

Formative Possibilities of Cinema

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“Formative possibilities of cinema” spawns from the concept of two distinct uses of cinema and of education: one directed towards exposing the world, with the pedagogical purpose of recognizing and validating its representation, and the other focused on problematizing the world, taking into account what is pictured on the screen as well as what is presented as real. The goal is to explore the pedagogical possibilities of a cinema that questions the world and affirms what’s real, even before an unpleasant reality.

Introduction

Chilean filmmaker Raúl Ruiz (2000, p. 86) proposes an interesting challenge by imagining what it would be like in the early days of cinema to conceive a film about going around the world in eighty days. The Lumière brothers would take the camera and travel around the world shooting the trip, while Georges Méliès would run to his studio to recreate the world in stage sets. Historically, two paths could be traced as distinct cinema proposals: for example, realism and illusion; other dichotomies, however, can also be drawn, such as criticism and entertainment, art and industry, thought and delight, so forth and so on, in an exercise as rich as these divisions’ arbitrariness – since nothing effectively allows us to reduce cinematography’s multiple applications and possibilities to any dichotomous pairing.

Nevertheless, this article intends (even if briefly) to insist on two distinct applications of cinematography in strict relation to human education – without, however, reducing cinema to a pedagogical function. Such applications would then result in a kind of cinema that proposes a *naturalized* worldview as opposed to one aiming at its *problematization*. This may seem like just another simplistic reduction and it would be, in fact, if our goal was to account for cinema itself; but there’s a different intention here: to draw on this exercise, on this suggestion or presupposition as a possible heuristic to understand cinema’s instructive potential. Hence, after making use of this argumentative scaffold, we must get rid of it, restoring cinema to its characteristic multiplicity, same as with all art.

The same resort may be applied with respect to education, insofar as the existence of two pedagogical intentions: one targeted at *exposing* the world – more specifically, a world we want to recognize – and the other directed towards its *problematization*, or to the questioning of the presented world.

To put this philosophically, on the one hand there is the belief in a guiding principle for existence, and on the other, there is distrust, not only of this or that principle, but also of the very existence of principles themselves. Thus, religious education will elect God as the principle, that is, he is the factor outside existence that becomes existence's creator as well as its judge. Being responsible for the game of existence, rules are attributed to him, many of which were historically revealed, while others are or may be deduced – and everything that does not come as a rule remains a mystery. Scientific education, on the other hand, believes in another principle, attested by the verifiability of its methods, which can be broadly and somewhat misrepresented with words like nature, or *physics*, or even some kind of force that, preceding existence, would act for its inception and remain in continuous renovation. These are commonly known as “laws of nature”, i.e., the idea that the reality of things is operated by foreign and determinant forces. Nature would then be the principle that makes the trees grow, the clouds form and the species evolve. Educating for science means knowing and accepting the conditions for a particular data to be accepted as valid because it was *scientifically* proven. Anything that is not filtered through the scientific sieve is considered either fake or a minor kind of knowledge (empirical, practical, superstitious, common sense, etc.).

Electing an organizing principle of what's real creates the illusion that there is a truth, a principle, a reality, a fact, that is, an *absolute* that would serve as reference for the world, in which language would be used to represent it. Hence, we establish a gap between what's said, what is thought, what's created and the “actual”, “real” world. Reality is fabricated as a truth that then functions as a principle that serves as parameter for evaluating language diversity and its formulations.

Thus, beyond a mere *pedagogy*, there are pedagogical *uses* of materials and distinct discourses aiming at limiting language to the expression of a single reality, a single truth, a single world. In the case of cinema – which has no pedagogical or educational purpose *a priori* (save for rare and disposable exceptions), there is a pedagogical use that consists in taking it as a discourse or representation of reality. Through this strategy, films and film excerpts are utilized as displays of the knowledge we intend to communicate. In this sense, the notion that everything that aids in communication becomes *didactic*; the transmission of a certain chunk of knowledge previously considered true because it is true, that is, because it is thus stated by science, ideology or the dominant scholastic discourse.

Going back to the initial issue, we can state quite broadly that there are two manners of conceiving reality, or existence or the world: one that intends to

naturalize it, that is, to affirm a principle, a truth, a somewhat stable collection of knowledge, beliefs, values and judgment methods; and another one that *problematizes* any naturalistic, homogeneous or dogmatic conception, choosing instead chance over principle, the empty over of the absolute, the multiplicity of interpretations rather than a *single version*.

