

Cinema and/as convergence

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Resumo

Considerando que vivemos em tempos de convergências - a convergência tecnológica ao redor da tela e a convergência espacial e temporal que vemos em termos de conteúdo - proponho que tais convergências são baseadas em uma convergência fundamental, que é a do mundo com o cinema. Ademais, argumento que tal convergência está fundada em uma ideologia corrente da divergência, divisão, separação e da hierarquização. Em suma, o cinema continua como sempre foi, um negócio. Mas talvez mais importante seja perceber que o negócio está cada vez mais se tornando cinema.

Palavras-chave: Convergência; hierarquização; não-cinema.

Abstract

Considering that we are living in an age of convergences – the technological convergence around the screen, and the spatial and temporal convergence that we see in terms of film content – I wish to argue today that these are based upon a more fundamental convergence, which is the convergence of the world in cinema. Furthermore, I shall argue that this convergence is itself predicated upon an ongoing ideology of divergence, of division, of separation, and of hierarchisation. In short, cinema continues to be business as usual. But perhaps more importantly, business as usual is increasingly becoming cinema.

Keywords: Convergence; hierarchisation; non-cinema.

Given the fundamental division that is at the heart of the computer, it is ironic that contemporary cinema depicts worlds without boundaries, as cameras pass from inside to outside of human bodies, through walls, and across galaxies in order to provide us with photorealistic images of continuous spaces. Furthermore, the digital computer-camera can record for so long now that there is a continuity of time in addition to a continuity of space, which in turn leads to a similar convergence of fiction and documentary with regard to film aesthetics, since we can no longer tell when the performance begins and when it ends.

And yet, for all of these convergences – the technological convergence around the screen, and the spatial and temporal convergence that we see in terms of film content – I wish to argue today that these are based upon a more fundamental convergence, which is the convergence of the world in cinema. Furthermore, I shall argue that this convergence is itself predicated upon an ongoing ideology of divergence, of division, of separation, and of hierarchisation. In short, cinema continues to be business as usual. But perhaps more importantly, business as usual is increasingly becoming cinema.

Screens proliferate to the point of ubiquity. I am surrounded by an endless array of screens – and if I find myself in a situation where I cannot see a screen, I need not worry, since at that moment I can take out the screen that I carry in my pocket and take a look at that one. I and many of my conspecifics are veritably addicted to, or at the very least dominated, by screens. How did this happen?

I imagine that the reasons for the rise of the screens are multiple, ranging at the very least from the psychological to the historical to the cultural and to the physiological. Perhaps there is a narcissism attached to the screen, especially in an age in which I use my smartphone to update my Facebook profile and constantly check it to see who has been looking at me. Certainly the proliferation of screens is attached to a particular period, what we might loosely term the present, and screens have not always been so prominent.

Arguably not every culture is as screen-absorbed as the one(s) with which I am most familiar, namely the cultures of the Global North. And yet, there are strong reasons regarding why every human does or might look at screens if surrounded by them, and these are to do with the human mechanisms of attention.

Our screens tend to involve bright colours and rapid changes in terms of editing, camera movement and/or what we see on the screen; they tend to feature humans that supposedly are most attractive, while the distortions in size (from the massive to the minute depending on the size of screen with which we are confronted) also serve to attract and to maintain our attention. Furthermore, the devices attached to the screens often emit loud and/or sonorous noises, which also arouse our attention. As numerous studies about human attention show, then, the kinds of images that we see on our screens accord more or less precisely with the kinds of things that arouse our attention: unusual things that make us ask whether what we are seeing is prey, predator or mate. Given that the human brain rewards itself when it has worked out whether it is prey, predator or mate that we are seeing, it makes sense that we want to go through this experience over and over again. Indeed, the neurotransmitters associated with attention are norepinephrine and acetylcholine (see, for example, Himmelheber et al, 2000). The former is known more commonly in the UK as noradrenaline, which conveys the adrenaline-like dimension of attention, while the latter is not dissimilar to nicotine (nicotine imitates acetylcholine, and thus stimulates acetylcholine receptors in the brain; see, for example, Wu et al 2013). In other words, it may not be too grand an exaggeration to suggest that we are addicted to our screens. It is not, therefore, that we have a deficit of attention; it is that our attention constantly is over-aroused; we have a surplus of attention.

