

ABSTRACT

Digital Characters in Cinema:
Phenomenology, Empathy, and Simulation

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Digital production practices in the contemporary film industry have reinvigorated discussions of ontology and viewer experience in film studies. Of particular interest is the phenomenon of audiences emotionally investing in and empathizing with digital elements in films, notably digital characters that do not exist in the physical world. This thesis examines the question of empathy with digital characters through embodied simulation theory and a phenomenological approach to the character of Gollum, based on his appearances in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and Jackson's later adaptation of *The Hobbit*. Phenomenological description and reflection on this character, his appearance, and his interactions with other characters in the films helpfully illuminates the process by which digital characters may form empathetic and engaged relationships with viewers, a process that this thesis terms *directed empathy*.

Digital Characters in Cinema:
Phenomenology, Empathy, and Simulation

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I love you, and I love you, and I love you.

CHAPTER ONE

The Gollum Question

We know that they are drawings and not living beings.

We know that they are projections of drawings on a screen.

We know that they are miracles and tricks of technology, that such beings don't really exist.

But at the same time:

We sense them as alive.

We sense them as moving, as active.

We sense them as existing and even thinking!

-Sergei Eisenstein, *On Disney*, p. 98

One evening in early 2016 my wife Kathleen and I sat on the couch, watching *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002). I had seen the film many times, while this was my wife's first exposure to Peter Jackson's depiction of Middle Earth. On the screen before us, the slinking, sneaking character Gollum deftly crawled, head-first, down a sheer cliff face. His large eyes glowing in the dim light, his ragged, stringy hair hanging down in wet strands over his face, Gollum was muttering to himself. He readied his sickeningly skeletal body to pounce on the two Hobbits--Frodo and Sam--laying beneath him, preparing to kill to obtain his "Precious," the One Ring that had enslaved him and his will. As Gollum's hand neared Frodo's still head, the Hobbits jumped into action, having only been pretending to sleep in order to trap the creature they knew to be following them.

In the struggle that ensues Gollum viciously fights back against his would-be captors, biting, shoving, and clawing in an attempt to simultaneously escape and obtain his precious trinket. Beside me on the couch, Kathleen writhed uncomfortably watching

the scuffle, cringing and gasping audibly throughout. The scene ends in a breathless faceoff, Gollum choking Sam, Frodo pointing a sword at Gollum's exposed throat and bargaining for the release of his companion. Knowing that he has been beaten, Gollum lets out a pained cry that acts to transition to the next scene.

Gollum's screams echo as the scene switches to another encounter with Frodo, Sam, and Gollum. The two Hobbits lead Gollum by a rope tied around his neck, which the gangly, sickly creature cries is burning him. Gollum begs for the rope to be removed and bargaining ensues, with Frodo ultimately committing Gollum--over Sam's stringent objections--to lead him and Sam to their destination of Mordor.

Towards the end of this second scene, with Gollum's pale face large in the frame, Kathleen reached over and paused the film. Turning to me and gesturing to the image onscreen she said, "Now I *know* that that isn't a real actor, but--is it?"

Particularly with the character of Gollum, sentiments such as these are not entirely uncommon. Even today, Gollum's appearance and performance in the concluding two chapters of Jackson's trilogy is considered a watershed moment in the creation of convincing, realistic digital characters (Blair, 2007; Letteri, 2013; Prince, 2012, p. 127). Indeed, many in Hollywood believed Andy Serkis's performance as the forlorn creature to be worthy of an Academy Award (Fleming, 2002; Holloway, 2011), though significant questions lingered about just who was most responsible for the character's performance onscreen. Was it Serkis, whose voice, motions and presence on set established the baseline performance for the character, or the litany of animators and technicians whose work was also responsible for the character's appearance and many of the subtleties of his behavior in the finished film?

Putting aside issues of performance attribution (which, while diminishing, continue to persist), the presence of visually and emotionally convincing digital characters--what have been called “synthespians” or “cyberstars” (Creed, 2000)--raises significant questions regarding the role that digital elements as a whole have on the cinematic experience. What makes digital elements of cinema, particularly digital characters, emotionally and empathetically compelling to viewers? Why is it that some digital characters and effects fail in attempting to be compelling? Are there experiential differences or even consequences to viewing digitally influenced or wholly digitally authored images versus “real” ones that have simply been captured by a camera?¹ Does the digital nature and origin of an element or character alter the experience that we have with the film they help comprise?

As digital technology has become commonplace as a driving force in nearly all aspects of film production, questions such as these have become more prominent as film scholars and practitioners seek to theorize and understand the implications these changes may have for the medium and the experience of spectators. In many ways, the questions that the burgeoning digital era prompts are not so different from those explored in the formative era of film studies. Perspectives on ontology, epistemology, realism, and perception have long been a part of the conversation surrounding the cinematic medium and its audience, and the arrival and contemporary pervasiveness of digital techniques

¹ Reality, as a term, requires some definition here. In this instance, and in most other discussions of reality in cinema, what is being referred to is “pro-filmic reality,” sometimes called *mis-en-scène*, which is effectively anything placed in front of the camera and, so, mediated by it. This differs from true reality, what phenomenologists refer to below as the “Lifeworld,” which is the world as it is directly encountered via the body and its various senses (i.e., in non-mediated fashion).

serves only to bring these issues back to the fore, with potentially new answers for a new era.

Ultimately, providing comprehensive, definitive answers to all these weighty questions is likely impossible here, given that each question could be a book in itself. However, this thesis will specifically probe the character of Gollum in light of these questions in order to provide some initial answers as the foundation for future research.

In Gollum, we see a wholly digital character with a notably convincing visual appearance of reality, and with a human actor at the core of his performance, usefully exemplifying many of the issues at stake in these discussions. As such, it is not surprising that some have already used the character of Gollum to examine such matters. “The Soul Factor: Deceptions in Intimations of Life in Computer-Generated Characters” by Kathryn S. Egan (2009) is one such piece, and seeks to examine the concept of digital characters having heart and soul. Egan specifically focuses on Gollum, whose creators used these terms (“heart” and “soul”) to describe him, and who treat Gollum as “so real that he is accepted as just another member of the cast” (p. 106). According to Egan, these descriptors are used as evidence of the “realness” of Gollum and other digital characters, though she contests the conclusion that these qualities exist or contribute to the formation of a relationship between these characters and a film’s viewer: “I argue that the claim for ‘soul’ in these characters is ironic: soul is what they lack, and therefore there is no hope to be found in them” (p. 106).

Along the way, Egan lends some helpful insights on authenticity and empathy that will centrally inform this study, and though I find her conclusions flawed, they draw into focus a critical argument for the usefulness of phenomenology, combined with an

embodied simulation account of the cinema. And so, an extended discussion of Egan's strengths and weaknesses will serve to outline my central contentions and methodology for the remainder of this study.

Kathryn S. Egan's Quest for Soul, and the Argument for Embodied Simulation

Egan begins her exploration into the "soul factor" of computer-generated characters by noting Aristotle's principle that "the soul is the principle of animal life" (p. 107), and further identifying independent movement as a significant indicator of the presence of a soul. From here, her discussion ventures into the realm of empathy, referencing Edith Stein's research and even her definition of the phenomena: "Empathy...is the givenness of foreign objects [Husserl's transcendent others] and their experiences to a psycho-physical 'I' that is body and soul together" (p. 107).²

From here, Egan elaborates on the process of computer animation, crediting both animators and computers for facilitating the process of engendering animated characters with life through the appearance of volitional movement, which she says is "evidence of soul" (p. 109). Very quickly, however, the notion of animated characters having soul is quashed by the logic of limitations inherent in animation technology:

The goal is a perfect reproduction of reality. But the computer is limited because it processes information in bits of atomistic information that cannot arrive at anything that approximates our understanding of the world. What the computer cannot calculate is soul. (p. 110)

² The bodily element to Stein's definition is notably emphasized, as it is the body that externalizes emotions and thoughts through expression. Additionally, Egan is careful to emphasize Stein's distinction between spirit and soul: the spirit is seen as the master of the soul and body, but it is the soul itself that is natural, a given that allows for the spirit to do the work of empathizing with another living, soul-inhabited being (p. 108). Also worth noting here is that I am not making an argument for the soul, but am trying to specifically address Egan's concerns as dimensions of the human experience, whatever metaphysical and ontological status they may have.

Egan criticizes the aesthetic of classical animation for its tendency towards exaggeration, which she characterizes as “coping practices that allow us to process the two-dimensional film images in terms of our own world” (p. 110), imbuing animated characters and objects with meaningfulness. These techniques enable some animated characters to be successful, with success here defined as their ability to engender empathy, or to “convey that the brain is driving the action,” with qualities of “aliveness” being “embodied in detail” (p. 110-111), meaning that the character’s appearance, sound, and movement onscreen seems to be accurate to the type of character that they are as identified and detailed within the narrative.

Beyond empathy, Egan explores the notion of authenticity in digital characters is explored through the concept of anomaly. She specifically details how the movements of an animated character’s eyes are essential in imbuing qualities characteristic of life. This is not merely attentiveness to a character’s gaze, eye-line, or consistency in blinking, but rather specific glances or seemingly unconscious behaviors that provoke a sense of consciousness behind the gaze of the animated character. Details such as these are essential for a character’s believability to an audience (though, in the end, Egan ultimately denies animators and animated characters any meaningful connection to audiences).

It is worth noting that Egan’s probing of empathy and authenticity in seeking answers to the conundrum of Gollum and other digital characters is not unique. Rather, such avenues of exploration are foundational to the practice and phenomenological inquiries of fiction at large, particularly within the cinematic medium. Questions of empathy are prominent in all sorts of film and animation (Misselhorn, 2009, p. 346), in

part due to the cinematic medium's inherent history "as a medium capable of exciting all the bodily senses" (Stephens, 2012, p. 529). Anomalous behavior as an indicator of authenticity is particularly noted as a factor in the exploration of digital effects and characters because of the way human beings interpret and enact sincerity. Boris Groys (2012) argues that people who display repetitive behavior or phrases often seem insincere and inauthentic such that exceptions to these repetitions, or behavior that deviates from expected interpersonal or cultural norms, is often deemed to be more real (p. 52, 81-82). Similar observations have been widely applied to the practice and study of visual effects, such that animators working on *The Life of Pi* (Lee, 2012) strove to introduce elements of spontaneity into the animation of the tiger Richard Parker so as to avoid anthropomorphizing his behavior, and to circumvent the appearance of a rigid, staged-seeming performance (Giralt, 2017, p. 13).

What these examples serve to show is that the topics Egan uses to evaluate Gollum's appearance and behavior for the presence of a soul are not foreign concepts to either animators or film scholars. She largely admits these qualities to Gollum, but remains unconvinced that empathy towards him is possible for ontological reasons. She emphasizes that Gollum is

inauthentic, because no matter how like a living person the computer-generated image may be, he is not really a 'person' but rather a composite of idealizations and typifications of Others....He fails to appear as a phenomenal being constantly in flux, graspable only in an essential intuition....Therefore, the Gollum is a deceitful sign, a fiction constructed by the animator....Stein's empathy requires a psycho-physical individual distinguished from a physical thing. This phenomenon of foreign psychic life (the Other) is given to me as a center of orientation of a phenomenal world in which it senses, thinks, feels, and wills. The CGI character simulates such a center of sensitive orientation and therefore deceives me. (p. 113)

Egan concludes: “I look at Gollum’s face looking out from his world seemingly into mine (but never right at me), and know that, having no body of his own, and, therefore, no possible psycho-physical relationship with me, there can be no empathy” (p. 114).

Yet, the question that my wife asked in response to her emotional experience persists. Gollum’s introductory scene had been fraught with tension, and the violence had been enough to elicit genuine emotional and physical responses from her as she concentrated on the heroes, Frodo and Sam, and the danger that they were in. The following dialog-heavy scene allowed time for the shock to settle and Gollum’s appearance to sink in. His unnaturally lithe movements--both in effortlessly scaling the surrounding vertiginous rocks and also wantonly throwing his body down upon them--and most prominently his emaciated, sickly-seeming body seemed entirely foreign to what a real, human actor would typically be capable of doing and looking like. And yet, even with his face filling the frame in high definition, Gollum *looked* real, looked like he *could* be a real person. In addition, Gollum *felt* real, and this is the critical area of investigation. Digital characters are not a novelty anymore, but the modeling, animation and *performance* of this particular character in the (then) fourteen-year-old film was in fact more convincing to her emotionally and aesthetically than the multitude of others that have become so commonplace in mainstream cinema since Gollum’s first appearance on film. How, then, are we supposed to make sense of this?

Egan’s approach to the question is highly rational, and is certainly steeped in the phenomenological literature one would expect to inform an examination of empathy and authenticity. But, for all its emphasis on the phenomenal, her article not only minimally

applies phenomenological methodology itself, it also comes to conclusions that are in stark opposition to the phenomenal experience Egan herself admits.

Following Husserl's guiding principle of concentrating on things and experiences themselves, Max Van Manen (2014) argues that the aim of phenomenology is not for arguing a particular understanding of the meaning of an experience, but rather for *showing* how meaning is revealed in that experience (p. 48). To this end he agrees with Merleau-Ponty's perspective that it is only through the doing of phenomenology that one can know it (p. 32), and *doing* phenomenology for Van Manen is deliberately practicing the art of phenomenological reflection and descriptive writing. More than simply assembling sources and citations to make an argument, phenomenological research ought to privilege the description of experience as it applies to a particular phenomenological question. Van Manen even titles one section of his book "The Research is the Writing" (p. 389) to emphasize this point.

Egan's analysis clearly privileges the logic of her research even over the evidence of her own experiences. Here, Egan very briefly verges on practicing phenomenological description as she discusses her engagement with Gollum as she watches *The Two Towers*:

In the case of Gollum, I surround myself with his situation in the context of the film. I see him hissing and moving erratically--the mood emerges and *I experience perceiving Gollum in anguish. His anguish is not my own, but I am pulled into it and experience it in Gollum's place, and then I am to feel his anguish though it is separate from me.* Gollum is represented to feel that anguish primordially and I am led by it to experience it non-primordially.

Nevertheless, ideally the anguish is empathetically the same for me, the viewer, as it is for Gollum, the comprehender. I know what it is to plumb the lowest depths of one's soul, to explore that personal hell, in order to become more fully human, no longer enslaved by lurking, unidentified spiritual demons. I look on Gollum's struggle with compassion. (p. 112-113, emphasis mine)

In her own way, and in her own words, Egan describes having an emotional encounter and connection with Gollum--just as my wife did. Later, Egan adds that “my presencing in the film causes me to take for granted his movement as coming from his soul, and willed by his spirit” (p. 113). However, she ultimately concludes that even given the experience she describes, “empathy eludes me” (p. 113) in regard to Gollum. That closing statement leads directly into the passages quoted further above, where Egan applies the logic of Stein’s examination of empathy to Gollum’s presence in the film. It is here that Egan’s account becomes problematic. In privileging the explorations of others above her own experience, Egan characterizes her empathy with Gollum as “self-deception,” noting that she has “falsely inferred, on the basis of my own orientation, that he has a soul” (p. 113, 114).

I propose here that Egan’s analysis falls short not because its logic about the ontological contours of human persons is so flawed, but because it fails to privilege the primacy of perception in fictional experience above the reflection that eventually follows that experience. The starting point of what one perceives and experiences is essential to the doing of phenomenology, as is expressed throughout the foundational works of phenomenological literature. Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. lxxx) notes that if we discuss phenomena as illusion or illusory than we have already presupposed categories of real/illusion, rather than describing what is evidently true to our perceptions at a given moment or in a given experience (p. lxxx). Don Ihde (Ihde, 2012) likewise emphasizes the importance of recognizing what is given to our perceptual faculties in a given experience:

Thus, while it may or may not be the case that the dark shadowy figure I perceive in the hallway really is a person rather than a hatrack [*sic*], at the moment of the

shadow-presentation, I cannot doubt that the presentation is given as I see it, within the limits of the moment of perception. (p. 18)

Finally, Van Manen (2014) articulates a similar perspective that precludes writing off any actual experience as inherently inauthentic:

Indeed, the object I see may turn out to be a dummy book or just the image of a book on a poster. And yet, my 'experience of having seen a book' cannot be doubted, even if, afterwards, the factuality of having seen a book turns out erroneous or false. (p. 63)

In addition, Egan's application of Stein's conception of empathy and authenticity may be right in concluding that Gollum and other digital characters are soulless, but this may not actually matter even given Stein's own definition of empathy. The portion of Stein that Egan quotes emphasizes the givenness of foreign objects to a particular "I" that is "body and soul together" (p. 107), but this only comments on the one feeling empathy, not the source of those empathetic feelings. I.e., the one who has the capacity for empathy is defined as requiring a body and soul intertwined, but this says nothing specific about the foreign objects for which the receiver feels empathy. Indeed, Peter Shum's (2012) analysis of Stein's work merely emphasizes that what one feels empathy for is inherently "something which is alien, and not something which belongs to one's sphere of ownness" (p. 178). Digital characters such as Gollum certainly fit the bill here, and the experiences of empathy that viewers clearly have with these characters--my wife's visceral reaction to the onscreen action and the Oscar-buzz that Serkis's performance as Gollum garnered here acting as evidence of audience identification or emotional connection with that character--cannot be discounted. This empathy may not

be empathy in the same fashion that direct empathy with another living, moving, soul-possessing human may be, but it is arguable that it is still a *form* of empathy nonetheless.³

Granting that the empathy one feels with Gollum might not be empathy we may feel with another person obviously raises questions over just what kind of empathy it may be, or how a distinct formulation of empathy manifests itself in the experience of viewing and feeling these characters. One explanation comes from the simulation theory of film perception as advanced by Gregory Currie in his work *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (1995/2008). Currie's conception of the film/viewer relation is saturated in the concept of imagination, arguing that developing emotional identification and empathy with both fictional situations and characters is predicated on our ability to imaginatively consider a perceptual state that is different than our own (p. 145). Seeing (or even reading about) fictional characters in particular situations enables us to imaginatively place ourselves in that situation to ascertain how they may be thinking or feeling about it, given our own prior experience in life and with the world of the film and knowledge of that character.

The same concepts may apply to our understanding of general scenes and situations in a film. We are not constantly engaged in the process of empathizing with characters, but sometimes use cues about the situational drama of a film or scene to feel emotions concerning characters and situations that are not directly accessible by the

³ It is interesting to note that Egan takes for granted that the real human beings onscreen, who possess souls by her definition, are portraying fictional *characters* within the film who in and of themselves do not possess a soul. That she so easily elides examining this distinction shows that in her mind the mere presence of a human actor transfers some measure of soul into their portrayal of even a "soulless" fictional character.

characters themselves. We may have knowledge about a situation that a particular character does not, and that knowledge contributes to how the scene inherently makes us feel even before a certain character or characters appear in that scene onscreen.

These different types of character experience within the cinema have been delineated in several different ways by different theorists, but perhaps the most useful is Murray Smith's (1997) categories of "central imagining" and "acentral imagining" (p. 415). Central imagining is the process by which viewers imagine a character's experience at a given point in a film, or that of another character at a different point. Acentral imagining is that which imagines the total situation of the film's scenario independent from the perspective of any particular character. Smith notes that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and that oftentimes central imagining is deeply informed by acentral imagining, such that the totality of the film experience involves balancing between the two types of imagining, sometimes switching between the two types of imagining, other times having them work strongly in conjunction with one another (p. 425).

A key question which Smith addresses is how central imagining is possible in film when so many of the fictional situations represented onscreen do not in any way resemble the experiences that the typical viewer has. By way of example, he notes that very few film viewers have experience as a prisoner on death row who claims to have been wrongly accused, which would seem to make centrally imagining oneself in the character of Matthew Poncelot (Sean Penn) in *Dead Man Walking* (Robbins, 1996) seemingly impossible. Rather than imagining oneself centrally in the *role* of the character, as Currie's (2008) earlier conceptions of "primary" and "secondary" imaginings would have viewers do, Smith argues that central imagining involves

imagining oneself in the *situations* onscreen. To imagine what it would feel like to be someone on death row is here seen as a central imagining, while imagining what it must be like for the specific character of Matthew Poncelot is characterized as central (p. 426).

Theories of imagination and film are detailed and complex, and Currie in particular has received some justified criticism (Sharpe, 1997; Turvey, 2006; Vaage, 2009). But in spite of the presence of some gaps in explanation or vagueness of terms, what Currie's theory usefully proposes and illustrates is that there is necessarily a role for real information, thoughts, and feelings to engage with fictional situations and characters, even as those situations and characters are acknowledged to be fictional. The mental "simulator" that we run fictional situations and encounters through acts as "a substitute for real action...[that] retains the connections between inner representation and bodily sensation which would be in place if the representation was functioning as a belief; what is *not* retained is the belief-like connection to behavior" (Currie, 1995, p. 157).

Here, Currie's description of the advantages of simulation theory sound remarkably similar to Daniel Barratt's (2007) conception of what is involved in assessing a film's reality-status. What Currie effectively describes is that the imagination enables us to experience the world of a film's situations and characters from an incredibly close-range (in fact as close as you could possibly get, given that the experience of imagination happens in your own mind) while maintaining the understanding that what you are seeing onscreen is fictional. The act of imagining enables the viewer to empathize with the fiction film's events and characters in a way that is similar to the act of empathizing in the real world. This is true even as the events and characters being empathized with

necessarily remain wholly distinct from real events and people in the viewer's mind, even if only at a subconscious level at some points in the viewing experience.

What Currie's theory contributes to Egan's analysis of Gollum, and to analysis of experience and encounters with digital images and characters in general, is an explanation for how genuine emotional and empathetic experience with fictional characters of all sorts--digital ones included--is entirely plausible and possible even within the fictional realm. Egan may be right that digital creatures do not have souls, but Currie demonstrates that discounting real emotional, empathetic connections even to soulless fictional characters is illogical; our ability to imaginatively believe in fictional worlds naturally has the consequence of eliciting genuine emotions from viewers. These emotions may be different in that they perhaps transition between states faster than emotions inspired in real-life outside of the context of the film (given the emotional stimulus of differing scenes within a single film) or in their ability to recede or be contained more logically or coherently following the end of a film, but they are real, felt emotions nonetheless. When Egan acknowledges that she feels something in watching Gollum's struggle, that emotion is not "self-deception" as she characterizes it. Rather, it is a genuine emotion, and legitimately could be characterized as a form of genuine empathy.

Pursuing the Experience of Digital Characters

Decreasing costs of software and computing power have continued to enable the creation of complex digital effects, and have allowed for greater levels of visual verisimilitude and accuracy in simulating processes of reality. Some fifteen years removed from Gollum's debut, digital characters and effects are arguably more realistic

than they have ever been. Yet, as has been noted in passing, some contemporary digital characters and effects fail to elicit genuine emotional, empathetic engagement in viewers, lacking some elements of what comprises a compelling performance in spite of the advanced nature of the techniques and algorithms used in their capture, modeling, and animation. As such, the questions posed above about the compelling possibilities of digital characters and their experiential consequences for viewers remain.

This study will investigate these questions from a phenomenological perspective, as informed by complementary cognitive research in film perception and viewer experience. Despite the privileging of experience over ontology, and the legitimacy of emotional experiences with fiction, the long debate over the ontology of the moving image cannot be whisked away so easily. Chapter Two provides a deeper engagement with these issues, and harvests the discussion of indexicality in film studies for insights that might contribute to a successful reception of a digital character. From André Bazin's (1967/2004) realist assertions to Lev Manovich's (2001) characterization of digital cinema as being closely linked to animation, ontological questions of cinema are alive and well in contemporary discourse, such that defining a basis for reality in this study is both formative and necessary.

Chapter Three synthesizes four foundational phenomenological perspectives to ascertain what insight they may provide in forming a phenomenology of digital characters in the cinema. These perspectives are Maurice Merleau-Ponty's establishing work in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of aesthetic experience in painting, Don Ihde's phenomenologies of technology and sound, and Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of the cinematic experience. Digital characters

involve elements that are integral to each of these phenomenologies: they are necessarily visual, first and foremost, and so involve a viewer's perceptual faculties in invoking an aesthetic experience; they are digitally created, and so bring with them the experiential consequences of contemporary technology; and finally, they are contained and displayed within a cinematic text.

