

FERRATER MORA AS A PHILOSOPHER AND CINEMA-MAKER

Prof. Josep-Maria Terricabras, IEC

Director of the Ferrater Mora Chair of Contemporary Thought

(University of Girona, Spain)

Josep Ferrater Mora (1912-1991) was no doubt the most important Catalan philosopher of the 20th Century. And that is quite a remarking thing, for it means that Ferrater should be placed in an outstanding position in the philosophical panorama of the history of the Catalan Countries. Today, however, we are not going to talk about Ferrater as a member of the academy, but about that philosopher and thinker who was interested in and keen on so many things, and above all on those in which his contemporaries were also interested. For Ferrater was, in the best sense of the term, a man of his time. He was fascinated by science and technique. He felt an interest in journalism and literature, but also in photography and cinema.

Now I would like to introduce Ferrater's interest in cinema as a philosopher in four brief parts. These four parts correspond, more or less, to the following questions: 1) when did Ferrater become interested in cinema, 2) in what way does he become interested in it, 3) why does he become interested in it, and finally 4) what is interesting for us with respect to this relation.

I. Ferrater's interest in cinema

Actually he was always interested in cinema. Let's remember his own words, written in 1974, seven years after he had begun doing cinema:

"Since my teens or a few years before my teens, cinema has been for me a tremendously attractive art (...). I wasn't born, as Rafael Alberti once wrote in a poem, "with the cinema", but certainly around that time. Two of my first essays are about cinema, and in one of them I try

(or rather I tried) to determine –that was a common practice then , fortunately not so practiced nowadays- “the essence of cinema”. “Life”, as tangos’ lyrics say, led me to do philosophy and to lecture, which I don’t regret at all, but cinema has always been a much interesting subject for me. Even as a spectator, I’ve never seen cinema merely as an amusement –but neither as an ultimate and supreme end, or a panacea. For a long time intellectuals have despised cinema with the same intensity with which nowadays many worship it. I didn’t try it explicitly, but I managed to avoid both extremes.”¹

From this cite, I would like to draw your attention to three things:

First, that Ferrater wrote indeed two essays on cinema when he was quite young: one in 1934 –when he was just 22 years old-, and the other in 1935 – when he was 23 years old-, which appeared in his first book *Cóctel de verdad*.²

Secondly, I want to comment briefly on the content of the essay to which he refers and where he regrets to have adopted a rather *essentialist* attitude. This essay is “Esquemas sobre el cine (in 1934)”. I think he is partly right in his own critique of the essay, since there he said that what characterizes and imposes its requirements to the other elements which make up cinema –e.g., music, silence, word and image-, is precisely the *movement*. That’s why images in cinema are different from images in the other plastic arts. For in cinema images are not closed in themselves, but in it any moment consists of a transition to a further form. Nonetheless, Ferrater is not so essentialist as he himself seems to belief some years later, for he doesn’t say that movement is the *essential* or *exclusive* feature of cinema. He just says that movement is “what leads all the other elements and, at the same time, (is) the indispensable element which enables cinema to be something more than

¹ *Cine sin filosofías*, Esti-Arte, Madrid, 1974, p. 19-20.

² *Cóctel de verdad*, Literatura, Madrid, 1935.

just a mere combination of multiple ingredients”³. In this sense, Ferrater thinks that photography is strictly speaking just a technique, and that it can be called “art” only in a very, very broad sense, for photography is *a mere combination of ingredients*⁴. Photography *selects*, whereas cinema takes advantage of this selection in order to maximize the perfection of its images. But the aesthetic value of a film doesn’t lie in its particular shots, but in the “direction of the general movement”⁵. For that reason Ferrater rejects explicitly the idea –so often defended by some critics- that slowness is a defect. This idea stems from a “deficient interpretation of the role of movement in cinema”⁶. So what Ferrater wants to bring out is that the *idea* of movement would belong to the essence of cinema, even when the film consisted in a film done with a succession of pictures. Whereas some pictures can have a *cinematographic character*⁷, some films can just show a good photographic technique.

