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The Time-Image Today: A Brief Look at Deleuze, Cinema, and the Digital

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In this paper I will revisit the question of the pertinence and critical applicability of basic concepts of European film theory in the age of global electronic media. I will pay special attention to Gilles Deleuze's much-discussed notion of the cinematic time-image, identified by Deleuze as the aesthetic practice developed largely in European cinema during the decades following the Second World War. Although this time period, together with the films and ideas considered by Deleuze, appears to have been superseded by a new technology and a matched consciousness, I will argue that the Deleuzian rationale of the mutually reversible cinematic time-image is highly relevant for coming to grips with the experience of immersive virtual worlds and the invasion, the thoroughgoing permeation, of our everyday reality by global electronic mediations. The reason for this, I will claim, is that the tradition of European film theory that spans from Hugo Münsterberg to and through Deleuze is firmly rooted in post-Kantian continental philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, which, in turn, advocate a reflexive production of reality and the lack of an ultimate referent, or foundation. I will show that the crystalline aesthetic through which cinema offers a direct presentation of the indiscernibility – that is, the continual and unfinalizable splitting of time – *between* real and imaginary, actual and virtual, is not only a continuation of the Kantian rationale of aesthetic reflection, but it also constitutes a reaction *avant la lettre* to today's digitally (in)formed and increasingly self-enclosed, one-dimensional reality.

I would like to begin this cursory investigation of Deleuze's cinematic projection of a new image of thought with D.N. Rodowick's remarkable comment that the time-image makes manifest "a certain Kantianism of the cinema, a *foundation of thinking in the form of time*, or a *Critique of Pure Reason* in images." (1) I cannot dwell on the deep Kantian inspiration of Deleuze's *Cinema* books. What I would like to focus on is the first half of Rodowick's statement, to wit, that the time-image brings to the fore the foundation of thinking in the form of time – which Deleuze associates with the creation of something out of nothing, the creation of the new. In other words, and I think this is something that has not been sufficiently emphasized, the deepest preoccupation of Deleuze's 'differential' cine-aesthetic is what he calls our lacking resistance to the present. As a direct presentation of the instance of differentiation – a "perpetual self-distinguishing, a distinction in

the process of being produced” (2) – cinema’s time-crystal aesthetic reintroduces creativity and inventiveness into what Deleuze considers to be an apathetic age. (No doubt, today’s cultural critics, enthused by the participatory potential of current interactive media forms, e.g., viral video, would contest Deleuze’s pessimistic view of mass media culture, and his taste for elitist film art.)

Indeed, the time-image for Deleuze is a means of making perceptible *that* there still exists a distinction, as indiscernible as the splitting of time, between binary terms, which are progressively losing their mutually exclusive character, giving way to indifference and superficiality. The dynamism of the time-image bears witness to the unceasing reconstitution of an indiscernible difference, an inorganic time, between perception (and something that is being perceived) and recollection, between a present and a past, the actual and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, object and subject, knowledge and belief. Deleuze’s imaginative and fascinating description of this process of distinguishing (or reflexive judgment), which is indebted to Henri Bergson as well as to Kant, is worth quoting at length:

[T]his splitting never goes right to the end. In fact, the crystal constantly exchanges the distinct images which constitute it, the actual image of the present which passes and the virtual image of the past which is preserved: distinct and yet indiscernible, and all the more indiscernible because distinct, because we do not know which is one and which is the other. This is unequal exchange, or the point of indiscernibility, the mutual image. The crystal always lives at the limit, it is itself the ‘vanishing limit between the immediate past which is already no longer, and the immediate future which is not yet... mobile mirror which endlessly reflects perception in recollection’. What we see in the crystal is therefore a dividing in two that the crystal itself constantly causes to turn on itself, that it prevents from reaching completion, because it is a perpetual *self-distinguishing*, a distinction in the process of being produced, which always resumes the distinct terms in itself, in order constantly to relaunch them. ‘The putting into abyss [*mise-en-abyme*] does not redouble the unit, as an external reflection might do; insofar as it is an internal mirroring, it can only ever split it in two’ and subject it ‘to the infinite relaunch of endlessly new splitting.’ (3)

