



## Cinematic Phenomenology in Architecture: The *Cartier Foundation*, Paris, Jean Nouvel

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Jean Nouvel is a French architect and theorist for whom architecture is not a formal question of aesthetically appealing buildings but a perceptual game of ephemeral optical effects. His work explores the possibility of turning the fixed, solid nature of architecture into an ever changing maelstrom of phenomenological illusions. He is a designer who seeks an architecture that is not based on presence, but one that is based on perception. However, he is also a designer inspired by modern visual culture and in particular, film. Film revolutionised the way Nouvel saw the world. It gave him a new visual language, allowing him to better understand the way the eye works in everyday settings. For Nouvel, the new visual phenomenon was, and is, a source of visual tropes employable by contemporary architects. In this double definition of architecture as optical game and phenomenological experience Nouvel sets out to create a form of architecture that is complex and at times contradictory. This analyses one of Nouvel's most celebrated works, The *Cartier Foundation* building, from a joint phenomenological – cinematic perspective. It does so through the prism of two key figures in these respective fields: Maurice Merleau-Ponty from the world of philosophy and André Bazin from the arena of film. The aim of this essay is to highlight how this building encapsulates Nouvel's attempts to incorporate his understanding of film and phenomenology into an architecture of intangible, ephemeral optical effects; an architecture that is both cinematic and phenomenological.

**KEYWORDS:** Cinematic phenomenology, Jean Nouvel, Cartier Foundation

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Stemming from the initial works and writings of Franz Brentano at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology was to become one of the most influential branches of western philosophy by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Associated with thinkers of the calibre of Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it found its way into the world of cinematic theory in the 1950s through the writings of Henri Agel, Amédée Ayfre and André Bazin. Its manifestation in the world of architecture would be seen in the writings of Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s, and in more populist essays

such *Genius Loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture* by Christian Nurberg Shulz at the beginning of the 1980s. More recently, it has been applied as an analytical model by architectural theorists such as Rob Shields and Jean Nouvel.

The central concept of this school of thought is that human consciousness manifests itself through perception. Consequently, perception becomes the central area of study for the phenomenologist. It proposes that human consciousness is composed of two mutually influencing factors; a sensorial act of assimilation and the object towards which that act is directed. For example, the memory of a friend, the analysis of a problem, the touching of an object or looking at our physical environment can all be considered *acts of perception* directed at *objects of perception*. Perception, and by extension

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consciousness, is thus definable as the interaction between external and internal factors.

In *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, Edmund Husserl, the figure to whom the establishment of phenomenology as an accepted school of thought is attributed, argued that philosophy should aspire to be a “rigorous science” [1]. With this aim he developed a methodology of thinking designed to ensure a rigorous analysis of *perception* and through that, consciousness. Divided into two stages, this methodology involves an initial *stage of suspension* in which a detailed observation and description of the objects and acts of perception is carried out. The aim here is to “put on hold” any preconceptions we may have, and attend exclusively to things “as they are”. In other words, to avoid what he calls “the so-called laws of thought” [2]. This is followed by the *eidetic stage* when our aim switches to the objective analysis of what we have previously simply observed and described. The rationale behind all of this is to treat philosophical enquiry as a form of scientific investigation.

Underlying these ideas is the supposition that the human subject is capable of separating and distancing itself from its own lived experience, and is thus capable of understanding experience objectively. In other words, Husserl’s ideas are based on the concept of the human being as a potentially *transcendental subject* [3]. This concept was completely rejected by another of Phenomenology’s most important figures some years later; Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty argued that such a hypothetical objectivity is quite simply impossible. In fact, he argued that this objective transcendence is only conceivable if we distort our understanding of perception by simplifying it beyond all recognition [4]. Thus, Merleau-Ponty proposes, both perception and consciousness are concepts beyond the objective grasp human subject; they are phenomena that we ultimately have to accept as indefinable and ambiguous.

In contrast to the *Transcendental Phenomenology* developed by Husserl, the ideas of Merleau-Ponty fit within the framework of what is defined as *Existential Phenomenology*. This proposition considers the inherent ambiguity of perception as stemming from various factors. Three of these are of interest in the context of this essay: i) the fact that the objects we observe are in themselves extremely complex; ii) the fact that the human subject is itself an integrated and inseparable part of these same phenomena; and iii) the fact that the sensorial machinery of the human mind and body is too limited to fully assimilate the complexity of what surrounds it.

