

# Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty: Cinema in its Continuous Rebirth

## *Deleuze e Merleau-Ponty: O Cinema em seu Renascimento Continuado*

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### ABSTRACT

Some of the most innovative and influential ideas in film theory in recent years are indebted to the works of Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is possible to feel the presence of their philosophies and respective investments in the theory of cinema throughout the affective and sensory turns that have taken over the reflection on the seventh art. However, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are generally seen as opposites. Our bet is in the reverse direction. Throughout the article, we trace a slippery movement which draws the philosophers close and distances them and, at the end, outlines a kind of alliance. What is envisioned is a way of seeing and venturing through cinema in its continuous rebirth.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty

### RESUMO

Algumas das ideias mais inovadoras e influentes da teoria do cinema nos últimos anos estão em dívida com as obras de Gilles Deleuze e Maurice Merleau-Ponty. É possível sentir a presença de suas filosofias e respectivos investimentos na teoria do cinema ao longo das reviravoltas afetivas e sensoriais que tomaram de assalto a reflexão sobre a sétima arte. Contudo, Deleuze e Merleau-Ponty são em geral vistos como opostos. Nossa aposta se faz no sentido contrário. Ao longo do artigo, traçamos um movimento escorregadio de aproximação e distanciamento que, ao final, esboça uma espécie de aliança. O que se vislumbra é uma maneira de ver e se aventurar pelo cinema em seu contínuo renascimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty

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SOME OF THE most innovative and influential hypotheses, paths, and ideas in film theory in recent years are indebted to the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze. Focusing on perception as an embodied and rooted experience, the first philosopher identified a convergence between phenomenology and cinema: a common intention to make us relearn how to see the world. The second imagined cinema not as a reflection or reproduction of something that already exists, but something like the emergence of a visionary critical activity, open to the Bergsonian universe of energies, processes, and intensities. It is possible to feel the presence of their philosophies and respective investments in film theory throughout the affective and sensorial upheavals that took reflection on the seventh art by storm.

What is curious is the blatant lack of interest in exploring a movement of approximation between these philosophers. In fact, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are generally seen as opposites. Deleuze (1985, p. 77) himself saw cinema as a radical alternative to the phenomenological theory of perception, rejecting the phenomenological accounts of cinematographic experience because, according to him, they equate *cinematographic perception* with *natural perception*. Phenomenology, in Deleuze's words, would be *pre-cinematographic*. The author of *The Movement-Image* (1985) and *The Time-Image* (1995) is right about alerting us to the foundationalist aspect that embarrasses Merleau-Ponty's initial phenomenology. And, in fact, Merleau-Ponty's approach in "The Film and the New Psychology" (1983)<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the interaction, continuity, and transition between the filmmaker, the cinema, and the spectator, although the philosopher is always looking for a plane in which these terms are intertwined – without ever meaning the same thing.

Despite Deleuze's comments and references to phenomenology in his film books and in some interviews, this article argues that, although, in general, Deleuze does not follow a phenomenological logic, at certain moments he crosses with phenomenology. With Bergsonian and Peircean inspiration, Deleuze's cinematographic approach explores the image by two explanatory prisms – the movement-image and the time-image – which, in turn, are broken down into several subdivisions (image-perception, image-affection, crystal-image, etc.). According to Deleuze (1985) himself, his work is stated as "an attempt at the classification of images and signs" (p. 7) as in the elaboration of a taxonomy, that is, a classification of cinematographic images and signs. However, phenomenology, as Boaz Hagin (2011) tells us, "is not absent from Deleuze's Bergsonian taxonomy of images" (p. 264), and Deleuze even goes so far as to claim that Bergson mischaracterized cinema and that "phenomenology is right" (Deleuze, 1985, p. 12).

Furthermore, if we take as a starting point Deleuze's requirements for a good transcendental philosophy – in short, immanence and difference –, we will be

<sup>1</sup> Conference presented by Merleau-Ponty at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC) in Paris on March 13, 1945, the same year of publication of his most famous work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. This famous essay shares with the first two works by the philosopher – the other is *The Structure of Behavior* (2006b) – a posture of questioning about the legacy left by modern rationalism, about the split between the corporeal and reflective thought, about the abandonment of the seeing and feeling in the name of the thought of seeing and feeling.

led to recognize that Merleau-Ponty's work is not homogeneous from beginning to end, and that at the end of his life, the phenomenologist realized that his first works had not been able to conceive the unity of the phenomenal body and the objective body, and outlined a different rapprochement with cinema. The subject, decentralized in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1994), is dissolved in *The Visible and Invisible* (2000). This is one of the reasons why the latter Merleau-Ponty should be situated on the limits of phenomenology (Barbaras, 2014) and would be best described as related to ontology.

I am aware that proposing this approximation/articulation is risky, and I am always tempted to see analogies – which, on a more rigorous level, do not hold up – or to describe the theories of one with the idiom of the other, betraying them both. But as slippery as the intersection between these authors may be, the enterprise is absolutely fertile, not only because it sheds new light on the reach and scope of these theories, but also because, with regard to cinema, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty may become powerful allies. What is on the horizon is the possibility of an ontological account of cinema, particularly emphasizing its non-mimetic aspect as an ambiguous (Merleau-Ponty) and paradoxical (Deleuze) opening to the simultaneity or partial coincidence of all things.

