



Cinematic Thinking

Room 327, Robert Webster Building | December 6th-8th, 2011

Mathew Abbott
University of Sydney

Greg Hainge
University of Queensland

Robert Sinnerbrink
Macquarie University

Damian Cox
Bond University

Marguerite La Caze
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Richard Smith
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Lisa Trahair
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Film as Philosophy
Understanding Cinematic Thinking

an Australian Research Council Discovery Project

Workshop on Cinematic Thinking: Timetable

Tuesday, Dec. 6th

- 11.00 Welcome
- 11.15 **Jean-Philippe Deranty**, 'Seeing the birth and the limits of thought'
- 12.15 **Gregory Flaxman**, 'Once More, With Feeling: Toward a Haptic Cinema'
- 1.15 *Lunch*
- 2.00 **Lisa Trahair**, 'Belief and the Spiritual Automaton in *Breaking the Waves*'
- 3.00 *Afternoon tea*
- 3.15 **Mathew Abbott**, 'Kiarostami's Picture Theory: Cinematic Scepticism in *The Wind Will Carry Us*'

Wednesday, Dec. 7th

- 10.00 **Jane Stadler**, 'Phenomenology of Emplacement and Displacement in Australian Cinema'
- 11.00 *Morning tea*
- 11.15 **Marguerite La Caze**, 'I've never met a me': Philosophy and identity in *D'ailleurs Derrida*'
- 12.15 **Paul Macovaz**, 'Jean Epstein's Aesthetics : Some Philological Analysis'
- 1.15 *Lunch*
- 2.00 **Damian Cox**, 'Philosophical Film Spectatorship'
- 3.00 *Afternoon tea*
- 3.15 **Mairead Phillips**, 'Alfred Hitchcock and the impulse-image'

Thursday, Dec. 8th

- 10.00 **Greg Hainge**, 'Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* and the Biocinematic Imaginary'
- 11.00 *Morning tea*
- 11.15 **Robert Sinnerbrink**, 'Philosophy in the boudoir: Cinematic critique in the films of Catherine Breillat'
- 12.15 **Richard Smith**, 'Simultaneity, action and the intuition of time'
- 1.15 *Lunch*
- 2.00 Future directions

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'Kiarostami's Picture Theory: Cinematic Scepticism in *The Wind Will Carry Us*'

For Stanley Cavell, modern philosophical scepticism is simultaneously correct and confused: correct because it intuits that the human relation to the world is epistemically unassured; confused because it takes this as a problem to be solved. The former claim is ontological; it is what Cavell calls the 'truth of scepticism' (*The Claim of Reason*, 241). The latter claim is historical; it is that philosophical modernity is characterised by a rage to know. This rage sees us distort the truth of scepticism: by raging against it, we fail to acknowledge it; we come to take it as a deficit in our knowledge. This is why the philosophical task for Cavell is not to solve the problems of scepticism, but to reorient us in relation to them. The task is to own up to the fact that 'the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing' (241).

In this paper, I am interested in how the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami might help us in this task. Kiarostami's cinema is interested in what happens when the grounds for knowledge dissolve; it is characteristic of his films that both the viewers and protagonists of them are faced with the impossibility of distinguishing between the real and the artificial. Yet part of the specific charm of Kiarostami's movies consists in how this dissolution is handled: not as an occasion for fear or horror, but as an occasion for acknowledgement. Kiarostami's is a didactic cinema: it is concerned with teaching us (Cavell: 'Philosophy is the education of grownups' (125)). Further, this is an education in looking, in seeing things differently; as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, Kiarostami's cinema is concerned with 'a possibility of looking that is no longer exactly a look at representation or a representative look' (*The Evidence of Film*, 10). For these reasons, Kiarostami's work – of which I take *The Wind Will Carry Us* to be perhaps the best and most perspicuous example – can help us think what it would mean to give up the philosophical rage that condemns us to waver between a fantasy of certainty and the horror of finding it lacking.

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'Philosophical Film Spectatorship'

In this paper I sketch an answer to the question, what is a philosophical film? A recalcitrant obstacle to answering this question is something Thomas Wartenberg calls the 'imposition problem'. Can a film be philosophical even if it is not deliberately or intentionally created to be philosophical? How might philosophical interpretations of such films avoid becoming impositions of extraneous philosophical material upon what are essentially non-philosophical works? I propose to answer the question indirectly. On my account, a

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philosophical film is one that encourages and rewards philosophical film spectatorship. Philosophical film spectatorship is a particular mode of experience of a film: it is primarily a way of watching, not merely a way of interpreting or exploiting what one has already watched. On this account, it does not matter whether a film has been intentionally constructed to encourage and reward philosophical spectatorship; to count as philosophical, it is enough that a film in fact encourages and rewards philosophical spectatorship. I offer a sketch of philosophical film spectatorship and what it is about films that encourages and rewards it. I illustrate how films can encourage and reward philosophical film spectatorship quite independently of the intentions of film-makers.

