



## Painting/Cinema: A Study on Saturated Phenomena.

Review: Alain Bonfand (2007) *Le cinéma saturé: Essai sur les relations de la peinture et des images en mouvement*.  
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Alain Bonfand's new book *Le cinéma saturé. Essai sur les relations de la peinture et des images en mouvement* revives the discussion between painting and cinema in French research in Film Studies while putting it on a phenomenological ground. The pertinence of the book stems from two major concepts:

1) The rejection of any literal pictorial citation. While painting is not a simple key for interpreting cinema, the comparison of the two should reveal their respective phenomenological singularity. This position explains the 'improbable' and 'risky' links Bonfand draws between a director and a painter in the four case studies of the first part of his book: Lewin and De Chirico, Hitchcock and Hopper, Ozu and Mondrian, Ford and Clyfford Still.

2) The concept of 'saturation' which he borrows from the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Nevertheless, Bonfand pushes the notion further: in cinema, the saturated

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phenomenon becomes something which is impossible to film, something which exceeds the frame of its representation within the medium. He particularly demonstrates this point in the two chapters on the sublime in Antonioni's cinema before operating a turnaround showing that cinema, at its limit, rediscovers the essence of painting: *acheiropoietos* images in Godard's cinema, icons for Tarkovski.

Dense, erudite and sometimes even esoteric, Bonfand's book is written for the scholar rather than a more general audience. Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge the risk-taking and even the *tour de force* aspect of the book in which Bonfand ponders the relation between painting and cinema in a very new way. Finally, this work is very encouraging for further investigations of the phenomenology of film using the groundbreaking concepts of the French new wave in phenomenology.

After a rather intense period of discussing the aesthetic relationship between cinema and painting in the early nineties, French research in Film Studies has stalled.<sup>1</sup> Alain Bonfand's new and promising book, *Le cinéma saturé. Essai sur les relations de la peinture et des images en mouvement* now revives the discussion while putting it on phenomenological ground.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See among the most important: Jacques, Aumont, *L'oeil interminable. Cinéma et peinture*, Paris, Séguier, 1989; Raymond, Bellour, *Cinéma et peinture*, Paris, PUF, 1990, Raymond, Bellour, *L'entre-images. Photo, cinéma, vidéo*, Paris, La Différence, 1990; Pascal, Bonitzer, *Peinture et cinéma. Décadrages*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma/Ed de l'Etoile, 1985; *Actes du colloque Peinture et cinéma Quimper mars 87*, Quimper, Association Gros Plan, 1990; *Peinture et cinéma*, Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, 1992; *Peinture cinéma peinture*, Paris, Hazan, 1989, special issue of *Positif* (1990) nos. 353-354, « Peinture et cinéma », special issue of *Protée* 19 (1991) no. 3, « Le cinéma et les autres arts ». One has to note two other books on the subject at the end of 2007: the special issue of *Ligeia Dossiers sur l'art*, nos. 77-78-79-80, July-Dec 2007. 'Peinture et cinéma: picturalité de l'image filmée, de la toile à l'écran' and Luc, Vancheri, *Cinéma et peinture: passages, partages, présences*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007. Since these two books remain more traditional (they stay on the level of quotation) in their understanding of the relation between painting and cinema, I found more interesting to focus only on Bonfand's book.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Bonfand (1957) teaches aesthetic and art theory at the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris. He is also associate faculty in the PhD program 'Languages and Concepts' at the University Paris IV Sorbonne. Bonfand's previous books on art show various interests in the subject (painting, photo, sculpture, cinema, Asian art, comics) as well as in the form of writing (monographs, catalog of expositions and essays) while particularly focusing on a phenomenological point of view. (A compilation of articles entitled *Histoire de l'art et phénoménologie: choix de textes 1985-2005*, Paris: Vrin is forthcoming in 2008). He wrote two books on Klee and his previous book on film was an essay about Antonioni's cinema. He also published a few novels, but so far, none of his books has been translated in English.

Like the majority of the works addressing this topic, *Le cinéma saturé* first appears arbitrarily composed of autonomous case studies. Bonfand claims for that his inductive method: each study comes from an 'intuition induced from the still and moving images, and never from copying a conceptual position on these images' (9). Indeed, his essay is far from being a history or even a genealogy of painting in cinema. Rather, it follows the moving path of the 'sublation' (Bonfand uses the German term *Aufhebung*) of painting by cinema. Considering the dual connotation of the Hegelian concept (both 'to keep' and 'to cancel'), the book is structured in two main parts each going against the grain of the other, and each equally composed of four chapters. The first part, entitled 'The replacement of painting by cinema', shows how the comparison between painting and cinema reexamines crucial questions of aesthetics such as the pregnant instant and the crisis of the frame. The second part, 'A saturation of glorious signs' begins by questioning the sublime side of Antonioni's cinema before operating a turnaround showing that cinema, at its limit, rediscovers the essence of painting: acheiropoietos images in Godard's cinema, icons for Tarkovski. The sublation becomes that of cinema by itself.

