

**QUESTIONS FOR JACQUES RANCIÈRE
AROUND HIS BOOK *LES ÉCARTS DU CINÉMA***

Interview conducted by

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CINEMA (C): Just like La fable cinématographique... (published in English as Film Fables), your 2001 book that was also entirely dedicated to cinema, Les écarts du cinéma, recently published by La Fabrique, is a collection of texts, which together provide support for your singular approach to cinema, and whose prologue attempts to explain the logic of this approach after the fact. How did this book come about, and how did you decide on the structure?

Jacques Rancière (JR): The theme of gaps was at the centre of the text that forms the prologue to this book. This text was a *post hoc* reflection on *Film Fables*, and shifted the axis of reflection somewhat. *Fables* looked at cinema through the lens of a tension between two regimes of art: the aesthetic regime, including the novelty of a writing with movement and the dream of a language of images; and the representative regime, with the resurgence of the art of telling stories in cinema, and distinctions between genres, which had been renounced in the old noble art forms. The problem of gaps is more a reflection on my own approach to cinema and all that this implies about the idea of cinema as an object of knowledge and discourse. It calls into question the idea of cinema as an art form that is thought to be a product of its own theory and specialised body of knowledge, by pointing out the plurality of practices and of forms of experience that are brought together under the name of cinema. From this starting point, I was prompted to bring together the texts I had written since *Film Fables* from the point of view of the gaps which, by drawing

cinema outside of itself, reveal its inner heterogeneity: gaps between cinema and literature, which question the idea of a language of cinema, transformation of filmmakers' politics, which are also tensions between cinema and the theatrical paradigm, paradoxical relationships between entertainment and art for art's sake, and so on. At each turn, it needs to be shown how an art form is intersected by other art forms, how it is impossible to separate the transformations that set it apart from itself, how it cannot be neatly assigned to a specific area of knowledge.

C: It could be said that the logic underlying these essays is the idea of the gap. However, you come back to the concept of fable, as a way of bringing together but not eclipsing the varieties of gap which, you say, characterise cinema and on which you have focused your writings about it. The fable is synonymous with a tension between the story and the constraints imposed on it by causality, and of a set of images that function as a way of suspending the story. But this is not specific to cinema. In your view, to what extent does the idea of the fable seem decisive to the way cinema is thought about today and the contradictions you have identified as having existed from the outset?

JR: The fable is a core idea of the representative regime, and within this regime the fable defines the connection between the incidents that occur in the poem, and the art forms for which the latter acts as the norm. In this way, it is an essential way of measuring to what extent a new art form has adopted such a logic. From the start, cinema was caught between two opposing regimes: on the one hand, in the representative regime, the fable was what set cinema apart from simple popular entertainment, and on the other, it was what separated cinema from the forms of artistic novelty which renounced the fable and which saw in the art of moving images an art form that would be able to transform the will of art into perceptible forms, by dismissing story and character. The history of cinema is, to me, the history of this tension between two logics. This is not just a tension between the story and

the image that arrest it. I attempt to bring out the divided nature of the fable in my analysis: there is a visual plot, which modifies the narrative plot, or there may even be a tension between two visual plots. This is the focus of my analysis of Robert Bresson's *Mouchette*. Shots play two different roles in this film, and this leads to the development of two different visual plots. On the one hand, the shots tend to become emptier, and thus act as a pure sign in an arrangement of images – a glance and a gesture, or a gesture and its outcome. It is thus made to serve the narrative in a story of a hunt, in which the young girl is only prey. On the other hand, the shots become more dense, and serve as a frame for a deviant performance by Mouchette's body: half of her is resistant to the messages and looks of others, and half is inventing deft gestures which form her own performance and which trace a narrative path that is distinct from the hunt, although these strands remain entangled throughout the film.

C: In the prologue to Film Fables, you directly related cinema to a pre-existing conceptual framework, the one concerning the "distribution of the sensible" and the regimes of art, while in your new book, although you return to the questions that you addressed in Film Fables, these are posed more explicitly from within cinematographic experience, which in your view is the experience of the cinephile and the amateur. You refer to a politics of the amateur, rather than that of the philosopher or the cinema critic. Could you explain the nature of your philosophical work on cinema, and how you see the relationship between philosophy and film?