Jean-Philippe Deranty, Macquarie University
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'Seeing the birth and the limits of thought'

This paper focuses on the circular relationships between film-images and thought so well explored by Deleuze: the fact that film-images produce forms of thought which act on the brain, but do so through the mobilisation of mental material produced by brain processes independent of film. The paper tries to show that a rich philosophical model to enlighten the complex, circular relations between brain and images is to be found in Hegel's genetic account of thought as progressive elaboration of mental images. Notwithstanding Deleuze's sharp disjunction between classical and modern cinema, which led him to rank Hegelian dialectic as a model of 'classical' montage no longer apt to capture our new 'relation to the brain', the paper reconstructs the layers of mental functioning delineated by Hegel to account for the rise of thought out of a primary, 'unconscious treasure of images' through the different processes of the imagination. With the help of Hegel's model, the paper argues, one can develop a more precise understanding of cinema's paradoxical capacity simultaneously to show the birth of thought and its inherent limits.

Gregory Flaxman, University of North Carolina
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'Once More, With Feeling: Toward a Haptic Cinema'

This talk begins at a point when the question of affect seems to have reached a kind of theoretical impasse or exhaustion in film studies. Once upon a time, film theory made 'visual pleasure' the object of renunciation, but over the last thirty years affect has been excavated, analyzed, avowed, and (in no uncertain terms) affirmed. The prescriptions of defamiliarization have given way to a thoroughgoing immersion—but to what end? The methods of alienation have given way to immanence—but what does this mean? In response, this talk considers the more or less recent 'haptic turn' of film studies as both the symptom of its impasse (the pathology of the discipline) and the possibility of its transformation. By drawing out a genealogy of the term from its art

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historical origins to its evocation by Gilles Deleuze, I hope to recast the concept of the haptic and to re-envision the cinema as a 'plane of immanence.' Doubtless, this ambition suggests an overarching theory, but my point in this talk is to produce a more finely grained articulation by reckoning with Robert Bresson, whose films remain the touchstone for Deleuze's sense of the haptic. Indeed, Bresson invents a tactile and tactical style that's unmistakable in the history of the medium, and it is in light on his three great films of the 1950s—*Diary of a Country Priest*, *A Condemned Man Escaped*, and *Pickpocket*—that I want to pose the question of a haptical cinema once more.

Greg Hainge, University of Queensland

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'Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* and the Biocinematic Imaginary'

In this paper, I will trace a series of articulations between Gaspar Noé's film *Enter the Void* (ETV) and a biomedical imaginary in order to posit the concept of a biocinematic imaginary. Specifically, I will examine the use of imagery in Noé's film that draws on the aesthetics of biomedical imaging technologies, but will also attempt to trace links between the interdependent relation of life and death that is found in both biomedical imaging technology projects such as the Visible Human Project (VHP) - and anatomical knowledge more generally of course - and the diegesis of the film which draws heavily on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The relationship between life and death will be seen to be of importance not only in the film's diegesis, but also in the point of view perspective that the film adopts following the main protagonist's death. Indeed, the viewing position adopted throughout the film will be seen to have more in common with a 'flythrough' perspective found in the reanimated images of bodies and organs in the VHP than with any perspective to be found in the repertoire of classical or even avant-garde cinema. Within the film, this technique is used not only in those sections drawing on biomedical imaging aesthetics, but as a general principle for the entire diegetic space of the film, all of which becomes a reanimated (in all senses of the term) virtual space.

In the final section of this paper, I will suggest how this analysis might be said to constitute an extreme example of the kind of radical reimagining of cinematic space found in Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema. More than this, however, I will suggest that this digitally reanimated space that enables a literalisation of Deleuze's concept of 'any space whatever' (and that would not have been possible during this philosopher's lifetime, even though he only died in 1995) has, in the context of ETV, important ramifications for analyses of the phenomenology of spectatorship. Indeed, just as there resides in anatomical knowledge a central paradox, namely that it is 'a science of life that owes a problematic debt to death' (Waldby: 117), so I will suggest that a deleuzian analysis of the kind of on-screen space seen in ETV has important ramifications for a consideration of the phenomenology of film spectatorship. This same paradox will be seen to reside in this reconsideration of the phenomenology of cinematic spectatorship since this science which sets out to understand the cinematic spectator's sensory engagement with the cinema may in fact require the death of that subject.

