

# Feeling Seen Through Scene Feeling

Determining the Origin of an Experience of Feeling Seen Through an Encounter With the Film

*Sound of Metal* (Marder, 2019)

Knut-Egil Knutsen



Master's Thesis in Media Studies

Department of Media and Communication

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

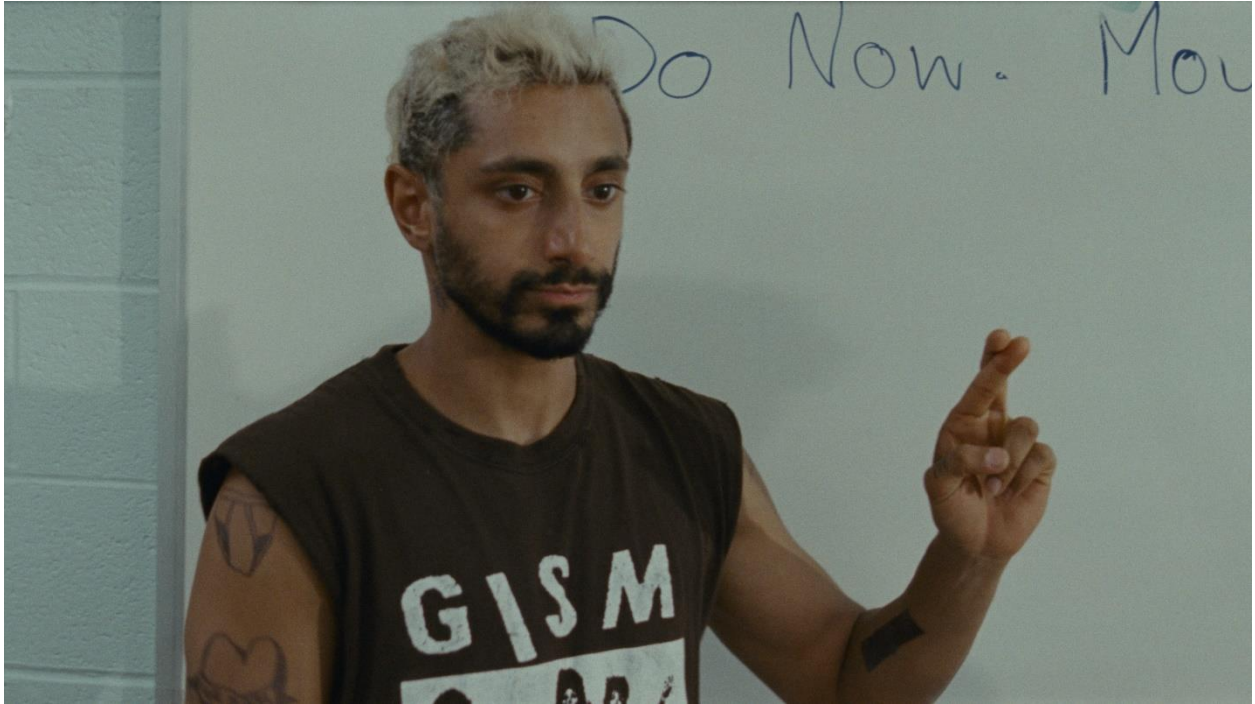
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# Abstract

With a focus on a particular viewing, the thesis looks at and analyzes the meeting between viewing subject and the film *Sound of Metal* (Darius Marder, 2019). By using a phenomenological approach as described by Vivian Sobchack, and further developed by Julian Hanich, the thesis aims to examine the functions of the film experience as part of the human experience. Through examples derived from an initial viewing, and subsequent analysis of select scenes, the thesis highlights how the film operates on various levels and what situational factors in the viewing subject's life that influenced the reception of the film.

# Foreword

Film has since I was a child been an important part of my life. Through many profound experiences, cinema in general has been a way for me to affirm my connection to the world. I would like to thank the University of Oslo for allowing me to delve deeper into my life-long relationship with cinema and Kjetil Rødje for guiding me along the way (Fall 2019 - Fall 2022). Constituting a major part of how I make sense of the world and the myriad of situations that can arise therein, it has been a privilege to be able to further study my relationship with moving images.

I owe a big thank to my aunt Sunniva for all her patience, help proofreading, and general good spirits.

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## Introduction

After a trip abroad in summer 2021 I was confined to a mandatory three-day isolation in my own home. All through the corona pandemic my hometown of Oslo was subject to a rather strict lockdown policy, but this was the first time since the beginning of the pandemic that I was basically under house arrest, with no allowance for social contact other than the strictly necessary. It was on day two of this isolation that I sat down to watch a film I had had on my radar for a while. The film was *Sound of Metal* from 2019, directed by Darius Marder and starring Riz Ahmed and Olivia Cooke. I've been a fan of the actor Riz Ahmed ever since I saw him in the HBO series *The Night Of* in 2016 and the film had been favorably reviewed by Eric Kohn on the web-based publication Indiewire (2019, Indiewire.com) After I had finished watching the film I went outside and felt connected to the world, despite my social isolation. I felt relieved and elated, and most of all I felt *seen*. I wasn't alone, I wasn't isolated, I was part of an understanding community. This dissonance between my social circumstance and what I was feeling, led me to a few questions about the film experience that this thesis aims to answer.

*Sound of Metal* (2019) by Darius Marder centers around heavy metal drummer Ruben who loses his hearing, and therefore his whole life as he knows it. This shocking upset in his life leads him to confront a few choices he needs to make moving forward. Will he be able to regain some hearing capacity in order to go back to his old life performing music with his girlfriend, or is he now destined to live the rest of his life as deaf. The movie poses the question of what to do when your life has been revolving around performing sound and you're suddenly unable to hear at all. Is our ability to hear integrally necessary to achieve a fully worthy human life and experience? Or is there a way to embrace the alternative way of existing that being deaf facilitates? The movie confronts the idea of total hearing loss being a handicap. It introduces Ruben to a deaf community that rejects the idea of hearing-loss being a hindrance to embracing yourself and experiencing the world on your own terms. This community shows Ruben how technological advances like a cochlear implant limit your ability to be fully yourself when deaf. On the other hand, the music is his connection to his love interest, Lou, and Ruben's main goal is to get his hearing back so he can get back to her. Ultimately the question becomes whether Ruben chooses to accept himself and his new circumstances but also then losing Lou, or if he



should break with the deaf community, try to live life as a hearing person, and then also getting to be with Lou.

This thesis aims to explore this meeting between me as a viewing-subject and the film *Sound of Metal*. At the surface level I do not have much in common with the main characters of the film, nor are their circumstances especially familiar or reminiscent of the circumstances I found myself in at the time. So, what in the film experience can help explain the overwhelming of emotion I felt towards the end of the film, and the following elation and feeling of connection to a world and a life that in and around this period was filled with so many factors that kept me from feeling this way through other means?

### ***Scope of this thesis***

There is a scene in *Modern Times* (1936) where Charlie Chaplin's Tramp character is in an office with a priest's wife. They're both waiting for someone else, so they have no story-related reason to interact. For the most part they sit there in awkward silence, but then a moment arises which is instantly recognizable. After having a sip of tea, the priest's wife's stomach starts growling. Enough so, that her dog starts barking. The Tramp also takes a sip, and his stomach starts growling as well. The uncomfortableness of the moment is exacerbated when in an attempt to mask the noise, The Tramp turns on the radio, only to have it tune in to an advertisement relating to stomach issues.

This, in many ways a mundane moment, is also so easy to identify with for anyone who has been in a similar situation. The setting could have been the waiting room at a doctor's office, a library or an awkward first date. The fact remains that bodily noises you can't control can in many situations be extremely embarrassing. That this phenomenon is depicted in a film nearly a hundred years old seems to suggest that what Chaplin used to create a funny situation all those years ago was derived from something universally human. A movie made for his contemporary audience is in the instance I'm watching it, bridging the gap between generations. As time goes on, this scene from 1936 will be there to divulge that the experiences of people living back then were comprised of many such moments that can be identified and appreciated today. This

mundane moment is a time capsule of human connection and understanding and it speaks to the power of the medium of film, by letting us take part with a larger sensory apparatus than would a book or an audio recording. Beyond my own experiences of a specific instance of film viewing with *Sound of Metal* this thesis is an attempt at exploring some ideas about not just how and why I relate specifically to that film experience, but how it can be an example of the role moving pictures play in the lives of so many of us.

### ***Film as mirror***

I remember standing in front of a bathroom mirror naked after a shower when I was nine years old. I turned sideways and looked at myself from the side with just my rear-end sticking out beyond the frame of the mirror. I realized that by standing this way it was impossible to tell where I ended. Thus, my imagination could fill in the rest of the picture of me with the rest of my body becoming that of a horse, making me a centaur. This was a very entertaining image. To me it was both the discovery of the power of my own imagination to create images that weren't there, and the affective power those images could have. Later in life I also realized that by framing an image in a certain way, leaving out as much as you put in, the story comes to life inside you just as much as it does in the image. The image is only the trigger.

Feeling seen in the context of film experience seems to be a common phenomenon. At least if we take the podcast "Feeling Seen" as evidence. In it, we hear host Jordan Crucchiola interview different guests that usually have a connection to the independent movie making business, about different films that in some way made them feel seen. As they state in a synopsis of the show "It's about that instant when a person connects to a piece of art so deeply that they see themselves reflected in it." (podcasts.apple.com, 2022). The tagline suggests that viewers are themselves the driving force behind the recognition. It is their act of "seeing" that leads to recognition by having the film experience act as a sort of mirror, only enabling them to recognize themselves. The metaphor of a mirror doesn't do the film experience justice though. While a mirror certainly offers us the ability to reflect on our appearance, and to some degree can offer realizations about our inner life, the film experience is more advanced, has more individual moving parts, and the reflection isn't such an obvious characteristic of the experience. But as

with a real mirror, there exists within the film mirror the potential for an expansion on that self-recognition. I not only see myself mirrored but I can also imagine other possible outcomes for myself. I could become a centaur, or as with *Sound of Metal*, I could realize that after a troubling period of isolation and loneliness I could find peace and relief again.

Most of the discourse around the phenomenon of “feeling seen” as expressed through the show and by host Crucchiola doesn’t delve too deeply into the “how” of it all, but the discussions are none-the-less interesting and evidence that my experience with feeling seen by film isn’t wholly unique.

## **What I Talk About When I Talk About Feeling Seen**

Mostly, to be seen is something we do every day, whether we want to or not. Being in the world together with other people entails having their eyes upon you at some point during your day. In some cases, this can be pleasurable, nerve-wracking, or both. If I on any day feel good about myself or my circumstances, it can feel good to be outside. I can walk around and take in the fact that I’m being seen by other people. If on the other hand I feel bad in some way, if I feel guilty about something, or have recently been through something stressful involving my relationship with other people, having others direct their gaze at me can feel threatening, make me defensive. In these instances, it isn’t the mere biological and physical process of light forming images on other’s retina that affects me, it’s more the fear or possibly the hope of what those people can and will do with that information. If I’m feeling good my hope can be that they will comment something positive about my appearance, or something I say or do will inspire positive actions or thoughts within someone else. If I’m feeling bad in some way, my fears could potentially be of other’s negative reaction towards me, and in the most extreme cases of anxiety it could lead to a fear of not having a place in society, abandonment, or ostracism.

Mostly these fears, desires and hopes come and go from moment to moment in my everyday life. It’s situational and unless I’m in some sort of deep personal crisis the effects on my mood and life circumstance are temporary. They are simply part of the cost of being alive and an active member of society. While I feel seen and am affected, the opinions and potential

thoughts of strangers are mostly dismissed at the end of the day. They are ripples on the surface of existence.

To most people, including myself, I would suggest that there exists a deeper level of being and of feeling “seen”, one which encompasses a larger part of our being. In some cases, this phenomenon also requires us to be in the world and willingly let ourselves be seen, but it also goes beyond this. This feeling of being seen arises when I’m not only recognized for my physical presence in the world, but also my cognitive and emotional presence. More than my appearance or the way I physically move through the world or act on any given day, this experience generates a feeling of belonging to the world based on other parts of my being, specifically my experiences. It could be a friend, a parent, a therapist, a co-worker or even a stranger who in some way conveys a sense of mutual understanding of those aspects about myself that I feel are unique or especially important to me. These experiences range from the situational to the more existential. If I’m upset and a co-worker recognizes and reacts in a way that allows for the feeling to exist, I feel seen, and the negative feelings which arose in that situation usually dissipate. If, on the other hand, I’m in deep conversation with a friend or a new acquaintance where larger parts of my experiences have been relayed during the conversation and the other party not only understands my point of view, but also has valuable insights to share, I can feel “seen” on a more existential level. These are examples of interpersonal experiences that can affect me to such a degree that I feel they change my outlook on life and circumstances. They can offer relief, understanding, motivation, comfort, confidence, and a myriad of other positive emotions that affect my relationship to the people in question, myself, and the world.

In all these instances, both the mundane and the more profound, the chief requirement for the phenomenon to occur is the presence and understanding of what I recognize to be another seeing, thinking, and feeling creature. Other people, to put it simply. It entails having them recognize me or some parts of me specifically as being in some way unique to me. (I sometimes hope that my dog understands me when I’m feeling down, but her limited ability to communicate leaves me mostly thinking that it’s projection on my part.)

## ***Attempting a Definition***

*“...some films have a longer, lingering effect: not always an altering, transfiguration of reality, but a gentle continuing inhabitation of our perceptions. Life outside the cinema is released, illuminated, freed-up. Time is elongated and movements magnified – my perceptions become images: my eyes become cameras, unafraid to lock onto faces or scenes or moments. Film reveals reality, exactly by showing a distorted mirror of it.” (Frampton, 2007, p. 3)*

As of writing the first search result which pops up in my Google feed when searching for “feeling seen” (without quotation marks) is a short column written by Boston, US based The Atlantic’s crossword puzzle editor titled “That Feeling When You ‘Feel Seen’” (Madison, 2021). In it, the author Caleb Madison playfully begins: “If I were Dr. Seuss, I would simply begin: “What does it mean / When I look at the screen / at a show or a meme / and I say ‘I feel seen’?”, before continuing on to try to describe what it means to “feel seen” and what emotion the passive verb of “seen” might be felt as. As he points out “In English, we feel passive verbs all the time: I feel exhausted; I feel prepared; I feel disrespected” and that these uses of the verb also have clear emotional connotations “weariness, accomplishment or embarrassment”. So, what about feeling ‘seen’? Through an act of transcendent writing, I feel seen by what Caleb Madison determines to be a definition of the emotions relating to the concept of “feeling seen”: “It’s a feeling of identification with the content that has truthfully reflected our own experience back to us.” Or in other words “I feel understood”, “I feel affirmed” or “I feel recognized. And also “to feel seen is to find comfort in the shared recognition of one’s own experience.”

As a verb, “to see” can have nine different meanings in the English language according to Merriam-Webster (n.d., Merriam-Webster.com). The word itself can have many more meanings if you account for its use as an intransitive verb or even as a noun. The first definition of “see” as a verb is unsurprisingly related to our eyes, “to perceive by the eye” or “to perceive or detect as if by sight.” The second definition proposes four different synonyms to “see” as a verb, namely “to recognize”, “to suppose”, “to visualize” or “to understand”. Its uses are many more, extending all the way to the act of meeting a bet in poker. For the purposes of how the word

relates to my notion of *feeling* seen it is the first two categories of verb definitions provided by Merriam-Webster that are most relevant.

Following Merriam-Webster's definition, to "see" at the most basic level describes the phenomenon that occurs all the time our eyes are open, provided the person in question is not visually impaired. Whether reflecting upon it or not, the sense perception of a seeing person is active all through their waking life. Their consciousness can be focused on other sensory stimuli, like something they are listening to, some bodily sensation like an upset stomach, or even their own thoughts. But so long as their eyes are open and there is enough light present, they are all the time "seeing".

