

The Cinematic Chiasm: Evoking Societal Empathy through the Phenomenological Language of Film

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Abstract

This paper is a recommendation for phenomenologists to use film as a perceptually-faithful language with which to disseminate research and insights about lived experience. I use Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to illustrate how film can evoke a state of profound, embodied empathy between self-and-other, which I refer to as "the cinematic chiasm". I incorporate a case study of my experience as audience member becoming intertwined with the flesh of the film "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly." I discuss four aesthetic techniques of this film through which I became enveloped in a state of visceral empathy towards the "other" on-screen. The cinematic chiasm offers exciting, creative possibilities for phenomenologists, particularly those who are interested in evoking widespread empathy for social justice purposes.

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Merleau-Ponty used the term "chiasm" to describe the fundamental reversibility between subject and object, self and world. He suggested that we are all part of a much larger intercorporeal unity—a universal flesh that we breathe, feel, and co-constitute. If our bodies are variations of one universal flesh, then there is no actual separation between self-and-other. Though we are unique in our differences, all beings are nevertheless still intimately intertwined with one another. As such, the chiasm entails a "criss-crossing" between the perceptual experiences of myself and others, so that the other's lifeworld can viscerally become my own, and vice versa (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Unfortunately, today's world remains painfully ignorant of this fundamental entwinement between self-and-other. Most societal problems involve an utter breakdown in human empathy, as alienation, discrimination, and violence dominate our current affairs. The ability to *share* in the lived experience of the other's body—this is what Merleau-Ponty calls the chiasm, and what we can also conceive of as

empathy. In the pursuit of social justice, it is essential to infuse society with a universal feeling of entwinement with others, across the spectrum of race, gender, religiosity, economic status, sexual orientation, and disability.

Phenomenological researchers have the potential to be not only producers of knowledge but also social activists. We produce creative artifacts that serve as glimpses into the experiences of those we learn about. There is opportunity here to cultivate societal empathy through our research, particularly when pursued in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty. How might phenomenologists conduct research in a way that renders his notion of the chiasm explicit and functional, so that our products evoke empathy among the public? Film offers an exciting solution. In this paper I will use Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to demonstrate how film can be a viable and effective end-product for phenomenological research. First, I will argue that film serves as an ideal language for phenomenological research, because it can express our participants' experiences in a perceptually faithful way. Second, I will explore how certain aesthetic techniques of film can evoke a profound state of embodied empathy among audience members—which I will call the “cinematic chiasm,” in honor of Merleau-Ponty. I will also propose how these techniques can be applied by phenomenological researchers to evoke empathy towards our participants.

Film as an Ideal Language for Phenomenological Research

Merleau-Ponty encourages researchers to forgo thinking of ourselves as separate from the phenomena we study. Rather than being subjects who hover over objects from above, we are deeply intertwined with all we seek to learn about: “we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 5). Thus we cannot rely on empiricism or intellectualism to guide our understandings, because they create a false dichotomy between subject-and-object and self-and-world. As such, Merleau-Ponty posits perception to be the only route through which we can faithfully understand the world, because we are of-it and for-it. His philosophy urges researchers to pursue our understandings of the world via our immediate senses, and by opening our eyes to “the things themselves.”

But as researchers, how can we account for that which we perceive? Merleau-Ponty criticized reflection as a cognitive process which obscures

perception, creating an abstraction that distances us from that which we experience: “the world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine it and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes inexplicably, irremediable distance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 8). Yet it is the researcher’s job to share our insights with others somehow. As such, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we share our lived experience through a hyper-reflexive, descriptive language which avoids abstraction or explanation and remains faithful to our sensual perception. Furthermore, this hyper-reflexive description must “plunge into the world instead of surveying it,” in order to make visible the inextricable bond between ourselves and that which we perceive (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 38). Finally, this hyper-reflexive description must strive to use language in a way that is not representative or symbolic, but rather expressive, in the closest way possible, of our direct contact with the things of the world that have not yet been languaged.

