Cinema and Child’s Play

Jennifer M. Barker

Abstract

This paper takes its cue from Jean-Pierre Meunier’s brief references to children’s games to ask what child’s play might teach us about his model of filmic identification. Filmic identification, in Meunier’s account, emerges from and against the background of “syncretic sociability,” a state of “anonymous collectivity” that characterizes infancy and early childhood, but which never entirely disappears in the adult. By examining what Daniel Stern called “forms of vitality,” we gain a clearer sense of how that shift between Meunier’s “primordial intersubjectivity” and “private intersubjectivity” takes place. Forms of vitality also lend support to Meunier’s nuanced descriptions of the affective relationship between spectators, characters, and films by bringing into focus the aesthetic movements through which that relation comes into being.

Keywords: Syncretic sociability; phenomenology; intersubjectivity; Jean-Pierre Meunier; child psychology; Daniel Stern

In The Structures of the Film Experience: Filmic Identification, Jean-Pierre Meunier addresses the question of the viewer’s attachment to and investment in cinema and identification with the people and characters it presents to us. He identifies three modes of cinema – the home movie, the documentary, and fiction – each of which “solicits” from its viewer a particular “attitude” or form of engagement, including a specific way of engaging with its characters (whether those are fictional or real-world people), and with the time of its narrative in relation to real-world time in the case of the non-fiction modes. Along the way, he makes a brief but intriguing aside, pointing out that “the consciousness of the child can teach us a lot” about the way spectators engage with these filmic modes. “But this is not our concern,” he continues, “We have only wanted to determine certain general attitudes of filmic consciousness, […] outside of any deviation” (p. 100).
This paper takes up the “consciousness of the child,” not as a “deviation,” but as a meaningful prehistory. Exactly what can child consciousness teach us about filmic modes and identification? Meunier’s arguments rest heavily on the premise that filmic identification emerges from and against the background of what he terms “syncretic sociability,” a state of “anonymous collectivity” that characterizes infancy and very early childhood, but that some psychologists and philosophers argue never disappears entirely. If this is true, we stand to learn something about adult spectatorship by attending to the complexity of infantile relations to the world and others in it. Specifically, by examining what developmental psychologists have termed “forms of vitality” and the early childhood play, in which they are the focus, we see just how participatory and interactive is the relation between spectator, character, and film in Meunier’s account of filmic identification.

Many scholars of early childhood agree that the “anonymous intersubjectivity” Meunier describes (p. 118) is the originary mode of engagement between an infant and others in the world. Drawing on phenomenology, cognitive psychology, and neuropsychology, contemporary scholars of early childhood development elaborate – in more detail than Meunier’s brief overview can do – just how “syncretic sociability” emerges and plays out, as well as how it anticipates, enables, and shifts into more ‘private’ forms of intersubjectivity, even as it lingers in some form. Bringing the psychology and phenomenology of childhood and child’s play to bear on Meunier’s theory of filmic identification also allows us to expand the discussion of filmic identification beyond narrative and character, to make room for formal, cinematic aspects of identification that are less emphasized by Meunier’s account.

Though Meunier calls the consciousness of a child a “deviation” from the “generalized” spectator he pursues through the book, there is good reason to turn to childhood for clues regarding filmic identification as it pertains to adult spectators. Of course, childhood differs from adulthood in more ways than we can count, but as Merleau-Ponty says, in a series of recently translated lectures on child psychology and pedagogy, “adult functions are already represented in the child, but are not present in the same sense. It is analogous to a game of chess; all the pieces are there at the start and yet the face of the game changes.”

As Merleau-Ponty argues, children’s mindsets demand to be engaged on their own terms, putting aside assumptions and comparative measures based on adult concepts and habits. If one approaches childhood in this fashion, one finds that structures inherent in early childhood are in some ways radically strange in comparison to those of adulthood, and yet they
continue to play a meaningful role long after the development of new ones. Syncretic sociability is one of these structures.

**Syncretic Sociability**

Meunier quotes Merleau-Ponty, who claims that syncretic sociability is “a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence” (p. 42). In this early stage in a child’s relation to the world, the child has not arrived at a sense of the self, nor of others. As Merleau-Ponty writes, syncretic sociability (the term he adopts from Henri Wallon) is “the existence of a kind of precommunication, an anonymous collectivity with differentiation, kind of a group existence.” It precedes a second stage, which is “the objectification of one’s body, segregation, distinction between individuals. [...] Individual consciousness only appears later, along with the objectification of one’s own body, establishing a dividing wall between the other and me and the constitution of the other and of me as ‘human beings’ in a reciprocal relationship.”

