



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Exhibiting or presenting? Politics, aesthetics and mysticism in Benjamin's and Deleuze's concepts of cinema

Früchtl, J.

Publication date

2010

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The European Society for Aesthetics. Proceedings

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Früchtl, J. (2010). Exhibiting or presenting? Politics, aesthetics and mysticism in Benjamin's and Deleuze's concepts of cinema. *The European Society for Aesthetics. Proceedings, 2*, 143-160. <http://proceedings.eurosa.org/2/fruechtl.pdf>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Exhibiting or Presenting? Politics, Aesthetics and Mysticism in Benjamin's and Deleuze's Concepts of Cinema

Josef Früchtl*
University of Amsterdam

ABSTRACT. In his famous "work of art" essay, Walter Benjamin places politics at the centre of an aesthetics of modernity. He provides a brisk contrast between the romantic tradition of art philosophy and a politicisation of perception, receiving its training through the experience of the metropolis, in terms of Georg Simmel, and developing its appropriate artistic medium in film. Simmel is also the theorist who provides the backing for Benjamin's concept of "exhibition value": in a modern society individuals have a right and a necessity to be exhibited, precisely because of their individuality; universal egalitarianism requires visual differentiation. To turn the attention to the ambivalence of that social visualization and to refine Benjamin's hegelian-marxist patterns of thought, it is helpful to refer to Michel Foucault's concept of the apparatus (*dispositif*). In contrast, Gilles Deleuze shifts the point of view. The kind of modern self-understanding, coined by the French Revolution, is questioned 'radically' by him and the French anarchist tradition of so-called postmodernism. Since 'the people' and 'the masses' no longer exist, they can no longer present themselves, including on the cinema screen. At best, they are 'coming soon'. Following an old tradition, the cinema of Deleuze therefore shifts attention from a social theory to an ontology. Based on the dualist epistemology of Bergson, in which 'analysis' meets 'intuition', science meets metaphysics, Deleuze looks for the "time-image" and a "seer" who oscillates between aesthetics and mysticism. It is therefore fair to state, and not only through the lens of Benjamin, that the Deleuzian philosophy of cinema establishes, in a pseudo-revolutionary way, the return of "cult value".

*Email: j.fruchtl@uva.nl

That, in a nutshell, is the theory I would like to propose in this paper. Taking a particular technical and aesthetic medium, namely film, and taking two authors of great significance within the context of this discussion, namely Benjamin and Deleuze, I would like to demonstrate the power that exhibiting or presenting can have: namely a political, aesthetic and mystical significance.

I. Cultural History of Perception and Apparatus

From the very first page of Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility", the focus is politics.¹ Karl Marx is the theorist from whom Benjamin takes his inspiration regarding basic terminology and cognitive interest. Here he is concerned with the conditions of production within a society, the dialectic of which is equally clear in the superstructure as it is in the economic foundations. He thus turns to the discussion of a relationship which has been back on the agenda since the works *Marxism and Philosophy* by Karl Korsch and *History and Class Consciousness* by Georg Lukács, both published in 1923, with a clear emphasis on revolutionary awareness, on the 'subjective factor'. Against this background, Benjamin believes his "theses" to be "contributing to the political struggle", and at this time of fascism the struggle had a real and prevailing opponent, even enemy.² The "work of art" essay is thus political in two senses, both that of everyday politics and that of strategic theory, but undoubtedly with the emphasis on the latter. Benjamin's ambition is directed towards a theory of art within the framework of Historical Materialism, the latter seeing itself as a theory bound to a particular, namely an emancipatory interest. With Korsch and Lukács, Benjamin renews the *primacy*

¹ Regarding the following citations, cf. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Vol. 4: 1938-1940*, transl. by E. Jephcott and others, ed. by H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press 2003, pp. 251.

² An 'agonistic pluralism', as currently represented by a Political Philosophy inspired by the French language and geared to dissent rather than consent (cf. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London/New York 2005, esp. Ch. IV), reaches its limits when confronted by such fundamental dissent. 'The others' can no longer be seen as mere opponents, but have to be seen as enemies when, as a we-group, they in turn terminate the minimum pluralistic consensus with 'the others'. Without consensus there can be no pluralism, not even agonistic pluralism.

of politics, and this means not only the priority of subjective-revolutionary and institutional-organised action over economics, but also the political determination (relatively speaking) of every theory grounded in the arts, the social sciences or cultural studies; accordingly, theory may not be dependent upon politics, but neither is it free from it.