In other words, there are two conflicting forces in place: one that seeks to stabilize the world and another that admits its instability; one that believes in progress and one that disbelieves in history; one that accounts for humanity's great achievements, even if through much sacrifice, and one that scorns human greatness for its inability to affirm values; one that elects reason as the means to access the truth and one that suspects reason due to its inability to accept its own limits; one that manufactures utopias and another that affirms existence's roughness; finally, one that embraces the world quite naturally and another that constantly finds it strange.

These two forces, these two ways of conceiving the world could be applied to philosophy and it wouldn't be difficult to map out the *naturalist* and *artificialist* philosophers (Almeida, 2012). We could even approach this as two aesthetics, two ethics or two mythologies, because the core issues at stake are the presuppositions, explicit or not, that guide our ways of living, thinking and acting, our worldviews, our existential perspectives. For the present discussion, we will focus on how these two perspectives arise in works of cinema and the pedagogical uses of cinema, seeking an understanding of their instructive aspects.

Screen, Window and Mirror

To transform cinema into entertainment, hobby or distraction is akin to numbing the viewers, pulling them out of their daily routine without necessarily instigating reflection or thought, not allowing them to question the life they endure. That's because it both ideologically and aesthetically condones the reinforcement of conventions, recognizing the presented landscape as reality itself.

We could enlist many examples in this sense, but it suffices to mention

Hollywood adventure films, which have their heroic lexicon widely disseminated. Good and evil, hero and villain are easily recognizable, as well as the motivation to fight, the apothecic ending with the great battle followed by the reward, which is most often the arms of a woman. More than a cliché, it's a whole genre. And what purpose do genres films serve if not to segment their audiences?

My interest is not to criticize, condemn or degrade the so-called commercial, entertainment or mass culture cinema, but to point out that there are many interests at play in the exploitation of cinema as a consumer product; among them, the obstruction or annihilation of its formative role. As a distraction

or pastime, cinema becomes a kind of *break*, a *vacation*, an activity of *rest* in between *serious*, *important* or *significant* activities. Its thought-inducing potential is thus subtracted, as well as the possibility of thinking against itself. Once transformed into an *illusion*, as though its function was to apprehend or represent reality – a flawed representation in any case, whether cinema, photography, literature, science or philosophy – its questioning, destabilizing, challenging exercise becomes void.

Philosophers must then take the word in defense of cinema:

The great film authors seem comparable – not only to painters, architects, musicians, but also to thinkers. They think with movement-images and time-images rather than concepts. The overwhelming proportion of nullity in cinematographic production does not constitute an objection: it is no worse than in other areas, but it has incomparable economic and industrial consequences. The great cinema authors are then simply more vulnerable, it is infinitely easier to prevent them from realizing their work.

(Deleuze, 1985, p. 8)

Deleuze (1985, 1990) devotes two of his works to the defense of cinema as thought, working with the concepts of movement-image and time-image. By means of sequencing shots, classic cinema editing would be responsible for creating a sense of movement or movement-image. By means of another *modus operandi*, modern cinema breaks with temporal linearity, exposing the manipulation of time, begetting time-image.

Under this perspective, cinema becomes conscious of operating movement-images and time-images. It is thus able to think about and against itself, aware that it does not *represent* the world, but *proposes* a world, as if it was exposing, beyond its images, its own language, or, in other words, the conditions for its existence.

How can we forget Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*? After traveling through the yard that serves as the set, the camera comes in through James Stewart's window, shows the sweat drop on his forehead, his pajamas, his leg in a cast, a photo camera, car photos, and magazines piles; that is, the entire situation is visually displayed. We know that it's morning; it's hot, and that the photographer is immobilized due to a car accident. The film teases us with the maybe morally objectionable idea – if we believe in the discussions put on screen – that when we watch a movie, we are as voyeuristic, curious or nosy as the protagonist, who insists on giving meaning to the scenes he enjoys from his window. What does he know about the lonely neighbor lady? How can he judge the dancer based only on the images he sees through the window? How can he infer, without witnessing, and only through thought signs, that the husband murdered his wife? We comply with his view, even if we doubt his theories, in a clear metaphor that cinema is like a window, as long as we do not rush to believe

that what it shows is real, and thus, the truth. What we see through the window is not facts, but interpretations, possibilities, hypotheses. We are continuously adding our personal repertoire to these images. This is the dynamics of imagination: images always say very little, it is us who complete their imperfections, their gaps and lack of clarity, despite all their sharpness.

