

LETTER TO SERGE DANAY: OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND TRAVEL

Your previous book, *La Rampe* (1983), brought together a number of articles written for *Cahiers*. What made it a real book was the way you based the arrangement on an analysis of the different periods *Cahiers* had gone through, and more specifically, on your analysis of various functions¹ of the cinematic image. An eminent earlier analyst of the plastic arts, Riegl, distinguished three tendencies in art: the beautification of Nature, the spiritualization of Nature, and competition with Nature (and he took "beautification," "spiritualization," and "competition" as historically and logically fundamental factors). You, in the *periodization* you propose, define an initial function expressed by the question: What is there to see behind the image? And of course what there is to see behind an image appears only in succeeding images, yet acts as what takes us from the first image to the others, linking them in a powerful beautifying organic totality, even when "horror" is one element in this transition. This allows you to say the initial period has as its principle *The Secret Beyond the Door*,² "the desire to see more, see behind, see through," where any object whatever can play the role of a "temporary mask,"³ and where any film is linked to others in an ideal mirroring. This first period of cinema is characterized by the art of *Montage*—culminating in great triptychs and corresponding to the beautification of Nature or the encyclopedia of the World—but also by a depth ascribed to the image taken as a harmo-

ny or consonance, by a network of obstacles and advances, by dissonances and resolutions in this depth, and by the specifically cinematic role of actors, bodies, and words in this universal scenography: the role of always furthering a supplementary vision, a "seeing more." In your new book you offer Eisenstein's library, the Cabinet of Doctor Eisenstein,⁴ as a symbol of this great encyclopedia.

Now, you've pointed out that this form of cinema didn't die a natural death but was killed in the war (Eisenstein's office in Moscow, indeed, became a dead, dispossessed, derelict place). Syberberg extensively developed some remarks of Walter Benjamin's about seeing Hitler as a filmmaker . . . You yourself remark that "the great political *mises en scène*, state propaganda turning into tableaux vivants, the first mass human detentions" realized cinema's dream, in circumstances where horror penetrated everything, where "behind" the image there was nothing to be seen but concentration camps, and the only remaining bodily link was torture. Paul Virilio in his turn shows that fascism was competing from beginning to end with Hollywood. The encyclopedia of the world, the beautification of Nature, politics as "art" in Benjamin's phrase, had become pure horror. The organic whole was simply totalitarianism, and authoritarian power was no longer the sign of an *auteur* or *metteur en scène* but the materialization of Caligari and Mabuse ("the old business of directing," you said, "would never again be an innocent business"). And if cinema was to revive after the war, it would have to be based on new principles, a new function of the image, a new "politics," a new artistic finality. Resnais's work is perhaps the greatest, the most symptomatic example of this: he brings cinema back from the dead. From the outset, through to his recent *Love Unto Death*, Resnais has considered only one cinematic subject, body or actor, a man returning from the dead. Thus in this book itself you compare Resnais to Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*.

After the war, then, a second function of the image was expressed by an altogether new question: What is there to see on the surface of the image? "No longer what there is to see behind it, but whether I can bring myself to look at what I can't help seeing—which unfolds on a single plane." This changed all the relations between cinematic images. *Montage* became secondary, giving way not only to the famous "sequence shot," but to new forms of composition and combination. Depth was condemned as "deceptive," and the image took on the flat-

ness of a "surface without depth," or a *slight depth* rather like the oceanographer's shallows (and there's no contradiction between this and depth of field, in Welles for example, one of the masters of this new cinema, who shows everything in one vast glimpse and does away with the old kind of depth). Images were no longer linked in an unambiguous order of cuts and continuities but became subject to relinkings, constantly revised and reworked across cuts and false continuities.⁵ The relation between the image and cinematic bodies and actors changed too: bodies became more Dantean, were no longer, that is, captured in actions, but in postures and the ways they're linked (this also you show in the present book, in relation to Akerman, to the Straubs, and in a striking passage where you say an actor in a drunken scene no longer has to add something to his movement and stagger around as in earlier films but rather has to adopt a posture, the posture that allows a real drunk to stay on his feet . . .). The relation between images and words, sounds, music changed too, with basic disymmetries between the aural and visual that allow the eye to read images, but also allow the ear to imagine the slightest noise. Finally, this new age of cinema, this new function of the image, was a *pedagogy of perception*, taking the place of an *encyclopedia of the world* that had fallen apart: a visionary cinema that no longer sets out in any sense to beautify nature but *spiritualizes* it in the most intense way. How can we wonder what there is to see behind an image (or following on from it . . .), when we can't even see what's in it or on the surface until we look with our mind's eye?⁶ And while we can identify many high points in this new cinema, it's the same pedagogical path that leads to all of them—Rossellini's pedagogy, "a Straubian pedagogy, a Godardian pedagogy," as you said in *La Rampe*, to which you now add Antonioni's pedagogy, by analyzing the eye and ear of a jealous man as a "poetics" registering everything evanescent, everything that might disappear, a woman on the desert island in particular . . .

