

The Paradoxes of Rationality

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Cinéma et philosophie represents a new step in Dominique Chateau's way of approaching the phenomenon of film, since he turns away from the prejudice of Peircean iconicity developed in his previous studies and towards a philosophy of cinema, with the declared intention of drawing up an assessment of the controversial relations between cinema and philosophy.¹ From the very beginning the author defends himself against the pretension of exhaustiveness and states that he aims to describe better the mutual contributions of cinema and philosophy and to define them as modern phenomena. This is a precaution he takes seriously, since his research is concerned with the multifarious aspects of a relation that has been pursued throughout a century of reflection.

The French film theorist unfolds his analysis in six uneven chapters, and we are cautioned that each of them is motivated both by a didactic and a critical spirit (7). Concerned mostly with already classic texts, Chateau does not disguise his taste for establishing theoretical genealogies inside the field of philosophical reflection on film, nor does he conceal his pleasure in turning upside down some celebrated hierarchies: either by not sparing the icons (Cavell and Deleuze, especially), or by re-examining the unfair neglect of others (Münsterberg or Mitry) (109). But, above all,

¹ Dominique Chateau, *Le Cinéma comme langage* (1986); *Le Bouclier d'Achille. Théorie de l'iconicité* (1997); *La Théorie peircienne dans son cadre sémiotique: la question de l'icône* (1997).

his pleasure in dichotomous distinctions, his Cartesian taste for oppositions, and the rhetorical flourishes of his style, mean he deserves to be included among those who make up what he calls 'the French academic community'.

In the first four chapters two complementary points of view are intertwined to offer the reader a panoramic image of the relations between cinema and philosophical thinking. In the first chapter this reflection begins from the point of view of cinema, in order to argue that the convergence with philosophy consists in the reflexive, that is, rational, nature of cinema. The next two chapters start from the point of view of philosophy, in an attempt to set up the cinema as a model of philosophical thinking. The fourth chapter literally weaves the two perspectives together, so that one cannot say whether cinema is an extension of philosophy, or the other way around, so that philosophy becomes a cinematic experience. The last two chapters are respectively devoted to the influence of the most important philosophical schools on the development of film theory, and to the aesthetics of cinema.

The opening chapter attempts to offer a thematic picture of the representation of the philosopher on film, which, according to Chateau, has been previously unfairly neglected by film history. Under the letter 'P' in the dictionary of movie characters we cannot find an entry for 'Philosopher', even if we can find the 'Pickpocket' or the 'Peasant'. Chateau argues that the lack of interest in this theme denotes a 'general tendency of cinema to imagine the world as a novel' (11). This remark is less innocent than it seems at first sight, since it strikes the keynote of the whole book, which is woven around the opposition of philosophy versus narration; philosophy being understood as the ability to express thought, and narration as the practice of telling stories. Chateau will later suggest, in his discussion of Deleuze, that it is impossible to say whether this opposition, this *segregation*, is due to the *nature* of cinema or to the *vocation* of philosophy (108).

However, the distance is not unconquerable, and this allows the French theorist to follow Ecclesiastes (12,10) in '*searching for the appropriate words*' to bring into question the philosophical nature of cinema. In fact, what Chateau attempts to do is to identify the question in order to justify the already existing answers; because, as he has shown before, the interest of pursuing discussion does not rely on what is said but on *how* it is said (see Chateau, 2001). Before doing this it seems necessary to gather the pieces of evidence and to eliminate false trails. There is no doubt that cinema is able to think, and to think in a philosophical way, rather than simply to entertain the public. However, Chateau continues in a didactic manner by claiming an

inherent relation between cinema and philosophy; one that could trouble both the still waters of abstractionism and metaphysics, and invokes the phantasm of the return of philosophy to the concreteness of experience. Or, worse, one could simply do what Chateau disdainfully calls 'applied philosophy' (24). Hence he declares himself against the liberty of using philosophy as the key to interpretation, as claimed by Zarader.² The merit of Chateau's argument lies in pointing out that the relation between cinema and philosophy is not about mapping one in terms of the other, but of determining an 'elective affinity' between them as each is defined in its 'essence'. Soon, the discussion about the philosophical vocation of cinema turns towards the question of specificity. Unfortunately, at the end of the first chapter, the appealing argument that attempted to integrate the seventh art into a modern ideological aesthetics falls into the classical dichotomy between form and content.

