

**CINEMA AND COMMUNICATION: ‘CINELOGIC’ AND
‘CINAESTHESIS’**

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the various ways in which cinema “communicates” meaning, making use of the five materials of film, namely three of an auditory nature and two of a visual nature: dialogue, soundtrack (music) and noise on the one hand, and images and graphic elements on the other. This is not all there is to it, because all these materials are unavoidably appropriated by filmmakers in the guise of various signifiers, each with its own signified, along the trajectories of two signifying axes of meaning, to wit, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, respectively, on both of which certain codes are audiovisually inscribed. But even a thorough overview of these elements of meaning-generation is not sufficient to understand the way that film communicates – one has to follow Deleuze in his radical philosophy of the cinema, and scrutinise the difference between the cinema of the movement-image, and the cinema of the time-image. This article claims that this complex intertwinement of signifying elements is the way that film communicates. Relevant films will be discussed to demonstrate how this happens.

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INTRODUCTION

How does film communicate meaning to audiences or viewers? At one level, this may seem like a redundant question, because today, people – especially young people – are so thoroughly film and television literate that they decode meanings in the course of watching movies and television programmes without even being aware precisely *how* they do it. I can say this with confidence because, when I teach courses on cinema, I usually start by giving students a quick primer in film-semiotics to enable them to decode and interpret, in a self-reflective manner, the films that will be studied as part of the course. And invariably they are surprised to find that what they have been doing routinely in the course of watching many movies and television programmes can be broken down into the mechanics of a certain process, with names for every part of the process involved. This usually makes them more reflective, and I would like to believe more critical and discerning, if not “better” viewers of film. Given the number of kitsch films that are produced and released annually, especially in Hollywood (and Bollywood), I believe that equipping not only students, but members of the public in general with the interpretive means to understand and reflect critically on cinema and television is an imperative task if one wishes to contribute to society’s ability to resist the ideological effects of mainstream commercial cinema.¹

It is not sufficient to give an account of the “semiotics of cinema” if one wishes to understand how meanings in this important contemporary art form are conveyed to viewers; one has to ask, in addition, what makes cinema distinctive, because some of the elements of its semiotic functioning are not exclusive to it as film. Music, for instance, shares some of these elements and the way in which they work with cinema. And although there have been several compelling theories about what is truly distinctive about film, I believe that Gilles Deleuze’s philosophical account of cinema comes closest to articulating what makes it singular among the arts. I shall focus on these two issues in turn.

CINEMATIC MATERIALS, SIGNIFIERS, AND REGISTERS OF MEANING

What are the materials of film?² As anyone who reflects on this question would discover, there are five, three of which are auditory, while two are visual: speech or dialogue, music (“soundtrack”), amorphous sounds or noise, images, and graphic elements (such as subtitles). Needless to say, these materials are harnessed by filmmakers as “signifiers”, that is, in such a way that they convey certain meanings – not, as some critics naively believe, only the meanings that directors wish or intend to inscribe in these materials, utilised as “signifiers”, but always more, other, perhaps latent meanings, too. Meaning in signifiers – auditory as well as visual – is always over-determined; in other words, signifiers such as spoken and written words, as well as images, are irrepressibly multivocal, just as any context of meaning-generation is, as Derrida (1982: 310) has famously argued, “unsaturable”.³ For example, when, in Stephen Surjik’s (1993) *Wayne’s World 2*, Wayne is shown driving a red Alfa Romeo sports car at breakneck speed to try and prevent his girlfriend from marrying someone else, running out of petrol, and eventually arriving at the church, it is a recognisable

“intertextual” or inter-cinematic reference to the quasi-identical, classical scene-sequence in Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate* (1967), where Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) races against time to prevent the woman he loves (who also happens to be his mistress’s daughter) from being married off to someone else by her parents, the Robinsons. Only here, the weirdly comical Wayne (Mike Myers) – who is a far cry from Hoffman’s alienated *noir* hero in the earlier film – confronts two identical-looking churches, and not merely one. Hence, while the “original” meaning (a desperate young man attempting to rescue his beloved from herself as well as from her parents and their chosen bridegroom) is implicitly transferred to the new context, the latter also, inescapably, adds new elements of meaning, as signified by the second church: the postmodern rebellion against the illusions of modernity, signified by Nichols’ *film noir*, has made way for an ironic self-parodying stance to phenomena such as being in love, with all the Angst and the quest for authenticity of the earlier *film noir* being rejected.

