

Olaf Berg

## When Benjamin meets Deleuze at the Cinema: Thinking History in a Filmic Mode.<sup>1</sup>

Our world is full of audio-visual media. Cinema, television, DVDs, internet, computer games are not only means of entertainment but also important sources of knowledge. So why shouldn't we think about doing history in film? This is not an innocent question about the timely presentation of historical insights. The historian's choice of the form of his writing, the tropes of his discourse, do have a strong impact on the resulting history he constructs, Hayden White showed in *Metahistory* as early as 1973.<sup>2</sup> Thus, thinking about film as a means of historical research implies another question: what influence might have a filmic production of history on the construction of history itself?

By formulating this question I have to admit that there aren't many historians that think about film this way. *Film as a source* for historical research and the *History of film* itself have become quite widespread and accepted in scholarship. The possibility to *present History in film* at least is seriously discussed among scholars and some historians have participated in such film productions and reflected on their experiences. But to consider *Film as Historical Research*, to think of film as a tool of production of original historical insights, to think about constructing history in filmic forms, seems to be a very weird idea to historians.

In the search for an intellectual companion in this venture to vindicate the possibility of creating original historical insight in a visual medium, another heretic to historical conventions comes to mind: Walter Benjamin. "History decays into images, not into stories." (N11, 4) he stated in his notes on *The Arcades Project*. And in his theses *On the Concept of History* he wrote: "The

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was given at the "Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity" conference at the UTS in Sydney 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*, 1 ed. (Baltimore, 1973).

past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again."<sup>3</sup> If these statements would refer to the flitting by images of film, I would only be too happy. But I have to admit, they refer to the image as a way of cognition that Benjamin calls "dialectic at a standstill".

Benjamin transposed onto history his theory of linguistic images he had developed in the *city images*<sup>4</sup>, as Sven Kramer has shown.<sup>5</sup> Benjamin's concept of image undermines the division between painting and poetry defined by Gotthold E. Lessing in his *Laokoon*. Following Lessing, the painting has to retain the action in its most concise moment, while the poetry can depict bodies only by dissolving them into action.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin in contrast insists also for language and scripture on the pictorial element of standstill and coexistence.

Although Benjamin was concerned with cinema he never systematically applied his concept of the dialectic image to film. Maybe because he saw, that in the cinema the images began to run, but at the cost of their subjugation to a movement of timely succession. To create dialectical images in film, the images need to be freed of the mechanical time. They need a standstill that liberates their inner movement and allows a superposition of time.

How can such an image that is independent of a timely succession be conceptualized in film? Fifty years after Benjamin's notes, Gilles Deleuze approaches cinema with a philosophic interest and distinguishes it into two

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols., vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA & London, England, 2003). 390.

<sup>4</sup> A loose series of essays on different cities Benjamin wrote between 1925 and 1930.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sven Kramer, "Stillstellung oder Verflüssigung. Schrift-Bild-Konstellationen bei Walter Benjamin und Peter Weiss," *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* 10 (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie," in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke Bd. 6. Kunsttheoretische und kunsthistorische Schriften*, ed. Albert von Schirnding (München, 1974 (1766)), 103.

main categories: the movement-image and the time-image.<sup>7</sup> He identifies the movement-image in the classical cinema that continues to be the main form of Hollywood cinema. It is characterized by a continuum of space and time – a movement from a starting point to its final destination. After the Second World War a new cinema emerged which Deleuze identifies as time-image, characterized by its rupture with the logic of succession. According to Deleuze its irrational cuts and the asynchronous relation between visual and sonic elements allows the time to emerge directly in the film.

In the movement-image time is dependent on movement through space, the sensory-motor link of action and reaction that binds the images to create the filmic world. In contrast the time-image lets different times coexist, brings past, present and future into a superposition. It breaks the sensory-motor link and time defines the movements of the film.

My initial question about doing history in film led me to unfold a whole complex of subsequent questions about the time relations involved in history and in images. In the following I will concentrate on possible implications of time relations established by images on the time relations established in history.

