Karen Hanson, “Minerva in the Movies: Relations Between Philosophy and Film”

Hanson begins by deploying the familiar assimilation of film to language: just as natural languages make it possible to convey information (and therefore, also, **knowledge**), **so, too, can** **film**.

Alexandre Astruc’s article “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Camėra-Stylo*” (‘camera-pen’) introduces a particular way of taking the claim that film is a language. For Astruc, “the fundamental problem of the cinema is how to express thought {my emphasis}”.

KH’s point is that he doesn’t compare film to *painting* even though many do. His reason is that painting communicates *emotions* whereas language communicates *ideas*.

KH then interrogates Astruc’s position because it is questionable that cinema could incorporate features of language proper, like the capacity to express “verb tenses and logical relationships.” [392Lt/m]

KH asks: “What *is* the direction of film?” Astruc seems to think that if Descartes lived in the 20th century, his *Discours de la Mėthode* would be expressed through film, not French, Latin, or any other natural human language.[392Rt]

KH notes that Descartes’ *method* was essentially geometric: you establish a set of axioms that stand at the foundation of all knowledge, and then *deduce* all other things knowable through a series of deductive arguments/deductive derivations.

Upshot: KH is noting that cinema is different from language-based *texts proper* in that you can *reread* a text, stop in the middle, go back, note some details, ignore others, reassemble your theory of what was said on first reading, etc., and none of this is possible while watching a film (even with fairly good rewind features, this stop-and-start process, necessary for reading a complex, structured text in search of *full understanding,* is incompatible with the fact that every film has **pace**. She quotes Cavell, who said that when it comes to events in film “its events exist only in motion.” Whereas geometrical proofs are *still*.[393Lm]

KH then interrupts her initially unsympathetic treatment of Astruc’s ambitious view of cinema’s possibilities by acknowledging that what Astruc had in mind was *not* that RD’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* would be rendered in a cinematic mode, but rather, that *what a 20th century Descartes would* ***be expressing*** *would* ***REQUIRE CINEMATIC EXPRESSION*** (a much more radical idea about what cinema *is*, and how it *relates* to other aspects of modern life).

Astruc wanted cinema to “break free from the tyranny of what is visual.”

KH is appropriately skeptical that this can be either achieved, or would be a *good thing* if it could be. As she notes, Astruc’s attraction to extremely abstract kinds of thinking and thoughts, those associated with abstract logic and metaphysics, seems problematic given that “…philosophical projects, which are detached from epistemological concerns, or which are aimed specifically at a realm unconditioned by the peculiarities of this world, seem inappropriate models for the movies {my emphasis}. In philosophical and mathematical logic, in some constructive metaphysics, *perspectives* disappear.” Imagining such a setting, she asks: “…But is this quiet, invisible heaven a good setting for a film?”

KH is not denying that film and philosophy could have a *companionate* relationship, only that it would need to be of a different kind than Astruc hoped for and imagined. [393Rm]

In particular, she sees that much of modern Western philosophy is focused on epistemology, moral theory, philosophy of perception, philosophy of mind, and all these branches of philosophy involve “a concern for perspectives and points of view.”[393Rm]

KH’s deepest cut: “not all thought is expressed in language.”[393Rb]

KH then considers that while film and philosophy both are often absorbed with “the character, the nature, and the characteristic problems of persons” {my emphasis}, there are important and objective differences in the way each engages with these problems. She uses the example of self-deception, as treated by a novelist (Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*) and by a movie. While a philosopher can abstract away from the particulars of the scene between the young woman on the first date who is not acknowledging consciously what her male companion’s act of holding her hand *means both to* ***him*** *and to her and the prospects of what significance will be attached to* ***leaving her hand there***, in a film presentation of the same scene, all sorts of *other things* must be added, what the woman is wearing, how she looks, exactly *how* she leaves her hand in the grasp of her companion, *what look she has on her face,* etc. Not just *any* actress could play this part and convey the self-deception that Sartre’s literary version clearly evokes and expresses.

KH’s point is that film *can* portray self-deception, but it must do so *with different materials,* and with *particulars* that novelistic treatment of the scene comfortably sidesteps with generalities and the power to focus our *imagination* on some general features without *filling in details that* ***film simply MUST include*** BY DEFAULT (because it conveys the scene *visually* and images have ***detail****!*).

KH’s main point in raising the question about how self-deception is treated by philosophers and by a film is to note that whereas the contradictory nature of self-deception is *paradoxical* for the philosopher (because believing what is not true and one knows to be false is to engage in *defective thinking*…*lying to oneself* would seem to be impossible since you are both the deceiver and the deceived!). But a film **can portray this very easily** and by putting the eye of the camera only on the behaviors of the self-deceived: we see what they do, we hear what they say they believe, and yet we also see how their behaviors and beliefs conflict with each other. As she says, “we view the subjects of film but are not viewed by them, and thus **we are empowered in judgment**.” {my emphasis} [395Rt/m]

In short: we can portray the self-deceived person *in the full complexity of their situation*, a situation that includes *the very things they are hiding from themselves!* This is something that film is better at than philosophy (and better than literature of the type Sartre produced in *Being and Nothingness* precisely because film is **not schematic** but **detailed and richly contextual** in what it can present to a viewer).