
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

The Cinematic Agora
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Dominique Chateau (2005) *Cinéma et Philosophie*

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When someone asks “what's the use of philosophy?” the reply must be aggressive, since the question tries to be ironic and caustic. Philosophy does not serve the State or the Church, who have other concerns. It serves no established power. The use of philosophy is to sadden. A philosophy which saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy. It is useful for harming stupidity, for turning stupidity into something shameful. Its only use is the exposure of all forms of baseness of thought. (...) Philosophy is at its most positive as a critique, as an enterprise of demystification.

Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983, 106)

Is Dominique Chateau a Cartesian philosopher? He most certainly is not, for as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, 173) pointed out, a Cartesian philosopher does not see himself in the mirror: he sees a mannequin, a shell, something incarnate. The image in the mirror is nothing more than a mechanical effect of things. That is not Chateau, and to honour *Cinéma et Philosophie* it is perhaps necessary to begin by remembering an apparently singular fact: in the 1930s, whenever he felt exhausted and drained from his classes at Cambridge, Ludwig Wittgenstein would go to the cinema with a friend or some student. Ray Monk tells us that he would always sit in the front row, where he could probably immerse himself more completely in the stream of images and sound, and he preferred either westerns or musicals starring the Portuguese-Brazilian Carmen Miranda (1990, 423).

The reason for this anecdote is not simply to point out that philosophy and cinema are fields that can articulate with one another in often unusual ways. To think of the thin, anxious figure of Wittgenstein enjoying the wiggling movement of Carmen Miranda is something truly astounding, depending on the point of view one chooses. The point of the anecdote, however, is to realise that the key to a profound comprehension of the projects behind *Cinéma et Philosophie* is probably found in an earlier Dominique Chateau text entitled *La question de la question de l'art* (1998), which is composed around the principles of analytic philosophy, especially the ideas of Wittgenstein, and from which Chateau reaffirms the idea that it is not possible to address a problem philosophically without questioning the manner with which the problem is addressed. Thus, the title of the book folds upon itself: it is not simply the 'question of art', but the 'question of the question of art'.

In this old text Chateau sets out on a structural discussion which can be summarised thusly: to circumscribe the concept of art is to search for a generic definition; in this perspective, what meaning would lie behind generic definitions of art? (It would be equally possible to ask the same thing with regard to the concepts of philosophy or cinema.) For Wittgenstein, as we know, it is not possible to precisely determine the concepts with which we work. The reason for this is not our ignorance regarding the true definitions of the concepts, but the evident fact that the concepts never fit their definitions.

When thinking of the question of the question of art, Chateau operates within the framework of this structure: if there is some essential, generic nature to art, it must be sought in its attributes of a relational order, that is, in the artistic field, seen as a relatively coherent set of shared references. Therefore, it is always a conflicting set of theories that define what art is, transforming any object into an artistic object. As Dominique Chateau demonstrated on this occasion one question within a second question is never completely resolved, or to put it better, is never concluded except with regard to its own inconclusiveness.

I believe that, in Chateau, there is no way to separate cinema from art. Similarly, *Cinéma et Philosophie* would be incomprehensible if it were not placed in the precise setting of a profound relation between art and philosophy. Moreover, it is simply not possible to isolate this book from the rest of a recent production that is widely dedicated to a broader discussion on art.¹ This was how I knew Dominique

¹ To cite just the production of Dominique Chateau at the end of the 1990s: *Arts plastiques – Archéologie d'une notion* (1999); *Le bouclier d'Achille: Théorie de l'iconologie* (1997); *L'art comme fait social total* (1998); *Duchamp et Duchamp* Cunha Filho, Paulo C. (2006) 'The Cinematic Agora'. *Film Philosophy*. v. 10, n. 2, pp. 99-107. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2006v10n2/cunhafilho.pdf>>. ISBN 1466-4615 online

Chateau and only in this way could I understand his work, from a time in which he was finishing his *Thèse d'État* entitled *La philosophie de l'art comme synthèse critique* in the early 1980s and began advising his first doctoral students. In his thesis Chateau pointed to unsuspected interpretations of classic painting that would lead to certain analysis solutions regarding *Cinéma et Philosophie*. For example, his overpowering interpretation that a painting could *contain* its own frame, a fact that one can perceive when observing Nicolas Poussin's self-portrait (oil on canvas, 1650, 98x74, Louvre Museum, Paris), in which the painter blends visual narrative strategy (the *portrait*) with thematic content (the representation of the atelier), showing himself looking into the eyes of the onlooker, surrounded by his canvases and frames.