We have, then, film-materials that are put together or combined in various ways as “signifiers” to produce or “signify” certain meanings. In so far as the meanings generated in this way are “decoded” and “understood” by viewers in such a way that they can articulate an interpretation of what they have viewed (including listening to film speech and music, of course), these meanings comprise “signifieds”. To anyone familiar with Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics, the terms “signifier” and “signified” – which, together, constitute the “sign” – would be nothing new. Neither would the reminder that Saussure’s semiological approach to language as a “system of signs” challenged the standard conception of language as a referential system, where the signs that comprise language “refer” to things and objects (called the “referents”) in the concrete world. Needless to say, this standard model of language works satisfactorily as long as one tries to correlate words or signifiers such as “cat” and “mat” with their experiential counterparts, but runs into trouble when one tries to correlate signifiers like “is” or “perhaps” with concrete things. The advantages of a linguistic model where no questions are asked about the ontological status of the signifieds that are the flip-side of the signifiers, and where meaning is explained as a function of *differences* among signifiers, should be obvious. As Saussure famously pointed out, in the linguistic system there are no positive terms, only differences – that is, every word or signifier derives its meaning from its relation with all the other signifiers that comprise the system as a whole. This also explains Derrida’s well-known contention that every signifier carries ineradicable “traces” of other signifiers (in fact, every signifier bears the trace of every other signifier which it is not) in the language-system, in so far as it is negatively defined. “Cat” is not “mat”, or “dog”, because, denoting as it does, a quasi-carnivorous mammalian, tree-climbing quadruped, it is demonstrably different from the other two signifiers regarding its linguistic meaning (even if only “tree-climbing” – and possibly also “omnivorous” – differentiates between “dog” and “cat”).

What this example also demonstrates, is the poststructuralist modification of Saussure’s conception of language as a system of signs, where “signs” split up into “signifiers” and

“signifieds”: every signifier (for instance the word “bird”) has a signified (“an oviparous, feathered, flying biped”) for Saussure. And even if poststructuralists such as Lacan and Derrida would go along with the claim that every signifier has a corresponding signified, they would add that the distinction is not watertight, because every signified is, in its turn, again a signifier. Take the example of “bird”, above – to understand its corresponding signified, one has to treat its constituent elements as signifiers in their turn: that is, what does “oviparous” mean, and “biped”? When a search for their meanings yield: “reproducing by means of hatching eggs”, and “two-legged”, respectively, it is apparent that these meanings, too, are formulated in terms of signifiers, and so on, and on, and on. No wonder Lacan speaks of language as a “chain of signifiers” – every signifier is a metonymic (and in many cases, metaphorical) link in the chain, and various other links can be attached to it and detached again, to be attached elsewhere (cf. Olivier 2005).

The metaphor of “chain of signifiers” brings us back to the question of how meaning is generated in film. Here, too, one intuitively follows “chains of signifiers” which are analogous to the chain of signifiers comprising language, with the implication that film functions *like* a language, although it is not *identical* to a language such as English or French (Andrew 1976: 219-224). As in the case of ordinary language, the process of meaning-generation unfolds simultaneously along two axes or registers, which continuously inform and enrich each other, namely the paradigmatic axis and the syntagmatic axis of meaning, respectively. This simply means that when people converse, or read, or watch a movie, they understand what signifiers (words, images) mean (their signifieds) because of similarities and differences between these words and/or images (paradigmatic), as well as because of the way that what comes later in the conversation, the text, or the movie, modifies what comes earlier (syntagmatic). To put it simply: all meaning is the result of perceiving differences and similarities (on the paradigmatic, “spatial” register of meaning) and of grasping how sequentiality alters (modifies, enriches, negates) meaning (on the syntagmatic, “temporal” register of meaning).

We all know how the completion of a sentence in an unexpected manner can radically affect its anticipated meaning. When someone says to us, referring to their stay at a famous overseas university: “Since my return from the US, I just haven’t been able to forget my experience on that campus”, it would probably be the case that we anticipate an elaboration on “experience” which amplifies just how good, interesting or wonderful it was. But when the speaker proceeds by saying: “It was awful”, we learn the lesson that everyone learns sooner or later, namely that we should never jump to conclusions about the meaning of a speaker’s words or a paragraph’s meaning before we have heard or read the “last word(s)”. This is how meaning works at the level of the syntagmatic axis.

