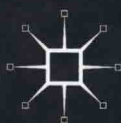# Post-War Modernist Cinema and Philosophy

Confronting Negativity and Time

Hamish Ford
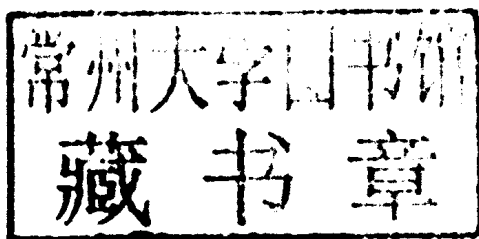
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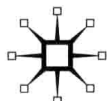
Confronting Negativity and Time

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For Imogen

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Introduction

Summarising the importance for modern philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche's 'genealogical challenge', Michel Foucault writes in 1971:

[I]f the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is something 'altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.

(1998, p. 371)

Nietzsche's emphasising of history's ontological violence in Foucault's succinct description sets the philosophical scene most effectively for the twin forces that bring such violence to the surface in the postwar European cinema presented in this book, and around which it is structured: negativity and time.

Phillip Rosen suggests history itself as marshalled by immediate human self-interest can provide the very means of suppressing or denying the terrible 'secret' highlighted by Foucault, writing that 'the contradiction between the universal affectivity of temporality in existence and a timeless consciousness (hence essence) is only overcome by a logical sleight of hand impelled by socio-historic circumstances' (1989, p. 28). Across discourses of influential philosophy, film theory and Western culture more broadly, the implications of time have been commonly either disavowed or prescriptively used then suppressed for no doubt understandable enough reasons. Yet the overcoming that Rosen describes should be more difficult to sustain when confronted with the medium of film. For all its immense powers of suggestion and illusion, cinema doggedly and radically inflicts a paradoxical impermanence,

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seeming to ossify the present and its enabling epistemological and ideological assumptions all the while showing such a concept's impossibility as ravaged by the inherent materiality and time of film itself plus that of the world, both within and beyond the frame.

Designated cinema or otherwise, the sound-image remains the primary means of considering the often vertiginous implications and ontological assault of historically contingent modern life. In the chapters that follow, I pursue this process in close-up through an examination of four European feature films presented as exemplifying post-war cinema at its modernist apotheosis: *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966); *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle/Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966); *L'eclisse/Eclipse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962); and *L'Année derniere a Marienbad/Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961). The remainder of this Introduction frames the book's key philosophical concepts of negativity and time, then the difficult ongoing question of cinema and modernism, and the importance of reflexive aesthetics and ambiguity for modernist cinema's searching out appropriate forms by which to render its historical reality.

The body of *Post-War Modernist Cinema and Philosophy: Confronting Negativity and Time* is comprised of two parts containing two chapters each, followed by a brief Conclusion. Part I: 'The Negative Impression' features intertwined analyses of *Persona* and *Two or Three Things* in developing the concept of negativity. Part II: 'An Anxious Pause', centrally concerned with cinematic time, presents comparative examinations of *L'eclisse* and *Marienbad*. The book does not offer complete analyses of these films, nor does it always or accumulatively devote equal space to each. The discussion may concentrate on one over a few pages or even a whole section, while at other times it will move quickly between different filmic references. Elsewhere, the emphasis will be on philosophically explicating the key concept at hand. For thematic and structural reasons the four films featured in the book are considered in pairs, two in Part I and the other two in Part II, through the concepts of negativity and time. While much could be said about all four in relation to these concepts, I focus on the particular interest of *Persona* and *Two or Three Things* for the former and *L'eclisse* and *Last Year in Marienbad* for the latter in building up the book's overall argument about the ongoing cinematic and philosophical importance of the post-war modernist cinema so exemplified by these films.

Chapter 1, 'Cinema's Ontological Challenge', establishes *Persona* and *Two or Three Things'* different treatments of contemporary life as

