

Towards a Singular Cinematic Pedagogy: Gilles Deleuze and Manoel de Oliveira

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Abstract

This paper aims to approach cinema, philosophy, and pedagogy from a double perspective: from the work of the Portuguese filmmaker, Manoel de Oliveira, and from the philosophical praxis of Gilles Deleuze. When Oliveira saw the public lecture that Deleuze gave in 1987 at La Fémis, he felt challenged by the philosopher's words and wrote him a letter in 1991. Furthermore, Deleuze referred to Oliveira's films as one of the "greatest pedagogies". Cinema was then seen as a new cartography to the philosophical plane contributing to a mutually reciprocal movement between cinema and philosophy. In this sense, the encounters between cinema and philosophy as well as the connection between cinematic images and philosophical concepts, will be the theme of this essay.

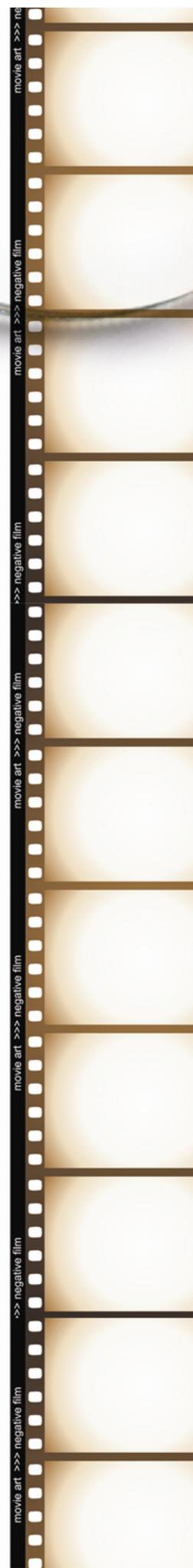
Keywords: Gilles Deleuze, Manoel de Oliveira, Cinematic Pedagogy, Philosophy of Film, Portuguese Cinema



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“(…) there's the internal development of cinema as it seeks new audio-visual combinations and major pedagogical lines (not just Rossellini, Resnais, Godard, and the Straubs, but Syberberg, Duras, Oliveira …).”¹

Introduction

My aim in this essay will be to approach cinema, philosophy, and cinematic pedagogy through and exploration of the interest and impact that the Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira (b. 1908) has had on the philosophical thought regarding cinema and moving images of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995).

According to Deleuze, there is a principle of affinity between the cinematographic and the philosophical form of thought expression, explored as a peculiar transversal project alongside pure philosophical inquiry. What different kinds of interferences may occur between philosophy and cinema? Should there be difference and disagreement between philosophy and art in general, rather than one common sense and agreement? If philosophy is the discipline that has to create concepts, should art “extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations” as stated in *What is Philosophy?*, written with Félix Guattari². Between art and philosophy we also encounter unplaceable intrusions that transform each other in a mutually reciprocal way. If cinema has forced philosophers to rethink their ideas regarding movement, time, and image philosophical concepts such as the time-image or the crystal-image, could also make filmmakers to rethink their own praxis. Cinema seems to have the ability to give philosophers the non-philosophical elements that make us think via concepts, thereby suggesting an affinity

between the cinematic image and the philosophical text as a philosophical expression in thinking in cinema through cinema.

In this sense, Manoel de Oliveira's curiosity in the lecture that Gilles Deleuze gave in 1987 at La Fémis entitled "What is the creative act?" ("Qu'est-ce que l'acte de création?"³), was somehow an achievement of that philosophical principle. Challenged by the philosopher's words, Oliveira wrote Gilles Deleuze in 1991. Besides, Deleuze mentioned the Portuguese filmmaker's films as one of the greatest pedagogies, along with Rossellini, Rossellini, or Godard, for example. Cinema was then seen, for the first time, as a new (possible) cartography to the philosophical plane contributing to a reciprocal movement between cinema and philosophy. The present essay aims to elucidate and to trace Deleuze's philosophical considerations of Oliveira's films with the final objective of demonstrating this reciprocity. In this sense, this research will also be of interest to both Deleuzian studies and cinema studies.

