
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Mapping Film Studies
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Dominique Chateau (2005) *Cinéma et philosophie*

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The title of Chateau's book sounds more essentialist than it is actually meant to be. Most readers might expect systematic research into at least one of two questions: 1. what is philosophical in film? and 2. what is cinematic in philosophy? The purpose of Chateau's book is not really to seriously engage in these questions but rather to enumerate the numerous encounters that have taken place between cinema and philosophy. In the introduction Chateau writes that he wants to 'review the encounters between the totality of phenomena covering the notion of cinema and the philosophical point of view' (5). He explains that 'as soon as one searches a little from 1970 onwards, one becomes aware that more or less serious, more or less direct, more or less voluntary scientific expeditions into the philosophy of cinema are abundant' (6). True, it is impossible to systematize *all* of these expeditions. For this reason a selection inspired by a certain theme would have been useful or even indispensable.

The book is encyclopaedic in scope and does not pretend to be a philosophical study of cinema. It had first been published in 2003 by Nathan, which is a publisher specializing in education books and textbooks. Chateau mentions almost everything that has ever been said about film in connection with philosophy or about philosophy in connection with film. The information is provided through summaries of the most important film theories, film reviews, extracts from books, and quotations

from filmmakers and journalists. Therefore, a better title for this book would perhaps have been *An Introduction to Film Theory*. The impressive point about the book is that the author does not seem to have forgotten anything. At the same time, this is the book's main problem. I do not suggest that Chateau is trying to do too many things at a time; it is rather that he does not try to do anything thoroughly enough – he is just talking about too many things.

Chateau seems to feel most at home in phenomenology and everything related to Bazin, Ayfre and Astruc as well as Bergson/Deleuze. Bergson is singled out as the only philosopher who has adopted 'film' as a model (7) though he did so not in order to honor cinema but in order to *use* it for philosophy (8). Of course, for a book entitled *Cinema and Philosophy*, lots of other fields needed to be covered: analytical philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics, cognitive science, gender studies, and cultural studies. Chateau has done his homework and is knowledgeable in everything. The problem is that things become necessarily too superficial up to the point that one has to raise the question what function such a book could have in the academic world? It might be a bold statement of mine but I believe that philosophers working on film do not *need* to know so many things. They are more likely to develop rigorous and systematic reflections on one topic or the other. The book can be useful for undergraduates in film-studies who need a map showing all areas of the humanities where film has inspired intellectual reflections. But even those undergraduates might prefer more 'punctual' advice.

The preponderant obligation to embrace 'everything' that has ever been said about film in connection with abstract thought makes the structure of the book unclear. Though it is understandable that Chateau felt obliged to add topics that are usually listed as 'theory' and not as philosophy, the final outcome looks more like a patchwork of theories lacking a dialectical structure, a hypothesis, or a synthesis of something that could have been pointed out as essential (the 'big questions'). One way to elude this problem could have been not to take 'the philosophical point of view' for granted but to provide first a definition of 'philosophy', that is, to say what 'the philosophical' really means, and to subsequently reflect the gained insights against film and film theory. This would have restricted the frame of the book to 'philosophy' (as the title announces); sometimes it might be better to accept limits even when they appear conventional. Of course, Chateau himself is aware of this problem and admits that 'the idea of philosophy implicated in such a kind of case remains vague, but threatens to become even more vague if one admits that any film, even those that do not bear the slightest intellectual intention, suggest a

Weltanschauung' (19).

In the course of the book Chateau introduces the thoughts of Astruc, Valéry, Benjamin, Bergson, Münsterberg, Merleau-Ponty, Eisenstein, Della Volpe, Cohen-Seat, Epstein, Bazin, Mitry, Cavell, Duhamel, Schefer, and Deleuze, and mentions those of many others. The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is on how philosophy has been filmed (Eisenstein filming *Das Kapital*, for example). The second and third chapters are based on the distinction between the '*filmique*' and the '*cinématographique*' respectively, a distinction that has been introduced by Gilbert Cohen-Séat in 1946 (Cohen-Séat, 1958). We have to thank Chateau for drawing our attention to this theme that has been left largely unconsidered by theorists. According to Cohen-Séat, '*filmique*' relates to the expression of 'the life of the world or of spirit, of imagination or beings and things through a determined system of combined images' (1958: 30), whereas '*cinématographique*' relates to the circulation of documents, of sensations, ideas, sentiments, and material offered by life and put into form by film. Cohen-Séat's idea is compelling, but I have doubts if Chateau's attribution of film theories to either the one or the other category really makes sense. In the category '*cinematographic*' he includes, for example, Plato, Valery, and Benjamin; under '*filmique*' he includes Bergson, Münsterberg, Eisenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Della Volpe. All this sounds fascinating as a project, but in the book it is not developed in a 'philosophical' manner. Instead it is compressed into summaries and allusive remarks. For example, chapters 2 and 3 together are only sixty-three pages long; this is not long enough to divide such a huge amount of film theory into two essential halves. Almost everything here is dealt with too quickly. A potentially interesting comparison of Metz and Georges Duhamel (37), for example, provides almost no insight at all because it is hurriedly stuffed into one paragraph.