played out through apparently hermetic intimacy and a media-saturated metropolis respectively. I then philosophically set up Part I's central concept of negativity, explicating Adorno's account, and its role in modern art in light of which the crucial issue of reflexivity exemplified by both these films is framed. Chapter 2, 'Formal Violence', focuses on negativity's impact through the formal seams and aesthetic patterns of these two films, marking the affective conduits of the film-viewer relationship. Their paradoxical modernist mix of dissonance, order and fragmentation is then explored, after which I turn to the concurrently hyper self-reflexive and auto-destructive portrayal of authorship the films offer, before homing in on the notion of autonomous images liberated from both author and grounding subject. The chapter and Part I then conclude by addressing the treatment of suffering via intertextual images as suggestive of modernism's impossible post-war task of facing historical reality, and the implications for the viewer of an intimate spectatorial engagement with the 'negative impression'. Chapter 3, 'Dangerous Temporalities', begins by introducing cinematic time as experienced in engagement with *Marienbad* and *L'eclisse*, both stretched and fragmentary in the former and much more relaxed yet insidiously elliptical in the latter. Following a select charting of the way time's usually suppressed role has been theoretically addressed, from André Bazin's seminal writing on Italian neorealism through to Deleuze's notion of the 'time-image', the chapter concludes with the provisional suggestion that the subject faces such temporal reality via a willed 'pause'. Chapter 4, 'A New World', more specifically details these two films' formal and aesthetic details as key to their philosophical contribution. First framing the time-image's remaking of the gaze, temporality is then addressed as an 'underground' but always-present event that forges a possibly 'post-human' or 'alien' world on screen, before I weigh up associated concepts of becoming, difference, and the notion of 'the eternal return' in light of the films' philosophical contributions. Part II then concludes by addressing the notion of the time-image's forcing of 'difficult thought' that self-consciously engages creativity and opportunity on the one hand and ontological devastation and 'impower' on the other.

Negativity rising, difficult time

The twin concepts that give *Post-War Modernist Cinema and Philosophy* its structure both highlight the book's philosophical terrain and in the process make apparent the precise nature of my contribution to the recently escalating 'film-philosophy' discourse.[1] The prime source

material drawn on in the chapters ahead when it comes to literary philosophy is work by two twentieth-century European writers exemplifying the 'Continental' tradition in its modern post-war form and more radical trajectories. German philosopher, political theorist, musicologist, and leading light of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, Theodor Adorno is the key philosophical contact for Part I, in particular through his extensive discussion of negativity. French poststructuralist philosopher and sometime film theorist Gilles Deleuze is the main touchstone for Part II, specifically his analysis of post-war European cinema's philosophical significance largely resulting from its unusually foregrounded temporality. Each philosopher's work, and a diverse range of other literary material, is called upon to explicate the two primary elements that I argue are central to a modernist cinema both radical in philosophical impact and for its intimate charting of everyday experience within an ever more truly modern world.

While the book carefully utilises particular philosophers' work and concepts, its primary energy and suggestiveness comes from the films themselves. If no region, era, or type of film-making rightfully owns the notion of philosophical cinema, it is my contention that the modernist films I address more than satisfy Daniel Shaw's (2006, 2008) notion of cinema 'doing philosophy' (as opposed to either our simply throwing some philosophy at any film as a kind of blank slate by which to demonstrate a favoured thesis, or the given film itself supplying and quoting a particular philosophical position), through both dramatic and thematic content but perhaps even more by way of highly complex aesthetic form. In partnership with a distinctly active viewer, all four films featured in the following chapters constantly provoke challenging, substantive philosophical questions as emanating from immediate encounters with post-war reality, and which – no matter how these famous works of modern European cinema have been interpreted according to a given era's or scholar's theoretical predilections – transcend a pre-digested 'thesis', every image and sequence subverting simple hermeneutic or illustrative didacticism. This book aims to concurrently demonstrate philosophy's select usefulness for exploring cinema's more conceptually and aesthetically radical trajectories but also cinema's potentially radical affect on – or 'as' – philosophy.

Swathed across the fields of culture, theory, politics and an everyday social real, negativity has played a central if often under-acknowledged role within a modern world that Deleuze suggests is characterised by growing unbelief (1989, p. 171).[2] Throughout her book *Negativity and*

Politics, philosopher Diana Coole argues that negativity has been a prominent but selectively applied force within competing philosophical and theoretical paradigms over the last century. She also points out that while its formless destructive-creative potential has frequently been utilised to critique dominant discourses so as to offer a new argument, within philosophy – and I would argue film theory as well – the concept has rarely been extensively invoked and engaged with in its more violent aspects (Coole, 2000). With many great modern critical-theoretical narratives such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism having come under serious strain over the last two decades, looking back on the twentieth century and early twenty-first we can see how the speed of cultural and subjective participation in modernity's nihilistic energy has exponentially increased, with structured belief and presumed method coming under increasing doubt. While different understandings of and debates around negativity feature throughout Part I ahead, the central point of reference will be its place in Adorno's work.