Deleuze and Oliveira: An Encounter

On March the 17th, 1987 only a couple of years after the publication of his *Cinema* books, *The Movement-Image* (1983) and *The Time-Image* (1985), Gilles Deleuze gave a conference talk at La Fémis, the national French film school in Paris, entitled "What is the creative act?" There, he questioned what it means to have an idea, in cinema, in philosophy, or in any discipline: "What do you do exactly, when you do cinema? And what do I do when I do or hope to do philosophy?"⁴ He began by saying that to have an idea is a rare event and that we do not have ideas in general, but always in a specific field. In this sense, ideas are always something of material. In this context we should, however, bear in mind the difference between an "idea" and a "concept", an essential distinction to a definition of a philosophy of

film. Summarizing, an idea is an image that forces us to think, it is a *pensative* image that is, by nature, thought *in the making*. It is in this sense that we can understand cinema as something “full of ideas”. A concept, while a necessary condition for the establishment of philosophical thinking, is an exclusive creation of philosophy, it is the work of the philosopher to obtain concepts in the making.

As is well known, Deleuze studied several filmmakers and films for different reasons. In that vast group I would like to highlight the presence of the Portuguese filmmaker, Manoel de Oliveira. Four fundamental references show the immediate relation between Deleuze and Oliveira: 1) *The Movement-image*, 2) the preface for Serge Daney’s *Ciné-Journal*, 3) a letter written by Oliveira to Deleuze, and 3) an interview published in *Revue Chimères*. I address each in turn below.

1) In October, 2013 it will be thirty years since the publication of *The Movement-Image*. In the first volume of his Cinema books, Gilles Deleuze refers in particular to one of the best-known of Oliveira's film, *Francisca* (1981), an adaptation of Agustina Bessa-Luis’s book, *Fanny Owen*. *Francisca* as “an Oliveira close-up” was one of Deleuze's examples, along with *Ivan the Terrible* as “an Eisenstein close-up”, to think about the affect-image, face, and close-up⁵.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this reference regards how Deleuze could have had access to Oliveira's film. To start with, Deleuze’s interest in Oliveira only took place thanks to a precise historical context that was related to the exhibition of Portuguese films in France. The French curiosity with Portuguese film production was a sudden phenomenon in what for Deleuze would be an unknown country, resulting from a Portuguese population that, after the 1974 Carnation Revolution, was awaking from a 48 year dictatorship. There were several

retrospective on Portuguese films and filmmakers appearing in France. As their films were discovered they greatly impressed both the public and film critics, particularly those who worked at Cahiers du cinema, like Serge Daney, who was a decisive influence to Deleuze's cinephilia⁶. This success was also achieved thanks to the pledge of producer and exhibitor Paulo Branco. "Out of scene", the retrospective on Portuguese filmmakers that Paulo Branco organized, was, according to Jacques Lemière, a "remarkable event"⁷ in what concerns the reception of Oliveira's work in France. Films like *Douro, Fauna Fluvial* (1931), *Aniki-Bobó* (1942), *The artist and the city* (1956), *Rite of Spring* and *The Hunt* (1963), *Past and Present* (1971), *Benilde or the virgin mother* (1975), *Doomed love* (1978) and *Francisca* (1981), were admired by the audiences.