Moving into the realm of metaphor, Merriam-Webster's second definition refers to human phenomenon that have the first definition as its prerequisite, although not necessarily on an individual level. Even if seeing we don't necessarily reflect on all that we see, and if we don't, we won't be able to "recognize" something, or we won't "understand" it, we probably won't be able to "visualize" it later, and our "suppositions" relating to what we were physically present for but consciously unaware of will have to be based on other experiences than the one in question. If we reflect on it however, we might recognize or understand something about others, ourselves, the world, or how these different parts relate to each other. In this space between our consciousness of what we see in the world and our understanding of each other and a possible recognition of ourselves is where I find my definition of what it means to feel "seen".

If we are to equate my notion of "feeling seen" with that of Merriam-Webster's definition of "recognition", Julian Hanich offers insight into how it is possible the film experience can offer us this recognition. Partly he argues that it comes from the form a film takes as perceptual object to the viewing subject. He argues that film in our experience becomes not a subject of its own looking back at us but is perceived as a "quasi-subject" sharing many of the characteristics that make up our own everyday human experience. Namely our own perceptions and how they function: "When we watch a film, we not only perceive the perceived world of the film, but we also perceive the film's perception of this world. The film not only presents the *seen*, but also its own *seeing*. It therefore exists simultaneously as a *viewed-view* and a *viewing-view*." (Hanich, 2012, p. 589) By infusing the word "see" with both Merriam-Webster's basic

definition (*to see* as in sight and *see* as in understand or recognize) we could then also state: seeing a seeing enables a seeing.

It might also be important to note, as Julian Hanich does as well (2012, p. 582), that the “recognition” I’m trying to describe is one that takes place on a subjective personal level specifically in the encounter with the film, and not as part of a social interaction later on. The example Hanich uses is one derived from Bourdieu’s theory of “social distinction based on cultural capital”, in which someone uses their “high-brow” cultural experience in a social setting so as to gain “recognition-through distinction in the social realm.” (Hanich, 2012, p. 582) While this phenomenon, in my experience, is a very real thing, it isn’t what I’m discussing here.

## **Film’s Position in The Current Media Landscape**

In a time where audiovisual content in some form is nearly all-present the question of why study the film experience in particular is a relevant one. Our mediated daily reality contains an infinite amount of experiences available at all times and almost all places. The explosion of user made content on websites such as Youtube, Vimeo and other video based social media like Instagram and TikTok, is all the time competing with the traditional cinematic experience for our attention. The traditional film industry is and has been for over 20 years, in a state of constant flux, ever since the dawn of the internet as a potential distribution channel not only for video, film and television, but all kinds of information. In recent years there’s been a shift towards a serialization of the medium. This can be seen both in the rise of prestige television as well as an increasing emphasis on the serial nature of film franchises such as the Marvel franchise, Star Wars, Mission Impossible, the Fast and the Furious series etc. Even the James Bond-movies has since the turn of the millennium changed its formula from that of the usual television format where there is a return to the status quo at the end of each episode/installment to a narrative style more akin to complex television serials, where there is a continuation of the story from each installment to the next.

To me it seems, there’s been a blurring of the lines between the format of the television series, classical narrative cinema, and the explosive contender which is user created content

online. All these examples of audiovisual entertainment, storytelling, and ways of using the medium of video/film blend together in a media landscape that is increasingly chaotic and unpredictable. In this landscape the classical narrative cinema experience is unique in the fact, that in difference to the neverending stream of franchise sequels, the cinema experience is finite. It is contained to the roughly two hour run time of each film, and in most cases it tells a story which offers closure.

In a setting which facilitates it, like a cinema, or a home movie theatre with sufficient respite from distractions, the film experience offers a dissolution of time and space. This isn't to say that television series can't produce the same effect, and to some people I'm sure the most important stories, relevant to their life is found through that format. But I think that the *event* nature of film, meaning it's mostly self-contained and viewed once, can naturally make the experience more valuable. To illustrate it through an example: A few months ago I was watching the film *Prey* (2022) at home (ironically, a self-contained prequel franchise film) Somewhere past the film's midpoint, I realized I needed to use the bathroom. At home I would usually interrupt whatever I was doing to relieve myself. When I'm out or for instance in a movie theater, I ignore the feeling longer. In this case I was invested in the suspenseful film so I didn't want to leave the experience but more importantly I didn't want to pause the film because that would make the streaming app show me how much time is left, reminding me of what I had to do after the show, my everyday life, and pulverizing the illusion that I'm in another world with near limitless possibilities. I didn't want to spoil my sense of dissolution of time (and self), cheapening the rest of the experience with mundanity looming in my conscious background.

### ***Reality, Fictionality and the Social Effect of Audiovisual Media***

A central question to the writing of this thesis is how we can differentiate and define the reality of what we experience when we see a film as opposed to what we otherwise experience and define as "reality" in our daily lives. Apart from documentaries, films usually operate within a fictional space, but at the same time, they very much occupy our real time and space for their duration and beyond. The characters we meet can live on within us, and their stories can be important and instructional in how we meet challenges in our own lives. If we account for all the



time we as a society spend watching both cinema and television series, I think it hard to disregard it as trivial entertainment (or perhaps we live in a society which produces a desperate need for trivial entertainment).

Distinguishing real from fictional and the fictional from the real is an ongoing challenge in our media-focused lives. From “fake news” and rumors spread on closed groups in social media as with the “anti-vaxxer” and “flat earth”-movements, to the information war related to the war in the Ukraine, the “truth” is no simple thing to agree on. Recently the marketing material for season 5 of Netflix drama “The Crown” has added a disclaimer stating that the show is a “fictional dramatization”, “inspired by real-life events” (Bushby and Glynn, 2022). The show, which aims at speculating what’s been taking place behind closed doors of the English Royal family, might’ve done too good a job and now they fear people won’t be able to distinguish real history from their dramatization. In a way it might seem ridiculous, while watching the show it’s not difficult to tell that you’re not watching a “fly-on-the-wall” documentary but rather a believable fiction. However, speaking for myself, this is the only dramatization I’ve seen of these events and as such it informs most of my imaginary life surrounding the British Queen, her family, and their history since World War 2. As time goes by and my experiences with media, films, documentaries or whatever I consume regarding the topic (which in all honesty, isn’t much) will be heavily (if not exclusively) influenced by the sounds and images of this television series. The “truth” of what really happened is lost to time, and those involved are disappearing one by one, this gives the television series power in shaping the narrative around a social institution which still holds significance in the western world. As such a disclaimer to reiterate its fictional nature might not be a bad idea.

I hope my study can contribute to an understanding of how cinematic experience impacts us, but also how we relate to the experience of other screen-based media. Social media, cellphone screens, video games, online retailers, streaming services and NFT galleries are all designed with the purpose of keeping your attention. And they are getting more and more insidious in their means of achieving it. Hidden algorithms tailor an experience to you personally based on your previous activity, but the reasoning behind how these services arrive at their recommendations, be it ads, who to befriend on Facebook, or what to watch next on Netflix is becoming more and more obfuscated. Netflix especially won’t even let you search for specific

genres without going the cumbersome way of looking up special “codes” online as Australian consumer advocacy group Choice details (Angove-Plumb, 2022) Speaking of ads, this is especially an area where our mental health and emotional stability gets challenged daily. Are Facebook or Instagram ads selected and informed by recording our conversations? This is a question more and more people are asking, as attested to by the fact that Business Insider has even made a guide on how to avoid it for the most paranoid among us (Johnson, 2021) As a driving force towards paranoia and alienation regarding the media we end up consuming through choice or by chance, these technologies need a to be met with an increased awareness by the consumer.

Seen through a cynical lens, film and cinema can be seen as another such “manipulative” technology. Others have noted that cinema and film in general can be described as an emotional manipulation machine (Ottersen, 2015). It is a technological device designed to capture your attention, and through sound and image it steers your emotions in this or that direction. The different genres of cinema are a good example of how this works. Horror films are mostly made in a certain way to generate a controlled fear response within the audience. A romantic film uses specific tropes and conventions to bring out emotions of love, jealousy, sexual desire and so on. Some of these genres are especially tailored to the manipulation of a bodily response. Writing about melodrama, horror films and pornography, Linda Williams notes: “What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts – an impression that the very colloquialisms of “tearjerker” and “fear jerker” express...” (1991, p. 5) What genres we choose to watch are according to Torben Grodal heavily linked to factors of our biology, especially our gender and our age define what genres we are drawn to. He also posits that the roots of most genres can be found in our biology, through our evolution and as part of repeating social rituals (Grodal, 2017).

From the earliest films until today these tools in the filmmaker’s toolbox have been tested, tweaked, and refined a thousand times in turn developing a modern language of cinema that can be very effective and persuasive. In reality, history has shown that these tools can be used for both good and bad, but without an understanding of how to critically reflect on what is presented audiences are left to their own devices of decoding. The films of Leni Riefenstahl were

a tool Joseph Goebbels used to spread Nazi propaganda and one of the most important works of film history's silent era, *Birth of a Nation*, is today considered to be one of the most racist films ever made (Mangum, 2022) "A film can change people's lives and their world view, and it can have very personal and private meanings, but it can also attach itself to various public discourses and ideologies in order to dominate, transform, and distort people's perception." Elsaesser and Hagen note on the power film can have in shaping how we view the world (2015, p. 170)

The history of manipulation through screens, and the cinematic space is as old as the technology itself. However, we are in a period where there is a shift from these experiences being collective ones (at a cinema for instance) to a reality where we are increasingly herded into our own separate experiential booths. Like Facebook ads, what we are served in the overpopulated jungle of consumable media is often at the power of the algorithms and the financial interests of large technological corporations. The need for a critical reflection about these technologies and these experiences in order to not fall victim to a reality where they govern all our decisions is highly needed. My belief is that through an exploration of how specific instances of our meetings with screen-based media impact us and function we will be better prepared to live in a media-saturated reality.

## Research Questions

*"The idea of film being detached from reality is voiced in the reassurance: "It's only a movie!" while the opposite view sees cinema as a new "life-form" and a distinct way of "being-in-the world." (Elsaesser and Hagen, 2015, p. 170)*

Starting out with this project I had a few experiences in my mind that I hadn't explored earlier. These were strong film experiences that not only had me entertained while I sat in the theatre, but which seemed to touch upon something deeper within me. And even though films like *Shame* by Steve McQueen, *Mommy* by Xavier Dolan and *Force Majeure* by Ruben Østlund were to some extent emotionally difficult to watch due to their subject matter and tone, I still felt that they offered some form of recognition for me. They were experiences that went beyond what I saw in the cinema and became important to me, continuing their lives inside me and affirming

my own existence. A few questions were central in my mind at the outset. One of them was how we can define and live with these film experiences as separate from our “real” lives when they so obviously inhabit our lives as equally real phenomenon. Meaning that even though we or I rationally know that these are works of fiction, there seemed to be a disconnect between this obvious rational notion and my lived experience of having film influence and connect with me my whole life. This question brought me into the realm of how we define our social existence and find meaning in our relationships with others, like parents, co-workers, spouses, friends etc. A further question I had on this subject was how the film experience then differentiates itself from our other lived experience of social contact, meaningful or otherwise. And, how it is that some of the profound experiences one can have in both cases can, at least in me, generate a similarly strong affective response.

When I started writing this thesis I soon figured out that the experiences I’d had, while strong, were simply too old to offer any meaningful data to work with. They were all seen 5-10 years prior to this project starting. Instead, I set myself the goal of watching one film a week. I did this in the cinema, but mostly at home. All the while I kept looking for tendencies within myself and the film I was watching that shared some of the same characteristics with my earlier experiences. This period of research lasted from early 2020 to summer of 2021.

The one film that hit me the hardest with the immediacy of the experience throughout this period was *Sound of Metal* and the question I was left with after seeing the film is how it was possible for me to feel seen when I was alone? Thus, the main research question in this thesis is: How is it possible to feel seen by a film? In what ways can my reaction to the film experience of *Sound of Metal* be explained?

Along with this I started researching the philosophical discipline of phenomenology which since Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s first essay in 1964 put the discipline in a relation with film, has been used by many scholars to try to get at the essence of the film experience. This discipline was what to me seemed the most fruitful in approaching the questions I had started out with. Another research question I ended up with as a byproduct of this process was: In what ways can a phenomenological analysis contribute to an understanding of why a specific film affected me in the particular way it did?

To answer these questions, I will follow a phenomenological line of inquiry. The theoretical basis for my analysis will be laid out in Chapter 1 – Theory, and the methodology I have applied for my analysis will be described in Chapter 2 – Method. These chapters provide the underpinnings going forward into my analysis in Chapter 3 – Being Seen by Sound of Metal. I will addend my analysis with discussions on the film’s sensory properties in Chapter 4: Establishing Connection Through Sense Perception and finally discuss my findings in the conclusion of the thesis.

# Chapter 1: Theoretical Basis

## Chapter Introduction

*“Phenomenology is defined by its focus on lived experience. It is a descriptive method that describes phenomena that are actually experienced – phenomena that we have at least a certain awareness of while living through them.” (Hanich, 2010, p. 15)*

To answer the question of how it is possible to feel seen by film and how the film experience of *Sound of Metal* could generate the affective response that it did, I have chosen the framework of Phenomenology. During all the time I’ve worked with studying films in various ways, a lot of the analysis has been on the formal aspects of the film. Despite the obvious merits of these kinds of analysis, I think they miss out on a large part of what’s important to the experience, because it too easily disregards the subjective experiential dimension of the film experience, instead relying on models and thought constructions. This can remove the analysis from what is lived through and place it within abstract confines which serves the purpose of the model or theory more than it does the human at the center of experience. The approach of phenomenology will instead place that experience front and center in the analysis and look at the basic structures of our perception. My case in this thesis aims to understand what it was about my perception at the time of viewing *Sound of Metal* that led to my experience of feeling seen, and phenomenology then seems best suited as a tool in this pursuit. In the following I will outline Phenomenology as a discipline, how it came to be associated with the study of film, what parts of the discipline that are relevant to this thesis and a few of the most important ideas that have come out of film phenomenology since the early 1990s.

## **Brief History of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline originating in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and associated with philosophers like Husserl, Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “Phenomenology was announced by Edmund Husserl in 1900–1901 as a bold, radically new way of doing philosophy, an attempt to [...]come into contact with the matters themselves, with concrete living experience.” (Moran, 2010, p. xiii) The discipline stands beside logic, epistemology, ethics and ontology as one of the major disciplines of philosophy. The development and application of phenomenology as a distinct philosophical direction in relation to these I consider to be beyond the scope of this thesis, but at a base level phenomenology is the study of the structure of experience. Its data is firsthand accounts of experience which is described at length so as to help understand consciousness, its structures and how it functions. Referring to one of the pioneers of the field, Dermot Moran writes: “Sartre sees phenomenology as allowing one to delineate carefully one’s own affective, emotional, and imaginative life, not in a set of static objective studies such as one finds in psychology but understood in the manner in which it is meaningfully lived.” (2010, p. 5) This inversion of how to understand the human phenomena of experience is important to this thesis. Rather than applying psychology with all its constraining models and limiting ideas about human nature, there is empowerment in being able to describe and define one’s own lived experience. Put rather simply: instead of applying someone else’s ideas about human nature in order to explain my lived experience, I can to a larger degree define it myself, or as Moran puts it: “It is indeed true that central to phenomenology, and indeed part of its continuing appeal, is its attempt to provide a rigorous defense of the fundamental and inextricable role of subjectivity and consciousness in all knowledge and in descriptions of the world.” (2010, p. 15)

### ***Phenomenology in Film Studies***

There are varying accounts of when and how film phenomenology came to be a field of study. An inspiration which is often cited though is Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his essay titled “The Film and the New Psychology” (1964). In general: «Merleau-Ponty maintained that

phenomenology is “an attempt to make us *see* the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to *explain* it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit.” (Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, 2016, p. 4) And in his essay “The Film and the New Psychology” he argues for how and why film is uniquely situated as a way of directly *seeing* that “bond”: “The movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 58)

A fascinating aspect of both film and phenomenology is that they were born and have developed simultaneously during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “Born almost at the same time, film and phenomenology share a mutual history. While never a dominating method, phenomenological thought has strongly influenced the study of film, sometimes in direct, mostly oblique ways.” (Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, 2016, p.4) This influence started gaining traction in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the “somatic turn” which started to fascinate many humanities disciplines. “The reigning semiotic, psychoanalytic and Marxist theories could not account for the richness of experiences one could make in the cinema, including the manifold pleasures of film viewing.” (Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, 2016, p. 28) One of the main reasons for this interest from film scholars through the 90s could be Vivian Sobchack’s important work from 1992, *The Address of The Eye* which I will return to later in this chapter.

