Film Form and Pedagogy: Beyond Perception[1]

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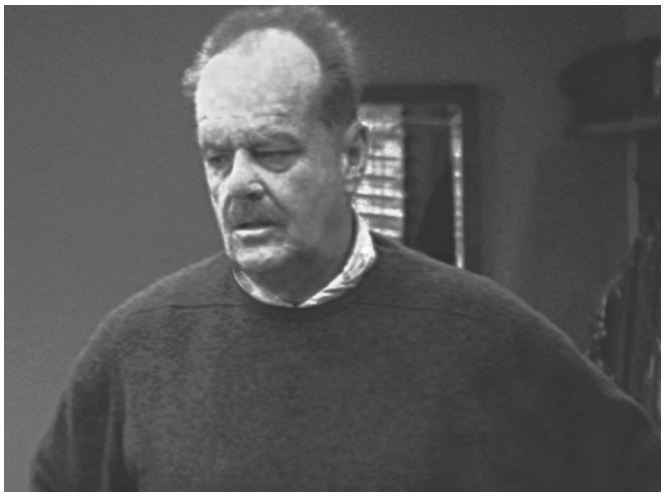
In a gloss on the film-philosophy writings of Gilles Deleuze, one commentator has noted that cinema achieves what vision obscures by undoing the "ordinary work of the human brain." It "puts perception back in things because its operation is one of restitution" of the reality that the brain has "confiscated," in part because it disrupts the human tendency to place oneself at "the center of the universe of images."[2] Deleuze's approach to cinema has important pedagogical implications because of how it treats cinema's critical capacity. Among other things, Deleuze focuses on the positioning of the viewing subject. His analysis challenges the assumption that there is a single center of perception from which one can infer the meaning of a filmic text. In more complex terms, Deleuze shows the way cinema deprivileges the directionality of centered commanding perception and thus allows the disorganized multiplicity that is the world to emerge. In his terms, "instead of going from the acentered state of things to centered perception, [we] could go back up towards the acentered state of things and get closer to it."[3] To pursue the pedagogical significance of recovering the "acentered state of things," I want to elaborate on Deleuze's remark by turning to Thomas Mann, who provides a similar insight in his epic tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers*, a set of novels whose style is strikingly cinematic. The third book, *Joseph in Egypt*, begins with Joseph's remark, "Where are you taking me," to a group of nomadic Ma'onites who have pulled him from the pit where his brothers had left him to die. After deflecting this and subsequent queries with which Joseph expresses the presumption that the Ma'onites are part *his* story, Kedema, whose father is the group's patriarch, says, "You have a way of putting yourself in the middle of things," and goes on to disabuse him of his privileged location: "Do you suppose...that we are a journeying simply so that you may arrive somewhere your god wants you to be?" [4] Like Kedema, who contests Joseph's centered perspective on his spatio-temporal location, cinema is a decentering mode of creation and reception.

Those who have recognized cinema's decentering effects are in debt to Henri Bergson's philosophy of embodiment. Bergson saw the body as a center of perception, but crucially, the Bergsonian centered body is a center of indetermination in that its perceptions are always partial. To perceive is to subtract in order to come up with a sense of the world, selected from all possible senses.[5] Inasmuch as each body, as a center of indetermination, selects an aggregate of images from the totality of the world's images, the question for Bergson becomes,

> how is it that the same images can belong at the same time to two different systems [for example Joseph's and Kedema's]: one in which each image varies for itself and in a well defined measure that it is patient of the real action of surrounding images; and another in which all images change for a single image [for Bergson each body is a single image] and in varying measure that they reflect the eventual action of this privileged image?"[6]

As is well know, Bergson's answer is that each single image or body subtracts in its own interest-based way, its way of isolating some aspects of the aggregate of images rather than others. Hence the Joseph-Kedema interchange is quintessentially Bergsonian.