According to Jacques Lemière, Oliveira was seen as a filmmaker who was "faithful to his artistic vision, and proceeds, with a calm artistry, with his goal to educate the viewer, through an ethical program" and "inventive formal choices"⁸. In the case of *Francisca*, this is illustrated by the use of long takes, the frontal and theatrical position of the actors, the repetition of the same scene from a different angle, the reflection of the mirrors, and the use of medium shots without close-ups. However, Deleuze refers to a particular scene, which is one of the most remarkable and analyzed. In this scene, José Augusto (Diogo Dória) insists on bringing the horse into the house of Camilo Castelo Branco (Mário Barroso), when he admits his love for Fanny (Teresa Menezes): "An Oliveira close-up: the two faces of the man, whilst, in depth this time, the horse which has mounted the stairs prefigures the affects of the seduction and the musical ride"⁹.

Apart from the unusual events portrayed in the scene and the use of the artifice and stage-like acting, commented on by many, Deleuze underlines the affective nature of that

medium shot. The eye of the viewer is attracted to the centre of the stage, to the horse's gaze; in this case, the affect-image is the horse. Camilo and José Augusto are looking straight into the camera. The horse's gaze turns into our gaze, "beyond the soul", and the horse is itself the face of the "soulless creature", to quote Eduardo Prado Coelho¹⁰ – this is a film about those who love soullessly, irrationally, an idea that comes from a scene when Fanny, at the ball, asks Camilo Castelo Branco: "What is the soul? The soul is a vice." That is to say that an affect-image of this nature is not an image that represents or expresses affects. On the contrary, it represents and expresses the inexpressible, the void, and the irrational connected to the soulless. It is in the viewer that one finds the affect: the viewer cannot but look to the horse.

2) A second reference to Manoel de Oliveira appears in the Preface that Deleuze wrote for Serge Daney's *Ciné-Journal*, published in 1986 and reprinted in *Negotiations*. In that short essay, Deleuze argues for "new audio-visual combinations and major pedagogical lines (not just Rossellini, Resnais, Godard, and the Straubs, but Syberberg, Duras, Oliveira ...) and finds in television a wonderful field to explore, with wonderful resources."¹¹

What interests me in this particular approach is to understand this philosophical interest that puts Oliveira, Godard, Duras, and Rossellini side-by-side. Oliveira was the only Portuguese filmmaker to rightfully belong to this bunch. One understands why this happened looking at the aesthetical and formal changes that took place in Portuguese cinema in the 1960's, 70's and early 80's. According to Prado Coelho, from the 60's on, the will to "restore the Portuguese cinema" will translate into an artistic expression marked by the distance to the viewers.

However, what seems to remain from this fragmentation reveals itself as philosophically appealing. According to Randall Johnson, "Oliveira's work (...) is

characterised by a rather iconoclastic reflective and self-reflexive cinematic discourse”¹², characteristics that remind us of what is a common idea on the Portuguese cinema, seen as “a cinema that, for many, became too literary, cerebral, experimentalist, intellectual or politic.”¹³ Those were qualities existing in Portuguese cinema, and a reflection of what was going on in European cinema, namely in France, with whom Portuguese filmmakers shared a sense of meta-cinematographical cinephilia.

3) In third place, we have the letter written by Oliveira in 1991 after seeing his lecture, “What is the creative act?”. Deleuze had sent a copy of the lecture to Oliveira while he was in Paris working on *The Divine Comedy* (1991). However, despite all efforts that Oliveira took to meet him in person, Deleuze was sick at the time (he was retired since 1987) and unable. Further, in the same sense that Deleuze had once felt compelled and stimulated by the connection between philosophy and art, Oliveira also felt “provoked” by the philosopher’s words. Writing that letter from Oporto, was a way for the 83 years old filmmaker, an “intellectual full of doubts” as he says, to expose to Deleuze some of his own doubts.

