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INTERMEDIALITY AND FILM CONSCIOUSNESS IN GAO XINGJIAN'S *LA SILHOUETTE SINON L'OMBRE*

ROSALIND SILVESTER

ABSTRACT

This article employs Merleau-Pontian phenomenology to deconstruct the mind-body unity in Gao Xingjian's film *La Silhouette sinon l'ombre* (2003), which shows the protagonist's sensory and bodily encounters with the physical world through a stream-of-consciousness technique. Applying this philosophy allows us to make sense of the apparently unconnected, disparate scenes and understand the relationship between inner and outer worlds by considering the role of subjective positionality. It explains how Gao brings the body to the screen as both perceiving object and subject of perception through an emphasis on sight and touch, and interprets the creative act as the synthesis of activity and interaction. *La Silhouette* is an important contribution to contemporary francophone films exploring the relationship between artist, viewer and artwork due, firstly, to Gao's tripartite aesthetics, dependent on the full integration of the senses, and secondly to the unique expression of the artist's world via the intermedial, suggesting the coexistence of several consciousnesses.

Keywords: Gao Xingjian, francophone Chinese, film, phenomenology, consciousness, Merleau-Ponty, intermediality

GAO XINGJIAN came to international prominence in the year 2000 after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his novels (most notably, *Soul Mountain*), short stories, plays and poems.¹ More recently a painter and filmmaker, he is recognized as one of the most eclectic and fertile artists of our time.² Gao settled in France in 1987, two years before the events of Tiananmen Square caused him to break definitively with the Communist Party and the Chinese regime. In 1998 he received French citizenship. It is perhaps due to this movement between cultures that Gao, in his films, works towards a space of becoming, recognizing that the relationship between space and being is a dynamic, relational and prospective process linking inside and outside, self and other, past and present. Shot in 2002 and 2003, *La Silhouette sinon l'ombre* (2003) combines footage of Gao walking and being driven around Marseille, encountering other solitary figures, undertaking a train journey, and visiting a Taiwanese temple. Interspersed are excerpts from rehearsals of his play *Le Quêteur*

*de la mort*³ and his opera *La Neige en août*, both performed during 'l'Année Gao' (2003) in Marseille, in addition to static shots of his calligraphies, sometimes involving an onlooker, but rarely including dialogue.⁴

In this way, the boundaries of media are not discrete in Gao's film and the viewer becomes aware of 'the materiality and mediality of artistic practices'.⁵ This quotation from Irina O. Rajewsky comes from her introductory remarks about intermediality, which have become a respected point of reference in intermedial studies. She notes that intermediality has come to designate, in broad terms, the 'crossing of borders between media', which necessarily involves external relations with other media, or what Werner Wolf calls 'heteromedial relations'.⁶ As Gao's film refers to his own diverse works (opera, plays, paintings), these references could be viewed as being internal to the totality of his creative production, suggesting that *intramediality* may, in fact, be a more appropriate term. However, Rajewsky states that the intramedial remains 'within a single medium', which clearly does not happen in the film *La Silhouette*.⁷ Consequently, this phenomenological study of artistic re-composition in Gao's film will be based on the aforementioned dominant and widely accepted definition of intermediality, whilst also drawing on the refinement of the term's meaning in recent film studies offered by Ágnes Pethő, namely that it may be considered as 'the repetition or the re-inscription of a medium as a form in the form of another medium, where the procedure of intermediality itself is also figured, that is: it becomes observable and it refers reflexively to itself'.⁸ This description is particularly useful because it recognizes the potentially self-regarding nature of a work, or its circulation of internal borrowings, in Gao's particular case, which draws attention to media processes and strategies.

Gao Xingjian is, of course, not the first francophone filmmaker to move between different media on screen and to show innovative narrative techniques. Agnès Varda, for instance, was known for her use of still images and for integrating fictional and documentary components into her films, notably *La Pointe courte* (1954) and *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), and she even went so far as to include footage of Jacques Demy, her husband, dying in *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), a film about his life and demise told partially through excerpts from his own films. With a similar theme, *Sans toit ni loi* (1984) experimented with the linearity of the story of Mona, a vagabond whose death is investigated by an anonymous interviewer. This film is made up of forty-seven episodes, each one recounted by a different person who has encountered Mona, thus offering fragmented and multiple viewpoints. Alain Resnais, too, adopted unusual means of narration, firstly to address political subjects and then to explore the interaction between cinema and other art forms, such as poetry (by Queneau and Eluard)

and painting (by Van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso), and later (approximately between 1981 and 2014), music, theatre and comic books. Without overly reducing his varied and distinctive productions, it may be claimed that these artistic combinations made a strong contribution to Resnais's unconventional study of the workings of memory, consciousness and the imagination.

Perhaps the closest precursor to *La Silhouette* is Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), comprised almost entirely of printed photographs displayed as a photomontage and devoid of dialogue, apart from unclear mutterings in German. Unlike Gao's film, however, a voice-over narrator tells the story of time travel post-nuclear war. *La Silhouette* diverges from the films of the aforementioned filmmakers in other ways too: as argued in this article, it deserves more critical attention and recognition as a formally distinctive and radical work that puts into practice Gao's tripartite theory of cinematographic space.⁹ He explains that, in his films, picture, sounds and language each have 'independence and autonomy, while complementing, combining and contrasting with one another to produce new meanings'.¹⁰ The three elements are thus separated and then brought together into an aesthetic dialogue, and this very possibility means, for Gao, that cinema is the most powerful and versatile art form since 'il utilise tous les procédés, tous les moyens expressifs possibles. Visuel, auditif et intellectuel par le biais du texte et des paroles.'¹¹ Reflection occurs at a 'metapoetic' level, to translate a phrase from Bittinger, and is focused on 'le faire artistique et [...] l'interpénétration entre les arts, rendue perceptible par la forme tripartite de l'œuvre filmique indissociable des thèmes contrapuntiques qu'elle développe.'¹² Meaning and form are thus aligned in this 'triple jeu', with *La Silhouette* adopting a stream-of-consciousness style which creates a space of ontological possibilities, reliant on different structures of experience and on the movement of consciousness(es) in the world. Such a space, Gao claims, allows the viewer the freedom to feel, be revived and to contemplate.¹³

