ETHICS IN FILM PHILOSOPHY (CAVELL, DELEUZE, LEVINAS)[1].

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Resumen

En este trabajo se explora el cine como una forma de pensamiento ético y no como una ilustración de casos éticos o de cuestiones éticas en el cine. Esta forma de pensamiento no consiste en una serie de valores morales trascendentales desde donde se pueda juzgar la consistencia buena o mala de los actos, sino que más bien es un modo de examinar los estilos de pensamiento relacionados a los modos de existir en la contingencia del tiempo, y por tanto en las posibilidades de transformación y encuentro de uno mismo con el mundo. Para ello se desarrolla una comprensión de las resonancias entre las concepciones del cine como pensar ético en Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze y Emmanuel Levinas, dado que en los tres el movimiento y el tiempo, que son materia de las imágenes cinematográficas son formas de creer en el mundo, en sus poderes de transformación y por tanto en el encuentro con otro que no es representable, y por lo cual éticamente es el fundamento del pensar sobre el mundo. Stanley Cavell

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presenta una imagen en movimiento del escepticismo que nos permite reconocer cómo podemos devenir presentes a nosotros mismos, donde el perfeccionismo emersoniano es la expresión no teleológica de un deseo de cambio, que resuena con la ética cinemática de Gilles Deleuze como la fe en este mundo y sus posibilidades de cambio. En Deleuze las dos formas de cine como imagen-movimiento o imagen-tiempo, son dos direcciones éticas: una como transformación del mundo por la humanidad y la otra como la confrontación con el tiempo anticipatorio de la contingencia, donde el pensar y la vida son inseparables, liberando la imagen de su forma de identidad y restaurándole el potencial del devenir y la recurrencia eterna. Finalmente, en Levinas el cine es la presencia originaria de la alteridad que desafía el dominio de la mirada y la coherencia del yo.

Palabras clave: tiempo, contingencia, alteridad, elección, ética, transformación.

Abstract

In this work, we explore cinema as a form of ethical thought and not as an illustration of ethical cases or ethical issues in cinema. This way of thinking does not consist of a series of transcendental moral values from which a judgment of acts as good or bad could be made; rather it is a way of examining the styles of thought related to ways of existing in the contingency of the time, and therefore in the possibilities of transformation and the encounter of oneself with the world. For this, an understanding of the resonances between the conceptions of cinema as ethical thinking in Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze and Emmanuel Levinas is developed, given that in all three movement and time, which are the substance of cinematographic images, are ways of believing in the world, in its powers of transformation and therefore in the encounter with an other that is not representable, and because of that it is the ethical grounding of thinking about the world. Stanley Cavell presents a moving image of skepticism that allows us to recognize how we can become present to ourselves, where Emersonian perfectionism is the non-teleological expression of a desire for change, resonating with Gilles Deleuze's cinematic ethics as faith in this world and its possibilities of change. In Deleuze the two forms of cinema as movement-image or time-image are two ethical directions: one as the transformation of the world by humanity and the other as the confrontation with the anticipatory time of contingency, where thinking and life are

inseparable, liberating the image from its form of identity and restoring to its potential of becoming and eternal recurrence. Finally, in Levinas, cinema is the original presence of alterity that challenges the domain of the gaze and the coherence of the self.

Keywords: time, contingency, alterity, choice, transformation, ethics.

1. Ethics in film philosophy (Cavell, Deleuze, Levinas)

At the beginning of the Epilogue to his *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer asks: «What is the good of the experience of cinema?»[3]. The phrasing of the question clarifies what it means to bring ethics and cinema together as a philosophical problem. Kracauer does not want to know if a particular film or filmmaker is «ethical», nor is the question the basis for making moral judgments of art works and their makers. His asks, rather, how do we evaluate our *experience* of the movies, meaning in what ways do the movies offer themselves as a medium for an interrogation of our selves, of our relationship to the world, and to other beings? In other words, how do movies solicit and sustain the possibility of ethical thought?

Aesthetics and ethics do not make an obvious pairing, much less film and moral reasoning.

Kracauer is among the first to offer an explicitly ethical question to film theory, and in so doing he places the study of film along some of the most ancient lines of philosophical reasoning. From at least the 5th century B.C., the activity of philosophy has been characterized by two fundamental questions: How do I know, and how shall I live? The latter is the most self-evidently ethical question. Yet how can the quality of one's thought be separated from the choice of a mode of existence? Both questions demand a reflexive examination of self, in its possibility of knowing itself and others, and in its openness to change or not. What links philosophy today to its most ancient origins are the intertwining projects of evaluating our styles of knowing

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3   Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 285. Printed.

and examining our modes of existence and their possibilities of transformation. In this way, an ethics is distinct from the usual sense of morality. Morals refer ordinarily to a transcendental system of values to which we conform or against which we are found lacking. An ethics is a immanent set of reasoned choices. In ethical expression, we evaluate our current mode of existence, seeking to expand, change, or abandon it in the effort to achieve another way of living and another form of community. *Philosophein* entails the expression and justification of this existential choice and its representation of the world.