In Hegelian terms, the primacy of politics does not prove itself proximately. Benjamin particularly underlines this point with a view to the theorists well-versed in Hegel choosing to flock around Max Horkheimer. In a letter to Horkheimer, he is quick to emphasise that his "work of art" essay was intended to "avoid all abrupt, non-mediated reference to politics".³ As we know, this good intention failed to stand up, especially to Adorno's severe examination. Making it all the more helpful today to exchange the Hegelian for Foucauldian vocabulary. What Benjamin then attempts in his work of art essay is an analysis of art and particular art forms under the heading *apparatus (dispositif)*

After presenting a short historic outline of artistic reproduction techniques in the first section of his essay and introducing the central concept of aura in the second, in the third Benjamin then erects a framework pertaining to perception theory and cultural history. He opens this section with the sentence "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception".⁴ This is a clear reference, implicitly to Marx and explicitly to the Vienna School of Alois Riegl and Franz Wickhoff. Today it has become forgotten that Riegl was "perhaps the most important theorist of art history in Europe around 1900".⁵ His term "artistic volition" (*Kunst-wollen*) is meant to express the way in which art, like all human volition, not only endeavours to shape human reference to the world, but also regu-

³ Letter to Horkheimer from 16th October 1935, cit. in: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. I.3: *Abhandlungen*, Frankfurt/M. 1974, p. 983.

⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, l.c. p. 255; on Marx cf. the formulation from the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*: "The forming of the *five senses* is a labour of the entire *history* of the world" („Die Bildung der 5 Sinne ist eine Arbeit der ganzen bisherigen Weltgeschichte“, *MEW Ergänzungsband. Schriften bis 1844. Erster Teil*, Berlin 1977, pp. 541-2.).

⁵ Michael W. Jennings, "The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art", in: *ibid.* et. al. (eds.), *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Walter Benjamin, Harvard University Press 2008, p. 9.

lates this shaping within the framework of a sensory appearance. He thus believed that it is possible to draw conclusions about the general perception of a period from the art of that period. The introduction of a concept like this, able to mediate between two different spheres — art on the one hand, everyday perception on the other — makes it possible to avoid what Benjamin and Critical Theorists from the Hegelian school strive to avoid at all costs: proximate references, especially to politics.

Foucault's term *dispositif* (apparatus) fulfils the same function. It is difficult to define this term and thus see beyond the word itself. At the same time, it is precisely this imprecision which seems to make it so successful, an imprecision which exceeds the permissible boundaries for a hypothesis intended to mobilise cognition.⁶ In his book *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault introduces it in order, as I see it, to give more tangible contours to the complex of power and knowledge therein established. The context is the production of subjectivity. Accordingly, apparatuses are connections generated through power strategies, and this means: an entanglement of discourses and practices, or more generally: interlacings of knowledge and power, two key axes of investigation in Foucault's work that are important for explaining what is going on on the third axe, the axe of subjectivity. Apparatuses, like the epistemic structures described previously by Foucault in his *The Order of Things*, facilitate certain ways of perceiving and speaking. But unlike these structures, it is no longer historic *aprioris* which are at stake. It is not the historically eruptive condition of the possibility of a manner of perceiving and speaking *at all* which is the focus, but the *concrete* condition of the possibility of a manner of perceiving and speaking, the condition of an interlaceability of certain actions and speech within the concrete historical and cultural setting in question. As Foucault puts it in his functionalistic vocabulary, a *dispositif* facilitates "connections", for example from sexuality, to a discourse. In the related mechanistic vocabulary, a *dispositif* is an "apparatus", a complex connec-

⁶ In contrast to Foucault, Agamben has greatly extended the list of *dispositifs* to include "the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and — why not — language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses — one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured" (Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, Stanford University Press 2009, p. 14).

tion or coupling mechanism.⁷

In his work of art essay, Benjamin similarly introduces a framework pertaining to perception theory and cultural history in order to be able to provide an explanation for his theory that, in the age of their technical reproducibility, the aura possessed by works of art declines. He always defines aura in categories of space and time. In the second section this is the "here and now" of a work of art, its "unique existence in a particular place". Here Benjamin assumes the empiristic version of the principle of individuation: what distinguishes two objects with fully identical appearances is their different positions in the space in which they simultaneously find themselves. Two pens identical in shape, colour and material lying on a desk are two different pens because they are lying next to each other, because they are simultaneously occupying different points in space. In the third section, Benjamin surprisingly selects nature as his level of illustration and defines aura as "the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be". Here too, then, an interleaving of space and time or, more precisely, an interleaving of distance and proximity which, to the perceiver following it, united with it temporally, comes across as an apparition. The theory of the decline of the aura can then be explained as a change in perception induced by society: the aura of works of art may decline with their reproducibility, but the latter corresponds to the "desire of the masses to 'get closer' to things spatially and humanly". For Benjamin, "illustrated magazines" and cinema "newsreels" are evidence of this. This desire of the masses is explained in turn by the fact that a "sense for sameness in the world" has emerged.⁸ Benjamin ignores the question of what has led this egalitarian sense to emerge, presumably because to him the answer seems too obvious. I shall return to this.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction*, transl. by R. Hurley, New York 1990 (French orig. 1976), p. 23.

⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, l.c., pp. 255; concerning the first definition of aura see p. 253. — In the age of the Internet, the cultural history of perception does, of course, require expansion. Once again we are faced with a departure from the idea of the *original*, this time the idea of a correct citation. The "Google copy-paste syndrome", so the title of a book by media and communication expert Stefan Weber, consists in compiling texts, for example seminar papers or school talks, from articles available on the Net, for example in Wikipedia, which in turn have all been copied from different books, often without citing these books as references.

II. Cult and Exhibition Value

But first let us address the two terms which Benjamin introduces in his next step and which mark the poles of my deliberations: "cult" and "exhibition value". Aura constitutes a kind of cross-fading, a semantic overlapping of spatial and non-spatial distance and proximity. As stated in Benjamin's first version of his work of art essay, it is a "strange tissue of space and time".⁹ "Tissue" means fine and strong and woven like the threads in a spider's web, glittering in the light and invisible in the dark. The phrase "web of lies" is a telling and poetic coupling of words. This definition of aura, as Benjamin comments, "represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. Distance is the opposite of nearness. The essentially distant is the unapproachable. Inapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image".¹⁰ However near the observer might be to a cult object in the spatial sense, it remains distant in a symbolic sense, comprehended as a symbol, as an object loaded with meaning. Benjamin links this semantic overlapping of nearness-distance concepts with the cultural historical argument that art, firstly, "originated in the service of rituals — first magical, then religious", and, secondly, that this ritual function has also been preserved in times of secularisation (beginning with the Renaissance); the teaching of *l'art pour l'art*, which is a "theology of art", makes that very clear.¹¹

One theory which has been well documented to date is that, with the epoch of Romanticism, art assumed a religious status. Here Benjamin can draw on Hegel, whose famous statement — "we are beyond the stage of venerating works of art as divine and as objects deserving our worship" — contains a clear, anti-Romantic barb.¹² Accordingly, whereas art in

⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3, l.c., p. 104.

¹⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, l.c., p. 256, fn. 11.

¹¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, l.c. p. 256.

¹² Cit. in: Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, l.c., p. 257, fn. 15. Benjamin appears to have taken the expression "theology of art" from Victor Cousin, cf. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Kommentar von Detlev Schöttker*, Frankfurt/M. 2007, pp. 140-1. Cousin may be viewed as the first Hegelian in France. With Théophile Gautier he appears to have coined the expression *l'art pour l'art*. — On romantic "religion in the form of art" (*Kunstreligion*), another Hegelian term, and

its cultic and ritual function emphasises the element of aura, symbolic inapproachability, semantic distance and divine veneration, in its political function — it is in this context that Benjamin introduces the alternative between "being founded on ritual" and "being founded on politics" — it emphasises its "exhibition value", meaning primarily and quite simply that it is not enough for works of art "to be present"; it is important for them "to be seen".¹³ *Visibility* is the first distinguishing criterion for art founded on politics. Since this visibility is greater the closer the objects are to their observers, spatial proximity is a specification of this criterion. Motivated by a communist hope, Benjamin's rhetorical trick ultimately consists, of course, in concluding from this spatial proximity a 'human' closeness.

Thus art is founded on politics if it is not unapproachable for humans. This kind of art is not intimidating, one might say, does not aspire to be something elevated and special, but challenges one to look it straight in the eye as an equal, and in the first instance this means dealing with it, doing something with it, interacting with it in some way. A fitting term here is "parasocial interaction". In such an action a subject *feigns* a social relationship to another subject in order to thereby *produce* this relationship. Parasocial interaction makes use of the as-if structure of acting as such. Since acting never is completely calculable it has to feign its success initially to then become real.¹⁴

Benjamin does subdivide exhibition value into different degrees ("a panel painting can be exhibited more easily than the mosaic or fresco") and he does relativise his theory that in the course of history exhibition value replaces cult value ("a certain oscillation between these two polar modes of reception can be demonstrated for each work of art" — and even technically reproducible art, for example photography, is familiar with cult value and the aura of "the human countenance"), and yet he is fundamentally convinced that the "emphasis" of these two values has changed through history.¹⁵ The present day — or to give it the name it has in Benjamin's

on expressivism as a religion, cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press 1989, p. 376.