This is among the greatest merits of *Cinéma et Philosophie*, the virtue of maintaining the coherence of a long-term reflection born back in the 1970s in a France that was strongly impregnated by structuralism within a spectrum that went from politics (through Althusserian Marxism) to psychoanalysis (precisely, Lacanian psychoanalysis), passing through structuralist semiotics, which for a number of years was marked by the work of Christian Metz in the study of cinema. Whoever, like myself, had the good fortune of enjoying the striking sympathy Metz doled out in his seminar entitled '*Théorie du Film*', at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, can understand the manner in which the rigour of his observation of films in particular and cinema in general were influential for an entire generation of young researchers.

Dominique Chateau could not escape the idea that it is possible to observe and analyse states, rules or conventions subjacent to cinema, and even his most current texts are therefore replete with the idea. I believe there is a remnant of the concealed logic in *Cinéma et Philosophie* of a generic system of meaning, which, as a cultural organisation, the cinema puts into operation through its fundamental structures.

Even considering that Dominique Chateau's recent work can be placed into a *post-theory* framework, as Bordwell and Carroll define it,² it does not appear possible to escape the fact that *Cinéma et Philosophie* reminds us of a trajectory that emerges and spreads throughout a structuralist context and, at the end of the road, will lead

(1999); *L'héritage de l'art – Imitation, Tradition et Modernité* (1999); *Qu'est-ce que l'art?* (2000), among other titles.

² In their introduction to the collection *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll affirmed the obsolescence of structuralism, since 'solid research can proceed without appeal to the doctrines once held to form the basis of all proper reflection about cinema' (xiii).

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Dominique Chateau to the position of Professor of Aesthetics at the Université de Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne). Indeed, in some fashion, a modality of thought and a method of analysis are found in *Cinéma et Philosophie*, without our knowing exactly where one ends and the other begins.

In this book by Chateau, there is a *fuite en avant* that transforms filmic analysis into the investigation of cinema as a large system that can be interpreted as a 'total social fact', or evoking Mauss: something constituted from constitutive relations and functions of a system.³

The obvious thesis behind any approach regarding the relationship between cinema and philosophy would be that a film is an audiovisual form that cannot be reduced to the sum of the images and sounds that compose it. An old empiricist lesson from Kuleshov and Eisenstein: two close planes generate a meaning that surpasses the sum of their internal characteristics. There is a secondary aspect associated to this principal thesis: cinema is a form of capturing the world and bringing a force into its representation system that teaches us about the relationship we have with the world.

However, this was not the path that Chateau took in his attempt at associating cinema and philosophy. Following the model developed in *La question de la question de l'art*, his strategy was to work on both the diversity of intersections between the two domains and, at each step, problematise questions within further questions in an infinite *mise en abyme*, in spite of a text that is clear and accessible even for non-specialised readers.

In the six chapters of *Cinéma et Philosophie*, Chateau opts for a more sinuous approach, going from 'philosophical cinema' (that is, the cinematographic representation of philosophy and philosophers) to aesthetic issues applied to cinema and/or films parting from philosophical notions and the relations between the theory of cinema and philosophy. As the author himself states, the book was composed with 'a double spirit: the educational spirit that leads to understanding and the critical spirit that leads to reflection' (7). Coherent with his previous production, Chateau tells us that 'it is not enough to supply answers to questions; it is necessary to question the answers immediately' (7).

³ Although I do not wish to enter into a discussion on influences regarding the base of French structuralism, speaking of cinema, art or philosophy in absolute or generic terms evidently leads to a re-appropriation of Mauss' interpretation of the *fait social total* in terms of a symbolic system. As we know, since 1901 Marcel Mauss introduces symbolism in the Durkheimian problem of representation and in the 1920s, conceives social conduct as linked to a *calling*, that is, multiple expressions

There is a curious fact that Chateau plucks from the corpus he has analysed: there have only been two important attempts to transport an expressly philosophical text to the cinema – Eisenstein's aborted project to film *Das Capital* by Marx and Alexandre Astruc's vague idea that if he had had access to a 16 mm camera, Descartes would have 'written' *Discourse on Method* in the form of a film (11). Though never carried out, these desires point to a kind of *semantic inadequacy* (15). Actually, for Chateau, the transposition from philosophic discourse to a cinematographic account would highlight both the *semantic inadequacy* of the conceptual entities of discourse as well as the need for a *syntactic transformation*. As Chateau demonstrates, the difficulty lies in replacing the absence of concepts with a diegetic content captured from reality.