The mutuality and indiscernibility between terms that the time-image makes manifest through an internal mirroring is, in turn, shown to hinge on, and reveal in its endless receding, an out-of-field *inside* thought, what Deleuze calls “a disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather, to ‘insist’ or ‘subsist’, a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time.” (4) The time-crystal reveals to us the foundation of a nonchronological time in its endless splitting, which is the essence, the core, of the “I think,” conceived here as an unfinalized, an aborted, Cogito. (5) What we see in the crystal is something unthought in thought, which is equivalent with the continued possibility of thinking the new. By offering us glimpses of this possibility of something possible, the time-image restores belief, a “belief not in a different world,” but “in a link between man and the world, in love or life,” in the body as the germ of life. (6) Without belief,

there would be no space for reflection, and no hope for creation and change, and thus the spirit would suffocate, Deleuze claims.

What is at stake here, I believe, is the rescue of the prodigious Kantian idea of the transcendental, the domain of the timeless synthetic a priori, which, on the one hand, is responsible for a schematic, automatic reduplication of reality in its own terms, but which, on the other hand, is invested with spontaneity, freedom, and, ultimately, with transcendence. (7) For Deleuze, cinema comes equipped with this irreconcilable duality of our transcendental reality production, insofar as cinema is able to show us the playful mutual metamorphosis of actual image into its own virtual image and vice versa: “It is as if an image in a mirror, a photo, or a postcard came to life,” became actual, *at the same time as* the actual image passed back to the mirror, resuming “its place in the photo or postcard, following a *double movement of liberation and capture.*” (8)

This simultaneous double movement of the transcendental that entails liberation *and* capture in one and the same time, and which is played out in, and as, an empty zone of indiscernibility *between* the actual and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, holds the key to the logic of the interstice, complete with a *transcendent*, non-human outside, which Deleuze identifies as the new image of thought brought to us by the cinematic time-image. It is, moreover, instructive that Deleuze conceives the double movement of the transcendental as the double transformation of the modulation (or movement-image) that is the operation of the Real into analogous and digital forms, that is, into resemblance by perceptible form and into a code or intelligible structure. In this sense, the analogous and the digital are similar and easy to link since they are both moulds. Modulation, on the contrary, is a continuous function, “a transformation of the mould at each moment of the operation” – as it happens in the electronic image, which for Deleuze appears to be the embodiment of the Bergsonian movement-image, (9) conceived as flowing matter, universal variation, undulation, and rippling without axes, centers, and directions. (10) But if the electronic image is a simulation of the Bergsonian plane of immanence or enduring impersonal (objective) becoming, it is feasible to argue that, in turn, the interstitial aesthetic of the cinematic time-image is tied to *subjectivity* understood as a gap or delay in the fluidity of transmission, an interval of indetermination, which may present something “unpredictable or new.” (11) That the interval of subjectivity is informed by a non-chronological endlessly splitting time is just a further twist in Deleuze’s paradoxical rescue operation of the subject in inorganic, non-human terms.

Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (*Orphée*, 1950) offers a savant and subtle depiction of this interstitial transcendental-transcendent logic, anticipating the self-conscious and self-reflective cinema of the 1960s and 1970s that Deleuze associates with the aesthetic of the time-image. Peculiarly, Cocteau's *Orphée* also happens to constitute a (so far unexplored) cinematic link to *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999), a film that has received much attention from philosophers and film scholars due to its overt concern with the aesthetics and the politics of a digitally mastered reality. Thus, *Orphée* seen as a proto-time-image with an affinity for the virtual allows us to trace the continuity, and the disparity, between Deleuze's transcendental cinematic aesthetic and the present regime of electronic simulations.