Following this, an extended case study will seek to further explore and apply the insights of the phenomenological perspectives explored in chapter three while also paying particular attention to the critical element of what exactly the experience of directly engaging with differing facets of digital characters is, how that experience is constituted, and what that experience contributes to (or detracts from) the cinematic experience. This case study will specifically focus on the character of Gollum to explore the experiential question at hand, seeking to apply phenomenological methodology to discern the fundamental structures that comprise the meaningful, meaning-making experience of watching and empathizing with Gollum onscreen. In contrast to Egan's wholly logical, research-driven perspective, this case study specifically involves original phenomenological descriptions of the phenomenon of Gollum, which can provide insights into the broader phenomenon of digital characters.

The last chapter will examine what the encounter with Gollum contributes to formulating a phenomenology of the experience of digital characters, and a final conclusion will elaborate on the potential for other research relating to questions of digital characters that may be fruitful to pursue.

CHAPTER TWO

Ontology, Verisimilitude, Simulation

Digital tools emulate properties of human vision as well as the camera's customary way of seeing things. In this regard, the application of digital tools continues a centuries-old tradition of analogizing camera and eye...

-Stephen (Prince, 2012), *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality*, p. 40

For the majority of the first century of cinema's existence, a hallmark of even its fictions has been the link that the images and characters onscreen have to the real world. André Bazin's (1967/2004) realist philosophy of cinema is known for its emphasis on the indexical relationship between reality and what the photographic camera sees, providing objective images of the world "without the creative intervention of man" (p. 13). Bazin sees photography and cinema as "discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" (p. 12), and it is this human "obsession" with realism and the cinema's fulfillment of that obsession that provides the essence of the cinematic art and elevates the medium. Lev Manovich (2001) summarizes Bazin's perspective by saying that for him, "cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint" (p. 295).

In part, the indexical relationship between the photographic image and reality is, in Bazin's view, based on spatial unity, where authenticity is enhanced through the appearance within a single, optically created frame of the elements that are a part of the drama of the narrative (Buckland, 1999, p. 187). As such, the aesthetic of montage, where drama and emotion are heightened through the assembly of disparate elements, can in no

way bear witness to reality in the same way that longer takes that contain these components together can. Constructed images--and even whole sequences constructed via editing--are unable to evoke the “subsurface aspects of life” as well as long takes and sequences can, which Bazin sees as more revelatory of a director’s perspectives and beliefs (Giralt, 2010, pp. 7–8).

However, seeing one film’s reality as more or less genuine than another’s seems problematic given the inherently constructed nature of the medium, even without additional elements such as special effects. Gabriel F. Giralt (2010) notes Fellini’s remarks on the filmmaker’s influence on reality and summarizes: “No matter how pure cinema may be, the ‘human agent,’ the author’s presence (the subjective presence) in the formation of the film image, brings about the fact that the use of the lens, wide angle or telephoto, the selection of the object, and the framing of it in the act of filming are conscious manipulations of what is being filmed” (p. 14).

As Dudley Andrew (2004) explains, “the way an image comes into being...sways the way we take it in” (p. xv), and so another consequence of Bazin’s preoccupation with reality pushes anything not live action somewhat out of the picture, as evidenced in his avoidance of the topic of animation. In Andrew’s opinion, Bazin would see animation as demoting cinema from its place as the medium of our time (p. xvii). With the advent of digital technologies and their rapid adoption in the film industry this is somewhat problematic. Indeed, Lev Manovich (2001) argues that “as cinema enters the digital age...cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation” (p. 295). This perspective is based on the inherent and near-total manipulability of digital images. Digital methods of capture and construction record the light of reality as binary code,

making the digitally-captured film “a copy without a source” (Fussfeld Cohen, 2014, p. 53) that turns “Bazin’s photographic image into a raw material to be processed” (Giralt, 2010, p. 8). Nearly anything imaginable may be done to this digital code through the mere manipulation of numbers, which changes are reflected on the screen in alterations to the way an image appears before the eye. This process may expand the expressive toolkit of filmmakers (Fussfeld Cohen, 2014), but also seemingly eradicates the indexical link between the image and reality:

As there are no longer any aesthetic features linking film to film stock, digital cinema also has a purity from its physical origin. Once live action material is digitized, the existing relation to reality is lost as the digital images become raw material (grids of pixels) for manipulation. Digital technology has eroded the distinctions between creation and modification, production and post-production, as every image--whatever its source--is processed through various computer programs before the final cut. (McGregor, 2013, p. 271)

What these perspectives point to is that at the material level, there is a *physical* difference between elements captured optically onto celluloid and those captured digitally, but most of these critiques fail to address the actual experience of viewing these ostensibly “new” sorts of images.

In opposition to this view, Stephen Prince (2012) argues that digital images have not lost their indexical value or relationship to reality, though his evidence contrasts some with the prevailing views of the indexicality/ontology of the digital image in that he is not focused on the issue at the level of materiality, but rather approaches it from the perspective of the *content*. Prince cites the authenticity a film gains through shooting on location, and while he recognizes that “critiques of digital imaging suggest that because digital images can be invisibly manipulated, a viewer cannot trust the image or know that an authentic location is really that” (p. 52), he argues that the manipulability of digital

images does not detract from the authenticity eventually depicted onscreen if the filmmaker really *does* go out and shoot on location.¹ Despite some claims or attempts to the contrary, film has always been a composite medium, such that Prince believes that “aesthetic and stylistic practices in cinema have changed little and...the difference between analog and digital cinema do not form a stark divide” (p. 53).

Prince’s perspective on this problem is refreshing in that it leads discussion of these issues back to the experience of the spectator. The philosophical differences between something shot on celluloid and something shot digitally tend to matter very little to the general spectator’s initial interest in a film. What matters more is that a given film has the expected level of realism or fantasticality given the nature of the story being told, though the degree to which “realism” is crucial to audience engagement is a matter of continued debate in contemporary film studies (C. R. Plantinga, 2010; Thomson-Jones, 2008; Wilson, 2016). Prince (2012) and other theorists writing about digital effects and digital film note that “perceptual realism”--which entails “anchoring the scene in a perceptual reality that the viewer will find credible”--in an effect may be more important than an effect’s exact mimicry of reality (p. 32). Most films today feature a surprisingly large number of “invisible” special effects--maybe as much as 90% of all effects work is intended to go unnoticed by audiences (Buckland, 1999, p. 184). From alterations to skies and buildings, to retouched lighting, weather, or blood spatters (Fincher, 2007, 2014), many purely digital elements in contemporary films often go entirely unnoticed or

¹ A valid counterargument for this particular point is that the ease, flexibility, and decreased cost of digital systems has led many filmmakers to abandon traditional production methods--including location shooting--for the “digital backlot” popularized by George Lucas. This would, in fact, have the consequence of eliminating the indexical link that actually shooting in a particular place would provide.

unremarked upon by most audiences, just as they are designed. This suggests that even though at the material level these effects may not have a basis in reality, their unnoticed presence in the film implies that they were effectively used and realistic enough to do the job they were intended to do.

The question of verisimilitude, or how realistic an effect needs to look, very much depends on the film that the effect is being used in. As Stephen Prince (2012) explains: “Visual effects seek to persuade viewers that the effects are real *within the referential terms of the story*. Therefore, the more comprehensive a scene in evoking perceptual realism, the likelier it is to compel the spectator’s belief” (p. 33; emphasis mine). Kristen Whissel (2014) supports this perspective by noting that the actual scenario of a film can be seen as a significant element in providing “presence” to digital effects such as creatures, perhaps even more so than the techniques used to create them (p. 117).

In addition to an effect needing to appear merely perceptually real, Julie Turnock (2012) argues that effects today are (and need to be) built to be *photorealistic*, meaning literally that they are designed to match the perceptual profile and evoke the feeling of being a photographed element.² Turnock’s perspective emerges from the special effects photography/cinematography that Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) established in the 1970s, which sought to integrate animated or modeled elements seamlessly into an already photographed reality. This meant that aesthetic and design choices were made in the creation of the effects to match with the cinematography and other photographed

² Photographic lenses and equipment inherently incorporate distortions into the images that they capture and present as reality, most often through subtly (or sometimes not-so-subtly) warping the lines in an image (barrel or pincushion distortion) or unnaturally dispersing the colors in an image (chromatic aberration). Photographed images are thus distinct from the reality they purport to capture.

elements of the film in which the effects were intended to appear. Just as elements on set were altered from reality through their being photographed, so too were the effects changed to give that same feeling of the altered, photographed reality that the film's director and cinematographer were aiming to achieve. Thus the effects were not intended to have a pure basis in reality, but rather they were intended to fit into the photographed, already artificial reality that the film was seeking to create.

Turnock argues that this aesthetic has continued into the contemporary era as cinematography and other shooting choices in some modern films are designed specifically with the effects in mind, so that the capabilities of digital effects to mimic photographic reality end up driving the cinematography of the film in which they are intended to appear (p. 165). This leads to the conclusion that effects do not necessarily have to maintain a basis in reality to be accepted, but must maintain a consistency of audience expectations with the filmic world in which they appear. The aesthetic of the overall film drives the aesthetic needs of the effects, such that the verisimilitude of the effects depends rather largely upon audience acceptance of the film's broader aesthetic and how those effects convincingly fit into that aesthetic. This could, in fact, mean that contemporary films may be progressively becoming less and less "realistic" (by historical standards) in order to compensate for deficiencies in the capabilities or appearances of their digital effects elements.

Regardless, given increases in computing power and software solutions aiding in the creation of more "photorealistic" elements, coupled with more "natural"-seeming

animation through more advanced motion and facial capture technologies,³ the gap between some digital effects and their real-life photographic counterparts may be increasingly slimming, and could even disappear entirely in the minds of some audience members. Perhaps they already have.

A Cognitive Perspective on Film Perception

Much of this ultimately comes down to the audience and the spectator, and his or her individual “buy-in” to the world of the film. Here, Torben Grodal’s (2009) PECMA flow theory of perception proves useful. Grodal’s understanding emerges from cognitive theory and is in opposition to the linguistic turn in film studies, which he sees as isolating both science-minded and phenomenological perspectives on film (p. 14-15). The PECMA (Perception, Emotion, Cognition, Motor Action) model is predicated on “the brain’s playful use of the brain’s innate specifications” to understand how viewers take in perceptual information that prompts actions as they are interpreted through our emotions (p. 146, 148). In viewing a film, we see things happening onscreen (perception) which triggers associations and--sometimes, though not always--memories (emotions) which we then think about in relation to the other images that we are seeing or our knowledge of those things (cognition); this cues our mirror neurons and sets our bodies into certain modes which resonate with our motor centers (motor action), which are cued towards action even if they are not actually executing that action (i.e., we remain seated instead of running away from something that scares us onscreen).

³ Natural in that they blend digital elements with the “captured” actions and expressions of real, human actors.

Grodal's theory supports the argument of perceptual realism as advanced by Prince: we attend to salient information in a given frame as it relates to the goals and concerns of a given film or even a given scene. Grodal notes in particular that this is often more than mere optical data (p. 192). By way of example he notes a sequence in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) where Jack (Jack Nicholson) is avidly pursuing Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and while all of the shots in the sequence are intended to promote identification with the terror Wendy is experiencing, many shots involve static doors or even feature Jack exclusively, i.e., some of the shots intended to help us identify with Wendy do not include *any* visual data about her (p. 193).

A critical component to Grodal's theory is the notion of "reality-status," which refers to an ever-active cognitive operation that enables us to assess the film we are viewing as being fictional or even merely not present before us, thus keeping us in our seats and instilling the feelings of action and emotion we receive without us actually leaping up and performing whatever action is being inspired by the content being viewed. As mentioned, this concept is also important to Daniel Barratt (2007), and he notes that the "default setting of the mind-brain is likely to be *naïve* realism" (p. 63), meaning that human beings naturally act as though the world is precisely how it appears and sounds, and that the things we are surrounded by are real objects. However, indicators in things being perceived may mark perceptual phenomena as being representational, cueing viewers into the fact that what they are watching is not actually real or present. One important cue in this regard is that viewers are typically seated in the theater or on their couch at home, looking towards a screen upon which moving images are being displayed, so it is very doubtful that a completely naïve experience of film ever occurs in an

audience. However, in regard to digital effects, Barratt makes the point that default naïve realism still runs at more specific levels of film experience, and implicitly assumes the indexical “truth” of perceived images. So, conversely, sequences that are clearly indexed as CGI may be called out as overriding our default stance towards assuming the sequence’s realism. But if we as viewers do not understand the sequence as being CGI, then we have no basis for assuming any stance other than an indexical one, i.e., we accept its truth within the constraints of the world being presented to us onscreen, and so “buy in” to its function or “truth” within the story (p. 73). In the end, this is a kind of “cinematic” realism that would, theoretically, experience Gollum as “real” at roughly the same level that audiences accept other, human characters (or human-like characters, such as Hobbits) as real, within the understanding that most films are fictional in the first place.

Grodal’s perspective provides some scientific backing to the phenomenological project of exploring the embodied experience of perception and being in the world through returning to the sensory richness provided by our own bodies. Vivian Sobchack (1992) notes that the experience of viewing a film is one that is an “embodied and meaningful existential activity” wherein viewers respond with expressions of their own perceptive experience (p. xvii, 9). As viewers we include a film’s visible performance in our own experience of the world in a way that is pre-linguistic and does not *become* linguistic until we segment it and break it down in our own minds (p. 12-13). This directly connects the experience of perceiving a film to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work on embodiment and gesture, which Richard Kearney (1994) summarizes as “Language as gesture precedes language as word” (p. 79). The perception of onscreen gestures (of

many sorts) provides meaning to us that prompts reactions, as per Grodal's PECMA flow, so that the audience's "recreation" of an artistic project's meaning--even at the level of our minds putting muscles into ready-status and not deploying them--is just as critical as the originator's act of creation (Kearney, 1994, p. 82).

Grodal's system provides a foundational explanation for why and how digital character encounters can, theoretically, be emotional. But what this requires is a more detailed evaluation of what constitutes "perceptual realism" and "credible" experience, and sharper tools for analyzing them. Only then can we move to directly examining those experiences in detail to determine why some digital characters are more successful and others seem to fail. In this regard, Husserl's (1913/2001) admonition for philosophers to return "to the things themselves" (p. 168) may be seen as an appropriate method for examining the digital turn in contemporary film. The only way to truly understand the consequences and impact that digital technologies have on the experience of a film is to directly examine those experiences to see what they can contribute to our knowledge and understanding of these questions. However, the experience of these newer technologies is comprised of other experiences which have been comprehensively examined by other phenomenologists, including the phenomena of perception, aesthetic experience, technology and sound, and film itself. Work by these philosophers has some significant insight that can contribute to the overall understanding of the experience of digital characters and technologies in the cinema. It is to these philosophers that I will first turn.

CHAPTER THREE

Phenomenologies and the Digital Image

It is more or less known that talking-films do not merely add a sonorous accompaniment to the spectacle, they modify the tenor of the spectacle itself.

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 243

Phenomenology and Film

Defining the relationship between the cinematic medium and the philosophical approach offered in phenomenology is no simple task. As a starting point, Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich (2016) note that at least some of the difficulty may be attributed to the very use of the term “phenomenology,” which has been variously employed by some of even its most famous practitioners (p. 12). Additional difficulty for the application of any phenomenological thought or perspective to the cinema arises in recognizing that no standard method of phenomenological study exists or is even possible to set down--phenomenology resists methodology, such that the establishment of a method automatically invalidates its use as a method for further inquiry (Van Manen, 2014, p. 41). However, this does not inherently mean that any or all experience-based approaches are phenomenological or may be considered as such. Understanding these distinctions necessarily requires a brief explanation of the basic tenets of phenomenology, for in spite of there being a wide variety of interpretations concerning types of phenomenology and positions regarding what phenomenological inquiry may be or may speak to, there are some aspects of the phenomenological project that may be seen as

relatively universal across mainstream contributions to the general philosophical approach.

First, as mentioned above, phenomenology is “a *practice* rather than a system” that aims at getting to the truth of matters through the description of phenomena (Moran, 2000, p. 4). This description is not mere recollection or the retelling of a series of events. Instead, it is an attempt to articulate the knowledge that emerges from particular phenomena at the level of experience.

This leads to the second and perhaps most important distinguishing element, which is that phenomenology “sought to reinvigorate philosophy by returning it to the life of the living subject” (Moran, 2000, p. 5). Rather than privileging the mind exclusively, phenomenology recognizes that all thought is a thought *of something* (the phenomenological principle of *intentionality*), meaning that thinking, and thus being, is inherently situated in what Husserl called the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*), or the concrete world that we perceive and act within. The embodied way of thinking that phenomenological study provokes sees each person as necessarily situated in the life-world, such that all aspects of their perception--and thus their understanding--are influenced by their “situatedness” which provides limitations and perspective that enables the acquisition of knowledge based upon experience. The Cartesian perspective of “I think, therefore I am” is strongly refuted by this fundamental aspect of phenomenology. Instead, phenomenology places significant emphasis on embodied perception, where the physical body is the originating location for all thought and experience, with knowledge emerging from the “I-world” relationship between the body and the world around it (Ihde, 1990, p. 45). This leads philosopher Don Ihde (1990) to characterize

phenomenology as “philosophical ecology,” meaning that it studies the relationship of humans to their various environments (p. 25).

Third, the practice of phenomenological inquiry, as directed through embodied experience, is concerned with accruing knowledge about the fundamental nature of things via the performance of the phenomenological reduction, also known as bracketing, the suspension of the natural attitude, or the *epoché*. Though a somewhat nebulous term, the practice of the reduction is intended as a return to a “presuppositionless” state that ignores any and all outside cultural influences or hypotheses that may have some bearing on the interpretation or meaning of an experience (Moran, 2000, pp. 9–12). Such outside influences aim “to go *behind* phenomena, to give reason for a phenomenon, or account for it in terms other than what appears” (Ihde, 2012, p. 19) (which detracts from the givenness) of the phenomena and what the experience of it may ultimately contribute to our understanding. Performing the reduction is perhaps the most difficult aspect of practicing phenomenology, requiring the cultivation of a mindset that allows for careful attention to experience both reflexively and as it unfolds, while also setting aside (or “bracketing”) any prior knowledge, cultural experience, or natural attitudes that may inject elements of interpretation into the description of the phenomenon under examination.

Fourth, beyond simply returning practitioners to a state of mind that puts them in better contact with both their bodies and the reality of the world around them, the aim of phenomenological inquiry via the reduction is to “*seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena*” (Ihde, 2012, p. 22). This means that phenomenological research “looks for the structures of things that appear in the way in which they appear”

(p. 22). Rather than merely describing what occurs in an experience, the phenomenologist looks to understand what perceptual or structural constants contribute to making that experience the experience that it is--what distinguishes one experience from another and makes it uniquely *that* experience.

Here the classical principles of phenomenology merge with what Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich (2016) see as the narrow aim of any “film phenomenology,” namely to describe “*invariant structures of the film viewer’s lived experience when watching moving images in a cinema or elsewhere*” (p. 13, emphasis theirs). This aim has been pursued to “various degrees of generality and specificity” (p. 14), with some scholars approaching and describing the film experience at large and others narrowing in on topically minute aspects of the film viewer’s relationship to the medium--including the multisensory aspects of film viewing, the spatial and temporal dimensions of the medium, the experiential aspects of specific types of cinema, and even qualities particular to environments of film viewing (p. 14). Varied approaches to the subject matter have led to the development of a number of research practices for examining film and phenomenology, namely five distinct yet not mutually exclusive categories that Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich have identified. These are: (1) excavation, or the practice of connecting filmmakers and film theorists to the world of phenomenology (p. 7); (2) explanation, which entails commenting on what major phenomenologists have said about film (p. 7-8); (3) exemplification, or the illumination of a particular film or body of films with insight from phenomenology or vice versa (p. 8); (4) extrapolation, or intuiting what phenomenologists *might* have said about film, given that surprisingly few have actually commented on the medium (p. 9); and (5) expansion, which aims to use

phenomenological precursors as the basis for a rigorous description of the cinematic experience (p. 10).

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the film-phenomenology conversation through a combination of three of these categories of research. This chapter specifically looks to both explain and extrapolate what certain theorists have said about film, particularly as it may relate to aspects of the digital image and experience. Following this, the analytical and concluding chapters of this work focus on expanding the film-phenomenology field through rigorous description of the cinematic experience of digital characters, specifically Gollum. By way of beginning, examining Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the perceptual basis of experience serves as a foundational entryway into the topic of the digital impact on film viewing and engagement. Then, building on Merleau-Ponty we will consider Don Ihde's consideration of the interpenetration of experience with technology, a set of insights that, combined with his work on sound, give us a phenomenological roadmap for understanding the experience of a digital character. The ideas of Jean-Luc Marion do not typically lend themselves well to considerations of digital cinema, given predilections he has about the indexical link of images to reality (*à la* Bazin), but Ihde prepares us for ways that Marion's insights into the "invisible" revelations of the image might operate here. Finally, I will consider a true, contemporary phenomenologist of film, Vivian Sobchack, who more explicitly explores the link between our embodied experience as viewers and the technologies of cinematic capture and display that mediate that experience.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

Though all phenomenology is to some extent concerned with elements of embodied experience, no phenomenological work is as closely tied to the term “embodied” as is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2013). Originally published in France in 1945, Merleau-Ponty’s project is a rigorous examination of the “primacy of perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), or the fundamental, foundational contribution that the perceptual act contributes to the construction of experience, which in turn leads to the grasping of meaning and, ultimately, knowledge. All of these processes are necessarily located in a subject’s body, which is “the vehicle of being in the world” such that “for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein...in this sense I am conscious of the world by means of my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 84). The body acts as a portal or entryway into an understanding of the world that the subject is situated within: “man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself” (2013, p. lxxiv). With this understanding of man as a “body-subject” in place, the phenomenological reduction in this context may be seen not only as an attempt to eliminate culturally informed perspectives on a phenomenon, but also as a return to the richness of sensory input that enables the phenomenon to be experienced in the first place (Kearney, 1994, p. 75).

Given the prominence of sensory perception and excitement in the experience of viewing a film, it is easy to see that Merleau-Ponty’s project potentially has much to contribute to a phenomenologically-informed understanding of the film experience. Indeed, *Phenomenology of Perception* is perhaps the most-cited text in Vivian

Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), examined below. Comprehensively summarizing Merleau-Ponty's work on perception--which ultimately spanned the entirety of his career--would be impractical and unnecessary for the task at hand. However, there are significant elements of his theory that usefully apply to an understanding of the film experience at large, as well as the particular question of the digital character. Some of this will be revisited later through the interpretative lens of Sobchack, but I would like to begin by focusing on Merleau-Ponty's words and thoughts themselves, moving through two particular topics within *Phenomenology of Perception* to extrapolate and explain their relation to the film and digital film experience: the relationship between perception of reality and illusion, and the nature of movement as communication, and as a perceptual element in the relation of one subject to another.