As Chateau also demonstrates in his book, there are films that have a 'philosophical range' and make explicit a type of 'philosophical gloss' (17). It is necessary to face the fact that any film, even those that are less intentionally intellectual, distil a type of *Weltanschauung*, a worldview in which philosophy often participates as a mere instrument for amplifying the aura of the audiovisual product (19).

In its attempts to represent philosophy the cinema is replete with films that have a *philosophical intention*. As an example, Chateau recalls that Jean-Luc Nancy identifies the nature of a true *metaphysical meditation* in the work of Kiarostami (21-22), and that Jean Epstein assures us 'philosophy can be born of this play between light and shadow where the audience only sees a sentimental or comical plot' (25). Chateau promotes a broad chain of further questions: does cinema offer a particularly fertile terrain for the exercise of philosophy? Does cinema exhibit some aspect that is truly all its own and is susceptible to fuelling philosophy? Is cinema a particularly apt medium for porting philosophy? Does it possess properties that could be characterised as philosophical? Chateau responds with rigour to all such questions, but always makes clear the contradictions in both the questions and the answers, stating the following:

The reserves that raise [the idea of a] *philosophical cinema* do not imply the complete rejection of the capacity of cinema for thought. In a certain manner, this philosophical cinema (in the Baudelairian sense) could qualify both very silent films (...) as well as very subtle films that nevertheless flaunt their philosophical ambitions – at the height of ancient, modern and post-modern philosophy. (30)

the coherence of which is made possible through the symbolic consistency of social

The densest part of *Cinéma et Philosophie* is in Chapters 2 and 3, discussing the possibility of a philosophy of the very cinematographic phenomenon from the distinction that gave rise to structuralist approaches to cinema between the *cinematographic* and the *filmic*, which emerges with Gilbert Cohen-Séat and is rigorously taken up by Christian Metz. From the establishment of this dichotomy, Chateau reviews the recuperation of philosophical ideas to explain cinema and film.

Château proposes an important reinterpretation of the contributions of Paul Valéry, Walter Benjamin and the team of Adorno and Horkheimer – as an attempt to understand cinema philosophically in the framework of the very infrastructure of the cultural industry. Using Plato's cave allegory (which, as Chateau demonstrates, has an ambivalent relation to the theory of cinema) *Cinéma et Philosophie* revisits both the approach of psychoanalysis to the cinematographic field and the ideological squabble that was born in the aftermath of May 1968 in France, and which transformed the technological apparatus of cinema into the touchstone of the political interpretation of cinema. Moreover, the Platonic cave permits Chateau to reposition the relation of cinema to archaic magic, in the most curious terms, in the direction of the anthropology of Edgar Morin. As Chateau states:

Morin's perspective is in no way a return to mythical sources that seek to deduce cinema from an origin and reduce its emergence in the modern context; it is much more to comprehend, because an entire mythical world is attached to it that appears a priori to be a stranger to its machine, its technique as with its modern context. (41)

Chateau goes from cinema to film, obviously guiding his interpretation through the thinking of Henri Bergson. As Chateau demonstrates, there is a crucial change of status in this case: 'Not only is Bergson not content to make allusion episodically to film, but he erects a cognitive model of a form of thought and the relation to movement and to time from which even the whole of his philosophy wishes to separate.' (52). In reviewing the appropriation Bergson makes of cinema, Chateau demonstrates how delicate the spectatorial experience of the philosopher is:

A philosopher can very well evolve in the framework of a secular discipline, and the thought schema he employs can be quite sufficiently abstract to withstand the erosion of history, but what he says about a real, historically determined object, such as cinema, is a tributary of his mindset at the moment in which he reflects. (59)

ties.

