Images of Thought and Acts of Creation: Deleuze, Bergson, and the Question of Cinema

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"Existing not as a subject but as a work of art...." ¹

Gilles Deleuze, in his two books on film, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, proposes a revolutionary approach to film theory. Drawing on Deleuze’s own philosophy of repetition and difference and the work of Henri Bergson, the Cinema books extend these theories to foreground those aspects that are most essential to the medium: that film unfolds in time, and is comprised of ever-differentiating planes of movement. Deleuze’s writings as a whole resonate with correspondences between concepts of transformation, difference, and the forces of impersonal time. Bergson’s work is consistent with the thrust of this project, so Deleuze’s exploration of Bergson in this context seems, on the one hand, unquestionably valid. In addressing the cinema, however, Deleuze transposes these theories, which are inherently bound up in the shifting and unique movements of life, and uses them to discuss the mechanized and standardized movements of film, a means of reproducing or representing that life.

How are we to account for Deleuze’s or Bergson’s theories of temporality, both based in philosophies of life, creation, and difference, when confronted with an aesthetic object such as film: a fixed, repeatable representation? Exploring the larger processes that drive Deleuze’s work as a whole, one is faced with perhaps a more fundamental question: why can or should one use Deleuze to think about film? What potentials does Deleuzian theory offer to those who work on film, and what implications will his work have for the field of film theory?

To begin mapping these implications, I will first examine what might appear to be a contradiction in Deleuze’s approach to film. He calls upon Bergson to address the cinema, while Bergson himself used the medium as a model for the forces of rationality that immobilize and fragment time. I will argue, however, that there is no contradiction between Deleuze’s and Bergson’s approaches when we view film not as a model for perception, nor a reflected image of reality, but as a unique image with its own duration. What this seeming conflict points to is at the heart of the problem of representation (as concept and in practice). At stake are not only all theories that address "the arts," but larger questions regarding the nature of the real. The key to unraveling this problem lies in the complex understanding of time that Bergson proposes. By using this theory to re-evaluate cinema, Deleuze does not misconstrue the mechanisms of film. Instead, following Bergson, Deleuze further expands our understanding of where the real lies, reinterpreting the way in which we understand
the temporal nature of film. The result is a fundamental destabilization of the very idea of a representation, displacing notions of signification and association in favor of acts of creation and images of thought.

The greatest achievement of the *Cinema* books is that they suggest a means of looking at film that explodes static views of the work that the work of art does. Rather than "representing" something, film, for Deleuze, has the potential to create its own fluid movements and temporalities. These movements, while related to formal elements of rhythm and duration within the film itself, cannot be reduced to specific techniques or concrete images. Similarly, the temporality that Deleuze locates within the cinema cannot be pinned to a specific type of shot, nor a particular moment in the shooting, editing, projection, or reception of a film. By refusing to thus situate his theory, Deleuze completely sidesteps psychoanalytic and semiological film theories that would locate the "meaning" of film beneath the surface level of signs. The ramifications of Deleuze's project far exceed the scope of this paper. My goal, nevertheless, is to map several of its threads. The first is an interrogation of what varied meanings the term "representation" might have for Bergson or Deleuze with specific reference to cinema. The second involves the relationship between film and the realm that can be designated as the "real." Finally, the overarching question that motivates me is whether it is possible to maintain a commitment to the "art of living" that Bergson (and Deleuze) so convincingly promote while doing work on the "objects" of visual culture. These are lines of inquiry that I cannot exhaust, but at the same time, they are a movement toward understanding the creative potentials of thinking through and with the work of art.

The *Cinema* books map a rift in filmmaking which can be roughly situated at the end of World War II. This split, however, cannot be reduced to a historical shift, but exists instead in differing configurations of movement and time. The movement-image, according to Deleuze, is exemplified by classical Hollywood cinema. Time proceeds only as dictated by action (the action of narrative, of cause and effect, of rationality). Temporality in the movement-image, for Deleuze, is governed by the "sensory-motor schema." All movements are determined by linear causality, and the characters are bent toward actions which respond to the situations of the present. Even when temporal continuity is momentarily disrupted (e.g. in a flashback), these moments are reintegrated into the prescribed evolution of past, present, and future. The movement-image is structured, not only by narrative, but by rationality: closed framings, reasonable progressions, and continuous juxtapositions.
The time-image, however, breaks itself from sensory-motor links. The emphasis shifts from the logical progression of images to the experience of the image-in-itself. What we find here are pure optical and sound situations (opsigns and sonsigns), unfettered by narrative progression, and empty, disconnected any-space-whatevers. This move from "acting" to "perceiving" carries over to the characters in the film, who cease to be "agents" and become, instead, "seers." Though Deleuze is hesitant to identify any single film that embodies the time-image, moments in films by Pasolini, Ozu, and Godard, for example, gesture towards that ideal: moments of rupture, hesitation, irrational cutting, or prolonged duration. Movement that is aberrant (i.e. not rational or sensory-motor) can be seen, according to Deleuze, to be caused by time itself. Built through irrational movements and op/sonsigns, the time-image exists thus not as a chronology, but as a series of juxtaposed "presents." What is achieved is exceedingly rare: a direct image of time.3