So, for instance, the concluding words in Bret Easton Ellis’s disturbing but revealing novel about the emptiness of yuppie-life in New York in the late 1980s, *American Psycho* (1991), to wit: “This is not an exit”, not only pertains to the physical situation

(in a building) of a character in the novel, but retrospectively alters the meaning of the entire novel, in so far as it immediately erases the customary distinction between the aesthetic space of the novel's "fictional" events, and the "real" world outside its aesthetic "frame". In other words, the last sentence in the novel reminds the reader that, when he or she has finished reading it, they cannot afford to sit back and sigh with relief at the thought that those terrible events are merely fictional. The sentence means: "You cannot exit or leave the 'reality' constituted by the world of this novel; you are in it, part of it." That final sentence therefore has an indispensable syntagmatic function; without it, it would be a significantly different novel. Signifiers that follow one another in time, sequentially, in film function in the same manner – they continually add to, nuance and modify those that went before the later ones.

What about the paradigmatic register? While the syntagmatic register is thought of as being the "horizontal", temporal axis of meaning – signifiers following one another sequentially in time – the paradigmatic register is regarded as being the "vertical", spatial axis of meaning, where signifiers do not generate meaning through their sequential unfolding in time, as it were, but instead via their similarities and differences on the "vertical" semiotic axis, which "cuts through" the syntagmatic axis whenever such similarities and differences assert themselves in the process of communication. It is easy to understand why the syntagmatic axis of meaning is "temporal" – it has to do with "what follows what" (in time), after all. One should also note that this sequentiality opens the possibility – which will be explored later via Deleuze's "cinema of the time-image" – for experimenting with time-dimensions of various kinds. But what is meant by saying that the paradigmatic axis of meaning has to do with space? This is because signifiers which function paradigmatically do so by establishing semiotic "connections" and resonances with signifieds (which are really also other *signifiers*, in their turn, as poststructuralism has shown convincingly; cf. Olivier 2005) across a spectrum of signification which is not necessarily sequential, but a "space" of signification that transcends sequentiality, even if such signifiers also form part of a syntagmatic level of meaning-generation. In other words, a signifier can function both syntagmatically and paradigmatically at the same time.

What would be instances of such simultaneous syntagmatic (temporal) and paradigmatic (spatial) operation of signifiers, specifically in cinema? I have referred to Bret Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho*, to illustrate the functioning of the syntagmatic register of meaning; one could use the film (Harron 2000) based on this novel to show how the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes function together.

Think of the manner in which the murders committed by Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) in the film follow one another in time. In fact, audiences witness Bateman raping, murdering and mutilating acquaintances as well as strangers without rhyme or reason, one after the other. This tale of horror therefore unfolds along the syntagmatic axis, and with every successive murder the senselessness of it all is exacerbated to the point where one is bound to be struck by the utter absurdity of such serial killing. Absurdity, one might say, is generated by the consecutive signifiers at the level of this axis. When

police detective Donald Kimble (Willem Dafoe) questions Bateman about the disappearance of Paul Allen (Jared Leto), whom Patrick killed several days earlier, this introduces a sequence of signifiers into the narrative (along the syntagmatic axis) which, one knows from familiarity with other such stories, could possibly alter the sequence of events. Expectations of his arrest are therefore raised, but frustrated time and again – all of this at the syntagmatic level of meaning-generation.

What about the paradigmatic axis of signification in this film, and where does it function simultaneously with the syntagmatic? Every murder and act of mutilation performed by Bateman in the course of the film-narrative resonates with every other, subsequent (and preceding) act of that kind. In other words, all his murderous actions are paradigmatically linked in a mutually reinforcing, if modifying and nuancing, manner. From the killing of the beggar, through Paul Allen's murder, to his gruesome destruction of the prostitute, and including all his other homicides, the signifiers carrying the meanings that constitute this aspect of the narrative share a paradigmatic element of (recognisable) similarity, and at the same time also function syntagmatically insofar as they carry the narrative forward in time. Hence, it is not so much a matter of strict distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic *signifiers*, as between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic *functioning* of (often the same) signifiers.

CINEMATIC CODES AND 'CINELOGIC'

But is there not a more precise way of understanding the paradigmatic *similarity* between different signifiers that would explain why some signifiers resonate paradigmatically with one another, while not with others (keeping in mind that such paradigmatic functioning always works in conjunction with the syntagmatic role of signifiers)? Indeed there is – the concept of a “code” is indispensable here. What is a cinematic code? In semiotics, the concept of “codes” names the principles according to which meaning (or a “message”) is generated by means of signifiers – one might say that all cinematic signifiers operate via codes, which make them interpretable. As Dudley Andrew (1976: 224) puts it, in the course of his discussion of the semiological work of Christian Metz:

The filmmaker uses codes to make his [or her] material speak to the spectator. The semiotician works in the opposite direction, using the messages of a film to help him construct the codes which transcend those messages. Most film discussions and film criticism concentrate on what a film says (on its messages); semiotics aims at the laws governing those messages, at the possibility of filmic speech itself. It does not want to repeat what the text (the film) says; rather it hopes to isolate all the logical mechanisms which permit the raw material to speak such messages.

