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The Evidence of Film and the Presence of the World: Jean-Luc Nancy's Cinematic Ontology*

Josef Früchtl

Following Deleuze's theory, the emergence of the "time-image" following the Second World War led to (our relationship to) the world disappearing from film. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, the Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami is a privileged witness to a cinema that liberates itself from a "postmodern" obsession with the disappearance of the world. Nancy reveals three foci of cinema: the look, the movement and the real (the world). The "alethic" (Heidegger) look is "mobilized" by cinema; it forces us to remain in contemplative and mental motion. In experiences of evidence the cinema presents us "the real" (Lacan). In Früchtl's article, he argues that cinema is not merely the ontological celebration of presence, but the aesthetic celebration of a tension generating and suspended difference: between presence and its re-presentation. The evidence of cinema thus is the mediated result of an interactive, even playful relationship of our dimensions of experience. What opens is a space full of possible meanings, a textual web which only takes shape with time and with the help of the subject providing meaning.

The Post-Postmodern Film

Let us begin with a brief reminder of Deleuze. Following his theory, the emergence of the "time-image" following the Second World War led to (our relationship to) the world disappearing from film. In this "post-classical" situation, film is apparently left with just two options: either it can bemoan as a loss, as an absence of meaning, the disappearance of the world and its classical film in which everything centred around stability of meaning; or, it can make this disappearance the object of an endless game. These three (pre- and post-War) historical film variations are often termed "classical", "modern" and "postmodern", but it is probably more accurate, as well as more helpful, to relinquish the modern-postmodern model, which is vague and seems to have run its course, and to call these variations "classical", "agonal" and "hybrid".¹

Jean-Luc Nancy now appears to have added a further variation to this list. He believes that film has liberated itself from its (agonal and hybrid) obsession with the disappearance of the world by emphasising the positive side of precisely this loss of meaning and its stable ascription; yet not in a playfully hybrid, endlessly recombining sense, but in a phenomenological one. A world which no longer has any (stable) meaning, because the

* A longer version in the German language entitled: "*Die Evidenz des Films und die Präsenz der Welt. Jean-Luc Nancys cineastische Ontologie*", will subsequently be published in: Ludger Schwarte (ed.), *Bild-Performanz. Die Kraft des Visuellen*, (München: Fink, 2010).

¹cf. Früchtl, Josef, *Das unverschämte Ich: Eine Heldengeschichte der Moderne* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), p. 19. In contrast, Laurent Kretschmar opts to retain the modern-postmodern model: "Is Cinema Renewing Itself?", *Film-Philosophy*, 6, no. 15 (July 2002).

relationship between it and its subject is no longer guaranteed, is meaningless in two senses of the word: it *no longer* has (a stable) meaning and it has no (stable) meaning *yet*. It is therefore also an entity which still has to find its (stable) meaning, still has to invent it. A world without (any) meaning would be a world in itself. It would be a *tabula rasa*, an empty page which offers itself (to writing, to ascription of meaning), a space devoid (of meaning) which opens up. And a world without a *stable* meaning in a sense restores a world in itself, namely in the sense that in the end it has no meaning at all; where nothing counts, everything is possible. This is unequivocally demonstrated, in Nancy's opinion, by the Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami. Kiarostami is "a privileged witness to all this, seeing that cinema renews itself, that is to say it comes close again to what it is and yet always brings it back into play".² This means that cinema has an essence which Kiarostami reveals afresh, albeit not without simultaneously –and hear we hear Hegel stir– putting it at stake (*remettre en jeu*). The central concept which is to underpin this postulation is already indicated in the title of his book on the same topic. Nancy wishes to demonstrate the *Evidence of Film*.

