹¹

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had couched two hands touching as an alteration of consciousness. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the figure of two hands touching demonstrates a structural reversibility that belongs to no-one. In this regard, 'flesh' re-directs the haptological implications of Merleau-Ponty's earlier work (and that of his forerunner, Edmund Husserl) towards a different end.¹² Touch becomes Merleau-Ponty's means of establishing an ontological reversibility that is not only appropriate to sight; it is indicative of all sensibility (Derrida, *On Touching*, pp. 162, 185–186). While the concerns of Merleau-Ponty's last work are traceable back to his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, his theory of 'flesh' replaces the former 'language of subject–object disjunction' with an ontology that is marked by a sense of material relatedness, of 'communion and reciprocity' (Dillon, *MPO*, p. 150). What 'flesh' rightly insists upon is that all perception is embodied, reciprocal, and reversible. To quote Merleau-Ponty: 'to say that the body is a seer is, curiously enough, not to say anything other than: it is visible' (VI, p. 273). Furthermore, if the positions of visual and visible can reverse, then '[t]o have a body is [also] to be looked at (it is not only that), it is to be *visible*' (VI, p. 189). For this book, such reversibility is essential to understanding the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' to baroque art and film. Within this critical framework, every visual is at the same time visible, the touching can be touched, the sonic heard, and the sensing also sensed.

At this juncture, we should pause to note that Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' is not actually reducible to the guise of literal human flesh. While the term boasts a definite carnal resonance, 'flesh' possesses no 'referent' because it is not an identifiable substance as such (Dastur, 'World', p. 34). As Merleau-Ponty himself remarks, 'we do not mean to do anthropology' when we speak of his ontology; 'flesh' pertains to a kind of 'anonymity innate to Myself' though 'one knows that there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it' (VI, pp. 136, 139). Although 'flesh' is not equivalent to actual human flesh, it does still return us to the basic phenomenological understanding of embodiment as it is lived in subjective and objective modalities—albeit

with one crucial difference. Whereas his earlier projects had counteracted the objectification of the body by detailing the body that is subjectively lived, Merleau-Ponty would later unite these twinned components of the subjective and objective under the heading of a basic structural reversibility or what he calls the *chiasm*.

In the chapter entitled ‘The Intertwining—The Chiasm’, Merleau-Ponty explicitly asserts that ‘we do not have to reassemble [the subjective and the objective] into a synthesis’—‘they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth’ (VI, p. 165).¹³ Foregrounding the ways in which the objective and the phenomenal body, self and other, or the lived body and its world will continuously ‘turn about one another or encroach upon one another’, Merleau-Ponty speaks to the inherently reversible nature of subjects and objects (VI, p. 117; see also Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 294). ‘Flesh’ is the name he gives to the manifestation of that reversibility or *chiasm* in embodied, enworlded existence: ‘the chiasm is that: the reversibility’ (Merleau-Ponty, VI, p. 263).

‘Flesh’ is one of many key terms that get repeated throughout *The Visible and the Invisible*. It appears alongside a number of important others: ‘*chiasm*’, ‘wild meaning’, ‘brute mind’, ‘brute’ or ‘savage being’, ‘fold’, ‘fabric’, ‘intertwining’, ‘divergence’, ‘*écart*’ (meaning gap or interval), and ‘reversibility’. Seeking to give voice to a mobile and materialist ontology that would ‘replace that of transcendental subjectivity [with its notions of] subject, object, meaning’, many of these terms make their appearance in Merleau-Ponty’s writing for the first time (Merleau-Ponty, VI, p. 167). In this regard, Michel de Certeau’s commentary on Merleau-Ponty’s last text is illuminating and well worth quoting at length. As he remarks, its prose is much like

a woven fabric, built upon a few recurrent words, which constitute its vibrant ‘ramification’: Brute, flesh, entrapment, hinge, complicity, engulfing, divergence, horizon, ramification, operative, opening, landscape, spectacle, style, etc. The most insistent of these refrains forms its own network of synonyms. *It provides a lexical figure for the movement of the discourse*: chain, circularity, coexistence, embracing, overlap, enjambment, enlacing, rolling up, intertwining, fabric, filigrane, implication, inextricable, inter-world, inter-section, intersubjectivity, mixture, knot, pre-possession, promiscuity, reciprocity, to reciprocate one another, redoubling, solidarity, tissue, weft, etc. The recurrence of these words, like successive waves, creates a magic spell of the text, but *they testify above all to that which bewitches it*. The interlacing of these words duplicates

that of the things. In that respect, *the literary structure of the discourse reproduces the 'enlaced' structure of the vision that it describes.* (de Certeau, 'Madness of Vision', pp. 30–31, fn. 4; italics mine)

