

Real and Immanence in Cinema

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Abstract: The pair Real and Immanence makes reference to two concepts employed respectively by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. My proposal is that there is a strong affinity between these two concepts, and that they can contribute to clarifying a specific capacity of art, in particular that of cinema. According to scholars who criticize the application of psychoanalysis to the arts, psychoanalysis always misses what should be its object – the work of art – studying the artist’s unconscious (or characters’ unconscious) or the unconscious of the viewers¹. I think, rather, that it is possible to study the phenomenon of art using some psychoanalytical concepts, at the same time considering art in its formal procedures and not only in its narrative or figurative contents. I believe that considering artistic content as if it was a shell containing the unconscious of the author that leads fatally to a failure of interpretation². Instead, observing and pointing out the similarities between ordinary psychic processes and the experiences that we all have of art, cinema, in this case, is a decisive step towards clarifying some aspects of its nature and its features. In such a perspective, aesthetic experience is an experience that cannot be dissolved in ordinary life, because it maintains its own specificity, but it is not totally separate (something considered as a luxury, something that you can consider at the end, when the needs of other more “serious” dimensions of our existence have been satisfied). During the aesthetic experience of a work of art, or that of a film rich with aesthetic qualities, the constituent aspects of nature and human life appear visible, enhanced, intensified, and reconfigured. I therefore propose to think in this way the interplay between aesthetics and psychoanalysis, on the questions of the Real and Immanence: aesthetic experience is a space where some psychic processes of ordinary experience appear in a more intense way.

Keywords: Real; Immanence; Lacan; Deleuze; Aesthetic; Psychoanalysis.

1. Lacan from the ‘Thing’ to the ‘Sinthome’

In his theory, Lacan describes the Real as a register connected to two others: the Imaginary, that is, imagination, self-awareness, psychology,

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1 See Carchia (1982, 134).

2 As an argument against such idea of interplay between psychoanalysis and arts, see Gombrich (1966).

and the Symbolic, that is, language in a very broad sense, that of the law and symbolization, the cultural system in general. These three registers of human life are reciprocally connected in a 'Borromean knot' (named after the insignia of the Borromeo family), composed of three rings interlocking each other. The key point of this Lacanian idea is that such a node exists only if the three rings are interlaced; otherwise the knot unties itself. One dimension cannot be experienced without the others³.

The conceptual implications of these three registers change in Lacan's thought over the years. I will not follow all the changes, but I will sketch a description of the Real. First of all, I have to underline that the Real is not the same as reality. If reality is the world interpreted through our Imaginary and Symbolic faculties, then the Real is what places itself beyond reality, something obscure, intangible, and resistant to meaningful formulations. According to Lacan himself, the Real is somewhat complex and elusive. Our ordinary experience is always intertwined with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, through which what we call 'our' reality is established. Usually we perceive our own world in a representation that makes the Real manageable, under control, tamed by our representation, in one word: humanized. On the one hand, the Real escapes language even though, in a certain sense, it is its internal limit and, on the other, it is not Imaginary, not a ghost, not a hallucination of desire. What has to be stressed is that such a conception of the Real is inseparable by its own intersections with the Imaginary and the Symbolic⁴. This is the general idea simplified. Now, we can try to specify some characters of the Real according to Lacan, with a short exploration around a series of forms that the Figure of the Real assumes in Lacan's seminars.

1) Book VII of the Seminars, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), marks a turning point in respect to the primacy of the Symbolic. In fact, until book VI, on *Desire and its Interpretation* (1958-1959), Lacan seemed to assign a privileged position to this register. In particular, the Symbolic saves human beings from the hallucination involved in the Imaginary and the impossibility of the Real. Here, in book VII, part 1, titled *Introduction to the Thing*, the Real is the 'thing'⁵ as a silent and meaningless manifestation, showing that not everything signifies. The Real is the thing as mute, a thing inasmuch as it doesn't speak to us. Lacan proposes as an example the character of Harpo Marx, the 'terrible dumb' one among the

3 See Lacan (2013).

4 It can be useful to note that such a distinction does not apply to non-human animals that simply live where they live.

5 *Das Ding* in German, different from *Sache*.

Marx brothers, and his smile as one without meaning: an example of the mute and disturbing Real, the ‘beyond-of-the-signified’⁶. Harpo’s smile is joyful but disturbing, disconcerting, and Lacan asks if it is ‘extreme perversity or extreme simplicity’⁷.

