

Deleuze, Benjamin and the Deterritorialisation of Film Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

In this article I elaborate upon a virtually-unobserved point of similarity between the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin – namely, their common cause on the revolutionary political significance of cinema as capable of scrambling conventional modes of experience. I argue that both philosophers view cinema as capable of soliciting a uniquely embodied and collective form of engagement, thus making possible a revolutionary disruption of conventional behaviour. This point of similarity, I argue, ought to figure more centrally to a comparison of the two philosophers’ views than their more superficial differences of opinion about which forms of cinema are capable of soliciting such subjective deterritorialisations. I subsequently identify a more substantial point of disagreement between the two thinkers in their different views regarding the temporality of these subjective modes: for Deleuze, cinematic subjectivity will point towards an always-displaced future; whereas for Benjamin, cinema makes possible a revolutionary rectification of the past.

KEYWORDS

film; subjectivity; Marxism; deterritorialisation; messianism

Introduction

The German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin's relation to Gilles Deleuze is not an undiscovered topic in scholarship, but it is a somewhat under-explored one. Among the scholarly references to Deleuze's interpretations and adaptations of Benjamin's thought, Deleuze's later reflections on the concept of the Baroque play the largest part. Deleuze's comments in his seminars on Leibniz from the 1980s, and the book which followed (*The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*), had natural reference points in Benjamin's early monograph, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), and the latter is cited as such (Flanagan, Prokić). At the same time, Benjamin's expansive and iconoclastic uptake of Marxian ideas – his adaptation of materialism in the direction of a Kabbalistic, “messianic” politics, and his highly syncretic approach to the concepts of history and art – gives the indication that someone with as eclectic philosophical tastes as Deleuze might have found some kindred spirit in the older philosopher. More narrowly, the somewhat surprising uptake of cinema as a critical reference point for Deleuze's most provocative theses on time, history, politics and subjectivity in the late *Cinema* books, I will argue, mirrors Benjamin's own optimistic, esoteric interpretation of cinema in perhaps his most enduring piece of writing, the repeatedly-redrafted “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction.” Because of this notable suturing of ideas about subjectivity, history and politics through reflections on cinema in Deleuze and Benjamin alike, this article aims to serve as an introduction to a richer understanding of the relationship between Deleuze and Benjamin's political philosophies, as these are discoverable in their passionate interpretations of cinema as a resource for revolutionary politics. In this sense, we will be able to think through the general question of the relationship between art, subjectivity and politics through an inspection of the encounter between these two philosophers.

The purposes of this article are – in this respect – twofold: on the one hand, I want to highlight an important but often overlooked aspect of classical Marxist thinking discoverable in the work of both philosophers, namely their recognition that among the harms of capitalism, one of these has to do with its insistent resurrection and valorisation of social “archaisms” even as it pursues its unimaginable destruction of traditional forms of social order. On the other hand, I want to show that we can use a recognition of this basically conservative aspect of capitalism to rethink the nature of class consciousness as entailing a basic “disordering” of conventional modes of subjectivity, a notion reflected in both Deleuze's and Benjamin's thoughts on cinema.

Moreover, an inspection of these two philosophers' remarkably compatible approaches to subjectivity will reveal an important divergence on a critical temporal dimension of their accounts. For Deleuze, as we will see, impersonal filmic subjectivity is essentially oriented towards a forever-displaced “future” of collective consciousness – what he refers to as a “people to come”, which is nonetheless capable of intervening through the subjectivity of the present audience. For Benjamin, on the other hand, we will see that his conception of revolutionary subjectivity is more properly linked to the dimension of the past as a perennially-available object of reinterpretation and redemption. Indeed, for Benjamin, it is the possibility of

a revolutionary messianic subjectivity in the present that makes possible a “liquidation” of the past in the name of its redemptive, counter-historical resurrection (*SW*4 255).

In drawing this association between cinematic art and an undermining of conventional modes of subjectivity, we can see how both Deleuze and Benjamin respond to, and inherit, tendencies of the post-Kantian tradition to both radicalize and refine idealist tendencies that link rationality and historical teleology to one another. In Benjamin, this takes place in the “Romanticism” of his reply to the image of history as an “infinite task,” preferring the fragmenting tendencies of art to problematize conventional distinctions between viewer and work. In Deleuze, it is discoverable in the effort to identify a (Fichtean-Maimonian) “shock” of difference that generates thought beyond the logic of rational conditioning. For both, cinema will satisfy – in its own way – the demands of an idealist tradition aiming to think beyond its own conventional dualisms (subject/object; artist/viewer; noumenon/phenomenon), radicalizing the utopian (and even messianic) demands of that tradition by freeing them from their bourgeois trappings. [1]

[1] On Deleuze as a “post-Kantian” figure, see Smith. Rebecca Comay analyses Benjamin’s reading of cinema in terms of his disillusionment with Kantian idealism in Comay (148-50).