Through its mobile and materialist language (enlacing, encroaching, intertwining, knot, fabric, fold, and so on), *The Visible and the Invisible* provocatively mimics the very ontology it is engaged in expressing. Similarly, Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor observe how the *chiasm* deliberately calls up the figure and the action of crisscrossing, as with 'a crosswise arrangement' ('Introduction', p. 17, fn. 2).¹⁴ Dillon, too, understands 'flesh' as an innately reversible structure. He likens the *chiasm* to 'the crossing and turning back on itself of the single thread that emanates from the spider's body when she spins her web. This web-matrix, the whole cloth, the flesh of the world is an interweaving, an elementary knotting' (*MPO*, p. 155). Following on from de Certeau, Evans and Lawlor, and Dillon, then, we can highlight that the key terms of *The Visible and the Invisible* (*chiasm*, intertwining, 'flesh') are evocative of ideas, forms, and figurations of reversibility. That reversibility or *chiasm* is essential to my understanding of baroque flesh and how it manifests itself in film.

A structural intertwining, interlacing, or entanglement between bodies is crucial to the baroque. When I first came across how film scholar, Elena del Río, had glossed Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the 'flesh' as connoting 'the structure of reversibility whereby all things are at the same time active and passive, visual subjects and visible objects, the outside of the inside, the inside of the outside', I could think of no aesthetic that was more invested in and expressive of that reversibility than the baroque ('The Body as Foundation of the Screen', p. 103). Deliberately opening up the internal and external properties of its own form, baroque art and film creates a heightened spatial, emotive, and experiential continuum between bodies. I contend that the formal and the philosophical hallmark of the baroque is its sensuous reversibility, as it enjoins an embodied response. Baroque flesh weds the 'inside' of embodied vision and feeling to the 'outside' of its aesthetic expressions; in turn, it uses the expressive 'outside' of its form to solicit the affective 'inside' of the body before the work. In this book, the notion of baroque flesh makes for an innately sensuous as well as reversible encounter between bodies: the art of entanglement.

As Dillon and del Río both propose it, 'flesh' needs to be situated *adverbially* rather than *substantially* (Dillon, 'Écart', p. 25; del Río, 'The Body as Foundation of the Screen', p. 103). Merleau-Ponty himself chose to invoke 'flesh' as something of a primary or even elemental term: 'the concrete

emblem of general manner of being' (VI, p. 147). According to Dillon, his use of the term 'manner' here is suggestive of how 'flesh' refers to the structural how of relations rather than to their corporeal make-up ('*Écart*', p. 25). Instead of delimiting 'flesh' to the human or to any specific matter, we need to understand it as the background or material field of possibility against which all discretely embodied and individualized figures emerge and differentiate themselves through the shifting relations of perception. As Alphonso Lingis likewise suggests, 'flesh' only pertains to the literal human 'body inasmuch as it is the visible seer, the audible hearer, the tangible touch—the sensitive sensible: inasmuch as in it is accomplished an equivalence of sensibility and sensible thing' ('Translator's Preface', p. liv).

For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is always implicated in the object of perception and *vice versa*. In his later philosophy, though, both positions co-exist in 'flesh' as the 'shared material exchange that makes possible the reversible exchange or transfer between one and the other' (del Río, 'The Body as Foundation of the Screen', p. 102). As 'flesh' is not a specific substance, its material exchange or transfer can also be extended to aesthetic experience. As structural reversibility, 'flesh' is as apposite to cinema and its range of technological mechanisms (film camera, projector, lenses, cinema screen, celluloid stock, or digitized code) as it is to the human body and its carnal mechanics (skeleton, musculature, neural channels, skin and hair, inner organs, sinews, tendons, and the like) (Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, p. 220). For Barker, to invoke Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' for film theory means insisting 'on a spectator [...] who joins the film in the act of making meaning' (Barker, *Tactile Eye*, p. 27). As it speaks to a mobile enjoining or enlacing in-between, 'flesh' can be used to shed light on baroque cinema as well. This is because the baroque is premised upon and often explicitly figures itself as a sensuous doubling or reversibility between bodies.