Merleau-Ponty praised art as an exceptional form of such hyper-reflexive language, because it retains the sensuality, openness, and wonder of our nascent perception. He conceived of art as an *amplification* of our nascent perception, and wrote that artists possess a heightened visual acuity of their landscape which they can extend to others through their creative artifacts. Therefore, rather than being representations of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty considered artworks to be *extensions* of our perceptual field (Quinn, 2009). Merleau-Ponty was particularly enchanted by cinema’s unique ability to express the world in a way that is more precise than our ordinary perception of it. In an essay entitled “Film and the New Psychology,” he wrote:

It is true that in our ordinary lives, we lose sight of this aesthetic value of the tiniest perceived thing...cinematic drama is finer-grained than real-life dramas; it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world...This is why the movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man...they directly present us with that special way of being in the world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 58)

Thus, film’s power lies in its ability to offer a slice of the world that is perceptually heightened compared with our typical experience of it. Through the aesthetics of film, we are able to achieve an even closer contact with being-in-the-world than ordinary perception could unveil.

Evoking Empathy through the Cinematic Chiasm

Alas, if phenomenological researchers seek a language through which to faithfully convey perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty would likely agree that film is an ideal vehicle. But how can it evoke empathy among those who view it? This is where the chiasm can become functional for social justice purposes. For just as film has the power to express a more heightened perception than ordinary reality, so does film have the power to make the fundamental intertwining between self-and-other more luminous than we would usually perceive it.

To illustrate film's ability to heighten our experience of the chiasm, I will use the example of the movie *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. This film tells the true story of a 43-year old man named Jean-Do, the French editor of *Elle* magazine, who was renowned for his party-loving, active lifestyle in Paris. One day he suffered a stroke which left him with Locked-in Syndrome, a condition whereby the person experiences full-body paralysis and is unable to move nearly all voluntary muscles, yet his or her mind remains consciously aware. The film situates itself in the first-person perspective of Jean-Do, after he awakens from a three-week coma and finds himself in a hospital bed experiencing utter paralysis, save for the ability to blink his left eye. In real life, Jean-Do worked with a speech therapist to create an innovative method of communication in which he could blink his left eye during recitations of the alphabet. In this manner, he dictated a poignant memoir about his lived experience of Locked-in Syndrome—of being trapped in a body which weighs him down like a diving bell, while his mind soars like a butterfly. Ten days before he died, Jean-Do's book was published and became a bestseller. In 2007 a movie version of his memoir was released, which is the focal point of our discussion here.

Let us imagine this film to be the end-product of a phenomenological research project about the lived experience of Locked-in Syndrome. How does the cinematic language of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* allow audience members to entwine with Jean-Do in an experience of empathic identification, through which our own bodies experience what it is like to be newly disabled and paralyzed? Throughout the rest of the paper I will demonstrate how *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* brings the cinematic chiasm to life, by providing phenomenological descriptions of my own experience as an audience member viewing four different clips of the film (these movie clips are available to watch online). I will also explicate the unique techniques of cinematography that are used throughout the film, incorporating Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and other theoretical literature

to help us understand the phenomenological language through which this film evokes embodied empathy towards the lived experience of Locked-in Syndrome. Finally, I will suggest how phenomenological researchers can be inspired by the cinematic chiasm in our own efforts to pursue societal empathy on behalf of research participants' lived experiences.

1. Film as Lived Body

(Please view the first movie clip here: "Good for a Wheelchair"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjkkbQy9fLA>)

The screen immediately pulls my vision into action, and I greet it effortlessly. The room in which I view this film rapidly falls away, and my senses are transported into Jean-Do's world. A Locked-In world.

My vision can only see what lies directly in front of him: the hospital bed, his naked chest, and IVs coming out of it. A flash of irritation heats up my flesh as I witness so many doctors' hands man-handling his arms and chest like puppeteers. My neck strains to obtain a broader perspective, but it is useless: our chin refuses to turn upwards. His neck remains stiffly frozen in place, staring bleakly in one direction. His limbs passively droop and poke out of the shirt that the doctors are trying to dress us in. I suddenly feel a heaviness in my own arms, like they are pinning my whole body down. My torso feels as if it is an enormous weight, an oppressive diving bell—as Jean-Do's must feel right now. A wave of humiliation chokes up my throat, as I feel what it might be like for a 43-year old man to suddenly feel helpless, infantile, a propped-up doll to be dressed by someone else. I don't know if he can cry, but witnessing his newly lifeless limbs certainly triggers my grief. A tear wells up in my eye and I do not bother to wipe it away, knowing that Jean-Do would not be able to.