If you belong to any critical tradition, it's to that of Bazin and *Cahiers*, along with Bonitzer, Narboni, and Schefer. You're still looking for a fundamental link between cinema and thought, and you still see film criticism as a poetic and aesthetic activity (while many of our contemporaries have felt the need to turn to language, to a linguistic formalism, in order to preserve the seriousness of criticism). Thus you still subscribe to the grand idea of cinema's first period: cinema

as a new Art and a new Thought. Only for the first filmmakers and critics, from Eisenstein or Gance to Elie Faure, the idea is bound up with a metaphysical optimism, a total art for the masses. The war and what led up to it, though, generated a radical metaphysical pessimism. But you've managed to salvage a certain critical optimism: cinema for you remains linked, not to a triumphant collective thought, but to a precarious, singular thought that can be grasped and sustained only in its "powerlessness," as it returns from the dead to confront the worthlessness of most cinematic activity.

This reflects the emergence of a third period, a third function of the image, a third set of relations. The question is no longer what there is to see behind the image, nor how we can see the image itself—it's how we can find a way into it, how we can slip in, because each image now slips across other images, "the background in any image is always another image," and the vacant gaze is a contact lens. And with this, you say, things come full circle, with Syberberg we're back to Méliès, but the mourning is now endless and the provocation is pointless,⁷ threatening to pitch your critical optimism into a critical pessimism. Indeed, two different factors meet in this new relation between images: on the one hand, there's the internal development of cinema as it seeks new audio-visual combinations and major pedagogical lines (not just Rossellini, Resnais, Godard, and the Straubs, but Syberberg, Duras, Oliveira . . .) and finds in television a wonderful field to explore, with wonderful resources; on the other hand, there's television's own development, as competing with cinema, as actually "perfecting" and "generalizing" it. Yet however interconnected, these two aspects are fundamentally different and *don't operate on the same level*. For if cinema looked to television and video to "relay" a new aesthetic and poetic function, television for its part (despite a few early experiments) took on an essentially *social function* that disrupted from the outset any relay, appropriated video, and substituted altogether different forces for the potential of beauty and thought.

Thus began a development reminiscent of the initial period of cinema: just as authoritarian power, culminating in fascism and major state intervention, made it impossible to continue the first form of cinema, the new social power of the postwar period, one of surveillance or control, threatened to kill the second form of cinema. Control is the name Burroughs gave to modern power. Even Mabuse

changes his method and operates through television sets. Once again, cinema faced no natural death: it was at the very beginning of its new explorations and creations. But the threat this time would come, not from an image always having another image as its background, and art reaching the point of "competing with Nature," but from the way all images present the single image of my vacant gaze contacting a non-Nature, a privileged spectator allowed into the wings, in contact with the image, entering into the image. Recent surveys show that one of the most highly prized forms of entertainment is to be in the studio audience of a television show: it's nothing to do with beauty or thought, it's about being in contact with the technology, touching the machinery. The prying zoom has been taken out of Rossellini's hands to become television's standard technique; continuity, through which art beautified and spiritualized Nature, and then competed with it, has become the televisual insert. A visit to the factory, with its rigid discipline, becomes ideal entertainment (seeing how they make a program), and *edification* becomes the highest aesthetic value ("an edifying experience"). The encyclopedia of the world and the pedagogy of perception collapse to make way for a professional training of the eye, a world of controllers and controlled communing in their admiration for technology, mere technology. The contact lens everywhere. This is where your critical optimism turns into critical pessimism.

Your new book leads on from the first one. It's a question, now, of taking up this confrontation of cinema and television on their two different levels. And, although you often allude to such matters in your book, you don't inscribe the problem within some abstract comparison of the cinematic image with newer kinds of image. Your functionalism fortunately rules this out. And from your functionalist viewpoint you're of course aware that television has, potentially, just as significant an aesthetic function as any other form of expression and, conversely, that cinema has always come up against forces working within it to seriously impede any aesthetic finality. But what I find so interesting in *Ciné-Journal* is that you try to establish two "facts," along with their determinants. The first is that television, despite significant efforts, often made by great filmmakers, hasn't sought its own specific identity in an aesthetic function but in a social function, a function of control and power, the dominance of the medium shot,⁸ which denies any exploration of perception, in the name of the profession-

al eye. Thus any innovation that does occur may appear in some unexpected corner, some unusual situation: you cite Giscard producing an empty shot on TV by walking off the set, or a brand of lavatory paper reviving American comedy. The second fact, on the other hand, is that cinema, despite all the forces it has served (and even launched), has always "preserved" an aesthetic and noetic function, however fragile and misunderstood. We shouldn't, then, compare different types of images, but cinema's aesthetic function and television's social function: you say the comparison not only *is* asymmetric but *has to be* asymmetric, only makes sense in an asymmetric way.