First, however, it is worth reiterating Merleau-Ponty's attention to the *sensory* and its impact on perception. Because sight is, for most people, the most obvious sense, the visual aspects of experience are those which appear most readily for analysis and reflection. This has certainly been true in the field of phenomenology, and also, it is worth noting, in the discipline of film studies (Balazs, 2011; Bazin, 2004, pp. 9–16, 23–52; Manovich, 2001; Rodowick, 2007). And it is easy to see why this has been the case:

In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than tactile experience, we can at least at first glance flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents a spectacle spread out before us at a distance and it gives us the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and of being situated nowhere. Tactile experience, however, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot spread it out before ourselves and it does not fully become an object. (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 330)

But concentrating on sight is not to be concentrating on perception in its entirety: “The visible is what we grasp with our eyes: the sensible is what we grasp *through* our senses” (p. 7). This requires recognizing that perception involves a synthesis of all our bodily senses, as experience presents itself wholly through all of them at one time, though the sensing subject obviously has the ability to privilege attention to the input from one or a few senses in the act of experiencing a particular phenomenon. Even still, data from the other senses is always present in an experience. Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) notes that one cannot “decompose a perception” (p. 15) by breaking it into distinct sensations; rather perception is a case in which the whole of it precedes any potential analysis of its disparate parts. The senses themselves do not perceive, but combine to contribute to perception in an inseparable fashion (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 220).¹

One fundamental question of perceptual experience that is directly associated with the phenomenon of perceptually real digital creations is the relationship between illusion and reality. As has been mentioned once before, Merleau-Ponty (2013) sees the discussion of raw experience as illusion as a methodological error, as the subject is already presupposing the categories of “real” and “illusion” rather than describing what is

¹ It is worth noting here that film operates in much the same way, as an inherently multisensory experience that may even be characterized as synesthetic. We are always, constantly perceiving films through more than our visual or even our aural senses. As Sobchack will illustrate below, we rather actively engage our senses of taste and even touch in particular cinematic contexts. Luis Rocha Antunes (Antunes, 2016) notes that understanding film as a multisensory phenomenon is not merely a matter of creative description or hindsight recognition, but rather in principle the fundamental way in which perception actually occurs: “Our natural, not exceptional or synesthetic, way of perceiving is multisensory....The natural way for the brain to operate is multisensory, and even if we desired purely visual experiences, we would be frustrated and incapable to force our brains to block out and inhibit some of the neural connections between the senses” (pp. 3-4).

evidently true to their perceptions at a given moment, or in a given experience (p. lxxx). This emphasizes the phenomenological privileging of perceptual experience above all else, such that for Merleau-Ponty questions of ontology are seemingly entirely irrelevant to phenomenological research. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that illusions (presumably visual tricks of some kind) may effectively trick audiences by passing themselves off as authentic perceptions in part due to the element of a subject's belief in the sensory input that is immediately present (p. 22). In the context of a film and a digital character, this evokes Julie Turnock's (2012) argument concerning the photographic realism of effects. A character who has sufficient qualities of verisimilitude in appearance and behavior to seemingly appear naturally in a photographed scene alongside other actors would appear to be structured no differently than a real actor appearing in that shot or scene. Merleau-Ponty (2013) continues:

If I think I see or sense, then I see or sense beyond all doubt, whatever may be true of the external object....If the entire being of my perception and the entire being of my illusion is contained within their manner of appearing, then the truth that defines the one and the falsity that defines the other must also appear to me. Thus, between them there will be a difference of structure. A true perception will be, quite simply, a genuine perception. Illusion will not be a genuine perception; certainty will have to be extended from vision or from sensation as conceived to perception as constitutive of an object. (p. 308)

Perception of any sort engenders belief in that perception: "To perceive is suddenly to commit to an entire future of experiences in a present that never, strictly speaking, guarantees that future; to perceive is to believe in a world" (p. 311).

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, illusions or tricks may have the "*value of reality*" (p. 358), a term that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the buy-in that hallucinating persons have in their hallucinations even though these phenomena are not actually perceptual. The concepts of hallucination and perception are linked because

...this fiction [hallucination] can only count as reality because reality itself is reached for the normal subject in an analogous operation. Insofar as he has sensory fields and a body, the normal subject himself also bears this gaping wound through which illusion can be introduced; the normal subject's representation of the world is vulnerable. (p. 358)

The “gaping wound” that is being referred to in the hallucinating subject is the notion of a distinct lack of attention in relation to the subject's milieu. The “normal” (i.e., non-hallucinating) subject finds his bearings through being grounded in the reality of the world he is situated in, such that he attributes it with a definite structure, allowing him to “situate [himself] sometimes fully in the world and sometimes on the margins of the world” (p. 358). This seemingly allows for imaginary acts to be performed or engaged with in a way that is impossible for the subject prone to hallucinations, a phenomenon which Merleau-Ponty attributes to their being decentered and disconnected from the reality that the world “is unaware of us” (p. 358). Essentially, the normal subject is able to delve into fictions and perhaps even be tricked by them in part because the subject is then able to emerge from that margin of the world, so to speak, and re-engage fully with the concrete world around them. This would seem to indicate that Merleau-Ponty would agree that for the normal subject as viewer, the ontological status of the digital image, effect, or character is unimportant, and the effectiveness of such a phenomenon ought to be judged on its ability to enchant the subject whose attention is engaging with the fiction.

The word “enchant” above is used deliberately in place of Merleau-Ponty's preferred term “trick,” which I see as having too many deceptive connotations to convey precisely what is being discussed in relation to the digital film experience. At one level, the aim of photorealistic digital images and effects *is* to fool the viewer such that they

believe that what they are seeing is real. But the intention for the use of digital tools does not simply stop there. The aim is not mere trickery, but rather enhanced engagement with the world, story, and characters of the fiction being viewed, and so the development of advanced digital tools and technologies has not merely been for the sake of convenience. Rather it has been so that the imagination of the filmmaker may be more artfully and realistically depicted so that there is less of a divide between what viewers would see in reality and what it is possible to depict onscreen. The more realistic the depiction, it would seem, the smaller the perceptual divide between what viewers know to be real and see to be real in the fiction, thus allowing less of a break in concentration from the story being presented onscreen.

Choosing the word “enchant” over the word “engage” is also deliberate even though engagement or identification with the story of a film is perhaps the most common ways of expressing this phenomenon of absorption into the filmic world. “Enchant” seems to connote a sense of wonder or amazement, even amusement, with the phenomenon at hand. To enchant is to carefully draw someone’s attention, to captivate or mesmerize them. This, I believe, is a more accurate descriptor for what contemporary approaches to digital characters must do to be effective, and also aligns handily with Julie Turnock’s (2012) argument concerning the photographic realism of effects in the wake of ILM: visual effects, particularly of the more fantastic and imaginative variety, must charm viewers into accepting them by adopting the appearance of reality as depicted in a particular film they are contained in, rather than by asserting themselves *as* reality.

Another aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s work that is particularly relevant to a discussion of digital characters is his examination of the concept of motion. Merleau-

Ponty's perspective on embodied motion contrasts with the psychologist's understanding of motion, which considers even human bodies as mere objects. For psychologists, the body as object characterizes motion as a process that involves intentionality as informed by an end goal: in the "kinesthetic sensation" the movement of an object anticipates its final position, so that the intentional relationship of the object to that end goal is to sketch out "a trajectory in order to meet up with a goal that is already given in its location" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 96). Merleau-Ponty disagrees, seeing that the moving of one's body requires little forethought or planning, typically, because we are located in our body, and it is as much a part of the way we interact with and perceive the world as our sight or any other of our senses. In many cases this is actually problematic to the project of phenomenological description in that too often we forget that this is so, taking the body's intentional relationship with the world for granted. But particularly with regard to movement this ought not to be forgotten, as

I move my body directly, I do not find it at one objective point in space in order to lead it to another, I have no need of looking for it *because it is always with me*. I have no need of directing it toward the goal of the movement, in a sense it touches the goal from the very beginning and it throws itself toward it. *In movement, the relations between my decision and my body are magical ones.* (pp. 96–97)

Later, Merleau-Ponty notes that things as a whole are primarily defined by their behavior, not their static properties (p. 288). This illustrates the distinction that may be seen between the natural movement of the human body and that of an animated character. The human body brings with it this sense of embodiment and intentionality that makes its motions fluid, dynamic, and spontaneous. The "magical" relation between the decision to move and the actual movement manifests itself in subtleties of behavior that are often unplanned or unattended to, but which imbue the movement of a person with the

presence and sense of being that person, of inhabiting that body. In contrast, the traditionally animated character necessarily displays the limitation of movement that the psychologists associate with objects: it moves through static positions towards a particular end goal, with each moment of “movement” simply following a prescribed trajectory that leads inevitably towards its intended conclusion.

Before bringing this back to a more thorough discussion of what implications Merleau-Ponty’s perspective may have for the question of digital characters under examination, there is one more element of motion that must be addressed, namely its importance in relation to the Other. Given the supposed primacy of individual consciousness in its relation to perception, the question raised is how an Other can exist when a subject’s individual consciousness purportedly constitutes the perceivable world. Merleau-Ponty asks

How can I know that there are other I’s? How can consciousness, which as knowledge of itself is, in principle, in the mode of the I, be grasped in the mode of the You, and thereby in the mode of the ‘One?’” (p. 364).

Too simplistic of an answer is that motion or action is what provides this perceptual allowance for another’s being. The perception of another’s activities are characterized as their “near presence” which is experienced under a “veil of anonymity,” such that “the perception of a cultural world could be verified through the perception of a human act and of another man” (p. 363). To see others using the tools and objects that I use, and in a similar fashion, allows me to “interpret their behavior through analogy with my own behavior and my own inner experience, which teaches me the sense and the intention of

the perceived gestures” (p. 364).² But more importantly, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that another consciousness, an individual as a body-subject, carries in them and displays a sense which is then perceived by other sensing body-subjects, indicating the presence and intentionality of another body-subject and, thus, consciousness (pp. 366-367).

Unlike Edith Stein (1989), Merleau-Ponty sees no direct need for the concept of empathy in perceiving and recognizing another’s consciousness. To return this to the realm of film in relation to digital characters, we can circle back to Kathryn S. Egan’s (2009) analysis of Gollum to understand how this shifts the dialog even further along. If intentional, embodied, and perceptive motion provokes the sense of another’s presence, then traditional conceptions of animation, for Egan, do not inherently have a sense or being that is conveyed. The animated medium’s necessary use of tools like keyframes place animated motion squarely in the category of objectified motion. Animated characters and objects literally move along an objective, frame-by-frame path, either set out and hand-animated by an artist or programmed into a computer such that an object moves in rote fashion from point A to point B. However, the contemporary era of animated effects--and characters in particular--does not rely quite so strongly on this traditional method of animation.

Instead, beginning with Gollum, the art of motion capture has become the standard method of bringing such characters to the screen, using technological means to translate human motion into data which may then be applied to an animated model--often in real time, at least in rough, polygonal form (Pellerin, 2003). This technology changes

² The discovery of mirror neurons in the 80’s and 90’s interestingly confirm the assertion that Merleau-Ponty makes here.

the game considerably through the introduction of a human, embodied origin for the motion that ends up appearing onscreen. The actual person performing the motion is not visible, but their intentional motion is, thus enabling digital characters to appear inherent to the cinematic world they inhabit. This would provoke the appearance of consciousness that Merleau-Ponty identifies as critical in the identification of the Other.³

Note that this circumvention--what some may criticize as a technicality of sorts--may not necessarily apply to every digital character. Though Merleau-Ponty attributes great significance to art and other phenomenologists and film theorists have found both drawings and animation to be of significant value, there is a fundamental difference that exists between what comprises movement for embodied subject versus the object. Traditionally animated characters--Mickey Mouse or any of the Looney Tunes, for instance--may be described as “movable objects” which do not display the kind of embodied intentionality Merleau-Ponty sees as essential to comprising the consciousness of another being: “The movable object, as the object of an indefinite series of explicit and concordant perceptions, has properties, while the moving object merely has a style” (p. 287). This implies that digital characters brought to life primarily through the digital equivalents of traditional animation techniques would not be seen as evoking the type of perceptual consciousness that allows for identification by another subject, particularly when paired onscreen with live elements like other human actors.

³ Though it is not the focus of this thesis, this conclusion provokes Merleau-Ponty’s question to be asked again with some additional elements: If my consciousness has a body, why would other bodies--even digital ones whose motility has its basis in a human body--not “have” consciousness in some form?

Acknowledging this divide is particularly interesting in the case of Gollum. In the actual creation of the character for Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the motion capture technology used to capture Andy Serkis's movements was relatively rudimentary, providing only a basic skeletal outline for the character which was not a 1:1 correlation for the more twisted and exaggerated skeleton that animators had created for the digital Gollum puppet (Pellerin, 2003). As such, even Serkis's motion captured performance often served merely as a guide for animators, who generally relied more on his on-set performance plates--which featured no motion capture or computerized data--to inform their manual animation of the character's movements (Pellerin, 2003). Thus, it could be said that traditional animation techniques, though transported into the digital realm, were largely responsible for Gollum's appearance and behavior--particularly his facial expressions, which were too detailed and subtle to be motion captured in any way. However, these limitations largely disappeared with the advancement of motion capture technology, such that Gollum's appearance and behaviors in the first entry of Jackson's later *Hobbit* trilogy (Jackson, 2012, 2013, 2014) were effectively based more on Andy Serkis's performance than had ever been possible in the previous set of films. This begs the question of whether the later Gollum is more (or perhaps less) compelling than the earlier Gollum, and what experiential consequences may result from the technological differences between the two.

Phenomenology and Technology

Many early film theorists argued that the technology necessary for the production of cinema majorly contributed to its fundamental essence as a medium. Most famously, Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" located in the physical medium of chemical photography the essence of the cinema. Bazin's assessment (and other, likeminded ones) does not take for granted that cinema is produced via technological means, but rather celebrates this fact as the crowning achievement of a long history of human beings striving towards an ideal of verisimilitude and reproduction in the arts. For Bazin, the development of moving image technology had reached its peak in the mechanisms of photography. While this view has been debated and generally argued about in the ensuing decades, the central role of technology in the production and distribution of cinematic artifacts has not diminished--in fact, quite the opposite. Films require technology in order to be made, begging the question of what technology contributes in both obvious and subtle ways to the cinematic product and the experience thereof.

Philosopher Don Ihde's influential work in phenomenology has centered primarily on the *practice* of phenomenology rather than its scholarly analysis. His *Experimental Phenomenology* (2012) provides an accessible introduction to the field of phenomenological exploration centered on the essential terms and processes by which phenomenological reductions, observations, and descriptions may be produced. Without establishing or encouraging a specific methodology of phenomenology (an impossibility, as has already been noted), Ihde's early work established a way of thinking about the

doing of phenomenology that was intended to encourage further explorations of phenomena in any number of areas. For Ihde himself, this has manifested in several ways, including an original phenomenology of sound (to be explored below), and a longstanding exploration of phenomenology's relationship to technology, particularly technologies that in some fashion mediate or alter the fundamental experiences of human perception.

Ihde has been credited as the first in the English-speaking world to write on the relationship between philosophy and technology (and philosophies *of* technology) in his book *Technics and Praxis* (1979). In this and many subsequent works on the same theme, Ihde identifies phenomenological thought as essential for understanding the role and influence of technology on individuals and society. Culture gave rise to the development of technologies. This, in turn, dramatically reshaped cultures and societies, such that the influence of technology is an inescapable element of life, to the degree that the lifeworld in which human experience is situated has become fundamentally different due to technology's pervasive influence.

This particular phenomenon of the alteration of society by technology is what Ihde sets out to explore in *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (1990). The daily existence of every human being in Western societies in particular has become "technologically textured" (p. 1) to the degree that we find it exceedingly peculiar when the peculiarity of technological influence is called out and recognized (p. 3). And while many philosophical schools of thought could (and have) dealt with questions of what technology means for human beings, Ihde notes that the monumental shifts in the experience and meanings of culture brought about *by* technology are best explored and

understood through a phenomenological lens. In this way, Ihde may be characterized as naturally following in Merleau-Ponty's footsteps with regard to his concern for the impacts of technologies on our embodied sense of perception.

That technology has radically altered the relationship between human beings and nature is apparent in both large and small ways. Subtle technologies--including things like roads, trails, or bridges that we rarely consider as technologies (p. 12)--have irrevocably altered our experience of natural environments, but Ihde notes that they do not typically have a prolonged impact at the sensory level of experience (eyeglasses and hearing aids being two notable exceptions). In these instances the technologies retain many of their non-technological characteristics in terms of mediating perception and experience (p. 18).

Galileo's telescope provides a useful illustration of the Ihde's argument as it relates to a number of different technologies, and as a lensed instrument is highly related to the world of film. Ihde notes that direct, non-mediated perceptions of the world are altered even through the introduction of the transparent pane of a window between the subject and the outside world, transforming the immediately present "I-world" relation to one of "I-window-world" that has direct consequences for the ontological nature of the experience with the world beyond the window. In this example, most sensory elements would be dulled through the presence of a window, including perceptual and physical access to space, the literal feeling of being present in that space including the ground beneath ones feet and the texture of the surrounding air, and the environment's sound would certainly be altered by the presence of a window's glass. In the invention of the telescope, Galileo succeeded in using lens technology to fundamentally alter the

experience of space through bringing distant objects “nearer” for the eye’s examination (p. 50). This shift in the “reach” of the perceptual faculty of sight provided heretofore impossible access to sights both local and distant, but also fundamentally altered the relationship of the telescope-bearer to the physical space surrounding them. The later development of the microscope (another lens-based technology) emphasized the study of small rather than large phenomena, but the fundamental structure of experience remained the same: the apparent distance between the observer and the observed was distinctly altered, bringing one or the other “closer” together (Ihde, 2001, p. 46).

What this observation points to is one of the invariant structures of technological mediation that Ihde identifies, namely that technology *amplifies* one or several senses beyond what is “normal” for typical human perceptual ability. The experiences offered through these visual technologies in particular are examples of an “artificial revelation” (Ihde, 1991, p. 74) of phenomena typically beyond the grasp of one’s perception. What is important to note for both science and film is that “*New instrumentation gives new perceptions*” (Ihde, 1990, p. 56), and so worthwhile questions to pursue in the adoption of any new technology relate to what perceptions that technology necessarily brings about. For the primary technology of the cinema--namely the camera--many viewers desire for the technology to disappear into the background of their viewing experience, providing the sensory extension that we have come to expect from the technology without the bodily awareness that such enhancements are taking place (p. 74).

The diminishment of the apparatus may be seen as a primary goal for most technologies, enabling the consideration of a piece of technology as a quasi-“other” that would seem to move the technology beyond the scope of consideration as an artifact

motivated and controlled by another person (pp. 100-101). In terms of watching a film, this may be illustrated by the viewer being “sucked into” the story in such a way that it becomes easy to forget that the physical camera was at one point operated and run by human beings; instead, the viewer sees the camera as simply another entity in the cinematic experience, one that enables viewing access into the world depicted onscreen.⁴

One explanation Ihde offers for this phenomenon as it relates to film is the distinctly *presentational* nature of the medium, as opposed to being representational (p. 105). Images, he notes, are phenomenologically presentation rather than representation-- images are independent, distinct “things themselves,” meaning objects in their own right (p. 165). That these objects may depict representational content does not detract from this extra element that comprises their visibility. What is interesting to note in the case of media like film and television is that while remaining presentational, independent objects, they are also media that *produce* imagery in their own fashion in terms of subcultures and other variations on the photographic images that serve as the starting points for these broadcasting media.

Interestingly, Ihde characterizes computer graphics and computer-generated images as distinct from those produced in film and television, seeing CG images as “concocted” and arguing that beyond presentation, these images comprise a new category of “hermeneutic imagery” that turn “back towards a kind of pictorial representationalism, a reverse evolution” (p. 186). In the computer’s shifting of numerical patterns into visual

⁴ Turning towards an argument seemingly tailor-made for the eventual proliferation of digital characters in films, Ihde notes that the quasi-autonomy of technology may be glimpsed in various automatons that ostensibly demonstrate human qualities of thinking and calculating, so that the real challenge may be that of replicating bodily motion rather than mental activities (p. 102).

representations Ihde sees a unique form of productive imaging that moves beyond mere juxtaposition of imagery and steps into a new realm of instrumentation, such that “Computer graphics stand at an interface between science and art, particularly art in its postmodern cinematographic sense” (p. 186). Writing even before the proliferation of CG films and characters, Ihde notes that the freedom of the computer allows for the imagination to be embodied through instrumentation (p. 187), though this action is necessarily constraining in its manifestation of abstraction. The landscape of cinema and its relation to computer imagery was not sufficiently developed enough for Ihde to analyze or theorize it, but it could be inferred that in his opinion the quasi-otherness of cinematic and television media would likely be further strained by the introduction of the computer’s instrumentation, which implicitly adds another layer of technology between the viewer and the final image produced onscreen. Given these observations, Ihde’s position on digital characters would likely be that they are fairly incommensurable with embodied experience by virtue of their abstract relationship to concrete reality. That this is contradicted by the real experiences of viewers problematizes Ihde’s views, but lends credence to the questions I am addressing in this work.

Phenomenology of Sound

Beyond initiating the phenomenological investigation of contemporary science and technology, Ihde has also made significant contributions to the study of sound and its function in perception. Originally published in 1976 and updated in 2007, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* was one of Ihde’s first attempts to push beyond scholarly analysis of phenomenological ideas and into the realm of *doing* an original phenomenology on a relatively neglected topic. Sound, Ihde recognizes, is a sense long

acknowledged but disregarded by phenomenological studies, which tend to favor the visual element of sensation (Ihde, 2007, p. xi). Aural phenomena may be addressed in the works of some thinkers, but never comprehensively, leaving Ihde to characterize most studies of sound or words as disincarnate, a decision which has resulted in a loss of attention to phenomena highly relevant for many ideas about how we construct ourselves and the world around us (pp. 4-5, 13). In particular, Ihde notes that sound provides us with direct access to realms of experience where vision can only offer access indirectly: “*It is to the invisible that listening may attend*” (p. 14; emphasis his). This will ultimately be shown to be significant in the acceptance of a digital character, particularly when they are not directly pictured onscreen--in these instances a character’s sound may be considered even more important than a character’s visual appearance.

Ihde is careful to emphasize that no singular sensation is enough to enable a full understanding of the world around us. Rather, all the senses must be examined together, for how they build upon one another in revealing the characteristics and structures of perception and reality. Sound, Ihde recognizes, is often very much tied to vision, and vice versa. In the field of visual perception, there are stable objects which are often unmoving and so mute, and others which move and seem to have sounds which accompany such movement; likewise, in the realm of sound there are sounds which seem to accompany moving objects and sounds which have no visual accompaniment (pp. 52-53). Some phenomena such as stable objects are revealed seemingly only to the eye, and some sounds lack a visual component such that they are immediately revealed only to the ear; additionally, some phenomena are “synthesized” or given to both senses (p. 53). What this is intended to emphasize is that while there are certainly objects which are more

directly “given” to one sense or another, “Phenomenologically I do not merely hear with my ears, I hear with my whole body” (p. 44; emphasis his), a statement which could be adapted to any of the other bodily senses.

However, unlike the visual sense, sound does not inherently establish a subject’s relationship to the world as one of “subject-object.” Rather, sound as an experience is pervasive and communal, as evidenced by the significant traditions of oral storytelling and culture that existed prior to the development of the written word and the omnipresence and directionality of sound (pp. 75-76). That aural environments are immersive and comprehensive is noteworthy in that the encompassing nature of a soundscape recognizes that the aural field is not stable, but rather sounds *move* around a hearer. In this way, sound may be considered “animating” when paired with moving images as in film due to a certain “timefulness” that is imparted (p. 83). Ihde recalls viewing a short film where the visuals centered around black and red dots on a green background; as the dots moved in conjunction with sound effects that seemed like words, there emerged a more comprehensive understanding of the film as depicting soccer players in the midst of a game. The sounds produced imparted an anthropomorphizing sense of movement to the otherwise abstract images, imbuing them with a meaning that would have been altogether lacking otherwise (p. 82). Additionally, Ihde notes that even the less representational sound of a film’s score imbues motivating characteristics to visuals: he relates that the spaceships in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) did not at first appear to be moving without background music, and notes that most silent movies were enlivened through a piano’s accompaniment (p. 83). Though images may be literally moving across the screen before a viewer, sound adds another dimension of

reality to that movement, seemingly even if the sounds themselves are not directly produced by or related to what is being visually displayed. This aural dimension may be characterized as a “depth” or “shape” that flat visual images inherently lack.

These characteristics also reveal some of the world that simply remains unseen. Sound does not merely act as confirmation of what the other senses are telling us about our world or experience, but rather functions to reveal things about the world that our other senses cannot in any way contain. Our sense of hearing gives us access to many invisible and unseen aspects of the world, such as wind. These are experiences and phenomena that are “present to the ear but invisible to the eye” (p. 53) and yet reveal characteristics about the world that cannot be ascertained in any other fashion.

