“Film Thinks!” What about Dreams?
A Reading of Daniel Frampton’s Filmosophy
by
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Introduction

In Filmosophy, Daniel Frampton inaugurates a new way of perceiving the reality of film by insisting that film does not narrate or show things, characters or actions; it thinks them. Frampton contends that we observe a thinking process while watching a film, and he attempts to grasp this cinematic thinking process with the help of newly coined concepts such as ‘film-thinking’ and ‘filmind’. Finally, he assigns to ‘filmosophy’ the task of “conceptualizing all film as an organic intelligence.” In this article I show that everything that Frampton points out about film being an autonomous cognitive realm can also be said about dream. Just like films, dreams represent an autonomous reality that functions independently of our imaginative and narrative inputs. Frampton dismisses the possibility that dream can fulfill the function of a filmind; for him, the “film as dream” discussion inaugurates no more than psychoanalytical perceptions of “subconscious film”. However, the filmind is the reality as it is experienced by the spectator in the same way in which the dream reality is the reality experienced by the dreamer. The dream reality is not the reproduction of some “exterior” reality, but it is its own world with its own intentions and its own creativity. I show this by pointing to non-essentializing accounts of dreams current in the writings of the French poet Paul Valéry and in Andrei Tarkovsky’s films, as well as by discussing the filmind in the context of far-Eastern definitions of dreams.

Film-Thinking

Frampton explains that film-thinking is not a metaphorical way of arranging reality but that “the filmind has its own particular film-phenomenology, its own way of attending to its world (it thinks a loved woman with soft-focus, we do not).” Film does not simply show fictional daydreaming and imaginings, but is able to carry out functions that can best be described as thinking: “planning, meditating, problem-solving, reverie, reasoning, daydreaming, figuring, judging, imagining.” A film director does not simply show us how melancholy transforms into boredom and non-movement, but in the film, “melancholy breeds boredom which breeds non-movement.” This does not mean that narrating has become impossible. It suggests however that the narrative must be seen as a sub-category of film-thinking. “Narrative is thus one result of film-thinking, a certain type of thinking, one which lines up plots
and characters to tell a story. The narrative is simply the form that film-thinking takes in most films — whether it be a tragedy, comedy, fable or thriller.”

It is clear that Frampton’s philosophy proposes revolutionary thoughts about film, and also about thinking. There is, on his view, a film-like way of thinking. Philosophers like Bachelard, for example, were able to produce “a flow that weaves discourses together, yet still with rigor and meaning,” which comes close to film-thinking. Still, though philosophers can learn from film-thinking, Frampton insists that “film has its own kind of thinking,” that it “cannot show us human thinking, [but that] it shows us ‘film-thinking’.”

Frampton’s redefinition of thinking is interesting in its own terms. While in cognitive studies the workings of the brain are more and more likened to the functions of a computer, Frampton introduces a more emotive way of reasoning that he derives from observations of the filmind. “Considering that film cannot exactly re-enact ‘argument’ or ‘reasoning’, staples of human thinking, should this filmic action not be termed film-feeling?” Film-thinking is radically removed from the mere processing of data and is held to be able to integrate, for example, colors into the cognitive activity. For example, “The Matrix thinks a brittle, chrome, almost sickly-green false world, perhaps feeling the cold and manipulative thinking of the Artificial Intelligence that provides it; while the real world is similarly cold in tone, this time in cold blue.”

**Film and Reality**

Saying that film thinks indirectly implies a revision of the relationship between film and reality. Film is different from real-life up to the point that it cannot be grasped by our eyes, our ‘I’, our brain, consciousness, experience, or our soul. Frampton rightly states that “the continual comparison to ‘the real’ has handicapped film studies [and] has disallowed a radical reconceptualization of film-being.” From the beginning, Frampton declares that his ambition is “to question the conceptual link between cinema and reality.” One of the projects of filmosophy is to show us that “we should steer away from simply accepting that we understand film like we understand reality: film-thinking is not mappable by the terms of human thinking.” As long as film only narrates or shows, it functions as a sort of second hand instance, processing “first hand” reality into the reality of film. A ‘thinking film,’ on the other hand, produces reality in the same way in which a mathematician produces equations or a philosopher produces a philosophical system. The filmind does not simply imagine elements (images, characters, actions, ideas, emotions), nor does it merely arrange these elements in a narrative way until they have attained the shape of a story. The filmind produces a full-fledged reality by thinking this reality. This activity can also contain the use of imagination, but it should not be reduced to imagination.
Frampton contends that the filmind “needs to be studied on its own playing field”\(^1\) because, as it overcomes the human viewpoint, it is “not a human-like mind, it is, uniquely, a ‘filmind’.\(^2\) This means that any reification of mental states is contrary to the filmind approach because film-thinking is not done from the subjective point of view of a human. Even perception materializes what it sees by calling it images, symbols, mental states, etc. The filmind, on the other hand, attempts to present film-reality as it is unfolding itself like a game. What is presented in film is not materialized because the filmind operates even prior to conventional perception. Frampton attempts to not see the film from the ‘I’ point of view because such a perspective necessarily leads to an objectification of film reality. Even the narrative is not told by a subjective mind. The narrative itself is a filmind and it “is the film that is steering its own (dis)course.”\(^3\)