### ***Phenomenology in Relation to Other Approaches to Film Studies***

*“However, since film studies has, for the longest time, focused its efforts on cognition (in cognitivism) or the unconscious (in psycho-semiotic film theory), it seems worthwhile to reclaim some hitherto neglected experiential aspects of movie-going, such as the cinematic shock itself.”* (Hanich, 2012, p. 585)

Phenomenology differentiates itself from other practices in film studies in several ways. One of the most important ones is its reliance on firsthand experience as its data. By doing so it frees the analyst from theoretical abstractions. In Marxist approaches, Semiotics, or possibly Freudian and Lacanian psychology, the one major component that disappears from the equation is the viewing-subject, the analysts themselves. This focus on the analysts lived body and its experience has



been important to phenomenologists who want to point out that not all experience derives from the western male viewpoint which so many of the previously hegemonic analytical frameworks did, (Marxism, Freudian analysis, Semiotics to name a few.) Not all perception belongs to those that create and perpetuate these theoretical paradigms. This isn't to say that many of these aren't useful in understanding a vast different range of aspects of the film experience, but they are all to an extent *prescriptive* in the sense that they mean to explain *why* our encounters with film affect us the way they do as opposed to *how*: “While cognitivists try to explain *why* we feel certain emotions (and therefore focus on *explanation*), phenomenology is interested in *how* we feel them (and thus specializes on *description*).” (Hanich, 2010, p. 13)

A common theme in many forms of film analysis then is that all focus is on the film itself, but “Beginning in the 1990s, however, a remarkable shift from *reading* films as texts toward *experiencing* films as events took place, moving from a linguistic semiotic model towards a non-hermeneutic, somatic one.” (Hanich, 2012, p. 583) Vivian Sobchack describes how the essential structures of film often are neglected when we disregard its experiential dimension. “The moving picture, too, perceives and expresses itself wildly and pervasively before it articulates its meanings more particularly and systematically as this or that kind of signification, that is, as a specific cinematic trope or figure, a specific set of generic configurations, a specific syntactical convention.” (1991, p. 12) The phenomenological view then, is that, before we define a film’s genre, before we analyze its psychoanalytical dimensions or apply a Bechdel test we need to look at a film’s more immediate perceptual qualities. Jumping ahead to these kinds of analytical and political frameworks misses out on establishing what a film *is* to us on a more immediate level.

## Identification, Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

*“Analytical reflection starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that experience, revealing the all-embracing synthesis as that without which there would be no world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, (preface). X)*

I started out this thesis by stating that I had an experience of feeling seen when I was engaged in the film experience of *Sound of Metal*. My main question being how this subjective experience is possible through the film encounter. An important part of that question is how we identify other entities appearing before us as subjects. In traditional psychology the notion of the “ego” is important in this respect. According to Jean-Pierre Meunier, Freud saw the ego as closed off and he thought that the basis for empathy comes from the recognition of common traits and characteristics (2019, p.47). This idea of a person being totally separate from the world around it is something Meunier wanted to dispute: “Traditional thought unreservedly acknowledged the distinction between the world and the individual. It placed the individual between parentheses and bestowed it with the necessary function for its integration into an environment” (Meunier, 2019, p. 38) He considers the idea that a subject must *thoughtfully* recognize another subject through his, her or their cognition as a requisite for intersubjectivity to be highly problematic. In his writings this recognition happens on a much more basic level, to him it’s rather a consequence of our immediate perception. “A given individual appearing in my visual field is perfectly unknown to me as a person (that is, as a singular being), but, because this being is structurally similar to me, because they appear to me in a given situation, their behavior already has meaning to me.” (2019, p. 49)

This idea is echoed by the theory of mind here described by Gosetti-Ferencei: “Theory of mind is meant to show that we do, to some extent, mind read, in that we can, contrary to Descarte’s skepticism, read off from others’ responses and actions that they have minds – we can read off something of their intentions.” (2019, p. 163) The only requisite for *intersubjectivity* is then two perceptually capable subjects. “At the same time, they have seen me, and due to this, my behavior no longer belongs to me, strictly speaking, by dint of the fact that it no longer has meaning for me alone. Instead, it also has meaning for this other person, who can read my

intentions just as I can read theirs.” (Meunier, 2019, p. 49) Gosetti- Ferencei further illustrates this point by way of an example which is highly relevant in the experience of film. “If we witness another recoiling in pain, or staggering in disorientation, or balancing or leaping with great poise, we may respond with an immediacy and viscosity not well captured by such theoretical constructions. Our embodied perception of others may be already imbued with an intuitive sense of their experiences and may thus be already proto-sensitive.” (2019, p. 164)

On the one hand these ideas could be applied to how I perceived and related to the characters presented in the film *Sound of Metal*. It can explain some of the link I felt to them, and beyond that the link I felt to the world. “Man is above all a social being, a node of relations, a being ineluctably linked with other people, and the nature of this link, in its original form, is what we call intersubjectivity.” (Meunier, 2019, p. 44) This is especially fitting in the case of the main character, Ruben. But, the story of that character goes beyond the initial “proto-identification” described above, and puts him in situations I can recognize, as well as offering details about his life that I have in common with him. In a larger sense though, this process of identification is relevant in discussing how I can relate to and gain recognition from the film experience itself. This is because it can shed light on how I can identify what kind of entity the film itself is. “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.” (Sobchack, 1991, p. 10) This quote points to that identification which I will further illustrate in the following part.

### ***Film as Subject***

*“The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself.” (Mearleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 57)*

Following a focus on subjectivity and what constitutes it, I arrive at an aspect of the film experience that has always seemed most interesting to me. The fact that many films, especially good ones, share many characteristics with another social phenomenon, that of a good conversation. I can feel myself discussing (in my mind) what takes place on screen just as if

there really is another person I'm discussing with. In the discussion there can be a back-and-forth exchange between me and the film. I can be led in one direction, feel myself argue against something, then be persuaded by something it communicates later. Vivian Sobchack describes this phenomenon like this: "The viewer, therefore, shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance." (1992, p. 10) Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich describe it like this "The *viewer's* body and the *film's* body stand in an *intersubjective* relation to each other, the relation between the two is a *dialogical* one." (2016, p. 30)

Sobchack's idea is that when we watch a film, we are watching a simulation of someone else's sensory and perceptual experience: "More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience." (1992, p. 3) What happens then while watching a film is that we are presented with a presentation of another's sensibly lived experience but through the duration of the film we are at the same time incorporating that experience into our own. "The embodied vision of the *spectator* in the cinema "meets" – and this is the surprising *coup de theatre* of Sobchack's book – the embodied vision of the *film*. For Sobchack the film literally, and not just metaphorically, has a perceiving and expressing body of its own: it is an "empirical and functional subject-object." (Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich, 2016, p. 29) This implies that the way we relate to a film while watching it, is in many ways the same we would relate to another subject we are having a conversation with.

Another who also has theorized around film in the same way is Daniel Frampton. His book *Filmosophy* launches the idea of a "film being" and what he calls a "filmind". "Filmosophy conceptualizes film as an organic intelligence: a "film being" thinking about the characters and subjects in the film." (2007, p. 7) The film itself becomes a representation of our own consciousness as it navigates through experience and creates meaning from disjointed sequences, just as we do when we try to make sense of our existence. In this way film becomes a pseudo-subject (or quasi-subject in Julian Hanich's words).

## Theoretical Summary

The phenomenological idea that to understand experience we must describe and analyze phenomena as they appear before us, is the background for my analysis of the film *Sound of Metal* and the meeting that took place between me as viewing-subject and it as aesthetic object. Sobchack's, and the other theorists', ideas about film as subject will be important in trying to answer the main question of this thesis: How is it possible to feel seen by a film?

The idea that identification takes place on a more immediate level than cognitive theory has posited will be important throughout my discussion of my encounter with the main character of the film, Ruben. Throughout my analysis I will also be referring to other theorists that deal with the way we relate to the sensory properties of the film experience, like Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener. When the phenomenological view comes short in my analysis, I will in a few instances be looking for recourse in the cognitivist writings of Ed Tan and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### About the Choice of Film

*“Such an attempt would no doubt mean to elevate the philosophical dignity of film as such (and not just this or that film which might be philosophically appealing.” (Ferench-Flatz, 2016, p. 12)*

Finding the material for my analysis was one of the major challenges I faced when working on this thesis. Initially I wanted to base my analysis on a few films, and a few film experiences that I had had several years ago. I soon found out that the emotional state I was in when I saw those films would be hard to replicate and thus too much of the analysis would have to be based on a thought re-construction of how the experience was at the time. The experiences were simply too old. Therefore, I broadened my search and set forth on watching one film a week, while at the same time doing my research and reading up on the theory. The films I chose to see were of different genres and eras, and because of the pandemic situation I had to view almost all of them at home (except for a few towards the later part of the project).

I chose films that I mostly hadn't seen before, in order for the experiences to be fresh, even though arguably all experiences are fresh in that my circumstances are different each time I view a film, I find that not knowing what I'm going to get helps make the emotional reception more acute. During the time I worked on the project, I saw many different films that were interesting, that had an emotional impact, that gave me something new, when that was something mostly lacking from my life in other areas, due to the pandemic lockdown. I was working at home, I was studying by myself, most if not all social arrangements were postponed and cancelled. Over time, what emerged from the viewing of these films was an accumulation of different thoughts and ideas about not any specific film experience, but more about the situation and the project. The lack of the ability to go to the cinema and experience film together with a larger audience was especially impactful. I therefore thought for a while that my analysis would be based on some quasi-quantitative subjective viewing data. While the weekly viewing remains an important introductory exercise in this project, I decided that the material should be much

more limited, in order to address the research questions with a more detailed and thorough analysis.

The reason for choosing *Sound of Metal* then is that, out of all the films I saw over the past year, this was the one which had the strongest emotional impact on me. This could be circumstance, or this could be the film itself, or probably a mixture of the two. The expectations I had towards the film beforehand were set by the reviews I had read and my relationship with the actor playing the main character. Story wise I didn't think it seemed particularly interesting beforehand, but when a film is highly reviewed and generates the amount of online buzz I registered that *Sound of Metal* did, I can get a "fear-of-missing-out" reaction which pushes me to see something.

Part of the problem of analyzing with a phenomenological approach is that the method you use can be a bit vague. Therefore, it's hard to select what criteria one should use when choosing your material. Returning to the basic premise of phenomenology and specifically when applied to film studies, is that it's an attempt at delving into the structures of perception and identifying the most basic aspects that are important for my subjective experience of any given film. Consequently, the choice of film doesn't really matter, because it's about the general film viewing experience. At the same time, it's hard to stay motivated to write about just any given film experience, when some of them can be as mundane as doing the laundry. This is why the strong emotional impact of *Sound of Metal* became important for me, along with other examples of emotionally strong viewing experiences I had over the last couple of years. For many reasons which I intend to explore, *Sound of Metal* turned out to be a very profound cinematic experience for me. One of those that come maybe once or twice a year.

So far, my contention has been that I had an experience leading to me feeling seen while viewing *Sound of Metal*, and that a modern phenomenological approach is what is most appropriate in trying to explain how this happened. In the following chapter I'm going to delve into a few of the aspects of the film that I think were important in generating this response within me. The examples range from those that could affect pretty much any one of us, to those that I feel are more specific to me. Both as part of the situation when the viewing took place, and as part of my background and upbringing. All these examples were probably felt at the time of viewing, but few of them were immediately clear to me as especially important. Only later in this process did

I discover my conscious understanding of how these parts of the experience functioned. At the time of viewing they were most certainly present as part of the experience, but if they were perceptibly registered by me, they would have been so on an unconscious. Therefore, most of these examples have been selected through a process of repeated viewing of the film, and an attempt at identifying those aspects that in some way contribute to my sense of being seen.

Even though a few of the examples are specific to my subjective experience at the time of viewing, I do think that some of these examples are universal. By this I mean that these aspects could draw anyone into the world of the film and facilitate a meeting between viewing subject and film which could lead to the same outcome, given the right viewing conditions. Even those aspects which I think were and are unique to me, most definitely have some intersecting points of recognition with other's experience. But by way of a phenomenological study of the experience I've ended up peeling back the onion of my consciousness, to arrive at these base structures in how I perceived the experience. As it happens, some of these elements are probably not that unique to me, and perhaps it was those base elements that made my sense of feeling seen by the experience possible.

Now, in doing it this way I've stumbled upon a paradox of the phenomenological method. How is it possible to describe as deeply as possible our reality as it is immediately experienced without grabbing hold of an experience and describing it after the fact, thus creating a thought construction and theorizing around it? The phenomenological approach has been trying to escape this essentially "distancing" practice, and instead trying to get closer to our immediate reality as it is experienced by our bodies. In a critique of previous film scholars Vivian Sobchack writes "The theorist, abstracted from his own embodied experience in the movie theater, describes cinematic vision as the essential entailment of a *viewing subject* and a *viewed object* in what is thought of, rather than lived through, as a *single* and *disembodied* act of vision and signification. (1991, p24) This critique is of course necessary, because many of the major theories which have been applied previously haven't been conscious of what viewpoint and *body* they originated from. When the theory then takes on a life of its own and is applied in various situations and time periods, it is further and further removed from the specific, time, place and conditions that it arose in. And so is also the academic applying the theory. Meunier also points to this problem of "objectivation" in phenomenological study "In effect, elucidating the invariable structure of a



psychic phenomenon supposes that we consider this phenomenon, that we take a distance with respect to it, and that we have an experience of the experience in a consciousness of consciousness, which, we might justly say, constitutes a certain form of objectivation.” (2019, p. 34)

So how does one go about disentangling the problematic nature of writing about an experience post the fact, when it has become a thought object in your mind, rather than something occurring simultaneously? My solution is to, throughout my analysis, be specific about what parts derive from the initial viewing experience and what parts are analyzed as a result of subsequent viewings. I believe that arriving at conclusions about *my* own experience is better served by utilizing a theory that doesn't prescribe certain “truths” about how *I* function, as for instance, a Freudian psychoanalytical approach might. “But at least by operating this kind of objectivation, we do not escape the experience of the subject – that is, the reality of the phenomena studied. The scientific attitude, in contrast, proceeds from a double objectivation.” (Meunier, 2019, p. 34)

## **Notes on Being a Film-Viewing Subject During the Pandemic**

The pandemic is a period I define as starting the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 and lasting until the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. The reasoning behind this periodization is that these dates represent the first and last date of nation-wide measures to restrict the spread of the virus here in Norway (regjeringen.no, 2022). The restrictions that were enforced during this time radically changed the social nature of day-to-day life, including how we consume media and experience film. Since my own project, which started before the pandemic was a fact, continued throughout this period I find it necessary to discuss how it impacted my film-viewing habits and potentially how it impacted the main case of this thesis, namely the viewing and reception of *Sound of Metal* (2019).