Defining the Baroque

As both an aesthetic and a critical concept, the 'baroque' is not the cultural phantom of a long distant past.¹⁵ As Timothy Hampton remarks, it has continued to shadow 'ghostlike around much recent thought' ('Introduction', p. 2). In his *Life of Forms in Art* (1934), the French art critic Henri Focillon was amongst the first to comment upon the baroque's potential to reveal 'identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time' (p. 58). Approaching aesthetic form as subject to trans-historic or cyclical renewal, Focillon pre-empts more contemporary

arguments for the persistence of the baroque into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

According to Deleuze, the baroque 'radiates everywhere, at all times' in fields such as mathematics, art, science, philosophy, and costume design (*The Fold*, p. 121; see also Conley, 'Translator's Forward', pp. x–xi). For Deleuze, as for a number of art, film, and cultural critics such as Mieke Bal, Omar Calabrese, Norman M. Klein, Angela Ndaljianis, Timothy Murray, and Lois Parkinson Zamora, the baroque is an incredibly elastic phenomenon that radiates out well beyond its inception in seventeenth-century Europe, wherein spectacular cultural productions were harnessed to meet the ends of the church and the absolutist state.¹⁶ In the work of Bal, for example, the baroque is approached as possessing a 'preposterous history' that seeps into the present through its reiterated citation (*Quoting*, p. 1). Although it enjoys historical specificity, the baroque is very much 'molded within our present being' (Bal, *Quoting*, p. 27). Similarly, the cultural historian José Antonio Maravall has intimated that 'one can speak of a baroque at any given time, in any field of human endeavor' (*Culture*, p. 5). Once it is expanded beyond past media traditions as well as along trans-historic and cross-cultural lines, the baroque reveals a startling formal and philosophical endurance.

In her *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Angela Ndaljianis expertly elucidates how cinema might be especially amenable to a neo-baroque logic that delights in visual illusion, cross-media serialization, and technological display (*Neo-Baroque*, p. 182). While Ndaljianis makes a compelling argument for the neo-baroque of contemporary Hollywood and its cross-media entertainments, it must be noted that the very notion of a 'cinematic' baroque remains conceptually fractured.¹⁷ Unlike Ndaljianis, there are critics who argue that modernity brought about a revival of the baroque or those who claim an avant-garde or modernist baroque that is typified by European or UK directors such as Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, the Brothers Quay, Jan Švankmajer, and Agnès Varda. Some situate the baroque as the progenitor of modernist surrealism while others refer to a 'Hollywood baroque' that is evident in the auteurist flair of studio-era directors like Orson Welles, Douglas Sirk, and Nicholas Ray. Some see the neo-baroque of the late twentieth century as a critical alternative to postmodernism while others argue that the neo-baroque is an exclusively digital phenomenon, evident in the work of new media artists such as Bill Viola. There are those who approach the baroque as an aesthetic of innate artifice that can be linked to pre-cinematic histories of special effects and animation; and those who explore the New World baroque of the Americas, examining how the filmmakers, artists, writers, and intellectuals of this

region have appropriated the European baroque of their ancestry to voice their own postcolonial identities.¹⁸

And yet, whenever the designation of a ‘cinematic’ baroque is called upon in film and media studies it tends to be reduced to films that veer towards the visually spectacular. Stephen Calloway, in his book *Baroque, Baroque: Culture of Excess*, illustrates the case in point. Calloway argues that baroque forms re-appeared throughout twentieth-century architecture, interior design, jewellery, *haute couture* fashion, and film. In terms of the latter, he admirably documents the potential for a baroque cinema across the course of film history—invoking directors as varied as Busby Berkeley, Jean Cocteau, Josef von Sternberg, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Sergei M. Eisenstein, and Federico Fellini. While noting that the baroque is ‘more than amplitude of form and swirling movement [...] more than just color and opulence and quality of materials or the simple elaboration of decoration [...] far more than just decorative style’, he rarely delves into the entrenched sensuality of the baroque aesthetic nor does he address cinema’s capacity to evoke it (*Baroque, Baroque*, pp. 15, 173).