Where Andrew refers to “logical mechanisms” in this excerpt, I would rather use the phrase “cinematic mechanisms” – or, to coin a word, “cinelological” mechanisms – which really means the principles that impart to cinema a “cinelologic” all its own. Understood in this way, codes function as the interpretive keys to comprehend the meanings generated by audiovisual signifiers on both axes of signification, namely the

paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. One might even argue that codes *are* signifiers of a certain kind. This suspicion requires corroboration, however.

Andrew (1976: 224-225) further points out that codes possess three fundamental characteristics which allow one to understand and interpret them, namely their “degrees of specificity,...levels of generality, and...reducibility to subcodes”. The concept of “specificity”, for Metz, allows one to single out those codes that are peculiar to cinema in varying degrees, the most distinctive of which would mark a code that belongs exclusively to cinema, such as what is known as the “freely tracking camera shot”, as well as “accelerated montage” (Andrew 1976: 225-226). Formally speaking, “accelerated montage” names the alternation of two (or three, perhaps four) different images, which follow one another with increasing speed and ever-shorter duration and intervals between them. While literature can approximate this code, in its specific form of alternating images it is unique to cinema, and nowhere else is a “message” transmitted in exactly this way. Any viewer familiar with cinema’s decoding conventions – and today, most viewers are familiar with these – would be able to understand what an instance of accelerated montage conveys, namely to show, or suggest, a narrative or dramatic proximity, a link, or perhaps a confluence of sorts, between the alternating images (or what they represent).

An eloquent example of accelerated montage as cinema-specific code is encountered in Darren Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a dream* (2000), where the images of a syringe, the dilating pupil of an eye, a shot of fluid moving along a tube (presumably a vein or artery) shown consecutively in section, accompanied by a corresponding series of sounds, occur every time two of the principal characters take a dose of cocaine (or heroin). The message communicated by means of this cinema-specific code (this set of visual and closely linked auditory signifiers) is easily recognisable as an indication, not merely that they are in the process of administering the drug (denotation), yet again, but that – as indicated by the mechanically monotonous presentation of the successive image-signifiers – it is a mono-dimensional, repetitive process (connotation), which is likely to affect the people concerned in such a way that they relinquish their essentially human mode of existence in favour of a reduced, scarcely human condition.

To the question whether accelerated montage, as code that belongs specifically and distinctively to cinema, instantiates a signifier, the answer seems, at first, to be negative, because it involves a sequence of alternating visual and auditory *signifiers*. One might, however, think of the sequence of iconic signifiers, alternating in accelerating fashion, as a composite signifier – which is nothing other than accelerated montage as a code. This would confirm my earlier suspicion, that one could regard codes as being themselves (sometimes composite) signifiers.

Apart from accelerated montage, there are other cinematic codes which are also, by themselves, signifiers. This seems to me to be especially true of the many non-specific “cultural codes” – that is, cultural signifiers functioning as codes simply by being assimilated into cinema. This includes the “car code”, where certain kinds of cars bear

different cultural meanings, for example a stereotypically American car like a Cadillac convertible (Andrew 1976: 225), or, for that matter, a chauffeur-driven Mercedes Benz, each of which represents, as cultural code, a specific set of easily recognisable values. Codes shared by cinema with other art forms, like literature and painting, may also be understood as “cinelological” signifiers of a certain kind, and include, according to Metz (Andrew 1976: 225), many narrative techniques encountered in literature, for instance “stories within stories”, flashbacks and flashforwards, as well as chiaroscuro lighting, borrowed from painting, and used liberally in German expressionist films such as Josef von Sternberg’s *The blue angel* (1930).

Things appear to be no different with codes that may be differentiated according to their “levels of generality”, in so far as the most general of codes, as well as codes which apply to more circumscribed groups of films ultimately function as signifiers, whether of a simple, or composite kind (Andrew 1976: 226). For example, Metz regards the panorama shot as a general code because it is not, in principle, restricted to any specific kind of film (even if it is not found in all films), nor is its function restricted to one kind of signification – sometimes it merely serves to show or “reveal” a land- sea- or cityscape, while on other occasions it can function directionally, enabling viewers to discern the movement of a person, an animal, an aeroplane or a car against a panoramic backdrop. As a general cinematic code, panoramic movement distinguishes film from still photography.