Stanley Cavell is undoubtedly the contemporary philosopher most centrally concerned with the problem of ethics in film and philosophy, above all through his characterization of an Emersonian moral perfectionism. However, in Cavell's Emersonian ethics there are also curious and powerful echoes with Gilles Deleuze's Nietzschean and Bergsonian perspectives on cinema, wherein movement and time are related as the expression of belief in the world and its powers of transformation. Unlike Cavell or Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas never wrote extensively on cinema. Nevertheless, a brief account is appropriate here in that Levinas has been the inspiration for a recent emphasis on ethics in film philosophy.

2. Stanley Cavell: skepticism and moral perfectionism

Two principle ideas unite Cavell's writings on film and philosophy. These are less separate ideas than iterations of the same ethical problem that succeed one another more or less chronologically. Familiar to any serious reader of Cavell's works, then, are the philosophical confrontation with skepticism and the concept of moral perfectionism.

A moving image of skepticism

Why is film so important as the companion or exemplification of a confrontation with skepticism? One clue resides in the title of an important Cavell essay, «What Photography Calls Thinking». What does it mean to say that images or art *think*, or that they respond to philosophical problems as a way of thinking or a style of thought? In

the first phase of Cavell's film philosophy, represented by the period surrounding the publication of *The World Viewed*, the responses to this question are ontological and epistemological. In Cavell's sense, an ontology of film is less concerned with characterizing a medium than with understanding how our current ways of being in the world and relating to it are "cinematic." In its very conditions of presentation and perception, cinema expresses skepticism as the realization «of human distance from the world, or some withdrawal of the world, which philosophy interprets as a limitation in our capacity for knowing the world». It is perhaps the principal theme of *The World Viewed* that the advent of photography expresses this distance as the modern fate to relate to the world by viewing it, taking views of it, as from behind the self[4].

In one way, in conveying the impression that all we can know of the world is that we have perceptions of it, film embodies the modern skeptical attitude. Film responds to a specific and profound desire: to view the world as it is or was, but anonymously and unseen. This sense of invisibility, in which the world is screened from us as much as we from it, is in Cavell's view:

> (…) an expression of modern privacy or anonymity». It is as though the world's projection explains our form of unknowness and our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition[5].

Here the screen functions as neither medium nor support, but rather as a barrier as much conceptual as physical —it is a philosophical situation embodied in photography and film itself comprising our present (but perhaps passing) ontology as a self divided from the

4   Cavell, Stanley, *Cavell on Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. Printed, pp. 115-133.

5   Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed. Enlarged Edition,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. Printed.

world by the window of perception—. The history of skepticism is complex, however, and this desire also expresses a longing to maintain or regain contact with this world *through* our perceptions of it. In feeling that our hold on the world was confined to our perceptions of it, we began to invent machines for perceiving the whole of the world.

If cinema presents "a moving image of skepticism," it neither exemplifies nor is analogous to the skeptical attitude. Rather, cinema expresses both the problem and its possible overcomings. The quality of "movement" in this philosophical image is temporal or historical in a specific sense. In its situation of viewing and encountering the world, cinema presents philosophy's historical dilemma (skepticism's perceptual disjunction from the world) as past, while orientating the modern subject towards a possible future. If, as Cavell argues, the reality that film holds before us is that of our own perceptual condition, then it opens the possibility of once again being present to self or acknowledging how we may again become present to ourselves. (Indeed Cavell's examination of cinema's relation to the fate of skepticism helps clarify later a Deleuzian cinematic ethics as faith in *this* world and its possibilities for change.) For these reasons, film may already be the emblem of skepticism in decline. Cinema takes up where philosophy leaves off, and this is why cinema both presents and replies to the skeptical attitude —the almost perfect realization of skeptical perception is a way, paradoxically, of reconnecting us to the world and asserting its causal presence—.

Emersonian moral perfectionism

Cavell's ontological characterization of cinema in the early seventies is already an ethics as the expression of our modern sense of the self as divided from the world, and from other minds, by the screen of perception. In the major books that follow, culminating in *Cities of Words*, the temporality of this epistemological condition is reconsidered as a question of art and ethical evaluation. The key concept here is what Cavell calls *moral perfectionism* as the non-teleological expression of a desire for change or becoming, which is often precipitated by a sense of existential crisis.

This turn to more explicitly ethical or moral problems is an expansion and a deepening of Cavell's account of cinema as

exemplifying the subjective condition of modernity as itself suspended between a worldly or epistemological domain and a moral domain. In both cases, cinema confronts the problem of skepticism. In the first instance, this is an epistemological disappointment in that we are disconnected from the world by our own subjectivity —all we can know of the world is from behind the screen of our consciousness—. The second responds to a moral disappointment in the state of the world or with my current mode of existence. This division is not only formal, it is also temporal. As Kant posed the problem, the province of understanding, of knowledge of objects and their causal laws, defines the modern scientific attitude whose formidable power derives from making time an independent variable.

What is unknown in the natural world could not become known through the powers of causal reasoning if the rules could change in the course of time. But the problem that so provoked Kant was that intemporal reason was in conflict with moral freedom. To be human is to experience change. So how might philosophy characterize humanity as at once subject of understanding *and* of reason, as subject to causal relations and expressive of moral freedom? Given that as material creatures we are in bondage to the empirical world and its causal laws, philosophy's task is to explain how we are also free to experience and to anticipate change in the projection of future existences.