Meunier describes this stage as the foundation of a sense of oneself as a unique entity, a subject in the world.

It is on the basis of this indistinct, intersubjective syncretism that self-awareness, and the awareness of others, is structured in the child. Moreover, it is remarkable that the recognition of other people always precedes the awareness of oneself as a singular being. [...] The link to other people is provided with existence in the form of a coexistence of consciousnesses. As such, it precedes the formation of people as private subjectivities and is even the precondition for this process (p. 45/46).

Indeed, then and now, many psychologists and phenomenologists agree that this syncretic sociability never fully disappears. After all, writes Wallon, “could adult intelligence have remained rich and productive if it had really been forced to abandon the sources from which the child’s intelligence springs?” Summarizing Merleau-Ponty, Talia Welsh writes that “all experiences are constituted by original, subjectless experience and thus all experiences express elements of original syncretic sociability.” In other words, “this anonymous existence is not just a period of the subject’s early life; it is interwoven within everyday existence.”

Meunier makes clear that “identification is founded on primordial intersubjectivity in order for it to be structured in relation to private
intersubjectivity” (p. 46). For a clearer sense of how that shift between “primordial intersubjectivity” and “private intersubjectivity” takes place, we can look to Daniel Stern’s work in developmental child psychology.

Stern’s career-long investigation of interpersonal relations, including and especially those of infancy and early childhood, reflects an increasing overlap between the fields of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience on these issues. He agrees with those of his contemporaries in cognitive child psychology who argue that intersubjectivity is an “innate, emergent human capacity,” but he parts company with them on the question of what precisely intersubjectivity is. While some have argued that the infant’s tendency to imitate the parents’ facial expressions suggests the infant does have a sense of self as separate from others, Stern “reserves intersubjectivity for the end of the first year, when the infant ‘discovers he has a mind, that other people have minds [...] and that inner subjective experiences are potentially shareable.’”

Stern does acknowledge that a certain kind of intersubjectivity exists in infancy, but he considers the term too broad to be useful. This prompts him to identify three categories, or stages, of “intersubjectivity” that develop between infant and parent. First, there is “interaffectivity” in which “the infant somehow makes a match between the feeling state as experienced within and as seen ‘on’ or ‘in’ another.” Following this, “interattentionality,” or joint attention, emerges: here, child and parent expressly share an object of attention, as when a child looks back at the parent to confirm that (in Stern’s example) it is safe to move forward to grasp a toy that appears beyond comfortable reach. Finally, with “interintentionality,” the infant attributes to the parent “the capacity to understand the infant’s intention,” as when (in Stern’s example) she demands a cookie and persists in her demand until the parent gives her the cookie or indicates explicitly that the demand has been refused.

It seems clear that interaffectivity overlaps or coincides with syncretic sociability. In the context of filmic identification, it seems to align as well with the first and second of “the three aspects of identification” Meunier identifies: “its motor or postural aspect, its affective aspect, and its dramatic aspect” (p. 52). Because Stern considers interaffectivity to be both corporeal and affective, he would not likely differentiate, as Meunier does, between the first and second of these. He would consider both to be precursors to the third, the “dramatic” aspect of identification, in which self and other are singular entities whose attention and intentionality are shareable (whether they actually are shared or not). Thus, what Stern discovers of the earliest “interaffective” stage of infantile social relations sheds light on the motoric and affective aspects of filmic identification in Meunier’s account.
Interaffectivity is not a static state: it manifests in movement and time. A typical interpersonal encounter, he writes, is “a performance where the faces, bodies, tone of voice, etc. of the speaker and listener are the show for each other and for themselves, involving rapid shifts in arousal, interest, and aliveness.” In early developmental stages, “preverbal infants (4 and 12 months) and mothers precisely time the starting, stopping, and pausing of their vocalizations to create a rhythmic coupling and bidirectional coordination of their vocal dialogues. This implies that they have ‘captured’ not only their own timing but that of the other as well.”