Deleuze’s reading of Bergson explodes all the basic assumptions of film theory to date (the separation of subject and object, the primacy of the apparatus, the psychological nature of perception, etc.). But to designate images "time-" or "movement-" related runs the risk of remaining merely descriptive if one does not fully grasp that the distinction between the two is neither a question of form nor content. For Bergson’s writing resists being reduced to a structural model; the experience of life, he claims, exceeds the comprehension of the intellect. And the integrated relationship between subject and object, matter and memory, that Bergson proposes results in a shift in emphasis from the aesthetic object to the act of creation. Indeed, Bergson’s contribution to thought rests not in a new analysis of art, but in rethinking the practice of "the art of living."4

To understand the consequences of this shift for film theory, one must first turn to the distinction that Bergson draws between the methodologies of the intellect and intuition. The intellect, Bergson argues, is always bent on action. It is the component of consciousness which allows a being to comprehend its environment and survive within it. While its mode of perception is essential to life, however, the intellect does not have a privileged access to reality. Bergson writes:

If the intellect were meant for pure theorizing, it would take its place within movement, for movement is reality itself, and immobility is always only apparent or relative. But the intellect is meant for something altogether different. Unless it does violence to itself, it takes the opposite course; it always starts from immobility, as if this were the ultimate reality: when it tries to form an idea of
movement, it does so by constructing movement out of immobilities put together.... Of immobility alone does the intellect form a clear idea.⁵

The intellect, in order to act upon reality, must thus reduce it to a series of frozen moments. Unlike the direct, reflective mode of what Bergson calls intuition, the intellect works scientifically. It extracts objects from motion in order to evaluate the action which it might perform upon them, restoring an abstract idea of motion upon them after the fact, like lines drawn between points on a graph.

Intuition, by contrast, is the mode through which one gains access to the undifferentiated flow of life, the real. All matter, for Bergson, exists as images defined by the range of their possible actions (real or virtual) upon other images. The human subject is an image/object like any other, with the distinction that, as a living being, it has both the potential to generate its own actions and to function as a perceptive center, organizing itself in relation to other images. While part of this organization involves the mechanisms of the intellect, there is a component that is opposed to spatialization and is inclined instead toward the temporal. Within each "living center" exists a potential delay between the moment of perception and the moment of action. The greater this delay or "zone of indeterminacy" becomes, the greater access the subject will have to an alternative axis of movement: that of intuition.

Bergson's intuition, unlike the popular usage of the term, involves a precise methodology. Rather than immobilizing and distilling from matter that which can be acted upon, intuition delves simultaneously inward to the depths of the self and outward, beyond the self, to grasp objects in their entirety, as they exist in duration. Duration here refers not to "time," which for Bergson is a concept already fractured into spatial components (minutes, seconds, years, etc.). Instead, each image contains its own unique duration, its own capacity for change. Intuition is a mode of unmediated access to the play of forces that comprise existence. Unlike the intellect, which is oriented toward the interest that a being has in the objects it can act upon, intuition is driven by the inward-motion of instinct, a form of sympathy "that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely."⁶ As Deleuze writes about the temporal nature of intuition: "Intuition is not duration itself. Intuition is rather the movement by which we emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration to affirm and immediately to recognize the existence of other durations, above or below us."⁷

Cinema, for Bergson, or rather the cinematic apparatus, corresponds directly to the function of the intellect. He describes the phenomenon of film as a series of immobile
snapshots of reality. The camera isolates fragments of reality, erasing the nuances of transformation occurring between frames. In order to achieve movement, the film must be unwound through the projector, thus restoring the illusion of continuous motion. But the motion we perceive is not the unique movement inherent to the object filmed. The camera/projector apparatus extracts from reality an "impersonal movement," a movement which can be generalized and regulated at a precise duration, a calculable frame rate. "Such is the contrivance of the cinematograph," Bergson writes, "[a]nd such is also that of our knowledge."\(^8\)