Worth questioning in conjunction with Ihde’s interest in phenomenology and technology is how shifts in the electronic production of sound have altered the aural landscape in culture at large and in film specifically. In the digital, electronic era, Ihde notes that images and sounds are moving beyond the aesthetics of the prior, explicitly mechanical era (pp. 232-233). Mechanical instruments are characterized by a temporality that moves, typically, in a singular direction, with repetitive, automated movements governing the forward stream of time. Ihde here recognizes Marshall McLuhan’s theories of how “We tend to mold our concepts of ourselves upon our concepts of the world” (p. 232), so that the purely mechanical era may be considered one of relatively rigid, standardized thinking and operating. Dominant metaphors for society included those of the machine, with each individual as a cog working and contributing to that machine’s production. The advent of the electronic, digital computer provided a paradigm shift in terms of the governing metaphors of society, which Ihde argues may be captured in the

term “flow.” As opposed to the mechanical, temporal predilection of prior technologies, electronic technologies “are suggestive of transmutation, transformation, and the melting of distinction” (p. 232). Ihde argues that unlike most dominant technological and societal metaphors, the concept of flow is perhaps most neatly understood through an attention to sound. In the recording of music digitally

Acoustical space is constructed; takes, retakes, and increasing musical editing goes into the development of the record such that a simple live-performance recording becomes but one possibility out of many. Active “construction” is the norm. The editing process “picks and chooses” the best takes (the analogue with cinema is obvious) to produce the “best” result. Time forward and the age of the “remix.” (p. 261)

Of course, many of these elements were possible in older, analog recording, but the labor was such that the enactment of such editing constructs or the presence of any kind of synthesizing process was minimal at best. What technology has allowed is a particular ease in producing these sounds, so that even the physical performance of musical instruments in a recording is sometimes entirely unnecessary. The practice of sampling, remixing, and editing has led to the status of digital recordings as one of instability, with recordings remaining highly mutable, perpetually subject to alteration.

As Ihde himself notes, this is not constrained to the music or recording industries, but has already been addressed in part for its relation to the proliferation of digital technology in nearly all aspects of film production--it may be seen as a fundamental invariant of the larger digital experience. The implication of a postmodern emphasis on flow in digital media of all sorts is that texts are never finished, and the author is in no way necessary or even identified (p. 261). Removing the production of the media from an actual performance shifts it into a highly malleable and indefinite status such that it could be argued that no definitive version of any digital production is truly able to exist. With

regard to digital characters, specifically, questions may be posed concerning the relevance of this perspective given the originating act of a human performance at some level. Whether via technologies like motion or facial capture or the recording of a character's voice, most digital characters maintain a significant relationship to a reality beyond the confines of the computer. What this ultimately means for the longevity or stability of a text in the digital era, however, remains to be seen.

Jean-Luc Marion, Phenomenology and Aesthetics

Jean-Luc Marion argues in his phenomenology of aesthetic experience, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Marion, 2004) that, "The question of painting does not pertain first or only to painters, much less only to aestheticians. It concerns visibility itself, and thus pertains to everything--to sensation in general" (Marion, 2004, p. ix). The same argument may be made of the techniques of cinematic production, such that Marion's considerations of the nature of the artistic object have import for our understanding of how we accept the ontological distinctiveness of artworks like films. As will be seen, Marion clings to the ontological link to reality as an essential quality of art, but in light of Heidegger's phenomenology of technology we can see that reality is already situated and grounded in technology, and so there may be more affordance for considering digital characters as characters and using Marion's ideas on the image to understand digital characters as artistic objects.

Marion's phenomenological project in this work is to define and understand the relationship of art, aesthetics, and perception. As has previously been mentioned, the sensible world of experience is not limited to the visual sense. However, given this

sense's primacy in our contact with the world around us, it is no surprise that an analysis of artistic experience and endeavors might begin with the visual sense. In a certain sense, Marion's analysis of the visual aesthetic experience may be viewed as an attempt to reconcile this seeming paradox, where art objects are first encountered visually as a part of the normal, experienced life-world that surrounds us, but are ultimately more fully experienced in a holistic, embodied fashion that is distinct from the world that surrounds that artistic object. The problem being examined may be summarized as such: we do not often afford the structure or walls of the museum with the same experiential aura or attention that we give the paintings hanging on those walls, yet all of these visual components are elements of our aesthetic, perceptual experience; what is it, then, that distinguishes the art object from other objects and creates the aesthetic experience that characterizes art and artistic expression? Marion's examination centers around the experience of experiencing paintings and other such static works, but may usefully be applied to the cinematic experience given film's visual aesthetic properties.

Marion's starting point is recognizing that most of our experience of art may be described as that seemingly paradoxically searching for the *invisible* within the *visible* (p. 1). He elaborates on this concept as relating to the problem of perspective in painting, and the recognition that perspective only *appears* present in otherwise two-dimensional artistic works. We read perspective into the artistic work: "In effect, in perspective my gaze invisibly traverses the visible, in such a way that, without undergoing any addition to the real, it becomes that much *more* visible" (p. 3). Nothing changes about the painting itself or the reality of the circumstances surrounding our viewing of that painting, but heretofore unseen *levels* within the painting reveal themselves to viewers through the

incorporation of perspectival strategies in the creation of the artwork. Marion attributes the intimation of perspective in painting as an *a priori* necessity in the establishment of the very phenomenality of the phenomena: “by it, the invisible of the gaze is stretched out, arranging and displaying the chaos of the visible as harmonious phenomena” (p. 5).

The provocation of a sense of depth in a painting is an example of the invisible promoting or calling more directed, specific attention to that which is visible. This Marion recognizes as the first paradox of perspective: “the visible increases in direct proportion to the invisible. The more the invisible is increased, the more the visible is deepened” (p. 5). Artful deployment of perspectival strategies guides the construction and interpretation of the image, transforming its other qualities into the unified image that is then experienced as having depth. The example that Marion turns to is perhaps one of the most well-known in illustrating depictions of depth in painting, *Portrait of the Betrothal of the Arnolfini* (Van Eyck, 1434; see Figure 1). This otherwise relatively straightforward depiction of two figures standing hand-in-hand is made complex by the presence of a mirror behind the figures ostensibly facing the portrait’s viewer. In the mirror may be glimpsed the side of the room otherwise unseen in the painting, as well as the presence of three witnesses to the scene portrayed. The “first visible” of the couple and the room is given new depth and meaning by the mirror’s presence, such that Marion argues that “Strictly speaking, the invisible thus constructs the visible and allots it” (p. 7). Invisibility provokes the illusion of depth that arranges the other elements of the painting, including the walls and other objects in the space, supplying them with the perspectival significance that renders the scene as being real to the viewer (p. 4, 7).

This perspectival reality aids in transforming the otherwise flat, static image of the painting into something that seems to contain movement, which Marion identifies as the second paradox of perspective (p. 10). The shifting of the viewer's gaze across the image's levels of depth, which action partially supplies the painting with its form, would not exist "so long as the gaze does not find the conditions and the point of view from which it takes shape for the first time" (p. 12). Marion equates the importance of perspective in painting to perspective as an essential tenet of Husserl's phenomenology. A painting "is essentially a flat surface covered with colors in a certain assembled order," just as the general experience of mere consciousness would be flattened and thus meaningless (p. 12). Perspective in visual perception is intentionally motivated, in Husserlian fashion, such that "the perspectival gaze is always a gaze of something other than what it actually experiences, in the same way that consciousness is always consciousness of something, thus of something other than itself" (pp. 12-13). The marriage of gaze and consciousness is essential to the perception of the image, as the gaze ultimately sees nothing in a painting of significance beyond what the consciousness of the viewer recognizes as visible (pp. 17-18).

Marion's ideas on "depth" and the invisible/visible relation transcend the perspectival strategies of the Renaissance; they have broad application across many artistic styles, artwork, and media. Marion recognizes in numerous, varied artworks an insertion of the invisible into the visible that enables the opening of a world (p. 22). As another, contrasting case study, Marion offers up a preoccupation with icons (particularly religious icons) that is effectively the driving force for analysis throughout the book. Icons are traditionally a flat depiction of a religious figure, such as Christ, which "offers



Figure 1. Portrait of the Betrothal of the Arnolfini (1434), Jan van Eyck. National Gallery, London.

itself up to be seen by the gaze without the mobilization of perspective,” and always depict “a gaze belonging to a human face” (p. 20).

This gaze affords the opening up of a tangible, even erotic face-to-face relation between the viewer and the viewed object, effecting the radical insertion of the invisible--a seeming consciousness or human quality that is not contingent on any kind of verisimilitude--into the visible (p. 21). Such an action is in part accomplished through the intentional insertion of the artist’s lived experience into the work in such a way that the *thing* (the artwork and all it might represent) is itself perceived rather than the viewer’s own *perception* of the thing (Tin, 2010, p. 867). According to Marion, true art of any sort--representational, iconic, or abstract--intertwines the lived experience of the artist’s life and the creation of the painting with the visual of the painting until the two are indistinguishable from one another, a state which becomes the true and only aim of the painting (p. 867). Marion recognizes Monet and Pollock as successful practitioners of this, and calls out the work of Simon Hantaï as lacking the experience that true art must bring to the intentional object; instead, Hantaï’s work--specifically the 496 nearly identical squares of *Tabula, 1974* (Hantaï, 1974)--merely calls attention to its mechanical qualities, such that Marion sees it as precisely the opposite of the accomplishments of Monet and Pollock, who captured a kind of soulful expression in their work that Hantaï’s work misses out on (Marion, 2004, p. 17).

Derision of the mechanistic thinking becomes significant later in Marion’s book and demands our attention given the inherently mechanical qualities of film and film production. Marion intentionally imbues “true” artistic endeavors with religious connotations, arguing that the true painter partakes in an authentic act of Creation--

reproducing nothing but rather *producing* something brand new, an entirely original phenomenon with no genealogy (pp. 25, 29). The painter paints what he sees, a vision which the spectator necessarily cannot share until, through the act of painting, the painter “makes visible what without him would have remained definitively invisible,” which Marion terms “the *unseen*” (p. 25).

The unseen, in a sense, imposes upon the visible, through *manifestation* in the visible, something of which the visible was unaware (p. 29). The visibility of the unseen is paramount--it is not merely the presence of the unseen that attracts viewers to the painting, but rather that the painting “exudes visibility from top to bottom” (p. 30), a phenomenon of attraction and fascination that Marion calls the painting’s “weight of glory” (p. 31). In a critical qualifier, Marion says that this process of calling forth the unseen to visibility is one in which *the artwork* plays an active role, so that true painters are those who let the artwork guide its own creation; to do otherwise, Marion says, is to “disqualify a painter as such” (p. 31). In this sense, “the painter records [what his unique gaze sees], he does not invent” (p. 36). As evidence of this phenomenon Marion offers up the anecdote of the painter seeing what the painting gives to him:

“To see what gives” means first of all: to stand back in order to better envisage the result of a stroke or a sketch that one has just inscribed upon the canvas. But this stepping back indicates above all that the one who has just physically put the color or lines on the surface of the canvas did not know, at the moment of effecting it, what he did, since, in order to see its effect, he must detach himself from his work, in order to learn, afterward, what visible appears there. He thus admits that, despite all his work, it is not he who put in the work on the painting but the painting itself, which, thus humbly called on to appear upon the occasion of the work, opens itself to the visible on its own initiative. (p. 44)

Marion further characterizes the active participation of the painting as a “donation” from the painting to the painter, emphasizing the highly generous and organic nature of the relationship between art and artist.

These ideas offer much to our analysis, but before we move forward with an application, we must address a major obstacle Marion’s aesthetic poses to us. According to Marion, this relationship between art and artist is significantly disrupted through the use of technology, which necessarily divorces the artist from both the artistic process and, consequentially, the finished product. This perspective is not limited to the realm of artistic creation, but rather the whole cultural realm of the visible. Introducing mechanical or technological methods into art makes it subject to the forces of desire on the part of both creator and consumer, which in turn are subject to the forces of the market (p. 34). Within this perspective the artistic work that results cannot, in essence, be considered artistic, but must rather be analyzed in terms of being an artistic *product*, meaning something that is created with some form of profit motive. For this reason, artists work not at the level of the unforeseen, bringing the painting into being through a process that brings the painter into collaboration with the painting itself, but rather at the level of the foreseen or anticipated--the work that is created has a particular effect, message, or aim in mind, eliminating the spontaneity that occurs in the true act of painting (p. 35). Marion decries Picasso in this vein, calling him “the most extraordinary creator of the foreseen, [and thus] the one most deadly for the unforeseen, therefore of the miracle [of true painting]” (p. 35).⁵

⁵ Marion’s exact issue with Picasso is not elaborated on or given any explanation in the text, unfortunately, leaving the specifics of his complaint obfuscated.

All of these elements are significantly related to the reproducibility that is inherent to mechanical methods. Whether it is the reproduction of many similarly-colored squares, such as in Hantai's *Tabula, 1974*, or the reproduction of whole paintings in the form of prints, the employment of mechanical means turns the artwork into an "ectype," separating the work from its original form, an ontological disconnect that Marion sees as highly significant (p. 38). To his mind, the painting's "weight of glory" is tied to its form, which bears the direct imprint of its creator's effort--the painter's lived experience--and this is impossible to transfer in any form of reproduction. It follows, then, that if reproduction is essential to the method of a work's creation, the lived experience essential for manipulating the invisible in order to make visible the unseen is entirely lacking from the artwork even at the level of the "original" (if there can be said to be one).

This critique of mechanical method raises significant questions that are highly relevant to the creation of cinematic works. Given that cinema is, famously, an art form rooted in technology and mechanical reproduction, it would seem that any applicability of Marion's ideas to the cinema would stop here. However, as suggested earlier and to be more fully developed later, the combination of phenomenology (even that of Marion) with elements of cognitive and embodied simulation theory alleviate many of the issues surrounding the "original" artwork or ontological ties to a pro-filmic "reality." What's more, Marion himself seems to afford some room for the artfulness of cinema. Sorting through Marion's complex view of moving images requires a bit more elaboration.

Marion focuses a large degree of attention on the liberation of the image, or the concept that in truly encountering or experiencing the artistic image the viewer does not encounter an *image*, but rather a world *through* the image (Marion, 2004, p. 46). This is

what enables the arts, particularly those that are image-based, to encounter “life” such as it is, and allows for the image to create a world rather than merely a mode (p. 46).

Conceptualizing images as being liberated from the inherent constraints of their medium means that this liberation is ultimately that of the image from its original referent: “the image is valued in itself and for itself, because it is valued by itself. The image has no original other than itself and undertakes to make itself acceptable only to the unique original” (p. 47). This “arrogance” of the image, Marion says, has been accentuated or marked by the proliferation of the medium and forms of television (pp. 47-48). In the realm of film, Marion notes “even in the most deliberate fiction, the image at least refers back to *a* reality--in this case, the actors” (p. 48; emphasis mine).⁶ Much like painters, actors engage the whole of their bodies in their performance, even being overcome and led by the character they are portraying rather than their own thinking. Feeling the performance, rather than logically thinking and executing it, creates in the actor’s work the same kind of originality and spontaneity that Marion identifies with the best, most “true” kinds of art. So, in sum, though the cinema is far from an ideal artistic medium in Marion’s mind, he ostensibly allows for authentic encounters with cinematic images as art through: 1) their basis in reality, identifying the fundamental quality of the cinema with its ontological relationship to the world in much the same way as Bazin, and 2) the spontaneity and temporal unfolding of performance as a unique, creative act.

⁶ Interestingly, Marion does *not* feel this way about television. Unlike cinema, Marion argues, the medium of television has usurped the structures of space and time so they are no longer “the *a priori* structures of experience but instead constituted the *a priori* conditions of the impossibility of any real experience” (p. 49), and the “regime of the image” has infiltrated the world of television such that ontological visual references to an original have become the exception rather than the rule (p. 50).

Neither of these admissions for cinema, on Marion's part, lend themselves to support of digital characters on first blush. Questions naturally occur, for instance, regarding what an aesthetic encounter with a film like *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) might look like through the lens of Marion, or if such an encounter is possible in the first place. Unlike more spontaneous filmmakers (eg., David Lynch), James Cameron's work--particularly in *Avatar*--is that of a highly methodical and intentional technician. It is clear that, at one level, *Avatar* may be thought of as a technological exercise, with numerous new and advanced filmmaking and animation technologies being conceived of and developed exclusively for the production of the film. This would seem to preclude the film's ability to be considered as an artistic object at all to Marion. However, though nearly all of the imagery in *Avatar* has been produced with specific aims in mind, i.e. intentionally, in a way that Marion would find lacking in ontological significance or meaning, certain characters and elements of the film would arguably allow for a genuine artistic encounter in Marion's eyes--albeit perhaps a somewhat limited one. Important to remember here is that Marion attributes a visible, meaningful gaze even to the flatly painted eyes of religious icons, "two dots of basically black paint" (p. 83). These dots bear an invisible gaze made visibly manifest via the image through the viewer's *intentional* relation to the image. Effectively, if the right components are in place to establish or provoke a genuine experience of or encounter with the artistic object, then intentionality, as a property of our subjective experience, allows for that encounter to occur.

With regard to *Avatar*, the advanced methods of motion and facial capture employed by James Cameron supplies much of the onscreen action with an embodied,

literal basis in reality--one that inherently carries at least some of the lived experience of the actor through to the finished, animated product. That this animation is in turn significantly altered or “cleaned up” by animators is, just as in the example of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy specifically, the limiting factor to this type of encounter. However, the animation in *Avatar* took advantage of more advanced technologies that required somewhat less alteration by animators, arguably giving these characters a greater degree of experiential weight than previous digital characters (Official Avatar, 2010). The technology enabled the film’s actors to imbue their digital counterparts with “more” of themselves and their performance, in similar fashion to how the painter pours themselves into their images.

Overall, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience that Jean-Luc Marion describes, while not inherently inclusive of the cinematic image, does manage to articulate components that contribute to a viewer’s aesthetic experience with visual art. These include the deployment of the invisible to achieve levels of depth and thus perspective, the imbuing of artistic works with the authenticity of lived experience, the communal process of artistic creation in which the artwork “donates” its own contributions to the work, and ultimately the aesthetic “weight of glory” that these components make up in the finished form of the art. For Marion, the cinema partially achieves these things, albeit with the qualifier that it maintains some form of ontological relationship with reality, most prominently the presence of human actors or the significant hand of human craftsmen in the creation of the images onscreen.

However, as has already been noted, Don Ihde’s recognition of the pervasiveness of technology in all of contemporary society may mean that the very notion of what

constitutes an ontological grounding in reality has shifted. What this would all seem to indicate is that the aesthetic experience of cinema at large may be characterized similarly to the concept of empathy discussed earlier: it is a *form* of aesthetic experience. Digital images--and contemporary digital characters, in particular--may be viewed as an additional form of aesthetic experience, seemingly one more step removed from the ideal form of an encounter with the physical artifact and world of a painting, yet still connected to reality through technologies such as performance capture.

Vivian Sobchack, Phenomenology of the Film Experience

Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich (2016) and many other scholars generally attribute the nascent emergence of phenomenology in film studies to Vivian Sobchack's foundational work *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992). Though her book would in time receive its own criticisms and garner detractors, it deserves credit for re-integrating the phenomenological project into the general discourse surrounding film theory and texts. While many early film theorists such as Bazin and Kracauer had quasi-phenomenological outlooks on film--particularly in relation to the types of moods and depictions of reality displayed in neorealist films--the field's attendance to experiential phenomenon and the spectator had morphed, to some degree, in ensuing decades. The ideological turn in the late 1960s and the move towards heavy psychoanalysis in the 1970s took the study of film somewhat far afield from the concrete experience of the actual moviegoer. Sobchack's work served as a significant force in re-emphasizing the role of the spectator in the cinematic experience, and combined experiential and perceptual insights from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,

considerations of technology and apparatuses from the work of Don Ihde, and original investigations surrounding the unique qualities of the cinematic medium. And despite its critics (Yacavone, 2016), Sobchack's phenomenology of film may still be considered the most authoritative and comprehensive examination of the topic, and so must necessarily be considered in any phenomenological work on the cinematic medium.

Sobchack has two related but seemingly contradictory notions in her work that bear comment in regard to questions of digital characters. First is Sobchack's commitment to an ontological connection between what is seen onscreen and reality (much like Marion), which manifests in a deep distrust of the digital turn in film production, though this is arguably made complicated by the inherently technological nature of the cinematic medium. And second is her conception of the "cinesthetic subject" contributing to the formation of a type of sensory identification between a film, its characters, and viewers, which she argues may replace traditional ideas of how viewers identify with characters onscreen.

In her Preface to *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack outlines her project as an intention to "describe and account for the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the experience of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity" (p. xvii). Her research question may be rephrased: how does the visual experience of watching a movie produce meaning for the viewer?

Because Sobchack's project is a phenomenology of film experience, she mostly directs her experience towards the finished product displayed before an audience. First, Sobchack emphasizes--like Merleau-Ponty and Ihde--that mediated perception is inherently distinct from that of a truly embodied perception (p. 178). Just as Ihde noted

that even a single pane of glass between the “I” and the “world” changes the ontological relationship the “I” has to the experience of that world, Sobchack recognizes that the more involved technology of the cinema camera alters the structure and form of perception to an even greater degree. Still, she notes, no matter what a technology’s consequence for our sensation, we still maintain our embodied flesh as the standard by which such consequences are evaluated, which points to the distanced relationship we necessarily have with a technology that can never become truly embodied--we can see *through* pieces of technology, but never can we see *as* the technology sees (pp. 182-183). Mediated sensation, then, is always at a slight disjunction with our actual, embodied sense.

What advances in cinematic technology ultimately provide is an advancement of a film’s bodily access to the world, providing more room for the expression of imagination (p. 257), which recalls the embodiment of imagination that Ihde spoke of. Though writing on the cusp of the truly digital era (*Jurassic Park* would be released in the year following Sobchack’s book), Sobchack recognizes that advances in technology bring about further possibilities for the depiction of heretofore unseen and perhaps only imaginable ideas, characters, and worlds. Even the development of something as simple as a new form or type of camera introduces new possibilities for its use and deployment, opening up new avenues of exploration for filmmakers to craft new experiences for spectators--indeed, developments in camera technology are to some degree at the very heart of the digital revolution (Kenneally, 2012). With specific regard to digital technology and its potential impact on the experience of the embodied spectator, Sobchack does not mince words, but rather sees the digital as destructive to the project of true embodiment. The perception-

structuring metaphors of human computing are seen to schematize and atomize experience in a way that concentrates attention on superficiality:

The materiality of the electronic digitizes existential *durée* [duration] and situation so that a centered and coherent investment in the lived-body is atomized and dispersed across various systems and networks that constitute temporality not as an *intentional flow of conscious experience* but as an *unselective transmission of random information*. The existential, bodily situation of “being-in-the-world” becomes itself digitized, becomes a conceptual and schematic space that is both compelling and inhospitable. That is, the lived body cannot intelligibly inhabit it. It is hardly surprising that our various narratives (academic and popular) are dominated by attempts to re-cognize the biological body as informed by a technology that will enable it to live in the spaces our electronic culture has constructed, spaces that have engaged our consciousness as they have refused our bodies. Cyborgs, androids, and replicants occupy our thoughts, arouse our emotions, and superficially drive our narratives while human bodies within them are repetitiously (compulsively) dis-membered and dis-integrated: riddled with bullet holes, slashed by knives, burned and melted by fire and toxic substances.

In an important sense, *electronic space dis-embodies*. (Sobchack, 1992, pp. 301-302; emphasis hers)

While Sobchack continually sees relationships between certain elements of the cinema--namely the camera and the projector--and the lived-body experience of viewers (p. 299), the digital lacks this same substance. Digital cinema, it would seem for Sobchack (in 1992, anyway), is no cinema at all.

This perspective becomes interesting in relation to Sobchack’s later volume *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), a collection of essays many of which deal with questions of embodiment as it relates to particular areas of the cinematic experience rather than the whole of it. This includes analyses of special effects, electronic presence, and multisensory facets of the film-viewing experience.