To understand precisely how human encounters unfold, Stern insists we must attend to the minutest flows of energy and force. These “forms of vitality,” as he terms them, he considers to be the building blocks of infantile and, eventually, adult relations with others. Vitality forms are “the felt experience of force – in movement – with a temporal contour, and a sense of aliveness, of going somewhere. They concern the ‘How,’ the manner, and the style, not the ‘What’ or the ‘Why’” of interpersonal relations. Here, as in all his work, he uses quite cinematic language to underscore their ubiquity and significance:

Zoom in to describe the ‘dynamics’ of the very small events, lasting seconds, that make up the interpersonal, psychological moments of our lives: the force, speed, flow of a gesture; the timing and stress of a spoken phrase or even a word; the way one breaks into a smile or the time course of decomposing the smile; the manner of shifting position in a chair; the time course of lifting the eyebrows when interested and the duration of their lift; the shift and flight of a gaze; and the rush or tumble of thoughts. These are examples of the dynamic forms and dynamic experiences of everyday life. The scale is small, but that is where we live.

To tease out the experience of vitality – not only in humans, but in the inanimate world and in the temporal arts of dance, music, and cinema, for example – requires close observation and descriptive language. “To understand dynamic forms of vitality more clearly,” he suggests we consider a lengthy list of words – among them, “exploding,” “drawn out,” “fluttering,” “tense,” “surging,” “languorous,” “swinging,” “loosely,” “fading,” “fleeting,” “halting.” These are neither sensations nor emotions nor acts, he points out: they are not modality-specific, like sensations, nor are they goal-oriented, like intentional acts. Vitality forms are cross-modal: mothers do not exactly mimic children’s precise sounds and movements, but transpose their vitality
affects into another register, perhaps responding to an excited child's forceful outward thrusting of the arms with a sound, a vocalization that matches that movement's enthusiastic force and intensity. Likewise, no vitality form belongs exclusively to any one emotion; “anger can ‘explode,’ ‘ooze out,’ ‘sneak up,’ or be ‘cold,’” for example, but “so could happiness and its smile.”16 “In short,” Stern writes, “vitality forms are different from emotions in their nature, feel, non-specificity, omnipresence, and neurobiology.”17 And yet, he insists, vitality affects are meaningful; “this is more than just ‘embodiment.’”18

Although Meunier focuses considerable attention on character attitude, personality, motivation, and behavior, he de-emphasizes the ‘how’ of the movements and gestures that express these things, and which certainly contribute to a spectator’s response. After all, “without motion we cannot read in or imagine mental activity underneath, or thoughts, emotions, or ‘will.’”19 In this respect, forms of vitality could be a useful tool for fleshing out Meunier’s analysis of filmic identification.

Vitality forms in the cinema entail not just the movements of human bodies, be they fictional or documentary, but also film style, in the aesthetic sense (an authorial style, or an acting style, for example) as well as in a broader, more pertinent phenomenological sense that Merleau-Ponty describes as a “unity,” which the world and everything in it has. Sounding very much like Meunier himself in his description of the way viewers of a home movie might identify friends or family members by their way of walking or smoking, Merleau-Ponty describes this “unity” as

comparable to that of an individual whom I recognize in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character, because he conserves the same style in all that he says and in all of his behavior, even if he changes milieu or opinions. A style is a certain way of handling situations that I identify or understand in an individual or for a writer by taking up the style for myself through a sort of mimicry, even if I am incapable of defining it; and the definition of a style, as accurate as it might be, never presents the exact equivalent and is only of interest to those who have already experienced the style.20

Vitality forms can disclose the relation between affect, movement, and time in very precise ways. The speed of a human gesture or a camera movement, the inflection of a voice or intensity of a sound effect – these and innumerable other aspects of a film’s style would lend support to Meunier’s nuanced descriptions of the affective relationship the spectator has to a
film's characters, whether fictional or belonging to a real-world context that may be intimately, or not at all, familiar to the spectator.

Child's Play

“Belief, in the cinema,” writes Meunier,

is rather comparable to belief when playing. The child who plays ‘cowboys and Indians’ never ceases to regard his behavior as imaginary, but this does not negate the fact that during the game – that is, until the moment when he decides to stop playing – the child ‘believes’ that he is a ‘cowboy,’ and ‘believes’ that his fellow players are ‘Indians.’ He is fascinated by the unreal world created by the game, just as the spectator is fascinated by the unreal world of the screen. (p. 95)

Child’s play begins long before ‘cowboys and Indians’ and imaginary tea parties, even before patty-cake and peek-a-boo. It has its roots in the deceptively simple exchange of vocalizations, touches, and gazes between newborns and their parents or closest caretakers. In a sense, they are the child’s first playground.