Reaction and Conservatism

Let us begin with some generalities about Deleuzian territoriality and the deterritorialisations of capitalism. It has become by now somewhat commonplace to think of capitalism as one mechanism for a massive and historically unprecedented destruction of traditional modes of being and experiencing. We see this today, for example, in the way that precarious labour lends itself to a wholesale destabilisation of conventional domestic systems, whether through the infusion of unpredictability and anxiety into social spaces, or simply through the effects of poverty on the possibility of long-term human development. In this context, liberal concerns about the influence of unchecked free markets have quite rightly been framed in terms of an awareness of the basically annihilative relationship between profit-seeking capital and even the most innocuous social forms.

[2] The *locus classicus* for skepticism of traditional social forms is likely Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). See also, in this connection, Marx: “However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry . . . does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes” (620).

Given this visible connection between capitalism and the “deterritorialisation” of the social order, it can be easy to forget that Marxist critics have not trans-historically called for the protection of these aforementioned modes of social organisation. [2] Indeed, if the effects of capitalism may, on the one hand, elicit a certain nostalgia for a social order now gone, they can also provide a potent reminder of what historical development has moved away from, whether these might be the archaisms of patriarchal and feudalistic social structures, or the mythopoetic forms of ignorance and superstition for which monotheistic religions bear so much responsibility. In this sense, capitalism’s conquest of “traditional” norms – a territory previously occupied perhaps by the Church and state – may have effected a potent “de-sacralisation” of the old world, but one which cannot but be admired in its own way.

De- and Re-territorialisation in Capitalism

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari make explicit use of the ambivalent relationship between “deterritorialisation” and “reterritorialisation” to specify the distinctive functioning of capitalism. Attempting to articulate the relationship between the more forcefully-affirmed quality of schizophrenia, with its orientation towards a decoding of flows – a reduction of organised, socially-interpretable blocks of meaning to abstract, malleable elements for novel re-articulation – and the broadly undesirable (or, rather, deleterious and oppressive) behaviour of capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari indicate the distinctive way in which capitalism, defined specifically through a “conjunction” of deterritorialised flows of labour in relation to a deterritorialised flow of available capital, not only effects a *deterritorialisation* of conventional practices and habits, but at the same time effects an equally potent – and uniquely virulent – *reterritorialisation* of code, linking these processes to a concept of the “*Urstaat*,” with its unifying and transcendental function, and ultimately with the Oedipal family as the “personal and private territoriality that corresponds to all of capitalism’s efforts at social reterritorialization” (266). Indeed, this will turn out to be, in an important way, one of the major mechanisms for the organisation of coherent modes of subjectivity (the “private persons” which Deleuze and Guattari describe as “*simulacra*” of social persons) (257) over and against forms of group subjectivity and deterritorialised modes of personal identity. Writing of this mechanism of de-, and re-territorialisation as it is effected and indeed comes to *define* the nature of capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari write:

Civilized modern societies are defined by processes of decoding and deterritorialization. But *what they deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other*. These neoterritorialities are often artificial, residual, archaic; but they are archaisms having a perfectly current function, our modern way of ‘imbricating,’ of sectioning off, of reintroducing code fragments, resuscitating old codes, inventing pseudo-codes or jargons. (259)

And indeed, it is not merely the mechanisms of hierarchicalised relations of production that define the territorialisations of capitalism: “archaic,” conventional, traditional and reactionary social codings not only co-exist with the capitalism’s deterritorialisations (its de-racinations and radicalisations), but moreover they find their uniquely perverse articulations *within* these deterritorialisations as violent political impulses on the part of the socius. Coupled with the abstractification and alienation of capitalism – the undoing of basic and fundamental forms of social organisation – capitalism introduces in all its purity the values of ethnic and religious bigotry, misogyny, and racism that have rarely found themselves ill-housed within a capitalist and commodity-driven society.

It is therefore (for Deleuze and Guattari) not only the mechanisms of reterritorialisation that function so naturally and necessarily against the background of a general deterritorialisation of society; it is, moreover, through the very folding of archaic, hierarchical values *back* onto the abstractified political field that we first find the “images” that we recognise as

“persons” in the particular constellation of bourgeois values: the morally autonomous and psychological self-enclosed agents that one finds depicted in classical psychoanalytic theory (264). As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the psychoanalytic “private person” is in fact nothing other than the effect of an inscription of the political structures of more archaic and despotic systems within the familial domain: “The family becomes the subaggregate to which the whole of the social field is applied” they write; an example of this is the reappearance of the manifestly authoritarian political leader in the figure of the castrating father (265).