If Theodor Adorno has often been ignored or cast as a villain within academic film studies, this is largely due to the heavy historical baggage of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Adorno and Max Horkheimer's very influential and also much criticised book, cinema is portrayed as hopelessly corrupted because operating at the very heart of 'the culture industry' – their famous phrase for mass consumer culture propagated by the socio-economic and political interests of late capitalism.[3] Even if the more apparently blanket elements of the 'culture industry' thesis are rejected, there remains an urgent claim in critically exploring cinema's still important role – be it apparently affirmative, critical, or arguable – as part of an often regressive socio-political reality in all its psychic, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. Part I ahead engages with Adorno's late writing less to mount an interrogation of cinema's ubiquitous conservative incarnations and role in sustaining regressive aspects of contemporary life, and more in considering its radical potential for formal and philosophical portrayals thereof in *Persona* and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*. In particular, his remarkable final decade's work is utilised as the culmination and epicentre of a sustained and unique elaboration of negativity. In conversation with Adorno's philosophy and aesthetic theory, 'depressing' films as designated by a desperately auto-affirming culture can in fact turn out to show healthy signs of genuine life, suggesting instead it is 'positive' ones that seem to say all is well which are beyond despair.[4]

In starkly different ways, *Two or Three Things* and *Persona* commit dual assaults on cinema's ability to render reality and the question of the human subject. Forging his own deeply reflexive 'essay film' style out of *cinéma vérité*, Godard literally talks to us from the edges of the frame over images of Paris and its new outer *banlieue* regions. And yet his film not only seems increasingly unable to find solace in the transforming modern world it charts but also undermines recognisable subjectivity (including perhaps the filmmaker's own) once the material power of the moving image comes into play. *Persona* is equally reflexive and in a more layered way. It brings a vast array of modernist formal devices to bear on Bergman's confrontingly intimate scenario and film style by inflicting negativity borne of cinema's materialist elements as well as a more human-derived ontological assault exchanged between two increasingly interconnected subjects on screen.

Whether informed by such flowering modernism in European cinema at the time or not, Adorno's brief article 'Transparencies on Film', published the same year as Bergman and Godard's above films, offers a skeletal re-think of the moving image's progressive potential.[5] But it is more broadly his array of late writing – culminating with *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno's towering final book posthumously edited and published in 1970 – that I utilise in Part I. The modernist cinema and contemporaneous post-war European philosophy featuring in Chapters 1 and 2, both reaching apogee points during the 1960s, share an emphasis on reflexivity. The modern work brings about what Adorno calls a 'tremor' generated by fragmentary form's critical engagement with and rendering of often horrific social reality as a result of the reflexive appropriation of materials from a culture industry-defined reality (1983, p. 346). The tonality of such artworks is anything but affirmational: in Adorno's famous (or notorious) phrase, 'black is the ideal' (ibid., p. 58) as means to both trenchant critique and possible newness. Modern art in this understanding is always alive as a 'meta' event or experience: both inherently reflexive, pointing to itself, and invoking/affecting possible space beyond its material form. Under the available conditions of a reified modernity, Adorno ventures, 'art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering' (ibid., p. 27). Fuelling and benefiting from such formally radical charting is the engaged capacity of a subject typically enslaved by its oppressive regimes to forge a potential space – a negative impression, I suggest in Part I – through which to newly experience and think.

Following Part I's focus on negativity, Part II explores time as a means of both ontological dissolution and creating a means to think differently. Although crucial to any film, in much cinema the effects and ramifications of time have for perhaps understandable reasons been heavily foreclosed. Even so, there has been a gradual but undeniable increase in the prominence of temporality as both theme and explicit aesthetic tool over recent years in different forms of filmmaking around the world, including Hollywood, which during the past decade or two has increasingly produced films that seem to foreground time and play with non-linear structures. Yet for all their avowed interest in memory and disabling temporal effects, films such as *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011) and *In Time* (Andrew Niccol, 2011) – or arguably even David Lynch's much more challenging, nightmarish non-Hollywood vision of Hollywood itself in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) – still carefully control time's impact to the extent required of a still-sacred narrative, primarily coming across as jigsaw puzzles to be put into correct linear order by the viewer-detective. Soon enough and certainly well before the end of the film, 'post-classical' Hollywood films typically work to retain and ultimately reinforce strict adherence to narrative movement thanks to fundamentally restorative protagonistic action that is not only successfully empowered against the debilitating effects of time but usually does so via wheezy – indeed now sclerotic – redemptive arcs of masculine crisis and the quintessentially conservative mythic drive to restore (or Oedipally redeem) the patriarchal family.

Looking to the more genuinely global state of filmmaking today, leading-edge world cinema is much more likely to emphasise temporality's power than Hollywood at its most ambitious, resulting in some of the most important and compelling meditations on life in our new century. Many scholars, for example Mark Betz (2010) and Dudley Andrew (2010), argue with good reason that films by largely non-Western directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Jia Zhangke, Tsai Ming-liang, Béla Tarr, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul offer more than a properly global equivalent in challenging, deeply rewarding contemporary art cinema, and rather a genuine extension of the aesthetic innovations and exploration of temporal effects seen in the post-war European modernism this book essays. Nevertheless, the films I examine in the chapters ahead are not just of historical interest as works deemed adventurous and 'modern' at the time but now long superseded.

