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Cinema and Phenomenology: Toward a Reflection on the Phenomena of Modernity as the Kingspin for the Origin of Cinematographic Language.

Abstract

This article aims at reflecting on cinematography, its origin and development along with the phenomenon of modernity. The utilization of Charles S. Peirce's Phenomenology in this study does not refer to the reception of cinematography, but to our aspiration to observe through which parameters, a language such as the one in movies, developed itself, in other words, how a kind of logic, esthetics and ethics found in the movies consolidated itself. Departing from such premises, the first step was to observe the phenomena in the metropolis through the philosophical texts of Walter Benjamin and the recent book organized by Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz: "The Movies and the Invention of Modern Life"; in search of a dialog between Peirce, Modernity and the Cinema.

KEYWORDS: Cinema, Semiotics, Phenomenology, Metropolis

Introduction

The development of cinematographic language is harnessed to the environment of the metropolis, but to what extent? Before embarking on the experience of the metropolis, though, we believe that we ought to understand the issues related to Peirce's *Phenomenology* and the *Normative Sciences*.

Phaneroscopy, or Phenomenology, will design itself as a science that aims at making an inventory of the characteristics of the *phaneron* or phenomenon (...)" (IBRI, 4).

By "(...) *phaneron* I understand the total collection of everything that is somehow present in the mind, without any consideration whether that corresponds to anything real or not." (PEIRCE *apud* IBRI, 4).

To Peirce, *Phenomenology*, the first branch of Philosophy - in his classification of the sciences - would be a science of appearances, how one has access to things in themselves, for it is through phenomena and their *diligent observation* that one has access to one's knowledge about the world. The phenomenon *appears* to the mind, whether it is an external or an internal one. Thus, since one has no access to the essence of things, the manner one can mediate them is through their external side, through the *phaneron*. However, Peirce, as it has already been seen, is emphatic in what is related to the observation of the phenomenon, for it is exactly through its observation that one can understand, learn and acquire knowledge about it: *seeing, paying attention to and generalizing*.

It is after *Phenomenology* that Peirce arrives at the three categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. *Firstness* corresponds to that which is *first* and, for that very reason, does not possess any relation or similarity with anything else; it is free "(...)" in the sense that there is no other behind it determining its actions (...)" (Peirce *apud* IBRI, 10); it is original, possesses the freshness of novelty, of life. *Secondness* corresponds to the Other, the non-ego. It possesses the character of alterity, of negation, of opposition to the self; it is thus a *second in relation to*. From Secondness comes the idea of action-reaction, here and now, brute force.

We are continuously colliding with hard facts. We would expect something or we passively took it for granted and we had its image in our minds, but experience throws this idea to the ground and compels us to think otherwise. (Peirce *apud* IBRI, 7).

Thirdness corresponds to order, regularity, permanence, habit and law. There is order and regularity in reality which makes it intelligible, in the sense that one can observe the conduct of the phenomenon and understands it after the features and facts with which it is impregnated, favoring the experience of

synthesis, mediation, concerning the *phaneron*, making it possible to *foresee* the future conduct of that phenomenon.

After this very brief (and summed up) explanation on Peircean Phenomenology, I believe we are ready to observe the characteristics of the phenomenological experience of the metropolis and, with it, to bring those general and abstract categories to the modern environment.

The metropolis inaugurates an environment saturated with phenomena; walking about in a large city is a rich experience and, at the same time, a confusion of sensations, feelings and thoughts. Everything gets mixed up: words, images, sounds, bodies, clothes, windows, stores, street-cars, streets, colors, tastes, odors etc. in a discontinuous and accelerating rhythm. The *Industrial Revolution* objectified a heated kind of capitalism, burying once and for all, all the inheritance of *Feudalism*, which had lasted for more than a thousand years. In this new historical moment, there is a radical change in the productive poles: people left the countryside and concentrated in the industrial cities, which, quickly got swollen, due to a heavy rural exodus, with field workers swarming into the cities in search of jobs, once, in the fields, there were no more job opportunities. That ended up bringing about an environment of:

... quick industrialization, urbanization and population growth; a proliferation of new technologies and means of transport; a saturation of advanced capitalism; an explosion of a mass consumption culture and so on and so forth. (SINGER, 95).

