
FILM PHILOSOPHY

Cinema and Its Shadow:
Mario Perniola's *Art and Its Shadow*

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Mario Perniola (2004), *Art and Its Shadow*

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A number of contemporary 'Continental' philosophers of art have recently turned their attention to the relationship between philosophy and cinema. Here we might mention relevant chapters in Alain Badiou's *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*, and Bernard Stiegler's monumental *Technics and Time*. Mario Perniola's marvelously succinct collection of essays on contemporary aesthetics and art practice is a welcome addition to this philosophical discussion. *Art and its Shadow* is not only fascinating reading for those interested in visual culture and aesthetics, it is also enlightening for those readers concerned with exploring the complex relationship between philosophy and cinema.

In what is a rather slim volume, the follow-up to his wonderfully titled *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, Perniola has succeeded in covering a wealth of topics with admirable clarity and conceptual depth. There are chapters on idiocy and splendour in contemporary art, the aesthetics of difference, Warhol and postmodernism, situationist

and conceptual art, and the question of what art can do after postmodernism. The topic of philosophical cinema is dealt with explicitly in only one of the chapters, 'Towards a Philosophical Cinema,' which exemplifies Perniola's central thesis that art *after* postmodernism remains challenging only when it remains 'in the shadow' of the dominant aesthetic frameworks of violent realism and spectacular communication. Perniola's thoughtful reflections on works such as Wim Wenders's *Lisbon Story* (1994) and Derek Jarman's final, autobiographical work, *Blue* (1993), open up a way of thinking that is sensitive to the singularity of film as an art, to the philosophical challenges posed by documentary film, and to filmmaking that subtly resists the homogenizing tendencies of dominant genres of narrative film.

According to Perniola, Western art has always been fascinated by the relationship between appearance and reality, either by celebrating appearance for its own sake or by intensifying our perception of reality (3). Indeed, contemporary art today could be said to fall into two corresponding streams: the celebration of spectacular media simulacra and communicative immediacy on the one hand, and the fascination with the abject real of the body, pain, suffering, violence, and death on the other. This schema accounts for the rather schizoid contemporary art scene, where hyper-reflexive forms of digital media collide with extreme forms of body and performance art. What this crisis situation requires, Perniola argues, is an attempt to rethink the exhausted categories of traditional Kantian-Hegelian aesthetics. We need to find new categories and concepts — Perniola mentions, among others, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Debordian anti-aesthetics, and Barthesian para-aesthetics — for thinking the peculiar coincidence of violence, spectacle, realism, and communication defining contemporary media and artistic practice. And this crisis of contemporary aesthetics clearly has important implications, Perniola contends, for cinema as an artform that is philosophical, communicative, and spectacular in its very essence.

For all the riches in Perniola's aesthetic reflections, I shall focus here on the chapter 'Towards a Philosophical Cinema,' which takes as its theme the possibility of a philosophical cinema today. The question at issue is whether cinema can 'espouse philosophical experience' (34): 'Can cinema create a total philosophical work that would comprehend and coordinate writing, vision, listening, event and spatiality?' (35) This question is clearly distinct from the more conventional inquiries into film aesthetics, or how film transforms our inherited conceptions of art, and so on. In the context of a crisis in contemporary art, the situation of cinema is especially dire, even though cinema has

always maintained a close affinity with philosophy. Indeed, there are many questions that point to the intimate relationship between philosophy and cinema: 'the relation between reality and its reproduction, the cognitive potentiality of the cinematographic medium, the representation of abstract ideas, the spectacular character of the collective imaginary, the contribution made by cinema to the knowledge of the emotions, behaviours and experiences' (34). All these questions naturally suggest, for Perniola, a strong link between philosophy and cinema, a link that remains mostly hidden from view in contemporary narrative film (unlike much European cinema of the 1960s and 70s). The question, then, is how to understand those rare contemporary works that attempt to create a non-didactic, 'relatively autonomous philosophical work' in film (34).

Two well-known examples Perniola discusses are both innovative forms of documentary: Wim Wenders's *Lisbon Story* (1994) and Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993). This choice is in keeping with Perniola's pivotal claim that 'an approach oriented towards the production of philosophical cinema would find its point of departure in the study of the documentary' (34). This claim raises interesting questions, not least the question of the relation between narrative and documentary functions of film, a question to which I shall return in conclusion. In any case, both films are very far from being conventional documentaries, combining documentary, narrative, poetic, and reflective dimensions of the image in novel and creative ways. Wenders's film, which concerns a failed fictional documentary about the city of Lisbon, is described as a 'kind of propaedeutic to visual philosophy' that takes its point of departure from the recognition of 'the crisis of the cinematographic image' (35). As enacted in Wenders's narrative, cinema is in the process of being displaced by video; it is struggling to define the specificity of its own image-making as distinct from television, advertising, and so on, in an age where images proliferate but no longer have the power to move us or show how things really are. To be sure, the reproductive facility of new visual technologies, as Benjamin observed long ago, makes the production of (post-auratic) images within everyone's grasp. Far from political revolution, however, this proliferation has produced, in Perniola's view, an avalanche of 'garbage-images that impair and blunt our ability for discrimination, wonder, and admiration' (35). Wenders takes up this theme of the corruption of the cinematic image in a visually saturated culture, one that risks leveling the difference between the documentary maker's art, the tourist on holiday, and the kid with a video camera. What is the filmmaker to do when faith in the revelatory power of the cinematic image begins to wane?