When Frampton criticizes analytical philosophy because it remains “rooted in linguistic contraction [and] denies the possibilities of conceptual advancement through images”\(^4\) one must not understand the activities of the filmind as a sort of “thinking in images.” The classical controversy that opposes “thinking in images” to a more abstract and relational way of thinking goes back to the Ukrainian linguist Alexander Potebnja who thought of poetry as a “thinking in images.” He was criticized by Viktor Shklovsky who pointed out that this conception leads to the creation of symbols as the main cognitive occupation. According to Shklovsky, artistic activity should rather consist of the reorganization of constellations. Frampton’s film-thinking functions much more like montage though it avoids its formalist aspects\(^5\) as will be shown below.

Films and Dreams

Frampton’s aim is to perceive what film is doing before it is objectified by our thinking and by our mind in order to see it as the manifestation of a not yet objectified consciousness.\(^6\) Also, dreams do not simply represent metaphors, internal conditions, or mental states. Pointing this out has mainly been the task of an alternative philosophy trying to snatch dream from all essentializing devices, most of which are Freudian. As mentioned, Frampton dismisses the possibility that a dream can fulfill the function of a filmind. Intimate accounts of the soul of “subconscious films” should never be confused with a filmind. Since filmosophy “is not about the conveying of ‘internal states’ [and] does not exhibit metaphors for mental states,”\(^7\) it cannot be about dreams. Frampton quotes Deleuze for whom “the dream is much too individual to be the template for film’s internal monologue – the dream is too easy a solution to the problem of thought.”\(^8\) Frampton also quotes Cavell who holds that “dreams are boring narratives” and that “in the end, dreams do not match up to the ways of film – film can be much more expressive than dreams, which actually seem quite ordered, with recognizable symbols and logic.”\(^9\)
Frampton’s reaction is understandable because in the past, the “Film is Dream” metaphor has indeed been mostly limited to the question of whether the reality status of film comes close to that of dream (because of its exclusiveness, its irrationality, the way in which it affects us) instead of asking in which way the dreamlike reality of film produces itself as a reality. In dream studies the situation is almost identical. As a consequence, the similarity between films and dreams is often reduced to that of “psychological states,” which will be seen as inferior to real states as writes, for example, Colin McGinn: “The laws of film are psychological laws, of the kind manifested in dreams, not physical laws. In dreaming the mind leaps from image to image, pursuing its own inner logic, dancing to its own tune; and movies do much the same thing—they arrange reality to suit the demands of mind.” Both films and dreams “follow the laws of the mind” blindly (that is, without thinking). The mind dictates its own agenda to films and dreams, which is not very different from what would do moods or magic. The conclusion is that films cannot think because dreams cannot think.

On the whole, though the question ‘does the dream have a structure that can be identified as thinking?’ has been dealt with, it has never been very prominent. John Locke once alluded to the possibility of dream thinking, only to immediately dismiss it as disordered and incoherent:

You find the mind in sleep, retired as it were from the sense, and out of reach of those motions made on the organs of sense, which at other times produce very vivid and sensible ideas. But in retirement of the mind from the sense, it often retains a yet more loose and incoherent manner of thinking, which we call dreaming; and last of all, sound sleep closes the scene quite, and puts an end to all appearances.