2) Such a character, which is at the same time ‘disturbing’ and ‘joyful’, leads us to the question of *jouissance* (enjoyment), another complex notion in Lacan’s theory. First of all, we could say that *jouissance* is not simply a pleasure, but it is a pleasure that implies pain; it is a mixture of the libidinal and death drives. In reference to book VII of the Seminars, I quote Antonio Di Ciaccia, the Italian translator of Lacan:

the Real is ‘that bone, hard and refractory to every meaningful order. It is the first time that the *jouissance* (enjoyment), after passing from the Imaginary and the Symbolic, reveals itself as Real. [...] *Das Ding*, the Thing, means that the enjoyment, the drive satisfaction, doesn’t meet up in imagination, nor in the Symbolic, it means that you are outside of what is symbolized, and this is what Lacan calls the ‘Real’⁸.

So, the Real reveals itself as enjoyment, it is related to sex and death, to the body as something destined to die.

3) The reference to death paves the way to book XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964). In this seminar, Lacan says that the Real is what Aristotle in *Phisica* II called *tuché*, which can be translated as event, destiny, fate: that is, an unexpected meeting, or an always failed meeting, ‘*malvenu*’ (inappropriate). Lacan proposes the case of Aristotle’s example: I go to the agora and by chance the first person I meet is that one who has a debt with me: it is a fate, I was not thinking about the possibility of such an encounter (otherwise it would not be a case of *tuché*), but maybe it is what I was looking for without knowing it, that is, we could say, unconsciously. So, the Real is something that happens to me as an adventure, but at the same time something that, once happened (*après-coup*), reveals its own necessity. The *tuché* is the way in which the unconscious is realized. In this sense, *tuché* is the *encounter with the Real*⁹, something that has to do with that point where the maximum of randomness and arbitrariness meets the maximum of necessity, of inevitability. The Real, according to Lacan, is actually what surprises us in the middle of our life, a life during which we are used to acting while aiming at some explicit pur-

6 Lacan (1992, 54).

7 Ivi, 55.

8 Di Ciaccia (2013, translation mine).

9 Lacan (1998, 53).

poses. In this sense, the Real is the impossible: it is something not implied in our possibilities, not implied in our expectations.

4) As we have already seen, it seems impossible to grasp the Real without passing through the Symbolic and Imaginary, without transforming it into something different, that is, reality. However, over the years Lacan seemed more and more interested in the possibility of experiencing the Real. In book XXII, Lacan affirms: “I began with the Imaginary, I then had to chew on the story of the Symbolic [...] and I finished by putting out for you this famous Real”¹⁰. This is the sense of the unexpected appearance of such a word like *Sinthome*, presented as a title of book XXIII, *The Sinthome* (1975–76). ‘Sinthome’ is an old way of spelling the modern word “*Symptôme*”. The difference between the two words is that *Symptôme* (symptom) points at the symptom that we suffer, that repeats itself in a compulsive way. In this sense, the symptom is the Real of our body and our life in as much as we suffer it; *Sinthome* is our symptom seen through a new perspective, our symptom used in a creative way. The symptom is a message to be deciphered; the *sinthome* is a trace of the modality of a subject’s *jouissance*.

The protagonist of the seminar, and of some another writings by Lacan, is James Joyce, who converted his psychosis – his impossible Real – into something different and creative (a real experienced and enjoyed). According to Jacques-Alain Miller, one of the most important scholars of Lacan, Joyce did not decipher or decode his symptoms, he encrypted them in a different way¹¹. Writing *Finnegans Wake* (1928-38), his final work, in a largely idiosyncratic language, a book in which the words are skewed from normal meaning, Joyce transcribed his symptoms, according to Lacan; he converted his sickness into art, his compulsions into his way of life, his symptoms into his personal style as a human and as an artist. The meeting of Joyce with his symptom is an encounter with the Real made possible by its conversion into an artistic process.

Obviously, the issue of art in Lacan deserves a much more extensive analysis, but certainly we can affirm that the artistic process is a different way to treat the symptom. However, I would like to underline just two points about Lacan and art which will be useful when we approach cinema.

In chapter 9 of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan poses the question: *What is a picture?* His answer is: a picture is a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze; when one looks at a picture, one is led by the

¹⁰ J. Lacan, *RSI*, 1974-1975. *Livre XXII*, quoted in Mellard (2006, 49).

¹¹ See Miller (2004-2005).

painting to subdue the gaze, the very gaze which used to be always moved by desire, tormented by the gap, by envy. So, the painting gives something to feed to the eye, it gives something to see, and it offers to the viewer the possibility to direct one's glance at something that is quiet and finally to let it rest. In this sense, since the picture captures and tames the viewer's gaze, there is a forced meeting, an event, a contingency. This is possible only if the viewer is not looking for something specific, but, rather, if the particular image, or the work of art grasps the subject. This is the point upon which I wish to focus: it is the image that captures the gaze of the viewer, not vice versa. It is an encounter with the real as *tuché*, something that is always produced by chance, but, when it happens, reveals its necessity¹².