Another example of this awareness that cinema has, or seems to have, of its power of dialogue between vigilance and dream, fact and version, reality and illusion, what happened and what could have happened, shows up in Eizo Sugawa's *Rare Floating Dreams* (1980). The film is somewhat unknown and the filmmaker is underappreciated even in Japan, which complicates its distribution (it was never released in digital format), but it has a unique richness. It is for this reason that I paraphrase the film before commenting on it.

Shuji, a middle-aged man, is in a hospital with an immobilized leg after an accident and, due to the scarcity of beds, he's forced to share a room with a woman patient named Mutsuko. Separated by a fabric screen, both immobilized, they engage in a nocturnal conversation about poetry. She teases Shuji's imagination. He accepts the game and goes on to describe how the love between them would be in a highly erotic atmosphere. At the height of the dialogue, the camera travels towards the window (another screen) where we see the snow flapping on the glass, in a metaphorical allusion to the couple's relationship.

The next morning, the fabric screen is removed for a brief moment; enough for Shuji to realize that Mutsuko is an old woman. A few months after, Shuji is working in his company's employee rehabilitation office when Mutsuko calls and schedules a meeting. We see her coming out of the subway, behind a glass shield (another screen) that reflects his image over hers and she looks like she is forty years old. We then learn that she is sixty-seven and that after ten days of a deep slumber, she began to rejuvenate. They go to a hotel to realize the love they once imagined. The camera leaves the couple and settles on the hotel's window (again, the screen). We simultaneously watch the outside and inside images: the sex scene reflected on the glass with the sky in the background.

Months later, Mutsuko returns even younger; Shuji considers leaving his work, his family (wife and son), to live with her. This time she appears at dusk, in the rain. She is wet and Shuji sees her through a glass door (always the screen). The light inside reflects his image on the glass. Before opening the door, he turns off the light in order to better see her, in a possible reference to the darkness of the movie theater, which is needed for the clarity of the projected images. In a beautiful sequence, she is about to give herself to him as if it is the first time. She feels like a virgin and tells him that her body controls her emotions. Her sixty-seven years of experience are worthless, her body makes her feel like a girl with emotions overcoming reason.

After another time shift, Shuji finds a rebellious and fickle teenager Mutsuko wearing a short skirt, acting impulsively and carrying a gun, although she's

fully aware of her situation and her love. Shuji is reported to the police for pedophilia. We find out that the complainant, a middle-aged man, is Mutsuko's son who's looking for her to resolve inheritance issues. Obviously, he doesn't recognize his mother in that adolescent body, even if he intuitively guesses she has something to do with the case. The fact is that the contrast is evident: despite being her son, he looks old enough to be her father.

Shuji is arrested and brought to trial for the crime of pedophilia, bringing scandal to his family; a family that does not understand him. The ending comes with Mutsuko's last appearance, looking like a six or seven year old child, but with the lucidity and reasoning of her actual sixty-seven years of age. Shuji asks her how she buys her clothes by herself. She replies that she bought them while she was a teenager and asks him if they can take a bath together. After the conversation between an adult man and a little girl in the bathtub, the last scene shows Shuji walking along a sidewalk with Mutsuko on his lap. They say goodbye, she insists that it's necessary to do so, and leaves him, alone in the crowd. The camera and Shuji get stuck, as we see her further and further in the distance, losing herself in the crowd, in the same way we lose the memory of our dreams in the flow of being awake.

Mutsuko is like a cinematic image, always appearing by means of (through) a screen, but in the movie the screen is torn and she fulfills Shuji's desires. In a certain way, cinema works like floating dreams. Images hover on the screen and for a while that world is real-like, even if we must say goodbye to those images afterwards, like Shuji did to Mutsuko. However, we are not near the end, but the beginning. The film's ending is like a return to ourselves; to our dreams, our beginnings, hence the strong image of the child for whom all possibilities are open. Cinema, like dreams and desires, renovates us; not in an optimistic sense, as if we could be young again, but in the sense of putting us in touch with our most intimate obsessions, our fears and anguishes, our unspoken or even rare desires.