As a consequence of this “folding” of the social field back onto individual psychological experience, any movement from the privacy of the familial field out into the political field will be impeded in advance. What occurs through the application of elements drawn from the social field *to* the private domain is the formation of a subject who is necessarily Oedipalised – one who becomes incapable of drawing a connection directly between her own desires and the social or political field to which they are said to apply. At the same time as the properly neurotic, self-enclosed psychoanalytic subject is formed (and we will have opportunity to discuss the nature of such a subject below), so also is a genuine political critique of capitalism conceptually foreclosed: our concerns are forever – as Deleuze and Guattari put it – with “daddy-mommy-me”; the psychoanalytic subject is unable to articulate anything which cannot be returned to the basically Oedipal structure with which it is fundamentally supposed to be concerned.

[3] See, for example, Mackay and Avanessian’s sometimes-presentation of Deleuze and Guattari as promoting the deterritorialising tendencies of *capitalism* (14).

[4] Note that what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the primary deterritorialising element *within* capitalism is simply the “discovery of an abstract subjective essence of wealth, in labor or production” (258): in other words, it is *labour* and not *capital* which generates the deterritorialising effects of capitalism – elements which are immediately *re*tterritorialised precisely to the extent that they come to be organised through “private ownership of the means of production” (*ibid*). In connection with what will come below, note that Benjamin’s definition of fascism is of a tendency that organises “the newly proletarianized masses [i.e., labour] while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish” (*SW*4 269).

What Deleuze and Guattari describe here, with frighteningly prognostic clarity, is the way in which capitalistic economic forms, with their constant uprooting and destruction of extant social organisations, nonetheless so frequently couple themselves to an equally violent re-articulation of the most banal, reactionary aspects of the conventional social order. Indeed, it is hard not to recognise, in the authors’ descriptions, the psycho-sexual investments of more recent examples of fascism: the close association between fascistic impulses and banal conventions about masculinity, racialised fantasies of political sexual violence alongside insipid libertarianisms, and so on. On this account we find an important corrective to the popular interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari as somehow promoting a capitalist “accelerationism” against contemporary values. [3] The question which Deleuze and Guattari here pursue is not how to advance the deterritorialising effects proper to capitalism (on this account, *there are none*), but rather how to undermine the endemic coupling of economic deterritorialisation and *fascist* reterritorialisation through a liberation of the schizophrenic impulses of proletarian subjectivity. [4] The question here will not be how to advance the already-advancing liberalisation of capitalism, but rather how to undermine the reactionary mechanism by which capitalism is able to organise and control the endemic forces of decoding that always threaten to destroy it.

Benjamin and the Deterritorialisation of Film Subjectivity

So how does this account of the de- and re-territorialising movements of capitalism relate to the seemingly esoteric concerns of the Marxist

philosopher Walter Benjamin in his meditations on art from the 1939 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”? One way to consider the significance of Benjamin’s ideas in this connection will be to notice Benjamin’s aim, in that piece, of describing what we might call a Deleuzian “decoding” or “deterritorialisation” of art in the political context of the early 20th century, alongside a description of the reciprocal function of art for a decoding or deterritorialisation of proletarian subjectivity through aesthetic experience. In this context, the major question of both Deleuze’s and Benjamin’s reflections – and, we will see, for Deleuze these reflections are similarly organised around the revolutionary potential of *film* as an aesthetic medium – will be how to produce or solicit a subjective encounter that undermines normalised relations between self and world within the context of contemporary capitalism. What Deleuze describes, in his *Cinema* books, in terms of the “hollowing-out” of subjectivity and the “mummification” of the self, will be described by Benjamin in “The Work of Art” as the development of an unconscious, habit-potentiating form of “reception in distraction” (*Rezeption in der Zerstreung*) whose function is to denaturalise collective social and political behaviour. Thus the revolutionary potential of (filmic) art will be precisely its capacity for a “deterritorialisation” of group subjectivity, away from the modes of unity that decline upon private persons and toward those forms that effect a genuinely collective (un)consciousness.

Benjamin defines his analysis as intending to “meet certain prognostic requirements” related to the conditions of capitalism and their influence on diverse aspects of culture and ideology (*SW4* 252). In particular, he aims to provide an account, not of some anticipated “art of the proletariat after its seizure of power” but rather of “the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production” such that these might elaborate in a direction that is “completely useless for the purposes of fascism” (252). In other words, he wants to identify those aspects of technological culture already effecting a partial dissolution of conventional aesthetic values, and to elaborate those concepts in a revolutionary, anti-fascist direction. And in this connection, there are notably two concepts around which his essay circulates.

