

## Introduction

### What Can Cinema Do?

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ONE WAY A BOOK of philosophical essays on film might begin is with an attempt to justify bringing philosophy and cinema together. Something could be made of the fact that the two share a constitutive and ambiguous relation to the past. The reality now projected on the screen, before which the present of its technological projection effaces itself, is no longer real. And by arriving after the event, as Hegel intimates in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, thinking opens up the difference from actuality in which it can lay claim to being the truth of what is.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the physical exertions, managerial vigilance, and, for want of a nicer if not better term, power politics that are seemingly prerequisites of the cinematic profession, the filmmaker is the contemplative among the artists. The specificity of the cinematic art is the passivity of the technological apparatus of reproduction before a given scene: to put it a little too pompously but not, for that matter, inaccurately, cinema is the contemplative eye of the storm of the technological manipulation of beings. The myth common to philosophy and cinema is that they acquiesce in front of the spectacle of what is. This myth does not so much inform philosophy's title to truth as ground the very understanding of truth. Cinema, which to begin with could not be acknowledged as art by the terms of late nineteenth-century aesthetics because a realistic art is an oxymoron, perhaps should not have found a place so quickly among the traditional arts. This is not to suggest that cinema should have been assimilated to philosophy; an analogy, and nothing further, exists between the disingenuousness with which Hegel writes of philosophy's resignation with respect to actuality and the

alleged passivity of the cinematic reproduction of phenomena. But it is to suggest that there is something peculiar about cinema. It is more realistic than the arts, but because it lacks their comparative self-subsistence, because its realism consists in pointing to what is no longer, in even being what is no longer, it is also less real, less actual.

Another way a book of philosophical essays on film might begin is with a statement of the irreconcilability of cinema and metaphysics. In the brute positivity of its reproductions of what is, cinema remains immersed in the singularity of phenomena and forgoes a claim to the universality in which metaphysical knowledge has its element. Even when cinema falters before the singular, it aligns itself with the cliché rather than the concept. If Hitchcock is a great director, if his recognition as an artist of genius was long resisted, it is arguably because his domain is the specifically cinematic space of nonideal, animistic, and conspiratorial singular objects. Cinema's gift for horror lies in its passivity and its attendant, paradoxically technological, invention of the experience of the pretechnological exposure to the tyranny of things. But the singularities with which cinema is populated can also be the occasion for a declaration of faith in the world: this is something that unites Cavell's and Deleuze's texts on film, just as it is something that could only properly be borne out by a profusion of at once exacting and eccentric observations (another shared feature of their texts). Cinema, whose passivity before what is slips all too easily over into a cynical complacency in the face of clichés, can by its receptiveness to the unassimilable recall metaphysics to its foundation in wonder.

Each of the essays in this collection addresses a single director from what, very broadly understood, may be called the New Cinema. Defined in purely historical terms, the New Cinema names the resurgence of various national film industries after the devastation wrought by World War II and the commercial dominance of the American sound film. But the Italian neorealism of the 1940s and 1950s, the French *nouvelle vague* (new wave) of the 1960s, the *Neuer Deutscher Film* (new German cinema) of the 1970s, along with other national and international styles and movements, resemble one another in more than their historical conditions. As the newness of the New Cinema is inextricable from a renewal of the very question of cinema, from a search for ways to open up the medium, it is one-sided to define the movement by its works rather than by its principle of an interrogation and rejection of the habits of cinema. If a case can be made for including *Psycho* and *The Birds*, it is because these films take

advantage of the cracks in the crumbling studio system against which the New Cinema was a reaction. The big-budget B-grade movies that in the 1970s restored Hollywood's fortunes were not committed to Hitchcock's insight into the horror of the everyday but sought in the supernatural and the extraterrestrial new resources for illusionist cinema. And the recent work of Claire Denis, the last director covered here, inasmuch as it eschews the marketable conventions of Hollywood and its foreign aspirants, as well as the hermetism of so-called experimental film, participates in the New Cinema's desire to extricate a medium of mass appeal from the clutches of cliché.