¹³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, l.c., p. 257.

¹⁴ Cf. Harald Wenzel, *Die Abenteuer der Kommunikation. Echtzeitmassenmedien und der Handlungsraum der Hochmoderne*, Weilerswist 2001.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, l.c., p. 257, 273-4.

studies of Baudelaire: Modernity — is characterised by a preponderance of exhibition value, by a strong emphasis on *visuality* and (parasocial) *interaction*.

III. Georg Simmel and the struggle for visibility

For this hypothesis, based on the Modernity theory, Benjamin could draw upon a sociologist who, at the time he was writing, was an academic unicorn of cultural philosophical competence and went on to become a role model for a whole generation of intellectuals, including Benjamin himself. I am talking of Georg Simmel.¹⁶ In his 1903 essay "*The Metropolis and Mental Life*", which has since become a classic, Simmel substantiates the social function of *visuality* as the result of a highly ambivalent Modernity. Modernity allows a person to develop his or her individuality on the basis of both the general formal sameness and the anonymous lifestyle of city dwelling, but at the same time makes this process difficult because in principle anybody and everybody, especially within the framework of this lifestyle, can develop. Simmel refers here to the relationship between "quantitative" and "qualitative" individualism, one which he himself introduced. The former crystallised as early as Christianity, especially with the Reformation, then the Enlightenment of the 18th century and finally 19th century socialism; the latter crystallised with Goethe, Romanticism and Nietzsche, although it was also partly embraced by the aristocratic Ancients and the representations of personality found in Shakespeare and

¹⁶ Cf. Benjamin's letter to Adorno from 23.2.1939, in which he reacts to Adorno's criticism in his famous letter of 10.11.1938, which also concerns Simmel. For, like Simmel, Benjamin gave "conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure" (Adorno-Benjamin: *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 283). Part of Benjamin's reply to this is the question: "Is it not time he (Simmel, J.F.) was recognised as one of the forefathers of cultural bolshevism?" (Adorno-Benjamin: *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, *l.c.*, p. 311; cf. Klaus Lichtblau, *Georg Simmel*, Frankfurt/M. 1997, pp. 11, esp. p. 13 & 17; Jürgen Habermas, „Georg Simmel über Philosophie und Kultur“, in: *ibid.*, *Texte und Kontexte*, Frankfurt/M. 1991, pp. 157).

Rembrandt.¹⁷ Whereas the former emphasises what makes one human being the same as all other human beings, the latter emphasises what makes one human being different from the rest. Qualitative individualism may neither historically nor semantically presuppose quantitative individualism, for even in an aristocratic or slave-holding society the representatives of inequality value their special status. But once quantitative individualism is realised in principle, such as was achieved by French Revolution, qualitative individualism follows hard on its heels. It becomes, namely, the irrefutable problem of a mass society.

The "sense for sameness in the world", which Benjamin cites as an explanation for the desire of the masses to come closer to things and destroy their aura is thus a product of a long historical development occurring in fits and starts. And this sense in turn produces the so-called aesthetic-deauratising, cultic-detabooing, politically monopolising desire of the masses. For in a Modernity geared towards political egalitarianism, *effort at differentiation*, to use Simmel's terminology, increases. And this differentiation is primarily achieved at the level of apparition, perception, *aisthesis* through visibility. Modernity, which emerged from a fight for fundamental rights, now necessitates a struggle for social and ethical visibility, taking place at the perceptive-aesthetic level. Visualisation is its programme. Differences have to be made visible, otherwise they do not exist. On the basis of political-legal equality they can only emerge in an everyday, practical, cultural sense. To this end they must and can *only show themselves aesthetically*. They thus individually pay homage to the "specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distantiation, of caprice, of fastidiousness".¹⁸ And the dialectic masterpiece of extravagance is that behaviour which Simmel terms "*blasé*". A blasé attitude is, on the one hand, a stance of refusing to react to the permanently changing stimulations wreaked on the senses by city life and, on the other hand, a "reflex" to the all-pervading financial economy. Specifically, a blasé person does *not*.