Now I see his body being lifted and positioned into a wheelchair. I hear the doctors celebrate with merry voices: "you are good for a wheelchair!" As they cheer, he diverts his eyes upwards to the lights on the ceiling. We focus on the lights instead of the limbs, a much safer sight. It is too painful to view the inertness of his body, a reminder of what has been forever lost. So we fixate on the light, and I release a silent sigh.

It is clear from the above description of the cinematic chiasm that my body was pulled into action by Jean-Do's paralyzed body onscreen, inviting me

into a visceral conversation about the felt experience of Locked-in Syndrome. To discuss the empathic power of this embodied cinematic experience, we must refer back to the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy—which is that the body is the pivot-point around which we experience, interact with, and understand the world. Our body is always solicited by the sensible—all the things that we perceive immediately animate our bodily sensations. Our body is especially summoned into action when we perceive other vital bodies, which spurs a sense of “communion” in which both bodies intermingle with one another: “It is precisely my body which perceives the body of another... Just as the parts of my body together form a system, so the other's body and mine are henceforth a unitary whole, merely the back and the front of one and the same phenomenon” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 311). As such, it is through the activation of our bodily senses that we can truly experience empathy towards others in the world. As two different bodies converse and respond to one another, the fundamental entwinement between self-and-other becomes tangibly and deeply felt.

The cinematography of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* positions Jean-Do's body at the front and center of the film's perceptual field. Consequently, as my own perception encountered the fleshy, moving images onscreen, I certainly experienced my own body being solicited by the body of Jean-Do. The agility of my own limbs was called into action as I perceived the stiffness of his limbs onscreen. My arms felt heavy and foreboding, sinking to the sides of my body, as I watched his limp limbs being arranged by doctors to fit into a sweater. My own neck tightened and strained itself as Jean-Do's neck remained frozen by the camera angle. While the doctors celebrated their ability to position Jean-Do into a wheelchair, I could feel his anguish as the camera diverted his vision to stare at anything but his lifeless limbs. This onscreen perceptual diversion summoned tears to well up in my eye. I found myself sighing several times, responding to Jean-Do's despair with my own release of breath. As such, throughout the duration of this short piece of film, my body actively experienced what it might be like to be enclosed in a body that is newly paralyzed, helpless, and fussed over by doctors. This evoked in me a profound, visceral sense of grief about the loss of mobility that Jean-Do once had. Our bodies intermingled and merged in cinematic spaces of sorrow and loss, co-constituting a unique meaning of “Locked-in Syndrome” within the meeting-place between us.

We can better understand the embodied experience of communion that I just described, if we also consider the film itself to be a body in its own right. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack proposed the idea of “film as lived body,” wherein just as the human body transcends our physiological anatomy, so does the film-body transcend its mechanical structures to become its own embodied existence, its own being-in-the-world (Bacon, 2007). A film behaves, acts, perceives and expresses, just like any other vital body. In fact, film’s expression is more embodied than other forms of communication, for it uses the language of seeing, hearing, movement, and temporality to express its perceptual field, which simulates human perception (Bacon, 2007). As such, Sobchack informs us that when we view a film’s projection on-screen, we are actually viewing the expressed perception of an “other” who is experienced as a present, living, breathing entity to us: “The film experience not only reflects upon the perceptual experience of the filmmaker...but also presents the direct experience of a perceptual existence as the film itself” (Sobchack, 1992; in Bacon, 2007, p. 3). This notion that the film itself is a unique, present, living other became evident in my viewing of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. In my experience of the film, I did not perceive the filmmaker behind the camera, but rather the film as an embodied *other*—“an other who is with us and for us and in itself as an object-subject,” and for whom my own body is solicited into action (Sobchack, 1992; in Bacon, 2007, p. 3). The notion that I am passively viewing a film on a screen faded away, and was replaced by the sense that my body was actively participating in a dynamic encounter with the vital body of Jean-Do.

The idea of film as lived-body presents a great opportunity for phenomenological researchers. We might ask ourselves: how can our research product itself become a vital, embodied other? How can our research be experienced as seeing, hearing, moving, and even breathing? If our research is a lived body in its own right, it can elicit bodily sensations in the audience that evoke a sense of communion with our participants. To brainstorm how we might create such an animate product, we can continue to examine the cinematic techniques of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* that evoke a sense of embodied empathy so profoundly.