The personal, corporeal and, sometimes, dissonant encounters with the world experienced by figures in Gao's film translate into similar embodied encounters between the viewers and the film's world, meaning that a phenomenological approach directed at the sensorial framework of the artwork will reveal how sensory perceptions affect the way in which viewers make meaning. Film is a medium particularly suited to conveying, in concrete and immediate terms, the sense of the corporeal in experiences, and the very process of filmmaking equates to a performative act inviting the spectator to encounter the world through all the senses. This article thus puts forward the idea of a dialogic relationship between philosophy and cinema, each equally concerned with perception, consciousness and

the construction of meaning. For instance, phenomenology promotes reflection on the role of the thinking and acting body, so that philosophy may contribute to our understanding of the subject's situatedness in space and time. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception will help with this undertaking, since it rejects dualities, such as that of mind and body, and proposes the continuity of the human body and the world, so that the *cogito* is not seen to act on a solely cerebral level, but involves itself in the sensory and affective impressions of the world. This is particularly relevant to Gao's film, since the film's 'narrative', if it may be called that, assumes the form of the protagonist's stream-of-consciousness, alongside a constant emphasis on embodiment, thus demonstrating the same mind-body unity espoused by Merleau-Ponty. In order to analyse this complementary functioning in the film, this article draws on the evolution of the philosopher's writings on phenomenology from an initially subjective and consciousness-based vision to the broader concepts of 'la chair du monde' and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm, an evolution to be traced over the course of three sections.

Each of the sections demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's changing philosophy resonates with Gao's audio-visual artwork in its tendency, first and foremost, to emphasize the spatial and temporal dimensions of film over its narrative-mimetic properties. To begin with, the article examines how Gao positions the body, whether as a whole or its parts, on screen, often opting for unusual and oblique camera angles to foreground a filmmaking consciousness. The body, at times moving and at other times stationary, comes into contact with the outside world, be it landscape or cityscape, or represented by a single Other. Then, as a performing self, the body embarks on an act of creation which leads the subject not only to produce an object of art, but also to extend itself in an effort of bodily plasticity. Since Gao's tripartite aesthetics draws as much attention to the sense of hearing as to that of seeing, we will consider, in the second section, mediated forms of perception in the film, such as listening to a poem being read and the guided journey of the cinematographic gaze. The final section will discuss the film as an intermedial vehicle which foregrounds sensory elements and promotes movement back and forth between works and temporal positions.

The body in the world

In addition to Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the concrete experiences and perceptions of human existence, the concern with the body also preoccupies his writings, including his most widely known work, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), and led him to an understanding of subjectivity that finds an echo in Gao's film. In contrast to Husserl's

phenomenology, which considers the body as attached to the materiality of the external world and as an object that a transcendent mind orders to perform various functions, Merleau-Ponty posited a consciousness bound up with corporeality and forming an integral, material part of the world. In ‘Le Primat de la perception’, he writes that ‘Percevoir c’est se rendre présent quelque chose à l’aide du corps,’¹⁴ meaning that ‘La conscience est l’être à la chose par l’intermédiaire du corps.’¹⁵ Subjects, then, experience a mind-body unity which is actively involved in the world around them: they exist in a particular place, within a specific social and cultural environment, and at a particular time.

Such a concern with the situated body is found in *La Silhouette*, which places the body in the foreground by allowing the physiognomy of single characters to occupy the screen for much of the film and by showing Gao, the principal actor, walking and being driven around the streets of Marseille. In the first sequence of shots, we are focused on Gao, who sits in the front seat of a car with the camera viewing him from behind and in close-up. After a cut, he is filmed from the side as he walks down a street, as if the camera is still in the car following him or, at least, there is a sense of a consciousness viewing or ‘tracking’ him. The relationship between interior and exterior is emphasized as Gao is sometimes seen in the car and sometimes outside it, and his deliberate steps in the world convey at the same time the ponderous workings of his mind. As well as this very real and physical subject, there is the representation of an absent consciousness which, in effect, closes the gaps in the film’s narrative and which is put there by the viewer’s imaginary. In other words, ‘any visual field in a film frame implies a consciousness from which it could arise’.¹⁶ A layering of consciousnesses thus results, indicated, for instance, by the shakiness of the camera located behind Gao in the car and by the use of unbalanced camera angles and de-framings in the shots of the outside. Additionally, the inner world of Gao and other characters is conveyed by scenes in black and white, focusing on dream sequences and memories, while colour is used in conjunction with visions of real life, such as shots of the city of Marseille. The mind registers and understands the experiences of the body in the world, but it is also part of that body: conscious subjectivity depends on the whole human being for both Gao and Merleau-Ponty.

Later in the film, when Gao continues his walk in the city, he stops in front of a church whose dimensions are exaggerated by the low-angle vertical shot and whose closed doors exclude the wanderer. He passes by disused garages and dilapidated buildings, some with blocked-up doors, others with windows left open. These shots echo other sequence-shots of walking during which the camera follows Gao into nature, a temple and a church, places

which inspire spatial reflection either outwards or upwards and are open, in contrast to the city with its closed doors. Such sequence-shots create a connection between the subjective realities of the walker and the objective realities of the sites/sights encountered, thereby mediating between internal and external spaces. They evoke, simultaneously, a here and an elsewhere, or a 'between worlds' experience which seems to be actualized by the dynamic act of passing through the physical world. It is not so much the sites/sights themselves that draw the spectator's attention, but the significance of the camera's gaze as it surveys them and reveals the functioning of a consciousness. These sequences demonstrate the fact that, as James S. Williams contends, 'cinema is a medium that allows us exceptionally to shift back and forth between subjective and objective worlds', and in Gao's case, montage aids this movement 'between different levels of reality and consciousness'.¹⁷ Rather than setting up binary relationships between inside and outside, subject and object, open and closed, Gao's cinematography negotiates a path between the concepts that entails their contiguous affiliation. The experiencing subject does not so much contemplate the world from some position on the outside, but is part of the world and so inhabits, rather than envisions, it.