### A SLIPPERY ENDEVOUR

Michel Foucault (1977, p. 79) once said that Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* (1974) “can be read as the most alien book imaginable from *Phenomenology of Perception*”. If Foucault is right, then the philosophies of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, at least as expressed in these two works, would be radically opposed to each other. This article aims, albeit briefly, to question this hypothesis in an investigation on the resonances between the two thinkers. The task is far from obvious, not only because we contradict Foucault's interpretation but above all because we also distance ourselves from how Deleuze himself characterized his relationship with Merleau-Ponty, in particular, and with phenomenology, in general. In fact, Deleuze rarely discusses Merleau-Ponty: among all of the former's books, there are about a dozen references to the latter, almost always negative. Furthermore, although Deleuze published his first text on Bergson in *Les Philosophes Célèbres*, 1956, edited by Merleau-Ponty, there was never, as far as is known, any other significant contact or exchange of ideas between the two thinkers – although another philosophical authority closer to Deleuze, Paul Virilio (1997, p. 42), has said in an interview that the author of *The Movement-Image* had enormously appreciated Merleau-Ponty's last and unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*<sup>2</sup>.

It is also not uncommon to resort to the different conceptual backgrounds from which the works of these two philosophers developed as a way of denying

<sup>2</sup> A book on which Merleau-Ponty was working shortly before his death in 1961, aged 53. Originally entitled *The Origin of Truth* but published under the title that the author adopted at the end, the work, of which only the first part and some notes were written, testifies to an effort to give a new expression to the phenomenologist's thought.

any possible resonance between them. If Deleuze belongs to a generation of thinkers who were inspired by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, Merleau-Ponty's frame of reference is headed by Hegel and Husserl. Which is not to say that the phenomenologist did not know Nietzsche, Marx, or Freud, nor that Deleuze was not familiar with Hegel or Husserl; on the contrary, from 1943 to 1948, when Deleuze was a student, the so-called "three Hs" (Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl) formed the dominant focus of philosophical instruction in French universities. His source of inspiration, however, came from elsewhere even though he was guided by experts on Hegel (Jean Hyppolite) and Heidegger (Jean Beaufret).

A possible and curious counter-argument to the above is the fact that Deleuze (as well as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault) turns to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in an effort to find answers to problems raised, among others, by phenomenologists. It would certainly be an exaggeration to align myself with Alain Beaulieu (2004, p. 11), who claims that phenomenology is the background against which all Deleuzian concepts are intelligible. However, it seems to me that phenomenology, the problems that drive it, and the holes into which it slips also served as inspiration, motivation, and struggle for the so-called "critical thinkers".

The most important argument in favor of resonance between the two thinkers must be – at least initially – philosophical. Therefore, before going to the cinema, it seems to me necessary to at least sketch an approximation with the thinking of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze. And, in general, both thinkers could be united around a transcendental project. Both examined the conditions of thought, which is to say that they are not motivated by a strictly epistemological issue. Furthermore, their primary interests are not the empirical causes of thought: they do not spend much time discussing, for example, the rules according to which thought works, or should work, in order to reach the truth. The central question of their work revolves around what must be presupposed for a phenomenon such as thought to be possible.

What these two transcendental projects share is precisely the fact that they situate the condition of thought in the empirical: they are guided by immanence. An ontological consequence of this understanding is that if the condition is to be situated within the conditioned, it cannot belong to a being that is fundamentally different from the being of the conditioned. These projects' philosophies are built on this idea of the immanence of the condition, which allows us to think that being is not situated beyond being, but on the same plane as being. Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty agree: the condition is not transcendent, but immanent to the conditioned. In other words, their projects evolve towards an ontology and reject the classical conception of the transcendental condition and the dualism inherent to it: the condition can no longer be associated with the perfect, the infinite, the immutable, or the original, nor can it continue to oppose the imperfect,

finite, changeable, and secondary character of the conditioned. Both thinkers trade this dualism for an immanent being, a being without hierarchies and fundamental differences. Judith Wambacq (2017) corroborates this argument – not without alerting us to the curious fact that Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze use the same notion, *expression*, to describe the immanent relationship of the condition with the conditioned.

Moreover, both understand the relation between the condition and the conditioned as a relation of expression: the essence, which is how the condition is often understood, is expressed by or in the conditioned. As we will see, this suggests that the ontological primacy of the condition is complemented by the epistemological primacy of the conditioned, and also that the ontological power is distributed over the condition and the conditioned. (Wambacq, 2017, p. 3)

It is following this path that Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze arrive at their perhaps most important notions, *flesh* and *virtual*, respectively. The flesh and the virtual combine unity and difference: the flesh/virtual is an event of indefinite differences, always open by a kind of fundamental void. Both authors emphasize that this emptiness or openness (what Deleuze considers as the problematic nature of the virtual and Merleau-Ponty as the invisible or divergent nature of the flesh) is not a contingent absence. It is not something that is really empty, but is potentially complete, it is not something invisible to us, but something visible to someone else. It is, therefore, an opening that is not opposed to closing, but that goes beyond this opposition. It is fundamentally open – it must remain open – because it is the condition of the visible and the real. An opening that necessarily implies an uninterrupted process of individuation.

The term “individuation” was not thrown here by accident. Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze describe individuation, or the production of concepts and things, whether living or inanimate, from the flesh or the virtual, as a process of differentiation of a pre-individual field. Instead of being a mere copy or imitative concretization of the ontological basis, the real/visible is a true creation. Therefore, it is curious that both thinkers also use the notion of *crystallization* to denote this process of differentiation. By understanding individuation as crystallization, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze therefore indicate that the relationship between the current and the visible, on the one hand, and the virtual and the invisible, on the other, implies creation, conservation, difference, and immanence.

