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Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin and the Challenges of Film considered as Historical Research

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When I confirmed my participation at this conference I had just finished a study on "Film considered as Historical Research". My contribution to this conference was easily elaborated, I thought, it could be a simple résumé of that investigation. When I received the list with the other participants I realized that it wasn't going to be that easy. Writing my study in a context of Historical Science somehow made me feel like the one-eyed among the blind with reference to the little knowledge I have about Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin. At this conference instead I feel like the one-eyed historian among a couple of fully educated philosophers and specialists on Deleuze. Even worse, I feel a little bit like a poacher in territories that aren't mine.

Trying to integrate my research into the context of this conference I have no choice but to transform my results into a new research project, trying to expose my limited access to the philosophy of Deleuze, Benjamin and others to the in-depth knowledge present at this conference. While I usually have to explain an author's access to film about whom the majority of historians have presumably never heard about, here I should try to explain more basically the historian's view on the problematic of film and writing History to philosophers and scientists of literature who are common to the ideas of Gilles Deleuze. Therefore my lecture will not be a simple conclusion of my past research but a presentation of these results as a work in progress.

I started my study on "Film considered as Historical Research" with Hayden White's well known consideration that 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.¹ I asked myself what influence a "filmic writing" might have on the construction of history.

By formulating this question I realized that there aren't many historians that think about film in this way. *Film as a source* for historical research and the *History of film* itself have become to some degree 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.

I then started reading Gilles Deleuze's "cinema-books". As you might imagine Deleuze's thesis of the coexistence of time within the time-image, that breaks with the idea of a sensorimotor bond of the movement-image, is very provocative to almost any historian. It challenges the basic topic of classical historical research: that the past is a successive series of passed presents connected with our present by 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 sensorimotor bond that leads us to connect one situation with another by reconstructing the set of actions that transforms the former into the latter.

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 "big 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 "big

¹ See Hayden White, *Metahistory. Die historische Einbildungskraft im 19. Jahrhundert in Europa*, Peter Kohlhaas trans. (Frankfurt/M, 1994 (1973)).

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 sensorimotor bond, 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". If something is historical, it is past and gone, so how can it be reality, something present and vivid, if not by a juxtaposition 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 past facts is crucial to separate history from fiction. For they are *past* facts, these facts have passed away. We know of these past facts only because of the evidence they left behind to the present. Using these past facts as the foundation for the reconstruction of history implies a constructive act. The reconstruction of history only reconstructs on the basis of facts that first have to be constructed from the evidence we encounter in the present. Thus this constructive act also implies a juxtaposition of time. The past facts are constructed from present facts and then reintroduced into the present as History, a narrative that presents these past facts as real facts.

To put things more clearly: I do not question that there has been a past and that something happened in the past. I do not doubt that somehow our present is a result of past events, and more specifically past struggles. What I'm questioning is the form in which we do connect ourselves with the past. What I'm questioning is the assertion that there is any transparent access to this past that allows us to look at it as if it were a look 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 form 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 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 to 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 disposition [dispositiv] of the production of knowledge in modernity. Wolfgang Fritz Haug described it as the "Camera Obscura of the consciousness"². He showed that Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* uses the window of his study as an element to establish his discourse of consciousness. 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 on the street and get 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. As in physics it is not possible to define the location and the impulse of a particle 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.

The only way to handle this contradiction is to introduce a teleology into history. As the teleology determines the movement of the fixated 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" we just have to forget the little detail that the foundation of all this history is based on the past facts which the historian has constructed out of the present he or she lives in. This may explain the great resistance against the idea of a juxtaposition of time among historical schol-

² 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).

arship. In order to make the founding juxtaposition invisible it is so very important to divide past and present and to prevent by all means an overt juxtaposition of time. This overt juxtaposition would uncover that invisible one, which is the basis of the whole act of constructing history this way.

Walter Benjamin criticized this kind of History as "additive: It uses the mass of facts, to fill out the homogeneous and empty time"³. In his Theses on 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 sensorimotor bond, 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".