We must, then, determine how cinema comes to embody this aesthetic function. Here, by asking yourself what it means to be a film critic, you come up with things I find very intriguing. You take the example of a film like Verneuil's *The Vultures*, which does without any press viewing, rejects criticism as thoroughly pointless, and seeks direct contact with "the social consensus" as its audience. This is perfectly reasonable, because this type of cinema doesn't need critics to fill, not only the cinemas, but the whole range of its social functions. If criticism has any point, then, it's to the extent that a film bears in it something supplementary, a sort of gap between it and a still virtual audience, so we have to play for time and preserve the traces as we wait. This notion of "supplement" seems to have various resonances; perhaps you take it from Derrida, reinterpreting it in your own way: the supplement turns out to be a film's aesthetic function, a tenuous thing that can, however, be isolated in some cases and some circumstances, with a bit of skill and thought. Thus Henri Langlois and André Bazin are for you two key figures. For one of them "was obsessed with showing that film should be preserved" and the other had "the same obsession, in reverse" to show that film preserved things, preserved everything that mattered, "a strange mirror whose silvering retains images." How can one claim that such a fragile material preserves anything? And what does it mean to preserve things, which seems a fairly humble function? It's nothing to do with the material, it's something to do with the image itself: you show that the cinematic image in itself preserves, preserves the one time in his life that a man cries, in Dreyer's *Gertrud*; preserves the wind, not great storms with their social function but moments "where the camera plays with the wind, runs ahead of it, turns back into it" in Sjöström

or the Straubs; preserves or watches over whatever can be watched—children, empty houses, plane trees—as in Varda's *Vagabond*, and throughout Ozu's work; preserving, but always out of step with things, because cinematic time isn't a time that flows on but one that endures and coexists with other times. Preserving is, thus understood, no little thing; it's creating, constantly creating a supplement (that beautifies Nature, or spiritualizes it). It's in the nature of a supplement that it has to be created, and therein lies its aesthetic or noetic function, itself something supplementary. You might have developed this into an elaborate theory, but you choose to speak very concretely, keeping as close as possible to your experience as a critic, insofar as you see the critic as "keeping watch" over the supplement and thereby bringing out cinema's aesthetic function.

Why not allow television this same supplementary force of creative preservation? There's nothing in principle to stop it adapting its different resources to this same end, except that TV's social functions (seen in game shows, news) stifle its potential aesthetic function. TV is, in its present form, the ultimate consensus: it's direct social engineering, leaving no gap at all between itself and the social sphere, it's social engineering in its purest form. For how could professional training, the professional eye, leave any room for something supplementary in the way of perceptual exploration? And if I had to choose among the finest passages of your book I'd pick those where you show that the "replay," the instant replay, is television's substitute for the supplement or self-preservation, of which it is in fact the opposite; I'd pick those where you rule out any chance of *jumping* from cinema to communication, or of setting up any "relay" between one and the other, since a relay could only be set up in a form of television that had a non-communicative supplement, a supplement called Welles; I'd pick those where you explain that television's professional eye, the famous socially engineered eye through which the viewer is himself invited to look, produces an immediate and complacent perfection that's instantly controllable and controlled. For you don't take the easy path, you don't criticize television for its imperfections, but purely and simply for its perfection. It has found a way of producing a technical perfection that is the very image of its complete aesthetic and noetic emptiness (which is how a visit to the factory becomes a new form of entertainment). And you find Bergman agreeing—with con-

siderable mirth, and considerable enthusiasm for what television might have contributed to the arts—that *Dallas* is completely empty, but a perfect piece of social engineering. In another area, one might say the same of *Apostrophes*:⁹ from a literary viewpoint (aesthetically, noetically) it's empty, but technically it's perfect. To say television has no soul is to say it has no supplement, except the one you confer on it as you describe the weary critic in his hotel room, turning the TV on once more, and recognizing that all the images are equivalent, having sacrificed present, past, and future to a flowing time.