Contrary to the common method of analyzing the relationship between painting and cinema, the book disclaims obvious uses of painting in cinema such as in procedures of quotations, thematic coincidences, or formal references<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, Bonfand's approach takes into account one of the main intuitions of Jacques Aumont's groundbreaking book, *L'œil interminable*: the rejection of any literal pictorial citation. Straight citation is a pitfall for cinema: 'Painting sometimes becomes in the film and even in cinema in general a regressive and often unfounded mean. It is not this pictorial presence on the surface that interests me; nothing bores me more, I believe, than citation in film' (Aumont 1989, 10). Painting is not merely a simple key for interpreting cinema. Rather, the comparison should reveal their respective heterogeneity, their phenomenological singularity. But if Aumont was committed to drawing aesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> This method of analyzing the relationship between painting and cinema is nevertheless the most prominent. Besides the two new French books cited above, one can find other examples in Angela Dalle Vacche's *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1996) which stays on the level of the strict citation. In her height study cases, she explores painting genres as keys to the interpretation of each films: sequences based on specific impressionist paintings in Minnelli's *An American in Paris*, use of collage as an iconoclastic device to challenge societal norms in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, necessity to understand Tarkovsky's *Andrei Roublev* from the Byzantine art of Icon....

similarities between visual arts within the history and mutations of visual perception, Bonfand gives greater place to risky, improbable or anachronistic links between the films and the pictorial works he chooses to bring together in the first chapters: Lewin and De Chirico, Hitchcock and Hopper, Ozu and Mondrian.

The most radical example is beyond a doubt the apparently heretical confrontation of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) with Clyfford Still's large abstract paintings. Focusing on the question of representing immensity -or how to let the un-limited and the un-filmable enter the screen beyond the frame (the dynamic dialectic between the cinematic screen and the pictorial frame being also a recurrent question in the book) precisely allows Bonfand to introduce in detail the original phenomenological concept which withstands the newness and pertinence of the book: the notion of 'saturation'.

Bonfand borrows it from the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion (one of the most important thinkers of the French *new wave* in phenomenology), as particularly developed in *In Excess: Studies on Saturated Phenomena*, 2002 (originally published as: *De surcroît. Etudes sur les phénomènes saturées*, 2001). In Marion's phenomenology of givenness, the saturated phenomenon refers to a kind of extreme phenomena which confront the perception and the condition of phenomenality to its limits. Traditionally, that is according to Kantian philosophy, in the case of poor phenomena, the quality -the intensive greatness- of the phenomenon allows the intuition to give, for each object, a degree of reality to the point that each phenomenon involves a degree of intuition which the perception can anticipate. But in the case of saturated phenomena, the intuition has no boundaries and so reaches an unlimited intensive greatness. From a certain degree of intensity, the intuition oversteps any anticipation in perception until the point where the perception can no longer anticipate what will be given within the intuition. The saturated phenomenon incarnates this overabundance of intuition above signification in the sensible experience. If the intuition is overstepped, it entails then the dismissal of intentionality and the impossibility of definite conceptualization. However, because the unlimited intensity of intuition overwhelms the anticipation of perception there is a loss in the degree of intensity. From being blind in poor phenomena, the intuition becomes blinding ('aveuglante') and entails an opaque and silent revelation since the phenomenon becomes overexposed, that is invisible, not by lack of light but by excess: 'It concerns a

visible which our sight can not bear; this visible is unbearable to the sight because it presses too hard on it; the glory of the visible weighs and weighs too much. What weighs is neither the hardship, nor the sadness nor the lack, but the glory, the happiness, the excess' (Marion 1992, quoted here p. 201). The aesthetic experience is then fully illustrative of saturated phenomena.

Nevertheless, if Marion limits the notion to a dazzling sight, Bonfand pushes the thought further: in cinema, the saturated phenomenon becomes something which is impossible to film, something which literally overflows the frame (the screen) of its representation and actualization within the medium. Immensity is fully a saturated phenomenon. Just as Still points to immensity by over-sizing the frame until denying it and letting the plain colours emerge from black scraps which withdraw from the borders, Bonfand shows how Ford points to immensity by using a frame inside the screen as a way to let the off-screen space enter the cinematic frame. For example, Ford shoots most of the landscapes from a cave which creates a random black frame that overflows the true frame from the inside. This paradoxical apparatus in framing becomes the condition for the frame to hold and keep what exceeds it: to reveal an out-of-frame phenomenon too big to be contained.

