

Sartre and Deleuze via Bergson

Sartre Anticipates Deleuze: The Cinema, a “Bergsonian Art”

“Together we would like to be the Humpty-Dumpty of philosophy, or its Laurel and Hardy. A philosophy-cinema.”¹ Thus writes Deleuze, referring to himself and to Félix Guattari, in his “Note to the Italian Edition of *The Logic of Sense*,” published in 1974. This sentence seems to echo the passage by which, six years earlier, he had finished the Preface to *Difference and Repetition*: “The time is coming when it will hardly be possible to write a book of philosophy as it has been done for so long: ‘Ah! The old style . . .’ The search for a new means of philosophical expression was begun by Nietzsche and must be pursued today in relation to the renewal of certain other arts, such as the theatre or the cinema.”² In short, Deleuze found that the novelty of cinema implied a renewal of the philosophical questions concerning not only our relationships to ourselves, to the others, to the things, and to the world, but also—and inevitably—concerning philosophy itself: that is, concerning its expressive style and, hence, the very style of its own thinking. Indeed, the question of the “philosophy-cinema” does not belong to a single thinker. Rather, it involves a whole *epoch*, as the Preface to *Difference and Repetition* suggested. In this sense, it is a question regarding thinking itself. As such—that is to say, precisely as it concerns a whole epoch—it is not surprising to see it emerge, every now and then, all through that epoch. Actually, also Jean-Paul Sartre, in a posthumously published writing, seems to have come across this question—with the imprudence of his (then) twenties. Apparently, such writing dates back to his last *khâgne*³ trimester (1924) or to his first year at the École Normale Supérieure (1924–25);

in any case, well before his first approach to phenomenology, which was to occur about ten years later. The writing's title is "Apologie pour le cinéma. Défense et illustration d'un Art international [Apology for the Cinema. Defense and Illustration of an International Art]."⁴

The starting point Sartre chose for this writing is what his former philosophy teacher and one of the time's most influential "masters of thinking"—namely, Emile-Auguste Chartier, better known as Alain—maintained in one of his own 1923 *Propos sur l'esthétique* (Thoughts on Aesthetics), significantly titled "L'immobile [Immobility]."

This is how Alain started: "Art expresses human power through immobility. There is no better sign of a soul's strength than immobility, since the thinking is recognizable in it."⁵ He concluded by affirming that "the art of the screen provides an *a contrario* evidence"⁶ of this artistic research of immobility, "without even looking for it; for the perpetual movement is the very law of films, not only because speech is lacking completely—and it becomes clear that to be mute from birth does not mean to keep silent—but most of all because the actor feels obliged to be restless, as if to pay homage to the mechanical invention."⁷

In short, this is roughly the syllogism proposed by Alain: if all art is a "search of immobility in movement,"⁸ and if—as we just read—"the perpetual movement is the very law of films," then "the art of the screen" is not an actual art.

The young Sartre highlights that he traces in Alain's question "the elements [of a problem] that is far more important than the sterile discussions of someone like Winckelmann: does [beauty consist] in immobility or rather in change?"⁹ Indeed, for Sartre, the most important problem is raised by the passage in which we heard Alain affirm that *thinking is recognizable in immobility*. In reconsidering this question, Sartre gives it a significant twist. Alain's thesis suggested that thinking is, by its very essence, recognizable in immobility. In Sartre's opinion, such a thesis expresses the attachment (the word he uses is, precisely, *attached [attaché]*) of the human mind "to what is motionless, and not only in aesthetics."¹⁰ Sartre hence explains that "[i]t is [easier to understand] the immutable. In particular, it is easier to love what does not change, and one tries to blind one's self to this point: 'You have not changed. You still look the same.'"¹¹ It is not hard to trace, in this sentence, some underlying Bergsonian echoes—which will later be confirmed—concerning the interpretation of our practical life.

Sartre hence seems to suggest that Platonism understood as the thinking of Being meant as *endurance* consists precisely in this effort to blind one's self. Still, "a new philosophy has dethroned that of the immutable Ideas,"¹² he claims. However, he only names it a few lines farther. "At the moment, there is no reality outside change. Will aesthetics not benefit from this?"¹³ Such a question allows Sartre to introduce his reflection on the cinema, for—as he will explain further—the cinema "inaugurates mobility in aesthetics."¹⁴

It looks as if we could synthesize things as follows: for Sartre, the cinema—by inaugurating mobility in aesthetics—has helped to unveil the fact that the supposed acknowledgment of thinking's essence in what is motionless was but an attachment to what is "easier." Hence, the cinema questions philosophy itself, for it "dethrones" Platonism and literally gets us thinking *anew*. Or rather, what shall be thought anew imposes onto philosophy, no less inevitably, the responsibility to think *of itself* as a "philosophy-cinema," we might say echoing Deleuze.

Yet, there is more. To Alain's dismissive judgment apropos of the cinema's mutism, Sartre responds as follows: "We are closer to non-speaking actors, who do in fact sing, and their song (I mean, that of the violins) signifies much better whatever they may say [. . .] does better than just teaching us what Mary Pickford thinks, since it makes us think as she does."¹⁵

On this basis, he hence recurs "to some Bergsonian passages,"¹⁶ in which one can notice the repeated reference to the *melody* as an example of composed and yet undecomposable movement. Indeed, it is through these passages by the grand philosopher that the young student aims at "making understand that a film, with its sound accompaniment, is a consciousness like ours."¹⁷ In other words—as in the case of a melody—it is "an indivisible flow."¹⁸ Besides, in the previous lines, Sartre had already declared that, since it "inaugurates mobility in aesthetics," "the cinema provides the formula of a Bergsonian art."¹⁹ Thus, he unveiled the identity of the "new philosophy" to which he was referring, and, by such means, he claimed something that, surprisingly enough, would anticipate in one single shot the double action by which, in 1983, Deleuze would begin, in his turn, the *Movement-Image*.