It is well known that individuation and crystallization are central terms for Gilbert Simondon and that they inform Deleuze’s work. But there is also a link between Simondon and Merleau-Ponty: the former was a student of the latter and dedicated

the first part of his doctoral dissertation, *The Individual and its Physico-Biological Genesis*, to the teacher. This dedication involves more than a gesture of reverence for the master. Their works, while seemingly crossing different fields, resonate at a number of points. Barbaras (2004), for example, refers to the fact that Simondon e Merleau-Ponty describe the individual as starting from individuation, and not vice versa. This suggests a *radical ontological reversal*, namely, the fact that Being can no longer be characterized as a substance subject to the principle of identity but must, on the contrary, be understood “on the basis of the possibility of the individuating processes, that is, as ‘not consisting solely in itself,’ ‘more than a unity,’ capable of ‘being out of phase with itself, to overflow itself here and there from its center’” (Barbaras, 2004, p. 185)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Barbaras (2004, p. 185) goes even further and underlines that Simondon’s notion of transduction, which designates something like the process of unification of beings as this process proceeds from the very difference between them, would be an inheritance of the term “dimensionality” by Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>4</sup> To read more about this dialogue in a movement of approximation and distancing between the philosophical projects of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, see Wambacq (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Wambacq (2017) invests more deeply in this dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze with the intercession of Bergson. The author even goes so far as to underline that what Merleau-Ponty puts forward as an alternative to Bergson actually corresponds to what Deleuze claims to find in Bergson: “This convergence finds its strongest proof in the fact that in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze situates his understanding of depth in the tradition that informs Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of it” (p. 127). Although, for Wambacq, there is no Merleau-Pontian equivalent for the conception of time found in Deleuze’s second film book, based on aion (p. 129).

In other words, neither Deleuze nor Merleau-Ponty see this immanence of being as the annihilation of difference. This is well known in the case of Deleuze – he is, after all, the thinker of difference – but Merleau-Ponty, contrary to what Deleuze himself sometimes implied, is not far off.

Despite the resonances just sketched here<sup>4</sup>, one must never neglect the irreconcilable elements of the philosophers’ respective systems. One might ask, for example, whether Merleau-Ponty’s non-identical unity is really similar to Deleuze’s notion of a unity that can only be said as difference. In fact, we find in Merleau-Ponty (2006a) several passages that confirm the differential nature of the unity of the flesh – the sensible is “being through difference and not through identity” (p. 382) – as well as moments that seem to go against it – “since they are all differences, extreme distances from the same thing” (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 87). There is no denying, for example, that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology focuses more on immanence than, as is the case with Deleuze, on difference, nor ignoring that Deleuze’s theory of individuation is much more developed than Merleau-Ponty’s.

## MERLEAU-PONTY, DELEUZE, AND CINEMA

Let’s go to the movies. After all, what interests us above all is how this movement of approximation and distancing between Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty inevitably leads us to Henri Bergson<sup>5</sup> and to the question of time and cinema. And, as I argue in this article, although people still insist today on having Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty as opposites, the philosophers’ advances in film theory remain close in many ways. Both Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism dismantle epistemological systems based on non-corporeal acts of meaning or cognition. The impulse to determine a clear dividing line between subject and world, perception and perceived reality, subjective and objective experience, is alike suspended and consequently undermined. Merleau-Ponty’s and Deleuze’s cinematographic advances are based on the continuity of the human body and the world, on the non-representative

emphasis of cinema, on a sensorial and affective approach to the world – replacing the purely mental and visual methods of the disembodied cogito. What can be seen after the lasting influence of Deleuze’s cinema books and the rediscovery of a cinematographic theory of phenomenological inspiration<sup>6</sup> is a certain protagonism of notions such as body, virtual, sensation, sensitive, and affect, among others, largely replacing the semiotic-structuralist, psychoanalytic, ideological-Marxist, and cognitivist models in mainstream film theory.

First of all: despite the many affinities among Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, it is once again important to recognize the differences between the two philosophers. Deleuze himself contrasted his Bergsonian theory of cinema with a phenomenological conception of cinema on several occasions in the first volume of his work on the seventh art, *The Movement-Image*. Given Deleuze’s comments in some interviews in relation to phenomenology, it is common to develop a reading that denies the possibility of an approximation between the philosopher of *The Time-Image* and Merleau-Ponty. Deleuze blames phenomenology for understanding cinematographic experience exclusively in the light of natural perception, taking as a starting point the subject’s natural anchoring in the world and subsequently interpreting movement as a pure “Gestalt” organized in a subject’s perceptual field.

In general, the vast majority of authors, having in mind, as Deleuze does, only the first phase of Merleau-Ponty’s work, usually reproduce this criticism. While for Merleau-Ponty sensation and affect are subjective phenomena that arise from an intentional and individualized relationship with the world and from a non-qualitative notion of time, Deleuze considers the sensational and the affective as material flows whose individuation and exchange do not rest on subjectified intentions, but on the functioning of an anonymous and non-organic force or life. But does this criticism really hold up? On a closer look, wouldn’t it be possible to identify moments in cinema books in which Deleuze himself seems to take the side of phenomenology? Moreover, was not Merleau-Ponty himself, towards the end of his life, engaged in a redescription of his project towards an ontology?