Like the meaning of any philosophical term, the meaning of "evidence" depends on the epistemological positions assumed. The position adopted by Nancy is first and foremost clearly a definition of evidence as an objective form of truth *finding* and not merely a subjective form of truth *acknowledgement*. What is evident is the "self-revelation" of facts, and not just the "sight" of them or an "insight" into them. Evidence is one of the criteria of truth, not just one of the pragmatic constituents of argumentation. In all cases, however, (just as with the concept of intuition) its opposite number is a discursive, conceptual, methodically ordered cognition.³ Nancy finds a bewitching metaphor for this: "Evidence always comprises a blind spot within its very obviousness... The blind spot does not deprive the eye of its sight; on the contrary, it makes an opening for a gaze and it *presses* upon it to look".⁴ Evidence renders something visible, recognisable, opens up an insight, permits recognition of a truth, but not of the manner in which one arrives at this truth. The method is its blind spot, which cannot be seen because it cannot be rendered the object of conceptual determination. In the language of argumentation theory, a piece of evidence can be performatively generated but not methodically proven.

² Nancy, Jean-Luc, *L'Evidence du film/The Evidence of Film* (Bruxelles: Yves Gevaert, 2001), p. 13.

³ cf. Mittelstraß, Jürgen, "Evidenz", in *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, Vol. 1: A-G (Mannheim/Wien/Zürich: Metzler, 1980), p. 609.

⁴ Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, *op cit*, pp. 13 & 19.

The Look, the Movement, the Real

Thinking in metaphors and gliding along chains of significant, is a style well practised in modern French philosophy. Nancy is no exception. His composition is an essay about film which is allowed to drift in a circular current of association, revealing three foci: the look, the movement and the real (world).

The look, at least for those who think in French (*le regard*), is a particular way of looking at, or regarding the world.⁵ Films, which cultivate this (out)look, “are here as eye openers, [are]...the budding and opening of a look in the middle of ordinary turbulence”.⁶ With this celebration of the look and the gaze, Nancy is not alone among 20th century French philosophers, but he is somewhat on the periphery. Probably with the exception of Merleau-Ponty, there are few within his tradition who are not at least ambivalent in their attitude towards the postulation that seeing is a privileged mode of cognition.⁷ Generally speaking, his teachers and colleagues are united in their blackening of occidental ocular centrism.⁸ Yet Nancy’s book on the *Evidence of Film* comes across as completely unimpressed by this disparagement. This raises the question, of course, as to whether his stance is well-founded.

For his book on film, this question cannot be answered in the affirmative without at least some reproach. Nancy favours etymological reasons for his stance. Returning to French, the look (*le regard*) is linked to “guarding” (*la garde*) and to “looking after” (*prise en garde*). The inspiration here in both form and content is Heidegger who, alongside Derrida and Bataille, has had the largest influence on Nancy. As Heidegger wrote in his *Letter on Humanism*, the human being has “to guard” the truth of Being. The word “respect”, Nancy continues, is also linked to the look, this time in Latin; *respectus* means “looking back”, “rear view”. And yet, as Nancy also adds, it is not the look in itself, but the “rightful look” which entails respect for the observed real, and this look is in turn distinguished as “openly attending” (*ouverture*), as an openness for the observed, which knows no distinction between defining (active) and being defined (passive).⁹

Nancy thus puts the case vociferously for a look which, in Heideggerian terms, is “*aletheic*”. Heidegger himself, of course, not only famously criticized the occidental forgetting of time, the translation from *theoria* to *contemplatio*, the repression of hearing and binding (to being); he was also the philosopher of “circumspection” (*Umsicht*) and “clearing”

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 15 & 39.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 17 & 23.

⁷ Following Gary Shapiro, the perspective of ambivalence would be the right one, *cf.* Shapiro, Gary, *Archeologies of Vision. Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2003), p. 6.

⁸ *cf.* Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

⁹ Nancy, *The Evidence of Film, op cit.*, p. 39.

(*Lichtung*), of a seeing which permits encounters and which at the same time unconceals and conceals.¹⁰ This second, ontological meaning of looking is pushed to the foreground by Nancy almost ceremonially, without any further justification. Those wishing to know more need to consult books such as *Le sens du monde* and *Être singulier pluriel*, in which Nancy explains the meaning of the concept of the world, also the political-global world, amongst other things by referring to Heidegger's "there is" (*es gibt*) analysis, of being as a giving entity, (and thus to what critics of philosophical language soberly refer to as an "existence operator").