This crisis of confidence in the cinematographic image is the subject of Wenders's film, which defies straightforward classification as either a documentary or as a fiction. It clearly has a fictional narrative dimension in which documentary director, Friedrich Monroe (or 'Frederico,' as he is known to the locals), is overcome by doubts about the power of the cinematic image to represent or express contemporary reality (37). He leaves an urgent message for his sound recordist, Philip Winter, to come and help, who eventually arrives in Lisbon only to find the unfinished documentary but no documentary maker, the latter having gone an 'urban drifting' without return (37). After much sound recording of everyday life in Lisbon streets, Winter discovers that Frederico has been experimenting with making a film by taking images without looking into the camera, bypassing the anchoring role of the director's subjectivity and thus allowing the city to reveal itself to the innocent gaze of the camera. Wenders' camera, for Perniola, is all the better able to represent the city by removing the mediation of the human eye, presenting images coalescing with the temporal reality they depict. The city and the image now commingle, while cameraman and spectator disappear, image and object uniting without human contamination or subjective interference.

This cinematic flânerie — reminiscent of Patrick Keiller's marvelous quasi-documentaries, *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) — eschews the diegetic framing of reality in favour of an aesthetic openness to the contingencies of chance, memory, and place. Narrative diegesis gives way to passages of poetry by Pessoa; as though the poetic word still resonates where images can no longer show how things are. The significance of music—the exquisite performances by the group 'Madredeus' being an undoubted highlight of the film—attests to the need for the image to renounce its visual immediacy and cultural dominance in favour of other ways of listening, thinking, and feeling.

In addition to poetry and music, philosophy, in the figure of the great Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira, is presented as a means of reflecting upon the way the cinematic image retains its uniqueness in being able to guarantee the existence of a moment — temporal, subjective, and historical — that is otherwise destined to fade. Interestingly, Perniola comments on the philosophical digression de Oliveira makes on the significance of art as a world-making practice, the power of the image to preserve experience in its contingency and fragility; but he does not mention the marvelous visual sequence that accompanies these reflections, Oliveira's brilliant Chaplin impersonation and Wenders' wonderful visual homage to Chaplin and Keaton.

This complex interplay between reality and fictional elements of the film suggests something of what is required to counteract the crisis of faith in the cinematographic image. In this sense, Perniola concludes, Wenders' fictional documentary, in presenting a 'library of images not seen,' as Monroe remarks, provides the only true documentary of Lisbon, 'a radical alternative to the garbage-images of the video-idiots of our time' (37). Perniola takes these tags from one of the film's key dialogues, where Frederico Monroe explains that garbage-images, which *sell* rather than *show* reality to us, have corrupted cinema and turned us, or rather the children of MTV and Coca-Cola, into 'vidiots'. His challenge is thus to find a way to restore innocence to the image, its revelatory power to move us, which the filmmakers rediscover in returning to the pure gaze of the camera.

While Perniola underlines the way Wenders is able to show Lisbon through the lens of a fictional documentary, and to find a way of presenting images as though 'the history of film had never happened,' he tends to ignore the highly reflective character of Wenders's work—this narrative film within a documentary or documentary within a narrative film. The fascinating concluding insight of *Lisbon Story* is that the filmmakers rediscover the innocence of cinema precisely by remembering its extraordinary history—the daring of Vertov, of Keaton, of Fellini, not to mention Wenders's own cinematic drifting, with its recurring themes of the road journey, the filmmaker as outsider, the gaze of the child, the power of music, and the decadence of the West (Germany).

Different responses to this crisis in the image are discernible in the other documentary films Perniola discusses, which also neatly express the competing currents of spectacular realism versus reflective appearance. The former current is exemplified in a disturbing sequence in Brigitte Cornand's documentary (co-authored with Guy Debord), *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (1994). Unlike Debord, who argued that images in the society of the spectacle become largely interchangeable, Cornand's documentary highlights the shocking realism of contemporary media images and the complicity they evoke in us — as comfortable bourgeois observers of the world's atrocities — before our television screens. In particular, Perniola discusses the distressing footage of an attempted stoning of a Somali woman accused of having sexual relations with UN soldiers. Here the documentary image, Perniola suggests, finds its highest excitement precisely in its shocking realism, capturing a moment of violence and brutality just as it occurs. How is it, Perniola asks, that modern technology, so adroit in capturing atrocities on film, seems powerless to provide practical help to the victims? (38)