Chateau's argument runs as follows: since it is not the metaphysical calibre of the auteur that makes a certain type of cinema philosophical, we must assume that its philosophy relies on some more or less *unique* property (26). In other words, the specificity of cinema is not independent of its capacity to conceptualise, to think, to be 'a thinking form' (26). Therefore the reader finds himself or herself inside a vicious circle: one cannot say whether cinema is philosophical because of its specific way of 'projecting the immediate data of consciousness', or on the contrary, that its specificity derives from the self-reflexive, philosophical nature of the image. In an early stage of his attempt to ask the right question Chateau examines the possibility that the very specificity of cinema could recharge reflection in the field of philosophy (26-27). According to Chateau the question reflects the point of view of philosophers. He treats their positive answers as 'anticipatory', because they only send us to a certain specific philosophical idea, not to a philosophical system. This is the case with Cavell, who points out the ability of cinema to open our consciousness to everyday experience, but also with Deleuze, who acknowledges that cinema grants permission to verify the relevance of certain concepts. However, this does not lead us towards the hypothesis of a 'philosophical cinema'. Therefore, one must ask whether 'cinema, as a medium, possesses properties one might call philosophical', like in Jean Epstein's interpretation of '*la machine cinématographique*': '*la machine cinématographique* thinks philosophically by itself' (27). Dissatisfied with this position, which is enhanced moreover by Cavell's and even Bazin's 'objectivist doctrine' of cinema existing in a 'philosophical state', and also by the opposite 'subjectivist

² As Zarader states: '*On n'a eu le sentiment de trahir ni la dialectique platonicienne, ni les Pensées de Pascal, ni la Logique de Hegel en tentant de trouver en elles la clef de déchiffrement de telle ou telle oeuvre cinématographique.*' (1997, 5).

doctrine' of distant contemplation, Chateau steps forward by searching for an answer from the practitioners. He quotes Godard: 'the *mise-en-scène* is like modern philosophy, let us say Husserl, Merleau-Ponty' (1961, 34). But a closer analysis of other directors' opinions reveals evidence that in most cases we are dealing with a philosophical conception, or intention, which is not embodied in the medium of film. The 'right question' should then be: 'does film express philosophical conceptions by its *textual form*'? (29) Thus the reader is brought back to the beginning of the chapter, where, even if the author claims that form and ideology do not function independently, this dichotomy was put in place.

There is no doubt that the reader enjoys Chateau's elegant style of slipping from one hypothesis to another, referring unceasingly to classic film theories. However, since the goal is more or less to probe the evidence for 'philosophical cinema', the reader may expect an investigation at the level of moving images. Chateau's discourse on philosophical cinema starts from the philosophical interpretation of cinema and not from cinema itself. Dudley Andrew characterized this situation, in which 'knowledge of an experience begins to substitute for the experience itself', as 'a peculiar modern phenomenon' (1976, 3).

Since the first chapter was supposed to clear the ground for a theory of philosophical cinema, a terminological shift will turn our attention to what is decisively called a 'philosophy of cinema' (31). The next two chapters distinguish, following Gilbert Cohen-Séat (1958) and his principles of a philosophy of cinema, the cinematographic phenomenon from the filmic one. This is a fallacious distinction, and we are cautioned and encouraged to consider it only as a methodological tool. The two aspects are inseparable and their enmeshing puts before our eyes the spectacle in its integrity. For Cohen-Séat the filmic fact is supposed to express 'the life of world and of the mind, of imagination or of people and things, by a determined system of image combinations' (1958, 54). The role of the cinematographic fact is to put into circulation 'the ideas, sensations, general data transformed by the film in a specific manner' (1958, 54). Justified by his theoretical reasons, Chateau borrows Cohen-Séat's distinction in order to develop a philosophy of the cinematographic fact, on the one hand, and, on the other, a philosophy of the filmic fact. The first will become a theory of the medium of film, while the second will be a multifaceted aesthetics of perception.

Since the 'best expression of the filmic-cinematographic synthesis' offering the spectacle in its 'entirety' concerns Plato's allegory of the Cave, Chateau chooses it to serve as a departure point for his discussion of the origins of film (33). The

critical disillusionment with the 'Cave theory' begins once the rumour goes that it considers the spectator as a passive puppet, a 'physically disabled person frozen in the darkness and captive of the projected images movement' (36).³ However, Chateau states that the real reason for rejecting this theory is ideological: quoting Georges Duhamel, for whom the seventh art was not only 'immoral' (36), but also enjoyable. At the same time there were other voices, like Vachel Lindsay's for example, that defended the rights of the spectator. Later, the allegory of the cave will largely be used by psychoanalysis as a model for the incursion into the imaginary realm of film. Chateau restates Baudry's and Metz's arguments without criticizing their structuralist and transhistorical approach to the cinematic apparatus.⁴