2. Film’s Intertwining Perspectives

(Please view the second movie clip here: “Sewing Up the Eye”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjkkbQy9fLA>)

I have climbed inside Jean-Do’s skull, and I am gazing at the world directly through his eyes. I am hearing his inner monologue, a voice that no one else can hear but him and me. The doctor is boasting about a fabulous ski trip he just took, the wind flapping upon his face while he whizzed down the mountain. Our voice scoffs “Screw that,” overriding the volume of the doctor’s voice and reacting to his oblivious insensitivity in light of the trauma that Jean-Do has endured. Yet this arrogant doctor pays no heed to our retort. I am reminded that we are mute, we are trapped, and no one will ever hear us. Despair and powerlessness sink in again.

Now the doctor is nonchalantly telling us he must sew one eye shut. “No, no, no!” our internal monologue screams, with a silent desperation that only the two of us will ever know. Eyelashes clump together, and from beneath these eyelids we watch as our world begins to go black, then red, then black. Our voice is bellowing as loudly as possible to keep the light—“You will NOT sew my eye shut!”—but to no avail, and half of the world suddenly goes dark.

The loss of our eye feels like lifelong imprisonment; it feels like eternal darkness. The loss of our eye feels like the loss of hope.

I could never have understood this from the outside.

As demonstrated in my description above, one of the most effective cinematic techniques that *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* uses to induce a sense of entwinement between self-and-other is to create the perception of a shared set of eyes between Jean-Do and audience members. In the language of cinematography, this is known as the “subjective camera angle”. With this technique, the camera stands in for the character’s vision, showing the audience the scene from their point-of-view. Thus we become pulled into the direct vantage point of Jean-Do, gazing at the world from a first-person perspective as if we were inside his locked-in body. The possibilities of evoking empathy through this technique cannot be underestimated, as the subjective camera angle allowing us to partake in another person’s subjective experience that we would likely never have privy to otherwise.

We can better appreciate the power of the subjective camera angle if we refer back to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that all

organisms co-exist in the world as *perspectival* beings. This means that in ordinary life, we can only perceive other things and people through the vantage point of our own milieu. In our daily encounters with others, we are only ever perceiving *one* particular perspective of that person, out of a vast array of possibilities of the other's being. Likewise, the other always retains hidden aspects that transcend our perceptual access. Merleau-Ponty explains:

The 'things' in naive experience are evident as perspectival beings: it is essential to them, both to offer themselves without interposed milieu and to reveal themselves only gradually and never completely; they are mediated by their perspectival appearances... I grasp in a perspectival appearance, which I know is only one of its possible aspects, the thing itself which transcends it. (Merleau-Ponty, 1942, p. 187)

Accordingly, we can never fully know the subjectivity of an other, as their hidden perspectives remain a mystery to us. Yet Merleau-Ponty also asserts that others can disclose their hidden perspectives to us through gesture and language. Language can reveal mysteries and invite us into new vantage points that we could never before perceive from where we stand. Furthermore, through language, the other's perspective does not only open itself to us, but it can *become* our own perspective as well:

It suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own... It is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 142)

Thus, language can envelop self and other into a greater set of eyes, a universal Visibility of the "flesh" through which our individual visual fields become entwined.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly reveals the mysterious, hidden perspectives of someone with Locked-In Syndrome through its unique cinematic language. In ordinary life, I could never have known the vantage point of a person in full-body paralysis such as Jean-Do, and the extent of despair he would experience during the seemingly minor medical procedure of getting

one eye sewn shut. Yet the subjective camera technique allowed me to experience Jean-Do's world firsthand: looking out from inside a paralyzed body with Locked-in Syndrome as if I inhabited those eyes myself. The subjective camera angle bridges the supposed distance between myself and a person with Locked-In syndrome—a distance I would have felt in ordinary life, if I happened to be in a hospital room with Jean-Do and peering at his immobile body from my external lens. Perhaps I too might have insensitively discussed my skiing adventures to make small talk, as the doctor had done. Yet the cinematic language of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* merges the perceptual fields of self-and-other, compelling me to switch perspectives and develop much-needed empathy.