And if it is cinema that arouses and maintains our attention, then it is perhaps unsurprising that it is the techniques developed in cinema that also proliferate and which fill those near-ubiquitous screens: physiologically we are predisposed to pay attention to those screens, whether we enjoy the

content of the screen or not.

But more than this. Knowing that we look at screens, that we look at screens perhaps even more than we do the real world, then it is seemingly logical that one should try to monetize this mechanism and to turn attention into an economy. Not only do our survival instincts – looking out for prey, predators or mates – become part of this economy, but this economy becomes necessary for survival, in the sense that one's business might go bust if one does not take part in or use the techniques developed in cinema, since if no one knows about your business or what you do/are selling (if no one pays attention to it), then your business might perish and your ability to survive is as a result compromised. In short, cinema affects the economy in such a way that nearly all businesses must become cinematic, or they must adopt what Jonathan Beller (2006) has called a cinematic mode of production.

While there might be a case for medium specificity, therefore, I wish to suggest that the convergence point of the contemporary world is cinema – the techniques developed as part of its history, and the screens that play a central role in its proliferation. Indeed, few are the jobs that are not now tied to screens, with Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (UK/France/Belgium, 2016) recently staging the demise of traditional labour as the title character is forced to become computer literate in an age when his skills as a carpenter are becoming increasingly redundant. To be clear: it is not that the screens that we look at are always playing what we might call films, although increasing amounts of information are passed on audiovisually, as we can see from the way in which newspaper websites increasingly carry video content, meaning that they are converging with television shows. Nonetheless, each has a cinematic logic, which is the central logic of contemporary capital: to gain attention and to put attention to work in a bid to make money. The best products are not the ones that make the most money; the products that garner the most attention are the ones that make the most money – and they do this through cinema. And so, a tool that we thought might show the world back to us, namely the cinematograph, in fact

changes the world, capitalizing upon our attention mechanisms in order to intensify a particular system of increasingly globalized behaviour, namely capital itself. If the world shaped cinema, it is perhaps more true to say that today cinema shapes the world; we do not measure cinema according to reality; we measure reality according to cinema and that which is not cinematic is as good as non-existent, a theme to which I shall return shortly.

However, I presently wish to address how the convergence that is cinema involves not just a spatial convergence, in the sense that screens are everywhere and the screen becomes the focus of nearly all of our attention, but that it also involves a temporal convergence. I mean three things by this temporal convergence. Firstly, since we are always looking at screens and thus always paying attention to images and thus always taking part in the business of cinema, capital now becomes not a part of the day that rhythmically starts and stops, but it is constant, or endless. I wake up in the night and check my phone, which stays under my pillow, with my laptop on the floor next to my bed. In effect, there is now no time difference; just an ongoing hum.

This is tied to a second convergence, which we might call something like the perpetual present, or an inability to retain memories. This is a very common experience: I am writing a paper to present at SOCINE XX, and I realize that I need quickly to check a passage from Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* (2013), and so I go online to see if I can find an electronic copy of that text. But before I get there, I see that I have three new emails in my gmail account, and so I check those – deleting two spam messages and responding to the third. Since I am checking emails, I check my work email and realize that I have to respond to one of those, from a student, quite urgently, but in order to do this properly, I have to consult their student profile, and so I must carry out various logins in order remotely to access the university's system. I do this and respond to the email, only to see that I have another email asking for a meeting next week, and so I go over to my calendar and check that, add the meeting to my calendar, adding at the same time another meeting that I forgot earlier to add, before going back

and responding to the email. I get an announcement telling me that I have received a message on Facebook, so I go to that – someone has sent me a link to a website that looks relevant enough for work, and so I follow the link, read the story, reply to my friend who sent me the link with a cursory thank you, and then... I know that I have to do something online, but I cannot remember what. Oh well, I should go back to writing my paper for SOCINE... Oh yes, I wanted to check that passage from Horkheimer. And so the cycle begins again. To reiterate: it is not that I cannot attend to my essay, it is that my attention is, with my complicity, aroused on all sides: I have a surplus of attention. All time converges in a perpetual present, then, as I remember nothing, but just drift from attention-arousing image to attention-arousing image.