In Cavell's account, moral perfectionism takes us from the form of skepticism to the possibilities of human change, and to the deeper moral problem of evaluating our contemporary mode of existence and transcending it in anticipation of a better, future life. In the first stage, the problem is to overcome my moral despair of ever knowing the world; in the second, my despair of changing it and myself. Thus, Cavell's interest in Emerson (or in Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, or Freud) is to heal this rift in philosophy exemplified as Wittgenstein's disappointment with knowledge as failing to make us better than we are or to give us peace. Alternatively, moral perfectionism begins with this sense of ethical disappointment and ontological restlessness, catching up the modern subject in a desire for self-transformation whose temporality is that of a becoming without finality. "In Emerson and Thoreau's sense of human existence", Cavell writes, «there is no question of reaching a final state of the soul but only and endlessly taking the next step to what Emerson calls 'an unattained but attainable self'» —a self

that is always and never ours— «a step that turns us not from bad to good, or wrong to right, but from confusion and constriction toward self-knowledge and sociability»[6].

Comedy and community; irony and privacy

The seven comedies of remarriage discussed in *Pursuits of Happiness* and the four melodramas of the unknown woman addressed in *Contesting Tears* are united, then, by the common ethical concern for "working out the problematic of self-reliance and conformity, or of hope and despair, as established in the founding American thinking of Emerson and of Thoreau" (Cavell 2004: 9). In these films (no less than Cavell's readings of Shakespeare), the quarreling couples of remarriage comedies and the unknown women of melodrama are exemplary of the human capacity to withstand and overcome skepticism's doubts concerning commerce with community and the world. Across the two genres, the drama of moral perfectionism addresses a common set of concerns: (re)marriage as the reaffirmation of community, the demand for an education, and the metamorphosis of the woman as the creation of the human.

The dilemmas confronted in both genres are not dissimilar from what Michel Foucault characterized as «the care of the self». In the comedies, this takes the form of the problem of sustaining marriage in the dynamics of conversations where the other is acknowledged as the vehicle for new self- knowledge and a transformation of self. «The issues the principal pair in these films confront each other with», Cavell explains:

> (…) are formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, what it would be best or right for them to do, than by the question of *how they shall live their lives*, *what kind of persons they aspire to be*. This aspect or moment of morality —in which a crisis forces an examination of one's life that calls for a transformation or reorienting of it— is the province of what I

6   Cavell, Stanley, *Cities of Words*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. Printed, p. 13.

emphasize as moral perfectionism[7].

Conversation becomes here the modeling of a form of life where talking together is being together or learning to speak the same language, both socially and sexually. These «diurnal comedies», as Cavell calls them, thus project a mode of existence where acknowledging another person, and being acknowledged in turn, is a way of reestablishing intimacy with the world in its dailiness. In this remarriage comes to signify:

> (…) the two most impressive affirmations of the task of human experience, the acceptance of human relatedness, as the acceptance of repetition. Kierkegaard's study called *Repetition*, which is a study of the possibility of marriage; and Nietzsche's Eternal Return (…) a heightening or ascension of time; this is literally *Hochzeit*, German for marriage, with time itself as the ring. As redemption by suffering does not depend on something that has already happened, so redemption by happiness does not depend on something that is yet to happen; both depend on a faith in something that is always happening, day by day[8].

The comedies thus project —through the dilemmas of marriage, domesticity, and the social everyday— the question of maintaining equality between human beings based on Emersonian qualities of rightful attraction, expressiveness, and joy. The melodramas, however, express problems of privacy, or qualities of self-reliance that demand this expressiveness first in relation to oneself. These films present the impossibility of marriage, expressed as the problem of a self in need of a transformation, not only from joylessness to self-acceptance, but also as the assertion of an independent place within a community of equals. Similarly, the unknowness of the melodramatic heroines is marked by an inversion or negation of the comedic mode of discourse. Where the comedic couples regain acknowledgment of

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7   *Íbid.,* p. 11.

8   Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. Printed.

and responsiveness to one another, the characteristic conversational mode of the melodramas is ironic, serving to block communication and social interaction. The unknown woman of the melodramas does not share a language with those around her raising the question, in the context of skepticism, of her isolation within her pictured community and therefore from us, the film spectators.

In their unknowness to us and their isolation from the community that surrounds them, the women in these melodramas embody the skeptical dilemmas of the world held at a distance and the isolation from other minds. And if skepticism is overcome through acknowledgment, sociability, and conversation, then the unknown women of the melodramas must find adequate partners in dialogue. The solution is their selves as the discovery of a new mode of self-reliance. In Stephen Mulhall's account, what the melodramas express is «a mode of metamorphosis which is a route toward a new or original integrity that can be (at least provisionally) achieved in isolation, a personal change without social interchange».[9]

In the context of moral perfectionism, the melodrama of the unknown woman amplifies the problem of self (re-)creation or of creating new states of self. «It can thus be thought of as involving a relation between two selves», Mulhall explains:

> (…) or rather two states of her self: condemned by the world of her film to a mode of existence in which she at best haunts the world, she stakes her life on her capacity to envision a further state of her self which it is within her power to realize or enact. She permits this vision of an unknown but knowable future self to attract her away from her present self, to initiate her self-transformation, her refusal of her world and its conditions to initiate and maintain her refusal to conform. Thus the melodrama of self-reliance involves a doubleness within the self, a capacity for self-transcendence which amounts to a movement from one state of the self to another, an avoidance of fixation or repetition

9   Mulhall, Stephen, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

and an openness to the unknown future.[10]

Cavell's profund contribution is to show film as the ordinary or quotidian expression of the deepest concerns of moral philosophy, concerns which academic philosophy may itself have abandoned. And just as Wittgenstein sought to displace metaphysical expression into ordinary language and daily concerns, film brings moral philosophy into the context of quotidian dramatic expression. In Cavell's account:

> These films are rather to be thought of as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of, but which, perhaps, it has cause sometimes to turn from prematurely, particularly in its forms since its professionalization, or academization. (…) The implied claim is that film, the latest of the great arts, shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture[11].