The mobile body continues to be foregrounded when Gao gets out of the car for the last time and follows tramway tracks, with only ambient environmental sounds acoustically framing this movement, until the tracks appear to meet up with the perspective of the viewer and the operatic music of Xu Shuya begins. Close-up shots of Gao's feet (see **Figure 1**) highlight not only the act of walking but also this corporeal extremity, a focalization which reminds us of Merleau-Ponty's later thoughts on the medium of painting and the phenomenology of visibility, namely the visual contraction of subjectivity through the concentration on body parts and the expansion of the self when a character is seen in their environment.¹⁸ Then, as Gao passes from tarmac to sand, the images change from colour to black and white and, correspondingly, we see silhouettes intermittently replacing human figures (see **Figure 2**), and a Chinese woman dressed in black. This has the effect of destabilizing and dispersing conventional perspectives and narrative points of reference. As Gao moves across the beach towards this female figure (symbolizing *la mère/la mer?*), it becomes apparent that the protagonist's world is shared with another conscious being, indeed, later, with multiple beings. The staging, which plays on the contrasts between darkness, light and colour, as well as between sound and silence, reinforces this early Merleau-Pontian conception of the phenomenological since it imbues the technological with perceptual markers indicating subjective consciousnesses at work.

The body-subject comes to a halt when faced with the remains of a demolished building, creating a tableau that conveys the interaction between an individual and the object of his experience, taking the form, in this case, of static contemplation. Gao, in the middle distance and with his back to the camera, casts a shadow onto a pile of stones amid the ruins, an image which recurs in the film along with discordant music. In this sequence characterized by numerous, incongruous cuts, shadows and voids are present when human beings are not, and vice versa, as if to remind us of the primacy of the body, whether in the form of an image or in reality, and to denote another type of absent presence. By directing attention to shadows, Gao ‘brackets off’ a certain layer of consciousness, perhaps to generate a reaction to, or an affective charge in, the image that is different from the emotion elicited by the body-reality. Shifts in camera angle and panning shots transcribe visually the destruction, picking out the lack of form and structure. For instance, attention falls on Gao looking up at the holes and bricked-up windows of a building, some with frames and panes of glass still attached as though vainly attempting to demarcate the outside from the inside. Since the director-actor is often included in these shots, we see a convergence of domains, with the mind investing the seeing eye and the body, in turn, being connected to the outer world.

As Merleau-Ponty would contend, there is no stable and definite frontier between our subjectivity and the world, so that meanings and interpretations always flow between both. This idea was elaborated in his later writings (‘L’Œil et l’esprit’ and ‘Le Visible et l’invisible’), in which he goes beyond the realm of perception to engage with a philosophy of being. Indeed, perception and being are imbricated in the form of the body, itself visible, which participates in the world through its very being. Merleau-Ponty uses the term ‘flesh’ to express the intertwining and reversibility of the visible and the invisible, the sentient and the sensible, subject and object, self and world, as well as other dualisms. The consequences of this interdependence are especially interesting, and relevant here, when he considers the actions of embodied flesh in the world, since he writes that the world is not simply an object:

Mais cela ne veut pas dire qu’il y ait, de moi à lui, fusion, coïncidence: au contraire, cela se fait parce qu’une sorte de déhiscence ouvre en deux mon corps, et qu’entre lui regardé et lui regardant, lui touché et lui touchant, il y a recouvrement ou empiètement, de sorte qu’il faut dire que les choses passent en nous aussi bien que nous dans les choses.¹⁹

Individuals invest themselves in their surroundings, interrogate them and are recorded on them because reversibility problematizes the notion of intentionality and the relationship is

reciprocal, not simply a subject acting on an object. The resulting encroachment between the two entities means that the world touches and alters us, as much as we may alter it. In this way, when Gao stands amongst the ruins in the above-mentioned scene of destruction, he becomes detectable in that world and a part of it, having an impact on how the spectator views the scene, now changed due to the human figure. Gao, having entered that particular world, becomes an internal witness of a past catastrophe, whilst the spectator, still external, registers a surviving trace of something that has all but disappeared. Both are aligned to a consciousness from another time.

When referring to ‘being-in-the-world’, Merleau-Ponty intended more than the pure contemplation of objects, as described above, or physical activity, following the examples of Gao moving around the city. Engagement with the world, in order to derive meaning from it, arises from the subject’s synthesis of activity and interaction, and in the film we witness this in a creative act. Before starting an ink painting, Gao stands in the foreground of the frame, immobile, as though readying himself for the subsequent action, both mentally and physically. The duality of the body, poised in its intentional immediacy, and thought, transcending fixity to become action, draw attention to the artist’s complete engagement. Such visible hesitancy is followed by a deliberate action when he moves to the middle of the sheet of paper and begins to paint with careful brushstrokes, seemingly using the brush as an extension of himself, in much the same way as Merleau-Ponty recognized ‘bodily plasticity’, or how the tool becomes ‘un appendice du corps, une extension de la synthèse corporelle’.²⁰ After a short while, the artist pauses and then empties the bowl of ink onto the paper (**Figure 3**). The ink spreads over the white surface and, for a few moments, Gao’s feet are followed as he treads in the ink, recalling the earlier metonymic image of feet on the sand and thereby referring to a beyond, an elsewhere exterior to the creative act. The physical world joins in with the artist’s experience of the artwork as the studio lights reflect his image as well as the windows onto the pool of ink (**Figure 4**). As Gao moves around the painting, he produces swirls and surges of the liquid, thereby coming into contact with the materiality of the creation. This extension of the body through artistic instruments, firstly a paint brush and then ink, has the reflexive effect of turning body-in-motion into a creative tool. It shows how we experience Gao’s cinema through the witnessing of bodily actions and sensations, and how he accomplishes a shift from sight to touch in the middle part of *La Silhouette*. The filmmaker encourages the viewer to move beyond the sensory limit of the visual in order to experience the full phenomenological potential of cinema. Only then may s/he be unfettered by the

conventional system of meaning-making and be opened up to new signifiers resulting from tactility.