## The complexity of the environment

Beginning with the first factor in Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of Husserl (the complexity of the objects or phenomena assimilated) he argues that the world is composed of elements that are “*non-determinable*” and characterised by their “*internal relations*” [5]. In his introductory explanation of these ideas, Michael Hammond identifies that this non-determinable quality corresponds, in its most basic form, to the simple complexity of objects themselves; every phenomenological object, whether a facial expression, a memory or a building, is something composed of multiple different factors. They are thus difficult, if not impossible, to perceive in all their detail [6]. Adding to the impossibility of understanding objects in all their detail is the fact that their individual components are internally related. In other words, our understanding of one individual component is influenced by our simultaneous perception and understanding of all the others.

Applied to the case of the external environment, a city street for example, this means that the phenomena we have before us is composed of multiple elements; the street itself, a car that drives along that street, the pavements lined with trees and the glass façade of a building that fronts the road, for example. The combination of these factors is defined as a “*spatial configuration*” [7]. To understand it one should take into account the multiplicity of factors that go to make it up, as well as their individual and multiple internal relations. Given that many of these factors and their internal relations are also momentary, Merleau-Ponty argues that their complete observation, description and understanding is not simply a difficult task, but quite simply, an impossible one.

## The body-in-the-world

Carrying on with arguments that would eventually lead to the rejection of the Husserlean methodology, Merleau-Ponty directed his attention to the nature of the human subject itself. Defining it as a *body-in-the-world*, he saw it as something completely integrated into the environment it intends to describe. In an analogous way to other non-determinable objects then, the mere presence of this *body-in-the-world* influences the spatial configuration to which it directs its attention. For example, the projection of our shadow on the object we look at, the subtle changes in temperature that we stimulate in our immediate environment and even, the changes on behaviour that we induce in other people and animals that inhabit the same

environmental configuration. We, as a *body-in-the-world*, are not only completely integrated into our surroundings but we also complicate them.

However, the most notable influence of this *body-in-the-world* is that it multiplies the number of possible readings of our environment due to its simple movement and the consequential changes in perspective it provides. To illustrate, if we imagine ourselves as a subject-body in the street mentioned earlier, we perceive a spatial configuration composed of elements organised in certain spatial relationships: a building with a glass façade in the background, trees along the pavement fronting it in the middle ground and cars and pedestrians passing by in foreground. However, if in a given moment we cross over the road and wait under a nearby streetlight, the image formed on our retina (the perception of what we intend to describe) changes in quite radical ways. The cars and people that were earlier in close proximity are now more distant; the perspective formed by the building has radically changed and the trees fronting the building are now seen from a very different angle. Thus, argues Merleau-Ponty, we have made the task of completely describing the environment we observe even more difficult, if not impossible.

### Restricted sensorial machinery

Developing this argument further, Merleau-Ponty nuances his definition of the *body-in-the-world* with the proposition that it is equipped with restricted sensorial machinery. This machinery is incapable of assimilating the multiple stimuli of the environment around it. In order to explain this argument, he resorts to experiments on visual perception carried out by Gestalt psychologists and, in particular, highlights the concept of *selective attention*, an idea most clearly evidenced by the famous double image of a chalice and two faces. Depending of the movements of the retina, alternatively explained as the focus of the eye, this image appears to be either the profile of two faces looking at each other or, alternatively, the profile of a chalice. Given the limitations of the eye, we can only focus on either the faces or the chalice, but never both images at the same time. In short, the eye is forced to select the object of its attention.

Another, even more basic example of the same effect is seen in Kasimir Malevich's painting *Black Square on White Background*. This famous example of Suprematist art is composed, as the title suggests, of a black square in the centre of a white canvas. The optical effect of looking at this piece is similar to that which characterises the Gestalt image; the black square appears to protrude or recede depending on

our point of focus. Based on the creation of two distinct perceptual spaces that exist simultaneously, but which can only be experienced individually, we see how the eye compensates for its own limitations; it selectively attends the stimuli around it.