One aspect of how the covid pandemic impacted film viewing during the pandemic is the periodic closing down of cinemas. A place which Francesco Casetti describes in his article “The Relocation of Cinema” by saying: “The cinema, from the moment of its birth, has been considered a particular form of experience.” (2016, p. 573) When they weren't closed the general

advice was not to go, in order to not co-mingle with other potential bearers of the virus. They were also never full when they were open, with social distancing guidelines dictating that every other seat (or more) couldn't be used. With a maximum number of guests per screening this all ensured that the experience of going to the cinema was radically changed even when they were open. "We also extract an «idea of cinema» from our habits. Every time we go to the movies, we experience the same cardinal elements and engage in the same behaviors: this consolidated experience orients us." (Casetti, 2016, p. 588) In my case, as a regularly cinema-going subject under normal circumstances, it meant that my relationship to the act of cinema-going and the very idea of cinema-going changed and was very much in flux during this period. The result in practice was that I mostly avoided it all together.

This isn't to say that I didn't have negatives experiences related to the Cinema before the pandemic. Julian Hanich argues that the social atmosphere created by having others present while viewing a film, can greatly impact the experience:" In negative terms, co-viewers imply distractions caused by incessant talking, ill-timed laughter, or unpleasant odors. In positive terms, the aesthetic object is perceived in common and in accordance, thus creating a bond." (2012, p. 584) Going to the cinema can be a claustrophobic experience. For approximately two hours you are confined to a soundproof bunker among strangers where social conventions dictate that you sit still for the duration. Necessary bathroom breaks can be tolerated by you and your surroundings if you time them right and are willing to scuffle over the rows of annoyed fellow "cinema-prisoners" on your way out and back. Of course, we tolerate confinement because of the potential positives it also facilitates. This can be positive emotions, intellectually stimulating ideas, connection with larger issues of humanity and our lives or as Casetti puts it: ".. at the cinema, we face screened moving images... [that]... feed our imagination, opening us up to the possible; they provide a knowledge and an awareness, and they make us live in unison with other spectators." (2016, p. 578)

If cinemas were open, I would find it preferable to see many of the films I wanted to see as part of this project, there. This is because of the freedom of concentration that the cinematic space usually creates, a sentiment shared by Francesco Casetti "For example, the exaltation of vision is undoubtedly linked to the fact that cinema works through screened images, and furthermore, it presents them to us in a darkened room, which augments our concentration."

(2016, p. 574) Julian Hanich further iterates on this point by writing: “Once the film begins, it is the only light source attracting our view; the audience remains quiet, isolated walls keep out external noise, and hence the film is the only sound source catching the attention of our sense of hearing; since the seats are soft-cushioned, the presence of our bodies is largely subdued and can therefore be affected first and foremost by the film.” (2012, p. 590)

In addition to the points on concentration, the physical act of removing yourself from your usual environment in order to go to the cinema functions as a binding contract between you and the experience you have there. Whereas a film-viewing situation encountered at home can be full of all kinds of distractions, imposing on that experience. Just the fact that the film-viewing occurs in the same physical space where so many other facets of life occupy my time, ensures that distractions are always readily available. The impulse to switch a film off during a more uneventful sequence is stronger when there is other «more fun» activities right next to me. The entire situation in general requires more discipline to sit through uncomfortable experiences than a screening at a cinema would. The bar for ending or interrupting the experience is in general higher at the cinema than it is at home. Another point about distractions is that during the pandemic with longer periods of social isolation, any real-world distraction (a phone call from a friend for instance) might also be more welcome, jeopardizing the “sanctity” of the film-viewing situation. Most films can withstand these distractions, be paused, and resumed. But the point is how all these elements together affect my general mood when watching the film, as opposed to the more isolated experience you get at the cinema.

Another aspect that changed the general film-experience during the pandemic was the sheer lack of films that reflected or in some way accurately depicted what life was like. Some of the most mundane films could at times come off as science fiction, all the while none of them considered the current social paradigm: Keep your distance, don't visit friends preferably, and never visit the elderly or sick. Wear masks don't touch people, or too many things in public spaces. Preferably register where you are at all times, so any contagion can be tracked and contend with fifty different ways to do business, when you can no longer reliably pop into a store and get what you need by swiping your card. The reality many films were produced in as well as the reality they presented, differed vastly from the reality of the pandemic, making it so that it

was at times hard to see them as imitations of reality. They could come off as fantasy, or science fiction (whereas dystopian science fiction became scarily too “real”)

### ***Relocation of Cinematic Vision***

There is a definitive difference between watching something at the cinema and at home. One is all the surrounding habits of the act of going to the cinema, another is the sheer size of the screen and speakers. The lights dim, turning the screen into the only possible focal point. The speakers are usually dimensioned in such a way that they create an inescapable blanket of sound. Your body is upright, but at rest in seats that are comfortable enough to make you partly forget it exists. In unison these elements create an atmosphere capable of “turning the experience up to eleven”, isolating your senses and your body from the outside world.

Even though the cinema experience is unique, I argue that film-viewing at home can share a lot of the same qualities under the right circumstances. Large flat-screen television sets are standard in most homes these days, and many have a good sound system to accompany them. As mentioned earlier, the blurring of the lines between cinematic films and television series has also led to a situation where those experiences you used to have at the cinema are just as easily accessed at home. In many cases (and especially so during the pandemic) films are released at the same time in movie theaters, as they are for streaming online.

A unique aspect of the cinematic screen today is that it is used (at least in my experience) exclusively to show films, whereas my television screen at home can and is used for many different purposes. You can browse the web for a while before you play some video games, access and listen to some music before you sit down to watch a film, all this on the same screen. But, despite this, Francesco Casetti argues that: “...vision often remains “cinematographic.” It triggers what we may call a *back-to the-cinema experience*” (2016, p.585) In my case, as a cinema-goer I have been trained in how to adjust my perception when viewing film. The “sanctity” of the film-viewing experience found at the cinema is relocated to my couch and my flat screen TV. “Relocation acts in such a way that an experience is reborn almost the same as it was.” (2016, p. 584.)

## My Phenomenological Approach

*“We must explore, describe, and explain phenomena such as they are immediately lived, and not such as they are conceived by virtue of some pre-established objective schema. In other words, we must make the effort to discover the meaning of phenomena as they present themselves to the subject who experiences them.” (Meunier, 2019, p. 34)*

My experience with *Sound of Metal* was a strong personal one. Therefore, it needs an analytical approach that can encompass the individuality of the experience generated. As an analyst you could say that all chosen tools of analysis, or choices regarding what aspects to focus on reflect something within the analyst that are expressed through those choices. Even if the analytical task is preconstructed by a third party, any analyst must make choices and ultimately all these choices will be on some level based on personal bias. A phenomenological approach is one that doesn't obfuscate or try to hide the analyst's choices or presence as an agent *and* subject within the experience described or within the text meant to describe it.

The methodology of Phenomonology however isn't clear cut: “As both systemic philosophy and systematic procedure, phenomenological inquiry is less a set of steps to be applied programmatically to phenomena than it is a series of *critical commitments* made by the researcher to respond openly to the phenomena of consciousness and to her own consciousness of phenomena.” (1991, p. 32) Like Sobchack here writes it mostly revolves around the analyst's perception of a given phenomenon and how they choose to describe them. Therefore, there has to be pressure on the analyst to prioritize what aspects of experience are more or less essential. When studying the film experience the exercise is to isolate those aspects that are instrumental in generating any specific experience. Which, in turn, is necessary to further understand the film experience in a more general manner and also understand its potential functions and impact on us in our daily lives, or on society as a whole.

This is the methodological basis for my analysis of the film experience of *Sound of Metal*. How the film was perceived by me, in space and time that first time. And how the film worked to generate the specific emotional response within me. As part of this analysis, I find it enlightening to identify and isolate those parts of the film experience that I feel are important for the generation of affect. Not generally, but specifically. As my own experience is the only

empirical data available to me from the viewing experience, it is from these initial and subsequent affects and thoughts that my analysis will necessarily derive. My choices of what aspects of the film I find relevant and important might be totally foreign to another viewer, but I also hope to identify certain universal characteristics that might contribute to a more general understanding of a phenomenology of film experience.

For the purpose of my analysis, I have identified three major components of the film experience. Firstly, the film itself, then the viewing subject and lastly, you have the meeting between the two in a specific context. The film in question is *Sound of Metal* (Marder, 2019), the context of the meeting is in my home, early August, 2021, and the viewing subject is me. In my analysis I will describe in detail the film, the context of the meeting, and what aspects of the film and context were specifically important towards my subjective experience of feeling seen. My descriptions are based on notes taken at the time of first viewing. Individual scenes have been selected as a consequence of subsequent viewings in a myriad of contexts.

## Chapter 3: Being Seen by *Sound of Metal*

### Chapter Introduction

In this chapter I showcase and discuss important aspects of my meeting with the film *Sound of Metal*. I will start with the location of the meeting and describe the situation of the meeting in further detail. I then move on to a description of the plot and narrative structure of the film. Following this, I highlight important aspects about my identification with the character of Ruben before I discuss three individual scenes I have chosen as key cases for the analysis.

My main focus will be to isolate and discuss key points in my meeting with the film *Sound of Metal* that led to an experience of feeling seen.

This analysis then serves as a backdrop for a reflection on the role of sense-perception in establishing the relationship between viewing subject and film-subject in Chapter 4.

### The Physical Location of the First Viewing

*“As a research procedure, phenomenology calls us to a series of systematic reflections within which we question and clarify that which we intimately live, but which has been lost to our reflective knowledge through habituation and/or institutionalization” (Vivian, Sobchack, 1991, p. 28)*

As stated previously, *Sound of Metal* was the one film experience which offered the greatest emotional impact during this project. As with many of the other films I saw during the process of working on this thesis it was viewed in my own home. I think acknowledging the specific physical circumstances which the experience took place in is crucial for understanding my feeling of “being seen”. As Hanich puts it: “As an embodied being, the viewer is always part of the reception surroundings. Consequently, it is never the film alone that shapes the recipient’s embodied consciousness, but also the viewer’s surroundings.” (2012, p. 584)

I viewed the film in my apartment’s main room. The main room is approximately 50 square meters with a kitchen part at one end, and a living room part in the other. The living room

part consists of bookshelves with books, a media console, a TV, a couple game consoles, a collection of vinyl records, graphic novels and comic books, a dog bed and a 5-seater couch. There's a large round table next to the sofa which is usually used for various remote controls, books, newspapers, drinks, and snacks. The main room has four relatively large windows which face in a western direction. During summertime sunlight shines through and can interrupt media consumption on the television due to distracting rays of light disturbing parts of the image. To mitigate this there are venetian blinds on all the windows which can be used to regulate the amount of light shining through. During summer it is necessary to keep the window open during peak sunshine hours because the apartment is old and the built-in ventilation is poor. It usually gets so hot that multiple fans are needed, and one is often pointed toward the couch when viewing films, television series or playing video games. The apartment is on a high first floor, separated from the street by a patch of grass with fencing. The street beyond is a one-way low traffic road, mostly used by residents, municipal vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. Across the street there is a large park which on sunny days is heavily populated during summer. With the window open during summer there is a general buzz of activity coming from the park until late in the evening.

The television screen is 55 inches, a modern 4K capable QLED display of Samsung make. Most content on the television screen is viewed through various streaming apps. There is no traditional linear TV connected to it. In the case of *Sound of Metal*, along with other films and television series not available through the subscribed streaming services, the media file used for projection was downloaded through a file sharing service. The file is a 1080p digital copy of a Blu-Ray disc and was streamed from a computer directly to my television through a service called Plex. The speaker system consists of two bookshelf-sized active speakers, they produce good sound and are positioned to produce optimal sound while viewing content on the television. One on each side of the screen. The couch is large, and soft, sometimes doubling as a bed. Often, I'll dim the lights to simulate the isolation gained in a movie theatre.

How did being in this space specifically while experiencing the film impact my reception of the film? As mentioned earlier, the connection you get with what takes place on screen can be stronger while at the cinema, but at the same time, the rituals that are learned and habituated through many years of going to the cinema can be repurposed to fit within the confines of your



own home. This helps facilitate a frame of mind that is open to the experience of the film. To be affected, I need to place my body and mind in a situation where it is comfortable being affected, Julian Hanich describes it this way: “Adopting an aesthetic attitude therefore implies that I have deliberately put myself in a position to be affected. I temporarily set aside the goal-oriented, instrumental attitude of everyday life and allow myself to be sensitive and vulnerable to what the aesthetic object might “do” to me.” (2012, p. 589) The rituals I have at home related to watching films, along with the familiarity of my surroundings ensures a mental safe space in which I can be open to experiences that expand and challenge the way I view the world and myself.

I saw many films in this way during the pandemic, so what was it about the experience of *Sound of Metal* specifically that had this impact on me? After all, habits can become mundane, and if the pandemic period taught me anything, it is how weary I can get of watching tv series upon tv series and film upon film expecting I will get something out of it. At a point, the tired existence of subjecting myself to mediated impressions of the world non-stop becomes a prison I need to revolt against. I need to experience real life for a while for cinematic experiences to regain their meaning for me afterwards. This leads me to think that my circumstances leading right up to the viewing of the film in this space, also was important.

### ***Outline of the Meeting Between Viewing Subject and Film-Subject***

In the introduction of this thesis, I briefly described the circumstances surrounding the viewing of the film. It happened while I was in mandatory covid-related isolation after a trip abroad. The first trip abroad in quite some time. Just prior to viewing the film my girlfriend who I live with had gone away to the North of the country to work for ten days, meaning I was alone with only the company of my dog for the duration of the isolation. The trip I had had was to visit my father in Sweden. Due to the pandemic there were restrictions and large uncertainties surrounding whether I would be able to go at all. There existed at the time weekly updated charts on where it was safe to travel and not, and what kind of quarantine procedures were necessary after returning home. My being able to travel was dependent on the number of confirmed covid-cases in the regions I would be travelling to and through. This uncertainty of what it would be possible to achieve or not socially, was a large factor in my life all through the pandemic. I had to always

weigh the risk of infection to myself and to those I would be spending time with versus the necessity of the visit. It was difficult, and in some cases downright illegal, to plan and carry out social events. This trip on the other hand actually took place and I enjoyed a week with family before returning home.

In the previous section I described a mental safe space created by the rituals related to and the familiarity with the film experience. This space which facilitates my openness to challenging film experiences can be a positive space of learning and development as Ed Tan describes: “The film situation gives the spectator an opportunity to transgress social norms and codes of behavior, albeit within strictly determined boundaries, in such a way that the stability of society is not endangered and may even be enhanced.” (1996, p. 21) But if a *positive* emotional engagement with the film was the only possibility, I think I would get bored rather quickly. What I come to the film situation for in many instances is an emotional and intellectual challenge (sometimes of course, I just want to be entertained though). There are many ways to describe and posit that a film experience is an engagement with a fictional fantasy, and thus something which will not affect your wellbeing as Ed Tan does here: “Perhaps we may go a step further by assuming that the activity of fantasizing, regardless of the content, is in itself enjoyable and that the media provide a powerful stimulation to fantasize.” (1996, p. 27) But this runs the risk of leaving out the very real psychological and emotional impact a challenging film can have. Speaking specifically of horror films Julian Hanich notes: “This strong commitment to characters and our thoughtful or imaginative engagement with their plight in the diegesis makes it hard to acknowledge that we often literally fear for our own current as well as future well-being.” (2014, p. 27) For me this can be especially true when watching a film alone. This is something cognitivist Ed Tan also recognizes: “There are limits to the possibilities for mood regulation by means of television and film drama. An affective state may be too strong or the stimuli may have a permanent effect that would cancel out influence of the entertainment product itself.” (1996, p. 25) In Hanich, Tan’s, and my own opinion then, there is always a psychological risk when we subject ourselves to challenging film experiences, dependent on factors related to the film, the situation and the mental state of the viewing subject.