In contrast to general codes, particular cinematic codes enable one to differentiate among different film genres, periods in film-history, and the distinctive styles of different directors as *auteurs* (Andrew 1976: 226). Who can fail to identify the codes (horses, cattle, wide-brimmed hats, revolvers in hip-holsters, gunfights, and so on) that communicate to viewers that they are watching a “cowboy film”, or the vampire-code(s) – including incisors-turned-fangs, pale-complexioned, black-cloaked figures, wooden stakes, and so on – which communicate the fact that one is confronted by a “vampire film”? And even if it is less often recognised as a distinct genre – judging by relevant film reviews – *film noir* is marked by a cluster of unmistakable signifiers-as-codes, such as unconventional detective types, fedora hats, Venetian blinds, chiaroscuro lighting, cigarette-smoking *femme fatales* and incoherent plots. Silent movies as belonging to an identifiable historical period, project the code from which their name derives via their “silence” and the use of written text between scenes, among other things, and *auteur*-directors are recognisable by many particular, differentiating codes, including certain preoccupations and predilections. David Lynch, for example, has a penchant for the grotesque in his films, while Alfred Hitchcock’s films teem with psychoanalytically relevant themes, such as “symptomatic behaviour” on the part of characters, which reveals repressed trauma from their past.

In addition to all of these kinds of cinematic codes, one can distinguish many subcodes (particular “solutions” to all the coding problems in cinema) within each of them, such as the many different varieties of acting (in different genres, or in different periods of film history; compare the acting in *Casablanca* with that in more recent films) as a

general fiction-film code (Andrew 1976: 227), or different kinds of camera movement or different camera angles introduced at specific moments in film history (think of the innovative work done in this respect by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*).

In light of what has been said so far, it appears to me that what is known as the syntagmatic axis of meaning, on the one hand, and the paradigmatic axis of meaning, on the other – discussed earlier – are nothing other than what Metz and other film-semiologists would refer to as “general codes” of a certain kind. After all, if viewers make sense of what is communicated through cinematic image-sequences by interpreting these on the basis of “what *follows* what” (syntagmatic), and, concomitantly, in terms of “what *belongs* with what”, that is, difference and similarity (paradigmatic axis), these are arguably the most fundamental “cinelological codes” for the “decoding” or interpretation of film. Admittedly, they are not cinema-specific codes, because they operate elsewhere, too, for instance in speech and in literature, but they are sufficiently fundamental for the creation as well as the reception of film – which is to say, for film-communication – for it to be unthinkable without them.

‘MOVEMENT-IMAGE’, ‘TIME-IMAGE’, AND ‘CINEAESTHESIS’

I would like to argue that one could go further than this semiological thinking about how signification or meaning-generation works in cinema (which really comprises the basis for the way film communicates), by drawing on the highly original work of Gilles Deleuze concerning what he calls classical cinema of the “movement-image” (1986) and modern cinema of the “time-image” (2005),⁴ respectively. It is not a matter of Deleuze’s work invalidating the insights of thinkers like Metz;⁵ rather, he places semiological and semiotic considerations within a new horizon of meaning – one that changes one’s conception of the way film communicates. One might say that the notion of the *movement-image* in cinema enables one to grasp that film does not simply communicate specific “contents” or “messages” (supposedly from a director to an audience), but communicates a novel way of perceiving the world as one of “moving images”, namely through the dislocating “mechanical eye” of the camera, which decentres the sight belonging to “normal” human embodiment, freeing motion for the first time from anthropocentric vision. Even more radically, the cinema of the *time-image* explores, and in so doing, communicates, a sense of time as that which is constitutive of subjectivity as such, and which cinema is in a unique position to address experimentally. The cinema of the time-image repeats what Kant did in the eighteenth century, when he reversed the Aristotelian dictum that “time is the measure of motion” (which grants movement primacy over time, as still visualised in analogue watches), by making time the fundamental, constitutive form of being-human in the world (Deleuze 1999).

These insights on Deleuze’s part into the philosophical and communicational significance of cinema enable one to understand and interpret specific films in terms of distinct kinds of treatment of images, something that gives new meaning to the idea of communication via cinematic signifiers and codes. For one thing, if there is a cinematic mode which constitutes, that is, “en-codes” images in terms of a movement freed from

the primary perspective of the human eye, it would make sense to assume that, for audiences to make sense of “movement-image” films, they first had (and still have) to “de-code” such movies at a fundamental level – where “de-coding” would mean understanding or “translating” (what were then) novel modes of visual representation through techniques such as cutting, suture, panning, montage, tracking and zooming into their familiar, life-world counterparts.

