

Remarks on the Direct Time-Image in *Cinema*, Vol. 2

- Gary Zabel

1. Italian Neo-Realism and French New-Wave push the characteristics of the postwar cinematic image – dispersive situations, weak sensory-motor linkages, and so on – to the breaking point, the point at which an entirely new kind of cinematic image emerges. This is the direct time-image, an image of time no longer dependent on an intermediary image of motion. Motion, of course, does not disappear from cinema, but its relationship with time is now reversed. Instead of time being understood as the measure of motion, and therefore as something dependent upon it, motion is now understood as a dependent phenomenon, a kind of shadow cast by time.
2. What makes this reversal possible is that pure optical and sound images appear in place of the sensory-motor situations of the action-image. Deleuze, for example, refers to simple optical images in the films of the Japanese director, Ozu. A vase is interposed between a daughter's half-smile and the beginning of her tears in *Late Spring*; sunlight that has fallen on a still life fades or gets stronger in *That Night's Wife* or *Passing Fancy*. The vase and the still life are direct images of time - change occurs within or in relation to them - but they themselves do not change, just as time itself is the enduring flow that sustains the changing passage of events.
3. The direct-time image is not exhausted by the pure optical and sound images that introduce it. What determines the content of the postwar Modernist film is the way the direct-time image gives rise to thought rather than action. The empty island landscape of Antonioni's *L'Aventura* is a direct image of time in that it persists unchanged as the woman who has landed on it vanishes. However its ultimate significance is that it reveals the relation of disrupted or deteriorated love that connects the woman with her male lover who has also landed on the island, and who has an affair with the woman's closest friend as the two of them search for her. The direct time-image reveals the original relation between the woman and her lover, as well as between the woman and her friend, suggesting that,

in the postwar era, love and friendship no longer are what they once were. *L'Aventura* takes these relations as its theme and thus constitutes a cinema, not of action, but of thought.

4. In postwar European cinema, the direct time-image often appears in the course of extreme, or limit experiences that block the possibility of acting, but these can be experiences of unbearable beauty as well as unbearable suffering. For example, in Rossolini's *Stromboli*, the foreign woman is defeated in her attempt to escape from her husband and her life on the island by the volcanic mountain; but when, at the top of the mountain, she gazes at the stars and fiery landscape she cries out, "I am finished! My God, what beauty!" The experience of overwhelming beauty is possible only when the woman gives up all hope of escape.
5. The action-image is no longer equal to the task of expressing in cinema the world as it emerges from World War Two, a world that escapes our attempts at mastery, or even significant influence. But this very failure of action enables cinema to move into a new and productive phase, that of the direct time-image that springs from the purely optical and sonic experiences that follow in the wake of paralyzed action. No longer presenting itself as a situation calling for action, the world now appears as an object of thought.
6. The direct time-image does not leave our experience of time unaffected; it is not as though, by giving up the intermediary of motion, we simply came closer to the original experience of time that was first indicated by the indirect time-image. Instead a new depth in our experience is revealed with the transition to a direct image of time.
7. This depth first appears as a kind of crystalline structure in which images are doubled or further multiplied. The multiplication of reflections in the famous fun house scene in Orson Welles' *Lady from Shanghai* is an example of this, but so is the overall narrative structure of a film like Renoir's *Rules of the Game*, in which every character and relation finds a counterpart – the Count and his mistress, the Count's wife and her aviator lover, the maid and her suitor - until the crystalline structure is shattered by the unique action in which the maid's husband mistakenly shoots the aviator. The crystal – the development of multiple, symmetric facets from an original seed – is a powerful image of time because the living

present is always caught up in a fundamental doubling. Some of Bergson's deepest reflections about time concern this phenomenon.