JR: I talk about the politics of the amateur in this book, and this is consistent with the rest of my work: a way of practising philosophy that moves away from the dominant view that philosophy provides the foundation or truth of whatever practice we may be considering, be it politics, an art form or anything else. I have practised a philosophy that questions the division between disciplines and skills, and the division between practices and the metadiscourses that claim to be able to

explain them. In my view there is therefore no single relationship between philosophy and cinema; rather, there is a variety of philosophical nexuses that can arise from various aspects of cinema. For example, in the article on Hitchcock and Vertov, the relationship of cinema to philosophy is implicit in the literature it adapts; in the article on Bresson, it is consistent with the idea of a language of images; in the article on Rossellini, it is the incarnation of thought in the philosopher's body, and so on. None of these nexuses arises from a specific body of knowledge that might be called a theory or philosophy of cinema.

C: You write about the privileged experience that constitutes an encounter with a film. What is it that defines this encounter, which paradoxically manifests itself as a gap, in that it is impossible to identify cinema completely with art, or theory, or politics?

JR: This idea of the encounter should not be seen as religious. This is partly linked to the generation in which I grew up: the status of cinema as an art form, the criteria for judging films, and the hierarchy of directors were all rather uncertain. There was no settled canon. The relationship between artistic and political judgements was also somewhat fluid: the Brechtian paradigm that was dominant at the time was very useful for criticising images in the media, but provided little by way of a framework for judging films as such. Under such conditions, the effect produced by one or more films was often what provided the feeling of the specific nature of cinema, or established a connection between the emotions of cinema and political affects. This situation is linked to a methodological question. Precisely because cinema is not a language, it does not delimit an object of knowledge that arises from a systematic reasoning, learning cinema lends itself particularly to the application of methods of intellectual emancipation: as Jacotot said, "learn something, and relate everything else to it." Cinema is "learned" by widening one's scope of perceptions, affects and meanings, which are built around a set of films.

C: *Your relationship with cinema is built around three gaps: between cinema and art, cinema and politics, and cinema and theory. For you, cinephilia is an illustration of the first type of gap, in that it throws confusion among the accepted judgements about cinema; and at the same time, it enables you to highlight the other two types of gap: if cinephilia calls into question the categories of modernism in art, and introduces a positive understanding of the impure nature of art, it is because it “struggles to comprehend the relationship between the reason underlying its emotions, and the reasons that enable one to adopt a political stance towards world conflicts.” One shifts from an intimate relationship between art and non-art (as determined by the difficulty of identifying criteria which can distinguish one from the other) to the impossibility of reconciling the appropriateness of a director’s gesture with the political and social upheavals in society. What is the relationship between these two types of gap? To what extent has theory shown itself incapable of filling these gaps, and (in your view) to what extent has it become, conversely, the place in which these gaps are rendered manifest?*

JR: In one sense the *cinephile* gap is an extension of an old tradition whereby artists and critics contrast rigorously accurate performances of minor art forms with culturally accepted forms. These gaps, which are a matter of taste, are always difficult to rationalise. But, in this case, this gap in taste arose at the same time as the huge theoretical upheaval that is summarised by the word “structuralism” and which claimed to be able simultaneously to renew the paradigms of thought, science and art. Passion for cinema was therefore swept up in the large-scale rationalisations of the 1960s, when the desire was to bring everything together into a general theory. It was claimed that these theories corresponded to the political agitation of the time, to anti-imperialist and decolonisation movements, to the cultural revolution, and so on. There was a large gap between taste-based judgement, theory and political commitment, which was difficult to fill using the notion of *mise-en-scène* alone, which itself seeks to hide the heterogeneous nature of film, and to associate it

artificially with a single artistic will. Conversely, awareness of this gap could encourage a practice that is very different from “theory”: the object of this practice is understood to be the product of an encounter between heterogeneous logics.

