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Phenomenology of In-betweenness: The Shimmering Images in Jane Schoenbrun's Films

Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of phenomenology and trans cinema through Jane Schoenbrun's films, arguing that they evoke the lived, sensory experience of in-betweenness and liminality. Drawing on theories by Sara Ahmed, Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, and Eliza Steinbock, I contend that Schoenbrun's cinema privileges affective resonance, haptic visuality, and temporal ambiguity over narrative resolution. Through digital textures, tactile imagery, and fragmented timelines, these films invite viewers to inhabit uncertainty and somatic disquiet as ongoing, *shimmering* events. Such cinematic approaches offer resistance by sensitizing audiences to new understandings of embodiment and identity in an era of contested bodily autonomy.

Keywords: trans cinema; phenomenology of cinema; shimmering image; Jane Schoenbrun; in-betweenness.

Introduction

“What you know, you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. There's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there.”

Morpheus, *The Matrix* (1999)

Recent debates about trans representation in cinema provoked the question of appropriating transition narratives. Multiple awarded Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Pérez* (2024), a musical following a Mexican cartel leader's gender transition, exemplifies this tension. Despite its Cannes acclaim, critics¹ have condemned the film as a “profoundly retrograde portrayal” that recycles harmful tropes: the conflation of surgery with moral absolution, and transition framed as a “death” of one's former self. *Emilia Pérez* in this discourse is an example of how mainstream cinema prioritizes representational narratives, reducing transness to a metaphorical rebirth rather than an

¹ GLAAD, “*Emilia Pérez* is Not Good Trans Representation,” GLAAD, November 15, 2024, <https://glaad.org/emilia-perez-is-not-good-trans-representation/>.

embodied, ongoing process. These debates, situated within broader social and political contexts (particularly those concerning trans and gender self-determination rights) inspire this paper's exploration of critical cinematic language that moves beyond conventional representation. This reflects a call to understand trans identity as more complex and fluid than traditional biological or socio-political definitions allow.

The film phenomenology, as a branch of the film theory, investigates the experience of viewing: building on the ontology of the cinematic image, theorists in this field have sought to establish a framework for understanding film at the level of sensory, and bodily experience. The body, often imagined as fixed and predetermined by birth, becomes the subject of phenomenological inquiry, but does everybody experience the world in the same way? This question increasingly preoccupies scholars concerned with bodies that resist easy categorization – bodies with disabilities, female bodies, trans bodies. Among the most influential interventions is Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which poses a question of how orientation – both sexual and spatial – shapes our experience of the world. And how are those experiences interpreted in cinema?

Building on phenomenological theories of cinema, this paper argues that Jane Schoenbrun's films *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021) and *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) construct the world of trans experience (rooted in their own *egg-crack* experience of gender transition). By privileging sensory disorientation over narrative resolution, Schoenbrun invites viewers to feel the somatic uncertainty of dysphoria, through the world of what Eliza Steinbock terms *shimmering images*. In this paper, I will analyze films precisely through the lens of the aforementioned theories, which emphasize the importance of the film language through which the idea of nonlinearity and anti-conventional narratives is communicated. Where films like *Emilia Pérez* fixate on transition as a narrative event, Schoenbrun evokes the lived phenomenology of in-betweenness.

Although themes of liminality, dissociation, digital hauntings, and the porousness of reality are not only related to trans experience and resonate across many subjectivities, they are also undeniably shaped by trans *knowledge*. As Eliza Steinbock writes, "Culturally, trans has a privileged relation to an aesthetics of change, particularly in comparison to the often negative framework for change emerging in relation to ageing or illness."² By rejecting the demand for explicit trans visibility and the event of transition, Schoenbrun's haptic aesthetics (digital textures, distorted audio) invite viewers to feel dysphoria's disquiet rather than consume it as a cinematic spectacle.

² Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019), ix.

Trans cinema: a phenomenological approach

When discussing trans or transgender film, recent studies emphasize the need to first redefine the concept of trans film (such as *Transgender Cinema* by Rebecca Bell-Metereau or *Trans New Wave Cinema* by Akkadia Ford). What is particularly notable in these studies is that the authors seek solutions by proposing an expanded scope for films that do not necessarily have to include explicit representations of trans identities' manifestations in cinema that are defined through "cross-dressing, drag, and other intersexed or nonconforming gender categories, genderqueer behaviour, or identification."³ These studies raise an exceptionally challenging question, especially considering Bell-Metereau's observation that "because one inherent feature of trans experience is the blurring of boundaries, the task of delineating categories of sex and gender presents an almost paradoxical challenge. Setting limitations or rigid definitions may distort rather than reveal the lived experiences of transgender people."⁴ Akkadia Ford similarly notes that Trans New Wave Cinema represents "an era of a profoundly new cinema centralizing the lived experiences of transgender embodiment and sexualities"⁵ in which "filmmakers are continually creating, adapting, and improvising cinematic strategies to relate trans narratives"⁶ beyond representation and mainstream cinema tropes.