### History and the superposition of time

As the reader might imagine Deleuze's proposition of the coexistence of time within the time-image is an outright provocation to practically every historian. It challenges the basic topic of classical historical research: that the past is a successive series of past presents connected with our present through a series of processes that transformed the successive past worlds into the one we live in. It seems that as historians we really do need the sensory-motor link that leads us to connect one situation with another by reconstructing the set of actions that transforms the former into the latter.

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, Barbara Habberjam Hugh Tomlinson trans., 1 ed. (London, 1986), Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta trans. (Minneapolis, 1989).

This notion is valid for the more traditional *political history* focused on the idea that "important white men make history" as well as for the more recent *social history* that aims to take into account the behavior of ordinary people and the structures that lead to historical changes. The differentiation between political history and social history coincides with Deleuze's differentiation between the "small form" and the "large form" of the movement-image: While the "small form" as well as the political history focuses on the action that leads to a new situation which in turn leads the hero to new action, the "large form" focuses on the structure, the situation that induces some specific action which transforms the situation into a new one. In both models time is a sensory-motor link, a measure of movement and History, the succession of events, one after the other.

On the other hand, the production of a coexistence of time is exactly what historians do when they try to reconstruct the past. Some historians even talk about "historical reality". How can something that is past and gone be reality, something present and vivid, if not by a superposition of time? Thus the confusion of time seems very deeply inscribed into the historian's work. It is linked to the form of relation to the past historians used to work with.

The foundation of history on facts about past events is crucial to separate history from fiction. For they are *past* events, these events have passed away. We know of these past events only because of the evidence they left behind to the present. This evidence are part of our present world, not of the past. Even though they are originally created in the past, the only possible access to them is a present one. Considering these evidence as facts about the past implies a hidden constructive act: The translation of the present encounter with the evidences into facts about the past. Thus this constructive act also implies a superposition of time. The facts about past events are constructed from facts about present evidence and then reintroduced into the present as History, a narrative that presents these constructed facts as real facts.

To put things more clearly: I do not question the existence of a past. I do not doubt that somehow our present is influenced by past events, and more specifically past struggles. What I am questioning is the form in which we do connect ourselves with the past. What I'm questioning is the assertion that

the remaining evidences of past events can grant us any transparent access to the past that allows us to look at it as if it were a glance through the window onto the present we live in. There is nothing real about the past. In contrast, History only exists in reality. Thus, History in my opinion rather is a mode of appropriation of the *present* then of the past.

In traditional History this appropriation of the present is bound to an act of reification. The once vivid and permanently changing past is reified to fixed facts: Facts that can be used as reference for the claim of historical truth and accuracy. The past has to become a dead past in order to be a set of references. This act of reification contradicts the common claim of historians to narrate history as if it were real, to present history as a "window to the past".

This look through the window is a basic *dispositiv* of the production of knowledge in modernity. The philosopher Wolfgang Fritz Haug describes it as the "Camera Obscura of the consciousness"<sup>8</sup>. He shows that Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* uses the window of his study as an element to establish his discourse of consciousness<sup>9</sup>. The window functions at the same time as separator and passageway, it produces a visual abstraction, a pure appearance, it prevents him from stepping out onto the street and getting himself and his consciousness involved into the practice of daily life. I shall call this contradiction between the fixation of facts and the vivid telling of history as a process "The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of History". Just as in physics it is not possible to define the location and the impulse of a particle both at the same time, in History there is an uncertainty between the determination of a fact and the construction of its history. The former needs a fixation, the latter implies a movement.

It seems, the only way to handle this contradiction is to introduce a teleology into history. As the teleology determines the movement of the fixated

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<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Die Camera obscura des Bewußtseins. Kritik der Subjekt/Objekt-Artikulation im Marxismus," in *Die Camera obscura der Ideologie. Philosophie - Ökonomie - Wissenschaft*, ed. Stuart Hall, Wolfgang Fritz Haug, and Veikko Pietilä, Argument-Sonderband AS 70 (Berlin, 1984).

fact, it is possible to determine its movement without measuring it. The dead facts become vivid in history because their "life" is the progressive development of history itself. The truth of this development is proven by the present we all can see as its result. History thus becomes affirmative of the present. All critical notions and all struggles of the past that were not won are lost and gone for ever. The future seems only possible as the prolongation of this one single past.