A challenging film then, might not be the best choice when you are in a bit of a mentally unbalanced state like I was on day two of the mandatory isolation, when I sat down to watch

*Sound of Metal*. As it turned out though the experience of watching it ended up being a profound one. My field notes bear witness that throughout the experience I went through emotions of loneliness, sadness, a sensation of something bittersweet and ultimately relief. A relief that came from the narrative conclusion, but also a relief related to the cathartic nature of being challenged by the film, navigating it and coming through it on the other side feeling better than I did when I started. In the following parts I will go into more detail of how I was affected by individual parts of the experience.

## **Narrative Synopsis of Sound of Metal**

*Sound of Metal* has a character driven narrative. There aren't high stakes thrills to be found in its plot. The journey is emotional, and as such a summary of the plot won't give a full picture of what the film is about. Still I think it necessary for my readers to be familiar with the setting, characters, and the narrative developments the viewer encounters. What follows is then a summary of the story of *Sound of Metal*.

In modern day America, bandmates and couple Ruben and Lou travel from town to town in an RV which they also live in. They stop to perform shows before they move on to the next town. Their music is heavy, loud, and dark. Ruben plays the drums and Lou sings and plays guitar.

While preparing for one of their shows Ruben hears a high-pitched ringing in his ears. Over the course of a few days this gets worse, until he can't hear anything at all. A doctor confirms that he has little to no hearing left and must immediately quit playing music. Ruben wants to continue playing, but Lou gets concerned. She contacts their manager who advises about a place that might help Ruben.

The couple travel to a remote community where they meet Joe. He recognizes Ruben as a former heroin addict and tries to convince Ruben to stay at his community for a while. Ruben doesn't want to stay, but Lou recognizes that they won't be able to fix this themselves, so she forces his hand by leaving. Ruben is then left alone with nowhere else to go.

Joe gives Ruben a room with a bed and takes away his cell phone. Then Ruben attends a group therapy session, where everyone speaks sign language. Ruben seems lost in his new

environment at first but slowly he becomes part of the community. He attends sign language classes at a local school for deaf children and becomes friends with the other inhabitants of the community. All the while he is absorbed in this process he sneaks into Joe's office and uses his computer to read e-mails from Lou.

Through instruction from Joe, Ruben begins every morning by sitting in a room, with nothing to do but write in a book. This is a task he struggles with, but at the same time he gets closer to the children at the school and becomes more proficient at sign language. After a while Joe asks Ruben to continue staying at the community by also working there. Ruben says he will think it over, but he sees something online about Lou that sets him off in a different direction. A video of her performing alone in Paris leads Ruben back to his RV, where he packs up everything he owns and sells it. He also sells the RV itself. He leaves a note for Joe saying he will be back the next day.

Ruben goes to a hospital and gets operated on in preparation for the insertion of cochlear implants. This is an electronic device that gives the brain the ability to simulate hearing. He is supposed to return to the hospital four weeks later for the final part of the operation.

At the community Joe is disappointed that Ruben went and got the operation. Ruben asks if he can borrow money to buy back his RV, but Joe says he sounds like an addict. Ruben asks if he can stay until he gets his implants fitted but Joe says he has violated the trust between him and the community, which is built upon the idea that being deaf isn't something to be fixed. He asks Ruben to leave the same day.

Ruben stays at a motel until he gets his implants. He is disappointed that the sound seems to be very bad, and nothing near how the world used to sound. He then leaves for France.

In France he goes to see Lou but is greeted by her father. Lou is out so they eat lunch together. Lou's father explains how he didn't like Ruben in the past, but now thanks him for taking care of Lou. Ruben explains about his operation and talks about his childhood where he moved around with his mother and didn't know his father.

Ruben is in Lou's childhood bedroom when she arrives. They talk but are interrupted by Lou's father. She must help prepare for a party her father is hosting.

At the party Ruben is isolated and having trouble communicating with Lou and the other guests. The sound from his implants is distorted and noisy. After a while Lou's Father asks Lou to sing with him. All the guests, along with Ruben watch as Lou sings a French ballad while her father plays the piano. Lou sounds completely different from her performances with Ruben.

After the party Ruben and Lou are in bed, together again. Ruben says he is impressed by her singing and that she can speak French. He continues saying that they should get back to their old life, and their tour. Lou is hesitant. Ruben breaks the silence that ensues by telling Lou that it's okay, she doesn't understand and cries. He says she saved his life. And she says he saved his.

In the middle of the night Ruben leaves without waking anyone up. At dawn he walks along an avenue and sits down on a bench. He disconnects his implants and looks out in silence.

### ***Narrative Structure***

Largely, *Sound of Metal* follows a classic Aristotelian three-act structure as laid out by Syd Field in the book *Screenwriting* (2005). The opening scene of the first act gets straight to the point by introducing the two main characters in the situation that is the reason for Ruben's loss of hearing, performing at heavy rock concerts. This scene also illustrates how this rock music is the glue of their relationship, and their belonging to a heavy metal tribal culture. This initial setup is further illustrated through a montage of Lou and Ruben's morning routine, their interactions in the camper van, their life on the road, and their preparations for a new show. It's at this next show that we get what Syd Field in his classic book *Screenplay* calls the "inciting incident", (2005 ed., p. 129), when Ruben starts to notice that his hearing is disappearing. This and the revelation that Ruben's hearing is disappearing so quickly that he must stop playing music immediately, destabilizes the status quo in Ruben and Lou's relationship. What follows is a period of back and forth between the two on what is the right course of action. What could be called the climax of act 1 (or plot point 1 according to Syd Field (2005, p. 135) comes when Lou leaves and Ruben must stay at the community.

The second act then begins around the 42-minute mark. Ruben is alone in a new environment and Lou is somewhere off camera. During the second act Ruben faces a few

different obstacles he needs to overcome. At first, he is unable to communicate with the other people in the community. He needs to learn sign language. He must confront and talk about his former heroin addiction. He needs to find out what to do with his time at the community. And ultimately, he needs to find a way to get out of there and get back to Lou and their previous life.

At the story's midpoint there's a scene which seems to confirm that Ruben is beginning to adapt and appreciate his new circumstances, making it unclear whether his return to Lou is or should be his ultimate goal. In a scene in class with some deaf children, Ruben takes a restless boy outside to share a moment of profound communication, not through sound or speech, but through banging on a metal slide. The reverberations from the banging can be felt by both him and the boy, and they can communicate like this back and forth, through what can vaguely be described as a "Sound of Metal". (This scene is not just the narrative's midpoint but also the midpoint of the film's running time, as it starts just before the one-hour mark of the two-hour film).

The climax of the second act (or Field's plot point II (2005)) comes with Joe's revelation after Ruben has sold his camper van and went ahead with the cochlear implant surgery: Ruben is no longer welcome in the community and must leave. This, a sort of point of no return, ultimately leaves Ruben on his own. When Ruben then also realizes that the implants which he thought would restore his hearing to what it was, actually will not, he is at the lowest point of the story. The implants, rather than restoring hearing leave him in a sort of limbo where he can't fully hear the world like he used to and he also can't claim to be deaf and live the life of Joe and his community. Exiled and alone he goes in search of Lou in France.

The third act, which Syd Field calls the "resolution" (2005, p. 26) commences when Joe rejects Ruben because of his actions and gains dramatic speed when Ruben realizes the implant won't solve his problems. In France is where Ruben must confront not his past as in the second act, but his future and where he will go from what he has been through and how he has developed. Can he reconnect with Lou after all this time, or is his path laid out in a different direction than hers? The ending goes a long way to suggest that Ruben is at peace when he can escape the noise, and that he and Lou will never go back to their previous life.

### ***Why Include Narrative Synopsis?***

*“... phenomenology is not an across-the-board method that has an answer for every question. Its usefulness runs its course once the semiotic element dominates and a film begs to be interpreted in terms of its conspicuous discursive dimension.” (Julian Hanich, 2012, p. 585)*

One of the main reasons I include a narrative synopsis and an analysis of the narrative is to familiarize my readers with the story and the major story beats. As I return to describing some individual scenes more in detail, I think this summary will be helpful to orient my readers in the story of the film, and somewhat in the experience I had.

The main question I’ve set forth answering is how it was possible for the experience of *Sound of Metal* to generate an affective response in me, which I have described as feeling “seen”. I contend that a strong affective response like the one I had wouldn’t be possible without a certain degree of narrative intelligibility caused by structural narrative familiarity. If the films sense-making properties weren’t readily apparent in a form I’m used to, as with an Aristotelian drama, the affective response I had, which I can only describe as positive, wouldn’t be possible. As with the familiarity of the cinematic experience at the cinema or as I have detailed, at home, the familiar form is what offers the freedom to dissolve oneself in what is occurring on screen. This could easily be juxtaposed with art-film, which to a large degree activates more of a cognitive response, as the viewer is constantly pushed into guessing at subtext rather than experiencing text. “Thus the art film solicits a particular reading procedure: whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation (Is a character’s mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we’re thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being “said” here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?) (Bordwell, 2012, p. 156) The form the narrative takes is thus important in how it influences my mode of reading and de-coding what takes place on screen, and my ability to be immediately affected.

## **My Identification With Ruben**

At a surface level I have very little in common with the main character of the film. He is an American metal drummer who ends up losing his hearing and finding belonging in the deaf community. But, Ruben's history plays a major part of the story and is important in order to understand his development. He and Lou live a nomadic lifestyle in a shared campervan that they drive around performing shows across the United States. This choice to lead a nomadic lifestyle is explained by his childhood as a so-called “army brat”, moving from town to town and never finding his footing, his community. He also has a history of drug abuse which is an element to his troubles.

Ruben's story told through this film spoke to me. Initially I would like to delve into why that is. What is it about Ruben's story that made me identify with it? What is it about the context I saw the film that made it make such an impact? And how is it possible that not only the characters through their dialogue, but also the film itself can "speak" to me? I'm not deaf, I'm not interested in drumming or metal music. However, like Ruben, I too am trying to navigate life by figuring out what community I belong to. Ruben's history as an army brat isn't revealed until later in the film, but his nomadic lifestyle still hit something in me early during the viewing. Growing up, I was also a so-called “army-brat”. I moved around my country of birth, and in and out of it a few times, so the sense of not belonging to any particular place but a strong need to create my own community as Ruben has done with Lou resonates with me to a very high degree. (I will return to describe this more specifically when describing SCENE 3).

At the same time, my sense of hearing and listening are very important to me. Not only does hearing help me navigate the world and its potential dangers and other necessary information I need to survive, but I have a strong relationship with music as a tool for grounding my existence. By that I mean that I have many of my own traditions when it comes to what music I listen to, when. As I'm writing it's a tool I use in order to help me concentrate. Whenever I am on a longer train ride, I usually listen to Pink Floyd's The Wall. Not necessarily because that record reminds me of travelling, but I can be anxious when travelling and it helps having that same record to soothe me. The repetition counter-acts the stressful uncertainties of being in



unfamiliar surroundings. Ruben's loss of hearing touches on a central fear I can relate to as something that would be devastating for me and how I live my life.

### ***The First Meeting with Ruben On-screen***

When Ruben first appears on screen he is sitting still, breathing, and looking down. The foreground of the image is covered by cymbals and the top of a drumkit. The background behind Ruben is completely dark. His hair is obviously bleached blonde and on his shirtless torso there is a tattoo stating "Please Kill Me" next to a crossed pair of revolvers. The camera slowly moves toward him as he looks up and around. The subtle feedback of guitar-noise ebbs and flows in the background, a chord is struck, and Ruben closes his eyes to concentrate. The camera shifts and the rest of the scene, a rock show, is revealed. As the music progresses, Ruben starts drumming and his eyes are intensely fixated on the other part of the show, a woman using a microphone to produce distorted vocals.

My para-social relationship with the character of Ruben begins before the film starts. It comes by way of having seen the actor portraying him, Riz Ahmed, in different television shows and films and sympathizing with him in those roles. In *The Night Of* (HBO, 2016) he especially left an impression as he played the lead character Nasir Khan who is implicated in a murder in the show's first episode. The show follows the events of his life after this fateful "night of" in a true crime inspired tale where it's always difficult to tell whether he is a victim of circumstance or an active force in determining his own fate. My first meeting with him in *Sound of Metal* then, is infused with my previous engagements with characters he has portrayed. This leads to certain expectancies as to which qualities he will bring the story. He has often utilized a natural naivety and innocence supported by his big eyes to portray characters which are easy to sympathize with like Nasir in *The Night Of*, Rick in *Nightcrawler* (2014) or Bodhi Rook in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016).

The first meeting I have with Ahmed's character Ruben in *Sound of Metal* turns these expectations on their head. Ruben doesn't look like an innocent boy who needs help in those first few seconds. He looks driven, focused, and capable. He looks calm and collected, interrupted by the aggressive controlled drum hits he performs. His tattoos are aggressive, albeit in a self-

deprecating manner. To me this doesn't look like someone who needs help, or at least someone who wants help, even though he might need it. After his circumstances change however and he loses his hearing, his life with Lou, and finds himself in an unfamiliar situation in the deaf community, a lot of the qualities I've come to expect from the actor return. In these circumstances I get the sense of a great vulnerability to the character of Ruben. He is insecure and lost for the better part of the story which made me empathize with him. He goes from being someone who seems in control, who won't accept help and is determined to fix his problematic circumstances himself, to someone who obviously desperately needs guidance as his life is falling apart. I can easily identify with the need to seem collected, and the misguided stubbornness Ruben displays rings a bell from difficult situations I've found myself in throughout my life.

In the following section I will describe three scenes that further illustrate my connection with Ruben, the story, and how and why these scenes affected me specifically.

### **Feeling Seen Through Feeling Three Scenes**

I have on repeated viewings of *Sound of Metal* identified three scenes that I found especially important. These scenes were selected after repeated viewings over the course of six months after the initial viewing situation which took place in early August 2021. Now, it's hard to tell in retrospect whether these scenes were what triggered the emotional reaction initially or whether the emotional reaction to the film is what triggered the need to identify some scenes and the selection is more random. Whatever the case, I am confident that the scenes hold some importance, and hopefully they will be able to shed some light on how the film and film as a medium operates on a larger scale.

Every scene selected is in some way relevant to my subjective notion of feeling seen, but each so in different ways. Each scene offers a special point of recognition which intersected with my subjective personal experience. The first scene echoed my situation at the time of viewing, the second scene echoed a general contemporary struggle I had, and the third scene created an intersection between the main character's history with my own subjective lived reality anchoring a connection between my reality and the film's reality. A large part of the film's narrative focuses

on Ruben's loss of hearing, but I would like to note that the scenes I have selected don't have the greatest emphasis on the "hearing-loss" part of the plot, and as such they aren't the most interesting examples of use of sound that the film has to offer. I base this choice on an assumption that the hearing-loss part of the story wasn't integral to the viewing subject's (me) experience of "feeling seen". I will however return to what role sound played in my reception of the film in chapter 4.

The first scene "Lou Leaves" is near the beginning of the film and can be said to be the climax of the first act. The second scene "Ruben writes" is from the film's second act and appears around the narrative midpoint of the story. The third scene "Ruben meets Lou's Father", is from the resolution or third act of the film.