Beyond that question, however, what that essay wanted to bring out is that “cinema is an art and not a technique”⁸. For it is true that no artistic creation –either cinema, poetry, painting or architecture- can renounce completely to technique; but it is also true that art doesn’t consist merely of a technical mastering. Therefore art is what technique needs but is beyond mere technique. Ferrater takes this idea very seriously. That’s why he also takes very seriously the technical aspects of cinema⁹.

³ *Obras selectas*, Revista de Occidente, Madrid, 1967, vol.I, p. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32-33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ One can see that clearly from the rigor with which he prepared his shootings or composed his films and from the fact that he used to ask for advice to his friend Néstor Almendros. See, e.g., the chapter entitled « Aspectos y comentarios técnicos » of his *Cine sin filosofías*, p. 153-173. On what he called the « photographic tone » and some more complex questions about shooting technique, see also the section « Autores’ y ‘equipos’ » in the essay « ¿Quién hace qué ? », which appeared in *El hombre y su medio y otros ensayos* (Siglo XXI, Madrid, 1971) and in *Ventana al mundo* (Anthropos, Barcelona, 1986). In this last essay he repeats that « ‘technique’ is, in cinema, a fundamental ingredient ».

In the same essay Ferrater still raises the question of why cinema has been born now and not before –you have to bear in mind that he wrote that in 1934. He points out two causes: the first cause has to do with the technique we now have and we didn't have before; but the second reason has to do with the way human beings are like nowadays. According to Ferrater, human beings have lost "their faith in the different 'classical' modes of art"¹⁰. In the past, one believed *in* art, one expected something out of it¹¹. Now art is no more part of the fundamentals of human existence. And since we require less from art, we also require less in the process towards the artistic work: we now want easiness and amusement. No other art adapts itself better to this requirement than cinema does. One can have access to it without any particular training period. Cinema offers finished and compacted products. The spectator can abandon himself to it and let himself be moved.

"That's the reason why cinema is the easiest art from the point of view of the spectator, and the most difficult art from the point of view of the producer. A creator of cinema has to be sort of a prophetic thaumaturge that anticipates the weakest wish of those who will look at his work. Theater is always, in a sense, a scheme where there are more or less "ideas". In cinema there are no "ideas". The "idea" gets vanished and is replaced by the concrete expression of the image. Even in the most difficult parts of a film –i.e. illusions-, the object is so clear and obvious, so simple in its particular showing that the least sagacious spectator follows effortlessly the deploying of the cinematographic work."¹²

Ferrater is aware that "there will always be obscurity-loving people who will look for that kind of difficulty and thickness through which they only can penetrate. In general, however, that is not the case"¹³. Cinema's success lies in that fact, with contrast to the other arts, which turn out to be too hermetic.

¹⁰ *Obras Selectas*, vol.I, p. 33.

¹¹ Ferrater refers to the faithful of the wagnerian musical religion, for example.

¹² *Obras Selectas*, vol.I, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*

It seems clear that, although those posterior objections, Ferrater had a particular predilection for that advanced piece of work on cinema. Thus in 1967 –Ferrater is 45 years old and his career enjoys a very productive period¹⁴–, when the prestigious publishing house *Revista de Occidente* publishes a two-volumed comprehensive anthology of his thought, entitled *Obras Selectas*¹⁵, Ferrater selects it as one of those essays he is willing to keep and let be known. This way he rescues it from his own strong and overall criticism against his *Cóctel de verdad*¹⁶.

The third thing I wanted to bring out from the citation that opened this lecture is that Ferrater, forty years after the publication of the mentioned essay, says “I have always been interested in cinema” and regrets that intellectuals’ attitude towards it has shifted from contempt to idolatry¹⁷. Indeed, Ferrater didn’t just keep the same line of theoretical interest in cinema¹⁸, but also increased it with a very intense, personal and practical dedication.