### Live sensorial assimilation

The limitations attributed to the eye characterise all the other senses as well, each one of which assimilates its own sphere of stimuli in the same selective manner. Inevitably, this reveals a clear contradiction in our attempts to rigorously and completely describe our perception of the environment around us. One of the consequences of these limitations is the conversion of the experiential act into a live constantly fluctuating experience.

If we consider sensorial experience in these terms, when we find ourselves in the street scene described earlier, the mind and body engage in a complex and multiple series of perceptual activities; our ears centre on the hushed conversation of a couple, pass to the general hum of the street behind and finally focus on the noise of construction work taking place in the distance. Our sense of smell may be attracted by the perfume of a passer-by in one moment, only to be drawn by the aroma of foliage in the next. It may eventually be hit by the odour of rubbish accumulated underneath one of the benches that line the street. At the same time, our eyes pass across the entire scene in a similarly fragmentary way, focusing on cars, buildings, trees and people in an agitated and fragmentary attempt to take in all that surrounds us.

In this context, the complete description and understanding of our perceptual experience, as described by Husserl, is only conceivable if we simplify the object of our attention, or restrict ourselves to a an extremely reduced range of stimuli. Merleau-Ponty argues that this is exactly what happens when the Husserlean methodology is employed and, as a result, he argues that it has to be considered a method that *distorts rather than describes*. We are forced to accept that the true nature of our surroundings must always be complex and ambiguous, always just beyond the grasp of objective thought.

### The phenomenology of André Bazin

The phenomenological ideas of Husserl were translated into cinematic theories through the work of Allan Casebier who, in his essay *Film and Phenomenology*, defines the cinema viewer as analogous to Husserl's transcendental subject; the

viewer is separated from what he or she sees, and thus capable of objectively analysing and understanding it [8]. By contrast, in the works and theories of the realist film critic André Bazin, the power and potential of cinema is seen to reside in its ability to engage the viewer in experiences impossible to analyse in all their sensorial detail, experiences that make the viewing of film something akin to our perception of the real world, as described by Merleau-Ponty.

In a practical sense, this was aided by the development of certain technical devices such as colour filming and sound recording in Bazin's time. However, it was also facilitated by acting style, realistic costume and, most importantly, filming style. The historian James Dudley Andrew argues that Bazin believed in the naked power of the mechanically recorded image, what he called "the filming of reality just like we live it" [9]. Central to this was the spatial and temporal unity of the filming found in the work of directors like Jean Renoir. This type of filming often involves the use of long takes, the moving camera, an intricate choreography of movements and the creation of deep space compositions, generally presented in medium or long shot. This combination of factors allows for the presentation of multiple primary and secondary actions, incidents, dialogues and gestures that, as a whole, are often too complicated and dense to be fully assimilated. For Bazin, it was a filming style that managed to represent the beauty and natural ambiguity of the real world. For want of a better term, it is a filming style that has certain *phenomenological* tendencies.

Beyond producing filmic images that are visually more complex than normal, this filming style also produces images that tend to be narratively cluttered. For certain critics, this reduced the effectiveness of the medium as a narrative device. With this type of filming, the spectator's eye is not directed exclusively at the most important visual and textual references in a given scene. On the contrary, it is allowed to scan the screen, passing over various elements of the image that often have little narrative or symbolic function. It was for this reason that the soviet director Sergei Eisenstein described it as "lacking in artistic intelligence; as showing a lack of economy and certainty." In other words, he saw it as too representative of the ambiguities of real life [10].

By way of contrast, the type of cinema proposed by Eisenstein was one in which each shot presented a single important action in such a way that the eye could not stray from the information considered important by the director. When placed in sequences, this control of vision also became the control of mental associations, with associative relationships

being deliberately set up by the director. Based on the *Kuleschov effect*, Eisenstein intended to create a type of cinema in which both the eye and the mind of the spectator would follow one clear and defined path. That path was to be laid down by the director himself.

This level of psycho-visual control is easily augmented through fast editing, which reduces the time available to the spectator to analyse what is presented on screen; the associations made between sequential images are reduced to the initial and most obvious ones possible. In this sense, the process of selective attention is replaced by something more akin to controlled association. Although not completely eliminating the active role played by the spectator in interpreting the film, this combination of factors severely limits it.