The continuity between the preliminary, purely affective play that dominates in the first year of life and the symbolic play that follows in later years parallels the relationship between syncretic sociability and the ‘private’ intersubjectivity that emerges later, in real-world interpersonal relations and in filmic identification.

In a study of child’s play that is substantially informed by Stern’s work, Silvia Español and her colleagues observed in the interactions between an adult and children, two and three years old, “a type of interactive play where child and adult, in a pleasant and organized fashion, actively manipulate the vitality forms of their own movements and sounds.” In this kind of play, dubbed forms-of-vitality-play (hereafter hyphenated for clarity) the researchers were struck by “two essential traits: its non-figurative character, and its link with temporal arts.”

The only ‘content’ in this category of play are the vitality forms themselves; there is no act of representation as in games of ‘cowboys and Indians’ or ‘house,’ for example. Instead, “the dyad [baby and parent] skillfully extracts some of the five events of forms of vitality (movement, time, force, space and intention/direction) and elaborates on them according to a repetition-variation structure.” Forms-of-vitality-play do, however, provide “a good
runway for the development of symbolic play."24 Forms-of-vitality-play also "prepares the child to participate in the temporal arts that belong to his culture," as Stern has claimed.25 In the patterning of movements and sounds between child and adult, for example, the researchers identified certain patterns of repetition and variation "of small units of movements and sounds, resembling patterns that are present in the temporal arts."26 Across forms-of-vitality-play, symbolic play, and in the temporal arts, they find that "in all three, the backbone is the repetition-variation form."27

Although Meunier likens the suspension of disbelief in the film experience to a child's game of 'cowboys and Indians,' his own account of filmic identification bears closer resemblance to forms-of-vitality-play. Consider the two possible kinds of participatory identification with a fictional character that he sets out: "being-with" and "being-like." Giving the example of a spectator who identifies with the hero in a classic Western, he writes that, in this case,

participation takes on the allure of an attempt to 'be like' the hero. Here there is identification in the narrow sense of the term. In other words, there is an attempted fusion with the highly valorized character. The ego tends to establish with the personality of the hero a relation not of exteriority but of belonging. The center of reference is no longer the ego of the spectator but the personality of the hero, and participatory behavior consists of an effort to be this personality. This is, therefore, participation in the mode of 'being-like' (p. 130/131).

Against this kind of identification, he posits another mode he calls "being-with." In this case,

while participating in her [the character's] existence, I remain situated with respect to her. In other terms, I do not engage my personal 'ego' in the character. [She] remains before me, in a relationship of exteriority. I live in connivance with her, in a sort of sympathetic complicity, but I remain a center of reference. As such, [her story] does not become my story, since I do not have a tendency to fuse with her, to be 'like her.' (p. 130)

Paradoxically, in this latter mode we empathize and identify more closely with a character by maintaining our difference and distance from her.

Likewise, in forms-of-vitality-play, difference not only exists but plays a crucial role, this despite the fact that the self and other, the 'I' and the 'you,' have not yet been fully conceptualized, much less firmly codified. Español
and her colleagues identify this as a hallmark of forms-of-vitality-play, distinct from the type of mimicry that comes just before it. Whereas the adult is the one who determines the dynamics of very early social play through repetition and difference, in forms-of-vitality-play, both adults and children manipulate their movements and sounds, “letting novelty emerge from their almost symmetrical exchanges” and creating a dialogic exchange. 28

Part of the pleasure and excitement in forms-of-vitality-play lies in contingency. “For play to appear,” Stern writes, there must be

a loose frame that permits spontaneity and unpredictability; the incorporation of accidents, errors, and rule violations; the momentary uncoupling from the other to explore and adjust inside yourself and then rejoin the partner; sometimes fiddling with the very timing of interactions and expectations so as to create variations and pleasurable violations; and other such nonlinear and frame-breaking features that enhance creativity. 29

In fact, Stern points to evidence that infants develop a tolerance and even desire for contingency. Babies younger than three months are drawn to situations in which the vitality dynamics of adult behavior perfectly match their own. Around the age of four months, however, they begin to show a preference for events in which adult behavior is “highly but imperfectly contingent with their own.” 30

If Meunier’s ‘being-with’ requires difference between self and other in identification, then, it is in forms-of-vitality-play that we see that difference coming into being, even though, at this stage, the self and other have not yet been clearly demarcated. This explains what Meunier says of children playing ‘cowboys and Indians,’ that they can quickly and easily shift from play to reality: they are cowboy and Indian, until they stop playing. This shift from being oneself to being another becomes easier with practice; perhaps forms-of-vitality-play offers precisely that.

