

Remarks on the Crisis of the Action-Image in *Cinema, Vol. 1*

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1. Remember the overall structure of Deleuze's two-volume work. In general, according to him, there is a privileged relation between cinema and time. Cinema is that visual art of the industrial age that takes as its theme the temporal (time-bound) character of our experience of the world. There are two ways that cinema deals with time. The first proceeds by creating an indirect time-image through the intermediary of motion. We experience time with reference to moving objects or moving living bodies, including the one the camera represents. This is in fact the cinematic version of an approach to time that is dominant in both ancient and modern philosophy. In the Western philosophical tradition until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we register the passage of time by observing motion, for example, the rotation of the heavenly bodies, or the sweep of a shadow cast by the sun as it moves along the ground, or the changing perspective on things that our living body generates as it moves through the world, or perhaps the emotional or organic changes that our bodies register as they age. In all of these examples, we grasp the flow of time, but indirectly, as reflected in the phenomena of motion and change. The indirect time-image as a vehicle of cinema is the topic of *Cinema, Vol.1*. In *Cinema, Volume 2* Deleuze is going to tell us that there is a direct time-image in addition to the indirect one, an image that grasps time without passing through the intermediary of motion. Though we will need to reserve discussion of the direct time-image until we have read the assignment from *Cinema, Vol. 2*, suffice it to say at this point that it involves such phenomena as memory, dreams, and abnormal or extraordinary conscious states.
2. *Cinema, Vol. 1* proceeds to dichotomize the indirect time-image. The motion that is the vehicle of the indirect time-image takes one of two forms. It may take the form of motion from the prospective of the infinite number of points occupied by matter as it is apart from a human presence (the theme of Dziga Vertov's work as well as that of some contemporary experimental filmmakers), or it may take the form of motion as it is experienced from the perspective of a living, moving, acting body.
3. The second version of the indirect time-image (the motion-image) itself splits into three components: the perception-image, the affection image, and the action-image. The perception-image depicts the world in which motion unfolds, and the affection-image depicts the way in which action is anticipated by motor tendencies contained within the envelope of the living

- body (i.e. emotions). The structure of the action-image is more complicated, involving a milieu with embedded properties and powers that pose a question or challenge to the one who needs to act, the response of the actor to that question or challenge, and the changed situation that results from the action. The second stage – that of the response to the question or challenge – involves its own internal complexity: it takes place in the form of a duel between two forces, a force represented by the person acting and a force that opposes his action.
4. The motion-image in the triple form of perception-image, affection-image, and action-image is most fully developed in pre-World War Two American cinema. We can also call this Classical Realist Cinema, cinema that concerns action in a world of real properties and powers, action in a determinate natural and historical environment. Whether the action succeeds or fails does not affect its status as an action-image. Even failed action is an expression of the actor's response to a challenge set by the milieu. After all, there would be little of interest in Classical Realist Cinema, especially in the form of the crime story, the war picture, the courtroom drama, or even the romance, if we knew that the hero or heroine were always destined to succeed.
 5. The crisis of the action-image is going to pivot on the paralysis of the ability to act (which is something quite different than an act that fails to achieve its goal). But this is only a negative way of characterizing the situation. For the paralysis of the ability to act has as its positive correlate the emergence of a new kind of image, which Deleuze calls the mental image, or the thought-image. The emergence of the mental image in cinema prepares the way for a major transition, that from pre-war American Realist Cinema to post-war European Modernist Cinema.
 6. Mentality, or thought in the sense that Deleuze uses the word need not involve heady or deep conversation. In fact the finest cinematic forms of the thought-image do not put thought into words at all, but rather express thoughts through the work of the camera. The key property of the thought-image in this sense is therefore not that it is something conceptual or linguistic, but rather that it reveals a relation or set of relations. Relations, even purely visual or cinematic ones, serve as the contents of thought in that they are more or less abstract. A relation is different than the terms that are connected to one another in that relation. The terms may be concrete, but the relation that connects them is not. Take the simple spatial relation of being to the left of something. When I say that the pen is to the left of the pad, I am dealing with two concrete objects: the pen and the pad. But being-to-the-left-of is not a third concrete object in addition to the other two. Instead it is something "intellectual" or "abstract," the content, not of a perception, affection, or action, but rather of a thought. As the preceding example indicates, the movie camera is able to explore relations without using words or concepts, but instead through processes of visual probing. Cinematic intellectuality need not have anything to do with words.
 7. Deleuze applies Pierce's philosophy of symbols to the discussion up to this point. The American Pragmatist philosopher, Charles Sanders Pierce claims