Gao's portrayal of the experiential field of the lived body during painting demonstrates a 'groundedness' or continuation between artist, tool and work, but on one other occasion he seems to reject this coincidence, treating his body like a foreign object. This act of dispossession occurs when he is filmed on a stretcher, being lifted into an ambulance, after collapsing during rehearsals in Marseille. Gao's collapse reminds us that Herbert Plügge has reconsidered Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of corporeality in the light of illness and argues that, when in pain, the body is experienced as an alien facticity, a 'thing body' that no longer belongs to the subject. The helpless, immobile figure of Gao, seemingly barely conscious, is viewed from the outside, from an onlooker's perspective, as if to reinforce the sense of estrangement that has arisen in the man himself. We see him, as he sees himself, as something 'thinglike and objectal', with his subjectivity compromised.²¹ This image of the body at odds with itself gives an insight into the ambiguity at the heart of Gao's subjectivity: the body, showing physical markers of the culture of origin, becomes the Other of the self since the feeling of bodily alienation signals a certain unease with that cultural origin. Such self-consciousness could, therefore, be an expression of the filmmaker's awareness of cultural hybridity which rises to the surface from time to time. The materiality of a body experienced as alien seems to underlie the impression, elsewhere in the film, of a unified presence-to-itself. If Gao is haunted by self-division, experiencing the displacement of his body whose facticity is, however, undeniable, then the viewers are affected by a similar detachment which disrupts the self-transcendent act of watching.

Perception: hearing and seeing

Analysis so far has revealed how Gao materializes the sense of embodiment of the cinematographic gaze by showing figures encountering the world, enacted as a series of entrances and exits, appearances and disappearances, which emphasise, variously, the static and the mobile. Engaged in the task of seeing or being seen, the filmmaker is involved in a process that turns the virtual into the actual and, as part of that, he does not begin with narrative, but with places and movements, with forms and textures. *La Silhouette* sets up an unconventional relationship between words, images and sounds right from the start, since silence accompanies the initial action and then music takes over. Words constitute incidental additions, heard as random lines from a poem, or sentences rehearsed in a play, or discussion between actor and artist, and they are stripped of their more conventional diegetic role by no

longer giving information with which to construct a scenario or plot. They combine differently with the visual and musical composition of shots. Each of the elements may act independently or come together to produce an unexpected or disruptive effect so that the resultant tripartite work frees the way in which meaning is produced, since meaning ceases to be derived predominantly from synchronized sound or narration. For much of the film Gao does not speak and he, like the other actors, are seen before they are assigned lines. Instead of assuming recognizable roles, they are considered primarily as embodied subjects.

In contrast, and untypically, the reading of Gao's poem *L'Errance de l'oiseau* (2003) within the film comprises a disembodied, aural performance, since it is divorced from any footage of the actor reading the lines.²² Instead, it is accompanied by a medley of images – ruins, ink paintings, a plastic bag blown by the wind and a bird in flight. Speech is heard here for the first time in the film, but then a subsequent mute performance of the poem is shown being rehearsed by an actor with whom Gao converses silently. The filmmaker is evidently invested in the sensory apparatuses of the film's body, going beyond a pair of eyes to become an ear attentive to the possibility of a story. By privileging the aural here, Gao confirms that his tripartite aesthetics allow him to play around with the relations between images, words and sounds. As a further example of this, he chooses moving images to convey a consciousness of place, rather than using language to narrate a sense of place. Panoramic shots of Marseille harbour appear intermittently on screen between shots of a seagull floating on currents of air above the seascape. The bird is objectified and offers, at the same time, the point of view from which to observe the scene, as if an anthropomorphic incarnation of the transcendent, that which, in phenomenological terms, is not only a phenomenon of consciousness but is also objective. Suspended silently in the air, the bird represents the 'en-soi' (Merleau-Ponty's idea of plenitude of being), or inert matter from nature. To a certain extent, the bird also symbolizes the camera, as it is able to penetrate spaces inaccessible to the filmmaker and articulate a point of view in a pre-linguistic manner similar to Merleau-Ponty's 'communication muette du geste'.²³ Moreover, the verticality of the shots, moving from sea to air, and the animality of the subject give concrete form to Merleau-Ponty's description of the first state of consciousness as '[un] monde "sauvage" et "vertical"'.²⁴

At other times, an inversion occurs and the camera takes on the birds-eye or aerial point of view, tracking vertically from one level to another, one step on a flight of stairs to another, or horizontally from building to building or window to window. The choice of paradigmatic places and the visual effects of ascending or descending reinforce the idea of beings moving through spaces. Significantly, at no point does the linearity belonging to plot

or to chronology, in other words the horizontal, take over from the discontinuities of vertical shots, so that the two axes are kept separate in their coexistence. Merleau-Ponty clearly delineates the complementary functioning of these positions: there is the vertical or invisible, represented by '[l']ordre du vrai' and, on the other hand, the horizontal or visible, evident in '[l']ordre de l'événement'.²⁵

The poem itself complicates the relationship between exteriority and interiority by putting the viewer, addressed as 'tu', in the position of the bird. As the Other, the viewer is assigned a succession of bird-like acts, as though understood from the inside, though s/he can only be an extraneous observer or listener. In Gao's phenomenological universe, objects and creatures may dehumanize and universalize intersubjective connections. In this way, there is an interplay between two sources of vision, mine and that of the Other, and thus the recognition of 'la dimension d'une vie généralisée qui s'est greffée sur la mienne', in the words of Merleau-Ponty.²⁶ Since one's private world no longer belongs solely to oneself, it becomes 'l'instrument dont un autre joue [...]'. C'est la chose même qui m'ouvre l'accès au monde privé d'autrui.²⁷ Both the bird and the camera incarnate this instrumentality, due to their movements and being in the world, and they reveal the image-objects to the spectator while at the same time sharing their subjective positionality.