The great project of film philosophy today is not only to help reinvigorate this moral reflection, but to heal by example the rift in philosophy's relation to everyday life.

3. Gilles Deleuze: a cinematic ethics of movement and time.

One important bridge between Deleuze and Cavell's thought on cinema and moral reasoning is their mutual interest in Nietzsche. Another is their original way of asking ethical questions in ontological contexts. Though Cavell uses the word frequently and Deleuze rarely, both evaluate ontology as the ways of being that art provokes in us —or more deeply—, how film and other forms of art express for us or return to us our past, current, and future states of being. There is also an important contrast with Cavell. Part of the difficulty of Deleuze's thought has to do with his choice to ignore or circumvent the dilemmas

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10   *Íbid.*, pp. 242-243.

11   Cavell, Stanley, *Cities of Words*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. Printed, p. 6.

of skepticism. Throughout his career Deleuze turned consistently to philosophers for whom the division of the thinking subject from the world was ontologically irrelevant; hence, his recovery of a path alternative to Descartes leading from Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche to Henri Bergson.

An emphasis on ethics appears late in Deleuze's work, and specifically in the two books on cinema, *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*. In Deleuze the fundamental ethical choice is to believe in this world and its powers of transformation. How does his avoidance or circumvention of the history of skepticism and Cartesian rationalism inform this question? Although Deleuze was not known for his love of philosophical systems, Alberto Gualandi has astutely recognized his commitment to two principles, which may be considered the basis of his ethics as well as his more general philosophy. The first is Spinoza's "pure ontology," or doctrine of *the univocity of Being*. For Spinoza, there is no division between humanity and nature, but only one absolute and unique substance for all that exists; all attributes and identities are only different manners of being for this substance, or different modalities of its expressiveness. As Gualandi explains:

> (…) the principle of univocal Being affirms the absolute *immanence* of thought in the world as it exists, as well as the categorical refusal of any form of thought *transcending* the Being of things in whatever form of the supersensible. For Deleuze as well as Spinoza, the intuition of the univocity of being is the highest intellectual expression of love for all that exists[12].

This doctrine of a single expressive substance inspires a first ethical principle: the choice to believe in *this* world, the world in which we exist now, alive and changing, and not some transcendent or ideal world. This is also an affirmation of thought's relation to the world, as the movements of thought in relation to those of matter differ only in their ways of expressing a common being or substance.

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12   Translated from Gualandi, Alberto, *Deleuze*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998. Printed, pp. 18-19.

The second principle is that of *Becoming*, wherein the univocity of Being is characterized by its relation to movement, time, and change. Here substance is connected to force as self-differentiation, producing a universe of continual metamorphosis characterized by Bergson as «creative evolution». Becoming is the principle of time as force, and time is the expressive form of change: the fact that the universe never stops moving, changing, and evolving, and that no static picture could ever be adequate to this flux of universal self-differentiation. The highest expression of this force is what Nietzsche called eternal recurrence.

Welles, Nietzsche, and the powers of the false

The ethical stance in the cinema books is fundamentally Nietzschean. Deleuze characterizes a Nietzschean ethics as encompassing two related activities: interpretation and evaluation. «To interpret», Deleuze wrote earlier, «is to determine the force which gives sense to a thing. To evaluate is to determine the will to power which gives value to a thing»[13]. "Interpretation" would relate to Deleuze's theory of film semiotics, which is too complex to address here. Alternatively, what philosophy must evaluate in any expression, including aesthetic expression, are its possibilities for life and experimentation in life.

To evaluate is to ask: *What mode of existence is willed in a given expression?* From Nietzsche's vitalist perspective, all is a question of force, and ethics involves characterizing forces by evaluating the qualities of their will to power. For example, there are fatigued or exhausted forces that can be quantitatively powerful, but which no longer know how to transform themselves through the variations they can affect or receive. Deleuze finds this will to power expressed in the films of Orson Welles where characters such as Bannister in *Lady from Shanghai* or Hank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* are the bodily expressions of a certain impotence: «that is, the precise point where the 'will to power' is nothing but a will-to-dominate, a being for death, which

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13   Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Printed, p. 54.

thirsts for its own death, as long as it can pass through others»[14]. These are characters who only know how to destroy or kill before destroying themselves. And no matter how great the forces these characters exercise or represent, they are exhausted and incapable of transformation.

