

Reviewed by Philippe Bédard

# *The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement*

by **Jordan Schonig**.

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*The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement*, a first book by Jordan Schonig, is a unique and deeply engaging foray into some of cinema's numerous and often overlooked motion forms. By studying six different forms of cinematic motion, the book also, and importantly, presents a method for critically engaging with the movements in and of cinema. Significantly, Schonig proposes what we could call an alternative phenomenology of cinematographic movement, a way to "re-examine an aspect of cinema so fundamental that it rarely garners sustained theoretical attention."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout six chapters and a conclusion, Schonig consistently and convincingly highlights the fundamental strangeness of movement when it is imaged—that is, when it is framed (temporally and spatially) and made available for reviewing. Each chapter deals with a different kind of motion form, from the "wind in the trees" of early cinema to unusual camera movements to the novel effects of compression glitches. None of Schonig's examples are strictly limited to any particular period in film history, as he prioritizes tracing links between recognizable phenomena, regardless of their context or, for the most part, of their function within narrative films.

1 Jordan Schonig, *The Shape of Motion: Cinema and the Aesthetics of Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 28.

As Schonig illustrates in *The Shape of Motion*, even the unpredictable movement of fire, water, and smoke and the often overlooked subtleties of human movement can be “pinned down and pictured on film.”<sup>2</sup> This makes such phenomena available for aesthetic judgment, but it also transforms them. A persistent assumption throughout the book is that the simple fact of capturing and representing motion on-screen creates the conditions for an alternative engagement with movements we might encounter in our regular lives but which we might not be capable of witnessing. This stems from the fact that cinema allows us all to see the same images “through the same set of eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Although Schonig does not make the connection to Vivian Sobchack’s description of the cinema’s unique duality as “an act of seeing that makes itself seen,” his account of our ability to *see the seeing* of movement through the cinema reaches the same conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Put differently, cinema offers us a perception of movement once removed; already bracketed from our habitual modes of perception, cinema makes it possible for us to attend to movement phenomenologically.

Chapter 1 illustrates this perfectly, as it deals with the “contingent motion” of smoke, water, and the wind in trees, both in early cinematographic experiments and in more recent computer-animated films with their ever more realistic particle effects.<sup>5</sup> To explain what led audiences of early cinema and viewers of contemporary digital animation to enjoy the contingency of these natural phenomena, Schonig insists that these movements are not merely unplanned but *unplannable*. While Immanuel Kant may have judged these “formless” phenomena incompatible with judgments of beauty, Schonig insists on cinema’s innate ability to give them form and thus make them available for aesthetic evaluation.<sup>6</sup> Hence, whether we consider the wind’s interaction with the leaves in the background of the Lumières’ *Repas de bébé* (*Baby’s Dinner*, 1895) or the elaborate particle effects of contemporary computer-generated imagery (CGI), the fundamental strangeness of cinematic motion is already felt in the fact that the image “frames” a moment and a movement that can therefore be reviewed. In this, cinema offers the capacity to reveal the intricacies of the movements we habitually perceive but to which we rarely pay attention.

The second chapter’s focus on cinema’s revelation of the countless movements contained within the simplest “habitual gestures” serves as a continuation of Schonig’s interest in the revelatory effect of cinema’s imaging of movement.<sup>7</sup> Here, the author turns his attention to the body and face of actors as yet another site for witnessing contingent motion.<sup>8</sup> Schonig attentively

2 Schonig, 26.

3 Schonig, 27.

4 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). See specifically Schonig, *Shape of Motion*, 27, 186.

5 See also Jordan Gowanlock, *Animating Unpredictable Effects: Nonlinearity in Hollywood’s R&D Complex* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

6 Schonig, *Shape of Motion*, 26.

7 Schonig, 43.

8 This link is made all the more concrete when Schonig quotes Jean-Marie Straub, who alludes to the “wind in the trees” anecdote as a useful point of departure for appreciating the contingencies of filming human motion. See Schonig, 57; and

describes the emergence of the unexpected in the habitual gestures of post-war realist cinema, with examples from *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), and *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1967). He also draws out the medium's propensity to make visible often unnoticed subtleties in human movement, a point most cleverly illustrated in his analysis of how Martin Arnold's found-footage work renders palpable the near-infinite articulations contained within even the simplest gestures.<sup>9</sup>

The transition from the second to the third chapter is made similarly seamless by the author's continued focus on the actor's face as a site for witnessing "durational metamorphosis."<sup>10</sup> Descriptions of contemplative images of slowly morphing faces, in Carlos Reygada's *Silent Light* (2007) and Bill Viola's video installation *The Locked Garden* (2000), are accompanied by analyses of the barely perceptible transformations of clouds in James Benning's *Ten Skies* (2004) and similar images in contemporary slow cinema. As rigorous as it is evocative, Schonig's account of the metamorphosis on display in the faces of Viola's subjects makes salient the differences between related but crucially distinct forms of movement on screen (e.g., between the *transformation* and *translocation* of the head).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the author's interpretation of Esther's resurrection in *Silent Light* conveys the minute changes witnessed in the character's face, again highlighting cinema's propensity to offer us a new perspective on often overlooked—or even barely perceptible—forms of motion.<sup>12</sup>

Chapters 4 and 5 offer the most interesting studies of cinema's motion forms, at least in my extremely biased opinion as someone invested in the study of (non-anthropomorphic) camera movements. Schonig begins by introducing the concept of "spatial unfurling" to describe the peculiar effect created by lateral camera movements.<sup>13</sup> In an attempt to forgo some of the shortcomings of usual film-phenomenological accounts of camera movement and thereby circumvent the "persistent assumption . . . that a moving camera seems to move *us* through the film's world along with it," the author offers "an alternative phenomenology of camera movement built on . . . particular ways of moving the camera that suppress the illusion of embodied movement and exploit the aesthetic potential of the flatness of the screen."<sup>14</sup> This approach to camera movement enables Schonig to discuss the screen's flatness as more than a mere "obstacle to the richness of an immersive cinematic experience."<sup>15</sup> That is not to say that the author denies that the camera can—and indeed does—furnish viewers with convincing illusions of bodily movement.<sup>16</sup> Rather, what Schonig attempts to do—and in my opinion suc-

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Jean-Marie Straub, "Gespräch mit Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub," *Filmkritik* 10 (1968): 689–690.