The third temporal convergence, meanwhile, is more profound, and it also finds an echo in Beller's work on the attention economy. This convergence is the way in which cinema is the constitutive event of modernity, in that while modernity began long before cinema, and while cinema is now already 120 years old, the cinematic logic of capital was always there and continues to be at the heart of capital. The addiction to screens as opposed to being with the world is in effect present in all media, including shoes, clothes, buildings, agriculture, road surfaces, and, be it for better or for worse, for ensuring our comfort, warmth and survival or otherwise, these all involve processes of separation from as opposed to a convergence with the world. In effect, rather than a history full of surprises, my contention is that cinema destroys history, and it presents itself as the teleological beginning, centre and end of human time. The very illusory nature of this and any teleology demonstrates the religious dimension of cinema: we worship it as we worship money, since cinema is capital; and it also demonstrates the way in which cinema involves the divergence of humanity and the world, since the world itself does not necessarily share the same fate as humanity, although humanity is trying to make it so through the mutual destruction of both the planet and itself. In effect, cinema demonstrates that we are not in Plato's cave (1987), watching shadows on a

wall, and from which we shall emerge dazzled and awe-inspired by reality, but that we are with the world and desperately trying to make our way into Plato's cave, because reality is - or, at least in comparison to cinema, has become - too traumatic in its senselessness, in its very absence of teleology, for humans in their collective, cinema-induced insanity to bear. Cinema, then, crystallises the tendency under modernity for humans to separate themselves from the world and from each other and to seek to bury and/or control the world and our own animal instincts under clothes, concrete and cinematic appearances. Convergence, then, is underwritten by divergence on a global scale.

The retreat into Plato's cave also highlights how that which is not cinematic is as good as non-existent in a world in which cinema is the measure of reality as opposed to reality being the measure of cinema. If you are not on a screen somewhere, then no one knows that you exist. This is perhaps the central problem with the recent fantasy of living outside of cinematic society, *Captain Fantastic* (Matt Ross, USA, 2016).

In this film, Ben (Viggo Mortensen) lives with his six children in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, raising them to read voraciously, from classic and modern literature to science books and Noam Chomsky, to speak numerous languages and to be ultra-fit survivalists. Owing to the death of his wife and the children's mother, they return to civilization, where they get a frosty reception, in particular from Jack (Frank Langella), the wealthy father of Ben's late wife, Leslie (Trin Miller). While the film features various tribulations, in particular regarding whether Ben's way of raising his children is good or appropriate, ultimately his children love him and they return to be with him even after Jack has tried to have them legally taken away from him. The film can be critiqued in various ways, including for its mythologisation of the outdoor life à la Ralph Waldo Emerson (1994) or Henry David Thoreau (1995), its glossing of various contradictions/plot holes (the family is repeatedly reliant on medical services for which they do not pay; somehow the children are fluent in six languages despite never having left the USA, or indeed interacted with other human beings), and for being a fantasy of re-empowered masculinity with still only

supporting, interchangeable roles for women. However, what I wish to suggest about the film is slightly different.

At one point, Ben's eldest son, Bo (George MacKay), learns that he has been accepted into more or less every Ivy League school in the USA, something that he achieved with the help of Leslie, making the applications with her behind Ben's back. Ben tells Bo that this is a great achievement, but he also says to him that he does not need that world, and that Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the other universities are all precisely part of the world that they were seeking to leave behind.