Contributing to this confusion are works that have tried to combine Deleuze’s works with phenomenology or have noted a similarity between the two, but have done so ambivalently or without sticking more directly to the consequences of their positioning. For example, in her work on the cinematic experience, Jennifer M. Barker (2009) very briefly suggests various “intersections,” “possible convergences”, or a “possible overlap” between Deleuze and phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. However, the author also adds that “any easy alignment” between the existential phenomenological approach and a Deleuzian approach would be “impossible” (p. 165).

<sup>6</sup>To read more about the long period of quarantine imposed on phenomenologically inspired film theory, see Andrew (1978).

An additional example can be found in the first chapter of Vivian Sobchack's seminal *Address of the Eye* (1992). She writes that Deleuze affirms the meaning of cinematic movement and images "phenomenologically" (p. 31) and that his work "stands in some relation" and "parallel" to her own phenomenological study "in many respects" (p. 30). However, she dedicates only one paragraph to this discussion, in which she admits that Deleuze criticizes phenomenology, finding differences between the two projects that seem to overcome any affinity. Sobchack never elaborates on the value that Deleuze's work can have for a phenomenology of cinema. The author of *The Movement-Image* is not mentioned again in *Address of the Eye* and appears as extremely marginal in Sobchack's later phenomenological work.

Laura Marks (2000) is perhaps the one that best balances Deleuze's work and diverse phenomenological insights. Although she recognizes that his work is "deeply theoretical" (p. xiv), she says she is far from the "rigor of academic knowledge" (p. xvii). Averse to more rigid theoretical frameworks, which could – she fears – give her work a totalizing impetus, Marks does not like the idea that her commitments to objects and ideas need to "eventually give way to a coherent critical structure" (p. xiii). In other words, she sees no problem in working with Deleuze's concepts in one paragraph and then embarking on phenomenological texts in the next, and she does not feel committed to investigating the theoretical implications of this methodological and philosophical conjugation.

A good way to untangle this node and tackle the problem is precisely to explore how Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty read and use Bergson, a philosopher they knew very well and to whom they often referred in their own works. Bergson is at the basis of Deleuzian thinking about cinema and his philosophy could not be absent from the discussions about memory and time present in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. However, it might seem at first glance that this attempt to use Bergson to look for resonances between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze's views on cinema is threatened by the following statement by the author of *The Movement-Image*:

It was necessary, at any cost, to overcome this duality of image and movement, of consciousness and thing. Two very different authors were to undertake this task at about the same time: Bergson and Husserl. Each had his own war cry: all consciousness is consciousness of something (Husserl), or more strongly, all consciousness is something (Bergson). (Deleuze, 1985, p. 83)

In this often quoted passage in the fourth chapter of *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze describes an almost mythological birth of Bergson's theory



and Husserl's phenomenology as both tried to overcome the conflict between materialism and idealism, which, according to the author, had reached a moment of crisis. It is precisely in this context that Deleuze offers his brief commentary on phenomenology and cinema – after misleadingly suggesting that Husserl never mentions cinema<sup>7</sup> and incorrectly claiming that Sartre does not cite the cinematographic image in *The Imaginary*. And, according to Deleuze, Bergson's attempt to overcome the “duality” of image (or consciousness) and movement (or body) is fundamentally cinematographic while Husserl's phenomenological attempt must be considered pre-cinematographic. Bergson's strategy, in other words, would be radically different from phenomenology. Why?

The notion of image, defined as something that acts and reacts in relation to other images in all their elementary parts, is central to Bergson's argument. An image is thus defined by the movements it undergoes and exerts. An image is nothing more than movement. For Bergson, things and consciousness are images and, therefore, the dualism between them would be dissolved. And since moving images are the instruments of cinema, Deleuze argues that this overcoming of dualism is absolutely cinematographic. Unlike Bergson, who was against cinema and what he saw as an attempt to restore time through a succession of positions in space, Deleuze believes that, although movement is artificially reproduced by cinema, the spectator perceives it as “pure”. If the means of recomposing movement are artificial, the result is not. In other words, movement cannot be seen as an addition to the image. It is in the image.

Merleau-Ponty, for Deleuze, thinks in an absolutely different way. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the phenomenologist understands movement as the passage of immobile and privileged moments, except that, for him, these moments are no longer essential, but existential. Movement does not invoke intelligible forms, but perceptible Gestalts, which organize one's field of perception according to their being-for-the-world so that this being-for-the-world constitutes the anchoring point of perception. For Deleuze, phenomenology would deny movement any creative character. After all, according to this view, the moving thing differs from the immobile thing only insofar as it occupies a different spatiotemporal position. Time is thus reduced to a homogeneous line – it is the same at all times and evolves linearly. Time is an independent variable. It is spatialized because it is understood as the juxtaposition of arbitrary, immobile, and external moments. In other words, in Deleuze's opinion, phenomenology would be pre-cinematographic.

In addition to this spatialized view of time initiated by the modern natural sciences, Bergson mentions another “wrong” conception of movement, namely that offered by the ancient Greeks. The Greeks, like the moderns, do not attach

<sup>7</sup> As Hagin remembers, in a posthumous collection of articles by Husserl (2005) published in the 1980s, the father of phenomenology cites the seventh art a few times.

a constitutive value to time; instead, they conceive of it as neutral, again like the moderns. Ultimately, what matters to the Greeks are infinite and immovable Essences or Ideas, so movement is reduced to the transition between these Essences. In other words, time is irrelevant in itself. Deleuze places Merleau-Ponty in this same tradition and underlines that, therefore, the phenomenologist could only see cinema as an ambiguous ally. Cinema would emerge against the anchoring of the perceiving subject of the world. In this way, by raising natural perception as a norm, phenomenology would constitute a static focus, based on an intentional awareness in a situation. This is what Gilles Deleuze (1992) comments in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*:

It's very odd. I have the feeling that modern philosophical conceptions of the imagination take no account of cinema: they either stick to movement but lose sight of the image, or they stick to the image losing sight of its movement. It's odd that Sartre, in *The Imaginary*, takes into account every type of image except the cinematographic image. Merleau-Ponty was interested in cinema, but only in relation to the general principles of perception and behavior. (p. 64)

This privileged notion of natural perception would make the phenomenologist see movement as successive “poses” that vary according to the perceiving founding subject and situation. For Deleuze, phenomenology sticks to pre-cinematographic conditions, which would justify its embarrassment and ambiguity in relation to cinema – sometimes denouncing the cinematographic movement as unfaithful to the conditions of perception, sometimes exalting it as a new narrative, capable of approaching the perceived and the perceiver, the world and perception. This is what the philosopher contests in *The Movement-Image*:

Cinema can, with impunity, bring us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them, it suppresses both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world. Hence it substitutes an implicit knowledge and a second intentionality for the conditions of natural perception. It is not the same as the other arts, which rather aim at something unreal through the world, but makes the world itself something unreal or a tale [récit]. With cinema, it is the world which becomes its own image, and not an image which becomes world. (Deleuze, 1985, p. 77)

The movement that interests Merleau-Ponty is that of the gaze focusing on an object (or a part of it), which the author compares with the movement of the camera as it approaches any object. And the author, in fact, writes that the canvas has no horizon and that the horizon makes things meaningful and gives them their identity (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 82). In *Phenomenology*

of *Perception*, cinema appears in a discussion about the perception of objects in what the philosopher calls natural perception. According to it, one directs their gaze to an area to reveal it. This revelation brings the area and its objects to life, excluding other areas and relegating them to the background or periphery, making them dormant. Merleau-Ponty (1994) says:

To see an object is either to have it on the fringe of the visual field and be able to concentrate on it, or else respond to this summons by actually concentrating upon it. When I do concentrate my eyes on it, I become anchored in it, but this coming to rest of the gaze is merely a modality of its movement: I continue inside one object the exploration which earlier hovered over them all, and in one movement I close up the landscape and open the object. (p. 82)

However, Merleau-Ponty also says that in cinema something else occurs, and the perception it offers is completely different. According to him, in natural perception, when one's gaze plunges into an object, the surrounding objects over which their gaze hovered before recede to the periphery and become a horizon, whereas in cinema, as the camera approaches an object, the objects around it are no longer visible on the periphery of our gaze. In one, the horizon guarantees the identity of the object. In another, the canvas "has no horizons".

When, in a film, the camera is trained on an object and moves nearer to it to give a close-up view, we can remember that we are being shown the ash tray or an actor's hand, we do not actually identify it. This is because the screen has no horizons. (Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 104)

It never ceases to be curious. Several works written in the wake of Deleuze's film books have criticized phenomenologically-inspired approaches to cinema and particularly pointed out that human experience is incommensurable with perception in cinema, while a phenomenology of cinema would argue otherwise. Steven Shaviro (1993), for example, punishes André Bazin for taking for granted "the anthropocentric structures of phenomenological reflection", saying that "film dislodges sensation from its supposed natural conditions" (p. 30). Jean Ungaro (2000, pp. 52-53), in turn, explains that the way we perceive things, according to Husserl, is at odds with the way we perceive things in cinema. While the perception of a thing happens through a flow of different sketches that one experiences or apprehends during the perception, in cinema, the sketches are no longer one's own, but created by the film's director.

Deleuze himself claims that Merleau-Ponty distinguishes very clearly between natural perception and cinematic perception, that the phenomenologist never

tries to eliminate this distinction. And it is precisely this understanding that leads Deleuze not only to say that Merleau-Ponty sees cinema in a dubious way (always contrasting it with natural perception) but also to take the side of phenomenology to the detriment of Bergson. Cinema is not an affront to the Merleau-Pontian project and there is no difficulty or conflict between cinema and analyses that consider the differences between the two types of perception. Deleuze makes it clear that phenomenologists do not try to impose natural perception on the film or its spectators, and it is Bergson who mistakenly believes that cinema reproduces the same illusion as natural perception. According to Deleuze (1985), “phenomenology is right” (p. 12) in this regard, and it was Bergson (although, it is worth repeating, the philosopher of *Matter and Memory* is Deleuze’s conductor in cinema) who misunderstood the true nature of cinematic viewing.

Also curious are some of the reasons Deleuze describes to explain his disagreement with Bergson. The former claims that the technical means by which cinema works – still frames at a certain speed – are not what is given to “us” spectators. We never see the individual still frames, but rather an intermediate image to which the movement belongs as an “immediate datum”. What appears for us, spectators, is “movement-image” (Deleuze, 1985, p. 12). This resource given to the spectator is surprising because, among other reasons, it is often said that Deleuze’s cinema books do not seem to have much interest in spectators. In a book released in the early 2000s and very well received in the Anglo-Saxon world of film studies, Barbara Kennedy states, for example, that Sobchack’s arguments are “dangerous” as they still maintain the privilege usually granted to notions such as “meaning” and prioritize “subjectivity”. Kennedy (2000) explains:

Sobchack’s work is predominantly a phenomenological explanation of the cinematic experience and whilst it provides a stepping stone in my argument, it does not go far enough because it is based on a theory of “natural perception” (that is the body and mind being separate entities) rather than on a molecular coagulation of perception and the materiality of the brain/body/mind imbrication. Sobchack does, however, break down the traditional oppositions between subject and object, mind and body, the visual and the visible object, arguing that film has always been both a dialectical and a dialogical engagement of viewing subjects. But this still maintains a concern with subjectivity, with “viewing subjects”. It still is locked into identitarian thinking and concern with psychic constructions of subjectivity as a fundamental element of the filmic experience. Nonetheless, her argument is still in danger of maintaining a prioritization of “signification” and “meaning” and the fundamental importance of subjectivity. She says, for example, “any film, however abstract or structural-materialist, presupposes that it will be understood

as signification”. I want to move further away from signification to seeing film as “event”, as “affect”, or as “becoming”. (pp. 56-57)

This excerpt reveals nothing more than Kennedy’s unfamiliarity not only with phenomenology and its various ramifications but also with the tradition of film theory that Sobchack drew from this source – not to mention a certain intellectual arrogance present in the suggestion that it would be necessary to overcome the concern with subjectivity which still exists in Sobchack’s work. Kennedy parades throughout his book an absolutely inexplicable aversion towards any analysis that crosses the subject of subjectivity, as if this would be a bad starting point to think about cinema, to the experience of watching a movie, or perhaps, an uninteresting issue.

The question of subjectivity is certainly not the origin or the end of Deleuze’s cinema books; however, it is possible to identify moments in which the question of the subjective perception of cinema and of some specific films becomes important guidelines for the author<sup>8</sup>. In other words: contrary to what is still widely said today, phenomenology is not absent from Deleuze’s Bergsonian taxonomy of images. In fact, it plays an important role in *The Movement-Image*, when Deleuze discusses spectators and where he claims – conjugating a phenomenological argument about spectators’ passivity with a Bergsonian understanding of movement – that cinematic spectators are not easy prey for “cinematographic illusion”. Deleuze also makes use of phenomenological concepts in several passages. The Heideggerian notion of *being with*, for example, is used to discuss the status of the image-perception in relation to the perception of characters (Deleuze, 1985, pp. 72, 74).

Deleuze is right to call our attention to the foundationalist aspect that embarrasses Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenology. This embarrassment, however, does not jeopardize the phenomenologist’s assertions about the kinesthetic character of perception. At no time, whether in “The Film and the New Psychology” or in *Phenomenology of Perception*, does Merleau-Ponty make any reservations about cinematographic art or denounce its movement as unfaithful to the conditions of perception, nor does he conceive movement in cinema as a succession of poses. On the contrary, like Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty considers image and movement as inseparable. The cinematographic image, says the phenomenologist, is a temporal form in movement, a “new reality” that cannot be reduced to a simple sum of the elements used.

In his only text dedicated exclusively to cinema, “The Film and the New Psychology”, Merleau-Ponty insists that the uniqueness of the seventh art lies in its power to bring together different views. The author describes at length the

<sup>8</sup> Joe Hughes (2008) even goes so far as to say, “it seems that Deleuze’s study of cinema is just as much a study of subjectivity” (p. 25).

# D

<sup>9</sup>The same inexpressible close-up of an actor is successively mounted with different shots (a table served with food, a child's coffin, a naked woman etc.). The montage leads the spectator to perceive and interpret the actor's expression differently.

<sup>10</sup> Ismail Xavier, organizer of the book *A Experiência do Cinema* (1983), which contains the Portuguese translation of Merleau-Ponty's text by José Lino Grünewald, explains that Pudovkin was the one who publicized Kulechov's works in France, where the author had carried out a conference series. Hence the philosopher's mistake.

Kulechov effect<sup>9</sup> (which he refers to as the “Pudovkin effect”<sup>10</sup>) and gives unreasonable praise to editing, understood as the essential characteristic of cinema. At no point does Merleau-Ponty approach a critique of classical decoupage, much less a defense of the use of the depth of field or the long-shot. On the contrary, the phenomenologist celebrates the convergence of his philosophy with the reflections of montage theorists, something that would be discussed only as a negation by other important authors at that time such as Bazin, Amédée Ayfre, and Michel Mourlet. “The Film and New Psychology” is one of the first essays to engage in a dialogue between cinema and phenomenology. Its originality, as observed by Fernão Ramos (2012), is even manifested by an absence: neorealism. If, on the one hand, we can say that Merleau-Ponty's text predates the explosion of this movement in Europe, on the other hand, it is not very difficult to see the philosopher's lack of familiarity with the then contemporary cinematographic production.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty's target in his essay was not exactly cinema but the new psychology, a theme that would pave the way for his most famous work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, also published in 1945. Cinema in this essay is always treated in its generality, and Merleau-Ponty cites a few films without ever having more frank clashes with them. Although the notion that the seventh art tacitly deciphers the world and men has taken root, the “unequal balance that leads cinema to serve as a counterweight in a brilliant analysis of contemporary psychology” is clear (Ramos, 2012, p. 54).

But does Deleuze's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of time – as a neutral container that must be assumed in order to think about the transition from one existentially fixed Gestalt to another – actually make sense? Does time in Merleau-Ponty have no ontological reality, no intrinsic relationship with the things that move and the way they move? It seems to us definitely incorrect to present Merleau-Ponty's view of time as a container, as something in which things happen. For the author, it is not that things are in time, it is time that is in things themselves – just as perception must be situated not in the observer, but in the perceived. It also cannot be said that Merleau-Ponty's time is merely a conceptual notion, something that must be assumed in order to think about transition in space. And, although Merleau-Ponty's time has a unitary function, working as an anchor point, reference point, and distribution, it is not itself a unit. That is to say: Merleau-Ponty's time is certainly more immanent than Deleuze presents it. If we consider Deleuze's philosophy as a developed articulation of Bergson's philosophy of time, we may have to recognize a difference between Merleau-Ponty's and Bergson/Deleuze's anti-dualism, but this is not the difference cited by Deleuze.