¹⁴ Ferrater has already published some of his major works (*La filosofía en el mundo de hoy* o *El ser y la muerte*), but not yet the last edition of his *Diccionario de filosofía* –which was prepared by him in 1976 and which appeared in 1979–, *Indagaciones sobre el lenguaje*, *Cambio de marcha en filosofía*, *De la materia a la razón* –arguably his most ambitious work–, *Ética aplicada* or *Fundamentos de filosofía*.

¹⁵ This is the only anthology of Ferrater’s works. The Ferrater Mora Chair hopes to edit in the future his *Complete Works*.

¹⁶ See what he said in 1982, in an interview : « I am happy that the book *Cóctel de verdad* is difficult to find, and is not going to be me who will make it accessible. The few rescuable pages that it had have already been republished, with some inevitable modifications –directed above all to improve the rethoric–, at the beginning of the first two volumes of an anthology called *Obras Selectas* » (S.Giner –E.Guisán, ed., *José Ferrater Mora : El hombre y su época*, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 1974, p. 324.)

¹⁷ He will repeat it in « ¿Quién hace qué ? » : « Until recently it was common among intellectuals, and especially among writers, to despise cinema so deeply as at the present many people of the same kind idolatre it, and even tag behind it » (*El hombre y su medio y otros ensayos*, p.81).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *El hombre y su medio y otros ensayos*, Siglo XXI, Madrid, 1971, which gathers articles published in « La Vanguardia » during a two-year-period ; among them one can find some on cinema, « Patton », « Godard », « ¿Quién hace qué ? », « Buñuel ». All these articles were included, without announcement, in *Ventana al mundo*, Anthropos, Barcelona, 1986, wich apart from encompassing the just mentioned book includes many other articles too. The only article of *El hombre y su medio* which doesn’t appear its integrity in *Ventana al mundo* is the essay XXI : « ¿Cuánto nos queda ? », whose second part appears only partially under the title « Galimatías I ». *Una mica de tot*, Editorial Moll, Palma de Mallorca, 1961 (col. Raixa, 51) is « a selection of the articles and essays written and published in Catalan for 6 years » (p. 7-8), in particular from 1944 to 1950, in Catalan reviews in America. The comment is not absolutetly precise, for the book contains the chapter « Digressió sobre el cinema » (pp. 37-50), which coincides –in an almost literal translation- with the article « Esquemas sobre el cine » already included in *Cóctel de verdad* and about which we have extensively spoken.

2. Cinematographic work.

The book *Cine sin filosofías*, which came out in 1974, is the best proof both of Ferrater's theoretical interest in cinema and his cinematographic work. There he acknowledges that seven years ago –that is, in 1967, when he was 55 years old- he had begun to devote many hours to “try to do cinema”¹⁹. In the end Ferrater produced almost thirty films, some of them just a few minutes long, others over an hour long. The just mentioned book gathers ten screenplays²⁰ for films in 16 mm. But they are more than just a collection of schematic notes about the shooting; they are rather proper literary screenplays, that is, screenplays which stand on its own, since they adequately explain a story.

But Ferrater also shot some films in Super 8, and about many things: he did films out of a properly speaking cinematographic purpose—some of which won an award in amateur contests in the USA-, as a thematic exercise (films about the snow, the earth, flowers, or animals), out of a vindicative intention (to fight for the animals' rights), or as an occasional recording on special events (on weddings, birthdays, Christmas's celebrations, civic demonstrations). Some films are just domestic films and also what Ferrater called “miniatures”, which consisted of very short pieces of film, often satirical and with comments by the very author. Apart from that he had two screenplays for films that he never did, called *Una passió inútil* and *Una pel·lícula de mil milions de dòlars*. Both screenplays were finally included as short-stories in his book *Siete relatos capitales*²¹.