This *ressentiment* or spirit of revenge is often paired in Welles' films with a blind will to truth as moral judgment. Thus Quinlan is paired with Vargas, or Iago with Othello. The latter are "truthful men" who judge life in the name of higher values:

> They (…) take themselves to be *higher men*; these are higher men who claim to judge life by their own standards, by their own authority. But is this not the same spirit of revenge in two forms: Vargas, the truthful man who invokes the laws for judging; but also his double, Quinlan, who gives himself the right to judge without law; Othello, the man of duty and virtue, but also his double, Iago, who takes revenge by nature and perversion? This is what Nietzsche called the stages of nihilism, the spirit of revenge embodied in various figures. Behind the truthful man, who judges life from the perspective of supposedly higher values, there is the sick man, 'the man sick with himself', who judges life from the perspective of his sickness, his degeneration and his exhaustion. And this is perhaps better than the truthful man, because a life of sickness is still life, it contrasts life with death, rather than contrasting it with 'higher values'[15].

Ethics is not a question of passing judgment on these figures as if from some higher moral ground. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze (and Welles) want to do away with the system of judgment to evaluate, rather, modes of existence in their relation to life. «[It] is not a matter of judging life in the name of a higher authority» Deleuze writes: «which would be the good, the true; it is a matter, on the contrary, of

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14   Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1989. Printed, pp. 140-141.

15   Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1989. Printed, pp. 140-141.

evaluating every being, every action and passion, even every value, in relation to the life which they involve. Affect as immanent evaluation, instead of judgment as transcendent value»[16].

Going "beyond good and evil," however, does not mean renouncing ideas of good and bad, or in Nietzsche's parlance, noble and base. What is base is an exhausted, descendent, and degenerating life, especially when it seeks to. propagate itself. But the noble is expressed in a blossoming, ascendant life, capable of transforming itself in cooperation with the forces it encounters, composing with them an ever- growing power, «always increasing the power to live, always opening new 'possibilities'»[17].

There is no more "truth" in one life than the other: there is only becoming, descendant or ascendant, and life's becoming is "the power of the false," a noble will to power. "False" here is not opposed to the "true," but rather allied to an aesthetic or artistic will, the will to create. The base will to power is the degenerative becoming of an exhausted life with its destructive and dominating will. But the noble will to power is characterized by a "virtue that gives"; it is an artistic will, the becoming of an ascendant life that creates new possibilities for life and experiments with new modes of existence. If becoming is the power of the false, then the good, the generous, or the noble are what raises the false to its highest creative or transformative powers — a becoming-artist. If there is exhaustion in this aesthetic life, it is put in service to what is reborn from life through metamorphosis and creation. Deleuze writes:

> These are two states of life opposed at the heart of an immanent becoming, and not an authority that would pose itself as superior to becoming in order to judge or dominate life, thus exhausting it. What Welles sees in Falstaff or Don Quixote is the 'goodness' of life in itself, a strange goodness that carries the living toward creation. It is in this sense that one can speak of an authentic or

16 *Íbid.,* p. 141.
17 *Íbid.,* p. 141.

spontaneous Nietzscheanism in Welles[18].

Choosing to choose: virtual conjunctions and any-spaces-whatever

The Nietzschean moral universe defines an ontology of descent and ascent, destruction and creation, a base will to power fueled by *ressentiment* and the will to truth, and a creative or artistic will that affirms life and its powers of transformation while seeking out possibilities for enhancing these powers and this life. Between these two wills lies the deepest ethical problem: the problem of choosing a mode of existence defined by the possibility of choice.

The problem of the choice of a mode of existence first occurs in the pages of *The Movement- Image* devoted to "lyrical abstraction," a style found principally in the films of Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. Deleuze is writing here, first, of the qualities and powers of affect in the image, especially in the treatment of light. This affection-image is distinguished from other types of movement- images through its virtuality or potentiality. With their pure pre-signifying quality, affection-images present "virtual conjunctions" —possibilities for meaning and emotion expressed not in a determined and meaning-laden space, but in "any-space-whatever" (*espace quelconque*)—. Affection-images are ready to act or to signify, but one does not yet know in what direction or with what meaning. They are the virtual expression of choices yet to be accomplished.

What lyrical abstraction exemplifies in the construction of any-spaces-whatever are scenarios of undetermined choice. Deleuze turns here to Pascal and Kierkegaard as emblematic of a new approach to ethics in modern philosophy, where moral dilemmas are less a matter of selecting from a limited set of alternatives —the lesser evil or the greater good— than the expression of the mode of existence of the one who chooses. The first case means persuading oneself of the absence of choice, or to remain in ignorance of the power to choose, either because one believes in moral necessity (this is my duty, or this confirms to an ideal of the Good), or that the situation presents no

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18   *Íbid.,* pp. 141-142.

viable alternatives, or that one is condemned by an inescapable drive or desire. What Deleuze calls "spiritual determination," however, presents the possibility of choosing a way of life along with the philosophical reasoning that accompanies it. Here the essence of moral reasoning is awareness of the choice between choosing or not-choosing exemplified by Pascal's wager:

> (…) the alternation of terms is either the affirmation of the existence of God, its denial, or the suspension of doubt and uncertainty. But the spiritual alternative is something else—it is between the mode of existence of one who 'wagers' that God exists and the mode of existence of one who gambles on non-existence or who does not want to bet. According to Pascal, only the first is conscious of the possibility of choosing; the others are only able to choose in ignorance of the choices confronting them. In sum, choice as spiritual determination has no other object than itself: I choose to choose, and in this act I exclude every choice made in the mode of not having a choice[19].