In a particular cinematic universe of Jane Schoenbrun's films, the meaning of "trans cinema" exceeds the representational framework and explores the world of the *experience* instead. Schoenbrun's films focus on adolescents immersed in the virtual world of media: in *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, the protagonist faces a challenge on social media, while in *I Saw the TV Glow*, the protagonists identify with a popular television series that haunts them. Schoenbrun deliberately eschews the exploitative tropes that have historically plagued trans representation in cinema – such as narratives culminating in trauma, fetishized medical transitions, or reductive "coming out" dramaturgy. Instead, their work employs a queer allegorical mode, reframing trans experience as a phenomenological reorientation. This idea corresponds with Sara Ahmed's conception of queer orientation as a disorienting "twisting" of bodily and spatial relations:

Life itself is often imagined in terms of 'having a direction' which decides from the present what the future should be [...] Indeed, it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is what we are. The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the 'toward' marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present.⁷

³ Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Transgender Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 3.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Akkadia Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2021), 33.

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 20.

Schoenbrun's films approach transition not as a discrete narrative event but as a metaphorical rupture in normative temporality and embodiment. Thus, the idea of representation does not unfold within the conventional frameworks of trans cinema but plunges into deep emotional and psychological processes of questioning identity and belonging to the world, best understood through a phenomenological approach. This emphasis on lived experience, sensory engagement, and intercorporeality makes phenomenology a particularly resonant methodology for analyzing trans cinematic aesthetics, which often foregrounds themes of bodily transition, dislocation, and affective dissonance. Vivian Sobchack's foundational work, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), situates cinematic spectatorship as an intercorporeal exchange between the viewer and the film's expressive *body*. She argues that both film and viewer share a common structure of embodied intentionality, which allows the viewer to "feel" the film through their own sensing body. For trans cinema – where bodily presence, dysphoria, and shifting corporeality are central – this intersubjective field of sensation is crucial. This phenomenological attention is further extended in Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), which theorizes *haptic visuality* – a mode of watching in which the eyes function like organs of touch. Especially in an intercultural cinema, she argues, images often seek to touch the viewer, generating affect not through clarity but through texture, opacity, and proximity, "the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imaged."⁸ Marks writes, "While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image."⁹ This mode is essential to trans films that seek not to explain or represent transition, but to evoke its sensation.

Writing specifically about trans cinema, Eliza Steinbock builds on these ideas in *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019), where they argue that trans cinema often disorients visual mastery and offers an aesthetic of becoming. Steinbock draws from phenomenology to conceptualize how trans bodies are not simply represented onscreen, but felt as unstable, in motion, in tension. The "shimmering" image becomes a metaphor for fluid embodiment: "The world-making practice of film in the transfeminist perspective of shimmering opens a line of escape from thinking in set binary oppositions by grasping the ongoing event of differential becomings."¹⁰ In trans cinema, phenomenology allows us to feel gender not as identity but as event, encounter, and unfolding:

[...] transgender and cinematic aesthetics alike operate through the bodily practice and technological principle of disjunction. More radically, within practices of filmmaking, delinking and relinking across the cuts,

⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke University Press, 2000), 163.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, 4.

gaps, fissures take place in the normal course of cinematography, rather than being exceptions. This makes it the art form most suited to a politically advantageous comparison with transgender forms of embodiment. Moreover, approaching embodiment through film reroutes the emphasis on sex/gender difference through aesthetics.¹¹

This connection between phenomenology and trans cinema also offers a way to rethink *temporality*. Conventional film narratives often rely on linear time. But Schoenbrun's films frequently disrupt this structure, foregrounding temporal ambiguity, memory, and delay. This intervention is deeply connected with the phenomenological category of time as duration – Merleau-Ponty wrote in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that time is not simply a sequence but an experience of duration. Schoenbrun's *We're All Going to the World's Fair* and *I Saw the TV Glow* disentangle in fragmented time, where moments stretch and resonate across multiple timelines, mirroring the nonlinear temporal experience. Those films intricately weave together haptic visuality, disjunctive temporality, and somatic spectatorship to materialize the affective and sensory dimensions of non-belonging.

