

Some Themes From Deleuze's Cinema, Volume 1

1. The universe is the open totality of images. It is open because there is no end to the process of change, or the emergence of novelty through this process.

2. Images are objects of ordinary experience, including their qualitative characteristics - color, texture, tone, and so on - all of which exist independently of observers. In this they differ from images as interpreted by subjectivist philosophies – i.e. images as purely mental phenomena, since they exist independently of observing minds; and they differ equally from matter as interpreted by objectivist philosophies – i.e. substances without any qualitative characteristics, since the qualitative characteristics of images are just as real as their material properties of spatial extension, impenetrability, momentum, and so on.

3. The human body, including the brain is an image, and therefore cannot serve as a repository of images. Thus the search for memory images in the brain is futile, though the condition of the brain may affect our ability to call up memory images. (Thus Leonard Shelby's brain injury in the film, *Memento*, prevents him from calling up memory images of the recent past, though it does not abolish what Bergson calls the "pure past," which is indeed what he seeks to access through his archive of tattoos, snapshots, notes, and cultivated habits.)

4. The brain, like the rest of the body, is an instrument of action, not representation. The specific function of the brain is to introduce a gap between sensory message and motor response, and thereby to replace simple, externally determined motor response with freely decided action. The brain is thus a "zone or center of indetermination," through which freedom is exercised. Memory images are called up from the pure past when they are relevant to these free actions. Thus we can see why brain injuries would affect our ability to call up memory images by altering our ability to act, even though those images do not reside in the brain.

5. Memory images are located, not "in the brain" but rather "in the past," which is a spiritual, not a material "location." Memory belongs to the spiritual phenomenon of the *duree*, the living flow of duration. In fact without memory there would be no flow of time at all, since it is memory that binds the moment that has passed to the moment that is in the act of

passing. Without it, instead of a flow, we would have a disjointed succession of disconnected instants.

6. There are two systems of images that comprise the universe: an acentered system and a centered system.

7. The acentered system is that of matter. In it every image equally influences and is influenced by every other image on all of its faces and in all of its aspects. Each indiscriminately passes on every influence it receives to other images, in a chain that reaches to the most extreme regions of the universe.

8. The centered system of images is that of perception. When a living body emerges, it takes on the function of a central image. As a "center of indetermination" that must act within the world in order to perpetuate its own existence, the living body must filter the world of images in such a way that only those facets of external images relevant to action are able to influence it. Thus perception is always limiting and selective. Contrary to a widespread philosophical prejudice, there is less, not more in the perceptual world than in the world of matter. Deleuze calls the process of selective limitation "framing," thereby indicating that the framing performed by ordinary perception anticipates cinematic framing.

(The preceding eight points are the position of Bergson, which Deleuze shares. They form the starting point of Deleuze's treatment of film in the two volumes of *Cinema*. What follows is no longer Bergson, but rather the use Deleuze makes of Bergson's framework in his treatment of film as a medium of art and thoughtful interpretation of the world.)

9. Cinema is uniquely suited to move between the two systems of images. By filming from a stable position, or from the perspective of one of the film's characters, the camera can adopt the attitude of the living body as a central image. However by going into motion, especially the free motion that dolly shots, elevation shots, and tracking shots permit, the camera is able to adopt the perspective of any image whatsoever, and thereby approximate to the universe as an acentered system.

10. There are two main historical expressions of the camera as a mobile perspective tending to identify itself with the acentered universe: the "liquid perception" of pre-World War Two French cinema (Renoir, Epstein, Bresson, Vigo), and the early Soviet cinema of Dziga Vertov.

11. The great pre-War French filmmakers had a fascination with water (see Renoir's *Ubu Saved From Drowning*, Epstein's *Le Tempestaire*, and Vigo's *L'Atlante*.) In the fluid medium of water they were able to extract pure forms of movement, each homogeneous with all of the others, and all collectively tending toward an absolute maximum of movement, expressing the "open whole as immensity of future and past." Though the liquid image expresses the simultaneous vibrations and interactions of matter, its purpose for the French directors is to evoke a more important spiritual element, that of the qualitatively changing whole of time. This they often try to accomplish by focusing on the unusual race of human beings - sailors, fishermen, lighthouse keepers – who make their home in this sublime liquid element, and must adapt to its simultaneously overwhelming and graceful pulsations. (Imagine yourself floating on the surface of the ocean when a wave breaks above your head, tossing you about under water until the wave subsides.)

12. It was Vertov, though, who went to the furthest extremity in pursuit of an image of acentered motion. He did this by creating images that were not meant to evoke the spirit, but rather the flux of matter, as it exists prior to a human presence. The machines of a newly industrializing Soviet Union provided Vertov with an image of movement in which different material parts respond to one another, communicating what has impacted them to yet other parts. But it was the camera-machine that enabled Vertov to formulate his conception of the Kino-Eye, a cinematic perspective that is perfectly mobile and therefore capable of embedding itself at any point in the material world. Think of the accelerating motion of the machines and people in *Man With a Movie Camera*, and of the dizzying shifts in cinematic point-of-view that keep pace with this acceleration. By taking the accelerating motion of industrial and cinematic machines to the absolute limit, Vertov goes beyond the liquid image to a "gaseous image," in which everything melts right down to the ultimate level of vibratory material particles. This is the pre-human world of matter that Vertov believed human beings were in the process of mastering while creating a communist society, though as the revolutionary period gave way to Stalinism, the Soviet authorities became progressively less sympathetic to Vertov's "formalist" experiments. Those experiments however have led a productive afterlife in the avant-garde films of such late twentieth-century American artists as Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow. (See Brakhage's films in the current Blackboard session.)

