

An Exploration of the Phenomenology of Cinema from the Perspective of McLuhan's Media Theory: A Case Study of the Film 'Searching'

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Abstract: Art originates from life, and film, as a medium of artistic expression, showcases certain realities of life with profound metaphors. The film "Searching" portrays a father unraveling the true nature of his daughter through her digital world, emphasizing that human interactions are primarily conducted online in this age. This paper examines the themes and significance of "Searching" through the lens of Marshall McLuhan's key concepts. McLuhan's views on media are significantly relevant to modern life, offering insights and research potential in an era where internet dependency is prevalent.

Keywords: Marshall McLuhan; Phenomenology of Cinema; "Searching"

1. Introduction

The concepts of "Cinema" and "Phenomenology" are closely linked. People perceive and empathize with films because they reconstruct life, creating new meanings. "Searching," a 2018 American mystery film, follows a father tracing his missing daughter's digital footprints. It highlights how everyone is pinpointed in the web of the internet era and immersed in the virtual world, reflecting the reality of modern life. By applying McLuhan's media perspective to the phenomenology of this film, it allows us to find life experiences or resonances within it, leading to an exploration and study of artistic aesthetics.

2. Imagery as a Metaphor for Existence

2.1 The Film Medium as the Message: The Power Struggle Between Humans and the Internet

Marshall McLuhan posited that the dreamscapes created by films do not prove an external reality, but rather, to some extent, "replace reality." The medium itself participates in shaping the world. This does not mean that we exist spatially first and are then shaped by media; rather, our interaction and co-evolution with media form our real world^[1]. The film "Searching" exemplifies this, depicting a human world constructed through electronic devices. The film's most commendable aspect is that all scenes are presented through computer or smartphone screens. Despite the lack of gore or supernatural elements, the film provokes deep, unsettling thoughts. Following his daughter's disappearance, the father can only understand her through the internet, discovering through various messages how unfamiliar his daughter in the online world actually is.

"Searching" is not only a story about paternal love or a distorted maternal love. Within these two intertwined storylines, there are two more narratives. One, unspoken, touches on the pain of losing a loved one, seeking comfort in illusions of the internet and drugs, and a girl named Margot who, in facing near death, regains her life experience, confidence, and ideals, experiencing a form of healing through this brush with mortality. The other narrative is more universal. The film offers a ruthless yet objective critique of how the general public's personas and realities are deconstructed and reconfigured in the virtual space of the internet.

The medium itself is the true message. Post-phenomenologist Don Ihde linked technological media with the embodiment in phenomenology, asserting their existential significance. Ihde suggested that in phenomenology's "consciousness of..." a media component should be inserted. Technology is not merely an object, but occupies the position of "of^[2]." For those who control the internet, it is a means of livelihood and a tool, including for solving crimes. In Mr. Kim's eyes, the protagonist, there is no difference between the online and real worlds. Everyone leaves traces online, and behind each avatar is a real person. He believes that following each avatar's tag leads to truth, but reality

often contradicts this belief. The “drug user” who seems dangerous online might just be a teenager who eats popcorn and watches movies in reality. Classmates labeled as close friends or appearing intimate with his missing daughter might not have such a good relationship in real life. People who navigate social media, constantly switching platforms and seeking comfort, might be consumed by the internet’s void. Presenting a false smile to family while releasing true displeasure online could be the first step towards an abyss. Whether caught in a bystander’s elaborate lies or the crowd’s ignorant malice, human nature can slowly spiral out of control, with the power of language and violence being immeasurable. The deceit and delusion of the internet exceed our imagination. The brother you chat with face-to-face might be hiding a big secret related to you; a former criminal confessing live might be targeted by a murderer; some use the internet to commit crimes or cover up their children’s wrongdoings, while others use it to find and save their daughters. It’s not the magic of the internet that accomplishes this, but rather the greatness and miracles of love.

2.2 The Medium as Massage: ‘Reality’ in the Internet

Marshall McLuhan further developed the concept of media extension, citing the Western cultural symbol of narcissism, Narcissus, to illustrate the media effect on our psyche and body. This effect causes us to depart from our pre-media self and become enamored with the reflected image in Narcissus’ pool, akin to the new media-influenced self. He even coined the phrase “the medium is the message,” indicating the subtle yet profound impact of media on our mind and body. In the film, the father can only trace his daughter through her social media accounts and chat histories. We see video windows, chat boxes, social media pages, live stream records, and via the police, surveillance footage. As the truth nearly surfaces, the film employs internet news, live TV broadcasts, and TV news to narrate the story.

Our lives, unbeknownst to us, are entirely online – both objectively and spiritually. While our real-world lives may seem monotonous and narrow, our online presence has already left a vast constellation of fragments. Do our family members truly not understand us? If Mr. Kim hadn’t been certain that his daughter was not one to run away from home, if he had abandoned this belief, Margot would have died. That fragmented, colossal virtual self is like an illusion, sometimes even deceiving ourselves, while our family knows who we are. No matter how stubborn or rebellious, she is still a naive and tender girl; no matter how laden with crimes, he is still an innocent son in need of maternal protection.