The first pages of The Movement-Image address Bergson's theory of "the cinematographic illusion." Deleuze suggests, however, that Bergson makes an oversight in locating cinema and natural perception along the same continuum. Deleuze argues that while the mechanisms of film might mask themselves as those of perception, in actuality the projector "corrects" the illusion from the outset through its regulated reanimation of the image: "cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image. It does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement."\(^9\) Deleuze's argument is that Bergson's concept of the movement-image might have implications for the cinema that Bergson himself could not perceive at the time. He further asserts that the apparatus of the camera possesses temporal capabilities that complicate and supercede those of the projector.

Deleuze potentially misrepresents the breadth of his theory in this attempt to recuperate the cinematic apparatus.\(^10\) If one considers film to be an attempt to reproduce physical reality, there is no doubt that the image on the screen cannot encompass the complex existence of the matter before the lens of the camera. Clearly Deleuze is writing against such a simplistic reading. At the same time, to argue that the mechanisms of film somehow ameliorate the visual "illusions" that the film audience necessarily undergoes is to leave such an assumption unchallenged. This is not a criticism that I would levy against the *Cinema* books as a whole. Indeed, Deleuze deftly avoids easy associations between physical "images" and Bergson's more complex use of the term, let alone any confusion between notions of "the real" and the objects that the camera represents. While I have reservations about Deleuze's argument in this instance, the goal of his investigation is, in fact, consistent with Bergson's larger project. The apparent discrepancy between Bergson and Deleuze's approaches to film is a reflection not of contradiction nor oversight, but of a fundamental shift in their understandings of the function of cinema. I see this shift between the way in which Bergson discusses film (as a metaphoric model for a mode of thought) and the way in
which Deleuze uses Bergson to discuss film (where film is no longer a "model," but contains its own potential image of thought) as an entryway for exploring the question of representation that lies at the heart of the *Cinema* books.

When Bergson compares cinema to the processes of the intellect, he describes it as a model of representation. Just as the intellect selects from the swirling movements of surrounding matter only those images upon which the body can act, the cinematic apparatus immobilizes instances, slicing them from the undifferentiated flow of life and reanimating them through the uniformity of the machine. Bergson's discussion of the cinematic apparatus perfectly describes his theory of the intellect (one might even pursue another line of inquiry: how do technological developments enable or influence the evolution of concepts?). But the analogy he makes is not sufficient for describing (or dismissing) the cinematic experience as a whole.

The mechanism of thought that functions "cinematically" creates a "theoretical illusion" for Bergson, obscuring our perception of "the true evolution, the radical becoming." But one would be mistaken to deduce from this that the "reality" which the "cinematographical mechanism of thought" prevents access to would in fact be representable given a more fluid apparatus or model. Or further that Bergson's critique of the mode of thought can be interpreted as or extended to a critique of the medium. What his "cinematographical" model does provide, however, is a powerful critique of the very mechanisms of representation. Representation operates through immobilization, spatialization. The representation becomes a "sign" through which we interpret the always implied referent. It asserts correspondences, analogies, and associations between elements at the expense of their differences, their dynamisms, their movements and changes.

The problem of representation is one that extends almost limitlessly. It is a question that permeates nearly all aspects of human existence: perception, language, and thought. How is it possible to move beyond the realm of representation? And if it is indeed a mechanism that can be overcome, what alternative methodologies might be left in its wake?

Deleuze and Guattari, in their discussion of the rhizome, make a distinction between a map and a tracing. The trace is described in terms strikingly similar to Bergson's model of "cinematographic thought": The trace is "like a photograph or X ray that begins by selecting or isolating, by artificial means such as colorations or other restrictive procedures, what it intends to reproduce." The strength of the map, by contrast, is that it never operates by means of resemblance. While a map functions
always in relation to something beyond itself, it engages in those relations as a toolbox, a set of potentialities that are never predetermined and that can in turn effect changes upon the images and objects they come up against:

What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious.... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification....A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same."13

The function of the map described here, I would argue, suggests a vehicle for thinking outside representation, a modality not dissimilar from that of Bergson's intuition. Like the flow of images that Bergson designates as the real, the map interacts with configurations of elements that defy binaristic classification (subject/object, spectator/text, etc.). With reference to the rhizomatic potential of literature, Deleuze and Guattari write:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject.... The book as assemblage with the outside, against the book as image of the world.14

The assemblages which film forms with its outside will necessarily differ from those formed in literature or the other arts. Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari's discussion bears weight on my discussion here. Practices of filming or writing cannot be generalized as having "productive" or "regressive" relationships with the real. Books and films can act equally rhizomatic/crystalline or trace-like, depending on their individual relation to the outside, the direction of their movements.