In some senses, one can take Ben's point and understand that (at least in principle) Bo should not need a certificate from a high-brow university in order to validate him as a human being. And yet, if this were so, then how does it apply to this film, *Captain Fantastic*? Ben and his family do not own a television and they do not watch films, apparently, with books and music being their sole authorized entertainment media. If by implication, then, cinema is also part of this world that Ben has wanted to leave behind, then why does director Matt Ross make *Captain Fantastic* a film? Why does he not write it as a novel that thus more fittingly can convey a desire to escape the contemporary world and/or selected aspects of modernity more generally? The reason is because the family does not leave society in order to lead a new life. It leaves society in order to be able to come back to society and to present itself as empowered; in short, it leaves cinema in order to come back only as cinematic. This in part explains both why *Captain Fantastic*, for all of its pleasurable aspects, is not only unadventurous formally (it really wants to be cinematic in quite a conventional sense), but it also demonstrates how the death of the mother is really an excuse for the father to show what a good father he is – regardless of his advice to his son about not going to Brown or Stanford. Indeed, that advice surely is hypocritical; what we should have seen was a family of idiots living in the wilderness being validated, rather than a fantasy of self-reliant *übermenschen*.

In other words, while *Captain Fantastic* pretends to be a fantasy about living in a world without cinema, and thus in a world without capital, it in fact is cinema as usual, complete with its patriarchal law that everyone follows, even the recalcitrant son, Rellian (Nicholas Hamilton) who spends much of the movie trying to rebel against his father.

However, for all that *Captain Fantastic* is a fantasy about disappearing off the grid, as it were, it also fails signally to recognise that the cinematic world in which we live is underpinned by two types of overlooked, invisible, and thus non- or only quasi-existent people, with cinema not allowing these different people democratically to converge, but rather relying structurally upon precisely their divergence, or separation. These two types of invisible people are the extremely rich and the poor.

When I say that the extremely rich are invisible, what I really mean is that capital itself is invisible. Under the cinematic mode of production, visibility is key, at the expense, even, of our other senses and the other ways of engaging with the world that they offer (smell, touch and so on). In Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* (USA, 2013), Leonardo DiCaprio's Jordan Belfort at one point walks toward the camera, which itself tracks backward, explaining how an IPO works; he stops himself mid-sentence and says: 'Look, I know you're not following what I'm saying anyway, right? That's... that's okay, that doesn't matter. The real question is this: was all this legal? Absolutely fucking not.' In other words, no one understands how capital works, not least because its working cannot be shown; and in a culture in which the visible is validated above all else, if something cannot be shown, then quickly it is going to becoming boring – hence Belfort explaining how no one understands what he is saying.

But more than being boring, it is in fact of vital importance that the workings of capital are invisible. For, in being invisible, and with visibility/cinema being the measure of reality (and not vice versa), one can always deny that capital actually exists. Where is the proof for it? Not in anything visible. We perhaps touch again here on the religious dimension of capital, the invisibility of which maintains its divinity. But more importantly, it is the deniability of capital that is what enables it to maintain its hegemonic

position in the world. Since there is no visible proof of exploitation, it becomes incredibly hard to show that there is exploitation and/or how it works.

This leads us to the second group of invisible people, who are precisely those who are exploited most, namely the poor. I am not denying here the existence of what we might broadly define as a history of social realist cinema, and in which we see the plight of the world's poor from migrant workers in Jean Renoir's *Toni* (France, 1935) through to the eponymous *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, Italy, 1948) in Vittorio de Sica, to exploited labourers in the films of the Dardenne brothers and the aforementioned Ken Loach. But, on the whole, the poor remain invisible; divergence is the condition upon which convergence apparently can take place. And if it is visibility, or being cinematic, that is the measure of reality, then who are we to deny the desire of anyone to become visible if indeed they are (or at the very least feel) invisible, or excluded? Indeed, to increase the number of poor people in the world only increases the number of people seeking to become cinematic, and who as a result are worshippers at the altar of cinema-capital. If *Captain Fantastic* presents to us a fantasy about going off-grid, it is only the fantasy of an already empowered family (which is revealed as no less than a fantasy in its continuous complicity with the cinematic society that it claims otherwise to condemn). While going off-grid is a privileged bourgeois fantasy, then, being or feeling off-grid and seeking to become cinematic, recognized, and thus real (a human being as opposed to a barbarian), is a far more common struggle.