Calloway’s baroque cinema relies upon costume, set design, architecture, and *mise-en-scène* yet he never addresses how the sensuality of film movement, colour, texture, materiality, and decoration might harbour meaning in their own right (pp. 15, 173). For Calloway, ‘the material of the plot and the action and the overall “feel” of a great many [...] films is undoubtedly baroque, and yet the actual quality of the film-making is straightforwardly banal [...]’ (p. 226). He continues that when ‘design is so obviously lacking, the term “baroque” [...] seems to be misused as a description of the true style of the film’ (p. 226). In this book, by contrast, I take the fact that a film can *feel* baroque—even without extravagant set design, technological displays, or stylistic hyperbole—to indicate that notions of baroque filmmaking need to be extended beyond that of a spectacular, virtuoso, or technologically-driven optic.

Clearly, some parameters are needed for us in approaching this aesthetic. Following on from phenomenological philosophy and from Bal’s work on the baroque, I understand the baroque as a fundamentally correlative aesthetic that entangles one body with another.¹⁹ Approaching the baroque as a doubled or correlative structure is suggestive of another crucial formal feature of the baroque: its characteristically ‘open’ spatiality. In 1915 the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin first noted that the baroque manifests a quintessentially ‘open form’ in its expansive depiction of space and in its stylistic attitude towards the frame (*Principles*, p. 124). Similarly, Ndalianis locates one of the foremost principles of baroque and neo-baroque form in its signature ‘lack of respect for the limits of the frame’ (*Neo-Baroque*,

p. 25). Umberto Eco, too, has argued that the baroque is a proponent of the 'open work' as it enacts 'deliberate move[s] to "open" the work to the free response of the addressee' ('The Poetics', pp. 52–53). Together, Ndalianis and Eco both helpfully indicate how the 'open' topology of the baroque occurs in conjunction with its 'open' attitude towards the participant. For Eco, 'open' works are characterized by a strong sense of physicality and movement, a porous spatiality and an invitation to the participant 'to make the [aesthetic] work together' ('The Poetics', p. 63). As Ndalianis similarly observes (and here we might take special note of her wording), the audience is '[e]ntangled in [the] neo-baroque order [...]' (Neo-)baroque form relies on the active engagement of audience members, who are invited to participate' (*Neo-Baroque*, p. 25; italics mine). The baroque manifests an open stance towards the frame, as if inviting the audience into the space of the representation.

These topological tendencies lead me on to another key definition of the baroque: the baroque as a highly sensuous aesthetic. Despite the predominantly visual nature of most discussion of the baroque, the inter-sensory texturing of perception is essential to historic baroque forms just as embodied vision, movement, and materiality are fundamental to baroque cinema. Of course, baroque flesh will be enacted and experienced differently in its transition from the seventeenth-century arts into film. Here, Ndalianis is once again apposite. As she writes, the 'neo-baroque shares a baroque delight in spectacle and sensory experiences' that combine the visual, auditory, and textual in 'ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth-century baroque form' (*Neo-Baroque*, p. 5). While Ndalianis' neo-baroque has been catalysed by post-sixties shifts in Hollywood, her point remains pertinent to the baroque flesh that concerns this book—the fact that cinema possesses strong sensorial continuity with as well as substantial difference from earlier baroque traditions.²⁰

Whereas the historic baroque arts were rendered through painted canvases, architectural frescoes, poetry, rhetoric, music, sculpture, and the play of light and shadow, a cinema of baroque flesh relies on very different technological bases. At the same time, the historically diverse and arguably still emergent technologies of cinema are also transcended by the sensible presence of what Sobchack labels the 'film's body' (*Address of the Eye*, pp. 164–259).²¹ As I discuss more fully in the next chapter, the embodied but non-human concept of the film's body allows us to attend to the likeness that cinema bears with our own bodily being, bearing, and perception, and to the different aesthetic modalities that can inflect cinematic embodiment.

