Malcolm Turvey: “Avant-Garde Films as Philosophy”

Avant-garde cinema is “informed by philosophy”.

But philosophy and film are different, *as different as* ***art***and ***philosophy***.

Murray Smith: “While philosophy seeks to clarify our understanding of the world, the vocation of art is to deliver an adventure in perception, cognition, and emotion.” [p573]

MT: “Avant-garde cinema [art] is, however, a notable exception, given that many avant-garde filmmakers have used their work in an attempt to “clarify our understanding of the world.”

Some reasons for this:

1) Avant-garde films emerged in the 1920s when Western art was becoming preoccupied with philosophical issues

2) It anticipated a gradual shift in what *counts as art* including *ready-mades*, Duchamp’s *Fountain*, John Cage’s *4’33”*[a soundless musical piece notable for being a *comment* on what counts as musical art. Cage called it “the absence of intended sounds” **but not the absence of sound!**]

3) Varieties of new media (including silent films, sound films, recorded music, etc.) led to new modes of artistic expression that challenged old ideas about what***kinds of things*** can be art.

4) Conceptual art (art in which the idea or concept presented by the artist is considered more important than its appearance or execution.)

These movements constituted a challenge to *what* ***counts*** *as art*, leading to such alternative conceptions of art as: a) the institutional account (art is what the Art World declares is art by presenting works in art museums, art galleries, concert halls, sculpture gardens, etc.); b) the ‘social construction’ theory of art (art, like norms of human conduct, are products of human invention based on how human beings *think about* and *regard* works that thereby become **artworks**).

But these movements are challenging more than just our conceptions of what ***art is***. As Annette Michelson first argued in the 1960s, “[Art as the] exploration of the conditions and terms of perception … converges with philosophy and science upon the problem of reality as known and knowable….it facilitates a critical focus upon the immediacy of experience in the flow of time.”[p574]

MT breaks down the possible relations between avant-garde cinema and philosophy into four possibilities:

A. Films that *Illustrate* Philosophical Ideas and Issues

B. Films that *Originate* Philosophical Ideas and Issues

C. Films that *Occasion Philosophical Reflection*

D. Films that *Enact* Philosophical Ideas and Issues

MT doubts that film can ***originate*** philosophy. More commonly, they *illustrate* philosophical issues and ideas. “…the attempt to equate film with verbal philosophy in its capacity to originate philosophical theories risks overlooking what is distinctive about cinema’s engagement with philosophy, which is its powerful experiential dimension. Films don’t just communicate meaning…. They offer viewers audiovisual experiences, and while avant-garde cinema may only rarely if ever be able to create innovative philosophy, …it excels at producing rich, philosophically informed perceptual experiences for viewers.”

The main difference between avant-garde artworks and ‘philosophy’: “Unlike works of verbal philosophy, which are evaluated in terms of their truth-value and whose significance is primarily epistemic, avant-garde films like other avant-garde artworks are admired mainly for their artistic inventions.” [p576]

JP Explains what a “Closed Sentence” is, and why that supports MT’s view that avant-garde artworks and philosophical works are significantly different because it is very hard to ‘close’ the meaning of an artwork.

**Avant-Garde Films Illustrating Philosophy**

MT mentions Wartenberg’s thesis that cinema can ‘do philosophy’ but challenges it via Paisley Livingstone’s compelling counterargument:

While verbal philosophy generally proceeds by verbal *statements* that are carefully constructed to establish *how they should be interpreted*, cinema that ‘does philosophy’ in Wartenberg’s sense (e.g., Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* as a film that exemplifies Marx’s theory of alienation), because film proceeds via a medium that is *nonverbal* [and hence subject to alternative interpretations], to take it as representing philosophical ideas can easily be due to the ideas the VIEWER brings to what they see and hear, rather than WHAT THE FILMMAKER INTENDED, or what a REASONABLE VIEWER can find expressed or illustrated in the film.

JP: and note that *even if the filmmaker* ***intended*** *their film to illustrate a philosophical idea* (like the relationship between memory and our sense of the *continuity of life* shown in Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*), many film theorists and philosophers of art argue that an artwork cannot be reduced to or derived from even well-establish intentions **of the artist**. Reason? Most artworks incorporate ***unintended elements*** [which is why some filmmakers, like Robert Altman and David Lynch, among many others, arrange to include improvisation as part of the way actors, director, screenwriters and DP’s come up with the final product which is shown onscreen] and many filmmakers ***refuse to say what their intentions are, OFTEN because* [as in the case of David Lynch] they think *the final result is a consequence of a collaboration among many agents no one or several of which dominate or determine the result!!***).

MT thinks that *A Sixth Part of the World* is one film that could arguably be taken as a film that extends a philosophical claim “in new directions”, particularly when the filmmaker (in this case Vertov) has explicitly asserted that the film should be *taken that way*. [p580]

But note: MT decides that film *fails* to extend a philosophical claim, only illustrate a philosophical claim/issue, but that it **qualifies** as an instance of his first way of thinking there is a relationship between cinema and philosophy anyway.

