

## CINEMA AS A DEMOCRATIC EMBLEM<sup>1</sup>

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Translated by Alex Ling and Aurélien Mondon

Philosophy only exists insofar as there are paradoxical relations, relations which fail to connect, or should not connect. When every connection is naturally legitimate, philosophy is impossible or in vain. Philosophy is the violence done by thought to impossible relations.

Today, which is to say “after Deleuze,” there is a clear requisitioning of philosophy by cinema — or of cinema by philosophy. It is therefore certain that cinema offers us paradoxical relations, entirely improbable connections.

Which ones?

The preformed philosophical response comes down to saying that cinema is an untenable relation between total artifice and total reality. Cinema simultaneously offers the possibility of a copy of reality and the entirely artificial dimension of this copy. With contemporary technologies, cinema is capable of producing the real artifice of the copy of a false copy of the real, or again, the false real copy of a false real. And other variations. This amounts to saying that cinema has become the immediate form (or “technique”) of an ancient paradox, that of the relations between being and appearance (which are far more fundamental than the relations everywhere exhibited between the virtual and the actual). We can thus proclaim cinema to be an ontological art. Many critics, André Bazin in particular, have been saying this for a long time.

I would like to enter into the question in an infinitely simpler and more empirical manner, removed from all philosophical preformation, starting with the elucidation of a statement: cinema is a “mass art.”

The syntagm “mass art” can be given an elementary definition: an art is a “mass art” if the masterpieces, the artistic productions that the erudite (or dominant, whatever) culture declares incontestable, are seen and liked by millions of people from all social groups at the very moment of their creation.

Adding “at the very moment of their creation” is especially important, because we know that we are dominated by a melancholy historicism, which creates a pure effect of pastness. Millions of people, regardless of their social background (apart of course from the base proletariat) are able to go to museums, because they like the icons of the past as treasures, for the modern passion for tourism extends to a kind of tourism of treasures. It is not of this kind of tourism that I am speaking, but of the millions of people who love an exceptional work at the very moment of its appearance. Yet we have, in the short history of cinema, incontestable examples

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of such love, examples that can only be compared to the public triumph of the great Greek tragedies. Take, for example, the great films of Chaplin. They have been seen throughout the world, even in the homes of Eskimos, or projected on tents in the desert. Everybody immediately understood that these films spoke in the profound and decisive way that I have proposed to call (when writing on Beckett's prose) "generic humanity," or humanity subtracted from its differences. The character of the Tramp, perfectly placed, filmed in a close frontal manner, in a familiar context, is no less a representative of generic "popular" humanity for an African than for a Japanese or for an Eskimo.

It would be wrong to believe this kind of example is limited to the comic or burlesque genre, which has always been able to reflect the vital energy of the people, the strength and cunning of social survival. We could as easily cite an extraordinarily concentrated film of staggering formal invention, doubtless one of the greatest existing cinematic poems: Murnau's *Sunrise*. This pure masterpiece was a phenomenal success in the United States, a sort of *Titanic*, without the industrial flavour.

Cinema is without a doubt capable of being a mass art on a scale which suffers no comparison with any other art. Certainly in the nineteenth century there were mass writers, mass poets: Victor Hugo in France, for example, or Pushkin in Russia. They had, and still have, millions of readers. However, the scale—at the moment of their creation—is incomparable to that of the great success of cinema.

The point is thus the following: "mass art" fixes a paradoxical relation. Why? Because "mass" is a political category, or more precisely a category of activist democracy, of communism. The Russian revolutionaries were able to define their actions in terms of a time when "the masses climbed onto the stage of History." We usually oppose "mass democracy" to representative and constitutional democracy. "Mass" is an essential political category. Mao said that "the masses, the masses alone, are creators of universal history."