'Good Looking'

In his remarkable book *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay has extensively documented how an almost endemic distrust of vision has haunted Western philosophy, whether that distrust has been directed towards images, shadows, mirrors, reflections, or the cinema.²² Even within current sensuous film scholarship, anti-visualism persists in the way that sight has come to signify a position of inherent optical or ideological mastery as opposed to the affective valuation of touch. Unlike other sensuously oriented film and media scholars, I try not to configure sight as distanced, disembodied, or distrustful in comparison to the other senses. Not only is vision inextricable from the rest of the human sensorium, even the notion of us making eye *contact* with another or with an artistic object can lead us on to moments of revelatory insight and ethically embodied connection (Cataldi, *Emotion*, p. 35).²³

To redress such takes upon vision, I turn to the media archaeological work of the art and visual cultural historian Barbara Maria Stafford. As Stafford compellingly demonstrates, many contemporary critiques of 'manufactured splendors and ocular falsifications' as well as critiques of vision itself as '[m]ere beholding' stem from the pre-modern period (*Artful Science*, pp. 21, 23). It is no secret that the Enlightenment railed against the flagrantly feeling 'eye' of the baroque. Not only did seventeenth-century arts and culture appeal to 'lying surfaces' but its desire to foreground physicality was regarded with a deep suspicion—the beholder might become all too responsive to the 'perils of tactile color and whorish paint' (Stafford, *Good Looking*, p. 102; see also Stafford, *Artful Science*, p. 21). The anti-visualism of Enlightenment discourse situated vision 'not with Cartesian clarity and rational distinctness, but with Jesuitical delusion and mystical obfuscation in general', thereby damning the sensuous visuality of the baroque as not to be trusted in the new age of reason (Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, p. 14). Such metaphysical inheritance 'prefers the verbal to the visual, the intelligible to the sensible, the text to the picture, and the rigorous articulations of signification to the ambiguities of untutored perception' (Shaviro, *Cinematic Body*, pp. 14–15). It is not surprising that this inheritance is discernable in film theory as well, especially those strains that distrust one taking visual pleasure in or 'being affected and moved by visual forms' (Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, p. 18).²⁴

In the wake of the 'sensual turn of scholarship' that has been steadily gaining sway in the humanities, it seems timely to consider the still highly pressing need to restore what Stafford calls 'good looking' to cinema (Howes,

Sensual Relations, p. xii; *Good Looking*, p. 11). 'Good looking' focuses on embodied intelligence and a faith in visuality as it induces thought-provoking attention (*Good Looking*, p. 11). In bringing together Stafford's call for 'good looking' with the phenomenon of baroque flesh, it is my hope that this book will recuperate a thoughtful visuality for the baroque—typically associated with deceptive, maddening, or chaotic modes of perception—and for film and media studies.²⁵ I want to harness the longstanding aesthetic, critical, and cultural history of the baroque to develop a model of baroque cinema and of embodied film theory that is simultaneously sensuous, formally structured, and thoughtful in its engagements with the viewer. As it engages the senses, the emotions, and our visual intelligence, the baroque cinema that this book explores demands materialist approaches and flexible frameworks to film that do not just focus on the pre-reflective body (as Barker, *Tactile Eye*, and Sobchack do) or confine cinematic sensation to an aesthetics of the excessive, the abstract, the experimental, or the formless (as recent studies such as those of Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, or Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film* also imply).²⁶

This brings me to another overarching concept for this book: the relationship between analogy and the baroque. Made famous by Walter Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* (the German tragic drama or mourning play), the baroque has often been linked with allegory.²⁷ As Paul de Man explains it, allegory 'names the rhetorical process by which the literary text moves from a phenomenal, world-oriented to a grammatical, language-oriented direction' ('Introduction', p. xxiii). If allegory boasts literary origins (the textual cleverness of making signs assume multiple meanings), then analogy can be considered visual in its origins and just as integral to the experience of baroque flesh.

In her book *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, Stafford invokes the ancient concept of analogy as 'a general theory of artful invention and as a practice of inter-media communication'; analogy derives from the Greek *analogia* or *ana/logos*, meaning 'according to due ratio' or 'according to the same kind of way' (*Visual Analogy*, p. 8). Reacting against what she perceives as the debilitating emphases on negativity, disjunction, fragmentation, differentiation, and decay brought about by post-structuralism, Stafford laments how we seem to 'possess no language for talking about resemblance, only an exaggerated awareness of difference' (*Visual Analogy*, p. 10).²⁸ She turns to analogical art, thought, and practice as a weaving together of things, as analogy 'discover[s] the relevant likeness in unlike things' (Stafford, *Good Looking*, p. 203; see also *Visual Analogy*, p. 3). Not only does Stafford identify analogy as at once a visual and a thoughtful

practice, she also maintains that the ‘visual arts [are] uniquely suited to provide explanatory power for the nature and function of the analogical procedure’ (*Visual Analogy*, p. 3).