The idea of a dream as a chaotic juxtaposition of images that needs to be put in order by a lucid human mind is essential for Sigmund Freud, for whom dreams are only interesting as quasi-linguistic forms of a narrative that expresses truths about “our” reality. Within any psychoanalytical scheme, it is impossible to grant dreams the capacity of thinking. At best, dreams are seen as normal, functional language, but they will never contain judgments (not even aesthetic ones). Nothing could be further removed from Freudianism than the idea of dreams as aesthetic and dramatic auto-narrations able to develop their own kind of thinking.

The Western concept of dreaming is very much dominated by Freudian concepts, most of which hold that dreams need to be mastered by reason. However, there are some other approaches that depict dreams in exactly the way in which Frampton depicts the filmind – as a realm that remains unmappable for “normal” human thinking. C.G. Jung, for example, sees dreams as composed of mythical themes, which leads him to the model of “dream thinking” (Traumdenken) as sort of an ancient way of thinking. The French writer Paul Valéry has made the most obvious effort to perceive dreams as a “simple presence” in which “the ‘if’ disappears and the conditional tense becomes present tense.” Any ‘if’ can be installed only from an outside point of view while in the dream, thinking unfolds itself unconditionally. Very
similar to what Frampton is doing with films, Valéry refuses to reduce dreams to mental states spelled out by an individual soul because the ‘I’ does not exist as a separate entity, but is part of the dream. He maintains that “in the dream, everything is dream. The ‘I’ is dreamt and this is what has once led me to compare the state of the dreamer to that of a system of internal forces.”

Frampton makes similar claims by affirming that “the filmind is not outside the film, it is the film. The film’s perspective is the whole film.”

Lacking a subjective “outside” position, to Valéry the dream appears as a “composition without objective [sans but], a combination of everything,” which frames the dream as an organic thinking system. For Valéry, dream is a “mode” able to generate things that follows its own rules. “What it is that turns the dream into a dream cannot be described and not even directly remembered – it is simply a mode of generation.”

When grammar is cancelled, dream thinking becomes richer than any model of thinking in words or thinking in images could convey. In dream thinking “the character and the setting do not match the signification – [they do not follow] the key of the image. They are created in the way in which an illustrator creates characters and settings of a historical event of which he knows only the theme or the verbal scheme.” The dream produces itself here through a form of thinking. Two compelling lines by Valéry eloquently express Frampton’s idea of “fluid film-thinking”:

There is no rhythm in dream
But there is dream in every rhythm

Dreams, just like films, are more than Freudian accumulations of symbols produced by distanciation and condensation. In an aesthetically playful way, dream combines unconscious and pre-linguistic elements and this resembles thinking much more than imagining or narrating. “The sleeper discloses his dream without anticipating it [sans le prévoir], going from transition to transition.” The rhythmic progression of dream is a sort of thinking in action which follows the structures of Frampton’s film-thinking. Dreams in the way they are dreamt – and not in the way they are perceived by an objectifying analyst – unfold themselves in a rhythmic-thinking fashion.

This is how dream manages to dream itself. As mentioned at the beginning, the filmind is the reality as it is experienced by the spectator in the same way in which the dream reality is the reality experienced by the dreamer. Like Frampton’s filmind, the dream is not of the world but it is a world.

Far-Eastern Models of Dream

We encounter such non-essentializing accounts of dreams much more in far-Eastern than in Western definitions of dreams. Eastern philosophy – from Hinduism, Taoism, and early Buddhist
philosophy up to Japanese poetry – uses the dream metaphor as a means of expressing different modes of human existence. Here, dreams are not interpreted as a product of (even unconscious or primitive) thought, but as expressive realities that have produced themselves by thinking themselves. Dreams are neither idle imageries nor half-conscious products of fiction, but immaterial ways of thinking.

This treatment of dreams is, of course, only attained by first establishing an original relationship between dreams and reality. Zen philosophy and practice in particular develops a scheme that attempts to grasp a non-objectified reality reminiscent of both Valéry’s unconditional dreams and Frampton’s filmind. The reality that Zen-Buddhism wants to apprehend is a non-essential and impermanent nothingness (sunyata), which represents an original, pre-linguistic and pre-imaginative reality. Within sunyata, nothing is formed yet, but the words, images, objects, and feelings come into being only later once we have materialized the dreamlike reality into “something.” Zen practices like the koan suppress all discursive reasoning, which concerns the use of words, ideas, and images. Within the sunyata, neither “representation” nor “symbolization” have a sense because both are purely “linguistic” phenomena.