### ***SCENE 1 – LOU LEAVES***

The opening scenes of *Sound of Metal* describe a life filled with freedom, through living on the open road, driving from town to town performing shows. The metal shows give off a sense of power and mastery for both our main characters, but there is an anger there. Their life is also one filled with love and harmony as depicted in the scenes describing the minutiae of their daily routine and their playfulness while on the road together. There is also a sense of community conveyed through the scenes involving their setting up for a show and chatting with others part of the same metal rock scene. Their life and their circumstances, while nomadic, seem fruitful and positive. It looks like they are on a successful path. But then, Ruben's rapid hearing loss triggers a crisis which their current life isn't equipped to deal with. At first this leads to confusion and denial. Then hopelessness, desperation, isolation, and loneliness. The dramatic tension which is built up in the first act culminates in the scene where Lou leaves.

#### ***Isolation***

During daytime, carrying a couple of bags, Ruben walks across a deserted road towards a stopped car and tells Lou to slow down. He turns towards the driver of the car and tells him to relax. Lou is behind the car packing bags into the trunk. Ruben pleads with her to tell him more

about her plan. Lou writes something in a notebook and shows Ruben. Ruben reacts with disappointment and frustration as he says, “Jesus, come on”. Lou points to her arms and says that if he hurts himself, she will hurt herself too. She asks him to promise, (probably referring to drug-use). Jump cut, Ruben hits the back of the car in frustration, he can’t argue with it, as if this is an absolute foundation in their relationship. He asks her to wait for him. They kiss, Ruben asks her to write to him, she nods. Ruben says that if it’s bullshit, she should come back, and he’ll fix it. They both cry as Lou gets in the car. Lou says she loves him, Ruben replies she is his “fucking heart”. The car drives off and Ruben is left alone crying.

There is one word which sums up the impact this scene had on me as a viewer at the time I first saw *Sound of Metal*. Loneliness. As mentioned previously, the situation I saw the film in was one of isolation. A mandatory three-day isolation after a short trip abroad to visit family. As a citizen of Oslo, I was no stranger to lockdowns and tough pandemic related measures, including mandatory social distancing, face masks, restrictions on who and how many I could meet during a week and self-isolation at every sign of Covid-related symptoms. This was, however, the first time I was alone at home during such an isolation, usually having my girlfriend there with me. In many ways, the struggles with loneliness were an all-encompassing experience of mine all through the pandemic. After relatively short notice on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 practically all areas of life were turned upside down, scrutinized and rearranged so that the risk of infection could be minimized. The result being that most of my social life was pulverized. Friends, fellow students, co-workers, and family were reduced to nicknames in chat rooms and video feeds. After a while the physical sensations of being in the same room with other people, hearing voices, experiencing bodily sensations in contact with other bodies, seeing facial expressions and bodily composure became a distant dream.

The days prior to the viewing of *Sound of Metal* had however been somewhat of a respite from this. I travelled with my father and my dog across the border for the first time in a few years, to his home in Sweden. At the time, which countries, and which parts of which countries were safe to travel to and through changed on a bi-weekly basis. Right up until the day I was going to leave it was uncertain whether I would be able to go or not. Or if the restrictions and mandatory isolations on both sides of the border were too much to make it worthwhile. As it turned out it was okay, and I could relax and enjoy this time with family only having to endure a

three-day isolation when I got back home. The experience, however, of the care-free holiday with family it was difficult to meet during the pandemic and the following sudden isolation of being alone felt like a dramatic shift of circumstance. It was this isolation and vague sense of loneliness that was triggered, dramatized, and actualized by the scene where Lou leaves.

The scene does many things to heighten and transfer the idea and emotion of loneliness and sense of isolation. An obvious observation is the fact that the main character ends up alone and crying at the end of the scene, but just as important are all the steps leading up to that point. The scene starts with Ruben and Lou as the only people in the world. In this world. The world of the film. We never see the driver. It's a nameless, faceless person, there to take Lou away. The scene is shot on a desolate cracked road, devoid of any other people. We don't know where she is going. So even though he knows, his frustration is amplified for me by not letting me know. The rest of the space around Ruben is also very empty. There are no other people, also amplifying the sense of loneliness.

The scene is shot with a handheld camera, with a gentle swaying following the motions of the characters. It opens with a medium full shot of Ruben and it takes a while before there is a cut between angles and we see Lou's face. For most of the scene she appears as a head of hair turned down and away. As the back-and-forth exchange between Ruben and Lou intensifies, the camera moves from the medium shot to close ups, switching from point of view shots over Lou and Ruben's shoulders. When Lou is gone and Ruben is alone on the road the camera zooms back out to a medium shot of Ruben. The third party of the scene, the driver of the car, is never in view of the camera. After the car drives off and Ruben is left alone, there are no cuts. All these details and choices by the camera focus the viewer's attention on Ruben and his emotional reaction to the events.

An important aspect relating to my subjective reception of the scene is its verisimilitude and what elements of the production align to sell the idea of this being a witnessing of a lived reality. The previously mentioned handheld camera is one such aspect. Through the beginning of the film most of the scenes between Ruben and Lou is shot with a handheld camera which doesn't offer a good overview of the action, rather focusing closely on each character and individual details about them. It gives of the impression of not having enough time to block and stage each scene, as if this fleeting reality had to be captured as is, no room for setting up and

shooting again. It's reminiscent of documentary footage and coupled with the main characters' life as professional musicians, the handheld camera creates a visual style that could just as easily be seen in a behind-the-scenes road movie, following a real-life band or group of musicians on tour.

Another aspect is that of sound. There is no music in the scene. As a matter of fact, the only music in the entire film is strictly diegetic, and comes from the performances of the characters themselves. In this scene there are no musical cues directing the viewer's emotional reaction. A tool which, while effective, can also remind us that we are in fact watching a film, something constructed from many individual parts, and something designed to elicit a specific emotional reaction. Being given the freedom to experience the emotional tone of the scene as is, is something which brings the scene closer to how we mostly experience reality, without a soundtrack. A third element underlining the fictional reality of the scene is its location and seemingly natural lighting. The environment around the dramatic scene is sparse, there are no extras to fill in the scene, there is nothing happening in the background apart from the rustling of trees in the wind. There is very little else to focus on apart from the main characters and little that indicates a large production team on location.

These different aspects, narrative action, camera, location, and lack of music work in conjunction to deliver an experience that triggers and activates my own sense of loneliness at the time of viewing. And even further it activates and gives form to a general fear I have of being alone and the uncertainties I feel that entails. The precariousness of the characters' isolated existence is highlighted by their surroundings' desolateness. When at the end of the scene, that relative twosome safety is forcefully split apart by one of its constituents, I'm faced with my own sense of hopelessness in similar situations.

To this effect my general identification with the character of Ruben also plays a large part. However, a large part of that identification wasn't established during the first viewing until later in the film as I will illustrate in SCENE 3. This scene was then identified on a subsequent viewing of the film as especially important. This means I selected it after I knew where the story was headed, and how much of a strong experience it had been for me. The scene delivers an emotional punch, but I would still like to note that for me specifically, there is an added

dimension to subsequent viewings because my bond with the characters is stronger, as I know where the story is going.

## ***SCENE 2 – RUBEN WRITES***

The second act of *Sound of Metal* continues the theme of loneliness coupled with growing uncertainty. There is a sense of bewilderment and disconnection when faced with new environments, situations, and challenges. There is longing and hope in the scenes where Ruben sneaks off to read e-mails from Lou against Joe's wishes. But then there is frustration and anger right after, as Ruben sits alone outside in the dark. While Ruben is amid these developments Joe gives him the challenge of starting every morning in a room, with nothing to do but sit still and write. If Ruben feels he is unable to sit still, Joe says he should write and stresses that he can't draw, just write.

The scene involving Ruben's experience with trying to write opens with a shot of a house at dawn. There are no sounds apart from insects and birds. Next shot is of a table with a donut, a mug, and a thermos on it. We see Ruben up close, questioningly looking at the table, looking around as if searching for someone. Next shot, Ruben is walking up a staircase, carrying a mug and a donut. At the top he opens a door to a room which he looks questioningly inside. On a table within sits a notebook and a pen. Ruben looks contemplatively at the scene before he enters the room. Close up shots of Ruben show him calmly sitting down at the table, he looks silently at the notebook before he suddenly smashes the donut laid out next to him with his fist. Coffee spills. He gathers up the pieces of the broken donut into a ball and smashes it again. He repeats this a couple of times. A jump cut to a close up indicates that he has been sitting there for a while. He stares silently, before he lunges forward screaming. He looks angry. He smashes his fist into the table and screams again, and another time. He takes a sip of coffee, before he mutters to himself, "nice, nice nice nice". Then he gets up as he says, "so fucking stupid". On his feet he starts laughing while shifting around. He laughs while the frame moves closer to his face. "You fucking idiot", he says. He becomes quiet for a moment before he turns around and bangs on the door with his fist. "What a fucking idiot", he says. It's unclear who he is referring to. Is he

talking about himself, is he talking about Joe, or is he talking about someone else entirely? Scene ends.

As a part of Ruben's character development over the course of the film, this is an important scene. It showcases his difficulties with sitting still and confronting the thoughts inside him. Up until this point we've learnt that Ruben is adept at drawing and often uses this as a way of self-expression, along with his music of course. His very physically aggressive act of banging on drums. We haven't seen a character who seems to use words as much as a way of getting things out of his system, so to speak. This challenge then, is an important one for his development because if he can master his own impulses, and not react with anger and aggression towards his own inner life, my experience tells me, that he will become more adept at also solving problems in his external life. As in dealing with his hearing loss, his separation from his girlfriend, and what path he is to choose moving forward under these new circumstances.

To me as a viewer the sequence and Ruben's frustrations is immediately recognizable. At a basic level it is easy to recognize that Ruben is struggling, and his frustration is so clear that if you've dealt with and recognized any kind of frustration within yourself at any time, you will understand his feelings. But to me, as someone who at the time of viewing was in the middle of trying to write the basic structures of what would later become this thesis, the sequence transcended the immediate recognition of a struggling human being and became a visual representation of my own struggles with the very writing process that has been all encompassing for so long.

For the narrative and Ruben's story it's also important because it is the beginning of a transformation we see over the next couple of scenes. The following scenes showcase different situations where Ruben seems to find a sense of community, with the children and making friends at Joe's community. We see him returning to the writing room twice. The first time he sits and scribbles in the notebook, angrily, but focused. The third time, it seems he is content with just sitting there and staring into the air, not needing to scream and smash things, and neither needing to write at all, just as Joe mentioned as a possibility earlier on.

Now, the identification that I experience while viewing this scene was and is profound, as my writing is an ongoing process. Of course, this was and is a contributing factor as to why this scene helped contribute to my sense of recognition by the story. There was the basic structure of



recognizable struggle, and then another layer which echoed my own subjective circumstance shown through the physically recognizable act of trying to sit still and write. Ruben doesn't talk about his struggles with writing, but it is shown through his bodily motions. His outbursts, his difficulty sitting still, and needing to stand up as well as his shouting and screaming, his aggressive vocalizations are all shown in the context of him trying to write. His body language is what mediates the idea of his struggle.

“While physical sensations can of course be experienced witnessing others' actions in everyday life, they may be most noticeable to the viewer watching exceptional performances.” (2019, p. 161) Gosetti-Ferencei writes, but what defines an exceptional performance can be relative to the spectator. The act of writing is in many cases a mundane endeavor, but when you are struggling to write a larger project that is important to you, the stakes are higher and your reaction to witnessing others in the same situation will be stronger. In cognitive theory there are a few competing models that “describe the conditions of mind necessary for social empathy” according to Gosetti-Ferencei (2019, p.162). One is the “theory of mind”. This theory bases itself on the assumption that we “infer the consciousness of others on the basis of an implicit working theory that they, too, have consciousness like I do” Another is called “simulation theory”, this is the idea that when we see something happening to another person, we can imagine ourselves going through the same situation based off our own experiences. Thirdly, Gosetti-Ferencei describes a neurobiological model that “suggests that intersubjectivity is grounded in our very neurobiological structure, even where the social dimension is also recognized as contributive.” (2019, p. 161) This last idea, is perhaps the one which is closest related to Meunier's theory of identification, in which our recognition of others' as thinking, feeling subjects is more immediate, and based on our immediate capacity for perception (2019, p. 49).

My basic identification with Ruben and his struggles sitting are explained by this quote from Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei “Our Corporeal familiarities, our fundamental bodily interactions with things and spaces of the world, provide schematic memories that supply imagination throughout the life of consciousness.” (2019, p. 175) But my reaction to this scene necessitates a familiarity with the struggles of writing. My ideas about what it would mean for the character if he were to overcome this challenge are based on larger ideas about what skillsets are needed to succeed in difficult situations. For me, this relates in large part to acceptance and conscious

awareness of what is going on inside myself. As such this part of my identification goes beyond a mere mirroring and identification with his physical actions. I project myself and my own experiences onto the character, and in this way make sense of the story being told.

### ***SCENE 3 – RUBEN HAS LUNCH WITH LOU’S FATHER***

#### ***Food as Recurring Motif***

The following scene I will describe takes place in a kitchen, but since this isn’t the first time *Sound of Metal* places its characters in a food-related setting, I think it is relevant to describe why this can be important to my reception of the story. Throughout the film, scenes involving food appear as a recurring motif at several different points during Ruben’s journey and development. The film’s second scene as described earlier revolves around Ruben and Lou’s morning routine, where an important aspect is the preparation of food, and coffee. Not only is the food present in the scene, it is featured prominently through the use of close-up shots and accompanied by a soundscape which isolates and foregrounds the sounds related to the blending of a smoothie, and the drip of a coffee maker. As a viewer who relies on coffee to wake up in the morning, the pavlovian response to the sound of the drip is felt immediately. The familiar sounds and sights make me recognize aspects about the character’s lives that are familiar to my own life, offering identification. (Writing about it also brings about the need to start my own coffee-dripping machine).

At a later point in the first act Ruben and Lou are trying to figure out what to do in the aftermath of Ruben’s hearing loss. Ruben seems intent on trying to fix it himself, one way or the other, refusing to recognize the seriousness of the situation. Lou on the other hand is talking to their band’s manager trying to get help and guidance. The whole scene takes place in a diner with food visibly present on the table. Both these scenes effectively tell me as a viewer a lot about the character, but they also function as a familiar temporal structuring of the first act of the film. There are many parts of their experience so far I can’t relate to, like their choice of music, living on the road in difficult cramped conditions, the clothes they wear and to an extent the language they speak but I do recognize the importance of food as a natural part of everyday life. The

moments in between these two scenes take place over the course of several days, but by having the first 25 minutes bookended in this way by at first a breakfast and then a dinner, Ruben and Lou's experiences are condensed so that they appear to take place in just one day.

Dinner scenes are also used to illustrate Ruben's character development throughout his time at the deaf community. In the first instance he is reserved and isolated when surrounded by the other outgoing sign-language speaking community members. The second time we see him in this situation he is not only taking part, but he is confident, open and happily joking around with the others. This repetition of the social rituals relating to food grounds the story in a common human experience and reaches somewhat of a culmination when Ruben has lunch with Lou's father.

### ***Ruben and Lou's Father***

Towards the end of the film, Ruben has gotten Cochlear implants which enable him to simulate a sense of hearing. He leaves the deaf community and travels to France in search of Lou.

Ruben walks along a quiet city street. He stops at a door to what looks like an apartment building and rings the doorbell. A man answers with a "oui?". Ruben asks if Lou is there. The man asks who Ruben is. Ruben says his name, but the man doesn't seem to understand so Ruben repeats himself. Finally, the man emits a sound of acknowledgement and the door buzzes open. Ruben opens the door and walks hesitantly inside. He greets someone who turns out to be Lou's father (even though he isn't introduced as such until later). The man says hi in French, Ruben repeats his name. It's clear they haven't met each other before, but Lou's Father doesn't introduce himself, in fact, he seems totally uninterested in the whole situation, but he tells Ruben to "come in".

