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Thinking the Unthinkable: Time, Cinema and the Incommensurable

Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was one of the first twentieth-century philosophers to develop an ontology predicated on movement and duration (and, by extension, memory) rather than a discourse grounded in spatial metaphors (static matter). In Creative Evolution (1907) Bergson systematized his ontology in terms of a basic contradiction between the experienced nature of time and how we actually measure and conceptualize it. In his ‘Introduction’ to Creative Evolution, Pete Gunter notes that for Bergson, ‘Time is experienced as a flow; but the concepts through which time is measured are static. The moments of experienced time shade into each other without clear boundaries; but measured time contains sharp cuts’ (Bergson, 1983, pp. xx–xxi). It would thus be completely erroneous to confuse one type of time with the other, for this is tantamount to substituting a static (that is, spatialized) dimension for a truly dynamic and qualitative flux. Real time is a continuous, non-segmentable stream which cannot be captured or framed with mechanistic concepts. According to Bergson, ‘there is no feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change every moment: if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow [...] The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change’ (Bergson, 1983, pp. 1–2). Moreover, this durational flow is ceaselessly active and creative, an affirmative spirit that Bergson calls élan vital. The latter opposes mechanistic theories of evolution, with their finalist, teleological trajectories, with a more fluid, affective, bodily weave of forces that constantly evolve and branch out in new, ever-changing directions. In this respect élan vital resembles Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic, molecular instincts, with their unpredictable forking, deterritorialized lines of flight and machinic, nomadic becomings. Like the rhizome, Bergson’s evolutionary impetus contains
an infinite number of potentialities and trajectories in a state of mutual interpenetration.¹

More importantly, Bergson also argues that the brain is incapable of understanding real duration and its creative biological processes. Instead, he privileges *instinct* over concept. Unfortunately, instinct is non-reflexive, it cannot intellectually know what it ‘knows’ as percept or affect. Bergson, in a somewhat uncharacteristic dialectical move, turns to a third term for the solution: *Intuition*. Intuition, as we saw in the Introduction, is a combination of instinct and intelligence that provides us with a philosophical method capable of generating new, extra-spatial paradigms, as well as new abstractions and symbols. Among these new paradigms is Bergson’s conflation of *élan vital* and its creative invention with duration itself, and more importantly, with memory. Thus, for Bergson, ‘Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation’ (Bergson, 1983, p. 4). In this sense, he redefines the very nature of time, dismantling the convenient temporal boxes of past, present and future created by the intellect. Instead, the present always already contains the past, and together they form a progressive movement, creating the future-as-becoming.²

The past and memory thus act as a dynamic motor, pushing the present which contains them, as if from behind, into a future that makes a new present, and what was present, past. As Deleuze eloquently puts a very complex notion, ‘the image has to be present and past, still present and already past, at once and at the same time. If it was not already past at the same time as present, the present would never pass on’ (Deleuze, 1989, p. 79). Thus past and present are not in a linear relationship – that is, the past does not follow the present that it is no longer. Instead, it co-exists with the present it once was, creating a simultaneity whereby the present constitutes the actual image while its contemporaneous past is a virtual, mirror image. This dynamic model, which deconstructs the Stoic differentiation between Chronos and Aion, sees time as a stream in which the virtual is already contained in the actual, the effect in the cause, so that the former can constantly move on into its new actuality-as-future-anterior.

However, Deleuze ultimately moves beyond Bergson and the Stoics by rereading this temporality-as-becoming in Nietzschean terms, reposing the question of movement as, ‘What is the being of that which becomes, of that which neither starts nor finishes becoming?’ (Deleuze, 1983, p. 48). The answer is that ‘*Returning is the being of that which*