C: There is the encounter with a film, but you also mention the experience of returning to a film, watching a film or films again, either to make comparisons with one’s memories — for example, the “vivid impression” left by a particular shot, or the more general impression left by a work that beguiled us — or to question an interpretation that was provided previously. Could you explain your relationship with cinema when you revisit films in this way, given that re-viewings are transformations, deformations and prolongations by memory and speech of the material object that is film, and lay open the variations in your thoughts within the territory of cinema? In what way has the unstable reconstitution of the perceptions, affections and traces that have been left by the films you have encountered been influenced by changing theoretical, political and philosophical concerns over the course of your life? What is the relationship between films you have watched and re-watched, your thoughts about cinema, and your work in the political and aesthetic fields?

JR: Here we see the conjunction between a structural necessity and a contingent reason. The first is part of the aesthetic regime of art. The idea of art is defined less by a way of doing things than by whether or not one belongs to a universe of sensibility. The codes and norms of the representative regime are replaced by other ways of “proving” art, which consist of a weaving together of memories, stories, commentaries, reproductions, re-showings and reinterpretations. This woven fabric is perpetually shifting: in ancient theatre, Dutch painting, “classical” music, etc., there is a constant metamorphosis of the ways in which these art forms can be perceived. The same is true of cinema. There is a practical problem, however: cinema, which is said to be an art that is technically reproducible, was for a long time an art form whose works were not accessible to methods of reproduction. You

never knew if you would see a film again, and it changed in your memory, and in the texts that discussed it; you were surprised when seeing it again to find that it was very different from how you remembered it, particularly since individual and collective perceptual frameworks had changed in the meantime. This is the idea behind my various visions of *Europa '51* (1952): the representation of the communist people, and of the marginal world on the edges of it; the acts of the well-meaning woman who attempts to navigate between the two; her experience of the brutal speed of the production line; the relationship between what she does and the communist explanation of the world or with psychiatric rationalisations — all of which is amenable not only to judgement but also to completely different interpretations, seen in the light of the time of the cultural revolution, the lessons of the Left, of Deleuze etc.

C: In the essay about Hitchcock and Vertov, these two directors represent two opposing ways of coming after literature. What does this mean in each case? This essay, as the title indicates, travels from Hitchcock to Vertov, i.e. from submitting cinematographic machinery to the mechanism of fiction and the Aristotelian logic, to a cinematographic utopia which denies the possibility of a storytelling art form, and back to Hitchcock via Godard, who, in his Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988-98) seeks, in a Vertovian gesture, to release the shots created by the master of suspense from the plots in which they are trapped. However, in your view, the analogy goes no further. What is the difference between the way in which Vertov dismisses story-telling and the way in which Godard dismantles stories?

JR: Vertov's work is part of the system of historical modernism: eliminating stories and characters, which also means eliminating art itself as a separate practice. His films are supposed to be material performances that link together all other material performances, and these connections are meant to represent communism as a tangible reality. This aesthetic communism, in which all movements are equally

possible, is a way of distancing the model of historical plotting on which the Soviet state found itself dependent: a model of strategic action supported by faith in a historical movement. As for Hitchcock, he used moving images to serve his stories, in other words he relegated machines to the status of instruments of narrative machination. Godard wants to release images in order to allow cinema to achieve its primary vocation and atone for its previous servitude to stories, in which is included the bad side of History in the form of 20th century dictatorships. The fragments that he thus isolates, though they link together as smoothly as those of Vertov, have little in common with the energies that Vertov wished to let loose. These images inhabit an imaginary museum in the style of Malraux, and they are testimonies and shadows that speak to us of the horrors of History.

C: In your analysis of Mouchette (1967), you try to show that Bresson's search for cinematographic purity, detached from references to theatre and literature, from classical theatrical and literary conventions, had precursors in literature and theatre. What are the gaps that are examined here?