Orpheus (Orphée. Jean Cocteau, 1950)

Clearly, Cocteau's main aim in *Orphée* is to throw into relief, to make stand out, the indiscernibility *between* the imaginary and the real, the virtual and the actual. This is achieved through the ingenious use of doubled characters within the Zone (the redoubling realm of the transcendental), which question individuality and originality. Equally remarkable is Cocteau's interchangeable application of framed mirrors and similar looking doorframes filled with characters that appear to be looking at us from a mirror.



Orpheus (Orphée. Jean Cocteau, 1950)

This interchangeability of actual and virtual images creates uncanny mise-en-abyme effects, dubious and disorienting spaces, without, however, erasing the difference between the structure-giving binary terms. Moreover, *Orphée* presents the indiscernibility between the world beyond the mirror (a virtual world) and the world in front of it (our everyday reality) within the same moment, in a time that has been put on hold – it is six o'clock throughout the entire time of being within the Zone of the mirror, or the reflexive transcendental sphere.



Orpheus (Orphée. Jean Cocteau, 1950)

The indiscernibility between real and imaginary, actual and virtual, is made poignant by the realist techniques applied by Cocteau, who was keenly aware that cinematography is superbly adapted to representing the twilight zone, the vanishing limit that consciousness is, “provided [cinema] takes the least possible advantage of what people call the supernatural.” For Cocteau, “The closer you get to a mystery, the most important it is to be realistic,” to keep one’s feet on the ground. (12)

Needless to say, the indiscernible difference that emerges through the interchangeability of the thusly established parallel universes is the vanishing gap of subjectivity that high modernist art has been seeking to reclaim, and which crystallizes in Deleuze's time-image.



Orpheus (Orphée. Jean Cocteau, 1950)

A similar duality and interchangeability of actual and virtual appears in *The Matrix*, which moreover, contains ample pictorial references to Cocteau's *Orphée*, including the appearance of twin characters (the silvery, translucent henchmen in *The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003), and the seeker protagonist's passage through the mirror. In *The Matrix*, the poet's quest for the nether world is converted into the search by a computer hacker for the truth of the Matrix, that is, of everyday reality revealed to be a neural-interactive simulation, a computer generated dream world. Significantly, similarly to *Orphée*, *The Matrix* features a mobile, viscous mirror as the means of passage toward illumination. However, in the pliable, shape-shifting virtual world of *The Matrix*, the protagonist does not traverse the mirror, as it happens in *Orphée*. Instead it is the mirror that traverses the protagonist, and becomes the protagonist, Neo, sending him on his journey to his 'inner core' and to rebirth, to his becoming the ONE. Not surprisingly, the "One" will turn out to be a hybrid, a cross between human and a computer program. *The Matrix* aptly conveys the horror of a false world experienced as real – which Deleuze might have called the power of the false. This world is made up only of perceptions, of electrical signals interpreted by the brain. Reality is but a dream controlled by malevolent non-human forces (machines with artificial intelligence) that keep humanity in bondage.



The Matrix (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999)

The striking similarities between the scenario known as ‘Plato’s cave’ and the actual-virtual world of digital simulations depicted in *The Matrix* have not passed unnoticed by critics, who have also frequently commented on the debt owed by the film to Jean Baudrillard’s philosophy. This, of course, is not surprising given that Baudrillard’s notions of the simulacrum and simulation have been key concepts in theorizing the regime of the digital as an image without an original model, as a surface with no depth, and as a mode of figuration that readily clones itself. Nor is it an accident that the title page of Baudrillard’s book, *Simulacra and Simulations* makes a brief appearance in *The Matrix*. Typically, the book itself is a fake, a container for hacked software.