Accordingly, the subjective camera angle technique also makes Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "shared flesh" explicit. While viewing this film, I perceptually climbed inside the body of Jean-Do. With the camera serving as our shared flesh, I felt his eye being sewn shut as if it were my own. I experienced our world growing darker and scarier as the needle wove the thread back and forth, frequently coming close to poking our eyeball out. I heard Jean-Do's inner monologue screaming in protest—a voice that I would never have heard from any other vantage point but his. But thanks to the subjective camera angle technique, I was privy to this hidden, desperate voice, which made me feel like I was inside Jean-Do's skull alongside him. As the movie clip went on, I stopped distinguishing whose body is whose. In my reflection I used the pronoun "us" and "our" without a thought while describing Jean-Do's lived experience. This indicates that I organically experienced myself and this person with Locked-In Syndrome to inhabit the same flesh. The cinematic chiasm of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* demonstrated that I am part of a much greater body than just myself; Jean-Do's eyes became my eyes—his Locked-In world became *our* Locked-In world.

The subjective camera angle technique presents an exquisite vehicle for phenomenological researchers who seek to evoke embodied empathy on behalf of our participants. We can use it to reveal the hidden perspectives of our participants, and to express their perceptual field as it is experienced through their very own eyes. Consequently, our participants' and audience's visual fields can intertwine to explicitly illustrate the presence of a greater, anonymous visibility, a shared flesh that envelops them both. Then, audience members may experience the suffering of the other as if it were their own subjective pain, just as I felt in regards to Jean-Do's despair.

3. Film's Haptic Visuality

(Please view the third movie clip here: "Am I in Heaven?":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6up-uz7Q9k&list=PL4C6867488775AE40&index=1>)

Her touch feels soft and hazy. The lightness of her fingertips dances with the shadows of my body as she massages me, and I am soothed into a state of waking slumber. The door opens and two beautiful women walk through the misty light, a halo softening the edges of their bodies as if they are angels, and we are in heaven. My perception feels the graze of fabric hanging over their soft breasts. Their faces come so close to mine, each pore and dip and curve visible, and it's as if I can feel the warmth of their breath caressing my face. Desire embraces all my senses, and I drink in this moment for a second before recalling my condition. My inner monologue sighs, "Just my luck. Two beauties and I'm stuck."

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly further entwines the audience member's perceptual field with Jean-Do's through a cinematic technique known as "haptic viscosity". Haptic viscosity refers to a film's attempt to appeal to the senses that it cannot technically represent, such as touch (Marks, 2000). This movie uses a number of different visual techniques to evoke the sensations of touch, and accordingly, to help us better understand the lived experience of Jean-Do. For instance, this movie clip displayed unfocused, blurry images, which were meant to be understood by going beyond the audience's vision to harness our tactile responses. In the beginning of this clip, as Jean-Do is receiving a massage, the camera shows fuzzy pastel imagery of fabric and flesh. As an audience member, my understanding of what was happening onscreen did not simply occur through sight alone, for at times my vision simply saw blurry flickers of color, light, and pattern. Yet the haziness onscreen expressed a soft and gentle texture, which made it feel like my body itself was being soothed by a sensual massage.

Furthermore, the film incorporates haptic viscosity through its use of close-up shots, such as when Jean-Do is being hovered over by his speech therapist and physiotherapist. In this shot, the camera zoomed up close to these women's faces so that I could detect even the subtlest glistens of sweat from their pores. This camera angle made me feel as if their flesh was brushing up against my own, and their breath was warming up my face. The camera also sometimes used a slow-panning movement across these close-up images, slowly skimming across these women's skin and lips and

breasts to make it seem like I was grazing over and embracing these body parts on-screen, as Jean-Do yearned to do. As such, through the vehicle of haptic visuality, I became enveloped in an extremely intimate understanding of Jean-Do's experience as a man with Locked-In Syndrome. I became viscerally attuned to the fact that disability does not kill desire. I simultaneously experienced the joys of his thriving libido alongside the frustration of not being able to express his sexuality, which may be so core to his identity. After all, Jean-Do was notorious as a "playboy" prior to his accident, and the film makes this part of his identity crystal clear in scenes such as this. Through haptic visuality, his lust bursts forth—a life force that even full-body paralysis could never extinguish.

The cinematic technique of haptic visuality coincides with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the chiasm, in which he suggested vision's reversibility with touch. He wrote that "there is an inscription of the touching in the visible, of the seeing in the tangible...and there is finally a propagation of these exchanges to all the bodies of the same type and of the same style which I see and touch" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 143). Merleau-Ponty said that our eyes "palpate" the world through sight; likewise, all visual experiences pull us into an intimate embrace with that which we perceive. This is the magic of haptic visuality—its ability to put all our bodily senses to work, beyond merely sight. As phenomenological researchers, perhaps we can use the haptic visual techniques of film to make our participants' experiences literally touch the audience's bodies: grazing over their flesh, encircling them in an embrace, and evoking the sensuality of their lived experience enough to give them goose bumps.