JR: Bresson is emblematic of the idea of pure cinema as a language of images. He makes fragmentation into a way of avoiding representation. The paradox is that this idea of a language of images ends up being a "linguistic" theory of montage, in which each shot is an element in a discourse-like statement. From this there results an over-emphasis on causal and organic relationships between elements. And yet this is exactly what is at the heart of the representative system. It is as though the Aristotelian model of the poem as an "arrangement of incidents" were applied to the combination of meaningful elements. Images lose their independence, their own duration and their ability to generate a variety of aleatoric image series. The body of the actor — the model, according to Bresson — is the element that must reintroduce this potentiality. This is accomplished using the gap between the actor's behaviour

and the traditional psychological expressive acting. However, the gap that Bresson distinguishes between “cinematography” and “filmed theatre” was in fact first identified by theatre reformers.

C: In your analysis of The Band Wagon (1953), in the essay “ars gratia artis: la poétique de Minnelli” [“ars gratia artis: the poetics of Minnelli”], to what extent is Minnelli’s cinematography both merged with and separate from that of the modern avant-garde director, with whom you compare him, and who dreams of the end of boundaries between art forms, and the equivalence between great art and popular entertainment?

JR: *The Band Wagon* is an adaptation of a Broadway show. Minnelli came from a show business family, for whom popular entertainment was an art. His work as a director was firmly within this tradition, and this is why he put so much emphasis in this film on the clash between the music hall artist and the avant-garde director. The director proclaims the great avant-garde credo: art is everywhere. What matters is the performance, not whether the subject is noble or lowly. This credo is, above all, a way in which art can give meaning to itself, by showing itself capable of absorbing anything, while remaining equal to itself. The result is a surfeit of the spectacular. Minnelli takes a different route. For one thing, he adheres to genre conventions: a musical comedy, which is primarily a series of musical and dance numbers, and melodrama, which is primarily defined by the emotions its subject can excite. Using this as a starting point, he deploys cinema's ability to displace genre requirements, by incorporating romantic emotion into the musical performance, and choreography and visual fireworks into melodramatic episodes. Art involves metamorphosis, not displaying itself. His films are faithful to MGM's motto: *ars gratia artis*, or art for art's sake. This is true for “popular” films, even though the term is often reserved for works aimed at connoisseurs.

C: *The essays on Straub and Pedro Costa clearly demonstrate that a film is not a political message and cannot be measured by its theme or by well-intentioned relationships with what is filmed. In your view, where does their cinematic politics reside, exactly?*

JR: Politics in film is not a simple strategy by which awareness and activism are elicited, using well-defined means — as montage was, once upon a time. It is a complex assembly of several things: forms of sensibility, stances adopted towards the current world order, choices about the duration of a shot, where to place the camera, the ways in which the entities being filmed relate to the camera, and also choices about production, funding, equipment and so on. These assemblages give rise to various types of adjustment. Straub and Costa are on the side of the oppressed. They work outside the mainstream, use non-professional actors and make films that are distanced from dominant fictional paradigms. Beyond this point, their methods differ. Straub constructs films around literary texts, but he never “adapts” them. These texts work in two different ways. Initially, they provide, in a Brechtian way, an explanation of or judgement on the characters’ experiences. More and more, though, they specify a particular type of high register or nobility of speech, and the amateur actors, portrayed against a backdrop that illustrates the condensed power of nature, are there to test the ability of common people to utter such speech and rise to its level. This dual purpose is presented in an exemplary way in the extract from *Dalla nube alla resistenza* (1953) on which I comment, in which a shepherd and his son discuss, as they do in Pavese’s story, the reasons for injustice. Pedro Costa dispenses of explanation, and of the heroic aspects of the backdrop and speech. He plunges with his lightweight camera into the life of immigrants and those on the edge of society, and into their relationship with time. He films these people first in shanty towns and then in new social housing. He is committed to showing that these people are able to create ways of speaking and attitudes that are equal to their own fate. He seeks to distil from their lives,

environments and stories the nobility of which all people are capable. The film is in the style of a documentary about their lives, although all the episodes were invented as the film progressed, as a way of condensing their experience and making the film less personal. They use different methods, but in neither case do these film-makers seek to express their politics by denouncing a situation; rather, they demonstrate the capabilities of those who are living it.