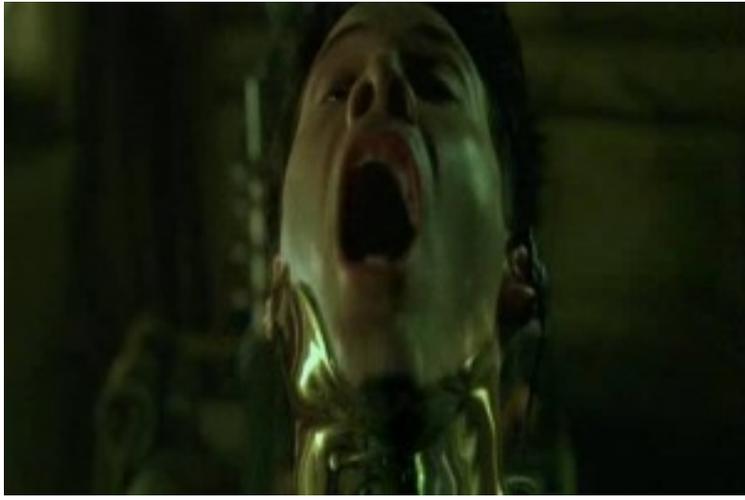
The Matrix (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999)

What is seldom noted in current discussions of simulacra, electronic simulations, and virtual worlds is that the notion of the simulacrum, or *phantasm*, makes its appearance in Plato, as Deleuze reminds us in *Difference and Repetition*. (13) Plato makes a crucial distinction between copies (or icons) of true ideal models, and simulacra (phantasms) that have no model, that are images without a likeness, and are produced by sophistry. (This may explain Plato's dislike of art.) For Deleuze, this basic distinction constitutes an inherent anti-Platonism at the heart of Platonism, the possibility of the Other, the unknown, as a model, countering the ideal identity of the Same.



The Matrix (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999)

The simulacra may be “models themselves,” Deleuze writes, “terrifying models of the *pseudos*, in which unfolds the power of the false.” (14) In other words, Plato's thought already contains the possibility of becoming, the *mise-en-abyme* of truth, its non-existence and emergence in the process of an auto-production. It is precisely this auto-production of the real and the true that informs and drives the figural regime of the digital, and which is shown as happening (as the event) in the time-image. However, there remains a subtle distinction between the two regimes of images. While the time-image is concerned with the indiscernible *difference between* actual and virtual, electronic simulations live off and reproduce the *indiscernibility* of terms. Deleuze's own notion of the simulacrum appears to be close to his conception of the time-image, insofar as he considers the simulacrum to be “a *play* of difference between two divergent series, which are made indiscernible, and whose indiscernibility makes obsolete the idea of original and copy.” (15)



The Matrix (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999)

This is the place to note that the legitimation, or, at least, the acknowledgement of the simulacrum (or phantasm) as a model without a likeness, without a referent, is performed in Kant's critical philosophy, and specifically through his notion of aesthetic reflection. The Kantian rationale of aesthetic reflective judgment rests on the regular and indefinite free *play* of imagination and understanding, where the cognitive faculties appear to mirror one another. In this apparently purposeless, yet deeply significant lingering, the imagination assumes the role of "a productive cognitive power," creating "as it were, another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it." The imagination may even free itself from the empirical realm (i.e., the law of association) and "restructure experience," constructing something that surpasses nature. (16) What surpasses nature is ideal, or rational. Kant describes the imagination's effort to match reason through its creation of, what Kant calls, aesthetic standard ideas (for example, that of "man"), by recalling and by superimposing a vast number of images. "From the congruence of most images of the same kind [the imagination] arrives at an average that serves as a common standard for all of them." (17) This obviously cinematic technique applied by the imagination describes the construction of a model by memory, a model, moreover, that has no ideal, or true foundation, but which is created, produced actively, by the special art of the imagination, which, Kant tells us, "is wholly beyond our grasp." (18) The aesthetic standard idea appears, in other words, as a simulacrum, with no model, or rather, something that is its own model, something that is arbitrary, and whose essence, so to speak, lies in its own production, in the technique, or art of producing.