For French philosopher Clément Rosset (2010, p. 14), a film is like a long dream while the dream is like a "micro-film"; both have a script, picture, director and producer, but while cinema interests a certain audience, the dream is only of interest to the dreamer. *Rare Floating Dreams* doesn't try at any point to convince us that Mutsuko is real. Therefore, at no point does it suggest it may be a dream, hallucination or deviation, nor does it appeal to a pseudoscientific explanation. We immediately accept the dual reality of the image (Aumont, 1993). We know it's a surface, a mere projection, but we simultaneously accept what it displays. We know it's the Mutsuko image and not Mutsuko herself we're seeing. We believe in her rejuvenation, not because it is *rationaly* possible, but due to cinema's proximity to reality which always offers *another* reality, or even another *scene* of reality (Rosset, 2010, p. 56). Thus, we believe in Mutsuko's rejuvenation because Shuji believes in it, because we see her rejuvenate-

nated, because it's possible to *believe* in the projected image, since we know it's an image and not reality, or rather, it is "just an image and not a just image", to remember Godard (quoted by Rosset, 1985).

We must finally highlight, in regards to this film, that Mutsuko's apparition always appears intercepted by a *surface*, a screen, or a *glass*. Initially, it is the cloth screen that separates the hospital beds. Aren't we also separated from cinematographic reality exactly by the screen on which the film is projected? Haven't we the impression that we can jump into the screen, or rather, that the character will jump out into our reality as the main character does in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985)? In this sense, doesn't the recent growth of three-dimensional technology, or 3D, explore precisely the phenomenon of the picture jumping out of the screen, beyond the more realistic illusion of depth?

Back to the film in scrutiny. Mutsuko is shown at least three other times behind a glass or projected over the surface of a transparent glass, as if we were constantly being warned that it is an image, or the projection of an image, or a reflex (perhaps a reflection) of an image. Would it be the same if we were dreaming? Yes, as long as if during the dream we'd be conscious that it's a dream - a thesis proposed by Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* (2006). He transfers the protagonist's undefined zone to *our* reality, so that during the film we too forget what is a dream and what is reality, although we never forget that it's just a movie.

In *Rare Floating Dreams*, Mutsuko also appears intercepted by a camera screen as a frozen image that can be reviewed, as an evocation of an occurred reality that's forever lost because it's attached to a past that cannot be relived like the present, but remembered as image or through an image.

Another memorable scene is when Shuji comes home arguing with his wife. We observe them approaching, until the woman throws a shoe towards the camera, i.e. in our direction, but the shoe hits the mirror and shatters it. The broken mirror and the couple's fragmented reflection coincides with the moment when we discover that the picture was not *real*, but a mirror reflection. Hence, if the film screen can be as transparent as glass, that is, a window that opens up to another landscape, it can also be as opaque as a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected (or projected), albeit with the serenity of knowing ourselves to be safe, comfortably seating on our seats. That's what Clément Rosset (2010, p. 26) argues when he claims that we are carefree *voyeurs* in cinema (while in the real world the *voyeur* is always concerned): we watch everything without ever getting caught.

These examples support the previous statement, at the beginning of this section, that cinema is self-conscious of being an art, a language and a possibility. This is important in order to understand the formative character of the cinema, and how it can build a formative itinerary.

Formative Itineraries

Any process of comprehension is an exercise in translation (Steiner, 2005). Thus, “reading and interpretation are ultimately a ‘translation’ that gives life, that lends life to the cold, dead work piece. Through ‘translation’, my own language becomes one with the creator’s” (Durand, 1998, p. 252). This applies both to written text and film.

Therefore, the viewer’s relationship with the film may even be a pastime, entertaining or fun, but the cinematic possibilities will never be reduced to the evasion of reality. This same *distancing* from what’s real is a necessary step to understand cinema, especially if that is the interest of those who *use* cinema not only to *think it*, but to think about the world through it.

Deleuze (1990) expresses the same point when he says that the cinematic view transforms the real into the imaginary at the same time it becomes real to give us back reality. A similar idea was developed by Clément Rosset (1985) who comprehends cinema’s impossibility of *fixating, or apprehending* reality. Though it can project views about reality, cinema actually makes up its own reality, *another reality*, that is not too distant from ours, but one which dialogues with it, in order to question, destabilize, problematize, denaturalize or make it less *serious*, less important, less heavy.