The philosophical interest of the New Cinema is its simultaneously material and political interest. Siegfried Kracauer clarifies this conjunction of the material and the political when he sets out the dilemma by whose refusal the New Cinema might be defined: "Average theatrical films and certain high-level avant-garde films must be lumped together in spite of all that separates them. Films of this kind exploit, not explore, the material phenomena they insert; they insert them not in their own interest but for the purpose of establishing a significant whole; and in pointing up some such whole, they refer us from the material dimension back to that of ideology."<sup>2</sup> Kracauer regrets these two paths of cinema because they betray cinema's specific innovation of a passivity before phenomena.<sup>3</sup> What the New Cinema advances against ideology, in the wake of fascism and Stalinism, in the context of Algeria, Vietnam, and military dictatorships in Latin America and elsewhere, is the *longueur*. To the extent that boredom breaks open the ideological whole, it is an avatar of the wonder of the Greeks (the decadence with which Heidegger, Duchamp, and Beckett, for instance, espouse boredom is also their originality). What is at stake is the proximity of the New Cinema to philosophy and the redefinition of art, politics, and their relationship that is the corollary of this proximity. The generality of such a statement, offered as it is in the introduction to an anthology, is not so much the articulation of the program of the collection as its problem: the point of indifference that an introduction might extract from the individual contributions is either so general as to be indifferent in the bad sense or at risk of being taken for true on no better grounds than consensus. It is not an issue of posing *the* question of cinema but of searching for new ways to pursue the debate around the phenomenon.

As each essay in this collection revolves around the work of a single director, it might appear that a decision on the nature of the phenomenon

of cinema has been presupposed. Is it not the case that even if one bears in mind that the proper name of a director denotes a constellation of collaborators, rather than a lone individual given over to the expression of his or her personal artistic vision, the specificity that Kracauer ascribes to cinema on the basis of its engagement with the material dimension has been exchanged for the understanding of the arts in general as the stamping of material with an overarching message (the message of the collaborators)? This question, however, is a little unfair. The cinematic proper name invariably escapes the interiority of an individual or a collective to invoke the historical and perceptual thickness of a given place: it becomes a path into that very concreteness of the cinematic image that remains unattainable for a general discussion of cinema.

In another sense, however, as Walter Benjamin contends in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility" (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*), cinema amounts to a break with the concrete: the here and now of the work of art, as constitutive of its "aura," yield to the nondeterminant locality and temporality of the multiple copies of a film. Whatever pretensions Kracauer may put forward in the name of the superior material engagement of cinema have to be set against the dissolution of the material singularity of the cinematic work itself. Reproductions of a work of the visual arts testify, as copies, to the privileged here and now of the original, whereas the performances of a theatrical text or a musical score, inasmuch as they first endow their sources with the singularity of a here and now, are their realization more than their reproduction. In cinema there is no such relation between original and copy. Benjamin, who wishes to ascribe a revolutionary potential to simulacra, writes off the here and now of the work of art as vestiges of the cult object. But in this regard Benjamin's Marxism remains too metaphysical. Political activism, which is by necessity a confrontation with, as well as enactment of, the here and now, cannot be given its due in an account that defines *authenticity* (*aura*) by the here and now and undertakes its liquidation.

The political hopes that Benjamin was not alone in placing in the "democratic" medium of cinema appear ill-founded so far as the disavowal of the here and now of the public at a given screening is concerned. By virtue of the possibility/ threat/ prohibition of participation, the one-off aesthetic space of a theatrical performance is much closer in nature to the volatile political space of a party meeting or mass rally than the lightless,

abstract realm where individuals gather for the private consumption of the interchangeable commodity of a film. The cinema presents its audience with a *fait accompli*. What is shown is already past, and although it opens itself up to the populations of the world through distribution and low entry prices, the cinema excludes its public by means of the fatalism with which a film plays itself out in being screened (even if audience members stop the projection, they are too late to influence the film). In the epilogue to his text Benjamin warns that fascism is turning politics into a theatrical performance.<sup>4</sup> Yet were one to base one's judgment solely—and with no doubt an inexcusable degree of historical irresponsibility, but here that is not to the point—on their structural similarities, one might await a reconversion of the theatrical into the political. From this perspective Cavell's diagnosis of the politics of cinema in *The World Viewed* seems much more desperate. The past that film restores to us is not myth (the continuity of culture and the vitality of traditions) but the raw fact of a here and now from which we are excluded:

On film, the past which is present is pastness or presentness itself, time itself, visually preserved in endless repetition, an eternal return, but thereby removed from the power to preserve us; in particular, powerless to bring us together. The myth of movies replaces the myth according to which obedience to law, being obedience to laws I have consented to and thus established, is obedience to the best of myself, hence constitutes my freedom—the myth of democracy. In replacing this myth, it suggests that democracy itself, the sacred image of secular politics, is unliveable.<sup>5</sup>

Film is illusionist not simply in certain of its themes; it is in itself an opiate because it gives us a here and now in which we cannot do anything.

It is specifically as cinema that cinema intervenes against the myth of the accommodating openness of democracy. A greater danger to democratic openness lies in this specificity than in what may have seemed to favor early conceptions of cinema as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Each component that is brought into play in the significant whole of a Wagnerian opera is an art. In cinema, however, the passivity of the recording apparatus is a mechanical intruder on the literary, musical, histrionic, and other artistic components. Given the disparity between its artistic and mechanical constituents, film may attain a degree of internal dissent incompatible with the notion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But this dissent, as much as it works against the totalizing procedures of ideology that Kracauer deplors, does not suffice to establish cinema's democratic credentials. Cinema effects its

own kind of closure: in place of the closed world of ideology, it presents the closed world of the past. That the means of playing audiovisual material can be employed to show, rather than what was, that which is occurring simultaneously—as in the case of live feeds on the Internet or the now customary giant screens that magnify the proceedings at a concert or political rally—is an argument not so much against defining cinema by a relation to the past as for excluding such uses from the class of phenomena to be discussed. Where recordings survive their immediate relay, their subsequent appearance in television schedules and screening programs, alongside what has come to be known as cinema, reconfigures their content as what is past.

Cinema is not incidentally but essentially a mass medium. It creates a mass mentality as much as it caters to it. Claiming that the presence of the actors in a theater stands in the way of the oneiric stupor in which a film screening takes its course, André Bazin ascribes to theater an insistence on an “active individual consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> Even if this insistence is intellectual in what it demands of the audience, it is grounded in the lived experience of a body among bodies. Cinema may appeal to what are called the lowest instincts, but the circumstances of its reception, when contrasted with the shared physical space of a theatrical performance, are further removed from the pheromone-filled air of prehistoric life on the savannah. Cinema cheats itself and its audience of an engagement with the present insofar as its technological means of recording what is can only put forward reproductions of what is past. The price of the realism of its reproduction is an unreality in the circumstances of its reception. The realism that is the automatic achievement of the technology of cinema reformulates rather than solves the problem in the visual arts of the relation to what is: its deviations in the representation of what is have to do not with fantasy and inaccuracy but with pastness. Technological proficiency in the replication of phenomena is the starting point of cinema, whereas in the visual arts it is a goal. As this technological proficiency does not allow itself to be appropriated by the individual filmmaker, the exhaustiveness of its reality can however be called into question. The supplementary reality that is not a technological given in the reception of cinema (precisely because of the technological nature of this reception) is also not an achievement of the mimetic technique (or naturalist commitments) of the individual filmmaker. It is the reality that certain politicized filmmakers in the New Cinema will conceive as the outcome

of breaking the technological spell in which the masses are held—cinema is to leap out of the hermetically sealed abstract space of its reception into the here and now of the political.