Frampton’s fluid film-thinking that produces a reality that can only be grasped through a filmic kind of thought is a direct reflection of this model. “The creation of this film-world is set and immovable and thus untouchable, unchangeable – it is unwavering intention, decision, choice, belief.” Language essentializes and objectifies the original dream reality of sunyata as it cuts the whole of sunyata into pieces until words and things come into being. Sunyata, however, is whole and organic. This means that everything that exists within the dreamlike and negative reality of sunyata does not come into existence through narration or imagination (as do those things that we encounter in “our” already materialized reality). Existence plays itself or thinks itself; and no “real” existence can be assumed beyond this thinking activity.

Frampton’s idea of a film-thinking that is not “mappable” also invites comparisons with Far-Eastern concepts of space, the most typical one of which is the notion of basho coined by the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro. Also the filmind is a spatial phenomenon, which becomes clear when Frampton writes that “we cannot see what is ‘in’ the film without seeing it the way the film thinks it.”38 Basho signifies a sort of “negative space” in which the objective world establishes itself and which is better rendered as “place.” Nishida’s philosophy of space is determined by the aforementioned Zen-Buddhist stances. The “Western” notion of space erroneously sees space as a – geometrically or socially – materialized phenomenon. For Nishida, on the other hand, the place determines itself all alone like a game that comes into being by being played without referring to any subjective or objective foundations. In Nishida’s place, singularities like words, images or selves form themselves. Finally, this game can be considered as a “consciousness.”39
Andrew Feenberg and Yoko Arisaka compare Nishida’s *basho* to a “movie screen that must be blank, a visual nothingness relative to the luminous images cast upon it.” For these philosophers, film is a sort of “pure seeing” which speaks a non-personalized language which comes into being while the film dream produces itself. Through the *basho* metaphor, film appears as the self-determination of a field of consciousness. Inside the *basho* there are only singular elements which determine themselves as “pure matters” independent of exterior determinations. This obviously comes very close to Frampton’s project of “understanding film as issuing from itself.”

Film space has been perceived like this also in the west, for example by Francis Sparshott who finds, when comparing films and dreams, that “in my dreams, too, I see from where I am not, move helplessly in a space whose very nature is inconstant, and may see beside me the being whose perceptions I share.” However, Frampton’s meditations about the filmind as a “transsubjective no-place” are more radical as they sound almost like Buddhist definitions of a space determined by emptiness: “The film becomes the creator of its own world, not from a ‘point’ of view, but from a realm, a no-place, that still gives us some things and not others.”

Does Style Think?

Immediately linked to spatial renderings of film-thinking or dream thinking is the phenomenon of style. Like the *basho*, style has no real geographical extension, it is a “no-place” that gives us some things and not others. Within Frampton’s system, style becomes an agent of thought able to act within the organic whole of film thought: “Film becomes in some sense ‘organic’ because style is tied to the story with natural, thoughtful, humanistic terms of intention that make film forms rather dramatic than technical.” Frampton refuses to reduce style to a formal device and puts forward its immediate implication in the filmic thinking process. In an organic filmind, “form becomes just more content. Film-thinking organizes the link between form and content.” Again this has to do with the lack of a subjective position within the filmind as well as in the dream, a position from which an ‘I’ could stylize reality. Style has become part and parcel of the filmic thinking process.

Formalists like Bordwell and Thompson understand film style not as an organic whole but as “one figure of style.” For these authors, “technique creates style” and style is a “formal system of the film that organizes film techniques.” According to Frampton, formalists see styles “as excess derivations, rather than thinkings in their own right. Seeing new styles as only ‘derivations’ ignores what a filmgoer might feel from the experience of this new form.” This also concerns the “form” of dream. Emile Benveniste’s formalist explanations of the linguistic differences between “normal” language and the *oneiric* language of myths and dreams through figures of aesthetic stylization show how much style and dream are linked. The problem is that Benveniste explains the existence of dream through a formalist
device of “stylization” while post-formalist philosophies of dream and film would attempt to see these “stylistic moments” as being integral to the dream itself. Style does not simply stylize a given reality, but it is the rhythm of film as well as of dreams just like dream offers the experience of an entirely new reality that has not been derived from the reality of waking life.

For Freud, dreamwork itself is unable to create a dream, it can only “stylize.” However, a film sequence like that of Bergman’s From the Life of the Marionettes introduces completely new connotations into the constellation of thoughts on dreamwork. The lack of speech in this sequence (which grants it its dreamlike identity) is much more than a stylistic device; it is a matter of film-thinking which helps this dream film to develop its own logic. The dream is here produced directly by the film through a thinking activity.