While in *Phenomenology of Perception* the analysis of the perceptual phenomenon allows Merleau-Ponty to describe the experience by pointing out the coupling between subject and object, between the body and the world, starting from the duality between these poles and reconciling them in the unity of the experiential field, in *The Visible and Invisible*, this formulation is revised. In his unfinished book, the experience is described as dehiscence, as fission where, from the primordial unity of the flesh, one gives rise to the other, body and world, observer and observed, me and the other. In other words, from identity the philosopher arrives at difference. With the introduction of the notion of flesh – of a properly ontological nature –, Merleau-Ponty radicalizes his movement of refusal of dualisms. This notion indicates at the same time the reversible nature of the body (which transits between the positions of body-subject and body-object) and the primordial unity between body and world. Reversibility then becomes more than a mark of the relationships between subject and object, being described as what defines the flesh.

It is precisely with the concept of flesh that Merleau-Ponty inscribes temporality at the center of his reflection on being – and he does so using a term resistant to the abstraction that the term “time” easily induces. The temporal dimension of flesh is revealed by a long and curious list of temporal metaphors that describe flesh as genesis: “emergence”, “transcendence”, “dehiscence”, “pregnancy of possibilities”. By introducing time as a structural dimension of experience, Merleau-Ponty circumvents the undesirable effect of the spatializing vocabulary, which so easily leads us to two-dimensional conceptions of being. And, in this way, temporality gains a prominent place in the Merleau-Pontian description of experience. Perhaps we can say that it basically becomes the fundamental center of gravity of experience since temporality is the field in which the dimensions of world and subject are implicated.

“Time must be understood as a subject, and the subject must be understood as time”, states Merleau-Ponty (1994, p. 566). The subject cannot be understood as an entity that preexists time and relates to it “from outside”, it is only in time. Thus, time is not just a notion on which one reflects, or a flow of events in which one locates themselves, it is “a dimension of our being” (p. 557). Time is also not a real process, a succession of events that the subject would limit himself to recording. It is born from the subject’s relationship with things in the world. Without this presence of the subject, time cannot be recognized as such. Time, in other words, is not the container where events happen: it is itself the place of events. It is the production of qualitative differences, not quantitative variation.

Although Merleau-Ponty was unfair in his criticisms of Bergson, it should be noted that the phenomenologist’s conception of time depends heavily on some crucial

Bergsonian insights. Bergson occupies a central place in Merleau-Ponty's reflections on time in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Like Bergson, Merleau-Ponty is opposed to the explanation of the passage of time as a succession of instants. And, again, like Bergson, Merleau-Ponty reflects on the coexistence of present and past and even goes so far as to suggest that time is what explains all differences, itself being nothing more than differentiation. The phenomenologist even uses Bergsonian metaphors, such as subtraction, to explain the relationship between time and its different updates. Together, these elements show that Merleau-Ponty cannot easily be associated with the group of philosophers who think of time as a neutral vessel.

And it is in this redescription of the sensible, in this movement towards a new ontology, that Merleau-Ponty also sketches another approach to cinema. In some of his last work notes, it is possible to identify his desire to incorporate cinema into the reflections he had been developing on literature and painting. This rapprochement crosses the question of vision as the reversibility of the flesh, "this precession of what is about what is seen and makes one see, of what is seen and made to be seen about what is, [as] an encounter, at a crossroads, of all aspects of Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 44). Although he does not go in-depth into his comments on cinema, the phenomenologist's notes and last essays seem to hint, or at least make us infer, the orientations according to which the last phase of Merleau-Ponty's thought could have developed an ontological account of cinema, emphasizing, above all, its non-mimetic character, as a presentation of the unrepresentable.

We thus glance at one more affinity: art has as its basic reference the invisible forces that move our world. Deleuze (2007) writes: "In art, both in painting and in music, it is not about reproducing or inventing forms, but capturing forces" (p. 62). Merleau-Ponty (2004) agrees: painting, he says, "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes invisible" (p. 16). It is notable that they both cite Cézanne. According to Deleuze (2007), Cézanne does not paint what a mountain looks like, but how "the bending force of mountains" is active; he does not even paint what an apple looks like, but the "germinal force of the apple" (p. 68). Merleau-Ponty (2004), in turn, praises Cézanne for not having painted an apple when determining its contours and thus fixing its essence, but considering the contour "the ideal limit towards which the sides of the apple flee in depth" (p. 103). The painter could say that he painted the apple event. Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, in short, consider Cézanne a painter who manages to make visible the invisible process that gives rise to something instead of being content by making the static essence that outlines something.

This is the cinema that Deleuze wants and that the second Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis of painting and vision, makes us infer: a cinema that expresses



the desire to restore confidence in the world and rediscover the possibilities of a body in an encounter with the unthinking. The issue at stake here is not that of the presence of bodies but, as the philosopher and author of *The Image-Time* explains through Jean-Louis Schefer, to describe the ways in which it is possible to restore world and body in cinema from the point of view of their absence. That is to say: cinema does not have as its objective the reconstitution of a presence of bodies, in perception and action, but rather the effectuation, the putting in motion, of a primordial genesis of bodies in the name of something like the beginning of the visible – which is still neither figure nor action.