Inside, the man walks ahead and asks Ruben if he is hungry. Ruben doesn't answer as they both stop in a kitchen where there is some activity in the background. The man says that Louise isn't there and Ruben nods understandingly. Lou's father asks if Ruben is hearing, Ruben doesn't respond so he repeats himself. Ruben says "yeah, he had an operation". The man says enquiringly, "wow, yes?". Ruben shows us his implants by removing his hat. The man leans in to inspect and says that it's very good, "Louise told him he wished for this" Ruben laughs almost

dismissively as he sits down. During the whole interaction Lou's father is occupied with some cooking in the kitchen, he tends to some meat in a frying pan and turns around asking Ruben if he is back to his drumming, while gesturing with his hands as if he is playing some drums. Hesitantly Ruben replies "not yet", he has to "deal with some stuff first." Lou's father asks him to elaborate. Ruben answers vaguely that he needs to "get back into it" and figure out some financial stuff. The man asks if "Louise knows that he's there". Ruben seems happy as he thinks about the question and answers "no". The man says that "it's a big surprise then". Ruben smiles. The man says that Louise has been quite busy and that they're having a party, so she will certainly be back later that evening. The man says that he's going to make Ruben some eggs. Ruben says "he's good" as in he's not hungry and asks if Lou's father needs any help. He replies no and says that Ruben "needs some eggs."

The scene transitions to Ruben and Lou's father sitting at a table eating. Lou's father asks Ruben where he grew up. Ruben answers "All over, Texas, California, Virginia." "Why so many places" the father asks. "My mom was a nurse in the military, so we kept moving around", Ruben replies. Lou's father asks if this is true about Ruben's father as well. Ruben answers that he doesn't know. "I see", Lou's father replies. "I must be honest, I did not always have good feelings for you, Ruben, all these years" Lou's father says as Ruben listens thoughtfully. Lou's father continues: "I confide, it is like if one... had stolen something precious." Ruben sneers. "But I know it's not you that took Louise from me. Her mother did that. She took Louise when she left me. And she took her again when she killed herself. And Louise must have come back home then. But she was hating me so much. What could I do? And you, you...well, you gave her a place to go... then. And this is a good thing. Do you see, I didn't like you much at the time, but now I thank you. I want to tell you that." Ruben listens intently and nods. "But anyhow, you're gonna be so happy to see how Louise... Is doing great now. And that's the most important, isn't it?"

If the first scene "Lou Leaves" hit me where I was mentally very specifically at the time of viewing, the second scene "Ruben Writes" connected with my general life situation in the months leading up to the viewing, then this third scene is what cemented my identification with the character of Ruben. Up until this point I could relate to him on a general basis, and as I've described previously this was due to a mixture of relating to his experiences and how the filmic

medium was manipulated by the creators of the film. This is the point in the story where we are offered the most information about Ruben's history. His familial ties haven't been discussed at all so far, and practically the only thing we know about where he has come from prior to his life with Lou and his present loss of hearing, is that he used to be addicted to heroin. This is important for the narrative because it reveals key points about Ruben's background that give his character a larger depth and explain a lot of his motivations. At the same time, Lou's father's admission and divulging of subtle details regarding Lou's background helps put her life with Ruben into context.

The character I relate to the most though is Ruben who shares a background with me as a child of a working professional in the military. Like Ruben, I also spent my childhood moving around from place to place. In and out of my birth-country of Norway a few times as well. This entailed changing schools, losing contact with friends, and being separated from other parts of my extended family for large periods of time. Up until this point in the story I have been identifying with Ruben on account of his restlessness, his vulnerability, his need for creating and maintaining stable routines, his isolation in difficult circumstances. As soon as this information comes up though (in a most casual manner I might add) all that which has come before is put into perspective and I recognize that Ruben's issues and way of life may be a consequence of a childhood like my own. This type of upbringing leaves a mark on you for better and worse, and this mark is one I feel I can recognize in Ruben as a mirroring of this same mark in me.

As I'm writing this, re-watching the film, I am in my mind transported back to the time when I first saw it. The way I felt then is coming back to me. The weather here in Oslo has been sunny the last days like it was then and watching the interaction between Ruben and Lou's father I'm thinking about what it is that really drives this movie forward. There is very little action, and most of the scenes involve dialogues between two participants, Ruben, and another. After leaving Joe, who was a father figure to Ruben, he comes to see an actual father, Lou's father. In this encounter I also learn that Ruben doesn't have a relationship with his own father, like he says when Lou's father asks, "what about your father?" and Ruben replies, "I don't know". This also reminds me that when I saw this film and when it connected with me the most was right after I had spent a longer period with my own family, and my own father, the one who was in the military while I was growing up. My relationship with my father has been through many

different phases over the years. We see each other regularly but don't live in the same city so not too often. During the pandemic, contact was naturally reduced a lot as well. But the one thing that I always go through when I meet him emotionally, is a feeling of security which turns into a feeling that that security comes at the price of a loss of freedom. It's an internal psychodrama I go through pretty much every time. The point I'm trying to make is that I came into the viewing with issues of paternal relationships actualized in my conscience. At the time of viewing this was an aspect that deepened my connection with the film.

## Chapter Conclusion

Towards the end of watching *Sound of Metal* for the first time I've written in my notes "I feel sad because I can tell where this is going. And it hurts." This realization came at the time right before Ruben and Lou have their final moments together and Ruben packs his bags and leaves quietly in the middle of the night. At this point in the story, Ruben and Lou have both gone through a transformation which necessitates the ending of their relationship and life together. But, they both seem to be in a better place than they were initially, despite their change in circumstance. *Sound of Metal* then ends like it began, on a quiet close-up of Ruben. Except, instead of sitting focused intently on his bandmate, ready to unleash a wall of chaotic sounds from his drum kit, he sits quietly on a bench taking in what he sees around him. He has disconnected the cochlear implants he thought would give him his old life back and seems to accept and find peace with himself. The following are notes I've taken just as the movie ends: "I'm sad because the movie is over. I'm also sad because these characters are lost to me, along with many other people I've known and cared about in my life. I'm also sad because I am lonely, and I don't want to be. Still, it feels good. It feels cathartic. Amazing film. Simply amazing."

"A work of art does not speak to its beholders directly, but rather involves them in a process that leads to insight, whether it is a question of a truth, an ideal, or a possibility." (1996, p. 29) Ed Tan writes, but still I felt *seen* after watching this film. And how is that possible when it didn't entail direct interaction with any other human being? Was the film experience merely a catalyst for other emotions that were inside me at the time? Or was there something inherent in

the film that touched upon something in me that created this experience? How can an “inanimate object” like a film *see* me?

Sobchack's suggestion is that the feeling of being seen which can be experienced through an encounter with a film can be understood as a consequence of a film's inherent subjectivity. The film isn't just a frame, or an apparatus or an object that we observe, it is a subject which we interact with. In this interaction there exists a high level of intimacy as the film reveals its thoughts and feelings to you, through editing, juxtaposition and its sensory properties. “The viewer, therefore, shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance.”, Sobchack writes (1992. p. 10). This negotiation takes the form of a dialogue which I actively participate in, albeit not out loud (although I have experienced “ho’s” and “hmm’s” coming from some lone cinema-goers in the theatre which is evidence to the contrary.) While I mostly sit still and watch, my body and mind are activated as Julian Hanich describes: «This is not to deny that that watching a film is simultaneously characterized by a certain passivity, particularly when compared to other more prototypical actions. Granting a passive as well as an active *doing*, makes it possible to ignore the much discussed but overly broad and fuzzy distinction between an active and a passive viewer: while passive in some sense, the viewer is simultaneously active in others.» (2014, p. 338)

When I sit down to see a film, any film, I am actively engaged in a conversation with it. But rather than having the actors speak directly to me, which rarely happens outside of avant-garde pieces or films built around a concept of breaking the fourth wall, the language the film speaks is its own. Its legibility as it appears before me has been habituated through many years of experience with it. It doesn't have to tell me directly what it is trying to say for me to grasp at its meaning. And by making sense through a language I understand I come away from the film experience much the same way I do after a discussion with a friend about difficult topics.

In many ways I think this is a very important aspect of my experience with *Sound of Metal* at the moment in time I first saw it. Especially considering that for the duration of the three days surrounding the viewing, there was no one else I could talk to face to face. In isolation the film took the place of a friend I could talk to, allowing me to *feel seen*.

I have so far mentioned sense-perception a few times as being important in my reception of the film. In the following chapter I will go into more detail about how this phenomenon impacted my reaction to the film, before I conclude with my thoughts on what I have learned from this process as a whole.



## Chapter 4: Establishing Connection Through Sense-Perception

### Sound

*“While the film image can be stopped and reproduced through stills and frame enlargements, sound can be reproduced only in time, that is, it cannot be reduced to a single moment. Sound, therefore, also reminds us of the irreversibility of time: it stands for loss and announces death – all the more reason, perhaps, why sound is so often associated with danger and fear.” (Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M, 2015, p. 156).*

Initially I dismissed sound as being a relevant part of this analysis. But on repeated viewings I realized that in many ways sound is essential to the experience that the film creates. An important aspect of *Sound of Metal* is precisely how it uses sound to convey Ruben's experience of the world. And it's a place where the medium of film is both important for the story to be told the way it is, through the senses, and an important aspect of how the film tells the story of Ruben and how it uses sound in order to establish identification with Ruben as a subject. “By inverting the traditional approach of sound being subservient to visuals, “*Sound of Metal*” establishes a point of hearing. Linking subjective sound and image, and then sharply juxtaposing it to an “omnipresent” perspective (how Marder describes being outside Ruben’s point of view), grounds the audience in the character’s disorientation.” Chris O’Falt writes for *Indiewire*, (*Indiewire.com*, 2021) As the film has sound as an important aspect of its story it also uses sound in unique ways to tell that story and facilitate a connection with the main character. Ways that aren’t possible in any other medium but film and television. Engaging with the film and engaging with the story of Ruben is somewhat heavily linked to how sound is used.

### *Opposing Soundscapes*

*Sound of Metal* opens on a noisy rock show. At first there is faint guitar noise and audio feedback. A chord on a guitar is struck. There’s cheering, whistling, and more isolated chord strikes. Some distorted vocals enter the mix. It’s impossible to make out the words. A drum is

struck, and the distorted vocals become a droning shout. Then there is a pause, before everything intensifies. Slowly, guitar, drums and vocals continue building a sonic chaos until finally releasing and dissipating, with nothing but the cheers of a crowd and a faint sound of feedback or possibly the sound of ringing ears left.

Then there is absolute silence. One by one we are introduced to the isolated sounds of a mundane morning routine. The soft shifting of sheets on a bed and the rustle of venetian blinds. A metallic lid hitting a countertop and a blender preparing breakfast. The drip of a coffee pot. The heavy breathing of repetitious bodily activity. A box of compressed air blowing dust, and then finally a needle hitting a spinning record which turns into an old-timey jazz song with female vocals.

The two soundscapes are direct opposites. The first represents a chaos of noise, where it's hard to distinguish sounds from each other or connect each muttered vocal sound to a word. The second introduces a meditative order, foregrounding each individual sound and its visual correlate. As a viewer the second soundscape offers relief, whereas the first feels stressful, unfulfilled, and unharmonious. In both cases the functions of the soundscapes as they serve the film and its larger narrative is clear. Sound is important. Both to the story, and to the characters who are the ones performing the show in the first scene and the ones who inhabit the morning routine described in the second.

To me as a viewer the first scene functions as a shock to my auditory system as I desperately try to navigate the sonic chaos. As I try to discern the words or understand where the show is going. What feelings are being conveyed? What situation are these people in, and on a personal note, who in their right mind would enjoy this "music"? (But that's possibly the point of the genre. It's an expression of a mind that isn't "right" and similarly enjoyed by those that get some satisfaction and personal recognition from having their inner states mirrored through this chaos of sound). In any case, as the intense noise disappears, I'm comforted by a return to the mundane in the second scene. The juxtaposition of the initial chaos heightens my appreciation of each individual sound showcased. I feel myself paying close attention to and becoming aware of the fact that I'm hearing. Which is an important point to the film experience of *Sound of Metal* as precisely loss of hearing is one of its main plot points. And as I am later brought into Ruben's world and his loss of hearing is illustrated so clearly, I too feel a sense of loss.

To hear is mostly a common human experience. It's a base part of our existence. It can be a great source of pleasure like listening to a piece of music you love, but it can also be a nuisance, like having that same piece of music be played loudly by your neighbors when you're trying to sleep. As part of the Cinematic experience, sound had a troubled beginning. Today, while viewing a silent film one might easily conclude that they are "missing" something in order to complete the experience, but as Elsaesser and Hagen note that wasn't always the case: "It is important to realise that the "deficit", retrospectively often ascribed to cinema before the introduction of sound, was not always perceived as such by film directors at the time." (2015, p. 150) This perspective by the creators of films at the time, is echoed by those who watched what they created: "For many critics in the late 1920s, then, sound film did not represent the perfection of film as an art form, but rather as merely adding a layer of (vulgar) illusion to the film" (Elsaesser and Hagen, 2015, p. 152)

However, as an accurate reproduction of how we perceive the world, the element of sound in film is more suited in recreating a "realistic" experience than is the image, Elsaesser and Hagen argue. This is due to the fact that whereas the image of a film is only a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space, sound on the other has no such spatial limits, and can be perceived as coming from all directions, just as in real life (dependent on the size and location of the speakers. "Furthermore, a focus on the ear and sound directly emphasizes the spatiality of the cinematic experience: We can hear around corners and through walls, in complete darkness and blinding brightness, even when we cannot see anything." (Elsaesser, T., & Hagen, M, 2015, p. 148) In many cases this is contingent on the equipment used to project the sound. A movie theater with its array of speakers is much more competent in controlling the directionality of sound than is a set of laptop speakers or a cell phone. But nevertheless, the spatiality created by sound isn't an illusion, as the sound projected is occurring in three-dimensional space, whereas the image of the film is not. "... Sound 'embodies' the image – seeing is always directional, because we see only in one direction, whereas hearing is always a three-dimensional, spatial perception, that is, it creates an acoustic space, because we hear in all directions." (Elsaesser, T., & Hagen, M, 2015, p. 154)

When sound is added to image, on the other hand the illusion the cinematic experience creates starts to take shape. Elsaesser and Hagen refer to Rudolf Arnheim who: "drew the

conclusion that sound transforms film from a formally abstract mode of (two-dimensional) representation into a medium of (three-dimensional) mimetic realism.” And: “Arnheim had rightly realized that, unlike the reproduction of images which entails a loss of dimensionality (from three to two dimensions), the reproduction of sound does not carry with it such a reduction in depth of information.” (Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M, 2015, p. 151)” Sound then, is uniquely situated as a tool to convey the perceptual world of the characters of cinema, as it carries with it more immediately relatable information than does the image.