The first of these – in terms of the undermining of conventional coordinates of aesthetic experience – involves the famous concept of the “aura,” which has by now become effectively metonymic for Benjamin’s aesthetic philosophy. [5] The main thrust of Benjamin’s argument, in this connection, is to show how this under-thematised dimension of aesthetic experience, enforced as it has been through millennia of social and political re-articulations, finds itself uniquely problematised within the context of advanced technological development. (By the latter, we mean to refer to the birth and development, in a qualitatively unique form, of mechanical practices of production that tend to supplant the unique work of art as a privileged object of aesthetic enjoyment.)

[5] On the shifting status of the aura in Benjamin’s thought, see Hansen.

Invoking a turn of phrase that could have been found in the *Critique of Judgment*, Benjamin describes the aesthetic “aura” as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near [an object] may be” (255) – an apparition which he goes on to link to the religious or “cultic” value with which the work of art

[6] See Kant on the mathematical sublime as an experience of “absolute” greatness (131).

[7] In this connection, Benjamin reminds us that film is a mode of art which requires speculation on its own circulation in order to become viable as a product. Thus, it is only *because* it will be mass-produced that it comes to be produced at all.

[8] See Benjamin *SW1*, where the author distinguishes between so-called “mythic” violence with its “law-making” function, and divine violence which “boundlessly destroys [laws]” (249).

[9] See Benjamin *SW4*: “These . . . processes [of destroying traditional social forms find] their most powerful agent [in] film” (254); and: “The difficulties which photography caused for traditional aesthetics were child’s play compared to those presented by film” (258).

[10] Benjamin defines this coincidence of critical and voluptuous enjoyment as a “progressive reaction”: one which is often denied to paintings of an ideologically “progressive” character (264).

has been historically invested. [6] This “cultic” value – Benjamin points out – may have been so bound up with the archaic concept of art that the original work of art need not have even been displayed in order to fulfil its fully social function (257). In extending this apparition of distance to the degree of an absolute or “essential” property of the work of art, the work belongs, basically, to the sphere of “unapproachable” religious items (272).

This “cultic” function of art – its relationship to archaic forms of social organisation, coupled with the diverse social and ideological principles that went along with these forms – is what the reproducibility of art (its mass reproduction and production *for* reproduction, as well as the role of mass reproduction as a condition for production) uniquely serves to undermine (273 n14). [7] Indeed, this “aura”-destroying function of technology falls among the distinctive pleasures afforded by that reproductive process: Benjamin highlights the “destructive, cathartic . . . liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage” (254). Here Benjamin is invoking a language of destruction that he has elsewhere reserved only for forms of “divine” or “messianic” violence. [8] In other words, the effects of technological advancement serve an all-but-sacred process of liquidation with respect to archaic and reactionary values.

Linked to this undermining of the aesthetic aura are two supplementary notions, in relation to which Benjamin will emphasise that *film* bears the lion’s share of progressive and revolutionary significance. [9] The first of these notions consists of a *coincidence*, in the viewing of film in particular, of collective aesthetic enjoyment with a sophisticated *critical* posture (264). In the observation of a collective medium like film (consider, for example, the way in which audible laughter both evokes and regulates the enjoyment of other audience members in a theatre) the audience harmonises its reactions through the reactions of all other viewing members severally, while at the same time arrogating to itself the rights of an informed and sophisticated critic. At once both entertained *consumer* and *judge*, this form of appreciation inverts the conventional polarity between enjoyment and critical distance according to which, historically, contemplative appreciation has stood at an antipode to common amusement. [10]

Yet a perhaps more important aspect to the undermining of the “auratic” quality of art lies in the reorganisation that this phenomenon tends to facilitate in terms of the statuses of *autonomy*, *rationality* and *distance* in aesthetic observation. In the novel forms of technological capture appropriate to media like photography and film, there is an equally novel reorganisation of subjective engagement that Benjamin describes as the audience’s “reception in distraction” (*Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*) of the work of art (268-69). In this context, it is not a reflective appreciation of what happens on-screen that directs and organises the subjective experience of the viewer, but rather its direct, “percussive” effects – its capacity to shape the subjectivity of viewers while avoiding the mediation of their “autonomous” subjectivity. The viewer of the reproducible work of art – and, in particular, the viewer of those works of art that scramble one’s conventional perceptual experience through the novel technological possibilities of the media – experiences the work in a state of unconscious or indirect attention.

[11] See Benjamin's citation of the complaint of Georges Duhamel: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images" (Duhamel 52, qtd. in Benjamin *SW4* 267).