From Pascal to Bresson, and Kierkegaard to Dreyer, Deleuze identifies an ethical typology of characters whose moral choices typify different modes of existence that swing from belief in the inescapability of a moral path to those who choose the possibility of choice. Of the former Deleuze characterizes three types of characters and modes of existence. First there are the "white" men of moral absolutes, of God and Virtue —the perhaps tyrannical or hypocritical guardians of religious or moral order, as in the priest-judges of Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc*—. There are then the grey men of uncertainty or vacillation, as in the protagonists of Dreyer's *Vampyr*, Bresson's *Lancelot du lac*, or *Pickpocket*. Thirdly, there are creatures of evil and the blackness of drives: Hélène's vengefulness in *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne*; Gérard's wickedness in *Au hazard Balthazar*; the thievery of *Pickpocket* and Yvonne's crimes in *L'argent*. These are all instances of false choice or decisions made from denying that there is or may still be a choice.

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19   Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Pres, 1986. Printed, p. 114.

Deleuze's reading of lyrical abstraction is close to the ethical interpretation of Nietzche's eternal return. We are not caught by the absolute values of darkness and light, or even the indecisiveness of grey. Rather, the possibility of "spiritual determination," indeed what Cavell might call moral perfectionism, is a choice not to be defined by what is chosen, «but by the power choosing possesses of being able to start again at each instant, to restart itself, and to affirm itself of itself, by putting all the stakes back into play each time. And even if this choice means sacrificing the character, this is a sacrifice made in full knowledge that it will recur each time, and for all times»[20].

From classic to modern cinema: the crisis in belief

This passage already anticipates the problems raised by modern cinema in *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*. The organic representation of the movement-image is based on connections that are "rational" as well as real. The term "rational" indicates a formal relation that assures the continuity of shots within each segment, the spatial contiguity of one segment to another, and the dialectical unity of parts within the whole of the film. But these rational connections also have an ethical dimension —they are expressive of a will to truth—. They express belief in the possibility and coherence of a complete and truthful representation of the world in images, and of the world in relation to thought, that is extendible in a dialectical unity encompassing image, world, and subject —hence Sergei Eisenstein's belief in the utopia of an intellectual cinema and of a direct relation between image and thought—.

In Deleuze's account, however, modern cinema is inaugurated by a crisis in this organic image and a corresponding crisis in belief. The recurrence of Bresson and Dreyer in the second volume demonstrate a deep connection across the two books. There is less a break between modern and classic cinema than a shift in the concept of belief, where the direct image of time restores or gives new expression to a potentiality always present, always renewable, within film's

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20   *Íbid.*, p. 115.

expressive movements. If the ethical stance of the cinematic movement-image is expressive of a will to truth, then that of the direct image of time is given in powers of the false that challenge the coherence and identity of organic representation. For Deleuze, modern cinema emerges from a profound and global crisis of belief, experienced as a tragic gulf between humanity and the world. Five characteristics drive the emergence of the new images and the crisis of belief they express and respond to. First there is a formal crisis of organic or synthetic representation that produces a tendency toward elliptical and decentered narratives with multiple protagonists. Secondly, this crisis promotes the breakdown of the sensori-motor or causal logic of classical cinema that results in de-linking of images one from the other, as well as the spectator's relation to those images in a synthetic whole. Having no synthetic relation, one to the other, images are drained of their powers of representation and proliferate as "clichés," banalities as well as fragmentary and insignificant images.

The forms of modern cinema are, thirdly, disconnected spaces and "irrational" relations. The virtual conjunctions of any-spaces-whatever already anticipate these irrational breaks where contiguity and succession are interrupted with aberrant movements and temporal discontinuities whose gapped narratives suggest a direct image of time as a non-spatial perception—time as force, potential, or recurrent becoming. With neither causality nor teleology directing the unfolding of images, nor a given totality in which they can be comprehended as a Whole, the powers of non-determined choice anticipated by affection-images are raised here to a new power. Consequently, and fourthly, there arises within the universe of modern cinema a new moral type defined by her sensitivity to "pure optical and acoustical situations" and her susceptibility to "wandering forms" (*la forme-balade*) —affective situations where characters stroll or stray without obvious goals, destinations or motivation—. Best exemplified by Ingrid Bergman in Rossellini's great post-war trilogy — *Voyage in Italy*, *Europa 51*, and *Stromboli*— the protagonists of modern cinema wander and observe. They transmit sights rather than motivating movements and actions:

> (…) the character becomes a kind of spectator. She may move, run, or stir restlessly, but the situation in which she finds herself

overflows her motor capacities on all sides, making her see and hear what no longer justifies a response or an action. She registers more than reacts. She surrenders to a vision, which she pursues or which pursues her, rather than engaging in an action[21].

Finally, this modern cinema is subject to a generalized paranoia, sensitive to conspiracy and suspicious of all forms of totality. In this, «the pure optical and acoustical situation does not extend into action, any more than it is induced by an action. It makes us grasp, or it is supposed to make us grasp, something intolerable, unbearable. It is matter of something too powerful or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, that henceforth exceeds our motor capacities»[22]. In sum, the time- image produces characters and affective situations marked by a perceptual sensitivity to the intolerability of a world where faith and confidence in representation have disappeared: «The idea of one single misery, interior and exterior, in the world and in consciousness»[23].