In the last part of the chapter this line of approaching the cave allegory leads to Walter Benjamin and his defence of the 'social signification' of cinema. Cinema, Benjamin argues in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', is meant to entertain the public, and reveals its complete meaning only in its interaction with the masses. Cinema is the art of modernity: as the 'Greeks had tragedy and the Middle Age had cathedrals' (47). In this sense it favours entertainment over meditation, abandoning the spectator to a cascade of visual images (49). Benjamin's spectator of the modern age is the same as Georg Simmel's urban citizen, exposed to the stimuli of modern life. The role of the camera is to open the way towards our unconscious, claims Benjamin, and not to our senses, as emphasized by Paul Valéry's '*esthétique*', his 'theory of the sensible'. Chateau examines the two positions, but decides against what Morin baptised this 'superb alternative' of the exclusive. However, it can be useful to analyse this debate by a certain periodization of the history of media. As Fredric Jameson points out (1990: 19), the postmodern era brings into question the basis of the distinction between high culture and mass culture. The object of what is called 'mass culture' imposes its own 'regime of perception', to use Odin's terms, as does the object of high culture.

'The philosophy of the *filmic phenomenon*' is a heterogeneous chapter where the philosophical status of the image is confronted with the spectator's mechanisms

³ Château quotes Marc Cerisuelo, '*La philosophie et le cinématographe*', in *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle*, tome IV, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p. 2048.

⁴ Franck Kessler (2003) aims at correcting this 'universal' view by redefining the term '*dispositif*' in a historical context. Thus, for example, the cinema of attraction would use a repertory of operations different from narrative cinema. In the same light, Roger Odin's concept of '*régime de la lecture*' is supposed to defend the spectator's right of approaching a film the way it seems appropriate to him in a certain context. The spectatorial *dispositif* is not the same when one watches Renoir's *Partie de*

of perception. It opens with a review of Bergson's writings on cinema and it emphasizes the theory of the 'inner film' and the concept of *durée*. For film philosophers, Bergson is, or has to be, 'the master who honoured cinema with the keenness of his analysis' (52). But Chateau, who claims that the post-Bergsonian philosophy of cinema departs from this origin, reads in Bergson's assumptions about cinema the same principles which constitute the very core of his philosophy of interiority. In this light Deleuze, but also Epstein and Sartre, were wrong in claiming the Bergsonian legacy and placing an emphasis on the concept of *durée*, instead of pursuing the path of his general system. It is true that Bergson condemned the new medium, unable, in his view, to offer the reality of eternal becoming. On the contrary, Deleuze contradicts the fact that the frame is an immobile shape which produces the illusion of movement, and deploys the theory of real filmic movement, based on montage and camera movements. Cinema helped Bergson to develop the theory of the 'inner film', that would best describe the operations of our cognition and perception, but it could not capture *durée*. However, Chateau is not the best person to make such a claim, since he strictly limits his investigations to philosophical texts on cinema, without extending his reading to the philosopher's system, despite his commentaries being engaging and well-written.

According to Chateau, the philosophy of film had mainly pursued two different paths: either, on the one hand, it has been built on or against certain already 'constituted philosophies': Münsterberg is a neo-Kantian, Eisenstein is more Hegelian than generally acknowledged, whereas Merleau-Ponty represents phenomenology. Or, on the other hand, cinema becomes the object of a philosophical syncretism: in the case of Bazin, Epstein or Jean Mitry. Laurent Jullier (2002), a French film cognitivist, begins his *Cinema and Cognition* with a tribute to Hugo Münsterberg. Dominique Chateau too pays his respects to this pioneer of the psychological approach to cinema, praising his foresight in 'adjusting the forms of the outer world, that is time, space, causality, to the forms of the inner world, attention, memory, imagination and emotion' (Münsterberg 1970, 74). However, Chateau overlooks Münsterberg's inclination to impregnate his philosophical reflections with experimental results. Even if it is true that the Harvard professor highly considered Kant's philosophy, he still tipped the scale in favour of human reflexes and perceptual automation. It is in this sense that Noël Carroll, mentioned by Chateau in passing, finds in Münsterberg's *The Photoplay*, arguments to support the contention that our perception of films is governed by rules derived from our perceptual behaviour, which

campagne in a class, for sequence analysis, for example, or at the cinema (Odin

'occurs naturally in situations where we are gathering information about our environment.' (Carroll 1996, 128). Like Laurent Jullier, Chateau thinks it is of urgent importance to stress that long before Deleuze, and against the convictions of his time, Münsterberg advanced the idea that the goal and role of cinema are not to imitate reality, but to represent the exercise of our thought.