It's from cinema that there's come the most radical criticism of information, from Godard for instance, and in a different way from Syberberg (this not just in things they've said but concretely in their work); it's from television that there comes the new threat of a death of cinema. So you've thought it necessary to go and "have a close look" at this essentially uneven or asymmetric confrontation. Cinema met its first death at the hands of an authoritarian power culminating in fascism. Why does its threatened second death involve television, just as the first involved radio? Because television is the form in which the new powers of "control" become immediate and direct. To get to the heart of the confrontation you'd almost have to ask whether this control might be reversed, harnessed by the supplementary function opposed to power: whether one could develop an art of control that would be a kind of new form of resistance. Taking the battle to the heart of cinema, making cinema see it as *its* problem instead of coming upon it from outside: that's what Burroughs did in literature, by substituting the viewpoint of control and controllers for that of authors and authority. But isn't this, as you suggest, what Coppola has in his turn attempted to do in cinema, with all his hesitations and ambiguities, but really fighting for something nonetheless? And you give the apt name of *mannerism* to the tense, convulsive form of cinema that leans, as it tries to turn round, on the very system that seeks to control or replace it.¹⁰ You'd already, in *La Rampe*, characterized the image's third phase as "mannerism": when there's nothing to see behind it, not much to see in it or on the surface, but just an image constantly slipping across preexisting, presupposed images, when "the background in any image is always another image," and so on endlessly, and that's what we have to see.

This is the stage where art no longer beautifies or spiritualizes

Nature but competes with it: the world is lost, the world itself "turns to film,"¹⁰ any film at all, and this is what television amounts to, the world turning to any film at all, and, as you say here, "nothing happening to human beings any more, but everything happening only to images." One might also say that bodies in Nature or people in a landscape are replaced by brains in a city: the screen's no longer a window or door (behind which . . .) nor a frame or surface (in which . . .) but a computer screen on which images as "data" slip around. How, though, can we still talk of art, if the world itself is turning cinematic, becoming "just an act" directly controlled and immediately processed by a television that excludes any supplementary function? Cinema ought to stop "being cinematic," stop playacting, and set up specific relationships with video, with electronic and digital images, in order to develop a new form of resistance and combat the televisual function of surveillance and control. It's not a question of short-circuiting television—how could that be possible?—but of preventing television subverting or short-circuiting the extension of cinema into the new types of image. For, as you show, "since television has scorned, marginalized, repressed the potential of video—its only chance of taking over from postwar modern cinema . . . taking over its urge to take images apart and put them back together, its break with theater, its new way of seeing the human body, bathed in images and sounds—one has to hope the development of video art will itself threaten TV." Here we see in outline the new art of City and Brain, of competing with Nature. And one can already see in this mannerism many different directions or paths, some blocked, others leading tentatively forward, offering great hopes. A mannerism of video "previsualization" in Coppola, where images are already assembled without a camera. And then a completely different mannerism, with its strict, indeed austere, method in Syberberg, where puppetry and front-projection produce an image unfolding against a background of images. Is this the same world we see in pop videos, special effects, and footage from space? Maybe pop video, up to the point where it lost its dreamlike quality, might have played some part in the pursuit of "new associations" proposed by Syberberg, might have traced out the new cerebral circuits of a cinema of the future, if it hadn't immediately been taken over by marketing jingles, sterile patterns of mental deficiency, intricately controlled epileptic fits (rather as, in the previous period, cin-

ema was taken over by the "then hysterical spectacle" of large-scale propaganda . . .). And maybe space footage might also have played a part in aesthetic and noetic creation, if it had managed to produce some last reason for traveling, as Burroughs suggested, if it had managed to break free from the control of a "regular guy on the Moon who didn't forget to bring along his prayer book," and better understood the endlessly rich example of *La Région centrale*, where Michael Snow devises a very austere way of making one image turn on another, and untamed nature on art, pushing cinema to the limit of a pure *Spatium*. And how can we tell where the experimentation with images, sounds, and music that's just beginning in the work of Resnais, Godard, the Straubs, and Duras will lead? And what new Comedy¹¹ will emerge from the mannerism of bodily postures? Your concept of mannerism is particularly convincing, once one understands how far all the various mannerisms are different, heterogeneous, above all how no common measure can be applied to them, the term indicating only a battlefield where art and thought launch together with cinema into a new domain, while the forces of control try to steal this domain from them, to take it over before they do, and set up a new clinic for social engineering. Mannerism is, in all these conflicting ways, the convulsive confrontation of cinema and television, where hope mingles with the worst of all possibilities.

