

Ingo Zechner

Deleuze and the Language of Cinema

Talk given at the German Department of the University of California at Berkeley

April 30, 2004

First of all I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk to you before I am going to leave Berkeley by the end of next week. You gave me a very warm welcome and I enjoyed the few months I have been staying here very much. I will miss the Bay Area and its climate, in every sense of the word. At least it will be spring in Vienna when I return.

In his introduction Mike Huffmaster already mentioned that I recently published a book on the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. When Tony Kaes and Mike Huffmaster first invited me to join this noon colloquium, they suggested to talk about Deleuze and literature, possibly about Deleuze and German literature. Well, Deleuze continuously wrote about literature. He concentrated on particular authors like Proust, Carroll or Beckett and he often referred to American literature, especially to Melville, Fitzgerald and Malcolm Lowry. He did not often deal with German literature, but he was very much interested in some German authors like Kleist, Sacher-Masoch and Kafka. On Sacher-Masoch he wrote a very fancy essay and together with Felix Guattari he published a beautiful book on Kafka. Despite his various texts on these and some other authors Deleuze never presented something like a systematic theory of literature. Considering the unpopularity of systematic theories in late 20th century Philosophy, this might seem not very unusual. Nevertheless it is a little bit surprising because Deleuze was an uncommon coherent philosopher, who offered systematic interpretations of other philosophers like Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Bergson, even of Nietzsche, and he developed systematic theories of other arts as painting and cinema.

Since in the German Department literature studies often are interlinked with film studies, I thought it might be interesting not to talk about Deleuze and literature but about Deleuze and the difference between literature and cinema. I will not directly address this difference. Instead I will say a few words about the relations between cinema and language. Deleuze himself calls it "the most pressing problem" [Cinema 2, 25], but it might also be the most difficult.

Of course one has to consider the theoretical debates of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to understand, why Deleuze is determined to deal with this problem and to solve it in a quite unusual way. When Deleuze published his two volumes on cinema, the first in 1983 and the

second in 1985, the hype of semiology of cinema was already over. Christian Metz, who started the whole discipline with his famous essay “Le cinema: Langue ou langage?” in 1964, and some of his followers had already shifted to a less rigid usage of semiological terms and broadened their studies to the fields of psychoanalysis and politics. What remained, was a linguistic paradigm in discourse on cinema. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, films were referred to as “texts”, narratological studies indifferently applied a lot of concepts (like “narrator”, “addresser”, “message”, “identification”) both to cinema and literature. On the other hand there was a consciousness of a certain dilemma that I would like to illustrate by quoting two headlines following each other in a widely read book by J. Dudley Andrew on “The Major Film Theories”, first published in 1976: “Film is Not a True Language”, “Nevertheless Film Is Like a Language”. It is the word “like” which should attract our attention. The supposed analogies of film and language occupied not only the semiologists but also some of the early debates on cinema. Let me remind you for example of Eisenstein referring to cinema as a “new Esperanto”. In the worst case the analogies gave way to a metaphorical usage of the word “language” which even survived the much tougher discussions of semiology, as one can see in the very popular introduction to film by James Monaco: “How to read a film”, first published in 1977. „Film is not a language“ but „it is useful to use the metaphor of language to describe the phenomenon of film“. [Monaco 121; 3rd ed. 152]

Well, it is not useful at all, says Deleuze, and therefore we should not do it. One has to add that Deleuze always rejects metaphorical speech in science and philosophy. Some of the key arguments, why film is not a language, were brought forward by semiology itself, first of all by Christian Metz, who spent a lot of time criticising the common notion of analogy between film and language. Let me name just three of these arguments which are closely connected with each other:

- (1) Film lacks, what linguists call the double articulation of language. There is no such distinction as between meaningless “phonemes” as units of the signifier and “monemes” as meaningful units of the signified. Film does not have smallest units at all.
- (2) There can never be a dictionary of cinematic expression.
- (3) There is not only no vocabulary of film but there is also no grammar. Despite there are obviously rules which might be violated, such violation cannot be called ungrammatical in a strict sense.

So why does Metz state those differences and afterwards go to a lot of trouble to overcome them by applying linguistic notions like *paradigm* (disjunction of present units with comparable absent units) and *syntagm* (conjunction of present units relative to each other) to cinema?

For Deleuze there are at least two other arguments of greater importance, Metz does not mention. The first seems to be either traditional or a little bit weird as long as one does not unfold its implications. The second is as simple as striking.

Let me start with the second argument: It is the peculiarity of cinema that it gives us an image in motion.

I continue with the disturbing first argument by quoting Deleuze: "the movement-image is not analogical in the sense of resemblance: it does not resemble an object that it would represent. [...] The movement-image is the object; the thing itself caught in movement as continuous function. The movement-image is the modulation of the object itself." Reading these sentences one is immediately reminded of the emphatic realism of Kracauer and André Bazin. But as Deleuze insists that there is no representation of an object but the object itself, he goes far beyond their positions. To understand what Deleuze means by this identification of the "image" and "the object itself" one has to refer to the philosophy of Henri Bergson which inspired the entire project of Deleuze's conception of cinema. In *Matter and Memory*, first published in 1896, Bergson treats the world as nothing else but "a collection of "images"" like Husserl treats it as a collection of phenomena. Not unlike Phenomenology Bergson tries to overcome the traditional philosophical problems of idealism and realism by taking things as they appear. Nothing appears without perception, but the perceived is not inside the perceiver. There is no such thing as a mental image representing a material object. In terms of Bergson the image is nothing else but the perceived object, but the object always is more than just one perception-image of it. Perception always subtracts from the object, in other words: from all available images perception selects those images it is interested in. The relationship of the perception-image to the object is that of a part to the whole from which it is extracted. Considering that an object is nothing but a series of virtual and actual perception-images and that every object has various relations to various other objects, one has to keep in mind that what Deleuze calls the "whole" is a concept of time as well as a concept of space and that it is in no sense a totality. Movement is transformation in time as well as translation in space. The galloping of Muybridges horse is a shifting of positions of an object in space. But by shifting the positions the whole of the horse, the camera, the spectators, the racetrack and their relations to each other is to be transformed. This transforming whole is what Bergson calls "duree", a concept which combines the commonly opposed notions of duration and succession.