Such a process of being taken, of being captured by the painting is described by Lacan in the same seminar, some pages before (in chapter 8) as the function of the 'stain' of the picture: in every painting there is an element of discontinuity, a hole, a spot, a blind field, a stain that looks at me and challenges me. The experience is one of being observed without being seen.

This strange possibility is well exemplified by the episode of the sardine can, illustrated by Lacan in these pages: The young Lacan was on a small boat with a young fisherman. They passed next to an empty sardine can abandoned at sea, glittering under the sun. The fisherman said laughing: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!"¹³. Lacan didn't find this incident so amusing, and says: what he "said to me, namely, the can did not see me, had no meaning, it was because, in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, that point at which everything that looks at me is situated"¹⁴. He felt disturbed by such a blind eye, an impersonal gaze, the same impersonal gaze that starts out from a picture in order to capture the viewer.

I want to emphasize an aspect of what has been assumed until now: I believe that the power and force of Lacan's thought is that every register maintains a perfect ambivalence: the Symbolic is what damns us, because it separates us from our present, from life, from the Real; however, it is also what we are, as human beings, that is, as beings that speak; the Imaginary can conduct us towards hallucinations, but it is the way we have our relationships with our own image and with the images of others; the Real seems impossible to speak and is disturbing and can be traumatic,

12 It is something at the same time unwanted and unavoidable, to use the words of Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), about the concept of *punctum* in photography.

13 Lacan (1988, 95).

14 *Ibidem*.

but at the same time – converted into an other perspective – it can be an experience of fullness and enjoyment. To experience the Real, just for a moment, means to make contact with life.

2. Deleuze and Guattari on immanence

In Deleuze's works, behind the multiplicity of concepts, it is possible to recognize one sense, one direction: the impression that under the forms of representation there is a powerful 'non-organic' or 'non-organized' life. To destroy these forms of representation which imprison us and prevent us from exploring life itself, from making perceptible impersonal power, non-human forces – this is the ethical, affective, political, aesthetical, and philosophical impetus of Deleuze.

In *What Is Philosophy?* (1991), the last book published by Deleuze before his death, with Guattari, they thematize the issue of chaos as an immanent field characterized by a continuous movement, a field of virtuality defined not so much by confusion but rather by a fugacity. Philosophy has the task of thinking such an immanence, the task of giving consistency to this field, without transforming it into something different, without renouncing virtuality and infinity. Crosscutting chaos means, in fact, instituting what they call the 'plane of immanence': or, 'the image of thought, the image thought gives itself of what it means to think'¹⁵. The plane of immanence is an image constituted by an infinite movement and horizontality and by a superficial becoming which does not imply any transcendence.

Deleuze and Guattari write that the task of inhabiting the immanence of the surface and of becoming is at the same time unavoidable and impossible, because 'transcendence [...] takes advantage of the interruption to re-emerge, revive, and spring forth again'¹⁶. After all, it might seem that thinking is forced to reintroduce a thought via some vertical movement. Using an even simpler formula, it thus seems that we are faced with an *aut aut*: either transcendence or pure unthinkable chaos. At bottom, the attempt of thought to refute any transcendent order is a perennial struggle, and the question whether it is possible not to succumb to chaos gets transformed into the question whether there might exist a plane on which to think pure immanence without imitating anything transcendent.

The problem is: How to think or represent what seems to exclude any thought or representation? In fact, immanence is perfect horizontality,

¹⁵ Deleuze, Guattari (2011, 37).

¹⁶ Ivi, 47.

while every thought is a thought *of* something, that is, every thought is somehow in a vertical relation with what it thinks. So, how to think the immanence without turning it into something else, without reintroducing the transcendence? And yet: How to experience becoming? In fact, immanence is another form of becoming. Such a question is the only ethical question that Deleuze brings up, and he responds with the Nietzschean formula of the eternal return: to become what one already was, to believe in the *Real*, in this world, a world of which even the idiots are part, as Deleuze writes in *Time-Image* (1985).

At this point, it is possible to affirm that immanence can be thought as something very close to the concept of the 'pure Real' as we have just seen in Lacan¹⁷. Immanence is a vital dimension that seems *almost* impossible to grasp and to think without using the transcendent categories always used by us (in Lacan's terms, language, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary); that is, all forms of representation that separate us from the real of our immanent life. Experiencing the real, or immanence, is an unavoidable and almost impossible task. On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari – as well as Lacan with his concept of the Real in his last teachings – propose some ways to face such a dilemma.