The subtle way out

The cinematic movement-image and time-image, then, appear as two ethical directions: one a transformation of the world by humanity, or the Eisensteinian belief that one can construct an image that makes thought happen; the other is Antonin Artaud's intuition of an interior, deeper, and higher world "before man" as it were, produced from a shock to thought or by thought's confrontation with what is unthinkable. This is a confrontation with a time which is not that of Being, identity, or teleology, but rather an anticipatory time of contingency, the purely conditional, the non-determined or not yet.

As in Kracauer's late theory, a European pessimism pervades Deleuze's cinematic ethics. The confrontation with post-war

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21   Deleuze, Giller, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 198. Printed, p. 3 (translation modified).

22   *Íbid.*, p. 18.

23   *Íbid.*, p. 209.

destruction, genocide, and the collapse of the grand narratives of ideology and utopia mark the decline of belief, expressed as a crisis in the organic image of thought. For Deleuze, modernity is experienced as a kind of traumatism. The break in the sensori-motor whole and the emergence of pure optical and acoustical situations…

> (…) makes man a seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought. Between the two, thought undergoes a strange fossilization, which is as it were its powerlessness to function, to be, its dispossession of itself and the world. For it is not in the name of a better or truer world that thought captures the intolerable in this world, but, on the contrary, it is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself. The intolerable is no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of daily banality. Man *is not himself* a world other than the one in which he experiences the intolerable and feels himself trapped[24].

The problem then becomes: how to restore belief in a world of universal pessimism, where we have no more faith in images than we do in the world?

In the pure optical situation, the seer is alienated both within herself and from the world, but she also sees farther, better, and deeper than she can react or think. This augmentation of the powers of sight and of sensitivity to the injustices of the world may give the appearance of passivity, or an impotence of thought before that which is intolerable to consider. But for Deleuze the solution is not to quail before the thought that there is no alternative to this or any other situation. What Deleuze calls the «im-powers of thought» demand a revaluation of our perceptual disjunction from the world that makes of it the possibility for a new faith and a new thought. The problem of skepticism is here radically reconfigured. It is not that we are perceptually disjoined from the world. But rather that self, sight, and thought are divided

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24   *Íbid.*, pp. 169-170.

from within and from each other by time, or by the force of time's passing. What is outside of thought that thought must confront as the unthought is our existential and ethical relationship to time as an infinite reservoir of non-determined choice, which is also an ontology where life and thought are inseparable.

What Deleuze calls the «subtle way out» of this dilemma has already been introduced through the concept of lyrical abstraction — to commit to a mode of existence in which one chooses out of faith in the link between world, thought, and life—. An arc must be drawn between the *Movement-Image* and the *Time- Image*, where new thought is generated in experiencing the powerlessness to think, just as new alternatives emerge in confrontation with the inability to choose:

> Which, then, is the subtle way out? To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which nonetheless cannot but be thought (…). We should rather make use of this powerlessness to believe in life, and to discover the identity of thought and life[25].

For Deleuze, the basic fact of modernity is that «we longer believe in this world». However, much is explained by emphasizing that «we no longer believe in *this* world», that is, the world present to us, in which we are present, and which comprises the present time we occupy as a constant becoming:

> It is the link between man and the world that has been broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief, as the impossible that must be given back in faith. Belief is no longer addressed to another world, or a transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical or acoustical situation. The reaction of which man is dispossessed can only be replaced by belief.
> Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees

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25   *Íbid.*, p. 170.

and hears. Cinema must not film the world, but rather belief in this world, our only link. One often questions the nature of cinematographic illusion. To give us back belief in the world— this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being shoddy). Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia *we need reasons to believe in this world*[26].

From Eisenstein to Artaud, the ethical problem for Deleuze is to understand that the traumatic unlinking of being from the world is yet more powerfully a leap towards faith in life, in *this* life or this world and its powers of self-transformation. The time-image's powers of the false do not show that the image is an illusion, nor do they replace a false perception with a true one. Rather, they release the image from the form of identity and restore to it the potential for Becoming or eternal recurrence. From the cinematic movement-image to the time-image, from Pascal to Nietzsche, and in the cinema of Rossellini and Dreyer, a great shift occurs in philosophy, replacing the model of knowledge with that of belief as if in a conversion from piety to atheism, and moralism to morality. One should emphasize here that knowledge is based on a faith no less than belief; namely, the will to truth and a belief in humanity's technological domination of nature. But even among the "pious" philosophers, belief no longer turns towards another, transcendent world, but is directed rather to *this* world, the one in which we exist. In Deleuze's account, what Kierkegaard or even Pascal assert in the concept of faith is something that returns to us humanity's link with the world and with life. Hence, belief only replaces knowledge when it elicits belief in this world and its future-oriented powers.

Deleuze's ethics is a moral reasoning that wants to give back to us a belief capable of perpetuating life as movement, change, becoming— the eternal recurrence of difference. And rather than yearning for another transcendent or transformed world, we must believe in the body and the flesh, in the substance of the world and the world as substance, returning to them all their one and unique voice.

26   *Íbid.*, pp. 171-172.