¹⁷ The distinction between these two forms of individualism is described in Georg Simmel, „Die beiden Formen des Individualismus“, in: *ibid.*, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen. 1901-1908, Bd. I, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 7*, Frankfurt/M. 1995.

¹⁸ Georg Simmel, „The Metropolis and Mental Life“, in: *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. G. Bridge & S. Watson, Oxford 2002, p. 18.; cf. Markus Schroer, *Das Individuum der Gesellschaft. Synchronie und diachrone Theorieperspektiven*, Frankfurt/M. 2001, p. 308.

wish to react to the constantly other and constantly new. Just as money expresses the qualitative differences between things purely quantitatively and is thus the most "frightful leveller", the blasé person is also a leveller in that he nullifies the "value of the differences between things".¹⁹ Somebody is blasé if he or she consciously refuses to perceive differences. And this, according to Simmel, is exactly what constitutes the pinnacle of a culture of difference, of qualitative individuality.

Accordingly, Modernity fulfils the political programme of an assertion of freedom and equality, an assertion of qualitative and quantitative individuality, by establishing a culture or everyday aesthetic of exhibiting (oneself), of showing (oneself) — and, one could add, of staging (oneself). Today we see the ambivalences, the positive and negative potentials of this process more clearly than Benjamin,²⁰ but even he was able to outline the fundamental significance of such a reversal of polarity sufficiently clearly. If visualisation and — I have not detailed this point any further — (parasocial) interactivity become centres of gravity within a society, an understanding of aesthetics develops which detaches itself from a religiously and civilly cultic meaning and focuses on a meaning which, in a broad sense, is political, namely a pragmatic meaning. The *politics of showing* here consists in the idea that what shows itself presents itself as part of a *solution to a problem*.

IV. Cinema as an Apparatus

The exemplary platform for Benjamin's deliberations is cinema. To repeat a catchword in this context, it is an 'apparatus' which steps between the spectators and the performers. This forces the performers, on the one hand, to be effective without their aura (which is bound to the here and now, to the physical presence of the actors in the same ontological space-time continuum as the spectators are in themselves), and invites the spectators, on the other hand, to adopt a stance of 'testing' and semi-professional discussion. Every single spectator can even "lay claim to being

¹⁹ Simmel, „The Metropolis and Mental Life“, l.c., p. 14-15.

²⁰ Cf. Josef Früchtl/Jörg Zimmermann, „Ästhetik der Inszenierung. Dimensionen eines gesellschaftlichen, individuellen und kulturellen Phänomens“, in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*, Frankfurt/M. 2001, pp. 9-47.

filmed", in other words to becoming a performer himself, albeit maybe just an extra²¹; the exhibition value of film therefore also realises the exhibition value of each individual.

This heady theory has, of course, as the context shows, to be comprehended in the sense of that feisty picture, so full of expectation, which Benjamin, like many other intellectuals in the 1920s, painted of the Soviet Union. In particular, it has to be comprehended against the background of films from the 1920s, again Soviet cinema, but also those of Fritz Lang and King Vidor, which were concerned with a favourable portrayal of the proletarian masses. Apart from Benjamin, the definitive theorists here are Eisenstein and Kracauer. Benjamin's theory does not seem exaggerated at all, however, in the context of Simmel's cultural philosophy. The *claim to being filmed* is a variation of that inevitable claim to *visible difference* under the conditions of political and legal *equality*.

As we know, Benjamin adds further provisions in order to characterise cinema as the exemplary location and apparatus of a modern, pragmatically political, solution-oriented aesthetics. Put another way, he describes cinema as an apparatus, as a technical-aesthetic medium which influences perception and thus thought and action, in short: the production of subjectivity. Cinema is a technical and transcendental apparatus (facilitating perception) which links everyday practical perception and action, for example the social struggle for visibility and self-portrayal, with discourses about art, culture, philosophy, etc.²² Translated back into Hegelian-Marxist language: cinema is a miniature system of social mediation.

Admittedly, one has to be aware of the dimension that Foucault describes with the catchword of the *panopticon*. Subjectivation, then, in modernity means internalizing the gaze of the others. Reciprocity and

²¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, l.c., p. 262.

²² In the 1970s, Jean-Louis Baudry made the theory of cinema as an apparatus famous. However, for him the theoretical framework is stipulated by psychoanalysis, by Freud's theory of dreams as the fulfilment of desires and Lacan's catchword 'the mirror stage'. This catchword has had far-reaching consequences in some approaches from the field of cultural studies, but from the perspective of empirical infant psychology it has failed to gain ground; cf. here Martin Dornes, *Die emotionale Welt des Kindes*, Frankfurt/M. 2000, pp. 217.

interaction is not possible within that dimension. Therefore it is by bringing together Foucault and Simmel in the name of Benjamin to avoid the extremes of a blue-eyed liberalism and a nightmarish totalitarianism.