In the phenomenological context considered here, this type of filming and editing represents a clear example of how film can simplify and distort the complex reality described by Merleau-Ponty. Quite simply, it involves the presentation of a limited amount of visual information organised in restricted but easily consumable sequences, something that is far from a realistic representation of the human perceptual experience.

### Phenomenological filming

In comparison to these characteristics, the realistic filming style proposed by André Bazin was very different and was typified by images overflowing with visual stimuli. If we consider the filming of a scene set in the street described earlier, we find ourselves faced with a cinematic image presented in long shot and filmed in one continuous take. Filming from the pavement in front of the previously mentioned example of a glass building, we examine an image that frames the entire building upon whose glass surface we see the reflections of everything that passes in front.

Through this façade, and its layer of reflections, we catch a glimpse of things that happen on the interior: a discussion amongst two colleagues or workers collecting their belongings at the end of the day. Immediately in front of the building, we see the everyday life of the street: friends strolling along the pavement, an old man reading a newspaper on a roadside bench and cars passing by at various speeds, *etc.* Scattered over the building's façade these activities and reflections turn the building into the screen for what Bazin would describe as a phenomenological image, an image full of the multiple, changing and contrasting secondary incidents and unimportant moments that characterise our physical environment [11].

If, amongst this already overloaded visual image, the camera begins to move, the configuration presented on screen inevitably intensifies and multiplies. As with the effect described with reference to the body-in-the-world, this movement means that everything previously seen, analysed and understood, manifests itself in different perspectives and configurations. The already complex scene becomes even more difficult to assimilate and describe in its totality; thus, the phenomenological realism of the scene intensifies.

According to Bazin, these changes contribute to the creation of a cinematic experience that is sensorially more live and active or, to use another term, more *realistic* than anything created through standard editing. When confronted with such a complex cinematographic image, the spectator is left with no alternative other than a selective and, thus, partial mode of appreciation. Therefore, whilst watching our typical street scene we may focus on the noise of the traffic only to be distracted by the overheard conversation of some passers-by. Similarly, we may be looking at the branches of one of the trees blowing in the wind, only to later focus on the changing reflections that run across the building's façade. Alternatively, we may watch the journey of a protagonist, who leaves the building and walks along the street having finished work for the day.

Confronted with such imagery, the cinematographic experience could be considered as similar to that of the physical environment. As Bazin was at pains to emphasise and promote, this similarity could be further heightened through costume, acting style, sound, colour and other technological developments of the time, such as *Cinerama*. *Cinerama* was basically an enormous hemispherical screen beneath which the viewer, as Bazin noted, "doesn't simply move his eyes, but is obliged to twist his head"[12]. In other words, *Cinerama* was a technical device that pushed the physical experience of cinema a step closer to the physical and sensorial experience of reality.

The way in which Bazin whole heartedly welcomed such technological developments shows that the realism of cinema was, for him, far more intricate than the creation of complex visual representations. On the contrary, it involved the complete absorption of the viewer in the virtual cinematic experience. For Bazin, spectators are enveloped in an active, live and realistic environment which aligns him with the phenomenological position of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In this regard, he differed from Allan Casebier, another celebrated defender of the phenomenology of cinema, who saw spectators as capable of

objectively distancing themselves from what they saw and thus akin to the phenomenological subject as described by Edmund Husserl.

### The phenomenology of Jean Nouvel

Many of Nouvel's buildings aim to create rich and complex sensorial games that transform the edifice into a series of ambiguous perceptions. Consequently, they are in some way representative of ephemeral, immaterial and intangible phenomena. With respect to the *Cartier Foundation* in Paris, this sensorial perspective has given rise to a building that simultaneously functions in a number of phenomenological registers, one of which is equally cinematographic.

Situated on the Boulevard Raspail, the *Cartier Foundation* is formally a very simple architectural gesture based on the counter position of two built elements: a five story glass box placed behind a high glass screen, some five metres in front of it (**figure 1**). This screen faces onto the pavement and the road in front and, as a result, is covered with the reflections of the street. The building proper (the five story high glass box) has a double height ground floor exhibition space and four upper floors



Figure 1. Main architectural elements of the *Cartier Foundation* building



Figure 2. Detail of additional façade of the *Cartier Foundation* building

occupied by the offices of the *Cartier Foundation* itself.