[12] Among numerous works on Deleuze's *Cinema* books, Paola Marrati's essential *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy* perhaps most directly highlights the implicit political valence of these volumes (xv). Bogue and Deamer also provide useful overviews of the *Cinema* books. To my mind Marrati's work moves closest to the concept to political subjectivity that I am pursuing in this article.

[13] See Deleuze *C2* (264 and 330n5,6). For references in *The Fold* see Deleuze *Fold* (125). The connection between Benjamin and Deleuze on the subject of the Baroque is probably the most common point of discussion in the secondary literature, where there exist a handful of papers on Benjamin's and Deleuze's ideas about this time period: see, for example, Flanagan and Prokić – although the latter moves more broadly to a consideration of the so-called "new materialist" tradition in relation to these two philosophers' thought. For other reference points in the secondary literature on Benjamin and Deleuze, see Berg and Früchtl – the latter substantially to the derogation of Deleuze. Benjamin's name does also appear several times in a handful of Deleuze's transcribed lectures from around the time of the latter's book on Leibniz, usually (again) with reference to the book on *Tragic Drama* (see the searchable *Deleuze Seminars*, online).

Consider, in this connection, the forced association of workers exiting a subway station with the imagery of sheep exiting a pen in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, or the details exposed in the sequence of slow-motion shots titled "Sports" in Dziga Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*. In these cases, it is the dislocation of conventional modes of seeing – the autonomy of associative thinking in the first case; the familiar appearance of everyday events in the second case – that suspends the routinised subjectivity of the viewer. No longer adopting the rationalistic stance that allows her to interpose a socially-mediated response, the viewer is now in a position to habituate new reactions, unprogrammed by the conventional organisations of understanding and judgment (268). [11] On this point Benjamin is clear: aesthetic receptivity, when no longer mediated through the rationality of the traditional contemplative attitude, makes uniquely possible a set of as-yet-undefined modes of behaviour potentially adequate to a revolutionary praxis. Unlike the contemplative eye, with its bourgeois, self-satisfied affectation of distance, filmic action-reaction is deeply corporeal, whereby behaviour and perception are mediated through a kind of impersonal, collective subjectivity (269).

Deleuze, Mummies, Belief

Now that we have seen some of what, with Benjamin, we might refer to as a "detritorialisation" of subjectivity through film – *away* from the bourgeois paradigm of personhood and *towards* a genuinely impersonal and political subjectivity – we can observe the degree to which Deleuze's own account of cinema evinces similar features of the filmic "self," before observing (as we will discuss below) certain recalcitrant differences between the two philosophers on the topic of *temporality* in the two conceptions of revolutionary politics. [12]

Deleuze's *Cinema* books (which, to my knowledge, contain that author's only explicit references to Walter Benjamin in his published materials – the only exception being a single reference to the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* in the later *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*) are centrally organised around a distinction that Deleuze wants to draw between what he refers to as "classical" cinema – generally speaking the cinema of the pre-war period, although we will see that the name refers more to a *style* or *mode* in which cinema is made – and "modern" cinema, archetypically represented by European cinema of the 40s, 50s and 60s in Italy, France and Germany, respectively. [13] "Classical" cinema, Deleuze argues, is conceptually grounded upon a Bergsonian model of the relationship between individuals and their surrounding environments; on this model, subjects are affected from without by movement-images (with their own inherent "luminosity" and intrinsic modality of consciousness) from which some portion of those images is then "selected" by one's perceptual apparatus (*C1* 63-64). These images are then transmitted through the "center of indetermination" constitutive of the human subject, from which subsequently arise diverse forms of action distinguishable from mere inanimate or passive reactions. Between these two poles of behaviour – the selective receptivity of perception and the

[14] For an admirably meticulous accounting of Deleuze's "taxonomy" of images, see Deamer.

novel action – subjectivity interposes an “affect” (what Deleuze refers to as a kind of “tendency” or “effort” on an immobile plane) that we recognise as the expression of a feeling subject (64-66). These three moments of the “movement-image” – the perception-image, the action-image, and the affect-image – are what, according to Deleuze, come to be expressed in classical cinema in diverse ways. [14] And in each of these cases, Deleuze argues, we can perceive the specifically “sensory-motor” model of human experience in the way in which subjects perceive, are affected by, and transmit movement through the medium of their subjective centre towards a periphery in the outside world. In this way, the circuit between self and world is facilitated by a dynamic but ultimately rational and predictable movement from cause to effect.