The struggle against the intrinsic unreality of cinema is invariably tied up with the struggle against the illusionism that is the prevailing possibility of film, in other words, with the struggle against Hollywood. Campaigns in defense of small national film industries often claim too much and too little politically for local productions, since substituting familiar accents, scenery, and so forth is incapable of annulling the cinemagoer's entrenched alienation, just as framing the debate around the notion of "cultural products" needlessly preempts the decision regarding the relation of these works to the (other) arts, the political, and truth. The extraordinary appeal of cinematic illusionism is due, not in small part, to the plausibility that the cinema's technological exactitude of reproduction lends to the fantastic: the cinema offers not so much fantasies as documents of fantasies. The truthfulness of cinema, its forensic admissibility (Hitchcock's films, for instance, are films of information), distinguishes it from a cultural product (nonetheless, this distinction, never absolute, is in the process of being corroded by the incursion of computer-generated images). Hence what the flourishing of national film industries in the 1960s and 1970s could set forth in self-defense was, above and beyond an upsurge of non-American perspectives, the works' truthfulness.

Yet the culturally and regionally specific truthfulness of what the image presents is rarely in accord with its conditions of possibility in the imported technology. In this way, as well, realism in cinema is both a given and a problem. Illusionist cinema, which could long be recognized by its disavowal of the problem, has of late applied itself, by means of a saturation with special effects, to erasing realism even as a given of the cinematic image. Such films stage the bankruptcy of the skeptical tradition of Anglo-Saxon culture. It is the essential absurdity of abusing film to advance the thesis of the unknowability of reality that makes *The Truman Show*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix* suffocating exercises. The New Cinema's suspicion of the image is taken up, but its "exaggeration" to the point of a hackneyed metaphysical position amounts to the vitiation of the properly political critique of illusionism. As in the days when Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, crisscrossed the world bullying heads of state into rescinding support for local film industries, illusionist cinema knows when to put aside its doubts concerning its relation

to reality and to pursue a policy of formidable pragmatism and opportunism, securing and increasing its lion's share of the global market.

Cinema, which was seen to situate itself on the threshold between art and reality, between the expressiveness of manipulated material and the impassivity of bare fact, is prone to an alienation from the here and now, to a hermetism from which traditional works of art are exempt. Cinema is life itself and an unprecedented parody of life. To be sure, the life that the projector brings to the lifeless photographic stills of which a film is composed requires the participation of its immediate audience, since the cinematic golem of movement owes its appearance of animation to the memory traces in the perceptual apparatus of those viewing it. The specificity of cinema is nothing technological: cinema differentiates itself from photography by a negation of the individual frames that are the sum of its actuality, coming into its difference from photography between the frames, in the caesura where its nonmaterial essence colludes with the synthetic prejudices of human perception. The romanticism of cinema is this setting to work of what is not there. In this respect at least, cinema precludes totalization, since it comes about less by putting images together than by preserving the intervals that hold images apart. A film does not begin and end as cinema but rather as photography: the film is reclaimed by the still in the same way that poetry yields to prose after the final enjambment. But the aesthetic engagement whereby cinema comes into its element in the immediacy of an audience's sensory processes does not resolve the ambiguity in which cinema is at once life and a parody of life because the mere immediacy of life is a shadow of life. Ontologically, the essence of cinema belongs more to the transcendental structures of experience than to the phenomenal realm, yet this intimacy that characterizes our relation to cinema goes hand in hand with the disengagement that marks our reception of the interchangeable copies of a film.

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Whatever negative appraisal might be made of cinema through comparing it with the traditional arts is risible in the face of the contemporary pervasiveness of film: the judgment's pretensions to critical negativity dissolve into nostalgia. It is not just that cinema now has a one-hundred-year history; the history of the last one hundred years has itself become cinematic for us—the nature of the technology of film in a given period reaches into the period to define it for us and to date it so that



our sense of the historical continuum of events is inextricable from our understanding of the developments in the technology with which those events were filmed. But if cinema cannot be dislodged by criticism, it can at least be better understood. This involves, in part, thinking through the way in which the sense of the here and the now of the political has been irrevocably transformed by cinema. Cinema was always destined to leave the planet, to rediscover Earth as the reality of the miraculous. Since everything has been reinscribed on the shed skin of light that may or may not be spooled on a reel of film, the question of cinema can no longer be posed from outside of cinema. There is no authoritative vantage ground from which a normative judgment could be passed concerning cinema as such. The question, because it now belongs to cinema, asks, "What can cinema do?"