13. The cinema of an acentered universe may persist in some contemporary experimental film, but the far more common form of cinematic art concerns the centered universe, reality as it is filtered through an active human presence. In this second, more typical case, the motion image splits into three fundamental varieties: the perception-image, the affection-image, and the action-image.

14. Consider again what an active human presence does to the world of material objects. The human body is the locus of sensory-motor circuits that take in information from the outside world, transmit that information through the nervous system to the brain where a gap is introduced in which a free choice of action is made, and finally transmit that choice to the motor circuits (the muscle groups) responsible for carrying out the action. Since the ability of the body to act on the world is what is significant here, only that sensory information relevant to action makes it through to the brain. Thus the material world is selectively filtered in the form of a perception-image, the first variety of the normal motion-image. In cinema, the perception-image is usually the topic of a distance shot in which the camera takes in the visual information relevant to the action about to unfold.

15. The perception-image is the basis of action. But before the body acts, it has an experience of “virtual action.” In order to decide between different courses of action, it sketches out these alternative possibilities as nascent movements, activations of nervous and muscular events that remain contained within the envelope of the body (think of a runner considering stealing second base, and feeling the nascent movements involved in that process before actually running.) The experience of nascent movement as contained within the envelope of the body is what Deleuze calls the affection-image. In cinema, the affection-image is usually the theme of the close-up, especially the close-up of the face. The face is almost completely dedicated to sensation rather than action. Because of its sensory dedication, the movements of facial muscles are especially subtle and self-referential; they register affective expression (emotions) more saliently than any other part of the body. The face and the close-up that focuses on it in film are the paramount vehicles of the affection-image.

16. The action-image completes the motion-image triad, and bears most of the artistic weight of standard narrative cinema. Deleuze’s point of reference here is pre-World War Two American film (and its continuation in the post-War period), the work of such great directors as Hawks, Ford,

Mankiewicz, Kazan, Preminger, Ray, Wyler, Huston, Minnelli, and, of course, Hitchcock. The last third of Cinema, vol. 1 (which we will read next week) concerns the action-image and the crisis of the action-image that finally gives way to post-War modernist European film.

17. Before discussing the action-image, however, Deleuze produces a fascinating treatment of a form of cinema positioned midway between the affection-image and the action-image, a cinema of the impulse-image, which Deleuze also calls “naturalism.” He primarily discusses three directors in this context, Stroheim, Bunuel, and Losey. Affect-images refer to the subtleties of the inner life, and they do so through the medium of close-ups, or alternatively, of distance or medium shots of nondescript, atmospheric environments, often bathed in shadow, which Deleuze calls “any-space-whatevers.” The fully developed action-image on the other hand exhibits the emergence of well-formed human qualities and powers in definite geographical and historical environments (think of the Western in which the hero exhibits the quality of courage by exercising the power to act in facing down the gunslinger on the deserted streets of the 19th century Montana town.) Midway between the Any-Space-Whatever/Affect pair and the Definite Environment/Determinate Behavior Pair, Deleuze tells us there is an Ordinary World/Elementary Impulse pair. Impulses are neither emotions nor motives for considered, determinate actions. They are immediate discharges of energy, seemingly more animal than human in character – voracious greed (Stroheim), sexual obsession (Bunuel), murderous rage (Ray), servile resentment and revenge (Losey), and so on. In the movies, the environments in which the characters discharge their impulses are not determinate historical or even geographical places, but rather “ordinary worlds,” part-human, part-animal, worlds that precede the differentiation of humans from their animal origins. They are marked off from the main setting of the film (which Deleuze calls “the derived world”) as delimited spaces taking the form of deserts, forests, swamps, garbage heaps, but also, as in the case of Bunuel’s *Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, upper class dining rooms. Here human/animal characters discharge their impulses, in the process tearing fragments out of their coherent objective contexts, making them into fetishes, part-objects in which the impulse is invested. (Once again we can take our example from Bunuel, many of whose films express a fetish for women’s shoes.) The impulses and fetishes that start in the “ordinary world” ultimately take over the “derived world” as well, degrading it in an expression of the death instinct. There are two primary expressions of such degradation: a “steepest slope,” best illustrated by Stroheim’s films, in which there is a

unilinear decent from human to animal condition (e.g. *Greed*); and a cycle of repetition and return, best illustrated by Bunuel's films (e.g. *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*). Of these two forms of naturalist cinema, Deleuze suggests that the cyclic return of the scene of degradation in Bunuel may afford a possibility of reversal, escape, or salvation. For Deleuze, the impulse-image, and therefore the cinematic genre of naturalism, is difficult to sustain, precisely because it remains suspended between affect and action. Some great directors, including Renoir (*The Human Beast*) and Visconti (*Obsession*) have been fascinated with it, yet unable to resist the pull toward emotion or action. Stroheim's *Greed* and all of Bunuel's movies (along with the films of Joseph Losey, e.g. *The Servant*) are the most developed expressions of this difficult in-between genre.

(We will continue this analysis next week when we consider Deleuze's in-depth treatment of the action-image.)