As such, I would agree with Deleuze that it is inaccurate to describe cinema based on a model of perception. At the same time, both cinematic and perceptive modalities exist in relation to a "real" that is, for Bergson (and Deleuze), more complex than has been indicated thus far. In Matter and Memory, Bergson proposes a definition of matter:

Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of "images." And by "image" we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation,
but less than that which the realist call a thing-- an existence placed halfway between the "thing" and the "representation."\[15\]

For Bergson, the brain does not produce a representation of what it perceives. Perception is the mutual influence of images upon one another, of which the brain is only another image--it does not "produce" anything, but filters impulses into actions or non-actions. The implications for film are two-fold. By addressing the perceiving subject as one image among the world of images, Bergson steps outside models that locate perception and memory within the mind of the subject. I would further suggest, following Deleuze, that Bergson's theory of matter allows us to see film not as a fixed representation, a concrete image of a "real" object, but as an image in its own right, with its own duration and axes of movement. What we might call the film-image thus occurs in the gap between subject and object, through the collision of affective images.

Deleuze's formulation of the film-image as a mobile assemblage (sometimes a frame, sometimes a shot, a sound, or the film as a whole) lends itself to this reading, refusing to reduce the physical image on the screen to a mere reproduction of an assumed "real" object it represents. Such a formulation similarly reevaluates the relationship between the concrete optical and sonic images that comprise the film. Rather than conceiving of each component as a concrete "building block," it allows for the shifting and multiple conglomerations of elements which are themselves dynamic and mobile. A film cannot be distilled to an analyzable structure that originates from outside itself. Instead, each film-image is contingent, particular, and evolving.

The potential affective force of film is not that it more closely resembles the objects that it represents (having a more direct relationship to those objects via the photographic method than more abstract systems of representation such as language or painting). Rather, this potential lies in film's ability to key into durations which would defy the limitations of the intellect, working not toward action, but toward the zone of indeterminacy which lies between perception and action. Bergson writes:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states....[I]n recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but it organizes them with itself [avec lui], as it happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak into one another.\[16\]
But film-images, while possessing individual durations, cannot engage in the active process of recollection that Bergson describes. Indeed, while my investigation of film has been driven by Bergson's theory of intuition, one could not claim that film functions "intuitively." The cinematic experience, for Deleuze, is not a pure state of reflection. One cannot "think inside" film; film must be conceived of as a problem that arises from outside. Meaning, as such, cannot be conceptualized as signification, nor as something garnered through a direct synthesis or sympathetic penetration of the object. Deleuze posits instead a theory of expression, filmic images that are temporal and dynamic. It is the image that is encountered directly, presenting a complex provocation to thought.

It is this provocation that I see as the true potential of film. The act of creation, for Bergson, is a solution to a challenge from the outside, from life. The question of cinema is not a question of representing or perceiving movement, but of thinking through movement, of creating new movements and new images of thought. Dorothea Olkowski, in her work on representation, returns to Bergson's assertion that the most elemental function of philosophy is to ask whether a problem has been properly stated. One cannot propose to solve a problem in which the terms are falsely established. In such cases, one will be bound up in an illusion, unable to see the qualitative and quantitative differences between the elements in question. Olkowski writes:

> This is the dark thought I have had about representation for so long; we are immersed in it and it has become inseparable from our condition. It has created a world, a cosmos even, of false problems such that we have lost our true freedom: that of invention.¹⁷ What Bergson and Deleuze both point to in their writings is a means of restating the question of representation, rending it open to the forces of creation and invention.

These forces are tapped into when perception, rather than isolating an image for the purposes of action, orients itself toward memory, the virtual potential of the past. "When perception is attentive," Olkowski writes, "every perception becomes an act of creation in which the perception opens as many circuits as there are memory images attracted by this new perception, making of every perception a qualitative multiplicity."¹⁸ The act of creation occurs with the introduction of the new. In the case of the body, the new exists as these perceptions and affections, what it creates from impulses and images it perceives.