This is a cutting remark that could be applied not only to Bergson, but also to others in varying degrees that appear in Château's review of what he calls the *portrait gallery* (110): Mitry, Bazin, Epstein, Münsterberg, Eisenstein, and others – as much filmmakers/thinkers as philosophers that thought cinema or intended to do so from cinema.

Two thinkers especially draw Chateau's attention: Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty. Regarding the first, *Cinéma et Philosophie* distils an irony that emerges from other comments ('Gilles Deleuze is a philosopher down to his fingertips...' (104)) and that points to the paradox at the heart of Deleuze's philosophy of cinema. As Deleuze states art does not produce *concepts* but only *sensations*. Therefore Deleuze's philosophy of cinema is a 'theory fabricated from concepts regarding an object that does not fabricate concepts and that therefore thinks' (106). For Chateau, Deleuze spurns cinema through the same philosophy with which he has appropriated it. It is assuredly the most virulent portrait from *Cinéma et Philosophie*, in which Deleuze is deconstructed from the very unfolding of his thinking: 'In order for the privilege offered to cinema by philosophy to appear just, it is not possible they reencounter one another on the same plane of the indifferentiation of practices: it is necessary that philosophy impose its own plane as a condition for recognising the specificity of the cinematic plane.' (109, see also 129ff). What bothers Chateau in the Deleuzian approach is that it establishes that cinema effectively has something that philosophy does not possess, but this properly cinematographic dimension can only be conceptually understood through philosophy itself. Along the same lines of this critique of the privilege of philosophy, Chateau borrows from Alain Badiou to say that the main interest in this type of theory of cinema in relation to philosophy is that it 'confirms the philosophy... of Deleuze' (130) and that 'the concepts of the philosophy of cinema pertain to philosophy and not to cinema' (130-131).

In the case of Merleau-Ponty, Chateau points to the fact that phenomenology has a *a priori* characteristics that predispose it to interest in the cinema. In the first place, as a theory of experiencing the world, it does not start from any privileged terrain, being interested in all domains of experience. The second advantage, according to Chateau (113), is to integrate each specific object and correlated experience into the framework of a general theory of concrete experience. The point in which Chateau approximates Merleau-Ponty to Bazin and Rossellini is exceptionally rich, pointing to the unfolding of thought that is organised around a certain neutrality of neo-realist experience. At this point of *Cinéma et Philosophie*, a model seems to emerge that points to a system:

Pure phenomenology of cinema is never really pure. The confrontation with the cinematographic datum intervenes in one instant or another in such a way as to always pose the problem of extrapolation of a philosophy of consciousness to an object that clearly is the result of the objectivation of a mental activity, but irredeemably transformed into achievement in the broad sense, a textual composition. (120)

The rest of Chateau's interpretations start from the core of the phenomenological approach: from Derrida to Lyotard, returning to Deleuze and ending with the problem of aesthetics, art and taste, in such a way as to return to the open-ended questions that actually fold over onto themselves in a succession of certainties and uncertainties that enrich Chateau's text.

Is a film in particular (or cinema in general) subject to the concept? To what extent does the film (or cinema) have a further finality that leads it beyond itself? Chateau's reading in *Cinéma et Philosophie* aggrandises film studies because it leads us to the core of this dialectic between intellectual meaning and audiovisual narration. Films generally associate ideas and stories from a representation of the real that imitates but is not reduced to the day-to-day experience. Thus, Chateau demonstrates how tension arises between understanding and imagination. It is a philosophical question, we could say, but actually one question within another: film (and cinema in general) cannot help but be self-referential, turning inward onto itself, its images and its sounds. Chateau's book allows us a glance at a way out of the original impasse: cinema has taught us to deal with representative form and concept, making us forget the real starting with its strongest memory.

It is nearly a direct evocation of Bergson, who in *Matter and Memory* compares two opposing directions of attention: philosophical attention, that which looks beyond, toward ideas; and artistic attention, which sees differently (1991: 100). It is clear that the relationship between cinema and philosophy resides precisely in this difference. That is what helps us to understand Chateau.

I am far, of course, from having exhausted the discussions raised in *Cinéma et Philosophie* and there would not be enough room here to review it all. But I would like to state that it is better to base the reading of Dominique Chateau's book from the standpoint of the historical coherence of this French thinker and a constant approximation between the spheres of thought and artistic expression.

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