V. Deleuze and Ontology

If we now abruptly turn the spotlight of our attention to the most successful current philosophy of film, namely that of Gilles Deleuze, politics immediately obtrudes as a massively conjunctive element. The popular success of Deleuze unmistakably issues from a critique of capitalism which may be ambivalent, but is nevertheless vehement in its rhetoric. With *Anti-Oedipus* — the first volume of: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* — a figure enters the cultural stage whom Deleuze and Guattari lovingly call the 'Schizo'. The Schizo is a friendly version of the oedipalised schizophrenic, rehabilitated to function capitalistically, who in Foucault's words is really abandoned by society, yet at the same time imaginarily produced by it. He is a new edition of the 'noble savage' myth²³ and the figure of desire appropriate to 20th century capitalism: a figure desired by capitalism because it is one which permanently exceeds boundaries, and feared by it because it also exceeds its own boundaries. It is a figure, and this is the basic psychoanalytical and metaphysical assumption of *Anti-Oedipus*, who still knows how to wish, who does not oedipally deform wishes and dissociate them in the distorting order of the symbolic. The reception of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* presages the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) of Deleuze. It creates a thinker, as has since been repeated, who radically defends the heterogeneous and differences, who defends an ethics and politics of the other, of the ability to be different, of anarchic diversity, and who defends an ontology of movement. This *Wirkungsgeschichte* incorporates him in the theoretical movement known as Postmodernism which Richard Rorty recognises, but also critically describes as the "cultural left wing", whose major enemy is a way of thinking, a mental-cultural system it has fought against very successfully for the past

²³ Cf. Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?*, Frankfurt/M. 1984, p. 419. This criticism seems to me true though Frank's book has a polemic tendency against 'neostukturalismus'.

forty years, but which also presages its limits: it sees everything from the culturalistic-constructivist perspective, even politics.²⁴

But of course Deleuze does not simply join the postmodernist movement without contradiction. The most conspicuous difference is marked by the element which above I termed 'ontology of movement'. The bone of contention is the fact that Deleuze devises an *ontology* at all.²⁵ Here the term ontology is fundamentally meant not in the sense of linguistic analysis, but in the Heideggerian sense; as an examination not of what is, but of (the sense of) being. Bound by the conditions imposed by a critique of ontology and metaphysics driven by Heidegger and Nietzsche, Deleuze can of course only seize upon this term affirmatively because he changes its meaning. Firstly, ontology is not a theoretical space filled by discoveries, but by inventions. It is concerned not with discovering the essence of fundamental entities, but with the construction of basic conditions oscillating between science and fiction. Methodically, this ontology emerges with a *weak* claim, but, as will be shown, it has a *strong*, emphatic claim as regards content. Secondly, and closely connected to the first point, it means a reversal of the ratio between identity and difference, between what is identifiable and thus being, and what cannot be identified. Philosophy as an ontology understood in this sense has to do with the non-identifiable. Deleuze's positive term for this is 'the virtual', for what can be identified is only an update of what is (truthfully, namely virtually).

Of course, this Deleuzean self-conception instils massive doubts, given prominence by Alain Badiou, for example. *The Clamour of Being (La clameur de l'Être)* is the title of his book on Deleuze, playing on the latter's philosophical description of self: "a single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same ocean for all the drops, a single Clamour of Being for all beings".²⁶ Badiou accordingly sees Deleuze's "fundamental concern" not as the "liberation of the multiple", but as "the

²⁴ Cf. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country. Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, Harvard University Press 1998, pp. 73.

²⁵ Cf. Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze. An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 13. In my opinion, May's book is not just "one", but "the" best philosophical introduction to Deleuze.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, transl. by P. Patton, New York 1994, p. 304.

folding of thought on a renewed concept of the one", on a new "metaphysics of the one".²⁷ And the two pioneering philosophers whom Deleuze needs to back this up are Spinoza and Bergson.

Spinoza provides an ontology of difference with, firstly, the guiding concept of (expressive) immanence. If "difference" does not mean the distinction between two identities (since this would make difference subordinate to identity), and if it does not mean the negation of an identity either (since this would only be a negative concept of difference); if instead it means the *reason*, or *ground* for all being, that is all identities, distinctions and negations, then being can, according to its substance, only be *one*. In the history of philosophy, this metaphysical theory is represented by Spinoza. There is only one substance — Spinoza calls it God or Nature ("deus sive natura") — and it is univocal, expressing itself in attributes and modes. All expressions remain within a sphere of immanence; there is no transcendence, and predominantly not that between God and all things created by Him, nor that between his modern substitute, the Cartesian ego-cogito, and material things.

