

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

The Occluded Relation:
Levinas and Cinema
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Emmanuel Levinas never wrote about cinema. To the uninitiated, this may appear surprising, given that his life spanned the twentieth century, in which film emerged as a major art form, and his work includes tantalising allusions to films and the cinematic medium. Far from surprising, however, the liminal place that cinema occupies in Levinas's thought is entirely understandable. Although his philosophy features many cultured references to literature and the other arts, and he discusses the work of such writers as Marcel Proust and Michel Leiris in some detail, his early work is dismissive of the aesthetic dimension in ethical terms. More significantly still, his philosophy bears a challenging relation to questions of vision and the phenomenological world of appearance, tending towards the anti-ocular and revealing an iconoclastic approach to images. There is something provocative, then, in wanting to ask what Levinas's philosophy has to say about cinema, if we understand this realm as the location *par excellence* of the moving image. Yet this is precisely the guiding question of this Special Issue, which is the first to bring together articles on the work of Levinas and the insights that his philosophy can offer to film studies. The collection features an international selection of contributors, and includes Levinas specialists as well as film scholars. There is no easy bond to be forged between this philosopher and film, and the possibility of making this connection remains open to interrogation throughout some of the articles. But by taking Levinas to the cinema, while tracking the cinematic aspects of his thinking, all of the contributors address this hitherto occluded relation in generative ways, and each creates a critical opening for future research in the field.

This Special Issue grew out of a conference that I organised on 'Levinas and Cinema' at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in London in May 2006.¹ This year was the centenary of Levinas's birth and seemed a fitting time to start asking new questions of his work and to encourage a shift in thinking about his philosophy into largely uncharted territory. Enthusiastic reception of the topic and the lively discussion that followed each panel session convinced me of the need for a subsequent collection of articles. To date, and in keeping with a broader ethical turn in the Humanities, work on this topic has mainly privileged Levinas's ethics. The ethical strand of Levinas's thinking has been discussed in relation to documentary (Renov 2004; Cooper 2006) and, more specifically, the work of Michelangelo Antonioni (Bergen-Aurand 2006). More broadly, Judith Butler also turns her attention to Levinas's concept of the face (*visage*) to discuss television reporting in the United States on the war against Iraq (Butler 2004: 128–151). And Michele Aaron notes the importance of Levinas for addressing the ethics of spectatorship in visual culture (Aaron 2007: 87–123). Although most of the contributions to this Special Issue similarly foreground the ethical dimension of his work, they also signal the relevance of other areas of his thought to film. Levinas's work traverses the fields of religion, aesthetics, and politics, as well as ethics. It is on all of these fronts that his thinking can intersect with debates within film theory, film philosophy, and with focused readings of specific films or genres, in order to open up current debates in film studies to the different perspectives that his work proffers. Yet exploring the usefulness of Levinas to film studies does not foreclose the possibility of re-reading Levinas through film. This two-way exchange is important and asks us to consider what film might say to, or about, his philosophy, as well as what his work can say to, or about, film.

Film studies is the most recent area to join the lineage of disciplines that have contributed to the reception and understanding of Levinas's work throughout the years. The main waves in the historical tide of responses have come through philosophy, Jewish studies, and literary studies. Most pertinent to the conjunction of Levinas and cinema is the latter. Literary scholars have looked beyond his early dismissal of the aesthetic dimension and have built productive relations between his writings and their readings of literature (see Eaglestone 1997; Robbins 1999; and Davis 2000). Several of the contributors to this collection follow the lead of their literary colleagues to the extent

¹ The following contributors to this Special Issue also spoke at the conference: Simon Critchley, Colin Davis, Lisa Downing, and Libby Saxton. I regret that the other speakers at this event were unable to contribute to this publication. I thank Tina Chanter, Robert Eaglestone, Seán Hand, and Emma Stone Mackinnon for their thought-provoking papers on the day.

that they too revisit Levinas's work on aesthetics. But film is not literature, and recognition of the specificity and complexity of the medium is generally understood to be crucial to this Levinasian turn in film scholarship. As well as having more to say about film than did the philosopher himself, the contributors to this volume also treat it differently. When Levinas does make a filmic reference in his work, it is usually to exemplify a philosophical point. The mention of Charlie Chaplin in the text *On Escape* (1935) provides one such early example, in which a scene from *City Lights* (1931) is brought in briefly as part of a broader meditation on being. This illustrative use of film certainly serves its intended purpose, but subordinates film to philosophy. This Special Issue redresses the balance, as film is placed on a level with philosophy.