However, "art", which is the other half of the syntagm "mass art," is and can only be an aristocratic category. To say that "art" is an aristocratic category is not a judgement. We simply note that "art" comprises the idea of formal creation, of visible novelty in the history of forms, and therefore requires the means of comprehending creation as such, necessitating a differential education, a minimal proximity to the history of the art concerned and to the vicissitudes of its grammar. A long and often unrewarding apprenticeship. Broadening of the mind. Pleasures, certainly, but pleasures which are sophisticated, constructed, acquired.

In "mass art" we have the paradoxical relation between a pure democratic element (on the side of irruption and evental energy) and an aristocratic element (on the side of individual education, of differential locations of taste).

All the arts of the twentieth century have been avant-garde. Painting was an avant-garde art and only ceases to be so at that crepuscular moment when it is introduced into museums. Music was an avant-garde art, and, from the days of Schönberg, has not ceased to be so (unless we also call "music" the groaning of popular music). Poetry exists today only as an avant-garde art. We can say that the twentieth century is the century of avant-gardes. But we can also say that it is the century of the greatest mass art that has ever existed.

The simple form of the paradoxical relation: the first great art which is mass *in its essence* appears and develops in a time which is the time of the avant-gardes. The derived form: cinema imposes impracticable relations between aristocracy and democracy, between invention and familiarity, between novelty and general taste. It is for this reason that philosophy takes an interest in cinema. Because it imposes a vast and obscure complex of paradoxical relations. "To think cinema" comes down to forcing the relation, to arranging the concepts which, under the constraint of real films, shift the established rules of the connection.

I believe, however, that there have been five major attempts at such a displacement. Or rather, five different ways of entering into the problem: "to think cinema as mass art." Firstly, from the paradox of the image. This

is the classic entry which I mentioned at the beginning: the ontological art. The second traces the paradox of time, of the filmic visibility of time. The third examines the difference of cinema, its strange connection to the established system of the fine arts. To put it another way: the paradox of the seventh art. The fourth establishes cinema at the border of art and non-art, its paradox being that of artistic impurity. The fifth proposes an ethical paradox: cinema as reservoir of figures of conscience, as popular phenomenology of every situation wherein we must choose.

Let us say a word about these five attempts.

1. On image. We will say that cinema is a “mass art” because it is the height of the old art of the image, and that the image, as far back as we go in the history of mankind, has always been ruthlessly fascinating. Cinema is the height of the visual offered as semblance. And since there can be no identification without the support of semblance, we will say that cinema is the final mastery of the metaphysical cycle of identification. Movie theatres, dining rooms, bedrooms, even the streets surprise the masses through a deceptive network of disparate identifications, since the technique of semblance outdates the religious fable and universally hands out the loose change of the miracle. Cinema’s masses are at base *pious* masses. Such is the first explication.

2. On time. This approach is fundamental for Deleuze, as for many other critics. It is tempting to think that cinema is a mass art *because it transforms time into perception*. We have with cinema the most powerful becoming-visible of time. It creates a temporal feeling distinct from lived time. More precisely, it transforms “the intimate sense of time” into representation. It is this representative gap which destines cinema to the immense audience of those who desire to suspend time in space in order to push fate aside.

This hypothesis moves cinema closer to music, which, in its basest form, is also a mass production. But music—and again “great” music more than popular music—is also an organization distanced from time. We can say very simply that music makes time audible, while cinema makes time visible. Certainly, cinema makes time audible as well, since music is incorporated into cinema. However, what is proper to cinema, which was for a long time mute, is definitely making time visible. The production of this visibility is universally enchanting. Such is the second explication.

3. The series of arts. It is clear that cinema takes from the other arts all that is popular, all that *could*, once isolated, filtered, separated from their aristocratic requirements, destine them to the masses. The seventh art borrows from the other six what in them most explicitly aims at generic humanity.

For example, what does cinema retain from painting? The pure possibility of changing the sensible beauty of the world into reproducible image. It does not take the intellectual technique of painting. It does not take the complicated modes of representation and formalisation. It retains a sensible and framed relationship with the external universe. In this sense, cinema is a painting without painting. A world painted without paint.