A second question remains, and this one cannot be answered by resorting to another book, namely that of why film *alone* celebrates the look and not other art forms, in particular painting or photography. Nancy insists that film is the art form of the look and that it can only be distinguished from other art forms via this characteristic.¹¹ His closer description shifts the emphasis to another characteristic of film, however, that of *movement*.

In Kiarostami's work, Nancy certainly has an excellent example of cinema which exudes calm, demands attention and grants its subject matter both space and time, thereby also affording it an opportunity to recede. This is cinema which even a contemplative idler like Peter Handke can really appreciate.¹² Nevertheless, in an age in which art has become manifold, in which video, performance art, body art, installation art, etc., have joined the show, the arts themselves also sustain an "inner multiplicity". This is true of "some" art forms at least, certainly of film, consisting as it does of images, music, speech and movement.¹³ For Nancy, movement, the kinetic in the cinematic, is the being of cinema ("*l'être du cinéma*"). Of course, for an ontologist, especially for a contemporary of Deleuze, whom Nancy quotes in this context, movement is not taken to be the object of film, something it "represents", but as something it *presents*, that it itself, ontologically speaking, *is*. "Being", according to Nancy's ontology of difference, "is not something; it is that something goes on", it is, with its moments and events "...that it continues...that it discontinues continuously. Like the images of the film".¹⁴ Movement is "presence, which is really *present*", which means, to stay true to the phenomenological-ontological comprehension, "coming before", coming before any conceptual definition; it is something which is not given as defined, but first and foremost as something awaiting definition. It is an "opening", which is clearly not (only) meant to refer to space, but

¹⁰ cf. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, *op cit*, p. 269.

¹¹ Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, *op cit*, p. 19.

¹² *ibid*, p. 39; cf. Handke, Peter, "Die Geschichte von Hossein und Tahereh. Eine Annäherung an den iranischen Cineasten Abbas Kiarostami", in Handke, Peter (ed.), *Mündliches und Schriftliches: Zu Büchern, Bildern und Filmen 1992-2002* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2002) pp. 66.

¹³ Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, *op cit*, p. 23.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 61.

(also and especially) to time, an *ouverture*.¹⁵ What opens is a space full of possible meanings, a textual web which only takes shape with time and with the help of the subject providing meaning.

In the case of film and cinema, with its peephole atmosphere, the look is therefore an opening because it “mobilises” something,¹⁶ it makes something move, in a multitude of senses: the sequence of images (corresponding to the mechanical sequence created by the equipment); the changing sequence of views (dictated by different camera shots); the concomitant thoughts and emotions. Being “carried away”, “driven, lifted away” (*emportement*) is thus a necessary effect of cinema.¹⁷ In this sense, for Nancy, cinema has to be comprehended as the art form of the look, as the art of mobilising, as the mobilisation of the look (*mobilisation du regard*).¹⁸ And in this sense one can agree with him. No other art form mobilizes the look as much as film does; no other forces us so hard to keep changing our direction of gaze and to remain in contemplative (and mental) motion.

Due to the dimension of time, Nancy, in line with the entire Romantic tradition since the nineteenth century, defers the recognisability of presence issue, generally explained using evidence, to the specifically time-related mode of *suddenness*. For him, too, the epistemology of presence is connected to the dimension of the moment. *Intensity* as a mode of perception and *immediacy* as a mode of cognition ultimately correspond to this time mode. Evidence is not “what makes sense”, but “what is striking” (*ce qui frappe*), and this “strike” (*le coup*) “gives a chance and an opportunity to meaning”.¹⁹

A sense which cannot be mastered is also what is meant by the third central term --namely what is *real*. Real is what has consistency (*consistance*) and resistance (*résistance*).²⁰ “Consistency” is not meant here, of course, in the logical sense, but once again in the literal (Latin) sense: real is what opposes the theoretical-conceptual and pragmatic-changing intentions of subjects as a restive entity. In this interpretation it belongs to the basic stock of occidental philosophy, most recently influenced by Lacan. Like Kant’s thing-in-itself, what is real is “even more puzzling than God”, or more precisely that God “to whom we can ascribe particular qualities”.²¹ To this extent alone, Nancy’s ontology is also coloured by theology and metaphysics, and increasingly so the more he addresses a different conception of God, so to speak, and poetically revolves around his objectless object of philosophical

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 15-16, and p. 32.