"Style in philosophy," Deleuze writes, "strains toward three different poles: concepts, or new ways of thinking; percepts, or new ways of seeing and hearing; and affects, or
new ways of feeling. They’re the philosophical trinity, philosophy as opera: you need all three to get things moving.” Cinema, I would argue, contains the potential to transect all three poles. While its relation to percepts and affects have been touched upon in terms of the act of perception, the concept draws cinema toward a new type of image, the image of thought.

D.N. Rodowick notes that the “image of thought” is not a representational image (i.e. the concept is not contained within a concrete, physical image). Rather, the image of thought is a movement, a process of continual differentiation. While this movement, in terms of film, takes its roots in what Deleuze calls the movement-image, Rodowick notes that an image of thought, for Deleuze, only becomes an active force when it takes a step further: "But in order to claim for philosophy what is its activity by right, the philosopher must invoke the more fundamental 'movement' of the impersonal form of time and eternal recurrence." This is what leads to the distinction between the movement-image and the time-image: a qualitative difference, where what is seen, what is conveyed becomes less significant than what is not revealed, what is unknown.

Only the movement-image pretends that thought can be presented directly in or by the image. Alternatively, time always divides thought from the signs that express or represent it. Through the force of the eternal return, time affirms a specific power, or rather “impower” of thought: “we are not yet thinking.”

It is this third axis of movement, toward concept, the image of thought, that allows film the potential to "get things moving." It never progresses by means of representation, tracing, but always through the crystal, the rhizome, the unforeseeable foldings of creation. "[T]here's a hidden image of thought that, as it unfolds, branches out, and mutates, inspires a need to keep on creating new concepts, not through any external determinism but through a becoming that carries the problems themselves along with it." Born from the unpredictable collision of forces which coalesce in the act of creation, the image of thought bears the motion of the question that has been reformulated, carrying it not toward solution, but opening it further into new, ever-differentiating questions.

Deleuze's assertions in the *Cinema* books can be read as a call to action on two fronts. On the one hand, the distinction he draws between images that rely upon movement-images and time-images challenge artists to create works that transcend the representational, that explore the interstices between memory and perception, that approach what we might call a pure image of time, an image of thought. I would argue that Deleuze's work on cinema poses an equal challenge to those who think and write
about/through film, a venture with perhaps even higher stakes. In opposing the movement- and time-images, Deleuze inadvertently constructs a structure of valuation that I find suspect (particularly when the images which he cites as most closely approaching the time-image—Goddard, Passolini, etc.—coincide with those championed by elitist, modernist traditions). Yet the tools that he provides for conceiving of film beyond the confines of representation carry invaluable potential for theorists to manipulate toward their own ends. A great deal more work remains to be done on the particular configurations of time within popular works that may be driven by the sensory-motor schema, but that are never fully contained by that logic. Likewise, the evolution of digital technology and new networks of image circulation will give rise to new images of thought and new theoretical methodologies.

The provocation, then, for both the filmmaker and the film theorist, is one posed by philosophy. The challenge is to see film not as a means of representation, but as an assemblage of images in flux with the world of images, to see the history of film and the history of philosophy as convergent. The art of living remains the becoming of true creation, but the image of thought introduces the stutters and hesitations that give us access to this movement. "It's the image of thought that guides the creation of concepts. It cries out, so to speak, whereas concepts are like songs." Bergson writes of the creative capacity in art, "[w]hen music cries, it is humanity, it is the whole of nature which cries with it. Truly speaking, it does not introduce these feelings in us; it introduces us rather into them, like the passers-by that might be nudged in a dance." It is somewhere between the crying out and the song that we can hope to find the movement of becoming that will carry us thus, beyond ourselves.

Footnotes


2. Deleuze develops his concept of the sensory-motor schema to describe structures and transitions that are governed by a linear, cause-and-effect logic. It emerges from Bergson's discussion of the faculties of perception and the actualization of images into action. In order to act upon its environment, a body must isolate from the undifferentiated flow that it perceives only those images that interest it in particular, upon which it can choose to act. The complex correlations between objects and images are thus reduced to causal (and spatial) links. Deleuze finds that the associations made between elements in the movement-image progress along a similar trajectory.


10. Rodowick similarly notes, "Deleuze's reasoning is certainly weak here," for Deleuze, in his attempt to distinguish between film and natural perception, privileges the automated movements of the projector, eliding any involvement of "cognitive correction" in the perception of the filmic event and creating a "curious identity between movement and image." Rodowick, 22.


13. Deleuze and Guattari, 12.


17. Olkowski, 91.  

18. Olkowski, 114.  


20. Rodowick, 176.  

21. Rodowick, 177.  

22. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 149.  