Secondly, Spinoza provides this Deleuzian ontology with the corresponding epistemological keyword, namely *scientia intuitiva*. He distinguishes three types of knowledge: sensually evoked, unordered knowledge referring to individual things, or opinion; rational knowledge or reason, namely knowledge ordered according to generally known concepts and principles; and, finally, intuition, which refers to an individual thing *in* its generality. Intuition provides a cognition of the individual in its individuality. According to Spinoza connoisseurs, it is difficult to specify the meaning of this form of cognition. It can be understood more mystically or more rationalistically.²⁸ And this ambiguity returns with Deleuze.²⁹

In order to demonstrate this, we need to turn in detail to Deleuze's

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, Univ of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. xiv.

²⁸ Cf. Stephen Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics. An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press 2006, pp. 171.

²⁹ It is an ambiguity which can also be described as that of the intellectual as the *hero* of Modernity. At the beginning of Modernity, Giordano Bruno grasped the aesthete and philosopher as a hero, rising up platonically from the level of sensuality to a higher level, the watching cognition of God as the principle of harmony between opposites (cf. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 3, p. 1045). Spinoza also shares this view with Bruno, and not just the comprehensive one of pantheism.

second informant with regard to ontology, namely Bergson. This not least because Bergson stresses intuition as a method of a philosophy referring to that form of being which cannot be described in clear scientific terms and an analytical style. According to Bergson, this movement is the real being, and as such can only be grasped intuitively. Intuition means the graphic-imaginative grasping of an object or "the whole" (*du tout*), of "what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible" (*qu'il a d'unique et par conséquent d'inexprimable*). It is the prerequisite of all analysis inasmuch as it first provides the latter with the object. The train of thought always leads from intuition to analysis, and not vice versa. Only a graphic imagination makes it possible to link individual analyses correctly.³⁰ Bergson may not be completely clear about the question of whether this type of knowledge and its corresponding manner of thinking, metaphysics, inherently possesses systematic primacy over the analytical and definitional type of knowledge of science, but his tendency in this respect is clear. It is also noticeable that he repeatedly cites examples from the field of art as evidence for the intuitive type of knowledge.³¹ And these ambiguities — is intuition a philosophical-metaphysical or far more an aesthetic type of knowledge? Does it complement scientific analysis or is it superior to it? — resurface with Deleuze.

Concerning intuition in general, unfortunately we are forced to admit (yet again) that the meaning which Deleuze attaches to this term is anything but clear. And, as may be expected, the facts of the matter do not become any clearer if we look at the significance this concept has for Deleuze himself. Badiou attempts to provide an answer here and needs a few pages to do so. It seems to be established that intuitive thinking, also for Deleuze, is "without mediation", "without categories", and yet does not occur at a single moment, is therefore a "complex construction" and the "most profound" of all the Bergson-Deleuze ideas.³² Using Foucault, Badiou suggests, one could call it a "thinking of the external" (once again ambiguous, depending on whether the genitive is the subject or the object:

³⁰ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, transl. by T. E. Hulme, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1999, p. 24 & 33 (*Introduction à la Métaphysique*, in: idem, *La Pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences*, Paris 1955, p. 205 & 217).

³¹ Cf. Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, l.c., p. 22-23, 32.

³² Badiou, *Gilles Deleuze*, loc.cit., p. 52, 54 & 60.

is somebody thinking of the external or is the external doing the thinking?) and it may be summarised by the term "fold".³³

Instead of endlessly unfolding this term — the pun can hardly be avoided — I would like to draw on a quotation which brings us back to Benjamin and suggests a palpable critique of this type of ontology. First of all, the idea of introducing the term 'fold' both ontologically and epistemologically is thoroughly understandable, for it contains an anti-idealistic, heteropathic and centrifugal approach. Thinking is then not a "projection of the internal", but an "internalisation of the external": "I do not meet myself in the external, but find the other in myself". And then Deleuze quotes Foucault: it is always a case of showing "how the other, the distant, is both the proximate and the same".³⁴ Vice versa, one can add that the proximate, our internal self, equally needs to be seen as something distant, as an other. And now, somewhat offensively maybe, I would like to bring these deliberations to a head: *Intuitive thinking (of the external) and the ontology of difference cultivate the aura of the being; they are a celebration of cult value in philosophy.* Whereas Benjamin stresses the *democratic exhibition value*, i.e. visibility and interaction, Deleuze produces a tissue of proximity and distance in which something *presents* itself by at the same time not presenting itself. Heidegger's influence here is evident even if Deleuze practises the phenomenological method of *Being and Time* only as a gesture.