What does cinema retain from music? Not the extraordinary difficulties of the musical composition, not the subtle arrangement of harmonic verticality and thematic horizontality, not even the chemistry of timbre. What is important for cinema is that music, or its rhythmic ghost, escorts the happenings of the visible. What it imposes everywhere—today even in everyday life—is a certain dialectic of the visible and the audible. To stuff all representable existence with a musical paste is the immense work of cinema. We regularly succumb to the emotion provoked by a strange mixture of existence and music, a musical subjectivization, a melodious accompaniment of the drama, an orchestral punctuation of the cataclysm... All this inserts in the representation a music without music, a music freed of musical problems, a music borrowed and returned to its subjective or narrative pretext.

What does cinema retain from the novel? Not the complexities of subjective formation, nor the infinite resources of literary montage, nor the slow and original restitution of the *taste* of an era. No, that of which cinema has

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an obsessive and insatiable need, and in the name of which it ceaselessly plunders universal literature, is the fable, the narrative, which it renames the “screenplay.” The imperative of cinema—artistic *and* commercial, indivisibly, since it is a mass art—is that of telling great stories, stories which can be understood by the whole of humanity.

What does cinema retain from theatre? The actor, the actress, the charm, the *aura* of the actor and the actress. In separating this *aura* from the powers of the literary text, so fundamental to theatre, cinema has transformed actors and actresses into *stars*.<sup>2</sup> This is one possible definition of cinema: a means of transforming the actor into a star.

It is absolutely true that cinema takes something from each of the other arts. But the operation of this appropriation is complex, because it takes a common and accessible element from its sophisticated artistic conditions. Cinema *opens* all the arts, it weakens their aristocratic, complex and composite quality. It delivers this simplified opening to images of unanimous existence. As painting without painting, music without music, novel without subjects, theatre reduced to the charm of actors, cinema ensures the *popularisation* of all the arts. This is why its vocation is universal. Such is the third hypothesis: the seventh art is a mass art because it is the active democratisation of the other six.

4. Impurity. Let us directly examine the relation between art and non-art in cinema. We will thus be able to affirm that it is a mass art because it is always at the edge of non-art. Cinema is an art particularly *charged* with non-art. An art always invested with vulgar forms. Cinema is, by a high number of its ingredients, always *beneath* art. Even its most obvious artistic successes comprise an immanent infinity of wretched ingredients, of obvious pieces of non-art. We can maintain that in every stage of its brief existence, cinema explores the border between art and that which is not art. It stands on this frontier. It incorporates the new forms of existence, be they art or non-art, and it makes a certain selection, albeit a selection which is never complete. So that in any film, even a pure masterpiece, you can find a great number of banal images, vulgar material, stereotypes, images seen one hundred times elsewhere, things of no interest whatsoever.

Bresson was particularly irritated by this resistance of artistic non-being. He desired pure art and called this purity “cinematographic writing.” But to no avail. With Bresson as well one must endure the worst of the visible, the incomprehensible invasion of the sensible baseness of the times. As essential as it is involuntary, this impurity does not prevent a number of Bresson’s films from being artistic masterpieces. They just show that the cinematic art can be a mass art. For you can enter into the art of cinema from that which, always present in it in abundance, *is not art*. Whereas for the other arts it is the other way around. You can only enter their non-artistic part, their failings, from art, from the grandeur of art. We can say that in cinema *it is possible to rise*. You can start from your most common representations, from your most nauseating sentimentality, from your vulgarity, even from your cowardice. You can be an absolutely ordinary spectator. You can have bad taste in your access, in your entry, in your initial disposition. This does not prevent the film allowing you to rise. Perhaps you will arrive at powerful and refined things. But you will not be asked to go back. Whereas in the other arts you always have the fear of the fall. This is the great democratic advantage of the art of cinema: you can go there on a Saturday evening to rest and rise unexpectedly. Aristotle said that if we do good, pleasure will come “as a gift.” When we see a film it is often the other way around: we feel an immediate pleasure, often suspect (thanks to the omnipresent non-art), and the Good (of art) comes as an unexpected bonus.