It is on the basis of a *collapse* of this so-called “sensory-motor” schema – the causes for which Deleuze will discover in both socio-political as well as aesthetic sources – that “modern” cinema emerges as a unique form of artistic creation. Deleuze writes of “the crisis which [comes to affect] the action-image” (that is, the last form proper to the sensory-motor system) that it

depend[ed] on many factors which only had their full effect after the [Second World War], some of which were social, economic, political, moral and others more internal to art, to literature and to the cinema in particular. We might mention, in no particular order, the war and its consequences, the unsteadiness of the “American Dream” in all its aspects, the new consciousness of minorities, the rise and inflation of images both in the external world and in people’s minds, the influence on the cinema of the new modes of narrative with which literature had experimented, the crisis of Hollywood and its old genre. (206)

In other words, the failure of the logical organisation of classical cinema emerges as a consequence of the un-trustworthiness or attenuation of the value of images – their inability to *grip* or *solicit* a meaningful response from the subject – such that old patterns of action and reaction must fall aside. It is in the context of the “collapse” of this sensory-motor schema that modern cinema will come to be defined by its depiction of a subjectivity detached from the regularly-programmable behaviour one finds in “classical” cinema. In cinema’s modern form, Deleuze writes, we find subjects in situations where the absence of an organisable response – the “impossibility” of a world which has either suddenly or surreptitiously become foreign and intolerable – forces agents to abandon the sort of predictable responses that had heretofore guided their behaviour, resulting in a sudden abstractification or dispossession of their reactions. In Rossellini’s *Europe '51* (1952), for example, it is the death of Irene’s son that causes a fracture in her usual experience of the world: her conventional role as wife and mother is replaced by a wandering through the post-war landscape, where, no longer able to ignore the suffering of those impoverished around her, she engages in an idealistic project of charitable aid, only to be thrown into a mental institution.

According to Deleuze, individuals – like Irene – within this context of abstractification appear less as “agents” and more as “seers” (*voyants*) who

wander a broken landscape, no longer capable of inhabiting their familiar modes of activity. A world once experienced as coherent and (broadly) tolerable has become, instead, the condition for an unpredictable and unprogrammable response, at once both *more* and *less* automatic than its classical counterpart. This response will be *more* automatic because a character's mode of reaction will no longer pass through their own reflective, contemplative control, and instead follow the mere "formal linkages of thought" (Deleuze *C2* 174) to which subjectivity is reduced under these conditions (what Deleuze describes as a "deductive" subjectivity and a kind of "mummification" [176]). But it will be *less* automatic because this "formalisation" – the wresting of control from a supposedly rational autonomy "over" one's thoughts in modern cinema – contributes to an undermining of the coding of predictable responses under familiar circumstances: thought becomes "dispossessed" of its power to function, and thereby precisely unable to facilitate a "normal" or stereotyped behaviour. As Deleuze writes, "thought undergoes a strange fossilization, which is as it were its powerlessness to function, to be, its dispossession of itself and the world" (170).

It is within the context of the world become unthinkable that, famously, *belief* intervenes in order to facilitate the kind of un-programmed response we have been describing. "Thought finds itself taken over by the exteriority of a 'belief' [*croissance*], outside of any interiority of a mode of knowledge" (170). In this context, it is the *unavailability* of a conscious reply to the world around her that forces the individual to discover the revolutionary route that allows for a generation of new modes of being and acting. Belief is no longer an *expectation* of a world to come, or a belief *in* the inherent goodness of the world, but rather, as Paola Marrati puts it, a practical commitment to the claim that "other forms of [the world] can still be invented" (86). As Deleuze writes: "Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. [Instead,] only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears" (*C2* 172). In other words, belief makes possible the sufficient openness to experiment and discover ways of being and living compatible with the world become intolerable.

Deleuze, Benjamin and the Deterritorialisation of Film Subjectivity

To therefore unite some of the threads that have been provided in the above accounts of Deleuze's and Benjamin's accounts of cinematic subjectivity, we can see that for both authors, what matters in their understandings of cinema is the way in which those factors that make necessary a reorganisation of subjective experience away from the closure of private personhood equally make possible forms of collective investment and creation. For Benjamin, this takes place quite manifestly through the solicitation of a form of "distracted" and embodied collective subjectivity – a form which circumvents calcified forms of bourgeois selfhood and permits a kind of relaying movement between the individual subjectivity of the audience member and the nascent collective subjectivity of one's co-viewers. For Deleuze, we saw that a similar deterritorialisation of experience takes place through the replacement of the programmable subjectivity of the individual,

and equally their capacity for reflective, “rational” thought by a thought captured by its own “Outside”: drawn towards novel modes of behaviour that involve a more intimate and embodied engagement with the forces of creation and deformation *behind* our everyday experience.

For both of these philosophers, it is this undermining of conventional, and in particular *autonomous*, modes of subjectivity that is at play in the novelty of cinematic experience. Cinema, as a distinctively “modern” art form, has done more than antecedent forms of art to destabilise and scramble the affective coordinates of its observers. And it is precisely this deterritorialising, counter-conventional effect that draws both Deleuze and Benjamin to investigate its incipient political possibilities.