**Dream Thinking in Tarkovsky’s Films**

Apart from the above-mentioned philosophical sources that suggest a sort of dream thinking, we find reflections on an organic filmic reasoning materialized in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky’s dreamlike expressions do not follow the kind of abstract logic in the same way that (Eisensteinian) montage tried to produce cinematic time. Instead they are founded on what Tarkovsky calls the “logic of the dream.” The logic of the dream implies that every scene produces its own temporal laws, its own time or, as Tarkovsky calls it, its own “time truth.” Tarkovsky does not use spatial metaphors like Nishida, but prefers temporal metaphors. Still, the results are similar as they suggest the possibility of dream thinking. Like Valéry, Tarkovsky refers to rhythm. A film’s timely rhythm is not produced through a scene’s logical relationship with other scenes. The temporal laws of the scene are absolutely “true” in that they are absolutely “necessary” in regard to the material itself. Tarkovsky says that the artistic expression “has to come from inner necessity, from an organic process going on in the material as a whole.” The organic whole of the material from which this necessity arises is not the abstract, structural, organism of a film that has been produced by an “exterior” instance like that of montage. It is rather an organic whole formed by artistic necessity, which arises out of the “inner dynamic of the mood of the situation.”

Nothing could come closer to a model of film-thinking. In Buñuel’s Nazarin, “the plague” seems to have arisen out of nowhere and it is definitely not a symbol. Tarkovsky’s description of the scene takes up points that Frampton postulated for his filmind:

The street is completely empty. Along the middle of the road, from the depth of the frame, a child is walking straight towards the camera, dragging behind him a white—brilliantly white—sheet. The camera slowly pans. And at the very last moment, just before cutting to the next shot the field of the frame is suddenly covered over, again with a white cloth, which gleams in the sunlight. One wonders where it can have come from. Could it be a sheet drying on a line? And then, with
astonishing intensity, you feel “the breath of the plague,” captured in this extraordinary manner, like a medical fact.⁵⁴

Valéry, Zen-Buddhism, and Tarkovsky depict a dream as having its own imagination; and this is exactly how Frampton wants to see film in general. Film, place, and dream can be seen as organic intelligences organized like minds that overcome ideas of individual authorship and subjectivity.

Conclusion

It has been shown that a sort of organic filmic reasoning is intrinsic to dreams as long as dreams are not merely seen as psychoanalytical perceptions of “subconscious film.” Far from being simply examples of “thinking in images,” “thinking in metaphors” or mental states, both filmind and dream are realities that think, produce or “breed” aesthetic expressions capable of developing their own logic, rhythm, and style. The overcoming of formalist as well as psychoanalytical paradigms works towards a radical reconceptualization of the being of dreams – which is exactly what Frampton is trying to do with films.

It has also been shown that this philosophy questions “reasoning” as a mental activity. Both film thinking and dream thinking represent more emotive ways of reasoning able to combine, in an aesthetically playful way, unconscious and pre-linguistic elements.

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Notes

1 Daniel Frampton, Filmosophy (London: Wallflower Press, 2006)
2 Frampton, p. 7.
3 Frampton, p. 91.
4 Frampton, p. 93.
5 Frampton, p. 140.
6 Frampton, p. 113.
7 Frampton, p. 179.
8 Frampton, p. 23.
9 Frampton, p. 47.
10 Frampton, p. 96.
11 Frampton, p. 119.
13 Frampton, p. 5.
14 Ibid.
15 Frampton, p. 151.
17 Frampton, p. 47.
18 Frampton, p. 7.
19 Frampton, p. 195.
21 Frampton, p. 93.
22 Ibid.
29 Valéry, p. 130.
30 Frampton, p. 86.
31 Valéry, p. 91.
33 Valéry, p. 72-73.
34 Frampton, p. 46.
35 Valéry, p. 147.
36 Valéry, p. 170.
37 Frampton, p. 6.
38 Frampton, p. 114.
41 Frampton, p. 38.
43 Sparshott, p. 47.
44 Sparshott, p. 38.
45 Frampton, p. 8.
46 Frampton, p. 174.
47 Frampton, p. 33.
49 Frampton, p. 108.
52 Ibid.
53 Tarkovsky, p. 74.
54 Tarkovsky, p. 73.