Ultimately, phenomenology provides tools for attending to what often escapes mainstream cinema's storytelling purposes – the sensations, atmospheres, and corporeal intensities. It resists the demand to fix or define gender visually and instead honours the ways trans films move us – somatically, affectively, and ethically. In this context, Eliza Steinbock's concept of shimmering images provides a transformative framework for understanding trans cinema through an aesthetic of change, where gender transitions are mediated not by static representation but through a dynamic, emergent formal cinematic approach.

Shimmering worlds: *We Are All Going to the World's Fair* and *I Saw the TV Glow*

Steinbock's phenomenological conceptual framework finds a parallel in Schoenbrun's cinema, where the experience of in-betweenness is explored through stories that foreground liminality. In their films, the allegory of liminality conjures an alternate world – mediated by the internet or television series – that promise new perspectives and possibilities for life. The entanglement of space, where the body is both embodied and resistant to fixed meanings, becomes a pivotal moment in storytelling. In Schoenbrun's own words, their films are about “something I think a lot of trans people understand [...] The tension between the space that you exist within, which feels like home, and the simultaneous terror and liberation of understanding that that space might not be able to hold you in your true form.”¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Holden Seidltz, “Jane Schoenbrun finds horror close to home,” *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/jane-schoenbrun-finds-horror-close-to-home>.

At the heart of *We're All Going to the World's Fair* is Casey, a teenager whose participation in an online horror challenge becomes a vehicle for exploring the porous boundaries between her corporeal self and her digital persona. To join, she performs a strange ritual and begins recording her experiences, posting unsettling videos that blur the line between reality and performance. As Casey goes deeper, she starts to feel her sense of self unravel, unsure if the changes she describes are real or imagined. The film explores her growing isolation and vulnerability, especially as she forms a tense online connection with a mysterious older man who claims to have initiated the game of challenge. Rather than offering a narrative plot and resolution, the story immerses us in Casey's emotional world, highlighting her search for identity, the dangers and allure of the internet culture, and the confusion of adolescence.

As the film unfolds in a haunting and ambiguous formal cinematic space, it focuses less on supernatural horror and more on the psychological impact of loneliness and the desire for transformation. Therefore, the film's aesthetic strategies (webcam footage, low-resolution digital images, and close-ups of skin pressed against glass) evoke Marks's haptic visuality – a mode of seeing that privileges tactile intimacy over optical distance. Marks writes that “the act of viewing is one in which both I and the object of my vision constitute each other”¹³, dissolving the distinction between seer and seen and rendering the act of looking itself a form of touch. Schoenbrun's use of webcam rawness and digital artefacts is not merely a stylistic choice but a means of materializing dissociation: when Casey presses her fingertips into her skin in front of the webcam, or when she watches the influencer gently touches the lens in a video designed to lull the viewers into a relaxed, almost hypnotic state, the audience is invited to experience the protagonist's disembodiment as something tactile, as if the screen itself becomes a permeable membrane between bodies. The camera's proximity (overexposing or distorting Casey's face) mirrors the instability and ongoing negotiation of her selfhood. These moments resist the cinematic impulse toward clarity, foregrounding instead the ambiguity and fluidity of identity. Much of the film spaces are lightened by the glow of computer screens and low-resolution digital haze, which gives the images a soft, flickering, almost ghostly texture. Recalling Steinbock's theory – this is not just a visual effect, it reflects Casey's uncertain sense of self as she navigates the blurred boundaries between the online world and her reality. The film uses this shimmering aesthetic to evoke the feeling of being in between states: not fully one thing or another but suspended in a space of potential change. Scenes shift between stillness and sudden movement, darkness and bursts of light, echoing the emotional instability and longing for transformation that Casey experiences. The screen itself becomes a metaphorical surface where identity is both reflected and distorted, where the desire to escape or become something new is both alluring and unsettling.

The sound landscape of the films further destabilizes the viewer's sense of bodily boundaries. Muffled whispers, glitchy audio, and ASMR-like sequences operate as sensations that are registered not through narrative comprehension but through

¹³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 183.

visceral, bodily response. During Casey's late-night rituals, the static hiss of the microphone and the rhythmic cadence of her breath become somatic triggers, mirroring the physiological unease of dysphoria. Sobchack's assertion: "Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved"¹⁴, illustrates the notion of how the film's sensory strategies implicate the viewer's own body in the protagonist's alienation.