Elsewhere in this volume, Daniel Fairfax points out how refreshing it is to see Meunier’s allusion to five- and six-year-old children, rather than the infant who figures so strongly in apparatus and psychoanalytic film theories. On the other hand, I appreciate that even the infant, who (thanks to Meunier’s emphasis on syncretic sociability) hovers just outside the frame of his discussion, is much more engaging than the one who figures in later film theory. That is, if we take Meunier’s cue to think of cinema in terms of play, but focus our attention on forms-of-vitality-play rather than the symbolic play of later childhood, we bring into relief the significant
difference between Meunier's idea of the spectator and the one imagined by apparatus theory. Meunier's spectator ‘plays back’ interactively with the film, bringing his or her own vitality forms into the mix, echoing Stern's argument that infants’ perceptual activities are far more active and acute than traditional accounts have given us to believe.

Vitality Affects and Filmic Identification

Stern consistently uses distinctly cinematic language when describing infantile interpersonal encounters – he refers to the parents' vocal and gestural behavior as a “sound and light show” for the infant, for example – and his own psychotherapy practice. He grew to realize how much occurs in a moment that lasts only seconds, he writes. “Once I got the hang of these techniques (e.g., freeze frame, slow motion, segment repeats) I could even use them, unsystematically, in real time, for very short stretches, to see my psychotherapy patients differently.”

It comes as no surprise, then, that in elaborating his concept of forms of vitality, Stern includes a lengthy discussion of Raymond Bellour’s 1979 essay, “System of a Fragment (on The Birds),” one of several essays in which the film theorist examines classical cinema’s definitive pattern of repetition and variation. “Bellour does a micro-analysis of film, working with units lasting only seconds, using stop frame, replay, fast forward, and slow motion – all the techniques that baby watchers use to analyze the ‘ordinary choreography’ between mother and infant.” In Bellour’s close reading, “flesh has been put on the narrative, and it has been imbued with powerful vitality forms. This use of Bellour’s work is only one among multiple possible examples of the unique ways in which cinema can produce the dynamic feel of experience.”

Stern’s admiration for Bellour’s work was mutual: the latter’s 2002 essay on the “unfolding of emotion” in cinematic experience draws substantially on Stern’s introduction of vitality affects in The Interpersonal World of the Infant, first published in 1985. In response to Stern’s argument that vitality affects underscore not only our earliest human social relations but also prepare us for the experience of the temporal arts, Bellour writes,

The cinema immediately seems to fill the frame of such a vision. [...] All the resources of the shot, from the frame to the movements that move it, either in their inner limits, or in animating them through the camera movements – all the resources of the shot and series of shots serve the
sustained deployment of vitality affects, under the pretext and according to the inclinations of psychological affects, supporting identifications with characters, with the fiction.\textsuperscript{36}

**Still Life**

I want to end this piece with two brief examples of the way forms-of-vitality research resonates with Meunier's theory of filmic identification.

The patterns Stern and fellow researchers identify in clinical experiments bear some resemblance to patterns of attention and movement in the filmic experience. For example, he points out that

when a mother goes 'still face' while facing her infant, i.e. not moving her face at all, not even with slight expressions, the baby, or even a neonate, becomes upset within seconds. Newborns already have working peripheral vision that is designed to detect motion at the periphery. Accordingly, stillness is registered no matter where their focal vision is on the mother's face.\textsuperscript{37}

This experiment recalls the scene in *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), in which Melanie looks on in horror as a gas station patron ignites a trail of spilled gasoline near the diner where she and other townspeople have taken refuge. The scene has prompted startled laughter in undergraduates seeing it for the first time in my classroom. Perhaps they, like the baby in Stern's experimental example, are startled by the utter stillness of Tippi Hedren's face. Preternaturally still, she stares in shock as the trail of fire rapidly speeds out of control. The moment unfolds in nine shots, neat eye-line matches that intercut her still face (each time in a slightly different position, always motionless) with shots of the fire racing along the ground.