In *What is Philosophy?*, among the ways in which thought faces chaos, the authors do not only mention philosophy, but also the modalities of science and art. If the specific content of philosophy is concepts, the content of science is functions, and that of art is the composition of sensible aggregates. These three forms of thought and creativity are associated by the drive to face the chaotic variability of life. These convergent and resonant activities somehow meet each other because they all attempt to solve, with their own specific instruments, the very same problem. So, what are the differences in their ways of tackling this incumbent and necessary dimension? Philosophy establishes a plane and proposes some concepts giving coherence to chaos; science penetrates matter, slowing it down and operating on chaos 'like a freeze-frame'¹⁸. But what about art? How does art intervene on the chaos of pure immanence?

First of all, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the main feature of art is that of *preservation*, that is, the creation of a block of sensations which gains immediate independence from their model, from the eventual audience as well as from the artist. It seems surprising that Deleuze – the philosopher of difference, of philosophical practice as creative activity – proposed the term 'preservation' for qualifying art. But, affirming the auto-positioning

¹⁷ Ronchi (2015) affirms a similar idea.

¹⁸ Deleuze, Guattari (2011, 118).

of the work of art and its self-standing character, Deleuze and Guattari refute the idea of art as an experience dependent on a subject. This block of sensations is in fact not composed by perceptions and affections, but rather of 'percepts' and 'affects', that is, sensations and sentiments that are independent and completely free from any subjective lived experience. Deleuze and Guattari, through the use of these terms, rightly insisted on defending the idea of art as something always exceeding living experience and memory, something which is able to see beyond and often *glimpse something intolerable*, something intense, full, and even disturbing. Therefore, between the author and her own characters there would be neither identification nor affinity, but rather an odd closeness, a zone of indiscernibility and indetermination which can be accounted for only through the transfer of self-positing sensations. Art inhabits these zones of transfer between author and characters, between the characters and the domains in which they live, and among characters themselves.

Therefore, art *embodies* the event, including it in the matter through which it is expressed and incorporating it into a sensibility so as to build a frame, a plane of composition. A necessary condition for the work of art is the conjunction that keeps together a block of sensations in which there is still an opening to the world. The aesthetical composition does not come prior to sensation, nor after it; rather, the two are complementary, since the one can exist only in virtue of the other. The composition results in 'deterritorializations' of a higher order, with the openings and escapes – the 'lines of flight' – typical of art. In painting or in cinema, and in literature as well, it is evident that the framing does not lead to a enclosed and univocal composition, but to a form that remains always porous.

The three paths of thought – philosophy, science, and art – represent different ways of instituting what Deleuze and Guattari label as *chaosmos*, a term coined by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*: chaos plus cosmos. Chaosmos is an order which somehow keeps in touch with the infinite variation of chaos: art does not cross the plane of virtuality and becoming as philosophy does; it does not establish a plane of reference as science does, but rather it territorializes and deterritorializes; that is, it allows a 'leap' that guides the artist from chaos into the organization of aesthetic composition, a composition which remains always open.

Even if in the conclusion of their volume Deleuze and Guattari stress that among the three ways there is not a hierarchy, my suggestion is that art is the most frequented and feasible route to approach immanence (or the Real), to gain contact with ideas and sensations which are usually dispersed, without however succumbing to them. When art engages in this

sort of fight against chaos, the Real, that is, the Immanence, is not dispelled, but rather incarnated and illuminated.

3. Cinema and the definitive by chance

It has been said by many theorists that cinema has the aptitude to adhere to reality, showing it with greater fidelity and proximity in respect to other arts. André Bazin is probably the main theorist of such an approach, with his prominent reflection on the ontology of photographic images and neo-realism. Cinema can adhere to reality in its unpredictability; therefore, it is a device whose specificity consists in rendering the movement and duration of reality. Cinema starts from the very thing and arrives at its reproduction through its mechanical nature; what is shown on the screen is not a simple reproduction, but rather the digital imprint of reality¹⁹.

However, I would argue that cinema not only shows our ordinary reality, that is, such a reality transformed, represented, and humanized by the two registers of the imaginary and of the symbolic; cinema also has a special capacity to grasp the Real in its Immanence. During a film, we can perceive this capacity maybe just for some short moments, such as when the visible element manifests itself in all its breadth, almost emerging from the plot. The power of the image shows itself as a gap, often in collision with the narrative concatenation, which becomes antagonistic, but also the necessary form for its emergence²⁰. The power of the images breaks through the significance, the symbolic, and can show something intractable, almost unthinkable in itself.