In cinema we travel to the pure from the impure. This is not the case in the other arts. Could you deliberately go and see bad painting? Bad painting is bad painting; there is little hope it will change into something good. You will not rise. From the simple fact that you are there, lost in bad painting, you are already falling, you are an aristocrat in distress. Whereas in cinema you are always more or less a democrat on the rise. Therein lies the paradoxical relation. The paradoxical relationship between aristocracy and democracy, which is finally an internal relationship between art and non-art. And this is also what politicises cinema: it operates on a junction between ordinary opinions and the work of thought. A subtle junction that you don’t find in the same form elsewhere.

Such is the fourth hypothesis: cinema is a mass art because it democratizes the movement by which art drags itself from non-art by drawing from this movement a border, by making from impurity the thing itself.

5. Ethical figures. Cinema is an art of figures. Not only figures of visible space and active places. It is foremost an art of the great figures of active humanity. It proposes a kind of universal stage of action and its confrontation with common values. After all, cinema is the last place populated by heroes. Our world is so commercial, so familial, so unheroic... However, even today no one would imagine cinema without the great moral figures, without the great American battle between Good and Evil. Here, even the gangsters are nothing but cases of conscience, redemptive decisions, sincere abolition of Nastiness. The most sordid cruelty is a cunning of reason toward a didactic enlightenment. The cops fare no better. Among them angelic inspectors, nowadays often women, keep watch. The ridiculousness of these fables, their dogmatic impurity, their dirty hypocrisy, by no means prevents their also possessing something admirable. As admirable as the Greek tragedies could be, cinema of Antiquity, of which we have the most noble yet false idea, since the innumerable turkeys played in the amphitheatres were not passed on to us. We only have a few dozen masterpieces, something like three Murnau, one Lang, two Eisenstein, four Griffith and six Chaplin. So that we do not see the impurity and massive banality of these spectacles. But we can recount their common end: to present an immense audience with the typical and excessive figures of all the great conflicts of human life. To speak of war, of passion, of justice and injustice, of truth, with, for ordinary material, all the cock-and-bull stories of old crooks, of female poisoners and mad kings. Cinema also speaks to us of courage, of justice, of passion, of betrayal. And the great genres of cinema, the most coded kinds, like the melodrama, the western and the "space opera," are precisely ethical genres, that is to say genres which address humanity inasmuch as they propose a moral mythology.

We know that philosophy began as a vast discussion with tragedy, with the theatre, with the impurity of the visible and performing arts. The essential interlocutors of Plato were on the stage, and included in this broader rhetorical visibility are the public stage, the democratic assembly, the performance of the sophists. We should not be surprised today that philosophy is, for an increasing part of its activity, a vast discussion with cinema. Because cinema and its derivatives, including television, represent on a human scale, after Tragedy and Religion, the third historical attempt at the spiritual subjugation of the visible, available to all, without exception or measure. Also present at the meeting, the democratic politicians and their sophist advisors, renamed "public relations consultants." The screen has become their supreme test. The question has changed in destination only. It goes: "if there exists a sovereign technique of semblance, and if this technique, when it is cinema, is also capable of producing a mass art, what torsion, what metamorphosis does this art impose on that by which philosophy supports itself, and which has the name 'truth'?"

Plato looked for the answer in a transcendent mimesis. To the figurative semblance, we will oppose everything that shows itself to the Idea which does not show itself. This gesture required the support of that which subtracts itself from semblance: the mathematics of finite perfection, numbers and figures. We will search rather for that which in the visible itself exceeds its visibility, tying semblance to the immanent but eternal register of its infinite form. One also needs mathematics of infinite perfection: sets, topologies, sheaves.

So, just as Plato dominated semblance with allegory, saving the image in the very place of Truth with his immortal "myths," we can in the same way hope that cinema will be overcome by cinema itself. After the philosophy of cinema must come—is already coming—philosophy *as* cinema, which consequently has the opportunity of being a mass philosophy.

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### NOTES

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2. English in the original [trans.]