There were four major “concerns” underlined by the filmmaker on Deleuze’s presentation: the “supreme urgency”, the “breakup between the profane and the religious”, Paul Klee’s sentence “The people are missing”, and the “act of resistance”¹⁴. It is through the concept of “people” that Oliveira links these four ideas connecting the individual conflict with the social one. Gilles Deleuze had finished his presentation by saying that every work of art appeals to a people that do not exist and just as he had said in the second volume of his Cinema books, if before the war the people were present, after the war we lack their presence: “if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exists, or not yet... *the people are missing*”¹⁵. The absence of people is therefore the first thing that

marks the difference between classic and modern cinema, from a political point of view. How can we understand this absence in modern cinema when we refer to an art form that is, since the beginning, not only appealing to the masses, but has also been put into the service of political propaganda? According to Oliveira's approach to Deleuze's statement, the people that are missing are the people of God, emphasizing the distance between the life of Jesus Christ and modern day living. The closing scene of *Rite of Spring* strongly exemplifies Oliveira's critical position towards this distance. Is it possible that the lack of belief in *this* world, the *intolerable* nature and the manipulative use of film (criticized so many times by the Portuguese filmmaker), has led modern cinema to an apolitical stance, the impossibility of a political or ideological engagement? These are some of the possible questions, to which I will get back later.

4) Last, we have the interview published in the magazine *Chimères*, with the title "The sky is historical", an interview conducted by Serge Daney and Raymond Bellour¹⁶. According to Oliveira's ethical program and formal creativity – as Lemièrè has highlighted – we understand the commitment to authenticity, realism, and objectivity in his work, even in his historical films relying on the power to imagine movement, colours, and sets. As Jorge Cruz puts it (in "Manoel de Oliveira, the sculptor of words"), "it is impossible to fully bring back an historical time: what gesture? What clothing? What expression? What ..."¹⁷ Faithful to his *deontology* – the concept used by Randal Johnson, in a Kantian reading of Oliveira's work¹⁸ – Oliveira refuses to shoot these representations of the soul. However, his films portray the soul and its doubts. Every time that he enacts or stages an historical time, he uses stylistic elements that stress that search for objectivity, for example, the sky shots that appear in his

films. Those shots, sky and clouds, are elements that bring the viewer closer of a lost, unseen, historical time: the sky is always there. It is, in this sense, completely historical.

Thus, this objectivity and realism, however paradoxical they may seem, are achieved through the theatrical staging of each scene, in a bold deconstruction of the rules and canon of film, following Deleuze's classification of the five elements of the new cinematographic image of the post-war: "These are the five apparent characteristics of the new image: *the dispersive situation, the deliberately weak links, the voyage form, the consciousness of clichés, the condemnation of the plot.*"¹⁹ For example, in the beginning of *No, or the Vain Glory of Command*, there is a false shot/reverse shot in the scene when Portuguese soldiers travel in the jeep; or the choice of medium shots, without the use of close-ups: it is the viewer that must find the most important element of the scene. These formal and aesthetical innovations have the purpose of making the viewer think about the metaphysics of time. Oliveira had admitted a strong sympathy and affinity with Deleuze's texts, stating that, until he read *The Movement-image* and *The Time-image*, he had never been aware that Deleuze's thoughts about cinematographical temporality were so close to his own: when a film is projected, it transforms itself; it becomes alive, it is a *durée*; the language of cinema is, precisely, time²⁰. It will be precisely to synthesize the relationship between Deleuze's cinematic approach to movement and time that, in his Doctor *Honoris Causa* speech, in 2002, Oliveira will mention cinematic images as *Movement-Time* as he is not able to dissociate four independent, although complementary, elements of the cinematic image: editing, word, sound, and music²¹.

Cinema, towards a new Paideia?

The elaboration of a film philosophy and a cinematic pedagogy, as well as a pedagogical cinephilia, remains a concern in the philosophical speech, and has a specific approach in Deleuzian studies. One can find two different attitudes towards the relationship between philosophy and cinema in the debate that Deleuze started 30 years ago, and they have been transversal to the analytical approach, as well as to the continental one; what is the relationship between cinema and philosophy? There is a most problematic approach that states that cinema is important to philosophy in a non-linguistic way. This approach is close to Deleuze's stance: there is a direct connection between cinema and philosophy itself.