VI. Deleuze and the Cinema of the Seers

This critique can easily be repeated for Deleuze's philosophy of cinema. According to Deleuze, modern cinema — which emerged after the Second World War with Italian neorealism, French *nouvelle vague* and West German auteur cinema (*Autorenkino*) — leads to a displacement of the sensor-motoric picture. Action and judgement are no longer central. And this displacement renders the human being a "seer" (*un voyant*), who sees himself confronted with "something unthinkable in thought", in other words

³³ Badiou, *Gilles Deleuze*, loc.cit., p. 116 & 121; on "fold" cf. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, loc.cit., p. 38.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 136 (my own transl.).

the so-called external (for the external is not physical, but metaphysical).³⁵ Cinema thus becomes the venue not merely of empirical and aesthetic seeing, but, in keeping with the plurivalence of this verb, of the visionary.

This visual-visionary upgrading of cinema is conspicuously consistent with the downgrading of its political, mass cultural, democratic-revolutionary status. After fascism, Stalinism and the USA (a *menage à trois* which is also features regularly in Heidegger and Horkheimer/Adorno), as well as the corresponding classical cinema from Eisenstein to John Ford, had shattered our faith in the masses as a true subject, a modern political cinema could only emerge if it showed that "the people no longer exist, or not yet ... the people are missing".³⁶ This theory of course requires social theoretical backing, in this case a negativistic one taking shape in the concept of the "control society". Strangely, in this context Deleuze is not interested in ambivalences.³⁷ And the parallel between his social theoretical negativism and his affirmation of cineastic seeing, which ranges in meaning from the contemplative through the voyeuristic to the visionary, is striking.

Deleuze begins his book about Bergson with a chapter about intuition and ends it by returning to intuition and a plea in its favour. According to Deleuze, it is less the philosophers who can master this graphic-imaginative thinking, and more the artists, as well as — specifically — the mystics. It is a curious, solemn, poetic plea which leaves the relationship between philosophical and mystic intuition wide open. Deleuze, in the spirit of Bergson, is concerned with intuition as a method. As a philosopher he can only consider the mystic "from the outside".³⁸ He could only cross this line if he himself ceased to be a philosopher, a thinker in the emphatic sense. And yet for Deleuze this line is not an absolute. As a philosopher he would still like to secure for himself the maximum of intuition and certainty represented by the mystic. As a philosopher he would

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, transl by H. Tomlinson & R. Galeta, University of Minnesota Press 1989 (French or. 1985), p. 169.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, l.c., p. 216.

³⁷ The theorists of ambivalence in social theory are Georg Simmel, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Henri Bergson zur Einführung*, transl. into German by Martin Weimann, Hamburg 1989, p. 141 (transl. into English by myself).

therefore also like to see himself from the outside, from the position of the mystic, in other words: as a mystic.

Thus, Deleuze *oscillates* between the theory that mysticism lies beyond what can be accounted for philosophically and the theory that this is the ideal which philosophy should strive towards. He himself would probably view this oscillation as an inevitable element of a thinking which has to escape rationalistic-analytical-definitorial provisions. It could also be seen, however, as a case of intellectual dishonesty. Then Deleuze would not be admitting openly enough to the hardened metaphysics and corresponding intuitionistic, if not mystic epistemological theory which he advocates in the spirit of Spinoza and Bergson. And in answer to why he does this, the required critique, as inferred above, has to be not only rational or conceptual, but also political. For the elitism linked to this epistemological theory does not tie in well with the anarchism which Deleuze also stands for. In emulation of Max Stirner, this radical anarchist denies that any regulation of the individual is justified and leaves it up to the spontaneous and voluntary acts of individuals to determine all social interaction. This is not compatible with a privilege of knowledge, as mysticism must acknowledge. Not unless one is convinced that radical anarchism realises politically what mysticism advocates epistemologically. The idea that insights refuse to lend themselves to argumentative plausibility is then consistent with social non-regulability and practical spontaneity. But the burdensome consequences ensuing from this conviction are so dubious that a critical theorist, a rationality-based theorist sympathising with anarchism, understandably opts not to take it on board.