In analyzing special effects, Sobchack concentrates on those relating primarily to the body. Taking the cultural pressure that inclines women towards cosmetic surgery as her jumping off point, Sobchack identifies a similar conceit related to appearances in

most bodily-based special effects. The culture of bodies--specifically, female bodies--and the culture of effects are similar in that they alter even internal perceptions of the body, foregrounding the body “as a material surface amenable to endless manipulation and total visibility” (p. 47). From makeup effects on forward to the contemporary era of digital manipulation, the body has been seen as a central site for alteration. Sobchack highlights the effects of Jim Carrey-vehicle *The Mask* (Russell, 1994) as emblematic of the problem that effects have in their relation to the body: they are wholly presentational, lacking any substance to back them up (p. 46).

Technologies as inherently and only surface-level is certainly a common critique leveled at all sorts of digital elements. The lack of any relation to reality means that digital images and characters exist purely as visual information to be taken in specifically in the context of the cinematic experience--just as computer interfaces exist nowhere beyond the bounds of the computer screen. There is nothing *real* to back these things up, to ensure their accurate depiction or functioning in the context of the film. For digital characters, this means that they do merely what they are instructed to do by animators and programmers. They are visually presented for consumption by audience’s eyes, rather than for contemplation or identification. Whether considering cinema or cosmetic surgery, Sobchack argues, we as viewers have been technologically transformed in terms of how we see, and how we see what we see (p. 50). For Sobchack (and seemingly for everybody) this is a profoundly negative development in terms of its relation to depictions of the body. Effects surrounding the body have warped and distanced sensations of embodiment rather than shoring up the importance of the embodied

spectator--for their own good, and for the good of their experience with the cinematic text.

However, Sobchack recognizes later that this is an experience we must accept, to some degree, and with which we must reckon. Technologies and the networks of communication that they entail are inescapable, as are the profound and profoundly personal implications these have for our embodied selves (p. 136). In analyzing the relationship between the electronic/digital era and the concept of “presence” in a film, Sobchack once again turns to a film’s literal movement as an invitation for spectators to enter *into* the scene being depicted, in stark opposition to photographs that merely invite contemplation of a scene (p. 144). Likewise, the digital or electronic image merely allows for contemplation rather than imaginative transportation or habitation. The electronic world “incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state” (p. 153). Later, she writes

the electronic is phenomenologically experienced not as a discrete, intentional, body-centered mediation and projection in space but rather as a simultaneous, dispersed, and insubstantial transmission across a network or web that is constituted spatially more as a materially flimsy latticework of nodal points than as the stable ground of embodied experience. (p. 154)

This leads Sobchack to the conclusion that the only body able to inhabit electronic space is an innately electronic body--obviously entirely unsuited to the embodied experience of human beings (p. 159).

Though writing in the wake of Gollum’s paradigm-shifting presence in *The Lord of the Rings* movies and seeing the emphasis on digital characters and techniques in cinema, Sobchack stands in staunch opposition to the industry’s dominant discourse, arguing that the digital entirely marginalizes and trivializes the human body. In terms of

solutions to this problem, Sobchack offers none for she does not see any as possible. The ontological difference in the electronic signal versus the analog film body is too radical a hurdle for her to overcome. For Sobchack, digital technologies dis-embodiment viewers from the viewing experience, allowing for no “presence” to be felt or identified with.

Interesting to note, however, is that Sobchack never comments on the advent of motion or performance capture technologies, or the argument that these ostensibly reintroduce some ontological connection with a human actor, whether that be via motion (which she, like Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes in connection with perceiving the consciousness of an Other), or temporality. Given her hardline stance on the necessity of that ontological connection, however, it is seemingly unlikely that she would acquiesce to such a view.

Sobchack’s ontological difficulty may be countered in a similar way to that of Marion, i.e., other perspectives on technology and the experience of viewing films assist in reducing the necessity of such an explicit link back to reality. As has been mentioned with regard to Marion, Ihde’s recognition of technology as a significant context for our reality shifts how we relate to and experience all phenomena, including artistic and cinematic works. Additionally, input from Daniel Barratt (2007), Gregory Currie (2008), and Torben Grodal (2009) in particular point to the significance of both our biology and our imaginations in engaging with the fictional material that we see in a film. Grodal’s PECMA flow effectively advances the assertion that “even as we watch fictional films it remains true that seeing is believing, because to believe incoming information is...the default mode and to disbelieve demands a special effort” (p. 154). These perspectives push back against Sobchack’s insistent denigration of digital developments in filmmaking. To be sure, there are plenty of digital elements and effects in films that have

failed dramatically in some fashion or another--Sobchack's own example of *The Mask* is certainly one of them. But particularly in the contemporary era, where effects and even characters have increased in their complexity, verisimilitude, and subtlety, one cannot patently discount the possibility of attributing any kind of *fictional* presence or empathetic significance to digital elements or characters.

If we can overcome Sobchack's objections to the ontological problem, she offers support and provide insight into how emotional and tactile experiences with digital characters may occur. In the essay "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," Sobchack addresses the inherently multisensory dimension to the cinema. Much like Merleau-Ponty notes that we do not experience the world through one singular sense at any given time, Sobchack acknowledges that "we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 63). In considering the language that we use to describe our cinematic experiences--language which is often full of sensuous, embodied, poetic terms like "breathtaking" or "heart-pounding"--Sobchack develops the notion of the "cinesthetic subject" (p. 67) as perhaps a more accurate way of considering identification with a cinematic work than the traditional subject positions of characters (*a la* (Smith, 1995).

Here, Sobchack is specifically attending to the senses of touch and taste that are easily evoked in the cinema and yet generally left behind in consideration of the visual and aural aspects of film. The examples that she uses rather descriptively are unspecific and yet universal--the experience of seeing food onscreen and tasting it on your tongue,

or of seeing a texture on a piece of clothing and simply knowing in your own body how that clothing would feel. These are normal multisensory experiences of the average person experiences (even if they do not have synesthesia as it is traditionally defined or talked about), and so Sobchack argues it ought not to be surprising that films naturally evoke such experiences in spectators (p. 70). The thrust of Sobchack's argument regarding how this works is that as viewers, seated in the theater watching a film, our intentionality is directed towards the images before us onscreen. All of our senses are engaged--we watch the film *sensibly*--but which senses we rely on at different times vacillates in response to what is happening in the film. Sometimes visual elements lead our identification with the cinematic, cinesthetic subject, other times perhaps we lean more heavily upon our sense of touch or taste to drive our engagement with the cinematic world. Sobchack continues:

However, insofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body's intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjectively felt lived body*. Thus, "on the rebound" from the screen--and without a reflective thought--I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality. (pp. 76-77; emphasis hers)

Because our bodies serve as the locus of cinematic experience, the sensual nature of what we see onscreen is reflected back and felt in our own bodies, displaying a kind of multisensory sympathy (or, arguably, empathy) with what is depicted in the film being experienced. Importantly, Sobchack notes

Thus, even if the intentional objects of my experience at the movies are not wholly realized by me and are grasped in a sensual distribution that would be differently structured were I outside the theater, I nonetheless do have a *real* sensual experience that is not reducible either to the satisfaction of merely two of

my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only “after the fact” through the cognitive operations of conscious thought. (p. 76; emphasis hers)

Sobchack’s note that these experiences are *real* experiences is critical, in that she identifies significance in something that is not completely, externally present to our physical senses. The things we view, hear, taste, or touch in a film may be wholly unfamiliar to us, but nonetheless we continue to relate to them in a multisensory fashion, supposing that we have direct real-life experiences with the things we see onscreen. And whatever these cues from the film are, our sensory engagement with them in the theater is, as Sobchack herself identified, *real*. The things we see, hear, taste, and touch are actually, in fact experienced as seen, heard, tasted, and touched through the capacities of our own body’s sensory capabilities. The phenomena that provoke these experiences need not be present. And though Sobchack would certainly push back, recognizing the possibility of real identification with things that lack physical presence also opens the door for a multisensory identification with digital characters.

Importantly, what this multisensory perspective emphasizes for the study of digital characters is that there is more to the viewer’s acceptance and engagement with such a character than merely their appearance. Visual verisimilitude and fidelity may be a starting point for some aspects of sensory identification with such a character, but it cannot be singled out as the defining factor of a digital character’s believability. Additionally, viewers vacillate between our reliance upon different senses at different moments in the film (Sobchack, 2004, p. 76), and this provides a useful linguistic insight into how we may come to define or describe our experiences with compelling digital characters, as will be explored in chapters four and five.

The Invariant Structure of “Quasi”

In summary, each of the four phenomenologists examined in this chapter have significant insights to contribute to questions of experiencing digital characters in film. Maurice Merleau-Ponty helps break down the categories of real and illusion, and establishes the primacy of embodiment as the source of both perception and our recognition of Others around us. Don Ihde’s phenomenology of technology shows not only the pervasiveness of technology in the ground of reality that we exist in today, but helpfully describes how technology has *altered* our embodied perception in significant ways that must be understood and reckoned with, particularly given the inherent technological bent of our reality, as well as the cinema that dynamically engages it. Additionally, Ihde’s description of aural phenomena provides further insights into how our other, less regarded senses contribute to our perception and engagement with the world, notably grounding us through its resonance in our bodies, corporeally connecting us to our world in a manner that sight does not.

Jean-Luc Marion’s discussion of the peculiarities of aesthetics and locating the invisible in the visible as a hallmark of a particular kind of consciousness or “weight of glory” within an aesthetic work points to ways in which even digital characters may be seen to carry something identifiably special “within” them that may be recognized and related to by spectators. His eloquent descriptions of the kind of transference of power, responsibility, and artistic vision that occurs between the artistic object and the artist raise interesting questions regarding the contribution that actors make to the digital characters they portray, and vice versa. Though Marion deeply distrusts technology and leans on an ontological link to reality as a significant qualifier for the significance of an artwork, his

insights nonetheless contribute to how digital characters may be looked at and assessed artistically.

And finally, despite Vivian Sobchack's denigration of digital technology in films, her recognition of the spectator's multisensory experience in the cinema opens up the door to the possibility of developing and maintaining a real, meaningful connection between what is perceived in the film world and the viewer doing the perceiving.

Before leaving this section and moving on to my own attempt at an original phenomenology of a digital character in film, it is worth noting one similarity between the perspectives of each of these phenomenologists, what may be seen as an invariant structure of all their explorations. This is their tendency to describe the emotions and experiences elicited by mediated phenomena as "quasi" emotions or experiences. That there exists a difference of some sort between the experience of empathy between two living people and the experience of empathy with a digital character has tended to be described in overly simplistic terms, as simply a "different kind" of empathy, or a "quasi-emotional" experience. Technology, in Don Ihde's description, is a "quasi-'other'" that bears a "quasi-autonomy" from users.

These descriptors are not inherently poor by any means, and may, in fact, be found to most comprehensively express and describe these experiences. However, Max Van Manen (2014) convincingly argues that the practice of phenomenological description ought to emphasize accuracy in terminology in order to get at the innate awe and wonder of phenomena in relation to experience (pp. 43, 52). This involves being detailed in one's description, but also using evocative and even poetic language to get at the heart of the experience being described (p. 221).

With this belief in mind, I would argue that the emotions and experiences evoked via mediated experience--particularly in the cinematic realm--ought not to be characterized in such terms as “quasi” or any of its synonyms. This strikes me as imprecise and unfair to the legitimate experiences that are provoked in the spectator. And so, in turning now to a chapter of explicitly phenomenological description, one of my aims is to use evocative language in order to give better name to the experiences that are provoked in the phenomenon of viewing digital characters.

In addition to this, the primary aim of performing a phenomenological exploration of digital characters is to attempt to describe in detail the ways in which these characters reveal themselves to viewers in their filmic realities in a way that signifies meaningfully. Like other phenomenologies, the overall goal may be said to be the uncovering of the invariants that structure and categorize these experiences in the minds, eyes, and hearts of viewers. The theorists mentioned throughout this work and profiled in detail in this chapter have established methods and directions for pursuing this study, but ultimately the descriptions must come not from the scholarly assemblage of arguments based on prior texts (*a la* Egan). Instead, these descriptions must originate in the phenomena themselves, here meaning the digital characters and the films in which they appear.

This is the aim to which I will now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Phenomenology of Digital Characters

In wonder we see the unusual in the usual, the extraordinary in the ordinary.
-Max Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, p. 223

Ultimately, the reasons for my choosing Gollum as the object of analysis in this chapter are two. First, his appearance in *The Two Towers* is what sparked the driving question of this thesis and is something that has also inspired others to pursue similar lines of questioning, making further engagement with the character relevant and useful to the broader discussion of digital characters in films. Second, Gollum is a character that has now appeared in what are effectively two different eras of digital character creation. This makes the close study of both his early appearance in *The Lord of the Rings* films and his later appearance in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* relevant for examination to see if there are differences in how the character appears, emotes, and connects with audiences across the two franchises and the different generations of technique and technologies used to bring the character to the screen.

What will emerge from this engagement with Gollum's various appearances is four consistent factors that seem tied to his most successful moments of performance on a phenomenological level. First is that Gollum's appearance is realistic in a multisensory fashion to a degree that allows the audience to accept his interactions with other onscreen characters. Second, other characters in the film acknowledge and interact with the character in an emotionally convincing manner. Third, the story itself gives Gollum room to grow and develop as a character. And finally, extended takes showcase Gollum's

appearance and the subtlety of emotional expression that pervades his performance.

Collectively, these four factors contribute to the phenomenon that I describe as *directed empathy* in the next chapter, which opens up the possibility of a significant, meaningful emotional connection between Gollum and viewers.

My phenomenology of Gollum is less a formulized operation (like Husserl's *epoché*), and more a thick, detailed description of my relational experience with this digital character. My aim here is to minimize factors that appear to be more subjective, and maximize factors that appear to have more universal application. The themes of the last chapter--embodied perception and consciousness, the enhancement of the senses through technology, the perceptual influence of sound, the invisible within the visible, and the multisensory nature of the film--guide my analysis throughout.

First, I would like to list each of the scenes in which Gollum appears in the first two *Lord of the Rings* films.¹ These scenes will be accompanied by a brief evaluation in terms of how each scene fares in terms of character attachment, and distinctive traits that these particular scenes contribute to the formation of the four factors listed above. Second, I will turn to specific scenes that exemplify each of the factors I have identified, showing how these factors contribute to our acknowledgement of Gollum as an independent, standalone character. Finally, I will repeat these steps in analyzing Gollum's appearance in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, to see how the audience's

¹ Many of the character dynamics that are established between Frodo, Sam, and Gollum in *The Two Towers* are carried over into *The Return of the King*, but ultimately end up reflecting similar kinds of actions and descriptions as will be seen below. As such, I have chosen not to describe any major scenes from the closing entry in the trilogy.

engagement with the character fares and how the four traits identified above may be present or lacking in this later appearance by the character.

Gollum in The Fellowship of the Ring and The Two Towers

Gollum's Appearances

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson, 2001), Gollum makes three brief appearances:²

1. Prologue: One Ring to Rule Them All... - Gollum appears in this accounting of the history of the titular Ring of power, in which he played some significant part. Gollum's appearance here is distant, and shadowed such that we never get a complete look at him. What we do see is textured in such a way as to appear wet, grimy, and altogether unpleasant.



Figure 2. Prologue: One Ring to Rule Them All...

2. The Shadow of the Past - Gollum is glanced in a flashback, wherein Gandalf describes to Frodo that Gollum revealed his surname and location as he was

² All chapter titles in this and the following section are taken from the Extended Editions of each of the films.

tortured by Sauron's orcs. All that is visible are Gollum's hands, contorted and deformed by pain. Here we as an audience cringe at the unnatural angles his fingers are set at, but do not identify with Gollum *as* Gollum.



Figure 3. Gollum's hands in *The Shadow of the Past*

3. A Journey in the Dark - Gollum appears first from a distance as Gandalf tells Frodo that he has known that Gollum is following them, and describes the pity that kept Bilbo from murdering Gollum years before. Gollum is also seen in a close-up that is nonetheless shadowed and indistinct. His eyes glow in the dark, and grime covers his skin. Gollum's overall appearance is realistic, but also hidden, such that there is nothing about him that matters here except that he is there, visible onscreen.

Gollum's appearances in *The Fellowship of the Ring* are simplistically villainous. Darkness and shadow characterize his presence in the film, which is minimal and almost inconsequential. Though perhaps intriguing for his relation to the story and hints at

greater significance to come, Gollum in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is not really a character to whom one relates, but rather a mysterious figure whose function is foreshadowing.



Figure 4. Gollum distant and up close in A Journey in the Dark

In *The Two Towers* (Jackson, 2002), however, Gollum has a greatly expanded presence that allows him to be fully incorporated into the narrative as a strong, standalone character:

1. The Taming of Sméagol - Gollum is finally seen in all his glory as he attacks the Hobbits, Frodo and Sam, at night. Here his appearance is notably emphasized, as

is his presence as a significant threat to the main characters. His actions elicit an emotional response, but one directed *towards* Frodo and Sam, who are in danger. This chapter's opening scene reaches a climax as Frodo subdues Gollum, and is immediately followed by a scene of an entirely different type. Here, Frodo and Sam engage in dialog with Gollum in open daylight, no longer leaving the digital character to be hidden in the shadows. Instead of action, the focus here is on interpersonal relations, and is notable in that it begins to establish Gollum's appearance and behavior as filled with subtlety and complexity beyond the villainy apparent in both *The Fellowship of the Ring* and his role as threat in the opening scene of this chapter.

2. The Passage of the Marshes - Gollum leads Frodo and Sam through a desolate stretch of land on their quest towards the Black Gate of Mordor, and the dynamic between the three characters is explored in more depth. Two notable qualities are present in this section of the film. First, Frodo and Sam's treatment of Gollum as a part of their group, acknowledging the character's presence in the circumstances and drama of the film. Second, some extended shot lengths allow for emphasis to be placed on both Gollum's gradually increasing range as far as visual displays of emotion, and his interactions with the other two characters.



Figure 5. The Taming of Sméagol



Figure 6. The Passage of the Marshes

3. The Black Gate is Closed - Having led the Hobbits to what they envisioned as their final destination, Gollum interrupts their plan and proceeds to argue for an alternative path that will take them further from danger and make it less likely for the ring that Frodo carries to fall into enemy hands. Once again, the scene allows for extensive physical and interpersonal interaction between the characters, and one palpably feels the excitement and tension that Gollum feels and introduces into the situation at hand.
4. Gollum and Sméagol - Throughout his time with the Hobbits, it becomes clear that there are really two personalities inhabiting Gollum's body, vying for control over his actions. One, known as Sméagol, is innocent and sweet, and likes Frodo very much. The other, Gollum, is nasty and bitter, filled with contempt for the Hobbits (particularly Sam) and even Sméagol. In this scene, the two personalities argue with one another over their current circumstances, with the kinder Sméagol personality eventually winning out. This scene is the first in which the Gollum character is given sufficient screen time to develop independently within the

story, another key factor in enabling compelling engagement between the character and the audience. This factor, combined with the character's verisimilitude within the world of the film and the extended shots that the scene is composed of serve to make this scene intensely emotional.

5. Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit - Having shaken off the evil side of his personality that kept him captive, Gollum displays newfound cheer in his interactions with the Hobbits. Sam's distrust of the creature creates conflict with Frodo, who notably empathizes with Gollum's plight of personality and depravity. Though Gollum himself is sometimes not visibly present, he is a subject of conversation and emotion between the two Hobbits, reinforcing the importance of other "real" characters treating a digital character with the same degree of engagement as any other character. The scene ends with Frodo and Sam being taken captive by a band of men who appear to be some kind of marauders, while Gollum escapes.



Figure 7. The Black Gate is Closed



Figure 8. Gollum and Sméagol

6. The Forbidden Pool - In a scene fraught with tension, Gollum's life is threatened by the men who captured Frodo and Sam for having swam in the Forbidden Pool. His life is able to be spared, but this requires Frodo to go down near the pool and convince Gollum to come with him, which Frodo accomplishes through deceiving Gollum into thinking that everything is alright. Gollum is hesitant to follow Frodo, and is angry and hurt when he is ultimately betrayed and taken captive by the men. In the scene immediately following, the Gollum/Sméagol dynamic that

had been suppressed returns as Gollum is beaten and questioned. The scene features other human actors but is effectively another instance of Gollum acting/interacting with himself. The drama of the scene in relation to the development of the character to this point in the film elicits a great sense of pity, disappointment, and even sadness as Gollum's darker side re-emerges.



Figure 9. Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit

6. Osgiliath - The men who have taken Frodo, Sam, and Gollum captive are men of the kingdom of Gondor, and they take their prisoners to the border city of Osgiliath partially to protect it from siege, and also to bring the Ring closer to their kingdom to eventually use it. In this scene, Gollum is a prisoner yet again, and has a far less central place in the scene's drama. However, there is an undercurrent of tension given the resurgence of the darker side of his personality.

It is unclear whether or not Frodo, in particular, knows about this development, calling into question his continued association with Gollum.



Figure 10. The Forbidden Pool

7. Farewell to Faramir - After realizing that the weapon Frodo is carrying will only corrupt and must be destroyed rather than used, the captain of the men who captured them, Faramir, shows Frodo, Sam, and Gollum an escape route out of the city. As they are preparing to leave and Faramir realizes the different route that Gollum is set to lead them down, he grabs the creature and both questions and

threatens him. This scene is notable in that it is an example of another character played by a real human actor besides Frodo and Sam directly engaging in a compelling fashion with Gollum. Though Gollum himself does little in the way of responding or actually interacting over the course of their brief conversation, Faramir's treatment of Gollum is such that it is believable and compels our continued engagement with Gollum, particularly as we now see the beginnings of his devious side coming out to be recognized by others.



Figure 11. Farewell to Faramir

8. Gollum's Plan - The final scene in the film most prominently features Gollum leading Frodo and Sam through a wooded area, but here he bounds on ahead and, in a return to the earlier conversation between the two halves of his personality, Gollum and Sméagol discuss what their plan actually is. The scene emphasizes Gollum's individual characterization, and is developed in a single lengthy shot that tracks with him as he careens through and around the woods conspiring with himself. Given all of the journey that has come before both in terms of the plot and Gollum's individual character, the emotions exemplified in this scene are a sadness at Gollum's fall and fear for the unaware Frodo and Sam, who are playing right into his hands. That the film ends here is eminently appropriate in terms of the structure of a three-part story, but nearly unbearable in terms of the dramatic tension this final scene sets up.

Having mentioned in brief the scenes that Gollum actually appears in, I would like to examine five in particular for how they illuminate the character and provide a basis for evaluating how audiences engage with the character in these moments, and how they lead to the formation of a true, empathetic relationship with the character. These scenes are Gollum's first attack on Frodo and Sam and the subsequent dialog, a particular moment of tension as he leads the Hobbits through the Dead Marshes, a scene in which another human character, Faramir, subtly acknowledges Gollum's presence and consciousness, and the two major scenes in which Gollum debates with the Sméagol part of his personality.



Figure 12. Gollum's Plan

Scene Analyses

In *The Two Towers*, Gollum no longer leers from the shadows like he did in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but rather leaps into action early in the film. In his introductory scene, which was briefly addressed in an earlier chapter but requires more detailed explication here, the heroes Frodo (Elijah Wood) and Sam (Sean Astin) lay seemingly asleep on rocky ground and aerial perspectives reveal Gollum--now finally fully visible instead of hidden in shadow--carefully contorting his body to wind his way down the

craggy rock face sheltering his prey. Gollum's movements are lithe and unnatural to how we know bodies to move. Still we respond to this, which increases the tension we feel for Frodo and Sam; this is not a typical threat.