As with any building, it occupies its own particular physical context or, to use the terminology of Merleau-Ponty, it forms part of a given *spatial configuration*. In this case, the spatial configuration consists of traffic lights, road signs, street benches, parked cars, passers-by and adjacent buildings etc., all of which are reflected in its glass screen façade. According to the theories of Merleau-Ponty, both the physical building and the reflections its facade collects are part of the environment that the human subject appreciates as it distractedly walks along the road. Distracted, and applying the limited sensorial machinery of the human body, the impression of the building that forms in the mind of the subject is inevitably ambiguous.

If, whilst walking, and thus constantly changing the scene we witness, we focus on a particular action, the multiple sensorial impression formed becomes even more complicated. For example, we may focus on somebody crossing the street, direct our attention to the street lights that are flickering into action or fix our gaze on an old man turning the page of his newspaper whilst sat on a bench. Similarly, we may listen to a conversation of pedestrians that walk past, centre our attention on the monotonous traffic noise in the distance or turn our ear to the sound of footsteps approaching from behind. As inherent parts of the immediate environment, these factors all contribute to the

agitated perception we get as our senses continuously pass between its multiple stimuli.

### The phenomenology of the Cartier Foundation

When we speak of a phenomenological interpretation of the *Cartier Foundation* there are a number of ways in which it can be interpreted. In its first and most obvious phenomenological register, the building is simply a constituent factor in the meaningful configuration of its surrounding environment. However, beyond that, it operates on another level; it is deliberately designed to be a type of architectural manifestation of phenomenology's principal ideas. Through the incorporation of visual and optical games that manipulate and confuse our perception, it is a building that intensifies the complex, multiple and ambiguous character of our sensorial assimilation. The clearest example of this is its conception as a glass building: a screen that assimilates reflections on its surface.

Oliver Boissière, the critic who has most closely documented the work of Nouvel, has spoken about this use of glass in a number of ways. In one sense he calls it “an attempt to evade architecture's materiality” or alternatively “an attempt to create a complete environment; an architecture that fuses the building with its immediate surroundings” [13]. In the case of the *Cartier Foundation*, this fusion involves the juxtaposition of diffuse exterior

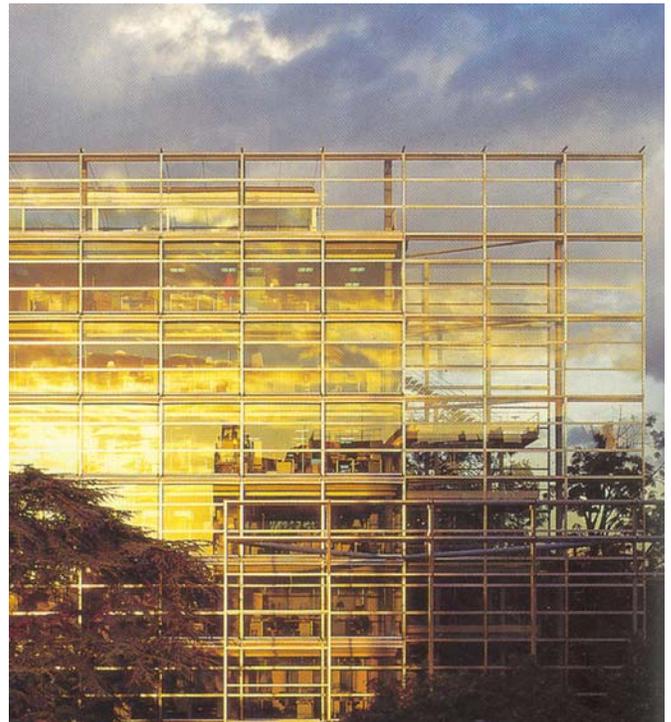


Figure 3. Transient fading/blending effect between façade of main glass building and the additional façade of the *Cartier Foundation* building

reflections with equally diffuse interior views. The result is a visually complex collage on the building's façade that collects together so many images that none are discernible in isolation. In fact, at times the optical game is so complex that the difference between exterior reflections and interior views is almost impossible to discern.