4. Film's Rhythmic Gestalt

(Please view the fourth movie clip here: "The Butterfly Escapes":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFxm9Q6E4M&index=6&list=PL4C6867488775AE40>)

I see Jean-Do as the world sees him—bundled in a wheelchair, seemingly mute—and I sigh with sympathy again. Yet Jean-Do's inner monologue tells us he's tired of pitying himself: "Two things are not paralyzed: my imagination and my memory. I can imagine anything, anybody, anywhere!" With gusto, he invites me into his freewheeling and vivid imagination. His mind flutters and soars like a butterfly through enchanting meadows and wide-open skies. With a

thrill, we jump off a cliff into the thrashing waters below. We march onwards like heroic cowboys in our own western film. There are no limits to the adventures of Jean-Do's mind.

Finally, the empathic power of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is achieved through its multi-sensory editing techniques—the special way it gathers together image, sound and movement across time in order to evoke the essence of being-in-the-world as someone with Locked-in Syndrome.

Merleau-Ponty wrote:

Beauty, when it manifests itself in cinematography, lies not in the story itself, which could quite easily be recounted in prose... what matters is the selection of episodes to be represented and, in each one, the choice of shots that will be featured, the length of time, allotted to these elements, the order in which they are able to presented, the sound or words with which they are or are not to be accompanied. Taken together, all these factors contribute to form a particular overall cinematography rhythm. (Merleau-Ponty, 1948, p. 98)

Thus the beauty of “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” lies not in its story but in its aesthetic montage of sensory experiences that opens up a world for us. Each moment is made meaningful by the moment that came before it; and by the way the sound and visual effects intermingle with one another. In this particular clip, the film blends various aspects of cinematography together to open up the world of Jean-Do's wondrous mind. All elements co-exist and intermingle to create a unity of his adventurous imagination, which cannot be held down by Locked-In Syndrome. The imagery and music and editing stitch together to depict a lively mind which weaves through meadows and soars through skies and longs for thrills and plays like a child. The film's poignancy is made possible by its careful temporal and spatial arrangement: I experienced the exciting flight of Jean-Do's imagination only because I witnessed his paralyzed body seconds earlier. I savored the beauty of the human mind, and felt profound gratitude for its elemental freedom, only because I have felt the perils of being locked in the diving bell of his body prior to this scene. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, particular in moments like this one, demonstrates that the true poignancy of cinema lies in the rhythmic gestalt, not in its particular storyline. Merleau-Ponty's insight about the rhythmic gestalt of film is crucial for the way researchers reflect upon our participants' experiences. We must challenge ourselves to creatively express the *rhythm* of our participants' lifeworlds, rather than merely trying to relay narrative information about their lives.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is an exemplary demonstration of how to package phenomenological research within the format of film, in order to evoke empathy on behalf of our participants. If Jean-Do were a research participant about the lived experience of Locked-In Syndrome, we would walk away from this cinematic product with an intuitive, visceral, and highly nuanced understanding of his lifeworld, as if we shared it with our own flesh. Alongside Jean-Do, we would experience the grief and frustration of the loss of a once-able body, while simultaneously savoring the delights of the human libido, memory, and imagination that full-body paralysis could never extinguish. Perhaps this ability for audience members to *share in the embodied experiences of our participants* is precisely the effect that phenomenological researchers should strive for in the work that we do. Merleau-Ponty himself said that the project of phenomenology “consists not in stringing concepts together but in describing the mingling of consciousness with the world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others...and this is movie material par excellence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 59). Yet even for researchers who hesitate to engage in filmmaking, there is much to learn from the cinematic chiasm that we can apply to social justice efforts. How can we create research products, no matter the format, that behave as vital, embodied “others” in their own right? How can our research use a point-of-view that enables people to share in the flesh of our participants? How can our research activate people’s tactile sensations and invite them into an intimate embrace? And finally, how can we render our participants’ lives poignant through a poetic temporal rhythm to which no narrative explanation could ever do justice? The creative possibilities are exhilarating, as is the possibility to someday live in a world that feels truly intertwined.

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