You had to go and "have a look" at this. So you became a journalist, at *Libération*, without giving up your connection with *Cahiers*. And since one of the most compelling reasons for becoming a journalist is wanting to travel, you produced a new series of critical pieces in the form of a series of investigations, reports, and journeys. But here again, what makes this book a real book is the fact that everything is woven around the convulsive problem with which *La Rampe* closed in a rather melancholy way. Any reflection on travel hinges perhaps on four observations, one to be found in Fitzgerald, another in Toynbee, the third in Beckett, and the last in Proust. The first notes that traveling, even to remote islands or wildernesses, never amounts to a real "break," if one takes along one's Bible, one's childhood memories, and one's habits of thought. The second, that travel aspires to a nomadic ideal, but it's a ridiculous aspiration, because nomads are in fact people who don't move on, don't want to leave, who cling to the land taken from them, their *région centrale*¹² (you yourself, talking

about a film by Van der Keuken, say that going south is bound to mean coming up against people who want to *stay* where they are). Because, according to the third observation, the most profound, Beckett's, "we don't travel, as far as I know, for the pleasure of traveling; we're dumb, but not that dumb."¹³ So what reason is there, ultimately, except *seeing for yourself*, going to check something, some inexpressible feeling deriving from a dream or nightmare, even if it's only finding out whether the Chinese are as yellow as people say, or whether some improbable color, a green ray, some bluish, purplish air, really exists somewhere, out there. The true dreamer, said Proust, is someone who goes to see something for himself . . . And in your case, what you set out to ascertain in your travels is that the world really is turning to film, is constantly moving in that direction, and that that's just what television amounts to, the whole world turning to film:¹⁴ so traveling amounts to seeing "what point in the history of the media" the city, or some particular city, has reached. Thus you describe São Paulo as a self-consuming city-brain. You even go to Japan to see Kurosawa and to see for yourself how the Japanese wind fills the banners in *Ran*; but as there's no wind that particular day, you find wretched wind-machines standing in for it and, miraculously, contributing to the image the indelible internal supplement, that is, the beauty or the thought that the image preserves only because they exist only in the image, because the image has created them.

Your travels, in other words, have left you with mixed feelings. Everywhere, on the one hand, you find the world turning to film, and find that this is the social function of television, its primary function of control—whence your critical pessimism, despair even. You find, on the other hand, that film itself still has endless possibilities, and that it is the ultimate journey, now that all other journeys come down to seeing what's on TV—whence your critical optimism. Where these two strands meet there's a convulsion, a manic depression you've made your own, a vertigo, a Mannerism that's the essence of art, but also a battlefield. And there sometimes seems to be an interplay between the two sides. Thus the traveler, wandering from TV set to TV set, can't help thinking, and seeing film for what it really is, extricating it from game shows and news alike: a kind of implosion that generates a little cinema in the televisual series you set up, for example, the series of three cities, or three tennis champions. And conversely,

returning to cinema as a critic, you can then see all the better that the flattest of images is almost imperceptibly inflected, layered, with varying depths that force you to travel within it, but on a supplementary journey, out of control: with its three speeds, in Wajda, or more particularly, the three kinds of movement in Mizoguchi, the three scenarios you discover in Imamura, the three great circles traced out in *Fanny and Alexander*, where you once more, in Bergman, come upon the three phases, the three functions of cinema—the beautifying theater of life, the spiritual antitheater of faces, and the competitive workings of magic. Why *three* so often, in so many forms, in the analyses of your book? Perhaps because *three* sometimes serves to close everything up, taking *two* back to *one*, but sometimes, on the other hand, takes up duality and carries it far away from unity, opening it up and sustaining it. "Three, or Video in the Balance: Critical Optimism and Pessimism" as your next book? The battle itself takes so many forms that it can be fought on any terrain. Fought out, for example, between the speed of movement that American cinema keeps on stepping up, and the slowness of the material that Soviet cinema weighs and preserves. You say, in a fine passage, that "the Americans have taken very far the study of continuous motion, of speed and lines of flight, of a motion that empties an image of its weight, its materiality, of bodies in a state of weightlessness . . . while in Europe, even in the USSR, at the risk of marginalizing themselves to death, some people allow themselves the luxury of exploring the other aspect of movement, slowed and discontinuous. Paradjanov and Tarkovsky, like Eisentein, Dovzhenko, and Barnet before them, observe matter accumulating and piling up, a geology of bits and pieces of rubbish and treasure slowly taking shape: theirs is the cinema of the Soviet ramparts, of that immobile empire . . ." And if the Americans have actually used video to go even faster (and to control the highest speeds), how can one return video to the uncontrollable slowness that preserves things, how teach it to slow down, as Godard "recommended" to Coppola?

Preface to Serge Daney's *Ciné-Journal* (1986)