When Gollum leaps and springs Frodo and Sam's trap, the tension in the scene only increases, as does our engagement with Gollum. As he crawls down the rock face his appearance, while vivid and realistic, brings with it an uncanny sense of movement: he is crawling face-first down a sheer rock face, effectively leaving time for the audience to question the character's physicality and presence. But when he leaps forward, the actions are fast, and the reactions of the Hobbits so harried and engaged with this threat that any visual questioning or disbelief that we may engage in simply disappears in the urgency of the moment. In the fast cuts of the struggle, the visual aspects of Gollum's appearance easily fit into our consideration of the action onscreen. It is important to point out that this experience conforms to Merleau-Ponty's understandings about reality and illusion. The urgency of the moment and reaction of the other characters demands that we suspend our judgments about reality/illusion for more immediate perceptual concerns. Notably here our attention shifts from Gollum's *appearance* to his *behavior*. Merleau-Ponty additionally noted that it is the holistic behavior of motion that must be considered, not its static properties. This shift in the scene's pace and situation accomplishes this kind of refocusing, so we transition to considering Gollum as a body behaving in a particular manner, and not on the superficial basis of appearance.

In reality, through the biting, clawing, and kicking, our focus and considerations do not rest upon Gollum, but rather on Frodo and Sam. We fear for them, and the tenacity of their struggle with the flailing, ferocious Gollum appears to be what drives our

engagement in the moment. For this we look less to Gollum, in all his contorted motion, than to the wide eyes and breathless effort of the Hobbits, struggling mightily against this threat. Our bodies sympathize and we gasp and cringe as Gollum bites at Sam's neck and pulls on his hair--not out of any direct engagement with Gollum's actions as located *in* Gollum, but rather out of our concern for Sam's body. We feel his pain and react accordingly.

This kind of engagement is not merely present in the moments of explicit struggle but may also be seen written on the faces of the Hobbits in the quieter moments at the struggle's end. Their fight concludes with Gollum choking Sam on the ground and Frodo holding a sword to Gollum's face to elicit Sam's release. In Sam's sweaty, tortured expression we see his pain, and in Frodo's snarling look down upon Gollum we see his anger. These closing moments shift the tone of the scene from fear to triumph, which we see in the bodies and faces of the Hobbits. Though we do not explicitly identify with Gollum here, the heroes do, which is significant.

In the scene immediately following, Frodo and Sam lead Gollum by a rope tied around his neck, the trio walking through a rocky canyon. The scene turns to a discussion and confrontation between the Hobbits and Gollum, who is trying to negotiate to have the rope taken off of him. Here, we get to see Gollum in daylight for the first time, and finally get a good look at him. Unlike his first appearance in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gollum here is no slimy, dank creature. Instead his skin is rough, with what amounts to a matte finish rather than any kind of sheen. His skin ultimately looks like skin, texturally and in terms of its color and fine detail. Facial expressions and bodily movements produce wrinkles and cracks in his skin's behavior and appearance. His eyes are large

and glassy, but not without the depth and dimension that real, human eyes inherently have. Their size makes them more explicitly expressive, but never are they cartoonish; their appearance is realistic and believable. Notably, Gollum holds up to visual consideration when he appears next to Frodo or Sam, or even next to the real photographic elements of the shooting location. He is not *entirely* realistic--his motion is sometimes unnatural and animalistic, such that he could potentially evoke the unease associated with the uncanny--but he *fits* within the world as it is depicted onscreen. What leaps to attention in considering Gollum's physicality is the incredible detail that characterizes his appearance and *interaction* with others and with elements shared by the other characters. As mentioned before, Gollum's behavior and movement drive our consideration of his visual appearance, and when his behavior is seen as realistic and believable, our belief in his outward appearance follows. When Gollum climbs on rocks his toes splay and flex to grip the rocks he stands upon; he pushes through plants shaken by the wind and treads upon muddy, marshy grounds alongside the Hobbits; he splashes in streams of water. Nuance and interaction pervade his appearance and performance, significantly assisted by the performances and presence of the real actors and elements he interacts with.

For the first several scenes with Gollum we watch the others around him as much as we watch him. Beyond Gollum's visual appearance it is the other characters who ground him in the world of the film. The interactions that they have with him--both physically and through dialog--are laden with weight and importance in the story that is significant. Gollum is no prop, not something merely to be acted with, instead the actors act *alongside* him. Because of their characterization and role in the story, we identify

with and care about the Hobbits, Frodo and Sam. And because *they* care about Gollum, and because Frodo specifically comes to empathize with Gollum, so do we. *Their* dynamic becomes the dynamic by which *we* relate to the characters, with all the confusion and conflict that accompanies such drama.

A later scene in the Dead Marshes sequence of the film illustrates this and adds to our understanding of what makes such connections possible. The scene involves the Hobbits taking a break to eat as they traverse the desolate wastes of the marshes. Gollum cannot eat their elvish food, and Sam says that maybe it would be a good thing for Gollum to starve, leading Gollum to make note of the empathy being shown him by Frodo. Gollum's attention is then drawn to the similarities between he and Frodo as a result of having worn and carried the ring. He slinks slowly towards Frodo, speaking of how they both know the burden of the ring and the power it can wield over one who carries it. In close-up, he reaches towards Frodo, whose hands are already gripping the ring. A brief shot focuses on Frodo, who slaps Gollum's reaching hand away. Another quick cut registers shock on Gollum's face, where a widening of his eyes is accompanied by a short gasp, and then a wider, longer take commences, showing Frodo and Sam seated on the left side of the frame and Gollum shrinking away from Frodo on the right.

The camera stays still as Gollum simply sits and regards Frodo. Sam glances nervously between those he sees as his master and his enemy, and then turns away from them both to stare out at the hazy horizon. After a moment of quietly regarding Frodo with his face unseen, Gollum turns so that his face is visible to the camera. His eyes glide slowly back and forth, as if searching; his jaw hangs open in shock at what he has done and how Frodo responded; the camera begins to pull back and Gollum turns his body to

furtively shrink from Frodo's presence, glancing away from where the Hobbits are seated like a whimpering, whipped dog. Crawling several feet away, he pauses and our gaze is drawn back to Frodo and Sam, sitting nearly frozen in the same positions they occupied at the start of the shot, both of them avoiding looking anywhere near where Gollum is now seated. Gollum bends down further to the ground, moving his arms and chest downwards, ultimately letting his head fall defeated to the ground.

This shot lasts only 13 seconds³ but encapsulates the dramatic engagement that both the other characters and the viewer have with Gollum. The wider angle and the take's length, coming after a series of close-ups and two very quick cuts, imbues the moment with greater significance through visual and temporal emphasis. This is risky for the filmmaker--longer takes featuring a digital character here may be seen to raise the chances of emotional investment, but at the risk of an audience's disengagement if one factor of the character's appearance or behavior is lacking. In this instance, the lengthier take reinforces our connection to Gollum. Subtly backing the camera up as Gollum crawls away from Frodo enhances the naturalness of his presence in the scene--the camera responds to this expression of emotional and physical distancing. That Sam may be seen to furtively glance between Frodo and Gollum, and that both Frodo and Sam ignore Gollum ironically grants the character a greater degree of acknowledgement in the scene. He is both being shamed and feels ashamed. The longer take drives home the continuing growth of both strain and ambiguity between all of the characters in a way that is palpable to the viewer.

³ 44:43-44:57 on Disc 1 of the Extended Edition Blu-Ray



Figure 13. Frodo's anger, Gollum's shock, and Gollum's shame

Perhaps the most famous scene featuring Gollum in *The Two Towers* interestingly removes Gollum from the context of interaction with Frodo and Sam. As the two hobbits sleep, Gollum's interior conflict emerges and is made visually manifest onscreen. He debates between the two halves of his personality--Sméagol, the kinder, nicer half that is

most reminiscent of who he was before the ring corrupted him and brought him into his current, degenerative state; and Gollum, the darker, murderous, conniving half of his personality named after the retching sound that involuntarily emerges from the characters throat at certain times. The scene is simple, effectively staged as a conversation between two characters, though here the entities are simply two halves of the same character. Initially, the camera moves in an arcing pattern before Gollum, who is perched on a rock. The camera slides to the left as the Gollum personality emerges and talks to Sméagol, and slides to the right when the gentler Sméagol is speaking. The camera's movement marking Gollum's transition between the two personalities is quickly abandoned, though, and hard cuts separate the personalities visually as Gollum debates himself over what his role should be, and whether or not to kill Frodo and steal the ring.

As the Gollum personality advocates murder and retaking possession of the ring, the camera subtly moves both in and out from his face in separate shots, while the camera on the Sméagol half of the conversation is relatively stable, albeit fluidly floating as if handheld. The camera's movement towards and away from the Gollum personality seems to move as an indicator of the directed, plotting nature of what Gollum is saying, while the seemingly natural, unmotivated camera of the shots focused on Sméagol emphasize the naturalness of his personality and presence in the scene. Gollum seems to be malicious in his arguing, Sméagol is innocent and trying to do the right thing, even covering his ears with his hands at one point to keep himself from hearing the creeping comments of his darker half. As Gollum, his mouth is drawn into a devious smile, his eyes thin slits of focused evil. As Sméagol, his eyes are wide and worried, his face bearing a panoply of emotions during the course of the conversation--horror, fear,

sadness, remorse. Tired of being bossed around and guiltily controlled with reminders of his past sins, Sméagol tells Gollum to leave and never come back. Gollum questions just what is happening, and a slack jaw shows a moment of disbelief at what is being said. Sméagol persists, and Gollum hisses angrily in frustration, bearing his teeth at his own alter ego; Sméagol repeats his mantra one last time--“Leave now and never come back!”--and instead of cutting back to Gollum, as has been the pattern, the shot stays focused on Sméagol, whose brows twitch and furrow worriedly, waiting for the response from Gollum that seems inevitable. He breathes somewhat heavily as if in amazement, his eyes darting quickly back and forth as if wondering where something--in this case Gollum--has gone.

The final shot of the sequence is near to the angle that previously featured Gollum, but here we see Sméagol continuing to glance around--primarily with his eyes, rather than his whole body--as if worried that an attacker is about to emerge from the shadows. His body is tense and tightly held, but suddenly he twists from the spot he had previously occupied like a statue and leans forward, transitioning his weight from his feet to his hands before turning back to glance over his shoulder as if to search for Gollum. He gasps and then suddenly his entire body seems to loosen up; he twists back and forth in his spot as if limbering himself up as a couple of small chitters of giggling laughter escape him. A smile appears on his face, not the malevolent smile of Gollum but one full of mirth, and he straightens his crooked spine so that his head and face point up and out away from his body, like a dog hearing his owner calling him from afar. “We told him to go away. And away he goes, precious,” Sméagol says to himself, and the camera follows as he bounds off of the stone into the nearby grass, twirling and cheering his freedom,



Figure 14. Emotional range in Gollum and Sméagol

kicking up and throwing handfuls of celebratory grass as he does. It is worth noting that, like the previously mentioned shot in the Dead Marshes, this lingering shot is the longest in the sequence, allowing time for a full range of emotions to play out across Sméagol's face and body.⁴



Figure 15. Sméagol, finally free of Gollum

This scene is distinctive in that it is perhaps the first time that Gollum comes into his own as a whole character whose actions can elicit a response independent of his interactions with the other, human actors in a given scene. But it is interesting and telling to note that this moment of emergence and independence is followed by a quick scene in which the nature of Gollum's character is explicitly addressed by his human companions. While Gollum flails after a fish in a rushing stream, Frodo calls Sam out for his consistent mistreatment of their companion, calling him names and berating him, never giving him an inch of latitude or leeway. Sam's defense is that Frodo does not see the

⁴ The shot is 18 seconds long, from 1:40:54-1:41:12 on Disc 1 of the Extended Edition Blu-Ray

danger that Gollum represents, while Frodo argues that Gollum's good behavior is evidence that he himself will not be destroyed by this mission. If Gollum can change, or display some goodness, then maybe hope remains for Frodo not to bend to the dark will of the object that he carries. Though Gollum is only onscreen for the beginning and ending of this brief scene, he is made present in two ways. First is the sound of his voice as he frolics in the stream and pursues a fish. Second--and most prominently--he is made present through the very topic of discussion between Frodo and Sam, where his motives, actions, and history are implied if not explicitly addressed. Before Gollum's character is given the opportunity to display growth, development, and significant emotion as an independent character, these qualities are considered by the other characters who have shared screen time with him. Though he is unseen in their discussion, he is nonetheless significantly present through the dialog, actions, and emotions on display between Frodo and Sam. Frodo, in particular, is clearly invested in Gollum's redemption. As he sees his fate in some ways tied to Gollum's, the concern and feeling that comes through his voice is rich and compelling in its sincerity. As Frodo worries over Gollum, so too does the viewer.

Following Sméagol's banishment of Gollum, his interactions become more intentionally invested, bringing his character's presence in the trio a greater amount of depth. No longer merely a skulking guide, Gollum/Sméagol⁵ is fully integrated into the dynamics of the group. The range of displayed emotions expands from anger, discomfort, and longing to include happiness, and even humor. His movements transition from

⁵ Henceforth referred to only as Gollum, in keeping with the general naming conventions used thus far

skulking and deforming of his body to being more cheerful and bounding, his overall behavior shifting from that of an ill-tempered cat to that of a loyal and loving puppy, at least in his interactions with Frodo. Though still crawling around unnaturally on the ground, Gollum's general disposition and movements are more tempered, normalized in their acceptance by the characters by which he is surrounded.

A scene much later in the film usefully illustrates the principles of interpenetration of the gaze with consciousness and the invisible as illuminated in Marion. This scene features the character of Faramir, who has taken Gollum captive in a manner that involved Frodo deceiving Gollum, harming the already tentative bond of trust that Frodo and Gollum had formed. In this scene Gollum has just been beaten and lays on the ground before Faramir, who has stepped in to question him. Instead, Gollum begins speaking to himself, and over the course of a few highly charged shots, the suppressed Gollum/Sméagol dynamic returns.

The powerful moments of this scene occur in effectively two shots, intercut with one another. In one, the camera pushes slowly in on Gollum/Sméagol as the nastier personality comforts the other and the two reconcile out of their betrayal by Frodo. In the other, the camera pushes in on Faramir's captivated gaze as he hears what the creature is saying and recognizes the implications for him, his men, and his kingdom. Marion posits that a perceiving subject's gaze is highly intertwined with the notion of another's consciousness, in much the same way that Merleau-Ponty argues subjects bear the marks of consciousness (Marion, 2004, p. 21). Faramir's expression and performance here are key for two reasons relevant to Marion's concerns. First, his rapt attention towards Gollum, who is seen in his own close-up but importantly *not* seen in Faramir's, implies

the existence of the world beyond the image that we are seeing in the moment; though Faramir is front and center in our view and Gollum is not, we know that he exists behind the camera's perspective, in the area that Faramir is looking towards, and we know that he is *there*, laying crumpled on the ground and consoling himself after his torture. Depth is implicit in Faramir's gaze. And second, so is consciousness. The information that we witness in Faramir's eyes and expression is emotionally charged and significant; and so just as Frodo's empathy with Gollum in his earlier confrontation imbues Gollum with a consciousness and its related weight, so too does Faramir's emotional response to Gollum's words. Though the moment itself is not necessarily one of empathy for Gollum so much as a tragically emotional moment of disappointment at his failure to hold his evil side at bay, it is significant in its allowance of Gollum's consciousness to be recognized by yet another human character, so that the empathy which was directed by other characters towards Gollum is reaffirmed.

The two principles of Marion's that this scene involves are present throughout the rest of the film as well--the invisible being made visible, and the recognition of the Other through the intermingling of gaze and consciousness. The intentional gaze of Frodo, Sam, and Faramir serve to implicate their own perspectives within the world of the film, implying the depth that reveals the invisible within the visible. The consciousness of their gaze as it rests upon Gollum in any number of moments is intentionally implying the *levels* of depth and perspective that Marion argues are present in what at first glance appears to be a flat, two-dimensional image. So not only are there visual elements in the lighting and cinematography that cue an aesthetic sense of depth, but the diegetic pairing



Figure 16. The visible and the invisible; the gaze and consciousness

of the gaze and consciousness of individual characters intentionally viewing Gollum recognizes his consciousness within the world of the film.

Gollum's final scene in *The Two Towers* is primarily comprised of him talking to himself in much the same manner as the earlier Gollum/Sméagol confrontation. Though the darker side of his personality had been suppressed in that scene, the stress of Frodo's betrayal and his subsequent interrogation and imprisonment exacerbated his condition such that the more villainous Gollum re-emerged. Gollum's final scene mainly takes the

form of an extended tracking shot⁶ following Gollum as he crawls through the woods ahead of Frodo and Sam, debating with himself as to how he might kill the Hobbits to reclaim the ring. The shot is handheld and carefully wandering, tracking with Gollum's slinking through the woods, pausing occasionally to debate amongst himself while backed up against a tree, Frodo and Sam lurking in the background, searching for their guide who, in the moment, does not want to be found. Unlike the earlier sequence that used cuts to distinguish between the Gollum and Sméagol personalities, the long flow of uninterrupted time spent here shows a full range of emotions passing across his face, captured in the shape and actions of the mouth and eyes. The lighter personality that seemed to love Frodo is now fully on board with the dastardly plans of its other, evil half, intently listening and participating in the planning rather than objecting to the deeds being discussed. Watching the performance in this shot is to watch with a sinking heart as a character with whom a certain love and hope has been formed falls back into the darkness. As Gollum plots, his words evoke a haughty feeling of betrayal, and significant concern for Frodo and Sam re-emerges, particularly as the dangers that Gollum is leading them towards remain unknown. The shot that follows Gollum's extended monologue features the Hobbits approaching him as he looks in their direction, a wide smile across his face. His expression of joy, familiar to the audience and to the Hobbits, reinforces the tragedy, and in the next shot when he turns from the Hobbits and whispers "Follow me" with a menacing hiss, the deception feels complete, the danger imminent.

⁶ Which lasts a full minute and 49 seconds before cutting to a reverse shot showing the Hobbits finally coming upon Gollum.

One final element that must be addressed here that pervades Gollum's presence in each and every scene is the sound of his voice. Perhaps more than even his appearance or some of his behavior, Gollum's voice distinguishes him from the litany of other characters in these films. Sometimes guttural and gravelly, other times hissing and feline, still other times bright and bubbling, Gollum's voice can tell viewers as much if not more about what is happening inside of him than even his body language and behavior. Additionally, Gollum's voice, the rough quality of his breathing, and the wailing of his cries, sometimes pervade scenes in which he is not visually present. These moments also assist in illustrating a certain depth of the cinematic image, as well as its multisensory components. The distinct qualities of Gollum's voice make it so that when it is heard from off-screen it makes his presence known and felt. Ihde noted that most considerations of sound tend to dis-embodiment the sense, when in fact hearing is a fully embodied activity such that sound may be said to ground the entirety of embodied experience in the aural landscape. Gollum's sounds, even when he is not seen, are perceived in an embodied sense alongside the other visual and tactile elements of the film. Having attributed to Gollum a body in his early appearances and interactions with environments and characters, his voice becomes a representative factor of his body, so that even when he is heard and not seen he is entirely present, perceptually embodied in the aural sense. Additionally, the sounds produced *by* his body--his footsteps, his hands on others and on objects, these further ground his body in the world of the film. His body maintains a certain verisimilitude in relation to the photographed world of Middle Earth in these films, even as it produces an auditory verisimilitude that further grounds his relations with that world.

In the concluding film of the trilogy, *The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003), the relationship between Frodo, Sam, and Gollum is further extended and explored in a narrative context similar to that of *The Two Towers*. One comes into *The Return of the King* primed with the unease that the concluding moments of *The Two Towers* supplied, such that Gollum's presence in scenes throughout the film fills the viewer with a sense of sick dread and anticipation, waiting for his villainy to show through. There are moments that provoke a certain curiosity or doubt--Gollum sometimes seems to be acting more like Sméagol and so the viewer wonders what he is up to, or if he can be up to anything. And on small occasions a feeling of pity shows through, a wish for Gollum to defeat his own demons. But here the emotions one feels surrounding Gollum are primarily directed outwards once more, towards his relationship with Frodo and Sam.⁷ Though the trio of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum share many scenes together throughout the final film, I mainly see them as benefitting from the setup established in the film's predecessor, and ultimately reflect the same sorts of actions and descriptions as have been made here. This makes direct description and reflection upon Gollum's scenes in *The Return of the King* unnecessary for the purposes of this project.

⁷ The one exception is in the film's climax, where Gollum, desperate to keep Frodo from fulfilling his mission of destroying the ring, bites off Frodo's finger. Here the audience's concern for Frodo in that moment transitions to a vitriolic hate directed towards Gollum, such that a kind of righteous joy emerges when Gollum falls to his death, holding the ring, in the lava of Mount Doom.

Gollum in The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

Gollum's lone appearance in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Jackson, 2012) occurs late in the film's runtime,⁸ and is comprised of a single long scene and two brief follow-up appearances.

1. Riddles in the Dark - The film's protagonist, the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) is traveling with a company of dwarves on a mission to reclaim their homeland but has become separated from them in the midst of their being taken into captivity by a horde of goblins deep in the heart of a mountain. Having tumbled through a dark, narrow ravine, Bilbo awakens amidst a pile of slimy, rotting mushrooms, accompanied by the dazed and injured body of a goblin who had been pursuing him. Still in a daze, a creature comes and takes the goblin's body away. Bilbo pursues and is eventually confronted by this creature, Gollum, who threatens to kill Bilbo until he is enticed into playing a riddle game. The two compete at stumping the other with clever riddles until Bilbo wins by asking what he has in his pocket. Gollum's failure to answer enrages him and he turns to kill Bilbo, but Bilbo disappears through slipping on the ring that he had in his pocket, a ring that he only acquired after Gollum dropped it as he took the goblin's body away at the beginning of the scene. This scene of rather theatrical drama comes in the midst of other, more hectic circumstances in the film's overall plot. The character of Gollum is in no way introduced or foreshadowed by the narrative, and so appears rather suddenly and even bizarrely as an eccentric, perhaps

⁸ His introduction in the chapter "Riddles in the Dark" begins at 2:09:51 on the Extended Edition Blu-Ray.

schizophrenic character. An overall lack of context serves here to divorce Gollum from any meaningful connection with viewers in this scene.



Figure 17. Riddles in the Dark

2. The Ring - Having stolen Gollum's ring, Bilbo hides from him using the powers of invisibility that the ring allows. Bilbo follows Gollum as he unknowingly leads Bilbo through the maze of tunnels beneath the mountain and towards safety. Primarily heard rather than seen and seen only in rapid motion in short takes,

Gollum is here perceived only as a threat to the character that we care for in this film--Bilbo.

3. The Pity of Bilbo - Nearing the mountain's exit, Bilbo intends to kill Gollum but is stopped by a look of absolute destitution and sadness that crosses Gollum's face. This look is crucial, and in the end amounts to the one moment of true emotional, empathetic connection that the audience is afforded with Gollum in this film.



Figure 18. The Pity of Bilbo

Scene Analyses

Having pursued Gollum into a cavernous watery chamber, Bilbo stands with his back to a rock, and his eyes rove briefly as if to check his periphery for signs of the creature he had seen. They quickly peer upwards, where the camera follows to reveal Gollum emerging deliberately over the jagged top of the rock. No sounds guide Bilbo's glances, it seems his look upwards is entirely based upon intuition. Gollum is first hidden in shadow, entirely silhouetted, though light quickly flashes into his eyes so they seem like glowering coals as he lithely pulls himself over the top of the rock to drop down in front of Bilbo. The shot briefly calls to mind Gollum's introduction in *The Two Towers*, but with a much smaller scale of both verticality and tension. Gollum is simply not as high up as he rounds on Bilbo, and Bilbo's glances were those of someone knowing that a threat was imminent. Fear and tension enter into the situation by virtue of Gollum's presence as an unknown entity and presumable threat, but Bilbo's perceived foreknowledge eliminates some of the anxiety that the situation may have otherwise warranted.