Her stillness is striking precisely because it contrasts not only with the movement of her fellow onlookers, but even with the movement of her own hair, blowing slightly in the breeze through the open window. Like an infant looking for signs of life in the mother's face, perhaps viewers are startled by the sudden absence of movement where one expects it. Interestingly, the shot of Mrs. Brenner's silent scream in response to farmer Dan Fawcett's ghastly corpse works in a similar fashion. There, the contrast plays out not so much in editing, but in sound and performance, between her paralyzed silence and the synchronous sound of the shot itself, including Mitch's voice asking her to explain what has happened.
“Compared to the infant’s expectations and wishes, the depressed mother’s face is flat and expressionless,” writes Stern.

She breaks eye contact and does not seek to re-establish it. There is a disappearance of her animation, tonicity, and so on. Along with these invariants coming from the mother there are resonant invariants invoked in the infant: the flight of animation, a deflation of posture, a fall in positive affect and facial expressivity, a decrease in activation, etc. In sum, the experience is descriptively one of a micro-depression.38

Stern’s description concerns an encounter that we certainly would not consider play. However, one can imagine a case in which the mother goes still in order to surprise the baby by playfully ‘coming to life’ again, provoking in the child a similar pattern of suspension and sudden arousal. In such a case of forms-of-vitality-play, the child and mother would be responding to one another’s vitality forms (movements, sounds, expressions) in such a way as to create expectation, resonance, and surprise. Hitchcock is playing with us in exactly this manner, in this sequence.

By attending to vitality forms as they emerge in infancy, then, we arrive at a formal pattern in The Birds and an approach to it that plays nicely with Bellour’s own argument about the semiotic structure of the film and its significance regarding the gendered gaze, identification, power, and authorship. This is a good example of the way psychoanalysis, phenomenology,
and cognitive science might intersect productively in the film theoretical analysis of filmic identification.

The editing-studio segment of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) provides another example. As children watch a magic trick with a mix of joyous and befuddled amazement, the film shifts to a series of successive freeze-frames, rendering each child’s face suddenly still. These shots are followed by a sequence of adult faces, also in freeze-frame, as if frozen in response to the children’s sudden stillness. After a short segment, in which we watch the film’s editor (Elizaveta Svilova) constructing the sequence we have just watched, these same faces launch into movement again. Much later, the use of stop-motion animation produces a similar effect, when a tripod and camera assemble themselves on-screen before an audience of curious moviegoers. The jerky motions of machinery repeat but modulate the quick, small movements of the diegetic viewers who laugh, blink, lean forward, or raise an eyebrow in amused surprise or consternation at the apparatuses’ antics. The play between stillness and movement, and more profoundly between human vitality forms and cinematic ones, exhibits the “momentary uncoupling from the other” that enables the creative “variations and pleasurable violations” Stern points to in forms-of-vitality-play.

Tom Gunning and Vivian Sobchack have discussed, separately, the uniquely cinematic experience of time. Gunning argues the “astonishment” attributed to early cinema spectators stems from the sudden transition from still image to moving image. Sobchack takes up Gunning’s argument in an analysis of a trope in contemporary martial arts films, in which fast-moving action sequences suddenly cut to extreme slow motion for a long moment, before cutting back to speed again. She argues the astonishment that spectators might experience in such moments stems not from the speed or the slowness itself, or even from their drastic difference, but from the transition from one to the other, which reveals the uncanny co-presence of identity and difference. “What ‘attracts,’ is not simply ‘still to moving’ or ‘moving to still’ but, rather, the movement from one terminus to the other – indeed, the movement of movement itself, which, made visible in slow motion, occupies the uncanny space ‘between’ these end points, and reveals them both to be merely different ‘dimensions of the same process’.”

The psychological research that I have discussed here raises the possibility that the “aesthetic of astonishment” (to borrow Gunning’s phrase) on display in Vertov’s film and exemplified by early cinema and the modern action film’s trope of abrupt slowness, may stem from very early child’s play, marked by “dialogic exchange” in which both child and adult “get to manipulate vitality forms letting novelty emerge from their almost
symmetrical exchanges."42 This ‘play’ involves not only vitality forms of the human figures on-screen, but also the film’s, including not only frame rate but also the speed, intensity, force, and orientation of camera movements and bodies in motion, of sound, of light, and so forth.