The close connection between images (in a broader sense) and philosophy has existed since the pre-Socratic era when philosophers used images and metaphors in their arguments; for example, the allegory of the cave in Plato's Republic. I mention this example because the association between the allegory and the movie theatre has been a repeated analogy: it mainly resides in the comparison between the prisoner in the cave and the film spectator as passive viewers of the observed images²². Thus, the "exit from the mind in the cave", in the platonic sense, may occur, paradoxically, through what Deleuze defines as a pedagogical cinephilia, a cinematic pedagogy not understood in the common sense of transmitting knowledge and/or information, but as new ways of perception and thinking (quotation from the Serge Daney's preface), mentioned beginning in his earlier texts and maintained throughout his career, such as *Difference and Repetition* (from 1968).

I will now briefly examine the link between educational choice and the connection between aesthetics, pedagogy, and metaphysics. The platonic use of images makes me think that if there is an educational use of images, there must also be this kind of use of cinematographic

images, in spite of their deceiving nature. In fact, this allegory appears in the platonic texts following the Greek ideal of Paideia, the Ancient Greek educational ideal. The idea of Paideia, even more than the allegory itself, is essential to the study of cinema and film philosophy nowadays – in the sense of an education that should be made public and accessible, to the extent of the idea of a pop-philosophy, as Deleuze understood it²³. In fact, the Deleuzian film philosophy stands up for, on one hand, the return of the philosophical domain to the public, the agora, that is, it stands for a return to the basics of Greek philosophy itself. Cinema, as an “art for the masses” has that power, of returning thought, in a democratic way, to everybody.

The propagandistic and rhetorical use of cinema is enough proof of this, but the creation of a human being dominated by the fascist image (in the sense of passivity towards image) is, on the other hand, a problem. Therefore, the revision of a theory of thinking and the devaluation of the sensitive world of images (as copy or phantoms) led to an art form that, according to Jacques Rancière, “solves the problem of platonic mimesis in its root: the platonic denouncing of images, the opposition between the sensitive copy and the intelligible model.”²⁴

Conclusion: philosophie-cinéma

In conclusion, Deleuze was aiming for new ways of thinking. The viewer’s experience differs from natural experience, from the everyday world experience; the film itself is not a mere copy or reproduction of reality. What does this mean, exactly? It means that the cinematographic images promote new ways of feeling and new ways of thinking: I mean the mental-image in Alfred Hitchcock, the crystal-image in Orson Welles, and the affect-image in Manoel de Oliveira. But the relationship is not purely intellectual; cinema is also able to teach us how to feel differently, how to live both individual and collective affects. Cinema is in this

sense a school of life in its most liberating way. Even if we are talking of one minoritarian filmmaker whose moviegoers are still to come.

Manoel de Oliveira's interest in Gilles Deleuze expresses something that is very common to all the artists that felt compelled by his philosophical ideas on art²⁵. But the problem with Deleuze's attempt to understand television and other possible cinematic media, such as pop videos, as a “wonderful field to explore” is that the democratic accessibility to images may correspond to vacuity and mindlessness of the art form, and so, prevent them from creating new circuits in art and in mind²⁶.

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- Oliveira defends that: “El trabajo lo hace la mente... Porque el cine es algo muy concreto. Porque un escritor puede decir “entró en su habitación, se sentó a una mesa, tomó una hoja y empezó a escribir”. En cine no puede hacerse eso. Porque “él entró”, ¿cómo?, ¿un hombre?, ¿cómo va vestido?, ¿cómo es la mesa?”. Pere Gimferrer y Manoel De Oliveira, 'La palabra hace la imagen: Conversación en torno a *El principio de la incertidumbre*', *El Cultural*, 6/03/2003: http://www.elcultural.es/version_papel/CINE/6588/Pere_Gimferrer_y_Manoel_De_Oliveira-La_palabra_hace_la_imagen
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