3. On the relationship between philosophy and cinema.

¹⁹ *Cine sin filosofías*, p. 20.

²⁰ It includes the following ten films : *Patinando para siempre*, *Los éxtasis del tiempo*, *El velo de la noche*, *El mundo de Andratx*, *Fragmentos de un travelogue*, *La piel de la tierra*, *Un héroe de nuestro tiempo*, *La vida cotidiana*, *De vuleta al pelotón de ejecución* i *La llamada*.

²¹ *Siete relatos capitales*, Planeta, Barcelona, 1979.

Ferrater was asked many times about the relationship between his philosophy and his cinema. But in *Cine sin filosofías* his answer was conclusive:

"I don't even see as worth inquiring whether there are any relationship –apart from mere coincidences- between my films and the concepts and arguments which appear in books of mine such as *El ser y la muerte*, and *El ser y el sentido*, not to mention *Indagaciones sobre el lenguaje* and *Cambio de marcha en filosofía*. As far as I am concerned, I can't see any."²²

Ferrater maintained his position over the years. We can see it in two interviews from 1982²³. Yet in those interviews he also acknowledged that it shouldn't surprise anyone to find the same "personal style", or stamp, in different productions by the same person. And when Ferrater attempts to identify this stamp he says that it is "a certain order, a certain transparency, a certain irony – one can find all these [features] in the two aspects of my work".

²² *Cine sin filosofías*, p. 18.

²³ One interview was conducted by Salvador Giner ; the other by Xavier Rubert de Ventós. When Ferrater was asked by Salvador Giner if his incursion in art –cinema and literature- was just an accident, a mere amusement, or on the contrary it was closely connected with his philosophical work, he replied: "Maybe at the beginning when I had just done a film or two, or had written a couple of stories, that might have been seen as a amusement, but that's a difficult opinion or illusion to maintain after having produced almost twenty films (most of them short, but two or three rather long) and having published a book of stories, having completed it with some more, having launched a novel and being working in another one. I have worked in it with all my five or six senses, and with the same enthusiasm that any creator of "fictions" would have employed. Whether all this is related to my philosophical thought is something one should consider with attention. But so far my opinion on the issue is the following.

I don't think that my "fictions" –especially the literary ones- intend to "exemplify" any philosophical idea. In other words, I don't think that the productions you call "artistic" are dominated or impelled by any "thesis", philosophical or not. Just as while writing on philosophical topics I try not to "do literature", with my literary works –and even more with my cinematographic works- I try not to "do philosophy". It is better to keep both things clearly apart from one another. (...) But one cannot exclude the possibility that in both cases, both in the philosophical work and in the artistic work, a "personal" style reveals itself" (S. Giner-E. Guisán, ed., op.cit., p. 331-332).

Also in 1982 Ferrater had this dialogue with Xavier Rubert de Ventós:

XRv: ¿Do you take as right this impression of mine that in your narrative you are exemplifying what you have sustained in theory in your philosophical work?

JFM: Not exactly. (...). In principle, I am inclined to think –and I've said it so often- that there is hardly any relation between my philosophical production and my narrative production, either literary or cinematographical. I think as well that it is adequate not to mix them very much. Philosophical thought is likely going to win with it –that will enable it to become more strict and plain- and the artistic productions are not going to loose anything with this distinction –that will enable them to gain more freedom. However, no one can deny that the kind of works we are referring to are produced by one and the same person, and so it is natural that this person leaves her stamp on them. A certain order, a certain transparency, a certain irony –one can find all these [features] in the two aspects of my work. (X. Rubert de Ventós, *Pensadors catalans*, Ed. 62, Barcelona, 1987, p. 58-59).

That is related to something that Ferrater used to say, namely, that in order to know someone one needs to consider not only her historical situation but her personal character as well and even the role of fortune in her life. So maybe if we now remember briefly what was Ferrater's character like as a philosopher we will understand better his figure as a cinema-maker. And once we understand better his character as a cinema-maker we will see clearer his figure as a philosopher.