Belief must then be reconnected to the two principles of Deleuze's system. Skepticism is the sign of a thought disconnected from life comprised of a single substance and a time of constant becoming. But Being and thought are in life; they speak with a single voice and become in the same time, such that skepticism must be overcome with another will to power, which draws its energy from life's potential for self-differentiation, and moralism overcome by choosing to believe in the ever-renewable possibility of beginning again—eternal recurrence.

4. Emmanuel Levinas: time and the Other

An influential figure in post-Heidegerrian French phenomenology, the originality of Emmanuel Levinas was to argue the priority of ethics to ontology. Like Cavell and Deleuze, Levinas avoids identifying ethics with a "moralism," that is, a prescriptive set of laws or codes. Rather, he sought the phenomenological sense of ethical relatedness. Levinas considered ethics a "first philosophy" that finds its origins in the primordial experience of responsibility for the other. Neither identity nor totality can be the first concern of philosophy in that they invariably signify a violent reduction of difference to sameness, the Other to the Same—a condition that Levinas refers to as war.

As in Cavell's concept of moral perfectionism and Deleuze's reconsideration of eternal recurrence, Levinas considers time a central feature of his ethics. In *Reality and its Shadow*, his only philosophical writing devoted explicitly to aesthetics, Levinas argues that the only reality of concern to being is inspired by the ethical relation —the time of the encounter with the Other—. Contrariwise, art doubles being with "resemblance," a caricature of being, and captures time in a cycle of identical repetition. Art does not involve us in ethical time, but rather in an *entre temps* or "between time," a suspended time whose emblematic figure is the statue where the becoming of a work of art is a congealing of being, not its unveiling. Here the Image no longer expresses the future, freedom, contingency or openness to others characteristic of the ethical relation. The time-based arts like cinema or music are not exempt from this condition, and may even embody it through the experience of "rhythm" —a dispossession of the self in time—. Therefore, neither identity, image, nor art can dislodge us

from the return of the same, but only the encounter with "the face" of the Other.

To comprehend what Levinas might offer to an ethical film philosophy, then, one must confront how his rejection of art might be redeployed or overcome. In *Selfless Cinema?* Sarah Cooper offers several points of contact between Levinas and contemporary film study. First, Levinas is a key figure for the philosophical context informing the post-war French phenomenological film theories of Henri Agel, Amédée Ayfre, André Bazin, and Roger Munier. The turn to Levinas also broadens more recent phenomenological explorations of film in the work of Alan Casebier and Vivian Sobchack. In this context, Levinas or Merleau-Ponty are seen as important alternatives to Lacanian theories of the cinematic apparatus that pose identification in the form of a transcendental subject. Moreover, in asserting the priority of ethics to ontology, Levinas is also a powerful alternative to cultural studies and identity politics. Levinas' ethics is thus important to an approach to filmmaking, and to spectatorship, based on a non-reductive relationship to alterity founded on the non-coincidence of vision and knowledge. This would be a cinematic ethics that challenges the powers of vision and visibility as well as the equation of sight with knowledge and control.

In the respect, film philosophy remaps Levinas' characterization of "the face" so as to replace the statue as an emblematic figure for the cinematographic image and our relationships to it. No doubt the face is a kind of image, or a relation to the image as the visible characteristics of our encounters with others. Yet the concept of the face indicates both a link and a displacement in our relationship to the Other or others. An encounter is always "face-to-face," an approach to the other from our own standpoint. In this respect, we share the spatial and temporal coordinates with the other, whose phenomenological relation with respect to our selves is reversible. But regardless of whether this encounter takes place in actuality, or say, through a photograph or film, the face has a visible side, which, ethically, is non-reversible and indicates a relation that is imperceptible and ultimately unknowable.

Rather than identifying with itself in a pure act of transcendental seeing, as in the psychoanalytic accounts of Jean-Louis Baudry or Christian Metz, vision encounters the originary presence of an alterity that challenges the dominance of sight and the coherence of the

self. As Cooper explains: «the face takes us out of the very relation it simultaneously creates: the Other always exceeds the idea I have of it, escapes my grasp, and thus breaks with the spatial symmetry that would equate my position with its own»[27]. In this respect, «the Other in Levinasian thinking is not a being to be seen. The ontological and the ocular offer nothing quite so locatable or dependable in the opening to alterity through the face, which escapes positioning as screen, be this object or subject»[28].

This is a reversal or redirection of psychoanalytic theories of image and identification in that the spectator's lack before the image is a kind of modesty or reticence; or rather, the acknowledgment that the image of others must itself be found lacking, or unable to transmit more than a partial knowledge of others. The encounter with the Other through the face thus becomes the foundation of an ethical relation surpassing the senses or any phenomenology based on sight. And to the extent that it exceeds not only representation but the idea of the concept itself, one may tend to compare it to the Kantian sublime or even the non-spatial perception of the Deleuzian time-image. But the face is not force nor does it call for thought. The transcendent power of the face, in which ethics precedes ontology, is a call to responsiveness with respect to the Other, a responsiveness that demands I relinquish my control, mastery, or possession of the other as an image. What Levinasian film philosophy seeks in the concept of the face, then, is the sense of an image that seeks neither control nor mastery of what it represents. It is a way of encountering others through images that neither mirrors nor projects onto them the prejudices of our own self-conception.

27   Cooper, Sarah, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary*. London: Legenda, 2006. Printed, p. 18.

28   *Íbid.*, p. 19.

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