Ultimately, the cinema on which I focus is removed both from the more challenging extremes of contemporary world cinema and certainly new-century Hollywood while having much closer historical and

aesthetic ties with the former, particularly in the area of time. While now many decades 'old', *L'eclisse* and *Last Year in Marienbad* for example certainly do not offer the sheer slowness of work by Tarr or Tsai. Yet the films continue to emit unusually complex and different temporalities, even more so for emerging out of a rather futuristic-looking 'modernist past'. One of the most famous yet also debated European 'art films' ever made, as well as enormously influential in global reach, when watched today *Marienbad* offers an arguably unmatched experience of non-chronological temporality. Stretching and slowness in the form of historically suggestive, leisurely tracking shots are combined with intricately patterned, often wildly non-linear fragmentation to dazzling and truly vertiginous effect. Offering a seemingly more relaxed temporality, *L'eclisse* essays the storied, palimpsestic Rome but even more closely a very modern yet historically defined space on its fringes. From the very first frame, an unnerving and insidious temporality defines image and gaze until the film's famous final minutes in which time appears to reign completely over any human characters.

Particularly since the emergence and subsequent translation of his two volumes *Cinema 1: The Movement-image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-image* (1989), Gilles Deleuze's work has played the central or founding role when it comes to European philosophy within the recently formalised 'film-philosophy' discourse, particularly on the topic of time.[6] Radically expanding Bazin's idea that the enhanced perceptual realism resulting from deep-focus and quality sound reproduction not only gives the viewer much greater opportunity to hermeneutically work with a more ambiguous image but also has the effect of 'bringing together real time, in which things exist, along with the duration of the action' (Bazin, 1967, p. 39), Deleuze charts both the historical and aesthetic extent of this process in coming to concentrate on films that take the temporalised image to its apogee of philosophical significance – in particular, the post-1960 European films Bazin did not live to write about that are my focus.

While Deleuze's project ought not to be treated as a mid/late-twentieth-century museum piece, its historical groundedness – the importance of World War II for the movement/time break, and that both philosopher and films emanate from a very particular set of European socio-political conditions – is important to emphasise. Equally crucial, however, is our own experience of the cinema he essays. If we underplay either historical or spectatorial context, critics of Deleuze and the time-image cinema he addresses (such as Cubitt, 2004, pp. 338–9) can seem to have a point in charging both with ahistorical utopianism. Sceptics and advocates alike commonly argue that Deleuze's philosophy of the

cinema seeks to undermine allegedly regressive elements of the Enlightenment subject and notions of 'being' to enable re-conceived understandings of subjectivity that emphasise and elaborate 'becoming'.[7] Following on from Part I's stressing of negativity, Part II will emphasise the more often nihilistic power of the time-image, which risks just as much damage to radically remade visions of subjectivity as to the conservative myths they ideally replace.

In a piece called 'Doubts About the Imaginary', Deleuze makes a point touching on the important connections between the two halves of this book, one again significantly indebted to Nietzsche. Referring to 'the crystal', his metaphor for how time works in all its heterogeneous material and virtual affect, Deleuze writes:

> What we see in the crystal is falsity, or rather, the power of falsity. The power of falsity is time itself, not because time has changing contents but because the form of time as becoming brings into question any formal model of truth.
>
> (1995, p. 66)

The proceeding chapters are concerned with charting the complex real-world effects of cinema's ontological violence. When openly engaged with, negativity and time cause immense theoretical, existential and corporeal trouble as a result of their appropriation-defying threats. It is easy to presume that while time ravages traditional subjective investments, it does not also problematise an idealistic reconfigured and more ethically 'advanced' vision of the subject. But this would mean that ontologies of subject and cinema – irrespective of whether or not they are in accordance with our personal ideologies and hopes – are affirmable within the modern image-world on and off screen. Confirmation of such belief, well intended or otherwise, is in the most powerful moments of the films I address undermined. What we are left with is a cinema that in ever-fascinating ways asks crucial questions of both its own modernities and the ever-later and increasingly global ones into which such films today return as digitally reincarnated, causing us to rethink what cinema 'is' and offering a distinctly modernist vision of film as capable of the most challenging philosophical prompting.

Modernity – film – modernism

Famously coining what would later become a much-used concept, French poet and self-styled *flâneur* Charles Baudelaire writes in his