If the saturated phenomenon encompasses excessive phenomena, it can also account for extremely empty and poor phenomena. This process of inversion and turnaround between two extremes in perception is certainly due to the 'negative' qualities of Marion's philosophy and of the French phenomenological new wave in general<sup>4</sup>. Poor phenomena become saturated into an equilibrium system between the empty and the full, the excess and the lack. If Bonfand underscores this particular process of phenomenological reduction in his chapter on Ozu and Mondrian, this turn-around is also the keystone of the two long essays on Antonioni (almost half of the book). Paradoxically, these chapters have a looser relation with painting which plays more as a general background. If Bonfand discovers pictorial references in Antonioni's cinema as

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<sup>4</sup> There is a 'negative phenomenology' like there is a 'negative theology'. The new French phenomenology gives high value to 'privative' concepts such as the in-visible, im-possible and in-finite, as well as uses the thought of negative-theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. This positioning is certainly the main rupture in regards to the phenomenological tradition as developed from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. It is also the crux of the philosophical debate in order to know if this reversal in phenomenology still belongs to phenomenology or if the phenomena discussed are no longer properly 'phenomenological'.

heterogeneous as Friedrich, Pollock, Klee, De Chirico, the New Realists or Mario Sironi, it is due to the fact that painting acts for Antonioni as the lever of the phenomenological reduction: 'Antonioni searches in painting what in it can show the invisible; painting is alternately a magnifying glass, a microscope, a telescope, the figure in the carpet of the visible, the requirement of its appearing, the phenomenological click' (131).

The first essay shows that this reference to painting allows the filmmaker to entail a process of reduction that points to a particular kind of sublime: a sublime of what is immobile, fallen, routed and diseased, a sublime made of what frightens. By filming ordinary and therefore invisible objects, by literally 'emptying' the image the camera performs a phenomenological reduction which suspends the intentionality in the constitution of the object. The anguish of banality is the sublime that crosses Antonioni's cinema: the poor phenomenon becomes saturated. This is how Bonfand explains the well-known final scene of *Eclipse* (*L'Eclisse*, 1962). The final step of this process of reduction of the banal world seized by anguish is a radical blindness owing to too much light as in the very last shot on the street lamp. The second essay follows the path of the relation between saturation and emptiness by making an inventory of saturated motifs: the sky, the explosion as well as different forms of vacuum: the wandering, neutralization of the place, anonymity of the subject, emptiness of the space, inform, anguish, breakdown, instability, boredom, indifference... Bonfand shows that in Antonioni's cinema the vacuum works as an autonomous and omnipresent force which disintegrates the system of representation of the films until saturating the image in return. Antonioni invents a phenomenality of emptiness that becomes a true saturated phenomenon.

Nevertheless, these chapters are probably the weakest part of the book. While Bonfand demonstrates impressive and detailed knowledge of Antonioni's work and embraces it as a whole in order to show its coherence and evolution, the relation to painting is often too slack and the essays lack structure. Likewise, Bonfand's arguments are less innovative here than in the rest of the book since most of the 'negative' topics he values in Antonioni's cinema have already been deeply discussed in former works, even if he does not bother to quote them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Among the most recent one can cite: José, Moure, *Michelangelo Antonioni: cineaste de l'évidement*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001; Scemama-Heard, Céline, *Antonioni: le desert figuré*, Paris, L'Harmattan,

In contrast, the final essay certainly carries the most interesting and audacious research of the book. There Bonfand reaches the deepest confrontation between cinema and painting by discussing the limits of their relation: when cinema, looking for its true essence, rediscovers at the same time the origins of painting and so is aimed to produce images 'not made by the hand of man': *acheiropoietos* images. As one may well know, the notion of the *acheiropoietos* image comes from the Christian iconographic tradition and counts three main images of Christ's Face: the Mandyion of Edessa, the Shroud of Turin, and Véronique's Veil. These are 'miraculous' images produced not by pictorial imitation, but by contact, by a direct imprint. They are indexes of the Face on the cloth which play the role of original and unsurpassable models for representing Christ's Face, for the most part in the art of icons.