In the case of the opening scenes of *Sound of Metal* the soundscape, much more than the images, is what creates a sense of subjective connection to the world of the characters. By establishing a very clear sensory connection for me as a viewer to the perceptual world of the main character Ruben I can identify myself with him on a very basic human level. Namely through the familiar sounds of everyday life. Julian Hanich describes this phenomenon when he discusses the effects and affects produced by “the cinemattick shock” “The strategy for bringing about this shock is aimed at me – the viewer – *directly*. It does not necessarily take a detour via empathy or sympathy with the characters. In many cases there is not even a character involved.” (2012, p. 591) In both cases identification is mainly predicated on the immediate experience of the film. As most people can and will be shocked by sudden violent or disturbing imagery, the immediate experience of sound latches itself onto a very basic part of human existence, and no special circumstances story wise are needed for this identification to take place. “In many ways we are more susceptible to sound than to visual perceptions, a fact on which horror films capitalize when sound is used to evoke a threatening and yet unseen presence.” (Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M, 2015, p. 155)

Then again, perhaps the individual foregrounding of the sounds of Ruben’s early morning routine are important because they help me re-establish a connection with my own auditory reality in: “... an era where sound no longer implies an anchoring in a fixed spatial position, but becomes rather a mobile cloud or an invisible cloak that we can wrap ourselves in, in order to protect us from the (acoustic) demands of a noisy environment.” (Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M, 2015, p. 149). In an existence where a lot of the sounds I daily live with aren’t directly connected to my everyday circumstance, this foregrounding of sound by the experience of *Sound of Metal*

is what helps structure my perceptions and orient my subjective experience in alignment with the experience of the main character.

## **Kinesthetic Empathy**

*«[About Philippe Petit]... Watching the tightrope artist is a tense and profound visceral experience. Even of a safely grounded viewer, the muscles will contract, the hands will clench, the heart will beat in a vicarious sensation of balance and exposure. For the observer, the scene is, literally, breathtaking.» (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2019, p. 160)*

This example is from another experience than this thesis' main case, the experience of *Sound of Metal*. However, it represents such a strong realization on my part of how the physical nature of my existence impacts my ability to identify with audiovisual representations, that I include it as a background to the analytical work.

See is a television show currently streaming on Apple TV+. In the first season we follow Jason Momoa's character Baba Voss and his family on a journey through a post-apocalyptic United States where everyone has lost the ability to do what the title implies. The show depicts a world where people organize without the sense that is most important to humans in navigating the world. The consequence is a few very scattered communities where the other senses, especially hearing dictate the conditions for living, communication, and worldview. Thematically the show echoes the subject-matter of *Sound of Metal*, by dealing with an exploration of existence devoid of one of our main five senses.

In season one, episode six, titled "Silk" (Knight et. al. 2019, tv.apple.com) there is a scene in which actor Jason Momoa's Baba Voss is stuck climbing an old mineshaft. The episode finds Baba Voss and parts of his family trapped underground in what is presumably an abandoned mine. The mine is inhabited by an unclear menace that wants Baba and his family to be dead. During the episode's climax the family's escape is close but at the last minute an elevator fails partway up a mineshaft. While Baba's children reach the top safely, he himself is stuck grabbing a ledge halfway up the shaft, with no rope to hold him or even the possibility of

seeing where he should put his hands. During large parts of the show as a viewer I find myself trying to understand how to empathize with how these people navigate the world. Never is it as clear as in this scene though. Individual close-up shots of his fingers (bloody and bruised hands from the fight preceding the climb) precarious grip on the cliff wall sends tingles running through my own hands, and probably would anyone whose tried climbing any difficult obstacle in any low stakes' situation. Gosetti-Ferencei describes the general phenomenon "When we observe, or even read vivid descriptions of, the risky actions of others, we tense up, anticipating their potential injury as we would our own, and we recoil from their scrapes, collisions and falls, as if the impact produced an echo in our own bodies." (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2019, p. 162)

This scene stuck with me after the episode was over. And it became an experience that lingered for a few days. In part this thesis tries to describe how this phenomenon works. Why is it that even though my attention could be entirely focused elsewhere, the experience of this scene in particular is what became so strong? In one way you could say that the dramatic tension of the entire episode was built around this scene. The family were stuck underground and their goal for the entire episode was to get out. Through determination, muscle power, and some emotional help from his children, Baba Voss makes it up in the end. Adding to the drama is the fact that this character has been shown to be strong, powerful, and capable in many ways earlier in the episode, and earlier in the show. This heightens the sense of how difficult the challenge is. Visually the scene emphasizes the strain in Baba Voss' face, hands, and muscles while he climbs. The same features are emphasized in the faces of his children, especially his son who helps him by grabbing his hand the last few feet of the climb.

It shouldn't be surprising that the episode's narrative climax is what left an impression on me. But the question goes a little deeper than this and I'm interested in figuring out how it's possible that it could leave an *impression* in the first place. How is it possible that without being present and going through the experience of the characters, impulses were still sent through me as if I was? The question is theoretically answered by the concept of kinesthetic empathy laid out by Gosetti-Ferencei and further described by Julian Hanich as "the innate capacity to feel with the movements and actions we observe" (2020, p. 309). The capacity though doesn't imply necessity. And my argument would be that if it wasn't for the situation I was physically and emotionally in at the time of viewing, the scene wouldn't have the visceral impact that it had.

Shortly prior to watching this episode I had been exercising by running outside in zero-degree weather, followed up with a few strength exercises. The cold outside stings at the beginning of the run. The slippery ice and snow have to be carefully navigated while running so as not to fall, other people and their dogs have to be navigated past, and my inner awareness is turned inside my body, feeling my pulse, motivating myself to climb the hills, watching the time, looking forward to the moment of relief when it's over. Likewise, my attention when doing strength exercises is on my own body, doing the exercises correctly, trying to avoid the wrong kind of pain that might indicate an overexertion of the muscle, leading to an injury, while at the same time motivating myself to endure the «good»-pain that comes from lifting a few dumbbells or doing a few push-ups. After the workout I can relax, feel accomplished and proud of myself for doing something that isn't very pleasant in the moment, but which pays off in the long run in many different ways. All these factors are what (consciously) put me in the mood I was in while watching the episode, and by exercising my body, I had also exercised my perceptions towards my own body, making it easy for me to relate to the physical strain that the main character goes through. And also, how I could physically feel the relief of the character when the climb was over. "The viewer's own kinesthetic awareness, the impression and sensation of a radical awareness of embodiment, would be stimulated so that one would feel a sense of balancing, and the threat of loss of balance, through every limb." (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2019, p. 160)

"To watch the highwire artist is to participate imaginatively in a physical experience, but also to experience a highly physical imagining." (2019, p. 161) As with the case of Philippe Petit in *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008) which Gosetti-Ferencei here refers to, my encounter with the struggles of Baba Voss created a physical sensation that aided the imagining of my own presence in the situation. There is a difference in what I subjectively believe to be potential consequences of failure though. In the case of Baba Voss, his life to an extent is on the line, but he is just as much in jeopardy as the protector of his two children and his family. In Phillippe Petit's case the potential physical consequences for the character are the focus, as his daring stunt takes place at the top of one of the tallest buildings in the world at the time, the twin towers of the world trade center.

## Chapter Conclusion

*“I feel, therefore I am. Or: I recognize myself, because I feel myself affected.” (Hanich, 2012, p.596)*

Returning to the main case of this thesis, the experience with the television show *See* makes me recognize that throughout the experience of watching *Sound of Metal* I not only participate with my mind, but I participate with my body. Ruben’s and the other characters’ bodily motions are recognized by this innate capacity for kinesthetic empathy which also contributes to how I feel myself become part of what goes on on screen.

Along with activating my sense of hearing, the kinesthetic empathy becomes part of my aesthetic engagement with the film. Aesthetic here deriving from the Greek *aisthikos*, meaning “perceptive by feeling”, (Hanich, 2012, p. 587) This innate sensory capacity of film and television engenders a physical connection between me as viewing subject and the film. Vivian Sobchack describes it like this «Thus, in its modalities of having sense and making sense, the cinema quite concretely returns us, as viewers and theorists to our senses.» (1991, p. 13)

My physical feeling of participation within the diegesis of the film brought on by the film’s sensory properties is an important part of how I am able to feel seen by the film. Julian Hanich sums it up like this: “In passive pathos we recognize ourselves not through our *e*-ffects but *a*-ffects; not by what we are capable of, but what we are able to do – namely, to feel ourselves affected... Aesthetic experience allows the lived body to be foregrounded in a safe and pleasurable way: Pathos substitutes for apathy” (2012, p. 587) The film isn’t what sees me, I am the one that sees me, but the seeing would not be possible without the film. Our relationship which leads to my experience is symbiotic. The feeling I have exists somewhere between the two of us.



## Conclusion

The questions this thesis wanted to answer was: How is it possible to feel seen by film? And in what ways can my reaction to the film experience of *Sound of Metal* be explained? By drawing on my own experiences with the film *Sound of Metal* I have tried to answer these questions through an analysis of different aspects of the film, me as a viewing-subject, and the meeting between the two. I have discussed the location the viewing took place, my affective state at the time of viewing, the films narrative, my identification with the character of Ruben and finally I have used three scenes from the film as cases for further analysis of my meeting with the film. In addition I have pointed towards a few sensory aspects that I feel were relevant to my reception of the film.

I based my discussion of the viewing location on the phenomenological assumption that our physical location impacts our perceptual understanding of phenomenon. During the pandemic I had few other options but to watch film at home, whereas being at the cinema would have been preferable. This is due to the rituals surrounding the act of going to the cinema and how they facilitate a pleasurable and concentrated film experience. I have however discovered that the rituals surrounding film-viewing at home can function in much the same way. Just as the cinema experience can isolate your senses so your sole focus is on the film, different aspects of how I carry out and relate to film-viewing in my own home can have the same qualities. This ensures that I can put aside other aspects of my life and allow myself to be affected by the film experience, an important pre-requisite for an experience of feeling *seen*.

Along with the need for familiarity in my surroundings as a requisite for my specific experience I argue that a familiarity with the narrative structure of the film functions in much the same way. It gives room for a pleasurable engagement with the film, where I am free to identify with and interpret the content of the film because its form is already familiar to me.

Descriptions of my general life-situation in the period leading up to my first meeting with the film, *Sound of Metal* has formed the background for my frame of mind in that initial meeting. These descriptions have formed the discussion of how the film impacted me the way that it did at the time, in the most immediate ways. Many of these factors were discovered after the fact and not immediately recognized by me, and as such run the risk of being based on constructions and

ideas about my experience, rather than the experience itself. This doesn't mean that I don't think I have been truthful in my descriptions, but I have set out on a mission to find causes and explanations OF my experience IN my experience, which can make the proceedings tricky and apt to find correlations for the sake of finding correlations. I might in some cases be victim to my own confirmation bias.

This possible confirmation bias might already have been an issue before I even saw *Sound of Metal* that first time. As I had had previous positive experiences with the actor playing the main character and reviews of the film had given me certain expectations going into the viewing. But, I was totally unaware of how profound the experience would turn out to be. How I would feel that the film spoke specifically to me in that moment and in those circumstances. Through my identification with the main character, Ruben, his sudden isolation, his relationship to sound, his struggles to write, and aspects of his familial ties and childhood on the move, the experience turned into an exchange between me and the film, like a conversation with someone I felt I shared common ground with. A back and forth of ideas, thoughts, and feelings took place during those two hours. From situational aspects in my life, aspects that touched on my history and the general circumstances related to the pandemic, the conversation with the film-subject led to a feeling of being seen within me.

Through its sensory properties and placement of narrative developments as part of common human rituals, the film grounds the experience in common shared human experiences meaning that the possibilities are there for anyone to feel seen by the film on some level.

Thus, there are varying answers to *how* it is possible to feel seen by a film. However, the most important answer I find in the writings of Vivian Sobchack and others on what kind of perceptual-object a film becomes in our experience. Its properties as being a way of seeing a seeing means that it relays experience in much the same way that people do, through its own language. So, in effect, I didn't sit down to watch a film that day, I sat down to speak with and be seen by a friend.

## Phenomenology as Method

Have I been successful in achieving a phenomenological study? I'm unsure. "Is the goal of the text a straightforwardly phenomenological one, i.e. does the author *do* film phenomenology by describing film-related experiences? Or is the objective an ulterior one, i.e. does the phenomenological concept or method help to achieve a different goal in film theory?" is a question posed by Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich (2016, p. 11) as a way of criticizing a pervasiveness in the field of film studies to classify a study as "phenomenological" without adhering to phenomenological descriptions as methodology. In this regard I think parts of my analysis fit with the spirit of a phenomenological analysis, whereas others don't.

Some of my examples might be too broad to conclude that I have. Trying to isolate and define basic structures of my own consciousness to arrive at something that can be seen as having intersubjective meaning, is difficult. In that respect I fear that many of my chosen examples would really have necessitated an even deeper analysis of my own experience. My general *inexperience* with a phenomenological approach might have made me too hesitant to go deep enough into my analysis. My aim from the start was always to try to avoid getting stuck in introspection. In doing so I might have been too intent on settling on examples that could more easily be identified as symptomatic of a shared human experience, rather than what I think was relevant about my own experience specifically.

There is also the difficulty of dealing with and describing an experience long after the fact. While I'm clear on many aspects of that initial experience, memory can be fickle. I can't be sure that I haven't subconsciously fabricated aspects of my experience in order for them to fit into a textual retelling of events. As soon as I write something down, the text, rather than the experience itself becomes the material I work with. If it were possible to stay in a constant hypnotic state that never took me out of the experience and all my daily distractions and obligations, my descriptions of that experience might've been more immediate all the while this thesis has taken shape. On a student budget, the means to buy the facilitating drugs or visit the correct hypnotherapist to achieve this state have been out of my reach. Jokes aside, I feel this speaks to the fleeting nature of experience, and more specifically the constantly shifting structures of consciousness dependent on the situation.

Thirdly, a weakness of this study might be a too loose connection to existing theory on the field. While phenomenology and film studies does have a history stretching back 60 years, (if you count Merleau-Ponty's essay "The Film and the New Psychology (1964) as the first instance), 60 years later there still doesn't seem to be any kind of clear consensus on how one should approach the subject methodically. Thus, my analysis might at times be more speculative than I had initially hoped to achieve. This thesis wasn't meant to be an exploration of whether or not a phenomenological approach to film studies has any merit or relevance, but through working with the subject it's difficult to avoid it becoming a topic. Even though I do think a phenomenological "practice" is a worthwhile endeavor as it relates to film experience and film studies, it's hard to identify exactly what can be learned from this practice other than an increased personal awareness for the analysts themselves.

## **Final Remarks**

I don't think the subjective notion of feeling "seen" is something unique to me. It is a base emotion I think we search for in the relationships we create and therefore also the media we consume. Or in other words, the media we foster a *relationship* with. But this also creates a conundrum, because I think it's fair to say that we can and do have meaningful relationships with un-interactive media (that is, media which isn't live and doesn't have a host which responds to questions, like a Twitch-Stream for instance). Whether it's literature, music recordings, television series or YouTube-videos: if they didn't in some way enrich our lives they wouldn't exist.

In a way all media can thus be seen as an extension of the social realm. The space where the phenomenon of being "seen" at the most fundamental level belongs. I have eyes, you have eyes. We can see each other. But being "seen" in the case of *Sound of Metal* involves something more, because just having someone lay eyes on me, in most cases wouldn't generate the feelings I felt, the sadness, the relief, the happiness. Being "seen" then means that greater parts of your being are recognized and acknowledged, elements of your current life situation and your history are reflected in what you see on screen.

Many films challenge you, they depict unusual relationships, unusual ways of life. Films can construct sympathy for people who do horrible things and thus make that human experience accessible to you. Through seeing the faults and qualities of others it can be easier to reconcile the faults and qualities within yourself. At the same time, cinema might also challenge you to think about yourself and your life in new ways. If you are struggling, cinema can fill you with images of situations that are worse, enriching your perspective and easing emotional pain. Cinema can provoke, it can disorient, it can be comfortable, it can be painful, it can be uplifting, and it can devastate. Cinema in this way reflects life itself, and maybe the best films are the ones that manage to do a little bit of all these things without overstaying their welcome.

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