What seems to reunite Münsterberg, Eisenstein, Merleau-Ponty and Della Volpe under the same roof is the belief that cinema can 'think' (63, 74). The origins of Eisenstein's dialectic are situated in Hegel rather than in Marx, and it is in the light of the German philosopher's principles that Chateau pursues the relations between reality, idea, form, ideology, subjectivity, and objectivity. This account of Eisenstein's philosophy of film is somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, Chateau argues that the Russian theorist placed philosophical materialism over idealism, at least in his notes and lectures, and on the other hand, he defends the hypothesis that the director is guided in his work by a prior idea, and thus favours the experience of subjectivity. But Jacques Rancière argues in the chapter on Eisenstein in *La Fable cinématographique* that the Hegelian legacy makes the Russian filmmaker see cinema as an 'aesthetic art', that is 'an art where the idea is no more translated in the plot, but expresses itself in a sensible form' (2001, 32). Further, Chateau finishes by quoting Herbert Marcuse's contention that ideological potential is to be found in the aesthetic form itself (65).

Eisenstein claimed that ideology is embodied in form, and, according to Chateau, Merleau-Ponty is not far from this assumption as he says that the meaning of film is 'incorporated in the rhythm of the form', and is inseparable from this *clay* (70). The merit of Merleau-Ponty lies in denying the hypothesis that film superimposes different semantic layers. Thus cinema is '*particularly qualified to affirm ('faire paraître') the union of body and mind, of mind and the world*' (74). Therefore we must assume that there are many similarities between the perception of film and the perception of reality. Cinema is intended to be the object of our perception, concludes Merleau-Ponty (70). As for the question that haunted Chateau in the first chapters, cinema is not philosophical *per ipsum* (71). But Chateau will not lay down his arms so soon. Helped by the Italian Francesco Casetti, who singled out the philosophy of Galvano della Volpe, Chateau will once again draw another genealogy of the division in film theory. Della Volpe contradicts Benedetto Croce's aesthetic doctrine, and, subsequently, all the romantic or 'lyric' theories inspired by Vico and by Nietzsche (72-73). On the other side, Pudovkin, Casetti, along with della

2000).

Volpe and Chateau himself, vote for *the rationality of the image*, which reflects a certain *conceptual level* both at the root of the image itself and within the spectator's psychological perception.

This visit to the portrait gallery of film and philosophy continues with Cavell, Jean-Louis Schefer and Deleuze; under the banner of their second-degree philosophy, that is, the philosophy of the philosophy of cinema. This is also what Chateau does in his book, interrogating 'the philosophical experience of cinema' (94). What links these three very disparate philosophers, Chateau declares, is a double relativism in their approaches to the phenomenon of film: since they rely upon their 'personal experience as spectators' and on their own 'highly personal philosophy' (94). We would add that they are also linked by Chateau's harsh criticism, especially of Cavell and Deleuze. One can already guess that Chateau defends the thesis that moving images are able to think in a *rational* way. He never proclaims it openly, but it is no less obvious for the reader who follows his comments on the texts he analyses. Cavell and Deleuze advance two conceptions of philosophy which are too 'unorthodox' to be tolerated by this partisan of the rational thought. He takes issue not with their mode of thinking, nor with their philosophical roots, but with their premises.

In *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Cavell writes that 'philosophy is outrageous all by itself. It seeks to disquiet the foundations of our lives and to offer us in recompense nothing better than itself' (1981, 9). Even if Cavell is the first to pose explicitly the problem of the relation between cinema and philosophical thinking, which is the subject of Chateau's book, this doesn't lead to Chateau giving him much credit. Apparently Cavell exhibits a 'determination to understand the obvious', meaning the trivial. Chateau exclaims '*Qu'y a-t-il à comprendre?*', 'What should be understood?' when he examines Cavell's commentary on the difference between the role of the actor in cinema and theatre (98). This commentary, nevertheless, is part of an entire analysis whereby Cavell brings into question the relation between cinema and reality. Cinema and reality are not indistinguishable, but cinema cannot be reduced to a simple copy of the outer world. What relates them is what pertains to our ordinary experience: 'This placing of cinema in the horizon of life is definitely the strongest reason why Cavell, as a philosopher, occupied himself with cinema' states Francesco Casetti in his *Theories of Cinema* (1999, 284). Chateau's reading of Cavell undoubtedly underscores the aspects that legitimated his philosophy, and among them the importance of film in our ordinary life. Cinema is not only food for thought, but also an object of pleasure and of collective memory. The importance of

cinema in our everyday experience is revealed in the manner it transforms reality and our perception rather than in its ontological status.