that the three most basic logical properties of signs and symbols are Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, while he associates these properties with affect, action, and thought respectively. Affect is an example of Firstness in that it concerns only a single term, namely the living body that experiences the affect in its own flesh as it were. Action is an example of Secondness because it always unfolds between two terms, the actor and the milieu, the force and the counterforce. Thought is an example of Thirdness because it concerns not the concrete terms that are the themes of affection (living body) or action (actor-milieu, force-counterforce), but rather the relations that hold between terms. The relation is always a Third, something in addition to the terms it connects, though not something concrete. It belongs to the realm of thought. In essence, the crisis of the cinematic action-image is a crisis of Secondness, and the emergence of Thirdness from that crisis. This is merely a way of saying in logical terms that the crisis is marked by the transition from action to thought.

8. The transition will not be fully accomplished until the European cinema of the post-war period. But, according to Deleuze, there is a transitional figure who bridges the distance between the Realist American movie and the modernist European film. That figure is Alfred Hitchcock.
9. Without explicitly breaking with the idiom of Realist filmmaking, Hitchcock makes films that concern both the paralysis of action and the emergence of relations as the objects of cinematic focus. Take for example *Rear Window*. The central character in the film is a journalistic photographer confined to a wheelchair due to a broken leg. With a pair of binoculars, he watches the goings-on in the apartments across the way from his own through a rear window. A psychoanalytic analysis of the film would focus on the voyeurism of the protagonist, but this is not what interests Deleuze. From a Deleuzian perspective, what is important is the fact that the protagonist is immobilized. Unable to act, he turns himself into a pure spectator, a sort of living camera. The act of seeing what a stationary camera sees reveals not just the people who inhabit the apartments across the way, but more importantly for the purposes of the film, the relations that connect these people with one another. What is the relation between the neighbor in the apartment directly across from the protagonist's and the neighbor's wife? Is it a relation between a husband who remains at home while his wife goes away on a trip, or is it instead a relation between murderer and murder victim? The paralysis of his ability to act enables the wheelchair-bound photographer to make the transition from Secondness to Thirdness, from Object to Relation, from Action to Thought.
10. As we've said, Hitchcock's break with Realist Cinema is only partial. We might express this by saying that the conventions of the action-image continue to structure his films even while he proceeds to break those conventions. He subverts the content of the Realist film while leaving its form intact, which is why Hitchcock's movies are still popular with mass audiences, including American audiences.

11. It was left to the European filmmakers of Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave to overthrow the form as well as the content of a cinema dominated by the action-image. This is the theme of Deleuze's treatment of the direct time-image in *Cinema, Vol. 2*.
12. In preparing for this discussion, Deleuze chronicles the further breakdown of the action-image in the work of such postwar American directors as Altman, Lumet, Casavettes, and Scorsese.
13. The factors responsible for this breakdown are various. Deleuze mentions the following: the Second World War and its consequences, the increasing instability of the American Dream, the rising consciousness of minorities, the saturation of public and private life with images, and the influence of modernist forms of literary narrative.
14. The five characteristics of the new image developed by postwar American film are 1) a dispersive situation instead of a unified one (e.g. the fragmented conversations in Altman's film, *Nashville*); 2) deliberately weak sensory-motor links between situation and action, or between the elements of a situation (*The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* by Casavettes); 3) the replacement of tight sensory-motor couplings with meandering journeys, voyages, or strolls (Hopper's *Easy Rider*); 4) the use of clichés to connect the dispersive elements of the cinematic set (Altman's *Nashville* again, or Scorsese's *King of Comedy*); and the condemnation of the criminal or corporate Plot that makes clichés and images circulate (Lumet's *Anderson Tapes, Network, and Prince of the City*, as well as Altman's *Nashville* yet again).
15. To the extent that the films mentioned above break the dominance of the older forms of Realist Cinema, they remain paradoxically caught in these very forms. That is to say they define themselves negatively, in relation to the older American Realist tradition. In this respect, European cinema had the advantage of being able to innovate without reference to an older canonical tradition.
16. Italian Neo-Realism (Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini, Antonioni) and French New Wave (Chabrol, Rohmer, Truffaut, Goddard) are the first movements in postwar European cinema that develop the five characteristics of the new cinematic image in complete freedom from the tradition of Classical Realism. Deleuze ends *Cinema, Vol. 1* on this note, the prelude to his discussion of the modernist cinema of postwar Europe in *Cinema, Vol. 2*.