Whether cutting between scenes of the poem being rehearsed and shots of the seagull, or between the landscape of ruins and the artistic act, the editing opens up a plurality of sites from which to observe the object. This 'polyphonie visuelle' reinforces the idea of vision as multi-dimensional perception: 'Elle incite le spectateur à devenir cocréateur du sens, en marquant en creux, par cette circulation indirecte des regards, toutes les places actives qu'il peut prendre.'²⁸ Gao does not conceive of the visible as a static, aesthetic form, but his cinematography translates movement and change, therefore suggesting a mode of constant becoming. He confers materiality, physicality and a sense of duration to acts of technological perception so that images and sounds endorse a sensory continuity between body and world in which one inevitably leads to the other. The act of looking at an object (of art) relies, initially, on the eyes and consciousness of a human subject, but subjectivity is then lost as the person's consciousness 'projects itself into the object of interest, ultimately brought back to the subject as a newly objectified act'.²⁹ *La Silhouette* may be considered as an example of phenomenological cinema, because it encourages a mode of vision involving this movement between the subject and the object which is dependent on the viewer's awareness of the image's sensorial and affective qualities. Not only that, Gao's film engages with the gaze of the Other, both the director's and the viewer's, recalling Merleau-Ponty's idea of the

intersubjective field of perception and action which he described as ‘le mélange de la conscience avec le monde, son engagement dans un corps, sa coexistence avec les autres’.³⁰

-Indeed, when Gao focuses on an ink painting of an eye, its white pupil surrounded by black and grey, the camera moves slowly nearer to the centre, in effect transgressing the boundary between the viewer and the viewed (**Figure 5**). Moreover, a sense of reciprocity is set up between the object, the gaze and the onlooker, as when the painter puts one hand over an eye whilst contemplating a work (**Figure 6**), or when a naked woman, with hair covering half of her face, looks straight into the camera at the viewer and simultaneously becomes the object under study. In respect to the first example, Elizabeth Stephens has noted that ‘interspersed shots of hand and eye are a common trope throughout early experimental cinema’, signalling, in her opinion, the relationship between sight and touch.³¹ For Gao, this is certainly true, given the importance he attributes to tactility, but the image also emphasizes the limitations of seeing, since the subject may see the object only partially, in both senses of the word, and alternative interpretations become possible with the engagement of other senses or other seeing beings. Certainly, an alternative point of view is relayed by a woman in black, who appears suddenly in the room, herself a viewer of paintings, then viewed in turn by the audience. Similarly, a boy observes the naked woman and the paintings, then looks through a doorway at Gao, himself staring at the child. Each of these shots, then, reveals a network of interrelational stances which allows the viewer to see an object from the character’s perspective and yet to remain outside it. Merleau-Ponty would emphasize here how the perceiving subject is in a situation, rather than being distanced from the situation, meaning that action and perception are interconnected.

In the film, multiple consciousnesses are framed within each other, or in front of (literal and metaphorical) screens. The eye, Gao reminds us, can never see itself seeing. Subjectivity is the source from which meaning in the world arises and the root of non-coincidence, ‘l’écart’ which disturbs the body’s immanence with itself and creates an internal fissure. To illustrate that the body is both perceiving object and subject of perception, Merleau-Ponty gave the example in *Phénoménologie de la perception* of one hand touching the other: ‘Quand je presse mes deux mains l’une contre l’autre, il ne s’agit donc pas de deux sensations que j’éprouverais ensemble, comme on perçoit deux objets juxtaposés, mais d’une organisation ambiguë où les deux mains peuvent alterner dans la fonction de “touchante” et de “touché”’.³² Both the philosopher and the filmmaker take this ambiguity between the subject and object to be representative of perception and sensibility generally.

Intermediality and the chiasm

During the course of *La Silhouette*, the artist is shown being involved in several activities relating to 'l'Année Gao', such as the rehearsals of his play *Le Quêteur de la mort* (2004) and his opera *La Neige en août* (2004), and the exhibition of his ink paintings. At the same time, as explored above, the film evokes verbal borrowings and visual imagery from his poem *L'Errance de l'oiseau*.³³ These generic layers give the impression of multiple perspectives and manifold consciousnesses which are juxtaposed, creating gaps, fragments and discontinuities. Or, as Yien puts it, the film depicts the creative process of the (now) French artist, 'told through the vocabulary of multimedia collage'.³⁴ As established earlier in this discussion, the film does not follow a conventional, linear narrative, since the beginning is not recognizable as such, the ending offers no resolution, and a storyline or plot is absent. Since cinema is, for Gao, 'un art de la continuité dans le temps', narration would be 'trop élémentaire', would limit too much its potential to be freely structured and to be able to accommodate contrasts and surprises, as well as linkages and congruities.³⁵ Indeed, loose reflections on both life and death appear in no obvious order, revealing an intermingling of images, music and words. Scenes switch between movement and stasis, and shots shift between human subjects, landscapes, paintings and staged *tableaux*. Dream-like images of Gao walking in Marseille and in the Taiwanese countryside are interwoven with fragments of real-life memories and a near-death experience, as well as diverse acts of artistic creation.