²¹ Eagleton, Terry, *Ästhetik: Die Geschichte ihrer Ideologie*, (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1994), p. 125 (English original. 1990, p. 120).

desire. Even Nancy pays homage to the negative-theological fundamental figure of recent French philosophy who is in love with paradoxes, even he skilfully plays the whole range of *amour fou*, which cannot live *with* the metaphysics of the absolute, but cannot live *without* it either. But he is far less happy than Derrida²² (or Adorno, in the German context), to be a prisoner of this system of thought. Like Deleuze and Badiou, he searches for the positive, for ways out, for loopholes and gaps, and *his* names for these are “evidence”, “presence”, “world”.

Some Unclarified Points

In order for the positive to fulfil its function, it requires at the very least a sufficient definition. In this context, I see in Nancy's deliberations several unclarified points. First of all, to be fair, Nancy should point out that determining the essence of film as mobilisation of the look was not his own discovery. This honour goes to Erwin Panofsky, who in his essay “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” names as the two specific achievements of film the “dynamisation of space” and the corresponding “spatialisation of time”. Accordingly, the fixed place that a spectator assumes in his cinema seat should not hide the fact that, as an *aesthetic* spectator, he is “constantly moving”, “his eye identifying with the lens of the camera”. Unlike on the theatre stage, “not only are bodies moving within space, but space itself is moving, approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and reforming.”²³ The mobility of the look is one of space. In the context of film, “seeing” particularly means seeing and experiencing a permanently changing space which is bound to time. Film provides a mobile, picturesque experience of space, a mobile experience of space through pictures, the experience of a virtual mobile space.²⁴

Secondly, there is an astonishing one-sidedness in Nancy's definition of the essence of film. He comprehends “mobilisation” of the look only in its literal sense. It is telling that he ignores its *military* sense, even though this addresses the aspect undeniably central to film theory that, with the exception of music, film proceeds more dictatorially than any other art form. Film imposes a look upon its recipients (just as music imposes a sequence of sounds). Its *alethic*, “being-presenting”, and thus “truth-unconcealing” dimension is not to be separated from its concealing dimension, not only in the ontological-philosophical, “dialectic” sense made

²² Derrida, of course, rejects the objection that his thinking of , ‘*la différance*’ is negative theological. See his famous article “Différance”, in *Margins of Philosophy*, translation by Alan Bass, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 6.

²³ Panofsky, Erwin, “*Stil und Medium im Film*” in *Stil und Medium im Film & Die ideologischen Vorläufer des Rolls-Royce-Kühlers* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 25.

²⁴ cf. Martin Seel, “Thirteen Statements on the Picture”, in *Aesthetics of Appearing*, translation by John Farrell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 182, with references not only to Panofsky, but also to Noël Carroll.

famous by Heidegger, but also in the crudely manipulative and thus political sense.

This denial of the ambiguity behind the term mobilisation is in line with a third objection, or at least a third unclarified point. According to Nancy, in evidence, “in the image’s strength”, “a shelter from the image’s ability to betray” also lies.²⁵ Nancy, unfortunately, leaves this as a peripheral comment, when on this point we would like to know so much more. The “ability of the image to betray” consists in projecting something as being which is not. And the question is how evidence is to provide “shelter” from that. For it can only lead to the experience *that* something is, not *what* it is. And yet, in cases of betrayal, the *what*, the false or deceptive defining of an (undefined) given, is usually crucial. But even remaining at the level of pure presence, the problem of distinguishability is still there. Even the experience *that* something (undefined) is there can be doubtful, an experience expressed in the question: “Is there anything there (at all)?” or in the statement: “There seems to be something here”. The “ability of the image to betray” then consists in the fact that it arouses an *appearance* of presence. The age-old question in this case is therefore whether and how to control appeals to evidence or, put another way: whether and how evidence can be distinguished from apparent evidence. Nancy does not even acknowledge this question. His only fleeting contact with it is when he, as already quoted, speaks of the “correct” look, necessary in order to testify respect for the real.