Admittedly, Stafford is not concerned with cinema. Nevertheless, her recuperation of analogy as an ongoing visual mode of engaging with the world and with the arts can be extended to film. Furthermore, the kind of perceptual intelligence that she opens up through the lens of the pre-modern is well worth considering for contemporary film studies. This is because analogy prompts ‘participatory performance’ in the aesthetic experience—a ‘mutual sharing in, or partaking of, certain determinable quantitative and qualitative attributes *through a mediating image*’ (Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, pp. 3, 10–11; italics mine). The visual component of analogy and its ‘fundamentally participatory mode of perception’ are especially well suited to my analyses of baroque flesh, as it draws our attention to a mutually shared sensuality between bodies (Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, pp. 23, 58).

According to art historian John Rupert Martin, the historic baroque arts lent ‘new force and meaning to received truths by translating them from the realm of the general and abstract into that of immediate, sensuous and concrete experience’ (*Baroque*, p. 132). Similarly, Stafford locates analogy as ‘a demonstrative or evidentiary practice—*putting the visible into relationship with the invisible* and manifesting the effect of that momentary union’ (*Visual Analogy*, pp. 23–24; italics mine). As an analogical art, the seventeenth-century baroque brought ‘invisible’ concepts into visibility, lending theoretical and intellectual ‘abstractions’ concrete forms. It rendered the intensity of subjective feeling in Counter-Reformation scenes of martyrdom, death, ecstasy, and the divine or the growing awareness of infinity in terms that were sensuously intelligible to the beholder. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann asserts, the baroque typically finds ‘meaning on matter and not on concept’ (*Baroque Reason*, p. 140). Such a ‘materialization or “corporealization” of the invisible’ accounts for the heightened function that the image accrues in baroque art (Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason*, pp. 140–141). Not content with abstractions, the baroque weaves connectivity and connection between bodies, signs, and phenomena. Seemingly ‘unrepresentable’ concepts are endowed with visual and tangible form in the arts, soliciting the sensuous perception of their beholder.

As Stafford puts it, analogy ‘has the virtue of making distant peoples, other periods, and even diverse contemporary contexts part of our own world’ (*Visual Analogy*, p. 51). As an age-old concept, it is analogical thought that allows the design of this book to proceed by providing us with great

conceptual 'opportunities to travel back into history, to spring forward in time, to leap across continents' (Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, p. 11). By way of analogy, what follows will draw attention to the correspondences and the differences that exist between the historic baroque and a baroque cinema, between cinema and our own embodied being, attempting to weave together imaginative and analogous connections between phenomena along the way.

A Cinema of Baroque Flesh

This brings us to the organization of this book. Each chapter is structured by particular themes, figures, feelings, and forms of the baroque—long-standing media archaeological motifs that can be traced back to the art, architecture, literature, poetry, historic treatises, and collecting practices of the seventeenth century. Throughout, I offer the reader close analyses of historic baroque artworks and/or cultural practices that I consider alongside my examples of a baroque cinema of the senses. To be sure, my film selections are expansive: they move from early cinema and silent slapstick through to contemporary European filmmaking; they rove between past and present Hollywood; ranging from the costumed bio-picture to digital documentary and jostling 'art' film alongside science fiction and horror. While my selections are expansive, they are not without careful consideration. They span film history, different national cinemas, and genres so as not to restrict baroque flesh to any one format or period of cinema. In bringing together the past and present of the baroque, I like to think of my film analyses as dynamic thought experiments in what a baroque cinema of the senses might involve and how it is experienced—readers should feel free to pause and add their own. For this book, baroque flesh lies latent within and is amenable to the ontological dynamics of cinema itself. A baroque cinema emerges when film enacts or reprises recognizably baroque figures, forms, and motifs, modes of perception, physicality, and feeling. Each chapter will endeavour to draw out the sensuous significance of the historic and cinematic baroque by considering its appeals to our different sense fields and to our analogical intelligence.

Chapter 1 establishes the main critical, contextual, and film-philosophical frameworks for my model of baroque flesh. By way of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, I identify the baroque as a doubled or correlative structure and as the aesthetics of reversibility. I argue for the relevance of film-phenomenology to the baroque and I mobilize Sobchack's striking concept

of the 'film's body' to deepen our understanding of baroque incarnations of that body (*Address of the Eye*, pp. 164–259). Following on from a discussion of baroque vision and painting the 'flesh' in seventeenth-century art, I examine the importance of vision, self-reflexivity, and gesture for the baroque. Contrasting two films that resonate with the baroque in different ways—the Hollywood science fiction/noir *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) and the European thriller *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005)—I argue that baroque cinema involves a self-reflexive layering of vision that also foregrounds experiences of perceptual flux.