In essence, Gao seems to want to explore the material and sensual aspects of cinema while de-emphasizing its narrative or psychological ones. This imperative makes itself felt in the second part of the film especially, in which there is more persistent evidence of intermedial composition. Gao is shown discussing the performance of his play with the actors in a pseudo-metanarrative which is followed by extracts from the play, and the point of view in the film changes from the auditorium to the wings behind the scenes at rehearsal, then to the stage as seen on the opening night. The same multiplicity of viewing consciousnesses is apparent for *La Neige en août*, since partial scenes from rehearsals (which took place in Taiwan) contrast with excerpts from the final performance in Marseille. Gao treats different generic forms as simultaneously occurring and mutually constructing, linking them in montage as if to highlight the relations between them. They are, for him, another way of showing the layers of human consciousness and how they are imperfectly joined into a web, in this case pulling together the threads of Gao's oeuvre into one creation. Each of these works is a discrete and separate entity, though there is a certain association between the works at the same time. Such a possibility of overlapping and encroachment is expressed by

Merleau-Ponty in *Le Visible et l'invisible* as the chiasm, a notion which recognizes the gap between distinct entities, such as mind and body, subject and object, and yet allows for the intertwining of the two. He gives the (above-mentioned) concrete example of touching and being touched to demonstrate the more general difference between the sentient and the sensible and to indicate that act and state may overlap so that the body oscillates between being a perceiving object and a subject of perception. Embodied subjectivity arises at the intersection between the tangibility of touch and the act of touching, and the chiasm denotes this space of overlap, this possibility for associations to be made between entities which remain inherently different.

Gao's intermediality acts in a similar way, suggesting coexistence, coincidence and difference in a complex system of acts and states. To illustrate this, it is notable that camera work focusing on the creative act of painting alternates with shots of finished, dried paintings. The two sets of works are linked since they have the same artist, are painted in the same style and are exhibited for the same purpose (to mark 'l'Année Gao'), but one comprises a performative act and the other a representational act, one conveys a state of becoming while the other is now a fixed entity. There is chiasm, both an overlap and a divergence between these existences and their temporal positioning, which demonstrates how intermediality is not simply about reprising a work, but how it widens the scope of cinema's potential, exceeding formal, narrative and ideological restrictions, to produce a new object. Merleau-Ponty's concept helps us to understand how the filming of the creative act and paintings is dependent on the intertwining of its constituent parts, without changing them, and ultimately produces a formally distinct art-object.

Moving from one genre or performance to another combines with the unusual physical placement of actors and the use of oblique camera angles to interrogate where consciousness is located in *La Silhouette*. A feeling of the unexpected or of dissonance arises when the camera is positioned backstage during part of the rehearsal of *Le Quêteur de la mort* or when it points upwards to Gao standing at the top of a flight of stairs in his studio with one hand over an eye (see **Figure 6**). Moments later he is seen lying down on the same spot, and this transposition from upright to prone, vertical to horizontal, creates perceptual and physiological tension. A subsequent sequence is filmed from the perspective of a slowly spinning camera which pans upwards between buildings and captures the sun's rays until an explosion is heard. Almost instantly, a child appears on screen with his hands covering his ears and visibly shouting, though no sound is heard (**Figure 7**). Gao depicts here the possibility of the body speaking for the subject, so that a simple facial gesture unites signs

and meaning in place of an utterance. Such emotions may be read immediately and from the outside, rather than being ‘des faits psychiques cachés au plus profond de la conscience d’autrui’.³⁶ This underlines the phenomenological idea of the body functioning as a site of semiosis. After this, the film cuts to shots of Gao being taken away in an ambulance – something that happened in real life during rehearsals for his play – which add a new, poignant interpretation to the image of him lying at the top of the stairs. This sort of embodiment involves visual disarrangement as it seeks to make the audience feel like they are in the field of performance by looking up or looking on, rather than looking from the outside.

The viewers experience the transcendence of unimpeded watching by going beyond the spatial boundaries of their human vision to attain a god-like omniscience and this is intensified by the use of sacred music. Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* (1748–49) adds melodic support and drama to the dizzying effect of the camera as it moves between buildings before the image of Gao’s collapse. Also, the inclusion of opera has both unifying and differentiating functions, much like the chiasm. In its very essence, opera joins the visual and the musical in a way that exemplifies the idea of a ‘total art’,³⁷ and the fact that it is a Chinese opera, with music composed by Xu Shuya and actors in traditional costume, sometimes playing oriental instruments, means that the screen becomes a window onto another culture (**Figure 8**). However, at the same time as permitting privileged access, distance is created by the action on stage and the tonalities of the music, which are foreign to the Western audience. Elsewhere, the contemporary music of Bernd Zimmermann’s *Requiem for a Young Poet* (1969) recurs, imbuing the images of war-torn buildings that it underscores with disharmony and anguish. The extracts chosen embed human voices – those of fanatical, political leaders and indistinguishable snippets of different languages – in ‘instrumental tonalities’ which combine to produce an auditory canvas of war memories.³⁸ Engendering affective displacement in another way, the reading of the text of the play is interrupted by Gao’s comments regarding the actor’s delivery, while the final performance comprises a monologue with two voices. Sound, here, moves between self and other, between the internal dynamics of rehearsal and the external, public enactment, and finally between meta-narrative and narrative. Elsaesser and Hagener have called sound a ‘third dimension’ and described the ear as ‘an interface between film and spectator, an organ that creates its own sonorous perceptual envelope, but also regulates the way that the human body locates itself in space’.³⁹ Gao modulates the use of sound by making it sometimes present and sometimes absent, occasionally distanced by means of commentary or internalized through silence, so that ‘the

sonorous perceptual envelope' is shown to be pliable and generative of another means of expression of consciousness in cinematic space.