We can see this tension between reality and cinema, between visibility and invisibility in cinema itself, for it uses these forms of invisibility in order to maintain its visibility. For, if computers and electronics more generally underpin the entire film industry (digital cameras, computers for post-production work, digital projectors and computers for exhibition and reception), then no one knows really how these machines actually work; taking one apart would show only an array of wires and chips too small for the human eye to consider. Furthermore, while many films are about making films, few to none are about the labour that goes into making the

equipment that helps us to make and to consume films. There have been *exposés* on the awful working conditions and the low pay of those who make iPhones and iPads, while the mining industries for the main component materials for computers, including silicon, copper, iron and more, are also strewn with poor human rights records, low pay and terrible working conditions. Not only do we not know how films get made on a fundamental level, then, but we do not see how this equipment gets made, with the workers making that equipment also being invisible, and thus in many respects non-existent. If there is media convergence in the contemporary age, it is predicated upon a fundamental class divergence that is now globalized.

This divergence is key to the running of the contemporary world. Sticking to the examples of filmmaking hardware and smartphones, if we lived in a world without exploitation, in which (in the spirit of Eduardo Galeano, 2009) the veins not just of Latin America but everywhere were left intact, and in which workers from the mining industries through to the assembling plants were paid decently, we would never be able to afford these products since they would be enormously expensive. As a result, images would not be produced, and the world as we know it would collapse – or at least the capitalist world would collapse, but likely with enormous wars as opposed to gleeful revolution.

That convergence is predicated upon divergence is perhaps clear in the etymology of the word. As likely is obvious, the word comes from *con-*, meaning together, and the Latin *vergere*, meaning to tend or to incline, which in turn takes its root from *wer-*, meaning to turn or to bend. The term also has a sense of *verge*, or to provide with a border, implying that the term is implicitly linked with the sense of creating borders. What type of borders these might be is perhaps suggested in the fact that the Old French term *verge* means a rod or a wand, as well as a penis. Indeed, the earliest English use of the term was to denote a male member. Keeping to Old French, the phrase ‘to be under the authority of’ would have been translated as *estre suz la verge de*, with a sense of the verge, then, being

linked to patriarchal law, the penis perhaps functioning as something like a border or dividing line.

If technological convergence is then based upon a fundamental divergence, it perhaps comes as no surprise that we currently are seeing attempts to reconnect with the world from which we have diverged. This is recognizable in particular in the 'slow' movement, including of course the growing prominence of slow cinema, the very slowness of which functions as a means to reconnect viewers with a world that is otherwise disappearing from the fast-moving screens, and thus increasingly disappearing from our sense of reality. That disappearing world can be characterised by the torpor of time itself. Conversely, that which is disappearing from view reaches toward cinema in order to try to remain relevant. Let us take philosophy, for example, which increasingly uses film in a bid to convince people of its ongoing relevance, as do numerous other university courses in an attempt to retain the attention and interest of would-be students.

However, a philosophy of cinema, or film and philosophy, remains beholden to cinema as the central convergence point of the contemporary world. Slow cinema, equally, is still cinema, even if a different kind of cinema. As Laruelle proposes non-philosophy in order to try to get back towards a world of connections and linkages as opposed to a world of division, separation and divergence, so might I propose non-cinema as a term to describe works that endeavor to highlight the exclusions that conventional cinema makes, not just in terms of political exclusions (few mainstream films are about transsexual sex workers à *la Tangerine*, Sean Baker, USA, 2015), but also in terms of exclusions that take place because of the very limits of the technology used to create cinema (certain lighting conditions, skin tones, durations, rhythms and sounds). These are films, therefore, that respond both thematically and formally to the divisions that cinema sews.

However, I wonder that even a radical 'non' cinema is still too beholden to that which it opposes in order genuinely to bring about the democratic convergence that might otherwise be promised beyond the divergences of

the cinematic mode of production. Thinking of recent work by Slavoj Žižek (2010), who suggests that it is the entire system of value that should be opposed, rather than the reassignment of value in a fashion that is perceived as more democratic, it is not an oppositional cinema that can lead us out of the impasse, but rather an opposition to cinema. A complete rejection of cinema: never to watch or to make another film again. Speaking personally, as a filmmaker who makes films that are not really films, as a non-cinematographer, as it were, this is a very difficult choice to make. Indeed, I am confronted with the power of my own addiction to images when I come to realize that I could hardly live in a world in which I could neither produce nor consume images. To imagine not watching another cat video, and the soul-laughter that it produces, is impossible.