The Past and the Future of Cinematic Subjects

It remains, however, to indicate a noteworthy dimension in which Deleuze and Benjamin part ways on their understanding of the deterritorialised subjectivity of the film viewer – namely, in the different ways in which these philosophers conceive of the dimension of *temporality* invoked through the nascent subjectivity of the deterritorialised individual.

The concept of *time* in Deleuze and Benjamin (and indeed, perhaps for nearly all philosophers who can’t avoid a fascination with the topic) constitutes an important element of how they think about the political ramifications of their philosophies. As Marrati points out, the *replacement of history by time* in moments of subjective deterritorialisation constitutes one of the major resources for a Deleuzian conception of politics (106). And, for Benjamin, the struggle *against* “progressive” and utopian conceptions of history *in the service* of a messianic time will play an equally important role in his own political thinking. [15] For both of these philosophers, what has been said above regarding the encounter of the individual subject with the “horrors” of the visible world holds true: the course of history is, in so many ways, *itself* a kind of record of catastrophe. History embodies the kind of linear, deterministic process in which – to quote Benjamin – “[the] enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (*SW4* 390).

If therefore, the destabilisation of subjectivity has something to do with a revolutionary moment in history, this concept is not simply related to the notion of a rectification or modification of the course of history so that it points more directly towards the eventual arrival of a utopian future. Indeed, if there is anything revolutionary about the temporality proper to such moments of dislocation, it consists precisely in the way in which these moments *escape* or *expiate* the abuses of historical “progress,” even while recognising some of the inevitability of history’s recapture of temporality.

To speak of Deleuze’s approach to this time without history, if there is a temporal dimension invoked in Deleuze’s conception of filmic subjectivity, it is precisely the dimension of the *future*: not in the sense of an imagined or anticipated utopia which should serve to guide the real progress of politics, but rather in the sense of an always-displaced “people to come,” which

[15] On the difference between history as “progress” and revolutionary time, see Benjamin *Arcades* (476 [N11,4]) and excerpts by Lotze, (478 [N13,2] and [N13,3]). See also the schema on “Messianic Time” versus “Empirical History” in Buck-Morss (242).

functions as a kind of a cipher through which the politics of the present is enacted. As Deleuze writes in *Cinema 2*, especially *à propos* of Franz Kafka, in those forms of cinema where the sensory-motor schema has collapsed and subjects can no longer speak from the perspective of a pre-existent subjectivity, it becomes possible and even necessary that subjects should speak in the voice of a “people who [are] still missing”: a subjectivity as yet *un-constituted* and *lacking* the coherent set of interests which would define a political platform or a program (C2 215-24).

Take, for example, the 1963 documentary *Pour la suite du monde* (Brault, Carrière, and Perrault; “For those who will come”), where the project of a local fishing village to recover their cultural and economic autonomy involves the re-enactment of a traditional porpoise-hunt that, although “belonging” in theory to the local community whose tradition it is, is familiar to virtually none of the surviving community-members. Through the performance of a quasi-fictionalised version of the tradition, the community becomes capable of asserting not only its sense of displaced collective identity, but moreover of assuming a novel source of economic autonomy. That is, it is not by *being* the (traditional) “people” perpetually sought in purist Marxist politics, but rather through a *performance* of a people absent and “yet to come” that the minoritarian politics of the Quebecois population is enacted. As Deleuze argues, the problem of politics under such conditions will not be to *claim* power in the name of a competitive, historically subjugated subject-position, but rather to *escape* power in the direction of a “minoritarian” or “minor” position – one that makes no claim to power – while nonetheless refusing to resign oneself to the determinism of History. [16]

[16] On Deleuzian politics as a politics of “minoritarian” subjectivity, see especially Marrati (“Doxa”) and also Zourabichvili (167).

It is from this position of *exemption* from the flow of deterministic history that Deleuze invokes the future (*l’avenir*) as the displaced mode of temporality that comes to intervene in the historical sequence:

[B]ecause the people are missing, the author [*l’auteur*: here in reference to a ‘literary’ author like Kafka, but also a conventional term for the cinematic *auteur*-director] is in a situation of producing utterances which are already collective, which are like *the seeds of the people to come* [*du peuple à venir*], and whose political impact is immediate and inescapable. (C2 221)

Hence, as Deleuze writes of so-called “Third World” cinema, to speak and write in the voice of a displaced subjectivity – no longer setting programmatic politics, but rather “fabulating” and writing from the position of a people who are still to-come – is precisely to speak as if from the position of the future: not a future reducible to an eventual present moment in chronological history, but rather an always-absent dimension *of* chronological history.