4. Ferrater's character as a thinker and an artist.

It is hard to choose those features which could, by themselves, deploy Ferrater's philosophical and artistic character. The following ones, however, might be of some help, for they certainly characterize -without exclusion of other possible features- Ferrater's work: order and mental clarity, concreteness and rigor with relation to the treatment of the subjects, linguistic vigor.

Ferrater was an intellectual interested in clarifying and ordering the chaos of sensations, information and ideas which surround us. He was an extremely clear man, both in philosophy and in his literary and cinematographic production. His works have an order, although this order can be circular, that is, at the end one can be returned to the departing point. One can see that clearly in his films *La vida cotidiana*, *El mundo de Andratx*, *El velo de la noche* and *De vuelta al pelotón de ejecución*²⁴. Ferrater is completely aware that although after a journey or a movement one can find herself at the point of departure, one never gets there again in the same way as one had departed from it.

Ferrater is concrete and rigorous with relation to the treatment of the subjects. That helps explaining why he often does "miniatures", stops at the details or develops particular cases. That's what he does, e.g., in three films

which could be called "Three exemplary stories" (*La vida cotidiana*, *De vuelta al pelotón de ejecución* and *La llamada*), for they explain three examples, three life cases. Ferrater was indeed a great narrator.

Finally, Ferrater's character has a remarkable linguistic vigor. He shows that not only in his philosophical production –both because his prose is sharp and precise and because he deals with subjects related to language- but also trying to deepen in the possibilities of non-philosophical languages such as the narrative language, the cinematographic language or the musical language. Ángel Sánchez Harguindey is right, for example, when after pointing out the placidity and serenity of Ferrater's films –for in them everything has been thought, nothing is left to improvisation-, he adds that their soundtracks have been extraordinarily well selected²⁵. This again brings out the important –and difficult- relationship that Ferrater saw between technique and art.

The four sections of this lecture have served the purpose of remarking four things: firstly, that Ferrater had a great interest in cinema in a time when this kind of interest was neither common nor valued among intellectuals; secondly, that Ferrater realized an intense and passionate cinematographic activity above all in the 70s; thirdly, that Ferrater wanted to do cinema without philosophy, and for cinema's own sake; and fourthly, that Ferrater experimented with the possibilities of the language (of literature and cinema), for although he wanted to do cinema without philosophy, he always did cinema with ideas. It doesn't surprise me that for him cinema and philosophy were like the two sides of a coin: for in his philosophy he always made clear that thinking is not only an art, but also a technique, just as cinema is not only a technique but also an art, that is, an activity through which one looks at the world and gives sense to it.

²⁴ See how Ferrater exposes it in *Cine sin filosofías*, pp. 22-23.

²⁵ See A. Sánchez Harguindey, « Comentarios en torno a un cineasta », in J. Ferrater Mora, *Cine sin filosofías*, p. 13.

Ferrater's work is indeed a peculiar combination of mixture and purity: mixture because of the possibilities he discovers in different ideas, techniques, questions and positions; purity, because the way of expressing this thought has to be purified until it gets as much clarity and simplicity as possible. This stylistic conjunction –that Ferrater masterly put into practice in all his works- constitutes precisely the challenge which has to be faced by all those who start studying his thought. For a particular style of thought is left helpless when it is not expressed in the best possible way. After all the form of expression doesn't exhaust its force in the expression itself of the thought, but it turns itself into an instrument which can suggest or restraint, to ease or hinder the course of new ideas which will have to be thought, rethought, and expressed adequately again in a neverending process.

Josep Ferrater Mora belongs to that class of philosophers and artists capable of leading to those who approach his work to experience a change of taste in the way of thinking and looking at things. In a time of superficiality and frivolity like ours, his work constitutes an invitation to practice endlessly, in all their rigor and joy, both the art of thinking and the art of looking at things.