The contributors make an energising diversity of connections between Levinasian philosophy and cinema, moving between direct engagement with specific films or genres, and more theoretical approaches to filmic debate using his work. The articles engage with a variety of theoretical positions, from the phenomenological to the psychoanalytic, through feminist discourse, the work of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur. Furthermore, they explore film from the classical to the contemporary era, and across the globe from France, Belgium, and Germany, through the Soviet Union, to the United States. From art-house to Hollywood cinema, through fiction and documentary, and in dialogue with a range of film theory, the contributors discuss central concepts of Levinasian thought, such as the face (*visage*) and the caress (*caresse*), along with the relation to the other, questions of art, responsibility, movement, temporality, and the feminine. It is with the status of the image and the aesthetic dimension that the volume begins, and this is an important thread that runs throughout.

Libby Saxton's article, 'Fragile Faces: Levinas and Lanzmann', opens the collection with an exploration of the ethical potential and risks of using images to bear witness to history and alterity. She focuses on the aural and visual impact of Claude Lanzmann's monumental documentary *Shoah* (1985), his reluctance to visualise the past directly, and his privileged use of oral over visual witnessing. She draws elegant parallels between the otherwise divergent projects of Levinas and Lanzmann, and argues persuasively that Lanzmann's images are hospitable to Levinasian thought. She demonstrates the pertinence of Levinas's thinking to the issues at stake in ongoing conversations about representation of, and after, the Holocaust, showing how the cinematic image has a vital ethical role to play in the context of such debate.

The next two articles broaden out this concern with the status of the image through detailed engagement with Levinas's problematic early essay on aesthetics, 'Reality and its Shadow' (1948). Both Reni Celeste and Colin Davis argue for a re-evaluation of the importance of this early work. Celeste's article, 'The Frozen Screen: Levinas and the Action Film', shifts the focus of filmic discussion to the Hollywood action film. She concentrates on Levinas's valuation of the tragic in his work on art. In his early essay, Levinas locates the aesthetic realm in statuesque immobility and outside of time. Celeste argues poignantly that cinema is the greatest example of this tragic state of the aesthetic and also its ultimate challenge, given that it is the privileged kinetic medium of the twentieth century. She takes up action cinema, since this is the genre that promises to resist statuesque encapsulation and to exemplify cinema's freedom from the photograph. Suggesting that action serves as a mask for a frozen screen, she draws a parallel between the futureless landscape of suspended time that Levinas associates with the tragic and with art. Ultimately, however, such cinema is deemed to escape Levinas's sense of the tragic as a realm severed from truth.

Davis's article, 'Levinas, *Nosferatu*, and the Love as Strong as Death', performs an intricate reading of F.W. Murnau's classic film *Nosferatu* (1922), using one of Levinas's later works, *Death and Time* (1991), in addition to 'Reality and its Shadow'. Davis engages with a key Heideggerian reading of the film in order to argue, in contrast, that *Nosferatu* reveals Levinas's difference from Heidegger. Davis suggests that Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is a key point of reference in 'Reality and its Shadow', even though Levinas does not mention the essay explicitly. Davis understands *Nosferatu* to justify Levinas's analysis of art in 'Reality and its Shadow', as well as offering an insight into the medium of film. Yet he avoids reading *Nosferatu* as an allegory of Levinas's philosophy. He stresses how Murnau's film contains knowledge of sex, death, and some of the blindspots of ethics that Levinas never envisaged. For Davis, the film, unlike the philosophy, leaves open the question of whether or not love is stronger than death.