**Avant-Garde Films Originating Philosophy**

Example #1: The “God and Country” sequence in Eisenstein’s *October*.

Smuts: the juxtaposition of a series of religiously-inflected images (some Pagan, some Christian) suggests that the latter are not really any difference than the former, and hence are no more value (=**no value**) and promotes a Marxist view of religion (which is a version of the *atheist*’s view of religion)

MT: *October*’s “God and Country” sequence **fails** to be a film ‘originating philosophy’ because there is nothing in Smuts way of taking that sequence that is *not already expressed clearly in Marxist views of religion widely expressed in written philosophical works*.

Example #2: Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity*

Show: *Serene Velocity* by Ernie Gehr

Ask the class what they think the film *means,* if anything

“[The] contrast between stillness and movement, Carroll contends, alerts the viewer to the difference between still and moving images and to the fact that the rapid juxtaposition of still images is ‘the secret behind the movement in all films.’” [p587]

For Carroll, the film thereby “proposes movement as an essential feature of cinema”, which promotes Carroll’s account of what is *essential to cinema art*.

Key: Gehr’s film *precedes* Arthur Danto’s introduction of the philosophical idea that *movement in pictures* is essential to the nature of film (first published after Gehr’s avant-garde film in the 1979 paper “Moving Pictures”).

MT challenges Carroll’s claim because he thinks that, absent an explanation of what is *philosophically interesting about the film*, one doesn’t realize that this is what it is doing.

JP: I didn’t tell you how the film was made, or of Gehr’s intentions, until I showed the film. So: did you or didn’t you think the experience you had suggested anything about **the nature of film itself**?

MT thinks Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* is a better example, one that supports Carroll’s thesis about *Serene Velocity* as an argument for his claim that the Gehr’s film *shows its audience something about the nature of cinema* (and in particular, how film moves from still images to moving images, thus supporting Carroll’s thesis about the most essential distinguishing feature of cinema art).

MT concludes that while *some* avant-garde films can manage to introduce original philosophical ideas, he agrees with Carl Plantinga, who wrote “film images alone may imply or suggest propositions, but cannot assert them with the directness of verbal language … [and hence] … cannot match the efficiency, intricacy, directness, nuance, and complexity of argument that words allow.” [p591]

**Avant-Garde Films Enacting Philosophy**

Example #1: Jean Epstein’s film *Le Tempestaire*, in which he slows down the soundtrack recording of a storm which reveals that this “ordinary noise, … [by being slowed down] … reveals its complicated nature, its individual characters, its possibilities for dramatic, comic, poetic, musical signification.” This is in service of Epstein’s belief “that reality is constantly changing in time, that it is in a perpetual state of *becoming* rather than *being*….[and that] the mobility of reality, the fact that it is constantly changing in time, is invisible to the naked human eye, and that the cinema had revealed it.”[p591]

Epstein’s point is that we experience the world as static (*we* move through it, and *some of it moves part of the time*, but we largely experience the world as *built out of* ***mostly stable*** persisting entities ***occasionally disrupted by change***).

Epstein: “Cinematography currently is the only instrument that records an event according to a system of four reference points [three dimensions of space, plus time]”.

JP: Epstein’s view requires us to accept his claim that we *can’t capture the moving nature of the world of our experience* (this seems to me worth arguing about…I think I can remember *sequences* and Epstein’s view seems to require that what I have *really recorded* in memory are just *a series of static images put* ***into motion*** *artificially by means of imagination*).

Ask Class: Is Epstein right?

Stan Brakhage had a similar view of human experience as *misunderstood* by those experiencing it. On his view, “[o]nce we possess language…we no longer see things fully because we categorize them using the concepts bequeathed to us by language.” “Imagine an eye,” he stated, “which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’”[p593]

MT: “In his films, however, Brakhage doesn’t so much illustrate this philosophical claim as enact it by trying to approximate a visual experience that is ‘foreign to language’.” [p593]

Wartenberg’s attempt to include *The Matrix* among films that *enact* a philosophical claim is unpersuasive for MT because there is no evidence that the author(s) of the film *intended this as an effect on the audience*. (I agree…the philosophical ideas that they famously have claimed to be sources of inspiration for the *Matrix* series of films are more in keeping with Baudrillard’s about simulation vs. reality than Descartes’ dream problem. And in any case, the main purpose of the film seems to be *political* and hence *if it is the enactment of a philosophical issue,* it is more likely to be about *oppression by elites* in an *oligarchic society*.

**Avant-Garde Films Occasioning Philosophical Reflection**

Maybe the best way in which avant-garde cinema can be *philosophical* is by occasioning *philosophical reflection on the nature of cinema itself*. Here *Serene Velocity*, or Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* and so many others (especially Brakhage’s films) seem to be cases in point.

Show some of Brakhage’s films. Wrap Up.