To believe in this "truth" one just has to forget the little detail that the foundation of all this history is based on the facts about past events which the historian has constructed out of the present he or she lives in. This may explain the rigorous resistance against the idea of a superposition of time among historical scholarship. In order to make the founding superposition invisible it is so very important to divide past and present and to prevent by all means an overt superposition of time. This overt superposition would uncover that invisible one, which is the basis of the whole act of constructing history this way.

How to escape a teleological history that will tear us into a catastrophe?

Walter Benjamin criticized this kind of History as "additive: It musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time"<sup>10</sup>. In his *Theses on the Concept of History* and in the fragments of his project on the Parisian arcades he insists on an image of the past that flashes up in the present, just for one short moment. History, he says, is not past and the materialist historian's work is not to "show things as they really were". History is not a process of progress but a constellation of danger. The continuity of history, i.e. its sensory-motor link, is a catastrophic progress for Benjamin which urgently has to be broken up. The revolution is not the glorious fulfillment of history but a messianic break-out from the catastrophic progress. Benjamin is looking for a possible escape and the images of the past are crucial for this task. He considers them as "dialectical images" or as an "dialectic at a stand still".

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<sup>9</sup> Descartes called it *res cogitans*.

<sup>10</sup> Thesis XVII of *On the Concept of History* in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4:396.

Benjamin considers his method as dialectical, but it is a different dialectic compared to that of Hegel. In the place of the progress of history he puts the actualization of an image. Instead of the relation between past [Vergangenheit] and present [Gegenwart] he talks about the what-has-been [Gewesenen] and the now-time [Jetztzeit]. While the former establishes a pure time relation, the latter establishes a dialectical one: "not of timely but of visual nature".<sup>11</sup> Instead of a phenomenological entity [Wesenheit] he introduces images with a "historical index" that defines the time at which they are readable.

To bring the ideas of Benjamin, anchored in the Marxist dialectical tradition of Critical Theory, in resonance with those of Deleuze, based in many aspects on the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson - criticized by Max Horkheimer as a metaphysic idealist<sup>12</sup> -, is without doubt the most difficult aspect of this contribution. When I try to read Deleuze dialectically I rely on Ian Buchanan's suggestion that "treating Deleuze as a dialectician is not so much a matter of reading him against the grain as wondering how his work may be conceptualised in practical terms."<sup>13</sup> It is their insistence on practices that links Benjamin to Deleuze. Both authors situate themselves inside a vivid and fluid world trying to reorder and invent things and concepts from within by using them. Both try to escape an teleological concept of change.

Deleuze doesn't feel at ease with the idea that the present is only a chain link, squeezed between past and future. When Deleuze argues with Bergson that there can not be any past, if it weren't through a separation that takes place in the very moment of the present, he unveils the necessary superposition of time inherent to any account of history.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Arcades Project*, convolute N3,1 in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M, 1972ff). Vol. V:578. and „Erste Notizen“ Q°21, V:1037f

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer, "Buchbesprechung: Bergson, Henri, Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2 (1933), Max Horkheimer, "Zu Bergsons Metaphysik der Zeit," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 3 (1934).

<sup>13</sup> Ian Buchanan, *Deleuzism. A Metacommentary* (Edinburgh, 2000). 194.

In order to address this aspect instead of suppressing it Benjamin's conception of a dialectic at a standstill can be helpful. History has to include the past events not as reference to fixed facts but as a referring relation to a shifting field of forces. A relation that abolishes, includes and supersedes in itself [aufheben] the events, that definitely have vanished. But this threefold inclusion can not be rendered as the development of an transcendental principle as Hegel thought it. It is a matter of reconfiguration of the elements immanent to the established relation. This relation can not be arbitrary but it neither is fixed. It can not deny the traces of past events existing in the present but it can include all the potential of past struggles that have been lost. For it to use this trace to establish a relation and not to construct fixed facts it does not need to create a teleological progress between past and present.