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“I’ve never met a me’: Philosophy and identity in *D’ailleurs Derrida*”

Derrida’s philosophy is presented in a distinctive way in *D’ailleurs Derrida*, a film by Safaa Fathy (1999). The not-meness of any identity is shown and yet the film allows the audience to capture the tone and cadence of Derrida’s speaking voice and his philosophy. The marrano’s marrano shows how silence, the not-said, the pauses are essential to his texts. What he says about his life may be said of anyone who always exaggerates: ‘I am the luckiest and happiness person in the world and yet I am destitute, sad, impatient, jealous...’ ‘I’ am these contradictions and so is anyone and yet this is Derrida. Like Jean Améry, Derrida stresses the impossibility of being who he is; and yet we experience through the film the other side, the necessity of being Derrida. Ultimately the film works by giving Derrida the location and space to speak his philosophy. We feel the presence of Derrida as he evokes absence.

Paul Macovaz, University of Sydney
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‘Jean Epstein’s Aesthetics : Some Philological Analysis’

Towards the end of the thirties Jean Epstein began to pose fundamental questions regarding the cinema in an increasingly philosophical language. Indeed, it seems that Epstein thought that the cinema’s importance lay in its capacity to reformulate certain age-old philosophical problems. Rarely, if ever, at least in English, have Epstein’s later writings been subjected to the sort of careful analysis, both with respect to their philosophical diction, and in terms of their place in the history of writings on the philosophy of art particularly prominent in the German tradition from Baumgarten onwards.

Although I can’t yet offer the thorough hermeneutic analysis of Epstein’s later writings that the above problem seems to require, I will try to shed light on some of its aspects in considering two book-length studies Epstein published shortly after the war, *L’intelligence d’une machine* (1946) and *Le cinéma du diable* (1947). Amongst the unpublished documents now housed at the Fonds Epstein in Paris there are several drafts of a dictionary of sorts Epstein worked on under the title ‘Les contre-pensées’. In it terms such as ‘dimension’, ‘number’, ‘irrational’, ‘fire’ are discussed in an anecdotal but enlightening manner. I will investigate some of the connections between these three documents, and what they mean for the way we understand Epstein’s notion of the cinema more generally.

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'Alfred Hitchcock and the impulse-image'

Alfred Hitchcock is the director singled out by Gilles Deleuze in his cinema books, as having invented 'the image of mental relations.' As such, Hitchcock is uniquely positioned 'at the juncture of the two cinemas, the classical that he perfects and the modern that he prepares' (Deleuze 1986: x). While Hitchcock is without doubt a relation-image director, his output is not solely limited to producing this type of image. My paper demonstrates the importance of the impulse-image to Hitchcock's relation-image scenarios. Without the impulses of the ordinary world, from within which Hitchcock's determined milieux communicate intimately, his films would be mere logical exercises, unable to account for the violence they exhibit and generate. By bringing this additional dimension to light, this paper presents a comprehensive and illuminating new way of understanding the singularity of Hitchcock's cinema.

Robert Sinnerbrink, Macquarie University
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'Philosophy in the boudoir: Cinematic critique in the films of Catherine Breillat'

James Quandt coined the phrase 'new extremity' to capture the new wave of explicit sex and extreme violence in French cinema during the late 1990s and early 2000s, an aesthetic trend in European cinema that has since been described as the 'cinema of sensation' (Martine Beugnet) or 'cinema of the body' (Tim Palmer). This intriguing wave spans various genres including psychological horror, realist drama, philosophical pornography, crime thriller, road movie, and the rape revenge story. Despite these films' shock effects, their aesthetic of sensation conceals a deeper ethico-political significance that finds cinematic expression in traumatic and transgressive ways. The more artistically and philosophically challenging ones deploy explicit depictions of sex and violence in order to stage an affective and reflective form of *cinematic critique*: a critique accomplished through the aesthetic form and sensuous materiality of cinematic images. The films of Catherine Breillat provide performative instances of such cinematic critique, exploring the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of the phenomena of shame, masculine and feminine desire, sexual identity, gender mythology, and a questioning of conventional cinematic representations of sexuality and violence. I explore Breillat's provocative cinematic thinking in some of her explicitly 'paired' films: *À ma sœur!* [For my sister] (2001) and *Sex is Comedy* (2002), along with *Romance* (1999) and *Anatomie de l'enfer* [Anatomy of Hell] (2004).