Not every film, just as not every viewer, fits into this scheme, but universality isn’t required here; it is more interesting to think of the issue of its *formative possibilities*. There’s not a just a single, unique, formative itinerary in cinema, as, for example, there is with the scholastic, almost uniformly promoted everywhere in the world, so that even the educational evaluations tend to get *globalized*. Man’s social homogenization does not matter here, but rather his anthropological *difference*, i.e. the possibilities of ways to exist in the world (Santos Ferreira & Almeida, 2011).

We then return to the initial question of a division, both of film and pedagogy, in relation to their possibilities. In cinema and the formative itineraries, interpretative and assimilative processes that permeate the long road to human (self) formation (Ferreira-Santos & Almeida, 2012, p. 142-145), provide the possibility of escaping from the pre-established discourses about the *meaning* of the world, of reality, mankind, life, sexuality, ethics etc. If there is a cinema that presents the projected world as equivalent to the real world, there is on the other hand a cinema that is only a possible scene of what’s real, another reality, or another scene of this same reality. The same options take place with the pedagogy, which oscillates between the attempt to restrict its teachings to a *unique* version (the supposedly true version) and the refusal to admit that any language can account for the reality to which it refers, opting instead for *possible interpretations*, by the continuous distrust of all discourses, including cinematic ones, ranging between opacity and transparency (Xavier, 2005).

In this sense, Rosset (1985) differentiates between cinema that seeks an exact image of what's real and cinema that is satisfied with just one more picture of what's real. The former believes in the possibility of cinematically apprehending reality, although it can only present preconceived discourses about reality (representation); in this case, an image would be equivalent to a pre-supposed meaning of what's real, an interpretation, a discourse about reality (p. 57). When cinema shows just an image, this image does not wish itself totality, but to be one more image, a possible proposition of the world (and not the representation of the possible world), that is, a cinema that knows that it's no more than images. This kind of cinema doesn't aim to represent reality, but finds its reality in the fragmentation and reordering of the images of reality. The reality projected on the screen will only become real insofar as the viewer accepts the fruition game, that is, he/she admits that it's just an image, but that it can be viewed *as it was* real. Thus, the more he/she dilutes him/herself in the film's reality, the more distant he/she is from reality itself. And it is this detachment, this *experience*, this *passage* onto another reality that allows for a gain in the return to the actual reality. The lights come on, the credits roll, and we can reflect about what we have just seen (search for an intellectual benefit from the filmic experience), we can reflect about how we feel in relation to the movie (search for a psychological benefit), or we can simply try to forget what we saw (as we forget a dream when waking up) and go back to quotidian activities. In any of these reactions, we leave the movie different from when we came in. We're more or less happy, bored, thoughtful, troubled, and finally, we leave with the need to place ourselves again in the world. This exercise of constantly placing ourselves in the world because a movie has disoriented or displaced us is what constitutes the formative character of cinema. The equation between the sum of these moments, the subtraction of many others, multiplied by the discourses that cross us, will result in our (self) formative itineraries.

Let us not forget the symbolic forms to which Cassirer refers (1994, p. 234): "Like all other symbolic forms (philosophy, science, religion), art is not a mere reproduction of a given, ready reality. It's one of the means that leads to an objective view of things and human life. Not an imitation but a discovery of reality."

Therefore, by discussing our view of the world, the others and ourselves, cinema - especially when understood in its formative facet, which is one among possible others - provides a pedagogical effect that the pedagogy of explanation or communication and transmission of knowledge does not accomplish: that of placing ourselves simultaneously before and distant to a given reality. We enjoy and suffer not what life delivers us, but what is projected on the screen. We participate without commitment in other lives and realities. Just like in flight simulators, where pilots learn their craft without crashing real airplanes, the cinema also teaches us ways of living, though we do not actually have to put all of those ways of living into practice.

To conclude, for many people cinema probably does not rise to the level of thoughtfulness detailed above nor can it reach that far, since its seduction may be alienating, its interests may be reduced to business, its themes may succumb to morally degrading appeals and its influence can be as malignant as that of the novellesque literature of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. In other words, that cinema is more dangerous than educational. But perhaps this interpretation does not apply only to films; perhaps it extends to reality as a whole. And then, if it is indeed so, we will have to make a final division of pedagogy: those that have as their aim to affirm what's real, even in its unpleasantness, and those that are satisfied with the fantasy of a better world, even if it means paying the price of delusion.

Such mingling of displacement and depth of exposure to new realities enables the development of skills such as analysis, evaluation and reasoning – especially towards media – which are among the core competences of media and information literacy.

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