One might venture a political answer here rather than an aesthetico-technological one, which perhaps points to a certain weakness in Perniola's discussion of the hyperinflation of the cinematic image through spectacular simulation and pornographic violence. The proliferation of post-auratic images made possible by visual technologies, as Benjamin argued, immediately raises the question of politics in all its ambiguity. The latter point is powerfully made in the sequence in question, which shows the Somali woman being chased by an angry mob, and then stripped naked as she wields a knife in self-defence. The perverse climax of the sequence, for Perniola, appears when the woman is aestheticized and eroticized at the very moment she is being violently brutalized; an epiphany 'that raises the poor girl to the Emyrean of the greatest images of art and literature, beside the Judiths, Lucretias and Penthesileas' (39). This startling remark captures a moment that only intensifies the morally questionable complicity of the enlightened, concerned viewer, appalled at what is happening on the screen, but also secretly excited by the cinematic shock of the 'real' effect—a kind of pornography of violence that is becoming a cultural norm in our image-saturated world. Perniola does not directly answer the disturbing questions raised by this sequence—is it exploitative? immoral? political?—but rather poses the question concerning how documentary realism, in getting what it wants, can turn the reality it captures into a perverse spectacle. Perniola's reading of the film therefore may not entirely satisfy some viewers, more sympathetic to Debord's ruthless negativity, for whom this 'epiphany' may be less aesthetic than political.

An alternative aesthetic response to the crisis in the cinematographic image is articulated in Derek Jarman's final autobiographical testimonial, *Blue* (1993). This extraordinary work is a film without images, entirely reliant on sound, a form of perverse iconoclasm as well as a personal reflection on mortality, sexuality, and cinematic art. The film consists of a continuous image of Kleinian blue, with musical accompaniment, while a chorus of voices recites passages from Jarman's poetic diary. The latter text, which was simultaneously broadcast as a radio play, comprises narrative, poetry, and other reflections recording Jarman's 'progressive loss of sight and the dramatic deterioration of his health' (41). This film without images, Perniola suggests, is a documentary in the purest sense; one based on 'the identity between life and cinema, illness and art which at the same time strives to be a poetic work, a work of art rather than 'the protocol of an agony' (41). Against the tendency, still evident in Wenders's film, to regard a purely impersonal recording of reality to be more authentic, Jarman shows

how even an intensely personal, autobiographical work is nonetheless 'a *staged authenticity*, a truth-effect' (41). Like Wenders's film, but more radically, Jarman's *Blue* erases the primacy of the image in favour of the texture of colour, the resonance of voice, the nuances of memory, and the expressivity of music. We experience a cinematic encounter with mortality at the other end of the spectrum from spectacular realism, with its ultra-violence and shock effects.

Jarman's meditation on illness, mortality, and art is all the more powerful for refusing the image in favour of a mesmerizing blue. The latter evokes many associations, from Jarman's progressive loss of sight, his depression, the colour of the sea (an important figure in Jarman's imaginary), the artist's leap into the void, to the horizon of sexual transgression that Jarman embraces as the source of his art and of his fate (41-42). Indeed, Jarman's *Blue* synthesizes these four dimensions—the abolition of images, the oceanic sentiment of life, beyond the pleasure principle, and perverse sexuality' (42)—into a strikingly original cinematic work. It is a testimony to the filmmaker's life and art, which combines an iconoclasm of the image, the loss of identity, and the mingling of death and eroticism in a way that remains artistically unified and open to interpretation.

One question Perniola's lapidary essay poses is that of the relationship between narrative and documentary cinema. As I mentioned earlier, Perniola maintains that documentary is the exemplary form of philosophical cinema, but he proceeds to discuss films that seriously question or redefine the traditional distinction between documentary and narrative. This is particularly evident in Wenders's *Lisbon Story* but also in Jarman's mesmerizing fusion of narrative poetry and the experience of blue. It is similarly manifest in fictional documentaries such as Keiller's *London*, or in Barison and Ross' fascinating philosophical documentary *The Ister* (2004). Here one might question the assumed distinction between documentary and narrative by extending Perniola's discussion further into the domain of philosophical narrative film. Isn't the same 'undecidability' that Perniola discerns in these documentaries also evident in narrative films that play with the reality-revealing ambiguities of the cinematic image? Among many possible examples, one might mention films as diverse as Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Godard's *Contempt* (1963), and Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2003). All three take their starting point from the question of the cinematic image, in particular the ambiguities of memory, time, and desire crystallized within that vast mnemo-technical prosthesis, or archive of tertiary memory, that is the history of cinema.

We might therefore question Perniola's assumption that documentary, as a cinematic exploration of the real, makes the obvious starting point for discussing the possibilities of philosophical cinema. Documentary may well be the 'shadow' of narrative cinema, in Perniola's sense of the 'shadow of art,' but this need not mean that we should neglect the philosophical possibilities of narrative cinema. These quibbles aside, Perniola's sophisticated reflections on the crisis of the cinematic image, and on the philosophical and artistic riches of fictional documentary, contribute admirably to the contemporary discourse on film and philosophy.