This brings us back to Deleuze's notions of simulacra, the powers of the false, and falsifying narration, manifest in time-image cinema, which Deleuze opposes to a truthful narration linked to real (sensory-motor) descriptions. I would like to suggest that this important distinction made by Deleuze between a truthful and a falsifying narration may anticipate the current split between narratology and "ludology." Promoters of ludology have justified the split by pointing to an emerging new mode of organizing and experiencing reality, that of a virtual reality manifest, for example, in computer games, teaming with multiple avatars, parallel worlds, multiple-choices at every moment of play, and an iterative logic of looping and relooping, rather than linear and

progressive paths of action. Deleuze credits Leibniz for coining the wonderful term of impossibility, an expression of the paradox of the simultaneity in the same universe of parallel worlds and events that both take place and don't take place at the same time, which constitute modifications of the same story. Considering Leibniz as the 'father' of ludology is hardly far fetched if we recall that it was Leibniz who discovered the binary system, the foundation of virtually all modern computer architecture. Again, the new – for example, the notion of the simulacrum or the concept of a ludic organization of the real – appears to re-emerge from a philosophical time that is “stratigraphic” rather than linear, as Deleuze and Guattari have shown. (19)

Given its aptitude to stage the indiscernibility between actual and virtual, real and imaginary, the cinematic time-image is well-suited to portray impossibility through falsifying narration. The forger is the character of this new cinema – and, I could add, also the narration assumes the stance of the forger here, which permeates the whole film by provoking “undecidable alternatives and inexplicable differences between the true and the false.” Narration is constantly being completely modified, as a consequence of disconnected places and de-chronologized moments. (20) It is not form but transformation that realizes the power of the false. There is no longer either truth or appearance. In sum, this is the narrational mode that corresponds to the regime of the simulacrum, to the phantasm that is not simply a bad copy but already a model, its own.

Memorably, Deleuze exemplifies falsifying narration and the powers of the false in time-image cinema through art house classics, including the work of Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet. (Wojciech Has's amazing *The Saragossa Manuscript*, 1965, should also have made Deleuze's list.) Remarkably, falsifying, or ludic, narration appears to be the rule rather than the exception in today's cinematic practice. Film scholars were quick to respond to the emergence in the mid-1990 of a body of films, in fact, a trend, in mainstream cinema that answers the Deleuzean criteria of falsifying narration. These films, whose address is no longer directed to a select art-house audience, make indiscernible the true and the false, reality and dream, or hallucination. Films portraying such a “reality warp” include Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*, 1998), a film openly emulating the iterative structure of a computer game, Alejandro Amenábar's *Open Your Eyes* (*Abre los ojos*, 1997) and its American remake *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), both of which have been marketed as psychological thrillers, as well as the very recent *The Science of Sleep* (Michel Gondry, 2006), *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), and *Roman de gare* (Claude Lelouch, (2007).

Ultimately, the time-image for Deleuze is the art of creating the truth, a truth that is not pre-given but self-founding and constantly evolving, following a non-human rationale. It is the will to art, an aesthetic practice, which ushers in the new, a new content that seeks a new form, and which, in turn, will become an established practice, co-opted by business, and politics. It was this will to art that introduced the time-image, which, according to Deleuze has had an “autonomous anticipatory function” with respect to the regime of the digital. (21) Thus, the automatisms of time-image cinema are no longer automata of mechanical movement, but “automata of computation

and thought, automata with controls and feedback,” while the configuration of power was changed from the regime of individual decision-makers to global information networks. The invasion of content by the new automata, in turn, brought about a mutation of form, that of the electronic image, the “tele and video image, the numerical image,” which was slated either to transform cinema or to replace it. (22) Following this logic, the digital form is a mere possibility that needs a will to art, a new aesthetic, to turn it into a true regime of electronic images – which might be a new, an as yet unknown aspect of the time-image. The fact is, Deleuze concludes – echoing Kant’s and Heidegger’s belief in the creative, inventive potential of art – that “the new spiritual automatism and the new psychological automata depend on an aesthetic, rather than depending on technology. It is the time-image which calls on an original regime of images and signs before electronics spoils it, or, in contrast, relaunches it.” (23)

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate Deleuze’s observation that a theory of cinema is “not ‘about’ cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to and which are themselves related to other concepts corresponding to other practices.” (24) I hope to have managed to demonstrate how this statement applies to the cinematic time-image, and, thus to make a plausible case for the continued relevance of film theory and philosophy in current cinema and media studies.

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