This relation is directed to the present in order to appropriate this present and to transform it. Thus it has no need to separate the past from the present but uses the superposition of past and present to open a critical perspective to the struggles of our times. As Benjamin once wrote, "The true image of the past flits by. [...] For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image."<sup>14</sup>

A main concern of Deleuze in the period he wrote his film-books was the relation between "the visible and the sayable"<sup>15</sup>, as Mirjam Schaub addresses the issue in the subtitle of her monograph on Deleuze. The visible and the sayable, she argues with Deleuze, do function in different systems guided by different rules. In contrast to the sayable the visible does not require successive actualization. While the linguistic sign as concretion of the sayable refers to an external entity, the image as the concretion of the visible includes all meaning in itself, but it never reveals its meaning at once, because its meaning is always complicated, always in a state of emergency.

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<sup>14</sup> Thesis V of *On the Concept of History* in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Vol 4:390f.

<sup>15</sup> Mirjam Schaub, *Gilles Deleuze im Kino. Das Sichtbare und das Sagbare*, 1 ed. (München, 2003).

Deleuze's taxonomy of filmic images shows a surprising coincidence with Benjamin's philosophy of history. Benjamin's critique of the additive fill-up of homogeneous and empty time by the Historism reminds of the Deleuzian critique of an understanding of film as the succession of single images that come into movement only a posteriori and his notion that "the whole is no more an addition than time is a succession of presents"<sup>16</sup>. The dialectical image, which makes the movement stand still and which "is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation"<sup>17</sup> is equivalent to the time-image in which "the actual image must enter into relation with its *own* virtual image as such"<sup>18</sup>. And as History includes in itself [in sich aufhebt] the past in its relation to it, the time-image includes as its first dimension the movement-image.

The time-image is capable of bringing the historical relation of the present to the past into a constellation of a dialectical image. As Deleuze says: "the cinema [is] becoming, no longer an undertaking of recognition [reconnaissance], but of knowledge [connaissance]"<sup>19</sup>.

Benjamin's dialectical image keeps the ambiguity between the definitely passed event of the past and the index of actuality, the historical images carry with them. In a similar way the time-image keeps the ambiguity of the actual and the virtual image. They become indistinguishable without losing their difference. The time-images oscillate between actuality and virtuality like the flashing up of dialectical images. Thus they refuse a fixation, without however being arbitrary. They produce a referentiality without fixing a referent. They are images of practice, better a practice of the images, that oppose themselves to the modern discourse on consciousness, each in his own way.

A filmic history based on the visible has the potential to reinsert the oppressed part of the past into history and therefore into the present. Hork-

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<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin trans. (Cambridge, MA & London, England, 2002). N3,1:463.

<sup>18</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*. 273.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

heimer insisted on the impossibility of indemnification of past injustice in his critique of Bergson as well as in a letter to Benjamin that comments his Arcades-Project. No future can revive the man who had been hit to death, he says.<sup>20</sup> History in dialectical time-images does not deny this aspect of the past. As the time-image includes the movement-image as its first dimension, such a visible history includes the succession as its first dimension.

But this visual history can even go further and organize our relation to the past in a way it empowers today's practices to direct its forces to a project that interrupts the supposedly necessary progress. Instead of a progress that is nothing else than always more of the same, it opens a world in which maybe the "not-yet" of the past that Ernst Bloch thought about can find a place of its realization.

My question about the impact of a filmic writing of history on the production of historical knowledge has led me to discuss Deleuze's film-books in a context of Benjamin's critical theory of history. I argued that it is possible to understand Deleuze's philosophy as dialectic in a Benjaminian sense of dialectic, not in that of Hegel. A dialectic that isn't based on a teleological premise, but on a visual one. This premise given, many similarities appeared between the two concepts of Deleuze and Benjamin.

Considering film as historical research implies a re-assembly of the relation between past and present that helps make film a machine embodying the world rather than representing the scientist's gaze on things. Based on present evidence of past events that definitely vanished, History becomes a practice of appropriation of the present rather than a representation of "how it really was". Therefore the potential of film to organize its material in a way that no longer subjugates it to chronology but fills the cinematic space with Benjamin's historical *now-time* gains importance. Film can help us to construct a critical historical knowledge that aims to overcome the unbearable state of modern capitalist societies.

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*. N8,1:471. Cf. Horkheimer, "Zu Bergsons Metaphysik.", p. 340f

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