Chapter 2 undertakes a substantial fleshing out of baroque vision and form. Bringing together Merleau-Ponty with the sensuous history of the baroque and the senses in film theory, I argue that baroque flesh resonates with an important decorative and conceptual motif for the baroque: the knot. Through a detailed examination of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila* (Cornaro Chapel, Rome, 1647–1652) amongst other historic baroque artworks, this chapter contextualizes the seventeenth-century *bel composto* (the beautiful whole) and early modern appeals to the 'passions' of the soul as crucial historic precedents for a baroque cinema. Chapter 2 delves into the flow between space, movement, and emotion for a cinema of baroque flesh. Concentrating on the brutally charged work of the contemporary French filmmaker Claire Denis and her film *Trouble Every Day* (2001), I argue that baroque 'excess' needs to be understood in more precise spatial, emotive, and inter-sensory terms. Denis' baroque is linked to sensuous assault as well as absorption, such that we are spatially and also emotionally immersed 'in' a cinema of the passions.

Chapter 3 develops the analogical world view of the baroque by focusing on the copy and the contact of baroque poetic language. Here I argue for baroque flesh as an intertwining of the figural with the literal, of language with experience, and of skin with signification. Reading the silent slapstick comedies of Buster Keaton through baroque poetics, I argue that the analogical witticisms of Keaton also belong to a baroque cinema. Keaton's films reprise both the copy and contact of baroque poetics by creating ingenious and surface-driven connections between bodies, signs, and worldly phenomena. Chapter 3 then turns to the history of the French absolutist court of Versailles to establish the baroque as a surface-based aesthetic that privileges the skin and different material textures. I argue that baroque sensibility persists in the affectively luxurious and surface-driven textures of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006).

Chapter 4 returns to Merleau-Ponty's figure of the two hands touching to develop a baroque haptics of the cinema. In the wake of Deleuze's own

mobilizations of the art historian Alois Riegl, together with Deleuzian-inflected studies of art and film such as those of Marks, discussions of the haptic in film theory have often relied upon Riegl.²⁹ While continuing to draw on Riegl, Deleuze, and Marks, this chapter brings the 'flesh' together with art historical studies of the baroque and with the work of Benjamin to propose a baroque haptics that is inclusive of figuration, depth, and signification. Using Jonathan Caouette's digital documentary *Tarnation* (2003) as my main case study, I examine how the design of baroque haptics moves between surface and depth and in and through shifting masses of detail. Connecting the digital assemblage of *Tarnation* to the collecting traditions of the seventeenth century, the baroque habit of perceiving and thinking by way of analogy again emerges here. Building on Stafford's work, I try to demonstrate that baroque analogy is as tactile and textural in its engagements with the world as it is visual.

The notion of a trans-historic baroque and its cinematic incarnation have provided the very impetus for this book. Together, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, Sobchack and Barker's film-phenomenology, and the work of sensuous film scholars such as Marks and del Río have provided its film-philosophical foundation, inspiring me to take a closer look, get a better feel, and listen to the sensuous murmurings of the body in terms of what might constitute an appropriately baroque cinema of the senses. Harnessing the strengths of film-phenomenological as well as detailed formal description, what follows will attend to the always two-sided exchange that occurs between film and viewer by examining what happens to my flesh as it engages with, recedes from, or is riled up by the baroque. This is not to imply that baroque cinema is particular to my flesh; rather, my use of close description strives to capture and to continue to document what Sobchack has valuably established as 'our common sensuous experience of the movies' (*Carnal Thoughts*, p. 65). While this common sensuality might be experienced by differently situated viewers in ways that are not fully described here, it is also not beyond a film-phenomenological nor an aesthetic thematization such as I undertake. By concentrating on the particular embodied manner by which a specific film or artwork engages me, I have been better able to identify and reflect upon the different embodied experiences of the baroque that can occur in cinema while still remaining committed to historicizing and contextualizing its sensuous significance. The art of entanglement is longstanding, while baroque flesh finds new life, sensuous form, and signification in cinema.