The crux of the matter is that, before the coming about of the metropolis, the forms of interaction and mediation had a time and a rhythm which were more contemplative, if compared to the one of this new environment. They were characterized by the seasonal periods which were, in turn, related to the sowing, caring and harvesting in the fields. On the other hand, in the big cities, this rhythm was dictated by the industries and by the circulation of merchandize. As

Georg Simmel highlights: “The modern vision of life leans on money, whose nature is fluctuating and which presents the identity of the essence in the major and more interchangeable variety of equivalents.” (Simmel *apud* Gunning, 36).

This interchangeable variety of equivalents and that fluctuating nature of money Simmel points to, ends up impregnating and consolidating all phenomena of modern life, the mixture and promiscuity of these objectify a revolution in the form of mediation in big cities. The first to *feel* this context were the poets, writers and painters. The esthetic experience of the metropolis ends up influencing movements like Expressionism and Dadaism, and writers like Allan Poe and Baudelaire, besides creating a new poetics: the *flanerie* and the so called *Panoramic Literature*. This roaming and fluctuating within the metropolis, capturing its *original* details, full of *life, freedom* and *freshness*, is the experience of *Firstness*, which is so important to Art and to the new forms of communication that appeared in that time. It is, also, the scenario of the *flaneur*, who fights to be always engulfed by the esthetic experience.

To embark on the phenomenological experience of *Secondness* in the metropolis, one must make use of philosopher Walter Benjamin, who dedicated his life to its analysis – a kind of archeology of those phenomena of modern life -, for, besides that poetics of the metropolis, he points to a *harsher* experience of the big city: *the shock*. The experience of shock and rupture is punctuated by action and reaction, brute force, non-ego and pure alterity, which the pedestrian in the crowd is obliged to undergo, is forced to adapt to, in a fast manner and in the rhythm dictated by the movement in the streets and avenues, so he may be able to survive in such environment. The fragment imposes itself as phenomenon, for there is no time to *see* the whole, there is only the instant to *pay attention* to the small parts of the environment and to *generalize* in fractions of seconds, swerving from a street-car, a car, from people, while crossing the street.

However, what allows *generalization*, even amid the shock, is that there is order and regularity in the metropolis, which configures itself in the organization

of the streets, avenues, districts, squares, trade and public buildings. There is, therefore, a whole spacial ordination, along with norms and laws, such as traffic signs, legislative codes of conduct for the citizens, as well as timetables for public transport, to enter and leave work, leisure etc. Even in the speed of cars and street-cars, there is regularity, and that propitiates a familiarity with this new environment which -, through collateral experiences in this roaming in the metropolis -, allows the pedestrian to have mediation. If the metropolis were only shock, there would be no chance to mediate it. The fact that there is regularity in such environment allows one to *foresee* the shocks and, who knows, to *avoid them*. It is through regularity and the permanence of the objects, that is, through the future observation of the phenomena, that knowledge is possible, making, thus, intrinsic to it, the *predictable* character of how these events *will* occur (IBRI, 32). But, it is important to observe that nothing is totally predictable, for there is a very intense phenomenological game brought about by indeterminism, by Chance (*Firstness*), and by order, by Law (*Thirdness*), while the shock, the here and now, action-reaction (*Secondness*), the tougher experience of the metropolis, occurs in the point in which Chance and Law meet, operating new reorganizations, new mediations, propelling the evolution of the organization in that environment. Therefore, it is through these phenomena, common to the metropolis, that new *habits* and new *processes of learning* were configured; it was through these intense and dynamic fluxes that a new order and the phenomenological continuity ended up getting embodied, which made, thus, mediation or *Thirdness*, possible.