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"⁴. Instead of a phenomenological entity [Wesenheit] he introduces images with a "historical index" that defines the time at which they are readable.

Benjamin situates himself inside the world and tries to reorder things and concepts from within by using them. „Poised somewhere between philosophy and history, like Foucault, Benjamin puts historical practice at the center of

³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M, 1972ff). Vol. 1:702.

⁴ Ibid. Vol. V:578.

both intellectual inquiry and eventual social transformation", Vanessa R. Schwartz states on occasion of the English edition of the Arcades-Project.⁵

Without doubt it is the most difficult aspect of my work to merge the ideas of Benjamin, anchored in the Marxist dialectical tradition of the Critical Theory with that of Deleuze, based in many aspects on the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson which Max Horkheimer criticized as a metaphysical idealist. I'm not a philosopher and with the help of the profound knowledge present at this conference later on we may discuss this aspect more deeply. What I'm trying here is to get hold of Deleuze's thinking in the same manner he got hold of other thinkers, including Bergson: to use his ideas disrespecting what he himself might have meant them for.

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

In order to address this aspect instead of suppressing it, History has to include the past facts not as reference but as a referring relation that includes in itself [aufheben] the facts, that definitely have passed away. 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 uses this traces 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 oneself of this present and to transform it. Thus it has no need to separate the past from the present but uses the juxtaposition of past and present to open a critical perspective to the struggles of our times. As Benjamin once wrote, "The true im-

⁵ Vanessa Schwartz, R., "Walter Benjamin for Historians," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1723.

age of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. [...] 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.”⁶

A main concern of Deleuze in the period he wrote his film-books was the relation between “the visible and the sayable”⁷, as Mirjam Schaub addresses the issue in the subtitle of her monograph on Deleuze. The visible and the sayable, she argues, 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.

Deleuze’ 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 “it is just as wrong to claim that the whole is an addition as to claim that time is a succession of presents”⁸. 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.”⁹ is equivalent to the time-image in which “the actual image comes into relation to its *own* virtual image as such”¹⁰. 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 to bring the historical relation of the present to the past into a constellation of a dialectical image. As Deleuze says: “Film be-

⁶ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol I, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, These V.

⁷ Mirjam Schaub, *Gilles Deleuze im Kino. Das Sichtbare und das Sagbare*, 1 ed. (München, 2003).

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Das Zeit-Bild. Kino 2*, stw 1289 (Frankfurt/M, 1997). 53.

⁹ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol V:N3.

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Zeit-Bild*. 349.

comes a medium of cognition [Erkennen], and ceases to be a medium of recognition [Wiedererkennen]."¹¹

Considering film as Historical Research tends to adapt the perspective of practices and from this perspective History is a form of appropriation of the present. Therefore film does not have the task to represent the (imaginary) gaze of the historian on his (past) object, but it is about using film as a tool of forming the practices of appropriation.

Benjamin's now-time, that hit like a lizard into the present and its history, is equivalent to the opto and sono signs, that according to Deleuze transgress the movement-image towards the time-image. Just as the new signs don't need the movement-image as representation of the whole anymore, but on the contrary form and specify their own transparent materiality, the now-time bursts the continuity of time. The dialectical image keeps the ambiguity between the definitely passed 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. They exchange permanently and therefore are a permanent practice, that lets the time-image appear as especially apt and predestinated to form the form of history that is considered a practice of appropriation.

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. Horkheimer 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. His-

¹¹ Ibid. 33.

tory in dialectical time-images do 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 future 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. To produce history in dialectical time-images opens a possibility to conceptualize a history from the perspective of a practice that is based on the negation of the capitalist progress that only seems to be without alternative.

My question about the impact of a filmic writing of history on the production of historical knowledge has lead 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 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 past events that definitely vanished, History becomes a practice of appropriation of the present rather than a representation of "how it really was". This reduces the significance of the well-known problem of the lack of accuracy in presenting past facts in film and the ensuing need to fill the image with invented details. Rather, the enormous 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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