It is not very different from what the latest Merleau-Ponty seeks: a return to perceptive faith. From an unshakable adherence to sensible certainties, he aims to suspend the instrumental view of the world, breaking with the philosophical tradition of the starting point and leading the philosopher to lose his sovereignty, to restore the experience as an initiation to the mysteries of the world. The power of experience is to open us to what is not us. It is an exercise of what has not yet been subjected to subject-object separation. It is promiscuity of things, bodies, words, ideas.

It is the elaboration of a theory that maintains a search effect that is on the agenda of both philosophers. Image as a dynamic principle endowed with certain powers and potency that engender forms of life and thought. Image as an indivisible, undecidable amalgam that gives birth to and radiates the world, reorganizing the concrete and the abstract, the animate and the inanimate, the actual and the virtual, the general and the particular. A cinema that shapes (the term, more associated with Deleuze, is not there for nothing) rather than reflects reality, that does not clarify a reality that already exists but sheds light on one that is in the process of taking shape. A cinema that is neither an appreciation nor a judgment of the world, but belief and faith in its continued birth.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By way of conclusion, although the general principle of organization of Deleuze's cinema books does not follow a phenomenological logic, it seems to me a mistake to understand Deleuze's comments as a pure and simple rejection of Merleau-Ponty. On the contrary, Deleuze's cinematic Bergsonism is neither exactly phenomenological nor entirely averse to phenomenology, as has often been argued. The two approaches can meet and forge additional connections between each other. This is because Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty definitely do not examine art in terms of what it says about being nor what it means or says about itself. In fact, we could go even further and say that for both philosophers there

is no fundamental difference between all the arts and all the human sciences. These are all forms of thinking. More specifically, they are all forms of creative and speculative thinking.

It is quite true, as we have seen, that there are divergences with regard to the philosophical principles that guide the efforts of these authors in the seventh art. Their interests and backgrounds, however, are not necessarily exclusive. Reading Merleau-Ponty with Deleuze in mind and vice versa clearly reveals a possible continuity between the two philosophies. And this curiously implies changes in relation to how tradition presents these philosophies individually, whether by extracting Deleuze from the triumvirate in which he is usually mentioned (Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida) and offering new ways to expand his reach or by affirming ontological immanence as a central theme in the philosophers' accounts of perception, art, and language – which contradicts the idea of thinking or experiencing the subject as a condition of possibility of perception, art, and language but also replaces the question of the relationship between thought and experience, on the one hand, and being, on the other, with the question of the relationship between thought and experience.

Despite the immanent and differential inspiration of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, we must recognize that, apparently, Deleuze does not consider this inspiration enough to sympathize with the phenomenologist. Deleuze is certainly not always the most careful – or fair – reader of Merleau-Ponty, having missed some elements that would make the author of *The Visible and the Invisible* an ally. Yet it is not unimaginable, for example, that Deleuze realized the importance of a properly developed differential theory of individuation when criticizing what he called “perverted” theories of immanence – including the work of Merleau-Ponty. Against this light, the fact that Deleuze replaces “structure” with “machine,” that he abandons “langue” and “parole” completely, that he develops the concept of “force,” that he defines time as the power of differentiation, and so on, should only be considered a fine-tuning of earlier theories of immanence and difference. All this to say, with the help of Wambacq (2017), that despite the regrets, “ultimately, Deleuze travels further down a road that, as I have tried to show in this book, they shared for at least part of the way” (p. 223).

In short, both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze invested in a philosophy of immanence. This immanence, however, does not imply, in either project (although the issue is more elaborated in Deleuze), that the difference between the condition and the conditioned is dissolved. It is, shall we say, curious: in the impossibility of an absolute coincidence between ground and ground, the partial nature of this “coincidence” is precisely what allows us to access the ground, as Merleau-Ponty would say. Deleuze would not be that far from this formulation, although

he would use other terms. That is to say, the impossibility of apprehending the virtual in its entirety is exactly what allows the infinite flow of updates to continue. “The difference between the dynamic, open, nonidentical, non-positive ground and the static, closed, identical, and positive grounded is not imposed from outside but has a transcendental reason”, explains Wambacq (2017, p. 216). It is precisely in this sense that it can be said that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has a “differential” inspiration. In his thought, as in Deleuze’s, difference plays a central role as it explains why the expressions that shape the background cannot, and must not, coincide with the background. There is a rift that must remain open, “a dynamic”, adds Wambacq, “that cannot be stopped, and an ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty) or paradox (Deleuze) that cannot be disentangled because they are the ground of the expressions” (p. 216).

Philosophy, for Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, exists in the interrogative mode. It answers a question that must forever remain open, must reject any possible endpoint – ask and answer, again. And so, each and every work has a certain unthought, that is, what through it, only through it, comes to us as not yet thought. This unthinking does not belong to Merleau-Ponty or Deleuze, much less to their fervent followers and their respective followers. To think, as the phenomenologist tells us, probably with the endorsement of the philosopher from *The Time-Image*,

is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to circumscribe through them a domain for thinking that we do not think yet. As the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, horizons between things, which are not things and not nothing, but on the contrary delimit themselves the fields of possible variation in the same thing and the same world – so the works and thought of a philosopher are all certain articulations between things said, for which there is no dilemma of objective interpretation and arbitrariness, since they are not objects of thought, since, like shadow and reflection, they would be destroyed by being subjected to analytic observation or insulating thought and since we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking again (Merleau-Ponty, 1991, p. 176). ■

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