It is true that there is a certain visual dominance in Bergson, although the concept of the image is not all limited to visual appearances. Bergson talks about visual images as well as about sonic images and tactile images.

Extracting a part from a whole is exactly what the camera does by framing an image. It determines a relatively closed ensemble which remains open to the whole it is cut from. Deleuze suggests that cinema is made out of perception-images in the sense of Bergson. Their perceiver is not the spectator but the camera. When perceiving a movie the spectator again will have to extract his own perception-images as parts from a whole. In Bergson's concept of the image the distinction between objects we usually call images (like paintings, drawings, photographs, movie-images) and all other kinds of objects is obviously lost. To regain this distinction one has to check their specific openness to the whole as well as their specific relation to each other.

According to Deleuze cinema is wrongly accused by Bergson for slicing the moving whole into a sequence of static moments. The cinematic image *projected on* and *reflected from* the screen is constituted not as a set of still photographs but as an image directly and immediately in motion, a moving image, or movement-image. As there is no movement without time, a movement-image is always an image of time. The first volume of "Cinema" is entirely dedicated to the movement-image, its various types and their relation to time. The second volume of "Cinema" tries to examine what happens when the usual order of perceiving, affecting and acting falls apart and when "time gets out of joint". In addition to the movement-image and its various types Deleuze introduces a time-image, its various types and their very different relations to time.

This is not the opportunity to name and describe all the image-types Deleuze distinguishes in cinema. Let me just point out which elements of the cinema-image Deleuze chooses to make the distinction:

- (1) The quantity of its content, reaching from "saturated" to "rarefied" with the limit of the empty black or white screen.
- (2) The quality of its framing, either "geometric" or "dynamic" (the usual geometric framing vs. Griffith's iris shots for example).
- (3) The quality of its content and of the arrangement of its content, either "geometric" or "dynamic" (the geometric composition of the desert horizon and some very distinct elements like riders, horses and mountains in some classic Westerns vs. the dynamic composition of shifting shadows, fogs, and fluids in most Film Noir).
- (4) The angle of framing, that is the camera-position in space from which the image is shot. (The very interesting concept of "deframing")

- (5) The out-of-field (Deleuze distinguishes between a “relative out-of-field” and an “absolute out-of-field”)

All these elements depend on each other and the problem of connecting the images depends on them as well as they depend on the intended connection. Therefore there are different types of frames, shots or takes and montage as the basic technical elements of cinema.

Being brief in recapitulation usually means being abstract. These concepts gain a lot of concreteness being used by Deleuze for analysing hundreds of films from Griffith to Syberberg, from mainstream to avantgarde cinema, from feature films to short films etc.

Does this mean one has to shift from cultural analysis to form analysis of cinema? On the contrary: this might be a different approach of cultural analysis. It is true that Deleuze finds a kind of closure of the movement-image in Hitchcock and that he sees an early rising of a time-image in Welles. But Deleuze himself also suggests that the falling apart of the movement-image, as it is seen in Italian Neorealism is the expression of what happened in World War II as well as in the destroyed European cities and societies during the postwar period. On the other hand the emergence of a time-image, as it is seen in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, might also be the expression of a very different cultural attitude, although Ozu had to experience the War like his Italian director colleagues. Is the falling apart of the movement-image in Hollywood cinema of the 1960s a symptom of the decline of the studio system or is the decline of the studio system an effect of the falling apart of the movement-image? Deleuze seems to me very close to Adorno who tried to do social studies by analysing the form of music in Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, Schönberg, Strawinsky or in Jazz. As in Adorno the formalism of Deleuze is full of political implications. Like Adorno in music Deleuze is not only interested in the history of cinema but in a cinema yet to come.

By rejecting the notion of a language *of* cinema he gains the chance to focus on language *in* cinema. He does so by discussing the possibilities of written language, from the intertitles of silent movies to the latest films of Jean-Luc Godard. Or by examining the relations of spoken language, music, other kinds of sound and the visible. For Deleuze narrative is not a generic structure of film but a secondary product of the given images of every single film. Try to narrate what you see and hear in any movie and you will know. Instead of narration Deleuze discovers “recit”. “Recit” is commonly translated as “story”, but Deleuze uses the concept of “recit” to characterize a very special kind of speech act as found in the movies of Jean Rouch and Pierre Perrault: an act of story-telling, of making up legends, of fabulation which takes on a political dimension by constituting a people.

As a matter of fact Deleuze's dealing with the problem of language and cinema is much more complex than I was and will be able to show in this very brief talk. By rejecting semiology Deleuze gives way to semiotics. Shifting from Saussure to Peirce and developing a taxonomy of cinema-signs Deleuze tries to show that only non-linguistic semiotics are able to fulfil a broken promise Saussure once gave: to create a semiology of which linguistics are only a part of. As Deleuze has shown in his books "Logic of Sense" and "A Thousand Plateaus" he has also a very different idea of linguistics and language. But that is another story.

Literature

Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1. The Movement-Image, transl. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis 1986.

Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2. The Time-Image, transl. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis 1989.

J. Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories. An Introduction, New York 1976.

James Monaco, How to Read a Film. The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia. Language, History, Theory, New York / Oxford³ 2000.