Indeed, many times, the texts and videos we leave online, expressions to strangers, are much more numerous than those to our closest in real life. We’ve become accustomed to socializing through typing, expressing emotions via emojis, forgetting what real conversation looks like. But are we truly authentic online? Is the sole purpose of “showing off” in our social media to display our real lives? Those carefully crafted images and texts, staged photos, and selective audience settings tell us that in the digital age, understanding others is difficult, and understanding oneself first requires confronting our inner selves. Kahlil Gibran in “The Seven Selves” wrote, “When it despised an ugly face, it did not know that it was one of its own masks.” Only by acknowledging falsehood can we approach reality. It’s not the internet that blinds us, but rather our own willful closure of eyes, living in an illusion.

2.3 The Film Medium in Shaping Thematic Worlds: Reflecting on the ‘Echelonization’ Phenomenon

Maurice Merleau-Ponty once noted that phenomenology “is not about exploring the world as it is in ideas, but rather about exploring the world as it actually is to us before it becomes a subject of discussion^[3].” McLuhan’s media studies provide a perspective on a world before it becomes ‘thematized,’ where our engagement with cinema forms an intersubjective fusion. It’s on this level that various content and ideological expressions find a foothold. Max also believed that film as a ‘tactile’ medium could more effectively facilitate cross-cultural communication than commercial visual cinema^[4]. Film phenomenology explains the philosophical basis of cinema’s ideological shaping power.

Circles formed by the internet are one of the social relationship patterns it constructs. Adolescents seek like-minded friends in the form of echelons, achieving precise online socialization. With the continuous development of the internet, the emergence of various interest groups and sections has formed a new type of communication pattern. ‘Echelonization’ living has become a daily state for ‘digital natives’ and ‘internet aborigines.’ Therefore, the ‘circles’ formed by ‘fate-based’ relationships nourish net surfers. In overlapping circles, the intersecting parts link the information transmission between circles, accelerating their interaction. Curious and knowledge-thirsty adolescents, through their virtual

identities on the internet, join various circles, becoming key disseminators of 'echelonized' communication, thus completing the 'echelonization' of internet language circles. Today, with the rapid development of the internet and information technology, people receive more information and increasingly diverse values. In this relaxed and open environment, various voices flourish and contend, creating favorable conditions for forming multiple echelons. However, the emergence of echelons, while beneficial for adolescents to quickly find and join their desired groups, should not overlook the drawbacks of 'echelonization.' First, within echelons, focusing only on internal hot topics can trap individuals in 'information cocoons,' heavily influenced by the 'echo chamber effect,' leading to group polarization. Second, for families, it significantly deepens the generational divide, affecting familial harmony. Third, for society, it widens the knowledge gap, impacting social stability.

Since circles formed by adolescents consist of individuals with similar hobbies or interests, they easily focus only on information within their circle, forming information barriers and falling into the trap of 'information cocoons.' Additionally, the relatively closed environment within each echelon means that similar opinions and voices are constantly repeated, leading to the 'echo chamber effect.' The '227 Unity' incident (a clash between fans of different fan circles against Xiao Zhan fans who reported AO3, Lofter, and other fan fiction platforms) had a detrimental impact. This was due to fans in 'information cocoons' being more prone to the 'echo chamber effect.' Negative comments from fans ferment within these 'echo walls,' leading to extreme decisions by fan groups, a phenomenon of group polarization. As teenagers in the same hobby or interest groups are mostly of similar ages, the second challenge of 'echelonization' is the deepening of the generational gap. With the rapid pace of technology updates, parents, primarily from the post-70s generation, inevitably struggle to keep up with the post-90s and 00s adolescents in learning new skills or embracing multiculturalism. In the film "Searching," the father, while physically present with his daughter, remains unaware of her true thoughts and never enters her inner world. He can only understand her through her interactions on social media, highlighting the chasm between parents and children. The 'cliquey' comfort of adolescents and the further 'echelonization' hinder the building of strong relationships between parents and children.

3. Conclusion

Nearly half a century ago, Marshall McLuhan prophesied, "Film is currently in its manuscript phase. In terms of the evolution of media forms, film is still far from its final draft^[5]." In the internet era, different cultural circles exhibit certain exclusivity and secrecy, leading to different social strata being divided into various echelons based on their distinct social backgrounds and practices. This division results in frequent information sharing and circulation within echelons, making it difficult for information to interflow across society. In an age where people are heavily reliant on the internet, film, as a medium of artistic expression, not only displays partial realities of life but is also rich in metaphors. McLuhan's view of media offers significant insights and research opportunities for both cinema and life.

References

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