Through this moment and the remainder of the sequence, the camera often moves in and around the conversation that Bilbo and Gollum have, sweeping and arcing in on the pair as they engage in a battle of wits and riddles. Hardly ever resting in one spot to watch, the sequence moves rapidly between angles of Bilbo, Gollum, or the pair of them. The scene is a long one altogether,⁹ but hardly ever breaks out of the relatively quick pace set by its opening. Familiarity and some semblance of a connection is established

⁹ The chapter on the home video release, which is comprised of the totality of this one scene, is 13 minutes and 30 seconds long.

with Bilbo through virtue of our having watched the film in its entirety leading up to this point, but nowhere in his appearance onscreen in this lengthy scene does Gollum offer a chance to connect. His presence in the scene has a wide and impressive range: his face and body language rapidly shift between the Gollum/Sméagol personalities, and between emotions like joy, confusion, I-have-the-word-right-on-the-tip-of-my-tongue thinking, and anger. Gollum's appearance is vivid and animated, his eyes a shocking electric blue, his lips and mouth moving rapidly to display such varied feelings. But as we watch, Gollum does not elicit from us any further engagement beyond that offered by his presence in the plot. Gollum acts, here, but does not live.

Gollum's final appearance in the film offers a glimmer of connection. Having fooled Gollum and escaped from the riddle game by using the magical ring he recovered from Gollum's leaping celebration over the injured goblin, Bilbo has invisibly followed Gollum away from the cavern and pool of water near to a way of escape from the mountains. Upon realizing that Bilbo had stolen his precious ring, Gollum had become angry and violent, but now, nearing the mountain's exit and not having recovered his lost treasure, Gollum's mood turns. He sits silent in the rocky tunnel before the cave entrance, suddenly sullen and dejected. Having reached his goal, Bilbo raises his sword as if to strike and kill Gollum, but he is stopped, suddenly, by a look that crosses across Gollum's face. The camera shows this look in close-up detail (see Figure 19): Gollum's eyes are wide, glassy, and a single tear rolls quickly down his cheeks; his chin quivers and his lips are pressed tightly together but tremble noticeably, as if the floodgates of his grief are about to burst. While the eyes are most visibly prominent in the framing, it is the trembling lips that reveal what is happening behind Gollum's eyes. They hold the key to

the pity that stays Bilbo's hand, causing him to let Gollum live. And for a brief moment, Gollum *does* live--the pity evoked is palpable, his expression that of a beloved pet heartbroken at his owner's departure. The shot is bookended by close-ups of Bilbo, his expression softening at the sight of Gollum's.



Figure 19. Gollum emotes, despite lacking fine detail and color

Notably, this close-up of Gollum's emotion is from the skewed perspective of the half-world that Bilbo exists in when wearing the ring that makes him invisible. Color is drained from the surrounding world, and nothing in this shadow world seems to have a definitive shape or solidity, with shadows and shapes dancing at the edges of objects, appearing like rapidly moving and morphing strokes of a paintbrush. Gollum's face in this void is pale, devoid of almost all color and most of the detail that otherwise gives him such vivid visual definition. While his eyes still shine, the rest of his body loses much of the subtlety that pervades his performance. Still, his lips stand out in their trembling, a miniscule movement that here makes all the difference.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is fascinating to me that this moment--which I here argue is the *only* moment in which Gollum succeeds emotionally in this film--does not actually benefit from some of the major technological advances made to the character's model and animation between the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and this second set of films. The special feature documentary "Riddles in the Dark: Gollum's Cave" (Pellerin, 2013) that accompanies the extended release of the film details improvements that have been made in the digital technology that helps bring Gollum to life, specifically improvements regarding the character model and rigging. Andy Serkis's skin was scanned, such that his own pores and skin texture make an appearance on Gollum's new model; advanced muscle rigs give a more scientifically accurate look to the way that Gollum's muscles move and contract, and how his skin slides over those muscles, details which the film's Animation Supervisor, David Clayton, says "make it feel real and compelling," and which Visual Effects Supervisor Joe Letteri says "go into giving you a sense that when you see this on the screen, visually, you're perceiving a weight and an organic quality to the character that feels real" (Pellerin, 2013). Further consideration is given to how light interacts with Gollum's skin and eyes, enhancing the realism of his appearance next to Bilbo's. But all of this is actually diminished or outright missing in the moment of empathetic connection with Gollum, as this shot is viewed through the skewed perspective of Bilbo wearing the ring that makes him invisible, which also alters the visible color palette. Instead of being vibrantly or realistically colored and depicted in the cave setting of the moment, Gollum is instead significantly desaturated, many of the details of his surface appearance simply wiped out by Bilbo's wearing of the ring. Thus, in the only moment of real empathy that the character engenders, he is actually and interestingly reduced from the pinnacle of detail that the visual effects technology behind Gollum has to offer.

The character's truly final appearance in this film is not distorted by the stylized visuals of Bilbo's wearing of the ring, yet for all its high-definition detail functions with a distinct lack of subtlety in its presentation. After Bilbo has leaped over Gollum and unceremoniously kicked him in the head in order to flee, Gollum cries out in anger and rushes towards the camera, screaming, "Baggins! Curse it and crush it! We hates it forever!" with the last word being drawn out with Gollum's face near to the camera, his electric blue eyes open wide, his mouth agape with his thin lips curled back in a monstrous snarl. The emotion of the previous moments is squandered as Gollum reverts to occupying the role of a cartoon villain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Digital Characters and Directed Empathy

According to Stein's account, as we shall see, during authentic empathy...the Other's primordial experience as such is not itself a primordial phenomenal datum at all, but remains veiled, at times attended to as the content of an objectifying apprehension, but always at one remove from what is originally given to the empathising [*sic*] consciousness. In the place of a claim to phenomenal unity with the Other, the idea is pervasive in Stein's thesis that empathy should properly be regarded as a particular kind of "seeing", not merely for the epistemic connotations of this word, but to the extent that one intuits something which is alien, and not something which belongs to one's sphere of ownness.

-Peter Shum, *Edith Stein and the Problem of Empathy: Locating Ascription and A Structural Relation to Picture Consciousness*, p. 178

On a phenomenological level, given the research and analysis so far, it seems that strong emotional audience relations with a digital character is possible, including actual empathy as Edith Stein characterized it: "the apperception and comprehension of another's mental life" (Shum, 2012, p. 178). Helpful to my case here is Shum noting in the quote above that this apperception and comprehension may be at some slight distance from our primordial experience as an "I". Though we feel empathy with an Other, and in so doing take on the characteristics of that Other's emotions, we are nonetheless distinctly *not* that Other in the process.

This is significant in that it opens up the possibility of a digital character being considered as a legitimate character, one whose sense of agency in the diegesis is considered the equal of any other character. What remains to be established is a refined description of the relationship between audiences and cinematic characters in general (that could better accommodate digital characters), and a generalized list of the most

significant factors in a digital character's presence in a film that would impact the acceptance of that character *as* a fully realized character, worthy of emotional relation and investment.

Emotional Audiences, Emotional Characters: A Case for Directed Empathy

One goal of this work was to move beyond classifications of emotions and other experiences arising from mediated phenomena as “quasi” or “like” a real experience, to more specifically describe or label the phenomenon as it is experienced. In the experience of carefully watching Gollum in these films, a useful concept emerges to describe the empathy that this character provokes in audiences: *directed empathy*.

It may be found that “empathy” is not the most accurate or descriptive word to use in this term, but I do believe the word has some merit. What my analysis has revealed is that something very akin to Stein's description of empathy occurs in the relationship between viewers and Gollum, which I am arguing causes our engagement with the character to transcend the qualifiers that have otherwise been appended to descriptions of our emotional responses to digital phenomena. This may be further enhanced by understanding the phenomenon through the model provided by simulation theory. Encompassing the experience of empathy within the simulation model of cinema raises the possibility of our empathy with cinematic characters being considered a kind of simulated empathy. This would imply that the empathic experiences we have in the cinema are real in the sense that our other emotional and physiological reactions to films are: acting as kinds of rehearsals for real emotions and behaviors in life outside of the film.

In brief, the concept of directed empathy is that there a viewer's engagement with a digital character and their ability to legitimately empathize with that character are enabled by four factors that *direct* their experience of these characters in order to spur empathetic involvement. Three of the four factors may be applicable to a viewer's relationship with any character in a film, whether digital or played by a real, human actor. The fourth, however, is distinctive in its application to digital characters. These four factors are not four explicitly required elements or steps that are necessary to enable a character to be legitimized or an audience to feel empathy with them. Instead, audiences vacillate (to use Sobchack's language) between their reliance upon each of the four factors in regulating or enabling their engagement with the character at any given time. These four factors, explained and supported in more detail below, are genuine and convincing performances by the human cast of the film, a story that affords the digital character sufficient screen time to dramatically develop, a moderately realist multisensory aesthetic that enables the digital character's performance to be fully displayed in all its nuance, and a certain measure of visual verisimilitude that convincingly places the digital character in the photographic world of the film at hand.

Entirely unpacking what is meant by the term directed empathy requires returning to the well-worn truism that one cannot examine a figure, or phenomenon, without some consideration being given to the ground against which that figure is seen. Nothing is devoid of context, and that context, though sometimes tangential or even irrelevant to the phenomenon under scrutiny, may not ever be entirely ignored. Focus, no matter how complete, is never total. Such is the case with any digital character. In the dramatic context of a film, no character may be removed from how they are presented in the work

as a whole. The plot plays a role in how characters and elements are viewed, as do the various components of the larger filmmaking apparatus--lighting, lenses, angles, coloring, shots and shot length, music, sound--that work in service of the revelation or direction of attention and meaning to the audience.

Engaging with characters in this way may be helpfully described using the classifications of Murray Smith (1995), who describes what he calls a “structure of sympathy” (p. 75) by which imaginative and emotional engagement occurs with characters in a film. Spectators are actively involved in the construction of a character, which Smith describes as *recognition*, namely the perception that a character exists on the screen and within the fiction being viewed (p. 82). Next, spectators experience a certain *alignment* with characters based on the actions of those characters and available access to what those characters think and feel in the context of the story (p. 83). This finally results in an *allegiance* between the spectator and the character, or “the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator” (p. 84). Having assessed characters in these three ways, viewers then follow those characters and their progression through the narrative at something of a remove--we may feel emotions *around* them, but do not feel *their* emotions. Smith writes:

Neither recognition nor alignment nor allegiance entails that the spectator replicate the traits, or experience the thoughts or emotions of a character. Recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits and mental states make up the character. With allegiance we go beyond understanding by evaluating and responding emotionally to the traits and emotions of the character, in the context of the narrative situation. Again, though, we respond emotionally without replicating the emotions of the character. (p. 85)

This is why Smith terms his system a “structure of sympathy” rather than a “structure of empathy.” He acknowledges in a brief section of the book that experiencing empathy

with a cinematic character is possible, though he identifies such occurrences as rare (p. 94), and his discussion of some of the mechanisms often associated with empathy (namely emotional simulation and affective mimicry) are ultimately demonstrated to be a part of the “structure of sympathy” that he argues governs our engagement with fictional characters. Nonetheless, he does not preclude an empathic response from being possible between viewers and onscreen characters.

Smith’s primary objection to the notion of empathy as a whole is that there are too many contested explanations for how such a phenomenon occurs. Some argue that empathy involves imaginatively engaging with another’s emotions, while others maintain that one actually replicates the other’s felt emotions when empathizing, and so Smith leans on sympathy as his key term rather than empathy out of an acknowledgement that the mechanisms of empathy, if such a phenomenon exists, are not clearly understood (pp. 95-96). If cinematic empathy is as rare as Smith believes, or not, it seems that audience empathy for a digital character would not only be a crowning achievement of filmmakers, but a validation of the legitimacy of such a character as an agent in the film. Empathy might not be the only mark of a “legitimate” digital character, but it would surely be a strong, validating one. To make a case for it, and find our way to the more refined notion of “directed empathy” we need a more precise description of ways audiences might feel different things for digital characters they encounter.

The difference in Gollum’s appearance in *The Fellowship of the Ring* versus that of *The Two Towers* can here serve to illustrate the difference in what may otherwise be the confusingly similar terms of *empathy* and *directed empathy*. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gollum’s indistinct and mysterious appearances build him up as a rather obviously

evil character. From his lurking in the shadows to his menacing breathing, everything about Gollum's appearance and presence exudes a singular air of villainy. But Gollum in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is not particularly engaging as a character. The *emotion* that he inspires in his various appearances is one of unease, but this is not the same as an empathetic engagement with the character himself. Even in the moment of torture described above, where the snapping and awkward angles of Gollum's fingers inspires a cringing reaction, this does nothing to truly transcend a fairly base level of emotional involvement. It is likely that the viewer cringes because of experience with the type of pain being depicted, not because he or she particularly cares about the character upon whom that pain is being inflicted.

One other way to describe this phenomenon of purely emotional engagement is through recognizing another distinction, that between engagement with a *character* and engagement with a *story*. The dramatic structure of stories in everything from novels to plays and to films is intended to elicit particular emotional responses. Each film moves through distinct acts in which the heroes are (typically) introduced to problems, tested, fail, and ultimately triumph. In watching the hero conquer their particular challenge, a certain sense of pride or happiness can be felt by audience members watching the situation unfold; but this feeling is not necessarily emerging from the character themselves, but rather the story itself. Additionally, it may be noted that in some cases specific characters function more explicitly as a part of the story than as standalone characters. In *The Lord of the Rings* the main villain of Sauron is less of a standalone character and more of an embodiment of evil that pervades the narrative and drives the plot forward. Additionally, a whole litany of orcs and other minor villains throughout the

films function as embodiments of emotions like danger and fear, and their role in the story is purely to evoke those emotions in the audience.

I have already noted some qualifications for what *does* define empathy and an empathetic engagement with characters in a film. Saying that I felt *with* Gollum is to say that I recognized an emotional depth to his performance onscreen that transcended his character's place as a plot element. Additionally, Gollum exuded a sense of his own agency within the scenes in which he appeared. This aligns with how Peter Shum (2012) summarizes Edith Stein's conception of empathy as "the apperception and comprehension of another's mental life" (p. 178). The example that Stein herself uses is that of a friend telling her that he has lost his brother, thus making her aware of and feeling the pain that he feels (Stein, 1989, p. 6). This awareness of her friend's pain is not just an intellectual recognition of someone else's emotional state, but rather something that is internalized and tangibly felt as if it were her own:

The pain is not a thing and is not given to me as a thing, even when I am aware of it 'in' the pained countenance [of her friend]. I perceive this countenance outwardly and the pain is given 'at one' with it. (p. 6)

Stein's connection to her friend enables a depth of emotion to be felt that causes her to feel *with* her friend and even *as* her friend. The friend's pain is felt as if it were her own, though with some differentiation in terms of its manifestation--she does not receive the pain in the same way that her friend has because she is not her friend, and so is not directly in the friend's position. But what matters is that these emotions *are* felt and experienced.

Support for this phenomenon may be found in the neurophysiological literature surrounding mirror neurons, which film theorist Dan Shaw (2008) sees as implicitly

supporting a simulation-based conception of empathy that he terms “basic” (p. 149). This idea of “basic empathy” within the context of a film is not so different from how empathy may be broadly defined in daily living: to feel empathy with a film character is to take on and internalize the emotional state of that character. In Shaw’s understanding, which aligns with Stein’s, we have empathy for and with fictional characters and know how they are feeling because *we feel the same things ourselves* (p. 149). This directly contrasts with the approach of theorists like Carl Plantinga and Noël Carroll, who recognize a far greater role for cognition in assigning meaning to our feelings. The “basic empathy” of Shaw is recast as “mirror responses” in Plantinga’s assessment (2008, p. 134), wherein the viewer may pre-cognitively identify something in the film image, but does not (according to Plantinga) actually feel anything about it until it has been actively thought about, as emotions are a distinct phenomenon that necessitate an act or aspect of cognition in order to be fully understood by the viewer (p. 134).

Importantly, Shaw’s understanding of empathy is capable of accommodating the cognitive insights offered by Plantinga and others in what Shaw recognizes as a more complex, reflective kind of empathy that would rely upon a heavier dose of cognitive appraisal (Shaw, 2008, p. 154). While “basic empathy” is an *automatic* response, a more complex sense of empathy would be influenced by the actions of the characters within the film, particularly given that most of our significant appraisal of characters is moral in nature (p. 154). This two-fold conception of empathy aligns with what Amy Coplan (2012) sees as a shift in cognitive film theory towards an emphasis on “less sophisticated ways of responding to characters, such as motor mimicry, affective mimicry, low-level simulation, mirror reflexes and emotional contagion” (p. 104). These baser assessments

of emotion, it follows, are lower level and more instinctual, interestingly bringing to mind the pre-reflective nature of phenomenological description and examination.

Important to note, however, is that between Shaw and Stein's use of the term and Smith's disavowal of it, the argument over "empathy" becomes largely semantic. The overall thrust of my argument, though, is not necessarily about empathy *per se*, but that the force, efficacy, and significance of feelings that well-crafted digital characters can occasion is sufficient to consider them as characters in their own right.

Both Stein (1989) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2013) make the case that true empathy is dependent upon the presence of an Other, one who bears the recognizable marks of consciousness and independent thought (agency), with whom we can relate in some fashion. And though a person's individual ability to empathetically relate with other people may vary, or may be dependent on any number of specific factors or circumstances, the mere humanity of those other people instantaneously anoints them as candidates for empathy--they are people who could possibly inspire an empathetic reaction or moment of connection, purely by virtue of their actually being other people. We certainly do not always empathize with others around us--even others we love and care about, or connect with emotionally in other circumstances--but others around us inherently bear the distinctive marks of consciousness that function as a signal of their ability to bear and inspire empathy by virtue of their *being* other consciousnesses.

What this means for a film is that human characters have an inherent quality that makes them automatic candidates for empathy. The ability to empathize *and* emotionally connect with human characters in a film is the catalyst for the process of *directed empathy* that enables viewers to empathize with *digital* characters. Part of the process of

directed empathy may be described as one in which the performances of human characters within a film *direct* the viewer's emotions towards the digital characters, ascribing these digital characters with the qualities or marks of consciousness that are inherent in a legitimate Other, and thus enabling them to transcend what may be seen as the limitations of their digital bodies and become fully legitimate, recognized, recognizable, and empathetically relatable characters. Other factors that aid in this process have already been mentioned: the story must dedicate time to allowing the character to develop *as* a character, the film must have a moderately realistic multisensory aesthetic, and there must be a degree of visual verisimilitude ascribed to the digital character.

To illustrate with Gollum, while the character introduced in *The Fellowship of the Ring* merely fulfills the trope of a lurking, scheming bad guy, Gollum in *The Two Towers* is transformed into a fully-fledged character whose fate in the midst of the plot's machinations is of direct concern to the audience. It is my experience, and my argument, that Gollum is not just a foil for Frodo and Sam throughout this film, but is rather a character in his own right, whose personal battles and fate are significant and emotionally and even empathetically involving for the audience. And the four factors that contribute to directed empathy can usefully illustrate how this is made possible.

Directed Empathy: The Four-Legged Stool

In more adequately explaining and supporting the idea of directed empathy, the metaphor of a four-legged stool is apt: a four-legged stool is strongest when all four legs are functioning perfectly; when one is weak or taken away, the stool may still stand, just not as surely as before; and to take away two or more legs significantly decreases the

support that the stool can offer. Similarly, taking away or weakening one of the factors of directed empathy may not significantly alter a viewer's experience with particular characters, but if any of the other factors are diminished, the viewer's ability to see a character as legitimate, or to empathize with them, is likely to disappear.

In considering each significant factor of directed empathy, it is crucial to remember that each element is not required to be perfectly executed in every film in order for every character to be successful. Instead, it must be recognized that each of these elements is simply one part that contributes to the whole of our experience with that character. To evoke Sobchack's language again, viewers *vacillate* between their reliance upon each particular leg of the stool at different points in the viewing experience, or in different films. Not every human performance that accompanies a digital character's is going to be convincing, for instance, or the level of believability in the human actor's performance may change from scene to scene. In these instances, a viewer may rely more upon the digital character's role in the scene, or the multisensory aesthetic of the scene and character, to drive their engagement in the moment.

Genuine, Convincing Human Performances

Gollum is not a fully-formed, engaging character right off the bat. In Gollum's introductory moments in *The Two Towers*, he may be seen as exemplifying the same kind of trope as in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Crawling down to attack the ostensibly sleeping Hobbits does not immediately position Gollum as a significant character. However, even in his approach towards the Hobbits, Gollum's presence elicits an emotional response from viewers, one of fear or anticipation. This is not directed towards Gollum, however, but rather towards the Hobbits, a response that carries throughout the

scene--though Gollum's presence in the situation is what initially provokes the scene's emotion, the fear and excitement we feel is directed towards the Hobbit characters as we fear for their safety and well-being. But there is also something significant in the performances of Frodo and Sam in this struggle: never once in the scene does the viewer doubt that the Hobbits are under attack. From their exasperated grunts to the pained expressions of surprise and fury on their faces, the fear produced initially by Gollum's attack is perpetuated and emphasized by the actions and *reactions* of the Hobbits. Their convincing pain and confusion amidst the bedlam of the tussle aids in justifying the tension audiences feel at Gollum's approach--viewers are right to take the threat of Gollum seriously because, as the Hobbits themselves make abundantly clear, he was a legitimate threat.

Frodo and Sam's clear engagement with Gollum at both physical and emotional levels primes viewers for the scene immediately following, where the harrowing emotion felt in the physical struggle is replaced with nuanced emotions that invite Gollum to be considered as more than merely a trope-fulfilling device of the plot. For one thing, in this scene, Gollum himself displays a new set of emotions than we have seen from him--he is crying out in pain at the elvish rope around his neck, not hissing menacingly or physically attacking the heroes. Frodo and Sam's reactions are significant here, as they discuss the problems raised by Gollum's shrieks, and debate over what to do about the problem. A bargaining discussion breaks out between Frodo and Gollum, which is interrupted by Sam, bringing about a tense discussion between the Hobbits. Frodo's exasperation at Sam is noteworthy here because it is arguably an emotion felt on *behalf* of Gollum *by* Frodo. Though Frodo is himself surely frustrated with Sam for reasons emanating from himself,

the pity that then plays across his face *for* Gollum is also certainly a catalyst for his feelings towards Sam. Effectively what you see here is that *Frodo feels empathy with Gollum*.

Frodo's visibly recognizable emotions in the scene form the basis for a kind of transfer of the emotional experience in the film, or a rupture in expectations surrounding the availability and tangibility of emotion to be found in a digital character. His recognition of Gollum's consciousness directs the viewer's recognition of Gollum's consciousness, and paves the way for the character's independence and emotional vitality within the narrative. Because Frodo sees Gollum as a legitimate Other, viewers are invited to do so as well.

The implication of recognizing the beginnings of an empathetic relationship with a digital character in the performance of a human character is that such performances must be convincing performances. Important to note is that in the moment of Frodo's empathy with Gollum, the viewer does not necessarily feel empathy with Frodo. Empathetic engagement with a human character is not necessary for the enabling of empathy with a digital one. Instead, the human performance must be emotionally engaging, realistic, and convincing within the boundaries and confines of the narrative in which it is contained.¹ Though technology can certainly be at fault for poor-looking digital characters even in the contemporary era where creating realistic images is far easier than it has ever been, it may be argued that some considerations of inferior CGI are equally a result of poor acting, or unconvincing performances. To act "with" characters

¹ A phrasing which intentionally echoes Stephen Prince's (2012) own comments on visual verisimilitude (see below, and Prince, 2012, p. 33)

who will eventually be digitally placed into a film is no simple process, technically or artistically for the other human actors involved--the process usually involves multiple takes, one of which physically features the actor to be replaced by a digital character, and others that feature the human actors performing as if the other character was there without any physical reference point (Pellerin, 2003; *The Genius of Andy Serkis*, 2011). Such a process is no doubt stressful and difficult for other actors used to having the presence of other people to direct, inform, and inspire their own performances. Asking the same level of commitment when faced with in many cases a distinct *lack* of presence from what will eventually be a digital character is bound to be something that not every person succeeds in doing, a factor which can contribute to the failure of a digital character to achieve compelling connections with audiences.