Fourthly, the relationship between presence and representation, between experience of evidence and articulation of sense, remains unclarified. Nancy’s ontology, influenced by Heidegger, leads us to expect a precedence of presence and evidence over the “descended” and secondary representation and sense. In fact, Nancy at one stage describes the relationship as one of *tension* and *suspension*, which can be interpreted as a relationship in which both sides have a mutual negative reference which overrides their one-sidedness. Put another way: a relationship in which their mutual reference might be negative, but it is also necessary, and through which they generate a tension (in both a structural and an emotional sense). Cinema “stretches and hangs between” (*est tendu et suspendu*) the world of presence and that of representation; it is (literally) stretched like the “screen” which Nancy (figuratively) observes to be a “sensitive membrane”, a skin mediating between two worlds, the presenting world and the representing world, doing so in such a way as to leave both in the balance.²⁶ Seen in this way, cinema is not merely the *ontological celebration of presence*, but the *aesthetic celebration of a tension-generating and suspended difference* - between presence and its re-presentation. This would, of course, also have *epistemological* consequences, the most important being that a pure, pre-

²⁵ Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, *op cit*, p. 35.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 57.

conceptual, sense-free experience of evidence would have to be characterized as an empty structure, or more precisely that we might have to *presuppose* the presence of (objects and events within) the world, but that we cannot keep *experience* of them/it sense-free.

The last unclarified point concerns the status of the evidence experience. Nancy switches back and forth between an *ontological* and an *aesthetic* conception. Initially it is clear that evidence is aimed at proving the existence and presence of phenomena. But in his essay on film, Nancy explicates and develops his ontological understanding within an aesthetic context, rendering it unclear how these two levels relate to each other. Like every art form, film is a “reconfiguration of experience and therefore of the world”.²⁷ Experiencing the world (having it presented) through film is a different matter than experiencing it through another art form or from the outside, beyond art altogether. But with Nancy, the dimensions of experience flow into one another. When, for example, he describes “the constants of the landscapes” in Kiarostami’s films as “alternating rhythmically in wide shots which sometimes stand still and sometimes seem to be fleeing from a fast car”, for him they are not “accompanying an action”, but “wide presences” (*larges présences*).²⁸

This levelling out of the differences inevitably leads, however, to an objection based on another conception of aesthetic experience inspired by Kant, Schiller and Dewey. Evidence, the power of conviction and persuasion within an aesthetic experience, on no account has to be due to an immediacy or a directness, but on the contrary can be due precisely to an interactive, even playful relationship. Accordingly, evidence is *feeling*, which is based on a dynamic of mediation, a movement which swings between our various dimensions of experience. Aesthetic evidence is a holistic experience which is not *pre-* but *transdiscursive*. This conception clearly needs to draw upon a number of theoreticians, as indicated above, in order to be convincing in its turn. And a detailed discussion would clearly have to commence at this point.²⁹ In the present context, however, my insistence upon Nancy’s conception of evidence being subjected at least to a *differentiation* should suffice.

Finally, I would like to raise a minor doubt concerning the “evidence machine” named cinema or film. It is doubtful whether film *per se* presents the world and can rely on this ontological power. I would like to substantiate this by turning to *Un long dimanche de fiançaille* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. This film is about a long-awaited reunion with a much-loved person, in other words an extremely affective experience of presence. When the

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁹ I presented this conception under the title “Integrative Aesthetics” in the first chapter of my book *Ästhetische Erfahrung und moralisches Urteil* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1996).

young wife, standing in a sun-drenched garden, eventually sees her husband again, whom she has traced down using detective work following the First World War, and whom she never once believed dead, the camera retreats almost hastily. Off-screen the voice of the narrator keeps repeating the same sentence: "*Elle le regard, elle le regard ...*". This look belongs to *her* alone, not to *us*, the viewers. The camera has no images to convey this look, *le regard*, in this emphatic, paradisiacally enchanting sense, this wordless and endless gazing. It is not suited to this type of presence, the presence of a happy ending. Happiness, or the overwhelming experience of presence, is not describable and not depictable. In this context, too, the very least that can be insisted upon is *differentiation*: "presence" is not always "presence"; it is revealed in different forms, not all of which are suited to pictures and cinema.