While *World's Fair* explores digital liminality through bodily and haptic instability, *I Saw the TV Glow* extends shimmering into the realm of temporality and memory. *I Saw the TV Glow* is also a coming-of-age film that explores the disorienting passage from adolescence to adulthood through the lens of media obsession and repressed identity. It follows Owen, a shy teenager in the 1990s, who becomes captivated by a mysterious late-night TV show introduced to him by an older classmate, Maddy. Their obsession with the show, *The Pink Opaque*, fractures their grasp on linear time and corporeal coherence. As their bond deepens, the line between reality and the show's fictional world begins to blur, reflecting Owen's internal struggles with isolation, longing, and self-realization.

Schoenbrun manipulates narrative time through recursive editing, repeated scenes, and VHS footage, creating a temporality that refuses straightforward progression. The phenomenological notion of temporal thickness – the experience of time as layered, non-linear, and affectively charged – helps to elucidate these strategies. Rather than moving cleanly from childhood to adulthood, Owen's journey is marked by repetition and slippage, reflecting the non-linear, recursive dynamics of dysphoria and memory. For Owen, time becomes a loop in which past and present collapse, rendering existence not as a linear journey, but as an ongoing reorientation. In one emblematic scene, Owen watches the final episode of *The Pink Opaque*: the protagonists, Isabel and Tara, have been captured by the series' villain, Mr. Melancholy, who buries them alive and promises they will live forever in the Midnight Realm. "It's such a wonderful, wonderful prison", he says, while showing the water globe with Owen's figure inside, watching TV. This scene is crucial for understanding the allegory. At the same time, it operates on the haptic level: the static vibrations and bends in the TV picture mirror Owen's bodily disquiet. This moment of distortion exemplifies Sobchack's notion of embodied intentionality, in which "film also presents the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence *as the film*."¹⁵ The screen becomes a kind of membrane, a boundary through which Owen's dissociation is somatically transmitted to the audience.

The mediated realm (internet and television) operates as both sanctuary and prison, a duality that complicates prevailing narratives about the liberatory potential of online spaces for trans subjects. In both films, mediated spaces – the internet in *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, and television in *I Saw the TV Glow* – function

¹⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

as zones that simultaneously enable and destabilize identity formation. Rather than offering stable mirrors for identity, these mediated realms exist between recognition and alienation, intimacy and estrangement. Casey's online performances blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, self and avatar. Her videos are not confessional truths but relics of affective instability, resisting stable interpretation. Similarly, Owen's relationship with *The Pink Opaque* becomes a site of deferred becoming – a space where identity is glimpsed but never fully attained. Both films thus resist the narrative of digital or televisual spaces as purely emancipatory. Instead, they foreground the double-edged nature of mediated existence: its capacity to open new modes of becoming while also amplifying dissociation and alienation.

Conclusion

Schoenbrun's films exemplify cinematic capacity to destabilize vision and reconfigure spectatorship as an embodied negotiation of uncertainty. These films refuse the demand for trans stories to "make sense" within cis frameworks, but also Hollywood narratives. As Steinbock asserts, trans cinema is a reflection of the notion that "trans ontologies are process-oriented, rather than object-oriented"¹⁶. Schoenbrun's films approach in a certain way aligns with the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999), which Lilly Wachowski later acknowledged as an "unintentional trans allegory".¹⁷ Like Neo's awakening to the desert of the real, Schoenbrun's protagonists navigate liminal spaces where identity fractures and reforms through haptic textures that reject the cishnormative visual mastery. Both worlds leverage speculative fiction to allegorize the experience, but where *The Matrix*'s red pill metaphor risks oversimplification, Schoenbrun's films dwell in the unresolved realm of "there's-something-wrong-with-the-world", treating dysphoria not as a problem to solve, but as a somatic language to inhabit. As we testify, our world and time are marked by the climate of immense fear of self-identification narratives, because the new understandings of trans identity are dismantling the position of political control over the body. Jane Schoenbrun's films quietly protest - by abandoning basic mainstream definitions and embracing narratives that align with feeling, experience, and humanity.

¹⁶ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 12.

¹⁷ "The Matrix is a 'trans metaphor', Lilly Wachowski says," *BBC*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53692435>.

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