Lisa Downing's article, 'Re-viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film', takes up the discussion of love in relation to the recent polemical work of French women directors Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis. She suggests that by not talking directly about sex, even though desire and Eros are central to much of his philosophy, Levinas offers an oblique way for thinking about the problems inherent in representing sex. She engages with critical feminist readings of the status of the feminine in Levinas's work

(most notably by Luce Irigaray and Tina Chanter) and performs a positive reading of this problematic, finding his work receptive to questions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, she argues that the erotic is not specifically or conclusively sexed or gendered in his work, and this is one way in which Levinas emerges as a proto-queer thinker in her view. She revisits the possessive male gaze of 1970s feminist film theory in order to open it to a Levinasian-inspired revision. Speaking of the 'caress' of the camera, she argues that vision in the spectacles that Breillat and Denis offer is more a matter of 'making strange' than an act of recuperation into familiar structures. Such vision thereby preserves alterity.

In her article, Downing comments on how one might find parallels between the projects of filmmakers and Levinas's philosophy, rather than apply his work to film. My own article, 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', is a reading of such a parallel through the recent films of the Belgian directors Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. The Dardennes acknowledge an explicit debt to Levinas in their comments on their filmmaking. I attend to the ways in which their filming of the bodies of their characters articulates a Levinasian-inspired ethics, which is based in brute materiality, but which gives rise to a spiritual dimension beyond the material world. Luc Dardenne speaks about Levinas's conception of the human soul, which is defined in terms of an inability to kill the other, rather than the immortality of the self. The redemptive, but secular, endings of each of the four films under discussion, flesh out this point of contact with the soul and the spiritual sphere. Through this Levinasian approach, the Dardennes also suggest ways in which recent theorising about film in terms of the mind or the body might be opened to what lies beyond the thinking, embodied subject.

Sam B. Girgus's article, 'Beyond Ontology: Levinas and the Ethical Frame in Film', furthers the connection between the material and the spiritual dimensions of Levinas's work. He sets the stage for the pertinence of discussing Levinas in relation to cinema more generally, by attending to the place of the cinematic term *mise en scène* in Levinas's thought. He situates Levinas's ethics critically in relation to the philosophical and theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Paul Ricoeur, in order to reconsider questions of film narrative and cinematic time through a Levinasian lens. Through this theoretical polylogue, Girgus pinpoints the spiritual optics of Levinas's ethics, which he sees articulated most persuasively in the films belonging to the 'Cinema of Redemption' in America, which ran roughly from the 1930s through to the 1960s.

Continuing the critical link that Girgus makes to Deleuze, albeit in different terms, Simon Critchley's article, 'To be or not to be is not the question – On Beckett's *Film*', makes a detailed reading of Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965). His reading is indebted to the movement that Levinas terms evasion, or the search for non-being. Critchley's subtle Levinasian reading contrasts markedly with Deleuze's interpretation of *Film*, and locates Beckett's struggle in the all-too-human world, rather than in the world before man that Deleuze glimpses in the film. Drawing upon Beckett's literary and theatrical texts, along with his own comments on his work, Critchley sees in *Film* an ethic of courage and continuation in existence, which becomes a movement of evasion that tries to escape that existence, a movement that necessarily fails.

Critchley marks a note of caution with regard to philosophical readings of art in which *Film* would merely confirm a pre-existing philosophical grid. It is this sensitivity to how one might bring together philosophy and film that also informs Dominic Michael Rainsford's article, 'Tarkovsky and Levinas: Cuts, Mirrors, Triangulations'. Rainsford questions what it means to make a comparison between Levinasian philosophy and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. He understands both to problematise notions of identification and translation, and questions how philosophy and film might read one another, and generate something new through the encounter – a commonality in spite of their differences.

These articles have been gathered together in the hope that they will inspire and encourage further work in this area. I am indebted to Benjamin Noys whose sound judgment and efficiency made him an excellent reader of each contribution; additionally, he has provided invaluable technical assistance in preparing the text for publication. I would also like to thank Colin Davis, Daniel Frampton, David Rodowick, and Emma Wilson for their supportive comments at various stages in the development of this project.

This Special Issue is dedicated to the memory of Reni Celeste.

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