For Benjamin, on the contrary, when he speaks of the effects of cinema as disordering and circumventing the autonomous subjectivity of the viewer, it is in reference to a displaced, but decidedly *retrospective*, dimension of time. History must be, as Benjamin phrases it, “brush[ed] against the grain” if there is to be a revolutionary moment *in* history (SW4 407). In this connection it

will be helpful to briefly clarify an important but underacknowledged premise of Benjamin's notion of history: namely, the way in which the *cinematic* and *collective* subjectivity of which he speaks in the "Work of Art" essay finds parallels in the historiographical theory of his later works – particularly in his *magnum opus*, *The Arcades Project*.

In that work, we can find Benjamin's explicit association of the political function of historiography with the effects and modes of subjectivity identified in the "Work of Art" essay. As he writes, among the aims of a materialist conception of historiography is precisely to duplicate the style and effects of *cinematic montage* such as it is described in the earlier work. The work of historiography "has to develop the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of *montage*" (*Arcades* 458 [N1,10], emphasis added). And again: "In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the *principle of montage* into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components" (*Arcades* 461 [N2,6]). [17] This is to say that the *function* of historiography – such as Benjamin conceives of it in these later, crucial works for understanding his views on temporality and history – is to bring about the kinds of effects previously described in terms of the disorienting effects of revolutionary cinema.

[17] See also passages from the earliest drafts of the *Arcades Project*: "Method of this work: *literary montage*. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show"; "Perhaps . . . there should be some indication of the intimate connection that [exists] between the intention for making the nearest nearness and the intensive utilization of refuse—a connection in fact exhibited in montage" (860-861 <O°,36> and <O°,37>).

Reciprocally, it is in speaking of the function of *cinema* (and, indeed, of any number of revolutionary modes of artistic creation), that Benjamin will highlight precisely the countervailing quality of those artistic modes against the forward-moving direction of history. In Benjamin's discussion of Brechtian theatre, it is the way in which citational and "gestural" theatre arrests or "interrupts" the flow of time, enabling a critical reflection on the immediate past of the present that marks its revolutionary potential (*SW4* 305). Moreover, in his discussion of cinema as itself a revolutionary art form, it is this same retrospective "liquidation" of the past – both through the "interruption" of the present and through the opening of a space for a "resurrection" of the past freed from the dominance of tradition – that constitutes its great potential (254). Here it is the immediate, retrospective, "critical" moment of cinema that lends it an affinity with empirical reconsiderations of traditional historical themes. In this connection Benjamin cites Abel Gance: "All legends, all mythologies, all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions, . . . await their celluloid resurrection" (255, quoting Gance 96). Thus, although the counter-vailing tendency in film to offer a revision of the past is generalized, its revolutionary, retrospective function is nonetheless, as Benjamin puts it, "most apparent in the great historical films" (254).

Hence, what Deleuze and Benjamin each describe in the deterritorialized subjectivity of the film viewer is a kind of dislocated temporality according to which the normal course of history is abandoned. For both, this dislocation of temporality invokes a particular dimension of time – for Deleuze, the future "to come"; for Benjamin a threatened past – brought to bear *against* historical progress. But if this should appear, in this account, as a kind of parting-of-ways between the two philosophers, we will lose the more

fundamental dimension of both philosophies: namely, the way in which the kind of subjectivity described by both philosophers constitutes an *abandonment* of a utopian revolutionary project – one closely linked to bourgeois historiography – in favour of a more complex, a-historical and reiterative conception of revolutionary politics. Neither Deleuze nor Benjamin will wed their political projects to a notion of an eventual “end of history,” but rather to an insistent conflict *over* history in terms of *both* the expiation of past injustices *and* the creation of novel forms of life.

Conclusion

Having shown how these two philosophers link their reflections on cinematic subjectivity to diverse dimensions of time, it remains to remind ourselves of the other major element of this account: namely, the observation that it is not simply in the *loss* of our conventional values, but rather in their *radicalisation* that a Marxist politics finds its bearings. Deleuze and Benjamin remind us that even as we seek to critique the excesses and inhumanity of capitalism, we must be careful not to mistakenly commit ourselves to the same, reactionary values which have been handed to us from the long history of oppression and inequality. Conventional beliefs about the self, about our freedom, about the family and other traditional social structures are not self-justifying; if anything, what capitalism has problematised is our capacity to freely and reflectively consider these values on our own terms. It is our capacity to walk this middle path – neither recklessly destroying nor nostalgically valorising our inherited values – which is the promise of a genuinely revolutionary politics. And it is also the promise of cinema, when, as Deleuze so gracefully puts it, “it stops being bad” (C2 172).

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