Indeed, the first chapter of this book by Deleuze appeared to be in accordance with the substance of the Sartrean judgment. At the same time, it implicitly reminded us that Bergson himself would have never

allowed such a judgment, for it was he who, in *Creative Evolution* (1907), matched the “typical example of false movement”²⁰ precisely with the cinema, which had then been born only a dozen years earlier and, still according to Bergson, claimed to reconstruct movement itself as a sum of “immobile sections and abstract time.”²¹

The problem is raised, first of all, by the fact that in a movie, as we know, at each second comes a succession of a certain number of photograms—between sixteen and eighteen at the time of silent pictures, later twenty-four. Such photograms are spaced by as many instants of black, which remain unperceived by the spectator. In fact, each of these motionless photograms is separated from the others by such an exiguous temporal gap that the ensemble we perceive creates an impression of continuity.

Sartre seems to refer precisely to this question when, in his “*Apologie pour le cinéma*,” he writes: “You may even consider it [the film] as a roll of motionless negatives; this is no more a film than the water from the tank is the water from the source, or a consciousness divided by associationism is the actual consciousness.”²² Convinced that one may say about the film what Bergson claimed apropos of the melody—and suggesting a little further that their respective indivisibility is one and the same with the *rhythm* that characterizes both²³—the young Sartre peremptorily stresses that “[t]he essence of the film is in mobility and in duration.”²⁴

About sixty years later, it is Deleuze who will proceed in a similar direction, by recurring precisely to Bergson so as to criticize the judgment on cinema, which Bergson himself had expressed in *Creative Evolution*: “Cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image.”²⁵ Deleuze also makes clear that this is the movement-image Bergson himself had discovered—in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*—as he overcame the opposition between “[m]ovement, as physical reality in the external world, and the image, as psychic reality in consciousness.”²⁶

Sartre Quits Bergsonianism and Film Theory

However, the parallel between the young Sartre’s path and that of Deleuze’s book comes to an end here, for they will move on in opposite directions. Starting from 1933, Sartre will discover Husserl’s phenomenology, which

he finds—with respect to his desire to move “toward concreteness”²⁷—more satisfactory than Bergson’s thinking. Of course, such concreteness includes that of images.²⁸ As for Deleuze, he will describe Bergson’s and Husserl’s paths as two antagonist replies to the same historical need “to overcome this duality of image and movement, of consciousness and thing.”²⁹ As is well known, he will then take sides in favor of Bergson’s reply against Husserl’s. Hence, if the editors of the young Sartre’s “Bergsonian” text considered it as a “pre-phenomenological”³⁰ writing, Deleuze rather qualifies the position Sartre assumed after the encounter with phenomenology in terms of “anti-Bergsonianism.”³¹ Of course, at the time Deleuze did not know this text by the young Sartre. Still, Sartre’s reference to the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* after his discovery of the Husserlian intentionality implicitly reckons a common aim in Bergson’s and Husserl’s ways, as well as some at least partially similar approaches.³² Since Deleuze will do the same in *The Movement-Image*, the polemic label by which he marks Sartre frankly seems a little excessive. In fact, a critical attitude toward the Bergsonian conception of the image is not necessarily considerable as “anti-Bergsonianism.”

Besides, only a few pages before this claim, Deleuze had already highlighted that, when “making an inventory and analysis of all kinds of images in *The Imagination*,” Sartre the phenomenologist “does not cite the cinematographic image.”³³ Why such silence? Evidently, all attempts to answer this question can only be hypothetical. Nevertheless, it has to be observed that, by such silence, Sartre at least ends up avoiding the temptation of tracing everything back to the philosophical current that, by then, had become his main reference. This is something it is important to highlight, I believe. For indeed, both in the young Sartre of the “Apologie pour le cinema” and in the Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition*, we found a suggestion to consider the cinema as a symptom of an epoch’s novelty; a novelty that, beginning with aesthetics, ends up implying ontology, and even philosophy as a whole. Actually, we have heard the two philosophers manifest the intention of approaching the cinema not so much in order to envelop it in a previously elaborated thinking, but rather in order to find at work in it a type of thinking that philosophy as such is *not yet able to think of*. Still, we have seen the young Sartre as well as the Deleuze of the cinema diptych³⁴ characterize the cinema as a “Bergsonian art.” In short, we have seen them share the tendency to interpret the cinema by opposing to the insufficiencies of the philosophical tradition the novelties of their own reference philosophy,

which they would make become a sort of “philosophy-cinema.”³⁵ Is this not a little too easy, though? If one looks deeper, the fact that, after the discovery of phenomenology, Sartre avoids assuming or hesitates to assume once more his previous attitude seems to authorize us to eventually think that a “philosophy-cinema” still basically remains *to be done*.

Indeed, if it is true—as Alain seems to claim and the young Sartre is willing to believe—that mobility has been introduced in art only thanks to the cinema; if, moreover, as Deleuze maintains, the cinema “immediately gives us a movement-image” that disavows the opposition between physical and psychic reality, between exterior and interior, between space and time, between the things and the gaze; then the “philosophy-cinema” deserves to be called not only to think of our new relation toward ourselves, the others, the things, the world—of which the advent of the cinema is, as I said before, a symptom—but also, in the name of that same need and according to such a mutated relationship, to rethink its own style of thinking and expression. In other words, the “philosophy-cinema,” rather than being called to think of the cinema by playing once more the role of a “form of reflection applied to a previously given object,”³⁶ is called to *think of the Being and itself according to the cinema*.