Of course, in principle, Chateau does not pretend to write a philosophical book. He does not want to *establish* facts but just wants to *introduce* them. However, sometimes the intellectualist manner of evoking a large range of cultural items becomes pretentious, as when he writes: 'For what concerns cinema in its strictest sense, there is about the same difference between Bergson and Lindsay as between Diderot the philosopher and writer of the encyclopaedia article on 'The Beautiful' and the Diderot of the '*chronique des Salons de peinture*' (59-60). Or when he writes on Münsterberg: 'We can understand that he could believe that, once the feature film was born, the technical potential of film was definitively established; a little like Kant considered at his time logic to be 'achieved and finished' (62). The pages on Marx, Hegel, Marcuse and Eisenstein are quasi-incomprehensible (around 67) and a

potentially very interesting parallel between Bazin and Agamben is mentioned in only one sentence (88).

Chateau's best idea has probably been to call to mind the Italian philosopher Galvano Della Volpe, who published in 1954 a book called *Il verosimile filmico e altri scritti di estetica*. Della Volpe remains almost unknown outside Italy although Francesco Casetti, in his *Les Théories du cinéma depuis 1945* (Italian 1993; French 1999), devoted a chapter to him (in general, in *Cinéma et philosophie*, Chateau draws very much on Casetti's book). Della Volpe, who was influenced by Croce (though he simultaneously rejected a large part of Croce's romanticist aesthetics), developed interesting thoughts concerning the rationality of the image. One of his main projects is that of a 'scientific aesthetics'. Rejecting Croce's intuitionist idea of the 'unspeakable' (ineffable), Della Volpe turns to Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Film Technique and Film Acting* and defines the character of the cinematic image as 'constituted by determined forms and ideas' (Della Volpe *Il verosimile...*, 47-48, Château, 73). As 'forms and ideas', the image is communicated as a 'discourse of intelligence' which enables us to crystallize a certain *rationality* in film in the sense of something *conceptual*.

The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to the 'philosophical experience of cinema' and presents the theories of Cavell, Schefer, and Deleuze, devoting five to six pages to each thinker. The presentation of Cavell is neutral, clear and useful for a French public that is not yet very much acquainted with Cavell's thought. The discussion of Deleuze is sophisticated and nuanced. Finally, on page 111, with Chapter 5, called 'Cinema Challenged by Great Philosophical Tendencies' the reader might suppose to have arrived at what looks like a systematic reflection on the question 'what is philosophical about film?'. This, however, is not the case. First we are offered more summaries of Merleau-Ponty, Ayfre, Bazin, and Deleuze. Then come some brief discussions about the philosophy of deconstruction, analytical philosophy, semiology, cognitive science, gender studies, and cultural studies, plus an apparently quickly added part on 'the challenge of the humanities'. I would hold that the sub-chapter on semiotics scans the topic much too quickly though the sub-chapter on deconstruction is the most disappointing one. It mainly reinstates arguments that are taken from two books on cinema and deconstruction by Marie-Claire Ropars (1981, 1990).

The final chapter on 'Aesthetics' discusses very fundamental problems, each within the space of some pages. Knowledge about analytical aesthetics comes from one of the few French books that treat this subject (from a 1988 reader on analytical

philosophy and aesthetics (see Lories, 1988)). One of the most general elaborations is extracted from this book when Chateau writes: 'If one admits that our attitude determines our way of seeing the world, which attitude does aesthetics have?' (172) It goes without saying that this question cannot be answered within the limits of such a sub-sub-chapter. I suppose that Chateau just wanted to show us that this question exists. The chapter continues in this style. Jauss, Roger de Piles and Nietzsche are mentioned in one single sentence (and in the next sentence he mentions Schefer, Donald Duck, and Adorno) (174).

The author has certainly succeeded in drawing a map of cinema theories that leaves almost no blank spaces. On the other hand, we all knew already more or less what such a map looks like. In the end, we have not gained essential insights into the particular continents and countries but the author has simply shown us that these continents, oceans, and countries exist. Some sub-chapters are good, some paragraphs are interesting; one also has to recognize the considerable amount of work that went into this book. However, as suspected, the idea to list all contacts that have ever existed between philosophy and film turns out to be insufficient in terms of a 'plotline' – even for a theoretical book. Had the book been conceived as an encyclopaedia of film theory, it would have had a more obvious function as a guide for students and also researchers. In that case, however, some of the most imprecise philosophical verbiage would have to go.

Bibliography

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