In the case of Gollum, after Frodo's initial act of bringing him into full recognition as a consciousness in the film, other characters also serve to support this development. Sam is the most prominent, obviously, in that the trio spend a significant amount of time together onscreen. And later Faramir's shadowy engagement with Frodo, Sam, and Gollum also enhances Gollum's ethos as an independent character, particularly as Faramir threatens Gollum regarding his plans for the Hobbits as they are shepherded out of the sieged city of Osgiliath. Beyond these two, the only other characters with whom Gollum engages with are stock characters rather than named ones, other villainous-types whose function in the film is as emotional or background support, rather than characters who demand a significant type of emotional or empathetic engagement in their own right.

Some of Merleau-Ponty's notions regarding movement as revelatory of the Other may be doubly applied here. His perspective that movement through the world is inherently also an act of involvement in perceiving the world, and that as this is displayed variously through movement, so consciousness is revealed in the perceiving subject may be seen in both our examination of the movement of human characters, and *their* examination of the movement of the digital characters. In watching Frodo, Sam, and Faramir act, their innate humanness carries with it the kind of intentional, consciousness-inhabited movement that is taken for granted as present in other human beings. We watch them onscreen, displaying their consciousness before us, even as they occupy these fictional roles. But what I am arguing here is that *their* intentional movement is reflecting the consciousness of the digital character which whom they are (apparently) dynamically interacting, who is then seen to explicitly have his own consciousness, as reflected in intentional movement.

Sufficient Screen Time for Dramatic Development as a Character

The Lord of the Rings films are long, complex stories that involve a large number of characters in many different locations. Yet, Gollum, even as a digital creation, is not lost in the shuffle of storylines and plot points. Instead, he is incorporated into the story in an essential fashion, complete with his own independent character arc that also contributes to the overarching development and themes of the larger story.

This may be illustrated through the significance of instances in which Gollum's performance elicits an emotional or empathetic response that is entirely of his own making. This primarily occurs in the first scene in which he debates with himself and temporarily banishes the disruptive and evil Gollum personality. For one thing, Gollum is

alone onscreen for the duration of this scene and others like it. The story being told in these instance *is* Gollum's, particularly in this first scene. Later scenes involve Gollum dialoging about other characters and his relationship to them, but this is the first major moment in which Gollum is considered on his own, as himself, by himself.

And this moment succeeds in *being* dramatic, in drawing viewers in to the drama of Gollum's split personalities, inviting them to root for him as he attempts to liberate himself from such a devious, pervasive captor. When he succeeds in throwing off the bonds of his own darker half we are excited for him, in addition to being happy for what this means for Frodo and Sam in terms of the dangers that the split personality of Gollum previously presented for them.

This is not all to say that Gollum only develops in this scene, or other scenes where he is by himself. Throughout the second and third parts of the trilogy, Gollum is an essential part of the trio alongside Frodo and Sam, with the three characters dramatically pushing and pulling at one another in compelling ways to inspire growth and development. But what this moment of solely focusing on Gollum does is emphasize that Gollum as a character has value beyond his ability to interact dynamically with the two Hobbits. It legitimizes his presence in the story for the sake of his own character, not just the larger plot, and also illustrates that by this point in the story we already care enough about the character on his own to engage dramatically with him at the level of empathy in his moment of triumph.

Related to this is some consideration of the actual shots in which empathetic emotions are stirred in audiences. Here I want to focus on three particular moments: the shot in which Gollum slinks disappointedly away from Frodo in the Dead Marshes, the

shot of elation at the end of the first Sméagol/Gollum confrontation in which the Gollum personality is banished, and the later Sméagol/Gollum debate that closes the film and sees Gollum deciding to lead the Hobbits into danger.

The element that unifies these three moments are their duration--in the case of the first two, these specific shots come at the end of a sequence of shorter shots, and in the last case the entire scene is effectively an extended monologue between Gollum's personalities. But all three contain significant moments of emotion that invite the audience into participation and feeling *with* the character. What this suggests is that effective digital characters must have sufficiently long takes and sequences in which to demonstrate their emotion, suggesting that in some instances or moments, something of a realist aesthetic or inclination towards extended takes is critical. As a rule, montage is highly effective at juxtaposing imagery for informational and emotional effect, but in the case of a digital character, montage may ultimately defeat the purpose of imbuing such characters with a vitality of character with which audiences can empathize with. Instead, time is necessary for the audience to fully apprehend and appreciate the character's visible emotions. Perhaps the term "realist aesthetic" pushes the concept too far--this is not to say that films must be comprised of long takes or fewer cuts, but merely that some longer takes and instances must be provided for the digital character to perform, rather than merely appear in various shots emoting as is necessary for the single shot's impact within the montage. This principle, it must be noted, holds true even in relation to real human actors--an actor's physical presence in the midst of a harried montage does little to emphasize or gild their performance, but instead turns them into objects merely pictured to elicit emotion.

A Moderately Realist, Multisensory Aesthetic

Related to the visual component of long takes, there are other sensory elements that may contribute to the grounding of a digital character in the world of a live-action film alongside human actors and real, physical elements. These may also be considered under the banner of a moderately realist aesthetic, with the word “multisensory” as an addendum. After film’s visual elements, sound is perhaps the most obvious area to explore, and Don Ihde’s work on the phenomenology of sound contributes to our understanding of how this omnipresent phenomenon contributes to the overall sense of reality in a film all around, and with characters specifically.

The privileging of the visual sense in the cinematic medium and the many arguments surrounding the realism and ontology of digital images have already been stated previously in this work, and so I will not restate them here. But what I think the prominence and continued lack of resolution in this discussion points to is that there may be nothing in the visual realm that cannot be shifted, altered, or altogether invented by the wizards of computer imagery. Perhaps the visual dimension is the wrong spot to look for realism in a digital character. Ihde, however, suggests another possibility: that of the aural. Though some of the same ontological questions surrounding digital images may be brought to bear on audio files and sound recording, it seems to me that most actors cast as digital characters end up having their actual voice mostly used in that character’s portrayal. Gollum is Andy Serkis’s voice, which is also heard in his turns as Caesar (*Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, and the other two entries in this trilogy), Captain Haddock (*The Adventures of Tintin* (Spielberg, 2011)), and Supreme Leader Snoke (both entries in Disney’s *Star Wars* revival (Abrams, 2015; Johnson, 2017)).

The sense that Ihde recognizes as both omnipresent and having particular deference to the invisible (Ihde, 2007, p. 14) may serve to function as the element that grounds an unreal, digital character in the real world. If the actor for a digital character may be said to not be there at all, if the character is arguably “invisible” in terms of its relationship to reality, then perhaps the sense that provides the most grounding in reality is that which is inherently linked to that invisibility. Detractors may argue about the vagaries of digital sound recording, remixing, and alteration, and they may be right to raise such objections. But, as Ihde notes, sound has often been disregarded or diminished in phenomenology, and many others have acknowledged its seeming lack of import in the realm of film studies (Beck & Grajeda, 2008; Belton, 1985; Schiffer, 2012; Sterne, 2008). Perhaps it is time to give sound its due, and perhaps this is one area where the use of sound may be acknowledged or even praised. To my knowledge, there has yet to be a digital character whose sound is entirely divorced from some human origin. Some robotic characters may arguably fit that bill, but in terms of digital main characters in film, it may be that a human (or maybe animal, in some instances) voice is the only connection to reality that the character actually has.

In addition to the visual and aural senses, Vivian Sobchack’s notion of the “cinesthetic subject” includes elements of taste and touch as prominent areas of discussion. With specific regard to Gollum, the element of taste is fairly minimized. At two different points in *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* Gollum eats raw meat--taking a brief bite of a rabbit in the former and nastily crunching a fish in close-up

in *The Return of the King*.² The rabbit moment is rather quickly deflected by Sam coming in and taking the rabbit from Gollum to prepare it properly, but the fish is prominently played up for all its multisensory, cringe-inducing possibilities. The visual of the bite is close-up; the sounds of the crunch and the sopping wetness of the bite send shivers down the spine; and though there is not, typically, a taste sensation when Gollum takes the bite, there can be a kind of oral retreat that happens in the viewer's mouth, as if you were being made to feel the slimy texture in your throat and taste the fish's pungent flavor. Sobchack's emphasis on the embodied experience of viewing accounts for this phenomenon, and the disgust it evokes in viewers.

Additionally, there are elements of touch and tactility that are quite prominent in Gollum's actions, nicely supported by his overall behavior. Throughout the films, Gollum is seen as a very capable climber, often scrambling up sheer rock faces and jumping off of gut-wrenching precipices. For all his slinking, creeping qualities Gollum is often lithe and impressively deliberate in his movements. Other times he scrabbles and flops with reckless abandon, slamming his body against the ground and the surrounding rocks with seemingly no regard to his own physical well-being. Watching these moments bring alternating feelings to the viewer's body. When Gollum crashes into what looks like razor-sharp rocks, our bodies cry out as if they too are hurting; and when Gollum elastically and elaborately jumps and moves around we almost feel like we are getting

² Interestingly this shot actually takes place in the film's prologue, which depicts the long fall of Sméagol into the emaciated creature Gollum. As such, though the *character* of Gollum is the one biting the fish, in this specific instance in the sequence the character is being played, live, by Andy Serkis.

into his rhythm, like our bodies could do those same things if we were in his position. Though we remain seated we feel like we too are dodging, jumping, rolling.

Sobchack notes that these responses are “not consciously reflective” (2004, p. 79), meaning that we do not think about our bodily responses to a film, because to do so would be to jar ourselves out of the direct cinematic experience. Instead, we respond bodily “as only one side of *an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen” (p. 79; emphasis hers). In our direct experiences of the film in all its multisensory facets, our bodies are often bound up with the narrative such that our bodily experience is not yet differentiated into the neat categories of reality and illusion. Sobchack here finds reasoning for why some people become sick in some movies or cover their eyes to protect themselves from some sights (p. 79). While our reactions to Gollum are unlikely to be so extreme, we nonetheless feel and respond to his body with our own in subtle, yet important ways.

Photographically Relative Visual Verisimilitude

To this point, the elements of directed empathy that I have discussed may be argued to apply to any character, not necessarily exclusively digital ones. That may be so, but here we come to that element which does explicitly distinguish the digital character-- the element of visual realism that has already been discussed to some degree in this thesis. What I wish to suggest is that some measure of visual verisimilitude is necessary in order for a digital character to appear realistic in a live-action setting, beside a real, human actor. But this verisimilitude does not need to be the kind of hyper-realism that characterizes many contemporary digital characters and effects.

Julie Turnock's (2012) term of "photographic realism" once again comes into play here, distinguishing that which may be argued to be as realistic as something in real life from that which appears realistic in the context of the film being viewed. Though it is not hard to accept her basic premise, or to understand the need to play to the strengths of the film that a digital character or effect is being placed into, this seems to not always happen in practice.

This issue of photographic or lifelike realism is something I find remarkably distracting in even recent releases featuring prominent digital characters. Supreme Leader Snoke in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2017) serves as the most prominent example in recent memory. The character model of Snoke (also played by Andy Serkis) is detailed to the point of distraction; in one close-up where Snoke and Daisy Ridley's character Rey stare menacingly into one another's eyes, I found myself glancing back and forth between the two characters' eyebrows. Snoke's were hideously bushy with nearly every hair on his brow clearly distinguishable and identifiable; Rey's, in contrast, were a simple black line with a distinct shape to the overall brow, but with nowhere near the amount of detail. It was strange to me how it seemed that the human characters had effectively lower fidelity in their visual appearance than did the digital character. I find myself agreeing more with Daniel Dockery (Dockery, 2018), who argues that what filmmakers lack now is not the power of technology that enables the creation of realistic images, but rather the *restraint* that the most effective use of that technology requires.

What perhaps matters most is that filmmakers effectively communicate the physical traits or characteristics of a character or effect that audiences most expect. Helpful here is Stephen Prince's (1996) notion of correspondences as a procedural

explanation for how we assess the reality of appearance and behavior in digital characters. In examining the creature special effects in *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993), Prince notes that the images of dinosaurs are “perceptually realistic” in that even though we know they are not (in fact cannot) be real they still appear to be in part through a complex process of correspondences in which viewers assess whether the images onscreen hold up to the things which we know to be true about the world.³ Prince writes that “these correspondences which anchor the computer-generated image in apparent three-dimensional space, routinely include such variables as surface texture, color, light, shadow, reflectance, motion speed and direction” (p. 33). In this manner, a dinosaur may be evaluated based upon what we know about large animals in the real world. Based on the appearance of the dinosaur’s skin texture and their sluggish movements, they may be argued to be consciously evoking the movements and appearance of creatures like elephants or rhinos, and so we might assess the validity of their movements and appearance based on what we know about these real animals. Thus, a certain level of

³ Prince’s term “perceptual realism” is somewhat problematic here, and deserves some explication. In short, I do not believe that he accurately supplies his own term with all the nuance that it *can* and should imply. In his essay *True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory* (1996) and his later book *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema* (2012) Prince uses the term perceptual realism to refer to the visual elements which comprise “the replication via digital means of contextual cues designating a three-dimensional world” (2012, p. 32). Prince goes on to say (in a statement already quoted in chapter two) that the aim of visual effects is to appear perceptually real within the referential terms of the story being told (p. 33). To my mind, in considering the visual elements exclusively, a more accurate and descriptive term would be that of “photographic realism,” *a la* Turnock. Perceptual realism, given the inherently multisensory aspects of perception, seems like it would be better served to more comprehensively assess the multitude of sensory inputs that may contribute to a digital object’s perception as “realistic.” In this sense, perceptual realism arguably functions better as a broader phenomenological term than it does in the rather narrow sense that Prince employs.

realistic detail is required in the appearance of a digital character, as is some semblance of realistic, multisensory expectation-satisfying movement and behavior, but what Prince once again emphasizes is the importance of perceptual realism over the exacting hyper-realism that is emphasized in innumerable behind-the-scenes featurettes about CG characters in the wake of Gollum (see, for instance, (Pellerin, 2006, 2013).

What all of this suggests is that visual verisimilitude is important to some extent, and that there is a minimum threshold of verisimilitude required to create a convincing digital character. But the need for continuity with the other visual elements may create a maximum threshold of realism and detail that may prove to disenchant viewers, even if it is executed in a way that would otherwise suggest circumventing the “uncanny valley.” A film may establish its own definition of what appears to be visually “normal” in that story’s world, and so our assessment of what passes for realistic (or realistic *enough*) may be made against the film’s visual grounding. Additionally, as has been emphasized above, the multisensory component of a film means that visual verisimilitude may also be mitigated and negotiated by other sensory factors that contribute to the overall perceived realism of a digital character.

A Brief Return to Soul

Don Ihde’s illustration of the changes introduced when a window comes between an observer and the world being observed highlights a fundamental reality of the world that we live in: technology changes everything about our experiences. And if one layer of technology changes our relationship to the world, then increasing layers of technology arguably increase the distance between us as viewers and the world to be observed or experienced. In this regard, the introduction of digital characters and the technologies

used to bring them to the screen *do* significantly change our relationship even to the already mediated experience of the cinema. These changes, and their ramifications, must be considered, and this returns us to the larger questions that began this thesis.

Kathryn S. Egan's search for a soul in Gollum came up lacking, and this is ultimately no real surprise. As a technological product in a mediated experience, there is something distanced and distinct about Gollum as a source of emotion, empathy, or engagement. Even as I have argued for directed empathy as the process by which viewers may form an authentic connection with a digital character, I have also acknowledged that this empathy is a *form* of empathy, a derivation of the kind of empathy that forms between two real, connected human beings.

Interestingly, the finding of true empathy in connection with an unreal, digital character seemingly opens the floodgates for carefully considering other ways that empathy may be defined or experienced, with perhaps a wider array of entities or Others than may have previously been recognized. Cinema has always been a reduction of real experience--Sobchack even argues that film may be identified as one of the purest forms of conducting the phenomenological reduction, given its intentional direction of the viewer's gaze, attention, and acquisition of information (p. 91). But what may, arguably, be revealed through the phenomenon of empathy with digital characters is the following, startling possibility: that the vitality and directness of an experience that viewers have with a film may have reached or even exceeded the kind of vigor of experience that they have in their real lives beyond the cinema screen. The technological pessimist in me hopes that this is not so, and prays that people continually find their most engaging and powerful experiences in non-mediated interaction with others and with the world. Yet

even this thesis shows that powerful emotional and empathetic connections can form with entities that have never even existed in a physical, concrete reality. This, of course, raises larger questions and connections than can be addressed in this current work.

Ultimately, what the insights of phenomenology, cognitive theory, and simulation theory have provided here is a basis for acknowledging and assessing our imaginative engagement with fictional worlds. Such engagement has meaning, gives way to real experiences, and thus dramatically impacts the real lives of viewers. This kind of experience cannot easily be dismissed.

CONCLUSION

Future Research, and Summation

Future Research

Early in this work I noted that what this thesis would contribute to the literature of film, phenomenology, and digital characters is a preliminary answer to the questions posed regarding the compelling nature of digital characters. Having found a preliminary answer, there are certainly a number of areas where this thesis could be expanded and elaborated upon in future research.

First, there are a number of other character studies that could be done to see what else can be gleaned about the nature of empathy, digital characters, and digital performance in film. The aforementioned Caesar, from *The Planet of the Apes* franchise, is perhaps the most notable and obvious candidate for such a study, but there are many others who could be mentioned here: Dobby from the *Harry Potter* series, Jar Jar Binks and a variety of other characters in the *Star Wars* saga, or Davy Jones in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (Verbinski, 2006, 2007) just to name a few. Additional examination could focus on the difference in main versus supporting digital characters, or even the use of digital animals versus creatures and characters who are human or humanoid. Questions concerning whether these characters emote or relate to audiences differently may be seen to be significant.

Additionally, more work could be done at both the technological and general audience levels. With regard to technology, there often seems to be a gap in film studies literature between the examination of a film and the examination of the making of the

film. Given that the making of a feature film--particularly feature films with the type of budgets that allow for the inclusion of significant digital characters--is a highly deliberate enterprise, it begs the question of just *why* digital characters are imbued with the characteristics, behaviors, or appearances that they are. From the use of specific motion or performance capture technologies, to the end choices regarding animation and its marriage to performance in the final visible image, there are a whole litany of questions that engagement with the technology and intricacies of the making of these characters could potentially illuminate. In examining the choices of technologies and their deployment, we may be able to understand more of why digital characters “act” the way they do and in turn impact us in particular ways.

This leads to greater consideration of the general audience in these questions. I have already articulated in this work that there sometimes seems to be a divide between what philosophical or academic literature is prepared to do with characters or certain circumstances in film and what the general public is willing to do. Kathryn S. Egan’s takedown of Gollum was based upon a philosophical and logical viewing of the character that ignored what (perhaps) millions of other viewers had experienced and believed to be true--that they had engaged emotionally and empathetically with a character who at his most fundamental level was nothing but a collection of 1s and 0s. Paying further attention to audience responses and engagement is crucial, and another section that could be added to such a study as this one.

Finally, it is worth noting that the genre of science fiction has long dealt with questions regarding reality and artificiality from both scientific and philosophical perspectives. The novels of Philip K. Dick, for instance, offer glimpses both encouraging

and terrifying regarding the possibilities of artificial life and entertainment,¹ as do works by writers as diverse as Isaac Asimov, Iain M. Banks, Orson Scott Card, Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Ellison, William Gibson, and Neal Stephenson.² Additionally, these questions have been examined extensively in the very medium under discussion here. Questions about artificiality, humanity, and reality are central to films such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017), *Cloud Atlas* (Tykwer & Wachowski, 2012), *Transcendence* (Pfister, 2014), and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015),³ just to name a few. These films, and others in the genre, address the core concern of questions surrounding the presence and implications of the unreal amidst the real, and what this means for human beings at the level of experience, life, and soul. Putting these films in further conversation with each other could provide a unique insight into the various ways that we have imagined such technologies impacting and altering our futures and lives, and what that might say about their actual impact in the world of today.

¹ Dick's novels *Time Out of Joint* (1959), *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), *The Simulacra* (1964), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and *We Can Build You* (1972), as well as countless other short stories and works, deal extensively with these questions and themes.

² *I, Robot* (1950) by Asimov, *Excession* (1996) by Banks, *Ender's Game* (1985) by Card, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Clarke, the short story *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (1967) by Ellison, *Neuromancer* (1984) and the rest of the Sprawl Trilogy by Gibson, and both *Snow Crash* (1992) and *The Diamond Age* (1995) by Stephenson all offer perspectives on some of these same questions, albeit in their own fantastic ways.

³ This one in many cases *directly* asks some of the same questions asked in this thesis, albeit more centered around artificial life writ large rather than just with regard to digital characters in films.

Summation

With regard to what makes digital characters compelling to viewers in an emotional or empathetic sense, my argument is that the other human characters in the film seem to provide the dynamics necessary for viewers to take such characters seriously *as* characters, thus enabling them to be engaged and to even become objects of empathy. The ability for this to happen rests on, convincing and genuine performances by the human cast of the film, a story that affords the digital character sufficient screen time to dramatically develop, a *moderately* realist multisensory aesthetic that enables the digital character's performance to be fully displayed in all its nuance and significance, and the verisimilitude of the character relative to the look of the film they are appearing in.

Digital characters suffer in terms of credibility when these criteria are not met sufficiently. In the case of Peter Jackson's other *Hobbit* films, the digital characters featured there are merely incorporated as set-dressing and trope-fulfilling roles that offer no real possibility of empathetic engagement with viewers. Additionally, digital characters in films that feature bad or stiff human acting, such as *Avatar*, arguably, are going to succeed to a far lesser degree than one in which the human actors legitimately act and react to their digital companions. If the actors believe in the characters they are ostensibly acting with, we will too, it seems. Beyond this, it may be possible for a movie with good acting and direction on behalf of the human actors to then fail to give the digital character a compelling storyline or action within the story. Or the digital character's presentation may only be as a puppet to be used within a film's editing style, rather than a character allowed to fully act or perform onscreen. Or the character may not fit visually in the world of the film, either appearing too realistic or not realistic enough

to cohere visually alongside real actors and real-world environments. A breakdown at any of the stages described above will result in a failed digital character, in the sense that these characters will be emotionally and empathetically unavailable to viewers.

The experiential differences or consequences that a digital character brings to the film seem mainly to be one of heightened attention to the other, real elements within the film. As I watched I noticed that my gaze was drawn often less to the specific actions of Gollum and more to the things with which he was interacting, as well as the people he was looking at and who were looking at him. In this way, the digital character may be said to alter our experience of the film they are appearing in by actually heightening our sensory engagement with the film. Whether consciously or unconsciously we assess these characters based on their interaction with many different facets of reality, calling upon our multisensory experiences with reality and elements of reality to validate what it is we are experiencing with the film and its characters.

Finally, I argued far above that the language of the “quasi-‘other’” or describing emotional engagement with films or film characters as “quasi-emotional” or “like” emotions or empathy is simply untenable from both a descriptive and phenomenological standpoint. In describing the experience that I had empathizing with Gollum, there emerged a more specific and accurate term to apply to this experience: directed empathy. This term may beneficially add to the literature by recognizing that empathy with digital characters *is* empathy, but is also an empathy that *is* different than that experienced directly between one human being and another. This empathy may be said to be buried a little deeper, requiring a guidepost or map in order to be accessed. Other human actors and the very real settings of the films that contain compelling digital characters act as

these guiding apparatuses, *directing* the viewer's experience of that character and, in a sense, telling the viewer that it is perfectly alright to feel something about or with this digital character.

When my wife first paused *The Two Towers* to ask me about Gollum, I believe that she was experiencing some of the same sorts of tension that many film theorists and thinkers have undergone in their consideration of digital characters. She knew at one level that what she was seeing could not be possible in reality, and yet the evidence of her experience of the film was such that she believed in what was there before her, thus ascribing to Gollum all the emotional connection that the film to that point had argued he was due. As many others have noted, this is one significant aspect of the cinema's incredible magic: its ability to carry us away to fantastic realms and cause us to engage and feel something with the most unlikely and, perhaps, unimaginable of creatures. This, I believe, truly is as close to magic as we typically experience, and while some may feel that the magic ought to be more logically thought out and explained, my final argument is that the best and most appropriate response is simply to acknowledge the experience for what it is, and, maybe, to revel in it just a little, too.

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