If one considers that Deleuze regards the cinema of the movement-image to have been what characterised the first great “wave” of films produced in the first half of the twentieth century, it should be clear that, by now, every viewer is familiar with the interpretive conventions for decoding this (sometimes dominant) aspect of films. Today, very few (if any) viewers fail to understand that, when a cine-camera shot zooms in on a running cheetah, keeping the animal, with its legs moving rapidly, in the frame while excluding its prey from view, it is covering ground fast, instead of marking time, as it were. But this is a specific visual (silent) film code that viewers had to learn first – it is doubtful whether the first audiences that witnessed something like this would immediately have grasped how they should decode such a shot, not to mention one of a car, a locomotive, or an elephant ostensibly charging towards the audience. Moreover, from these considerations it is apparent that these movement-images instantiated what I have dubbed a certain distinctive “cinelagic”, to which I should add – given that (“cine-)logic” still, unavoidably, carries the imprint of the superiority attributed to the (abstract) “word” (*logos*) over the (concrete) image – a recognition of its irreducible “cinaesthesia”, in the sense of the “aesthesia” (from *aisthanesthai*, the ancient Greek for “to perceive”) or perceptual principles proper to the encoding production as well as the decoding of cinematic signifiers of the movement-image kind. The homophonic qualities of “cinaesthesia” and “synaesthesia” further enrich this concept in the context of cinema. Something is said to have “synaesthetic” qualities when it draws on, or implicates more than one of the senses, for example the visual texture of a rock which reminds one of the appearance and the taste of honeycomb simultaneously, or Sibelius’s “synaesthetic” composition, *Finlandia*, which conjures up, via its auditory signification, visual images of Finland’s breathtaking landscapes. Hence, “cinaesthesia”, or the “kinaesthetic” qualities of movement-images (as Deleuze understands them) bring together perceptual qualities of images in a novel manner, never before experienced from the perspective of the human eye – that is, in principle not capable of being experienced before the cine-camera mediated the visually perceivable world in such a way that the centrality of the human eye was removed, and in its place the world of movement was presented through the impersonal “eye” (lens) of the camera.

A glance at the history of cinema confirms my claim, above, that fundamental “cinelagic” and “cinaesthetic” codes for making sense of what film (in this case movement-image film) communicates, first had to be learned. Referring to the first projection of Thomas Edison’s film images (which had previously been shown in “Kinetoscope” peepshows) onto a theatre screen in 1896, Griffith and Mayer (1971: 3) observe:

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These ‘wonderfully real and singularly exhilarating’ scenes were mostly moving photographs of standard vaudeville acts, and vaudeville houses, then in their heyday, became the first home of the movies. For a time the new invention took the place of the star turn. There was something marvellous and magical about even routine acts when they were blown up by the camera to ten times life size – and when they involved the onlooker in a new physical experience. The distance between the movie viewer and what happens on the screen is in a state of perpetual flux. He is either drawn into the midst of the action or the action comes toward or recedes away from him. In 1896, this was a new and godlike experience.

If it is not yet clear from this excerpt (as it should be) that the experience of film-images projected onto a screen was sufficiently novel to disorientate people’s “normal” visual perception, then Griffith and Mayer’s (1971: 5) reference to the striking occurrence of audiences in 1896 “shrieking in fear” when they saw the image of a train speeding towards them on the screen, should convey the point that the “movement-image” disrupted everyday viewing experiences so radically that the key to understanding or decoding what these moving images were communicating first had to be acquired at a “cinelological” and “cinaesthetic” level.⁶ And in the process, while confronting them with images embodying movement as something liberated from its customary substantialist bias (that is, the uncritical belief that things or objects exist primarily as independent substances, and movement is somehow dependent on this)⁷ according to Deleuze, classical cinema did not give audiences “direct” access to a cinematic experience of time, but kept it in the background, guarding the primacy of movement. Claire Colebrook (2002: 50) elaborates as follows on the difference between cinema of the movement-image and its time-image counterpart:

In the cinema of the movement-image the flow of time is sensed as that which lies above and beyond any of the divergent movements. In the time-image we sense duration directly, not derived from movement... its becoming is positive: for we confront becoming itself, not as an indirect whole of all the composed mobile sections. And this non-dialectical or positive becoming also has a different political orientation. It does not just free us from fixed images by indicating the flow of history from which we have emerged; it presents the creative flow of time as becoming or the opening to the future.