9 Schonig, *Shape of Motion*, 70–71.

10 Schonig, 74.

11 Schonig, 87–90.

12 Schonig, 90–95.

13 Schonig, 99.

14 Schonig, 100.

15 Schonig, 114.

16 See Scott C. Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

ceeds in doing—is showcase how the camera does not *necessarily* or *automatically* reproduce these sensations.

Indeed, both chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how unusual ways of moving the camera can create effects on screen that challenge expectations as to how cameras should behave, at least in the context of narrative films. For one, the spatial unfurling Schonig introduces in chapter 4 casts aside the illusion of depth produced by most camera movement, foregrounding instead the flatness of the screen and the boundedness of the image. Through the example of lateral camera movements in Leos Carax's *Mauvais sang* (*Bad Blood*, 1986) and *Holy Motors* (2012), the author convincingly demonstrates the alternative effects produced by ways of moving the camera that deny the kinesthetic sympathy typically generated by camera movement. The recourse to experimental films such as Michael Snow's *La région centrale* (1971) and Ken Jacobs's *The Georgetown Loop* (1996) and *Disorient Express* (1996) only serve to make this conclusion more evident.

Interestingly, just as Jacobs's experiment "disrupts our perceptual habit of participating in what we ordinarily perceive as the camera's movement," the fourth chapter achieves a distancing effect in the context of the book's larger discussion of camera movement.<sup>17</sup> Having set aside cinema's proclivity toward "forward movement into depth" to discuss spatial unfurling, Schonig returns to it in chapter 5 by focusing on the follow shot, a technique that puts the camera behind the character, following them and denying us any access to their face.<sup>18</sup> These characteristics make this an image that is neither quite subjective nor objective but rather "trajective," where *trajectivity* defines "a distillation of towardness, the vectorial nature of human will itself."<sup>19</sup> This is what makes follow shots—particularly those of Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989) and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003)—such apt objects to study, as they offer "an image of this trajectivity distilled, made palpable."<sup>20</sup> Importantly, Schonig's sustained analysis of the follow shot allows us to appreciate the crucial importance of cinema's imaging of movement; it renders visible and repeatable a particular set of experiential conditions.

The sixth and final chapter of *The Shape of Motion* sees Schonig shift from the camera movements discussed in the past two chapters to a phenomenological account of the compression glitches we regularly encounter with digital video. While I do not share Schonig's optimism when he suggests that

17 Schonig, *Shape of Motion*, 121.

18 Although quite similar, this technique is distinct from the double-dolly shot often seen in the films of Spike Lee (a technique in which the actor is passively transported on a platform with or immediately in front of the camera) and from what I have alternatively termed third-person or "exo-centric" images (images created by having the camera *attached to but away from* the actor's body, *looking back* at them). See Philippe Bédard, "Disembodied Perspective: Third-Person Images in GoPro Videos," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 9 (Summer 2015), <https://alphavillejournal.com/Issue9/HTML/ArticleBedard.html>; Philippe Bédard, "L'espace exo-centrique au cinéma," *Écranosphère* 4, no. 1 (2020), <http://www.ecranosphere.ca/article.php?id=81>; and Philippe Bédard, "Going beyond the Human Perspective: GoPro Cameras and (Non)anthropocentric Ways of Seeing," in *Versatile Camcorders: Looking at the GoPro Movement*, ed. Winfried Gerling and Florian Krautkrämer (Berlin: Kadmos, 2021).

19 Schonig, *Shape of Motion*, 131.

20 Schonig, 133.

“the regularity of glitches . . . sensitizes us to movement on screen in a new way,” I do applaud his astute description of the way these glitches serve as traces of the algorithmic processes at the core of our contemporary viewing practices.<sup>21</sup> Glitches—and more specifically their intentional use within datamoshing—create an “occasion for a sustained aesthetic encounter with that familiar but generally overlooked aspect of compressed video,” encouraging what Schonig describes as “a mode of perceptual reflexivity (a reflection on my processes of motion perception).”<sup>22</sup>

Schonig’s main interest throughout *The Shape of Motion* lies in the way cinema allows us to gain a new perspective on forms of movement. I would even go so far as describing the book’s very methodological contribution as being its encouragement to rediscover the fundamental strangeness of cinematic motion. In conclusion, the book presents a thoughtful and deeply engaging piece of scholarship on one of cinema’s most fundamental characteristics: its ability to make movement visible. I strongly believe the book should be considered for best first book awards, and I hope many will be inspired by the work Schonig has initiated here. Finally, while some might feel the approximately twenty-page chapter leaves much up for discussion, I am of the opinion that this would be missing the central project of the book: to lay the groundwork and develop a method for a new kind of phenomenology of cinematic motion writ large.

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21 Schonig, 155.

22 Schonig, 170. As the author explains, “datamoshing” refers to “a technique that exploits compression glitches for aesthetic effect.” Schonig, 151.