More than this, though, I am deeply affected and influenced by cinema: it is embarrassing to confess it, but receiving attention has addictive qualities just like the arousal of attention. Indeed, one wonders that attention here is in fact not just looking and not being seen, or being seen but not looking back, but, rather, a profoundly social mechanism that is about looking and *showing that one is looking* (sharing videos on Facebook), and about being seen *and knowing that one is being seen*. In this sense, we can understand that attention is not dissimilar to shame: shame is always dependent on others – one has to be seen to be guilty in order to feel shame, in order to be ashamed. Indeed, the term in Portuguese for shame, *vergonha*, comes from the Latin term *verecundia*, which in turn is derived from the Proto-Italic *werēōr* and the Proto-Indo-European *wer-*, meaning to note or to sense, and which is a cognate with the Ancient Greek verb, *ὁράω/horáō*, meaning to see. If the convergences of the attention economy are predicated upon a divergence, we perhaps get towards a sense in which the shame of divergence is key to convergence; convergence is shameful – and in its shameful dimension, we understand that the divergence away from the world that is convergence is fully understood, desired, and not something of which we are unaware or ignorant (*wer-* is also the root for the English term awareness).

And so if we are shamed, but in some senses also shameless about the divergence of convergence (we know that we separate ourselves from the world; we know that we prefer Plato's Cave to reality – and we shan't do anything about it), then where are we to go? If I cannot give up filmmaking or watching cat videos, we realize not only that cinema has become entirely naturalized and that it perhaps cannot be renounced, but we also perhaps realize that our hope lies not with rejecting cinema outright, since this now cannot be done. Rather, we can return to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1985, p.94) and realize that as with capital it is not a revolution that will overthrow it, but that it is the very destiny of capital to reach its own conclusion, then so, too, is it the destiny of cinema to reach its own conclusion, without necessary input from a conscious and/or conscientious revolution in aesthetics. In other words, non-cinema (if I may continue using the term) is not so much an oppositional movement, but it is what we recognise in already existing cinema that announces the movement of cinema towards its own dissolution. It is the very unsustainability of cinema, and thus by extension capital, collapsing under its own weight.

The final issue becomes, then, whether cinema-capital is co- extensive with Earth. In *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, USA, 2013) and *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, USA/UK, 2014) both, we see humans having left Earth and created a simulation of the planet in miniature in space. Both are in some senses pastoral ideals. They masquerade as temporary homes for humanity while they work out what to do with themselves in terms of healing Earth or finding another planet on which to live. But really, both are the fantasy of humans to live in Plato's Cave, not least involving the exclusion of/divergence from the poor that is also at the root of capital's convergences. If to exhaust capital, one exhausts the Earth, then humanity faces cataclysm: to exhaust the Earth is likely to exhaust humanity, since the fantasies of *Elysium* and *Interstellar* are from being realized in the actual world that we inhabit, the dreams and schemes of Elon Musk notwithstanding. These are fantasy spaces that truly do diverge from reality, which is perhaps better represented in a film like *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón,

UK/USA, 2013), informed as it is by the Third World sensibility of its director: being out in space is chaotic, and the machines in which we travel there both break down and are torn apart simply by floating debris. As per *Gravity*, the only hope is of getting back to Earth. Of finally converging once again with reality. The question is whether there is a reality left once cinema-capital has done with Earth and/or itself. To this question, I cannot give an answer. But in not having a set answer, in not knowing the future as an already-controlled thing (as opposed to an open-ended time), hope can be born. Let us hope and let us continue working towards a world in which the divergences that underwrite the superficial convergences of capital-cinema are overcome, and in which we work back towards converging with our planet and with each other.

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