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'Simultaneity, action and the intuition of time'

At a *Société de Philosophie* reception hosted for M. Einstein on April 26 1922, Henri Bergson stood to 'reconcile' a common sense intuition of time with Einstein's concept of relativity. The centrepiece of this 'reconciliation' was the by now popular experience of simultaneity. Einstein stood and in a blunt response refused Bergson's common sense intuition, closing his remarks with an unambiguous statement, '[t]here is no philosopher's time; there is only a psychological time that differs from the time of the physicist' (*Duration and Simultaneity*. Appendix V, 159). This paper uses the dispute between Bergson's philosopher's time and Einstein's physicist's time to reconsider questions of simultaneity in cinema, specifically as they pertain to synchronised actions, or timed-actions. The paper identifies a 'genre' of action films that do not so much derive from individual agency, masculine or otherwise, but from a modernist time sensibility. Peter Galison argues that during the mid 1860's and 1870's that the capillary extension of coordinated, or synchronised time 'intervened in people's lives the way electric power, sewerage, or gas did: as a circulating fluid of modern urban life' (*Einstein's Clocks*. 107). Heists and hijacks cut into this 'circulating fluid' and seek to either syphon value from it or to control its motion. The paper will examine a heist film, Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956) and a hijack film, Jack Sargeant's *The Taking of Pelham 123* (1974) to specify some of the mechanics of timed-action.

Jane Stadler, University of Queensland

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'A Phenomenology of Emplacement and Displacement in Australian Cinema'

From sun-blasted desert heat so searing that the reek of carrion, stale beer, and sweat is almost palpable in *Wake in Fright* (Kotcheff, 1971) to the deep and silent green of the gloomy canopy of dank, interlocking branches in *Van Diemen's Land* (*Auf der Heide* 2009), landscape often catalyses action in Australian film. Place frames identity and shapes our encounters with the world, as research on topology and dwelling by scholars as diverse as Jeff Malpas and Edward Casey acknowledges, yet cinematic landscapes form a special category of space that has received little attention by philosophers.

Building on a phenomenological method of film analysis that has, to date, taken embodiment and affect as its chief concerns, this paper develops a phenomenology of screen space derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and his claim that space is existential, and existence is spatial. I question how the experiences of displacement, emplacement, and mobility in the cinema draw attention to what it means to have a sense of place, arguing that film landscapes contribute to the production of environmental and geographic knowledge and extend spatial understanding beyond the horizons of personal experience

The screen represents the world and locates us within it yet it also, quite literally, screens what we see and hear and frames what we know. Interrogating the ethical and epistemological implications of the technologically mediated, synaesthetic experience of cinematic space is particularly important when geo-political concerns such as climate change and border control dominate the news. This paper, therefore, identifies received knowledge and attempts to set aside literary modes of analysis such as gothic symbolism, postcolonial critiques, and structuralist dichotomies on which film criticism has tended to rely in order to seek a new way of perceiving and understanding cinematic landscapes.

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'Belief and the Spiritual Automaton in *Breaking the Waves*'

It is arguable that von Trier's perverse and confronting interest in female masochism (*Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Dogville*) is an attempt to both undertake a historical reflection on the acculturated coextension of femininity and sacrifice and engage with a sensibility previously opened up to cinema by his compatriot Carl Dreyer. And yet in an essay on *Breaking the Waves* (1996), Stephen Heath characterises von Trier's work as 'a confused, restless film' that is muddled in its thinking as it wrestles with questions of good and evil by combining themes of love, religion and feminine sexuality. Other commentators have sought refuge from this 'muddled thinking' by arguing that the film works within an aesthetic of the sublime. The central protagonist Bess (played by Emily Watson) is understood by nearly everyone around her to be soft in the head or 'touched', but to the viewer what is remarkable is her extreme responsiveness to her immediate situation, her sensitivity to world in which she lives, her devotion in all senses of the word, and most significantly her belief that her actions interact spiritually with other existences independently of their corporeality. Half-way through the film she explains to the physician who will soon section her that everybody is good at something and her particular talent is belief. This paper approaches the question of cinematic thinking by examining how von Trier's female protagonists' acute sensitivity to the world is connected with the question of belief and considers how these characters articulate with the spiritual automaton that Deleuze finds in Dreyer's films.