According to Peirce, all knowledge comes from perception, and it is through such mediation of reality that we develop language, in a process of understanding and learning about the surrounding world. It is important to understand that such world of appearances, of phenomenology as experience, forces itself and makes possible the cognitive process, it makes man think, and therefore, it is a *cognitive result of living* (IBRI, 13). These phenomena of modern

life enter consciousness through perception, inseminate it with the forms of representation and conduct in this new environment.

Collateral experience and the various accesses that perception seeks to understand the surrounding environment and touch the core of the question of adaptation to the metropolis. Peirce denominates *Percept* to all the physical phenomena which a mind encounters; in the case of modern life, these percepts multiply themselves, get all mixed up, are all in constant circulation, transforming themselves, without any control of the pedestrian. It was no longer possible to have a vision of the whole, of everything that surrounds the pedestrian, in case he stopped and desired to have such experience, probably he would be literally run over. What has changed in this environment? One needed a form of relation and communication which could correspond to such reality; what one saw more and more, however, were forms and formats of organization that could be organized in fragments, in the instant of the blinking of the eyes to transmit a piece of information, to focus, select, cut... so, the perceptive judgment ended up getting used to it, got the habit, it became a language in signic juxtapositions, ever more articulated in newspapers, in products, in ads, in signs, in buildings, stores, galleries, windowshops, cars, in work environments, in houses, squares, and even in clothes.

There is a game, therefore, of the common daily perception of the city, one that structures itself at every moment, everyday: representations that are being created at every instant, with news and phrases thrown at random, with billboards and ads, transiting between cafés, bars and amid the crowds. At the same time, there is the occult, the unknown, the mystery, that is, unknown places, districts, territories, streets and avenues, that have not been experienced, but are spoken of in the news, in newspapers or in a chat in a street-car; representations collected without one ever having passed by or been in those places, everything adds up to a poetics of the mixture, to the collage, in that reality of the fluctuating circulation of novelty. This means that this modern subject is immerse in that language; he starts dealing with it as the phenomena

arrive at his mind and, in his mind, he is obliged to make a synthesis of that reality, that is, he is obliged to weave and *assemble* these moving fragments, everything being mixed up, everything going on at the same time, the shock, the rupture, the dislocations of time and space, sounds, odors, texts, ads etc. By observing this environment, it becomes easier to understand why language is not in the mind, but that mind is in the language.

So as to better understand these representations of the modern environment, it is necessary to approach the second order of Philosophy. According to Peirce:

(...) the Normative Sciences aim at clarifying the ultimate motivations of rational conduct, immersed as they are in the multiform universe of phenomena (...) at collecting from the phenomena the data for its elaborations, depending on Phenomenology to characterize such phenomena and to be able to represent them. (...) They aim at understanding what, in everything that appears, motivates, ultimately, the conduct.” (Silveira, 212 and 213)

This second order of Philosophy is made up of the three suborders: Esthetics, Ethics and Logic or Semeiotic, and it depends thoroughly upon Phenomenology, and it is directly linked to the representations, beliefs and the conduct that refer to that phenomenical reality.

Influenced by the *flanerie* and by this esthetic of the fragment in the metropolis, what appears are the so - called *micronarratives*, or as Benjamin called them, the *Panoramic Literature*. Those are narratives that hold on to the detail, the information about the character and his environment is made up slowly during the reading, where the visuality gives the tone and is suggested by the text, exploring and conversing with an imaginary of the metropolis. Each author depicts an angle of the metropolis; the book was a compilation of stories about one same space, made up of a fragmentation of the dramatic action of the

city, through various points of view. This understanding about the fact that reality has become too complex to be able to be seen from one single point of view strengthens the sense of the fragment as phenomenon, once, for the text to have the effects of reality it also has to possess the same kind of Esthetics and Language that is found in the metropolis.