The simultaneity inherent in intermediality brings works to the fore in a way that reflects Merleau-Ponty's description in 'Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie' of how human consciousness works: '[L]es objets derrière mon dos ne me sont pas représentés par quelque opération de la mémoire ou du jugement, ils me sont présents, ils *comptent* pour moi, comme le fond que je ne vois pas n'en continue pas moins d'être présent sous la figure qui le masque en partie.'⁴⁰ The versions of the works, which are similar but not quite the same, come together to replicate the flawed linkages between self and what may be called 'other-to-self' in a to-ing and fro-ing between artistic objects on screen, which are connected, ultimately, by the viewing consciousness. During this movement between past and present images and sounds, that which was implicit in the originals on their own now becomes explicit in the shared work of *La Silhouette*. While the inclusion of Gao's previous works seems, at first, to be dictated by randomness, especially given that their position in the latter part of the film suggests that they are of secondary importance, they reveal themselves to be, in the end, absolutely necessary to his project. They fit into the flow of visual and aural objects which gradually allow meaningful synthesis to take place. From a multitude of sensations produced by the embedded works, a retainable perception results – the documenting of Gao's accomplishments since moving to France – and a discursive interpretation emerges out of this seemingly chaotic assemblage. Also, the interdependence of the elements ensures the survival of the originals. Subtle allusions to this longevity are evident when the sound of a beating heart is heard at the same time as we see certain ink paintings projected inside a church and when a character from the play, before hanging himself, tips up a pot of ink and the camera follows the movement of the black liquid, reminding us of the earlier image of flowing ink during the painting process. These set up, respectively, a correlation between life and art, then death and creation, meaning that the immortality of the work of art is assured. Indeed, *La Silhouette* lives on, assuming the form of a book four years later as an integral component of the more expansive art exhibition concerning Gao and his recent work. While Sze-Lorrain's *Silhouette/Shadow: The Cinematic Art of Gao Xingjian* begins by exploring Gao's deconstructionist filmmaking strategies, it soon transcends generic boundaries by including stills from the film and excerpts from his play and opera, as well as the complete text of the poem 'L'errance de l'oiseau', and in this way borrows from the film's structure. Moreover,

the book is in English, adding a linguistic dimension to the reinvention of what has gone before.

Gao's intermediality avoids rationalist epistemology by blurring distinctions between genres, and in fact he goes so far as to coin new terms for his artistic endeavour: *La Silhouette* is as much a 'cinematic poem' as a 'modern fable'.⁴¹ It comprises, as Bittinger observes, '[une] récréation d'espaces-temps spécifiques travaillant sur le sensible et le visible, à partir de cet entrecroisement des pratiques créatrices'.⁴² By evoking his other recent artistic creations, Gao produces an intricate montage of sensory perceptions so that the film serves as a record of his being-in-the-world, a depository of first-hand experiences externalized by technology. This brings us back to the usefulness of deconstructing Merleau-Pontian phenomenology in order to better understand the mind-body unity in Gao's film. The philosopher describes the human being as 'la source absolue',⁴³ located at the centre of his/her own world, and, in the same way, Gao presents the objects (images, sounds, buildings, landscapes, artworks) and people in his world as having meaning for him only through their relationship to his (artistic) purposes, activities and needs. The meaning of the world can only be understood through the self, so that Gao is not shown as the product of social and physical circumstances, but rather it is through him that they exist. Applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has led us to interpret the multiple viewpoints from which Gao is observed – from behind, side-on, above, below, spiralling downwards – as cinematographic expressions of a subjective positionality which is revealed in this study to be central to the filmmaker's project.

What is more, the philosopher's thinking, from its earlier manifestations preoccupied with consciousness to its later intricacies concerned with the embodied flesh, makes sense of the apparently unconnected and disparate scenes in Gao's film which fluctuate between inner and outer worlds, mind and body. It explains them as variable and personal forms of interaction with the world, in Gao's case involving movement around different landscapes, the contemplation of ruins, interiors and paintings, and the production of a work of art. In this way, the boundary between the individual's subjectivity and the world of phenomena is shown to be negligible and the audience's attention is drawn to the range of sensorial structures deployed by Gao. Indeed, the absence of structures like sound or language, or of physical beings at certain times, is demonstrated to be as important as their presence. When the human subject is replaced by an animal (the bird) or an inanimate object (the plastic bag), intersubjective connections which either dehumanize or universalize come to the fore. Elsewhere and more usually, we have seen how Gao brings the body to the screen as both

perceiving object and subject of perception, another concept originating with Merleau-Ponty. This is achieved, firstly, by foregrounding the relationship between sight and touch in the act of artistic creation, during which the camera lingers on the textures and movement of the ink as it comes into contact with the paper, and on the actions of the brush, used as an extension of the artist's hand. Secondly, it was noted how the images of individuals being seen with a hand or strands of hair over one eye and then seeing another being who returns their gaze or deflects it reduce the distance between both subject and object, sight and touch.

This study has sought to establish a suitably unvoiced dialogue between Gao and Merleau-Ponty: the concentration on the self in *La Silhouette*, manifested simultaneously through the stream-of-consciousness approach and through the images of an active and engaged body, reflects the importance that the philosopher placed on the indivisibility of the mind and body. If Gao's experimental work is not the first francophone film to interrogate the subject in, potentially, phenomenological ways, it contributes at least to the collection of contemporary films which explore how the human body promotes continuity with the world, via the relationship between artist, viewer and artwork. More significantly and uniquely, Gao's tripartite aesthetics, dependent on the full integration of the senses, allows the intervention of several consciousnesses to be felt, which in turn prepares the foundation for the artist's world to be conveyed through the intermedial.

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NOTES

¹ The press release from the Swedish Academy (2000) states that Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 'for an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama'. In the same year, he also received the Premio Letterario Ferionia and the Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur. *Soul Mountain* was first published in Chinese in 1990 (by Lianjing Chubanshe); the English translation (by Mabel Lee) was published by Harper Collins, in 2000.