If Cavell is accused of tarring all films with the same brush, Deleuze is the object of the contrary observation. The 'auteur-ish politics' of the French philosopher causes a rift between 'the essence of cinema' and 'the generality of films' (106). This Deleuzian philosophy of cinema functions as a whole system and one cannot shift a single stone without moving all the others. Chateau is aware of this and challenges the very foundation of Deleuze's philosophy: his definition of concepts. 'Cinema's concepts are not given in cinema', states Deleuze in *Cinema 2 The Time-Image*, which means, according to Chateau, that Deleuze withdraws from cinema the ability to produce concepts. Moreover, the concepts produced by cinema, identifiable by their 'autopoetic character', are too close to perceptions, sensations, emotions, and it is by means of concepts and, more precisely, by means of *the philosophical version of concepts* that philosophy gains access to arts and sciences (105). Moreover, the philosophical version of the concept must be 'purified' of any residues of perceptions, sensations, or affections. Jean-Louis Schefer's theory of the 'ordinary man of the cinema' runs precisely against this tradition of rationality. Chateau states clearly that emotions and perceptions do not grant access to consciousness, so in Schefer's case we would be justified to talk about moral *souffrance* (104). For Deleuze philosophy is only 'a practice of concepts', among others (1989, 280). Philosophy in general does not preexist its object of investigation; this is the reason why Deleuze's philosophy of cinema takes form and invents its concepts as it covers the field of cinema. Cinema, as a philosophical practice of concepts, must be distinguished, not separated, from what is generally called philosophy.

The penultimate chapter takes in the gallery of philosophical schools and general currents of thought: phenomenology, deconstruction, Lyotard's theory of 'figural', analytic philosophy, and semiology. 'Is cinema phenomenological?' asks a subchapter (112). What would make it phenomenological? First, there is the correspondence between thought and technique, as pointed out by Merleau-Ponty (1964: 9), followed by the problem of movement, able to restore reality to our senses. Phenomenology, continues Chateau, is a philosophy of subjectivity. When Husserl advocated the 'return to things themselves', he did not mean the objective structure of things but the experience we make of them. One can conclude that cinema is phenomenological not by virtue of its medium, but because it offers the viewer the opportunity to assist at the spectacle of his own experience; that of 'the immersion of consciousness' (118). This theory, though very open to cinema, has produced little

effect except Bazin's theory of 'phenomenological realism'. It is its semiotic version, which binds phenomenology and Peirce, that has been more successful.

Chateau remains faithful to Peirce when discussing Lyotard's concept of 'figural', especially in relation to the version developed by Philippe Dubois. Lyotard (1978) does not mention film when elaborating his concept. The figural is opposed to the discursive, which is the site of the rationality of meaning: the figural is to be seen and not thought, because the thought instituted by Western metaphysics censured the act of pure seeing. In other words, the figural is the very emergence of the visible. Chateau favours Dubois's reading of Lyotard, which was published in a collective volume edited by Chateau himself. This reading is a beautiful text on the intertitles in the German cinema of the 20s, which argues that '[t]he figural is more related to sensation than to comprehension or perception' (1999, 247). Chateau omits to mention a different but accurate reading of the 'figural' with specific regard to cinema and the new media: D. N. Rodowick explains how the figural opens meaning to intuition and affection, and hence contradicts, or rather 'transforms and deforms' rational sense (2001: 11).

The final conflict Chateau touches on is between analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy. When Allen and Smith wrote in the introduction of *Film Theory and Philosophy* that 'the phrase *analytic philosophy* conjures up a range of mostly negative associations' they anticipated the violent disagreements with 'continental' film theorists (1997, 2). Chateau's criticism of analytic philosophy responds directly to this text, criticising Allen and Smith for unfairly confining 'Continental' work on film to philosophers like Adorno, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, whilst ignoring Continental *film* theorists. This Manichean phenomenon is perhaps the best description of the conflicts that animates the field of film theory. Very rarely, points out Chateau, do exchanges go beyond the names of Deleuze and Bazin, whereas in the French field the academic community overlooks the internal conflicts of Anglo-American theory. From this point of view Chateau, who teaches at the University of Paris I, offers a faithful picture not only of the situation of French film theory and philosophy, but also of the perception of foreign theories by the French academic community.

Chateau's *Cinéma et philosophie* impresses by its penetrating analysis, even if sometimes, his eye offers a close-up on certain textual fragments at the expense of the whole system. It aims to review the major film theories for the French-reading student and scholar, always demonstrating its pedagogical concern. Chateau offers

in *Cinéma et philosophie* an updated attempt to organize the main philosophical approaches to cinema, the first one available to the French market.

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