In the following excerpt by Georg Simmel, it is important to highlight the silence of the eye:

Before the invention of the buses, trains and street-cars in the XIX century, people had not come to the point of being obliged to face each other for long periods of time, without exchanging a word. (Simmel *apud* Benjamin, 142).

It's worth emphasizing, *following the dislocations for long periods of time, looking at a person without exchanging a word*. Another excerpt by Margaret Cohen could be added to this one, to emphasize the so called *Panoramic Literature*:

The heterogeneity of this panoramic kind only highlights the hermeneutical complexity introduced by the lack of a point of view that is able to impose authority. (Cohen, 267)

That is, the narrative is no longer composed from one point of view, but from various angles. These two excerpts are important for one to understand the act of filming, the silence of the plan and the fragmentation of action in several plans, a sensation that is described by Baudelaire in this excerpt concerning the *flaneur*: "(...) to see the world, to be in the center of the world and to be hidden in the world." (Baudelaire *apud* Benjamin, 487)

These passages draw ones attention by corresponding to the way of filming, by telling a story of the movies and, at the same time, by being in tune

with the modern perceptive environment. Another important excerpt that is worth mentioning is the poem by Baudelaire:

The poet enjoys this unsurpassable privilege of being able to, when he so pleases, to be himself and another. Like those erring souls that seek a body, he enters, if he so pleases, in someone else's persona." (Baudelaire, 41)

This poet narrates the point of view of the other, or of various characters, but is still himself, however in possession of the capacity of exploring different angles; so, this artist *enjoys an incomparable privilege of being able to be and take part of other looks*. All these passages are connected to a Language; yet, besides that, there is an Esthetics of the fragment, that is, the *freedom* to explore the phenomenon of the fragment, the poet *feels* this incredible possibility of being able to have various eyes, moving in various directions, through details to reveal a place, a character, to make up a story. No wonder that, decades later, the theoretician Béla Balazs would point out:

The camera looks at the other characters and to their environment from the point of view of a character. It can look at the environment from the eyes of a different character at every instant. By means of such takings, we see the space of action from the inside, with the eyes of the dramatis personae, and we know how they feel in it. The abyss the hero falls into opens itself up at our feet and the heights he has to climb lie toward the heavenly space before our eyes. (Balázs, 2003, 97)

Walter Benjamin emphasizes another characteristic of the *flaneur*:

For as the *flanerie* can transform all of Paris into an interior, into a house whose rooms are the blocks, not neatly divided by doorways such as the

rooms in a house are, on the other hand, the city, too, can open itself up before the pedestrian, like a view without doorways. (Benjamin, 192)

To transform all of Paris in an interior and the city may open itself up before the pedestrian like a view without doorways, are characteristics of the cinematographic narrative in its dislocations between interiors and exteriors, showing a diversity of dislocations, transforming the film in an environment without doorways, accessing everything as if this everything were a place, a house whose rooms did not possess barriers or walls. To penetrate, through various angles, the space and time of the characters, to follow, in silence, the fragments of these stories, to relate, but from afar. To look and to be looked at as a narrative seems to send to the multiplicity of the point of view, to the plan, the profundity of field and its continuity, and the assemblage of the plans from a diversity of angles. Another important factor is that the direction of the narrative changes according to the change in the point of view; the reader discovers other stories within Paris, within the same space, at every point of view, plots about the city are retold under new looks, as if through these fragments he were able to bring new senses, new meanings.

These excerpts that were brought up here are examples of representations coming from phenomena in the metropolitan environment, such as: the hybridism of the languages, the ephemeral and the transitory, the fragmentation and the assemblage/collage, the micronarratives, the mixture of genres and styles, the circulation and the movement, all these signic relations developing as a Esthetics and a Logic of modernity. At the same time, embodying an Ethics of the big city, we have the multiplicity of the eye, its silence and its dislocation, and the confessing curiosity. The Movies is an *updating* of that modern thought; it is the external side of that which is internalized as the Language of the metropolitan quotidian. The cinematographer made the pragmatic consolidation of this thought possible.

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