But does this make sense? Already with the cinema of movement-images a major mind-shift is required – one is so accustomed to thinking of the visually perceivable world as comprising substantially enduring things that it is hard to adjust one’s mind to the thought that, in Colebrook’s words (2002: 51): “Life is movement and becoming from which distinct things are actualized.” It requires nothing less than the metaphysical revolution, from the assumption of a static universe within which local movements occur (underlying Aristotle’s ancient Greek world-view) to that of a universe in constant motion to begin with (underlying Galileo’s and Newton’s modern world-view), to do perceptual justice to what classical cinema communicates through its

moving images. Against the everyday prejudice concerning the secondariness of movement, Deleuze claims (phrasing it in the language of the movement-image; 1986: 58):

There is no moving body [*mobile*] which is distinct from executed movement. There is nothing moved which is distinct from the received movement. Every thing, that is to say every image, is indistinguishable from its actions and reactions...

In the cinema of the movement-image human beings discover movement as such (Deleuze 2005: 33-35) – movement which is no longer inescapably linked with “centred” perception; movement that is “abnormal” in so far as it can be presented via codes such as speeding-up, slowing-down, reversal, paradoxical motionlessness-in-motion (recall the example of the cheetah running, with its body remaining in “the same place” relative to the audience). Hence one could say (Deleuze 2005: 35):

The movement-image does not reproduce a world, but constitutes an autonomous world, made up of breaks and disproportion, deprived of all its centres, addressing itself as such to a viewer who is in himself no longer centre of his own perception.

This was a far cry from the lifeworld-experience of moving things, and hence (as remarked earlier) necessitated audiences’ re-calibration of their perceptual apparatus, as it were. A more radical step is taken by the cinema of the time-image, which presents, in audio-visual images, the temporal conditions of possibility of a natural and social world. If, in ordinary perception, as well as in the cinema of the movement-image, time remains subordinated to movement (in accordance with Aristotle’s precept that time is the measure of motion), Deleuze points out that, for the time-image to become manifest (2005: 35):

...aberrant movement calls into question the status of time as indirect representation or number of movement, because it evades the relationships of number. But, far from time itself being shaken, it rather finds this the moment to surface directly, to shake off its subordination in relation to movement and to reverse this subordination. Conversely, then, a direct presentation of time does not imply the halting of movement, but rather the promotion of aberrant movement.

Whether one subscribes to the (premodern) Aristotelian conception of time as “the measure of motion”, or to the (modern) Kantian corrective that time has primacy over movement, it seems clear that, for Deleuze, movement and time are somehow “connected” – or, to put it differently, the one always implicates the other. Otherwise the time-image could not have emerged from the “aberrant movements” encountered in the cinema of the movement-image. Such “aberrant movements” therefore seem to me to mark a transitional point from one cinaesthetic context to another, where that of the time-image requires a different kind of decoding than that of the movement-image.

What would such aberrant movement, which becomes the aperture through which the time-image emerges, be, and how would one decode it as a “direct” intimation of time in the image or image-sequence concerned?⁸ Deleuze (2005: 35) gives one a clue where he refers to those image-sequences (already alluded to above) that are reversed, speeded

up, slowed down, non-distancing of frontally shown moving bodies (such as a facial shot of a person running), ongoing alterations in proportion and scale (such as the alternation between close-up “sections” and panoramic shots of mountains), and “false continuities of movement”. A reversed image-sequence of a woman ostensibly walking backwards into a shop presents one with “false movement” of a certain kind, and the time-image announces itself in one’s intuitive awareness that such a sequence implies “going back in time”. The kind of speeded-up image-sequences of plants growing at an impossible rate (from bud to flower in a matter of seconds) encountered in David Attenborough’s BBC nature films, again, are “direct” intimations of time. So are impossible image-sequence continuities where a series of shots culminates in one where the hero – Indiana Jones, for example – after running along a hang-bridge strung across a deep ravine, the anchoring ropes of which are being cut by the villain, leaps forward at the moment when the bridge collapses and just manages to reach the side, with his hands clinging to the edge. In these instances it is not a matter of the movement-image being absent, but of the time-image being liberated from its dominant function, and announcing itself as the interpretive matrix within which all other signifiers as codes have their provenance. In Deleuze’s words (2005: 36): “What aberrant movement reveals is time as everything, as ‘infinite opening’, as anteriority over all normal movement defined as motivity...: time has to be anterior to the controlled flow of every action...”