8. The moment that we are currently living through is present, but it is also in the process of passing, of slipping into the past. And this does not mean that, while it is here now, it will have later slipped into the past. Rather, the present moment has always already slipped into the past, since it would be impossible to understand how it could *subsequently* acquire the ability to give up its hold on actuality. The moment that we are currently living through is *present and past, actual and virtual at one and the same time*. It is a double moment, a living process of doubling. Two streams of time diverge from the wellspring of the current moment: in one stream the present is something actual - the actual process of passage - and in the other stream, it is something that has always already passed, and so is not actual but virtual. The doubling of the faces of a crystal in cinematic imagery has its model in this doubling of the streams of time. It is for this reason that the direct time-image of the new cinema has a fundamentally crystalline structure.
9. Deleuze elaborates these ideas in the remarkable fifth chapter of *Cinema, Volume 2: "Peaks of Present and Sheets of Past."* If the present is always already past, then the problem occurs of how to distinguish it from other past moments. In what way does the present I am currently living through differ from the past I lived through yesterday, or the one I lived through ten years ago? Deleuze once again appeals to Bergson. Bergson answers this question with the image of an inverted cone bisected along its length at various points by horizontal planes. The tip of the cone is the present I am currently living through, but the tip is what it is precisely because it lies at the apex of the entire cone (the accumulated mass of the past). In Bergson's formulation, the present is the most contracted degree of the past. It gathers into its punctual actuality the whole of its experienced but now virtual past. What makes the present I currently live through different than the one I lived through yesterday is that my current present contracts within it everything my former present contracted, *along with the now past experiences of the following day*. Although it is true that my present is always already past, my present changes, signifying an advance within time, as the past that it concentrates continually swells. The content of the apex of the

cone alters as the mass of the cone grows with a progressively accumulating past.

10. The bisections that occur along the length of the cone are different regions, segments, or sheets of past. When I try to recall something in an act of reproductive memory, I must first direct my attention to the past in general. But secondly I must locate the particular sheet of past in which the event I am seeking lies (did it happen my senior year of high school or my freshman year of college?) These are real “locations,” just as independent of me as the material objects I experience in sense perception. If I am successful in finding the sheet, or region where the event lies, then I am able to express the event in a memory-image. The memory-image is actual – it belongs to my living present – though the remembered event does not. The remembered event remains where it always was, in the specific region of the “pure past” where I have found it.
11. Since there are two divergent streams of time - the present in the act of passing and the accumulated mass of presents that have passed - there are two basic varieties of the direct image of time. In the first type of direct time-image, I attempt to place myself in the sheet of the past where the memory I am seeking resides. In the second type of direct time-image I immerse myself in the past event, reliving it as a past series of once-present moments.
12. Now imagine that I am reminiscing with a friend. There are two different ways in which we may have discrepant memories of an event. On the one hand, we may disagree about the sheet of past where the event resides: did we stay in that hotel on our vacation to Canada or on our vacation to Maine? On the other hand, we may disagree about the succession of present moments that occurred while we were staying in the hotel: did we check out before or after we went to dinner? In the first case we differ about sheets of past, in the second case about peaks of present. Now this is a banal example. But we will see that one of the great achievements of postwar European cinema, Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad*, involves both of these forms of discrepant memory.
13. Let's look a little closer at what happens when we immerse ourselves in recollection of an event that has past. The event is comprised of many moments, many past presents. In relation to any past present we happen to focus on, there is a moment that

preceded it and one that followed in the concrete duration that constitutes the whole of the past event. Therefore every past moment is, at one and the same time, a past present, a past past, and a past future, when regarded from the vantage-point of itself, the moment that comes after it, or the moment that comes before it. Another way of saying this is that, in the act of recollection, every moment is happening, has already happened, and has not yet happened, all at the same time (the total elapsed time of the recollected event.) Regarding the event that has passed as a set of peaks of present therefore creates the paradoxical situation in which every past present has all three characteristics of time - past, present, and future - not as successive moments but as simultaneous ones. It is as though the whole time of the past event is tightly curled up in each of its moments.

14. Filmmakers are able to explore the events they depict in their films as either sheets of past, or peaks of present, or both.
15. In the case of Orson Welles' famous movie, *Citizen Kane*, Welles treats the life of the now- deceased Charles Foster Kane as sheets of past. Each person who knew Kane is interviewed about the sheet of past that he or she shared with him in an attempt to locate the object that Kane refers to with his dying breath, "Rosebud." Was it in the sheet of past that he shared with the drunken singer, or that of the friend that he broke with, or the one he shared with his typesetter, and so on?
16. *Last Year at Marienbad* has a more complex structure than *Citizen Kane* because it treats the event that may or may not have taken place (the near love affair between the man and the woman the previous year) as both sheets of present and peaks of past. The man attempts to capture the woman by enveloping her in multiple sheets of past (he tries to get her to remember the key occurrences that he claims comprised their near affair), while she tries to escape from his net by jumping between different peaks of present (what he relates, according to her, never happened, is happening now, or will happen).
17. Thus in the case of *Citizen Kane* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, we are dealing with two powerful direct time-images, that of sheets of past and peaks of present. These images do not depend upon motion in order to reveal the time in which motion takes place. On

the contrary, the motion depicted in the film (including the actions of the characters) depends upon the nature of the direct time-image that frames it and gives it meaning.