Now we can get back to some elements proposed by Lacan about art in general in order to note how they seem even more convincing when applied to the case of film. First of all, we can affirm that the cinematographic image is a *dompte-regard*, a taming of the gaze: the spectator is captured by images; she is absorbed by them, more than a viewer of a painting, because the technical possibilities of cinema (time-lapse, camera movements, close up, and so on) are much more powerful and flexible than 'static' art. Jean Epstein, filmmaker and film theorist from the 1920s to the late 1940s, wrote that the audience gets hypnotized by the screen by means of a sort of optical emotive procedure²¹. The viewer is induced to let her gaze stay, to come to a stop.

19 See Bazin (2004, 9-16).

20 This is the main idea of the book by J. Rancière, *Film Fables* (2006).

21 See Epstein (1974-1975).

Therefore, I would like to propose a definition of such aesthetic enjoyment in front of a film: the enjoyment of an image whose completeness, fullness, does not mean closure – an image that offers itself as food for the eye. Such an idea, which places the emphasis on an artistic image as full, complete, and somewhat ‘alive’ perhaps runs the risk of proposing an idea of art as something too consolatory and too peaceful. However, I believe that it is possible to qualify this enjoyment in another sense, such a sense as that of *jouissance*. In fact, in book VII, Lacan describes the fullness of contact with the Real as an enjoyment that does not have to do only with a pleasant dimension.

Moreover, we can recall the episode of the sardine can, the can that looked at Lacan without actually seeing him: This is what Lacan called the ‘function of stain’. Let us think of the intensity that the character’s gaze has when it is directed toward the camera, towards the viewer; such an experience shows itself even when we see images without human figures, images that seem to call us, to attract our gaze towards a spot, something ‘blinking’ in the image²².

The impersonality of the technical genesis of cinema allows the emergence of powerful images beyond the intentions of the subject, the director, or the cameraman. There is a link, apparently paradoxical, between the accuracy of technique and unpredictability, randomness, contingency: the facility of the camera to analyze closely, to isolate, to slow down, reveals unexpected elements in film, which usually flow by imperceptibly. About this topic we have to recover another philosopher, Walter Benjamin, who in *Short History of Photography* (1931) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) highlights the capacity of photography, and in particular cinema, to show nature and the world in such a new perspective that escapes a daily and ordinary viewpoint. Thanks to the cinematographic technique, through the impassibility and accuracy of the lens, the ‘optical unconscious’ can emerge, revealing unknown and unexpected details and guaranteeing a huge margin of freedom.

Translated into the terms developed in this paper: the immanent Real breaks onto the screen in all its strength due to cinema’s technical ability to show the unpredictable. I would say that there is a forced meeting, an event. This term “event” is to be understood here in a strong sense, the sense in which Jacques Lacan in book XI spoke of *tuché*, destiny, fate: a fatality or a meeting ‘that can always be failed’, and it is finally, *après coup*,

²² Žižek (2007) proposes the example of the red tip of the murderer’s cigarette within the black rectangle of the window in *Rear Window* by Hitchcock.

revealed in its necessity. It is an event definitive ‘by chance’ – these are the words used by Jean-Luc Godard about his film *Vivre sa vie* (1962).

Remarkable examples of *tuché* include some frames from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer. The film retells the trial and Joan of Arc’s death on the stake and is remembered for its rigor and radical stylistic choices: it consists almost exclusively of *décadrages* (headshots) and close-ups that follow almost obsessively the face and the moods of the protagonist, performed by the actress Renée Falconetti. In some frames of the film a fly buzzed onto the scene, landing on Falconetti’s face. Years after, the director, well known as a master of formal control, spoke about his own conscious choice to leave the fly in the frame, having considered it a gift, an act of grace due to a ‘third dimension’ that can break into film.²³ Such an episode reveals how the work of art is always exposed to a fortuitous event and, in particular, how cinema has the ability to crystallize these events in a document; thus, it appears as a kind of model for taking into account the phenomenon of the *tuché*. The fly is the Real, it is an encounter ‘that always can be failed’. However, I would say that sometimes the unexpected detail is already there, and it is sufficient that it is framed in order for it to display its own power.

Radicalizing such a last statement, I want to conclude with a general hypothesis. The realization of any aesthetic experience requires what Lacan defined as the presence of the definitive by chance. From this point of view, thanks to its own technical apparatus, cinema is the art most capable to capture the unconscious as a contingency.

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²³ An Italian book by Massimo Carboni reflects on the role of contingency in the arts starting from this film, see Carboni (2007).

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