Looking at adult film perception through the lens of forms-of-vitality-play supports Meunier’s own reading of filmic identification, by casting the spectator as a much more active player in the experience than the apparatus theory that follows quickly on the heels of his 1969 text would have it. It has the added advantage of extending Meunier’s discussion of ‘identification’ into the realm of aesthetics, rather than solely narrative and character. That is, although he frames his discussion of ‘being-with’ and ‘being-like’ squarely in terms of identification with characters embedded in stories (be those fictional or not, classically organized or not), using ‘forms of vitality’ to think through filmic identification allows us both to attend to formal qualities involved in any instance of filmic identification, and to consider filmic identification in films organized around formal play, rather than character and story.

Bellour draws a similar conclusion regarding vitality affects and film analysis: to see the bodies, objects, light, and camera movements as vitality affects, rather than as narratively motivated and meaningful characters, objects, and gestures is not to say that therefore we cannot commit ourselves to aims of analysis that are meant to be, on one side, more figurative or figural in nature, on the other, more narrative or narratological. But the essential thing is that [...] the two aspects are in the end forever linked just as they were at another level welded from their origin. And this, in such a way that such a link also proves to be free from all predestination, and open to the greatest chance, in life and in cinema.43

Forms-of-vitality-play also seems an appropriate analogue to moviegoing in that it emerges within the syncretic sociability that Meunier posits as a crucial support for the ‘private’ sort of identification a spectator experiences with characters. In this stage of life, “it is true that children have an ambiguous understanding of other people as subjects,” writes Talia Welsh in her own take on Merleau-Ponty’s child psychology lectures

But it is not the case that other people are objects for children. [...] Intersubjectivity is not a matter of discrete subjects. When I live in the world, it is not similar to watching a movie where things pass in front of
me and I passively receive them. Nor do I experience my body like a thing that processes sensations akin to how a money-counter counts bills.44

Counter to Welsh’s assumptions here, research into forms of vitality, when paired with Meunier’s discussion of filmic identification, reminds us just how active watching a movie is for its spectators, who interactively play with narrative, actors, and the film itself.

Notes


2. Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, p. 248. Meunier’s “syncretic sociality” seems interchangeable with “syncretic sociability,” Wallon’s term for the same concept, a term later adopted by Merleau-Ponty. This essay employs the latter term, more commonly used in the context of phenomenology.


8. Beebe et al., “A Comparison of Meltzoff, Trevarthen, and Stern,” p. 789. In addition to the helpful comparison between the theories of Andrew Meltzoff, Colwyn Trevarthan, and Stern in Beebe et al., see also Talia Welsh’s discussion in *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* of Meltzoff and Shaun Gallagher’s work in relation (and opposition) to Merleau-Ponty’s description of syncetic sociality, where the researchers draw conclusions from which Gallagher himself would later depart.


12. Ibid., p. 73.
13. Ibid., p. 8.
15. Ibid., p. 7.
16. Ibid., p. 23.
17. Ibid., p. 28.
18. Ibid., p. 25.
19. Ibid., p. 10.
22. Ibid., p. 480.
23. Ibid., p. 487.
27. Ibid., p. 487.
28. Ibid., p. 487.
32. Stern, The Present Moment, p. xii.
34. Stern, Forms of Vitality, p. 94.
35. Ibid., p. 98.
37. Stern, Forms of Vitality, p. 10.
40. Vivian Sobchack, “Cutting to the Quick: Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of Slow Motion,” in Wanda Strauven (ed.), The Cinema of
Attractions Reloaded, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 337–351.
42. Español et al., “Forms of Vitality Play in Infancy,” p. 487.
43. Bellour, “The Unfolding of Emotions.”
44. Welsh, The Child as Natural Phenomenologist, p. 52.

About the author

Jennifer M. Barker is Associate Professor of Moving Image Studies in the School of Film, Media & Theatre at Georgia State University. She researches in the area of moving-image studies, with particular interests in synaesthesia, cinema, and mind/body relations; moving image aesthetics, affect, and embodied spectatorship; performance studies; documentary studies; and film theory. She recently completed a fellowship with the Cinepoetics Center for Advanced Film Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. She is the author of The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience (2009). Her work has also appeared in Somatechnics, Studia Phaenomenologica, Discourse, New Review of Film & Television Studies, and Film-Philosophy, among others.