According to Bonfand, it is this principle of imprint which drives a large part of Godard's system of representation, particularly in the intuitive and memory-based principle which leads the heterogeneity of his juxtapositions and collages of images starting from *Pierrot le fou* (1965). He demonstrates that Godard considers the canvas of the cinematic screen as 'a sensible surface, a supporting beam in which something imprints itself [...]' (222). This inclination opens on a theory of cinema which goes back to the *arche* of representation, to the *acheiropoietos* image which perfectly fits the cinematic apparatus itself. A scene in *Histoire(s) du cinéma: Une vague nouvelle* (1998) particularly reveals for Bonfand this theoretic shift in Godard's system of representation: when a white moving cloth wipes, by superposition, a few faces (including the faces of musician angels), as if it was trying to take their imprint. In this scene (which Bonfand names 'the little mandyion's scene') Godard obviously makes a reference to a similar scene in *Passion* (1982) (the reconstitution of the Greco's *Assumption*) and asserts 'the passage from an aesthetic of representation and mimesis to another, this one closer to the essence of cinema, an aesthetic ruled by the power of the *acheiropoietos* images' (224). The white cloth becomes the cinematic screen which both confronts and aids the painting, making it visible while erasing it. This scene in which Godard goes the deepest in his theory of cinema also shows a true *mise en abyme* of painting by cinema. Godard replaces the pictorial logic of imitation and perspective which still prevailed in *Passion* with the

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1998; as well as Bonfand's own and first book about cinema: *Le cinéma de Michelangelo Antonioni*, Paris, Images Modernes, 2003.

cinematic logic of the index and, by doing so, emancipates cinema from painting while going back to its very roots.

If acheiropoietos images are for Godard the ultimate aesthetic and conceptual model for his cinema, Tarkovsky's reference to icons remains unexplained. Nevertheless, Bonfand dares to write that 'Tarkovsky's films are for cinema in general what the icons are for painting' (239). It is not with filming real icons (*Andrei Rublev*, 1969) that Tarkovsky expresses the iconic value of his work, but rather from that moment on, in the cinematic construction of the shots themselves. Tarkovsky builds his shots like icons as Bonfand's detailed analysis of the antepenultimate shot of the Zone's part in *Stalker* (1979) shows us. He demonstrates how the technical elaboration of the shot, by the effects of color and light, - their superimposition as layers until the frame becomes saturated - exactly reproduces the genesis and the technical process of making an icon. More precisely, he insists on the fundamental role of the sudden appearance of the rain that literally 'irradiates' the frame with an inexplicable but vibrating light. The rain becomes a 'golden rain', similar to the golden background of the icons, and transcends the cinematic image until a real transfiguration arises. Tarkovsky's cinematic gesture in this shot is then similar to the one of religious painters. But Tarkovsky creates a specific cinematic icon since the icon appears within a temporality. The creation of the icon, its appearance within the shot, coincides with the time of the vision. By doing so, Tarkovsky reaches the essence of the phenomenology of the image: the image *is* ontologically only as it *appears*. The shot becomes an icon which goes beyond aesthetic, or rather toward an aesthetic linked with a transcendental. Tarkovsky makes his shots as one prays, as an act of faith, as Bonfand writes in one of the most subjectively engaged and lyrical parts of the book.

Bonfand's style takes full advantage of the freedom allowed by the essay form. In the first place, Bonfand's use of bibliographical materials follows a strict *parti-pris*. While he gives great importance to the filmmakers, or painters, own words, often quoting interviews or autobiographies and excavates and values non-produced film scenarios (in the two chapters on Antonioni), he does not waste time nor room by quoting existing books on the subjects he approaches. This orientation is sometimes embarrassing and weakens the intellectual honesty of the book as a whole. The style of writing itself is also rather poetic, convoluted, erudite, and sometimes even esoteric, using rather complex



terminology for both the aesthetical and philosophical concepts he invokes. His manner of multiplying references from various fields and sources, as well as beating around an idea little by little without a clear structure obviously shows a wide culture, but which sometimes blurs the main intention of the argument. The author's lack of clarity combined with the fact that the book contains no illustrations, makes it such that the reading requires a well-grounded previous knowledge of both the films and the paintings analyzed. This general orientation conveys the feeling that Bonfand is writing for a narrow audience of colleagues, rather than for the neophyte. While the scholar, or even better the *amateur éclairé* will surely find true delights in the book, one cannot help but think that Bonfand could (should) have made his book more accessible for the common reader.

Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that Bonfand's book takes risks, and can even be called a theoretical *tour de force*. By rejecting citation and confronting painting and cinema according to their 'phenomenologicality', Bonfand truly ponders the relation between painting and cinema beyond the box, even though the correlation between the two may sometimes seem too loose in a couple of chapters. Additionally, the different essays remain too randomly juxtaposed, which deprives the book from having a solid structure and argument. Finally, this work is above all very engaging and encouraging for further investigations of the phenomenology of film using the groundbreaking concepts of the French new wave in phenomenology, which promises an interesting future in exploring visual experience in cinema.

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