The apparent optical fusion of the building with its surroundings that occurs on the façade is repeated on the façade of the glass box building behind. The independent screen extends beyond the limits of the constructed building, both in terms of width and height (**figure 2**). As a result, the peripheral parts of the façade, composed simply of a single layer of glass, appear more transparent than the central part, which has a constructed structure visible behind. In foggy or misty weather conditions, this technique is intended to produce an effect in which the borders of the building seem to fade and blend with its diffuse surroundings (**figure 3**).

With the decision to leave a mature oak tree between the building proper and its independent screen, this fusion of building and environment acquires even more nuances. The built form now blends not only with the sky, but also the surrounding foliage on the site. In addition, the tree helps provoke the impression of constant visual change as we see the movement of the tree's branches and leaves but also see these movements reflected on the screen and façade of the glass box behind. Given that the nature of this effect changes with the seasons, it fulfils another of Nouvel's stated aims: to create an architecture that changes with the "time of day, the weather and the season of the year" [14].

Through this type of technique - a combination of natural elements and the use of glass - Nouvel manages to create an architecture that is both ambiguous and, to an extent, constantly changing. In a sense, it is possible to form an analogy between the aim on the architect and the philosophical speculations of Heraclites, *the impossibility of experimenting the same building twice*. When the direct views of the building's interior combine with the reflections of the oak tree and the street, the general visual effect becomes agitated, something more typical of a complex cinematographic image than the standard view of a building façade.

### The cinematography of the Cartier Foundation

Everything described above points to an attempt at creating a building whose principal aim is the manipulation of perception. The dominant motivator behind this architecture is not an interest in architecture as built form, but rather architecture as

an ephemeral and intangible phenomenon. However, this interest in creating architecture that reflects ideas from phenomenology leads to an interpretation of the building in purely cinematographic terms as well.

The placement of an independent screen in front of the building proper creates the effect of two mirrors facing one another. This in turn results in an explosion of reflections, in which we see diffuse footprints of both elements superimposed on each other, both on the surface of the building proper and on the independent screen in front (**figure 4**). From the street, the passer-by primarily sees the independent screen. On the surface of this screen, however, we also see the reflections of the street and those of the building's façade behind (which invariably includes reflections of the screen itself). The main visual image of the building is not only something architectural and ephemeral, but is also a form of mediated representation of itself; the screen acts as a screen for its own visual representation.

Given that the image is extremely complex and impossible to appropriate in all its detail, it is an image that can carry echoes of the type of filming



Figure 4. Complex reflective effects generated by the interplay between both façades of the *Cartier Foundation* building

lauded by André Bazin. The on-screen image presented to the passer-by is a long shot that is overloaded with information and presented in one continuous and constant take. Within the multiple stimuli that this representation collects together is the image of the building itself superimposed on images of the activities and events on the street; people talking, trees blowing, cars passing by and street lights flickering, *etc.* Seen in different parts of the screen, these multiple incidents create an image of the building and the street that the eye cannot assimilate in its entirety.

In response to this complexity, as happens with the direct view of the overall street scene, the eye agitatedly oscillates between the different changing and static stimuli that together create the image. As André Bazin and Merleau-Ponty indicated with respect to *Cinéma* and the physical environment respectively, in any attempt to assimilate all the information contained on the screen, passers-by are obliged to “move their eyes but also to twist their heads”. Consequently, this building presents us with a phenomenological experience that is not only active and live, but also operative in a mediated arena.

## Conclusion

The *Cartier Foundation* illustrates how Nouvel eschews the conception of architecture as purely built physical form and focuses on a hybrid architecture of phenomenological and cinematic effects. Our appropriation of this building obviously occurs through our physical engagement with its structure, but it also occurs through our engagement with the ever changing environment of the street and the constantly moving reflection of that environment on the buildings surface screens. This is an architecture of ephemeral optical effects in which the solid building is subsumed in phenomenological and cinematic-like illusions.

Consequently, this is a building that cannot be explained through recourse solely to architectural theory. It is an architecture that requires us to consider multiple influences from the worlds of phenomenology and cinema. It is not based on the construction of a structure or the presence of a built form. It is an architecture inspired by the ethereal nature of sensorial perception and the visual complexity of the filmic image. In short, the *Cartier Foundation* is a building that incorporates Nouvel's understanding of film and phenomenology into an architecture of intangible, ephemeral optical effects; an architecture that is both cinematic and phenomenological.

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