CONCLUSION

In light of the above I would like to argue that both the cinema of the movement-image and that of the time-image as characterised by Deleuze have – that is, communicate – distinct “synaesthetic” and “cinelological” qualities, which audiences (that is, communities) have to learn to decode, lest the implications of these images escape them. And for society – or, on a smaller scale, communities – to be ignorant of what appears to me to function as fundamental cinematic codes, would be tantamount to be the film-counterpart of illiteracy, recognisable by a kind of iconic anaesthesia regarding film. No community can afford to be guilty of such an iconicity in the early twenty-first century, a time when icon-interpretation constitutes a significant part of every urban dweller’s life.

But there is an even more important reason for taking the implications of Deleuze’s elaboration on especially the time-image seriously. At present the world is in the grip of a recent (2008) financial crisis-induced economic recession, something that *ought* to galvanise people (consumers) worldwide into organised resistance to capitalist greed and exploitation (which is demonstrably to blame for the crisis). I say “ought to” because, as Foucault has persuasively argued, the mere “knowledge” of being exploited is not sufficient for people to resist the dominant discourse of neo-liberal capitalism; a fundamental re-subjectivisation in terms of a completely different discourse of individual autonomy is required before this is even conceivable.⁹ And yet, as Claire Colebrook remarks (in the passage quoted earlier) about Deleuze’s cinema of the time-image: “It does not just free us from fixed images by indicating the flow of history from

which we have emerged; it presents the creative flow of time as becoming or the opening to the future.” In other words, an understanding of, or ability to decode time-images such as those discussed above, should alert viewers to the awareness that humans are fundamentally temporally constituted beings, and that this creates the ever-present possibility to change what has been, into something different – something, perhaps, liberating with regard to dominant discourses and the hold that they seem to have on people’s behaviour.

Endnotes

¹ This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of kitsch cinema and its “ideological” effects on the vast numbers of moviegoers worldwide. In this regard, see Olivier (2003).

² Most of what is discussed here regarding the materials of film and the manner in which meaning is generated by means of relations between signifiers and signifieds, as well as the two “axes” of meaning – the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic – may be found in Andrew’s (1976: 212-241) overview of the semiological work of Christian Metz in cinema theory.

³ That is, when a signifier or a set of signifiers is shifted from one context to another, it takes the “original” meaning along with it, but in addition acquires new meanings in every successive context. See in this regard Olivier (2005), especially regarding the itinerary of Einstein’s famous formula, $E = mc^2$ from one context to another.

⁴ It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of Deleuze’s two books on cinema and its implications for philosophy in a mere article – for example to his classification of different kinds of cinematic images within each category of cinema, or to his reading of Bergson and of Peirce (whose semiotic categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness correlate with Deleuze’s “affection-image”, “action-image” and “relation-image”, respectively) which feeds into his own philosophy of cinema, or to the significance of his concepts, “percept” and “affect”, for understanding the workings of cinema. That will have to wait for an opportunity that allows a more lengthy treatment; here I can merely focus on the most general, albeit (in my judgment) profoundly significant aspects of his work on cinema.

⁵ It is true that there are fundamental differences among them, of course, but one can read the two together, as I try to show here. See, for example, Andrew (1976: 228-229) on Metz’s position regarding the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of meaning in film, and Deleuze (2005: 27-28), where he denies that the movement-image has anything to do with paradigm and syntagm. As far as the latter two concepts are concerned, I believe that one can indeed use them in a manner compatible with Deleuze’s two kinds of cinematic images.

⁶ Dana Polan (1986: 66-67) mentions another very telling, intra-cinematic illustration of (cinema’s self-reflective awareness of) the unavoidable need to learn the codes of cinema, lest the innocent viewer remain flummoxed by incomprehensible image-sequences. In Godard’s film, *Les Carabiniers* (1963), the character of Michel-Ange enters a cinema theatre for the first time, and, dumbfounded but excited by the images

on the silver screen – especially one of a naked woman taking a bath – walks to the front of the theatre and tries to peep over the edge of the bathtub at her, in the process rupturing the screen to reveal the grimy wall behind it. As Polan points out, this scene is simultaneously (self-) critical of the limitations of film as a concatenation of mere images masquerading as “reality”, and caught within the paradoxical limitations of film as, inescapably, always, a spectacle that merely “shows” something, in the process justifying it and undermining cinema’s own self-criticism.

⁷ Lacan (1977: 17), too, draws attention to this (falsifying) substantialist bias in ordinary perception.

⁸ Elsewhere (Olivier 2009) I have elaborated on the interpretation of several films (including Roeg’s *Bad Timing* and Gavin Hood’s *Rendition*) in terms of Deleuze’s cinema of the time-image.

⁹ See in this regard Olivier (2007), for an examination of Foucault’s concept of discourse in relation to a discursive strategy against the present bureaucratisation and corporatisation of universities in South Africa.

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