² Gao Xingjian has, to date, held over thirty exhibitions, the first of which was in 1985 in the foyer of the Beijing People's Art Theatre. *La Silhouette sinon l'ombre* was his first film (2003), and was followed by *Après le déluge* (2008) and *Le Deuil de la beauté* (2013). Gilbert Fong, who has translated some of Gao Xingjian's

plays into English, spoke in the introduction to his paper ‘Why say no to Chineseness? Gao Xingjian and Exile’ about Gao’s wide-ranging achievements (‘Traits chinois, lignes francophones’ conference, 19–20 February 2010, Queen’s University Belfast).

³ Gao Xingjian, *Le Quêteur de la mort, suivi de ‘L’Autre rive’ et ‘La Neige en août’* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

⁴ *La Silhouette sinon l’ombre* was shown in 2003 during the celebrations for ‘l’année Gao’ in Marseille and subsequently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, on 16 December 2006, and at the Musée Guimet, Paris, on 14 May 2012. It was released officially in 2006. The SUDOC catalogue offers a way of accessing the film through interlibrary loan: <<http://www.sudoc.abes.fr>>.

⁵ Irina O. Rajewsky, ‘Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality’, *Intermedialities*, 6 (2005), 43–64 (p. 44).

⁶ Rajewsky, ‘Intermediality’, p. 46; Werner Wolf, ‘Intermediality’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 252–56 (p. 252).

⁷ Rajewsky, ‘Intermediality’, p. 54.

⁸ Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 40.

⁹ While there are several monographs and edited volumes on Gao’s writings and theatre, no substantial, critical study exists of his films. The edited book by Fiona Sze-Lorrain, *Silhouette/Shadow: The Cinematic Art of Gao Xingjian* (Paris: Contours, 2007) functions as a companion piece to Gao’s film, describing the work and translating Gao’s stated intentions for the benefit of an anglophone audience. Sze-Lorrain writes the foreword (pp. 9–13) and the section ‘Gao Xingjian: Who is *Xingjian Gao*?’ (pp. 181–90).

¹⁰ Gao’s words are translated by Mabel Lee in the section ‘Concerning *Silhouette/Shadow*’ in Sze-Lorrain, *Silhouette/Shadow*, p. 22.

¹¹ Gao is quoted in the interview with Natalie Bittinger and Guillaume Thouroude, ‘La Vitre brisée dans l’encre de Chine: Gao Xingjian et le cinéma’, in *Traits chinois/lignes francophones: écritures, images, cultures*, ed. by Rosalind Silvester and Guillaume Thouroude (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2012), pp. 87–99 (p. 93).

¹² Nathalie Bittinger, ‘Gao Xingjian cinéaste: traces d’ombres et recompositions transartistiques’, in *Traits chinois/lignes francophones*, ed. by Silvester and Thouroude, pp. 100–19 (p. 102).

¹³ Bittinger and Thouroude, ‘La Vitre brisée’, p. 99.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques* [presented to la Société française de philosophie, 23 November 1946] (Paris: Verdier, 1996), p. 104.

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* [Paris: Gallimard, 1945] (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 161.

¹⁶ George Butte, ‘Suture and the Narration of Subjectivity in Film’, *Poetics Today*, 29.2 (2008), 277–308 (p. 281).

¹⁷ James S. Williams, *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 3 (both quotations).

¹⁸ An interesting discussion of Merleau-Pontian philosophy, visibility and embodiment is offered by Vivian Sobchak in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* suivi de 'Notes de travail' (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 162.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 178.

²¹ Herbert Plügge, 'Man and His Body', in *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism*, ed. by Stuart F. Spicker, trans. by Erling Eng (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), pp. 293–311 (p. 298).

²² The following lines from *L'Errance de l'oiseau* are read out:

Si tu es un oiseau
 Rien d'autre qu'un oiseau
 Au moment où le vent se lève
 Tu t'envoles
 Ecarquillant ton œil tout rond
 Tu regardes dans l'obscurité ce sacré bas monde
 Au-delà du marais des ennuis
 En vol de nuit, sans but précis
 A l'écoute du sifflement de l'air et le cœur battant
 Quelle aisance dans l'errance.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 226.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p. 231.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Bittinger, 'Gao Xingjian cinéaste', p. 114 (both quotations).

²⁹ Franck Dalmas, 'Lived Images/Imagined Existences: A Phenomenology of Image Creation in the Works of Michel Tournier and Photography', in *Existence, Historical Fabulation, Destiny*, ed. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Analecta Husserliana*, 99 (2009), 93–106 (p. 93).

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Le Cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie', in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), p. 105.

³¹ Elizabeth Stephens, 'Sensation Machine: Film, Phenomenology and the Training of the Senses', *Continuum*, 26.4 (2012), 529–39 (p. 532).

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 109.

³³ Gao Xingjian, *L'Errance de l'oiseau* (Paris: Seuil, 2003) was published as a box set of black and white prints along with the text of the poem.

³⁴ Barbara Yien, 'Life as Art as Cinemoem: Gao Xingjian's *Silhouette/Shadow*', <<http://www.cerisepress.com/01/01/life-as-art-as-cinemoem-gao-xingjians-silhouette-shadow>> [accessed 10 September 2012].

³⁵ Gao quoted in Bittinger and Thouroude, 'La Vitre brisée', p. 90.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 'Le Cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie', p. 94.

³⁷ The term is used by Sze-Lorrain, *Silhouette/Shadow*, p. 16.

³⁸ Gao Xingjian cited in translation in Fiona Sze-Lorrain, 'Cinema, Too, Is Literature', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (March 2008) <<http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/sze>> [accessed 30 May 2017].

³⁹ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (New York/London: Routledge, 2010), p. 137 and p. 10.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 'Le Cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie', p. 92.

⁴¹ Gao's terms are translated into English in Sze-Lorrain, *Silhouette/Shadow*, p. 19.

⁴² Bittinger, 'Gao Xingjian cinéaste', p. 102.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. iii.

[ROSALIND SILVESTER

GAO XINGJIAN'S *LA SILHOUETTE SINON L'OMBRE*]