The brain, for Bergson, is thus a particularlizing and evacuating mechanism. Edified by Bergson's insights on perception, Deleuze offers a *cinematic* body as a center of indetermination by noting how a film's cuts and juxtapositions generate perspectives that depart from the control exercised by individual embodiment. Subjective perception is not cinema's primary model for Deleuze, who insists that "cinema does *not* have natural subjective perception as its model...because the mobility of its centers and the variability of its framings always lead it to restore vast acentered and deframed zones."[7] For Deleuze, as for Bergson, perception is a moment of arrest; it is an interval that sits suspended between a sensation and an action. That the interval is a matter of "indetermination" reflects the



multiple possibilities for response as the subject oscillates, "going backwards between the plane of action and that of pure memory."[8] And cinema, inasmuch as it lacks a stable center (contrary to mind-based models of meaning production such as phenomenology, which privileges "natural perception") has an "advantage" according to Deleuze; "just because it lacks a center of anchorage and of horizon, the sections which it makes would not prevent it from going back up the path that natural perception comes down."[9] It is a superior screen to the brain-as-screen because it allows for a recovery of what perception evacuates. In the rest of the piece I use examples from two feature films to explicate the implications for pedagogy of the preceding discussion of cinema's superiority to perception.

In order to appreciate the way cinema provides a critical perspective on the world that exceeds what mere perception can achieve, it's necessary to see a film's characters as aesthetic rather than merely psychological subjects. What is an aesthetic as opposed to a psychological subject? To approach this question one has to appreciate that subjects are best understood not as static entities—as for example tinkers, tailors, soldiers, and spies (to borrow from a Le Carré title)—but as beings with multiple possibilities for becoming. Such an assumption deflects attention from the motivational forces of individuals—away from "psychic subject-hood"—and toward the "aesthetic" subject.[10] For example, in Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's treatment of Jean Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), a film in which a couple becomes estranged when the wife, Camille (Bridget Bardot), has her feelings for her husband, Paul (Michel Piccoli), turn from love to contempt, they note that Godard's focus is not on "the psychic origins of contempt" but on "its effects on the world," which in the context of cinema is conveyed by "what contempt does to cinematic space…how it affect[s] the visual field within which Godard works and especially the range and kinds of movement allowed for in that space."[11] As Bergson insisted, the interval, constituted as perception, brings into proximity multiple points in space that connect with the subjects' motor responses. Accordingly, in Godard's *Contempt*, the dynamics of changing interpersonal perception are reflected in the ways that the spatial trajectories are constructed through linked cinematic frames, which, as a whole, convey implications beyond those that the estranged couple explicitly perceive and acknowledge.

Another telling illustration of the epistemic and political value of the aesthetic as opposed to psychological subject is apparent in Sean Penn's *The Pledge* (2001). Much of the film involves close-up shots of the face of Jerry Black (Jack Nicholson), a retired police detective who becomes obsessed with solving a series of murders (all of young school girls) in the Reno-Lake Tahoe vicinity. While many of the film's shots, especially close-ups of faces, convey the film's psychological drama (it is never clear whether the evidence of a serial killer reflects actual occurrences or is a result of Jerry's obsessions and struggle to manage a post-retirement malaise), there are also depth of focus, and wide angle and framing shots throughout, which supplement the personal drama with imagery that conveys both the timeless aspects of the landscape and aspects of its regional past. Ultimately, the film's *mise-en-scène* is more telling than its storyline.

The landscape shots usher in historical time as they locate the viewers in "spatial and temporal positions" that are "distinct from those of the characters."[12] As a result, to follow Jerry's investigation—his encounters and movement through space—is to map an area that was once inhabited by Native American peoples.

Thus although much of the film focuses on the character, Jerry Black, who is situated in time, first as an aging retiree, then as one partially stymied by the temporal rhythms of police investigations (once a suspect is selected, there is enormous pressure to close the case), and finally as one whose investigative opportunities are affected by seasonal changes (there are several seasonal tableaux that are interspersed in the imagistic mechanisms of the storyline), Jerry can also be viewed aesthetically rather than psychologically, because his movements in the institutionalized spaces of Reno-Tahoe reveal the existence of different dimensions of ethnic and geopolitical time. The area of the drama, now a white-dominated region of the West, is shown to be firmly linked to the U.S. nation in, for example, an Independence Day parade scene. However, there are also signs of the region's ethnohistorical past.

Signs of the process of whitening are shown continually—in scenes that include Native Americans, in some of the landscape scenes (which include both panoramas and depth-of-focus shots), and in scenes that focus on a white icon. A plump pink and white adolescent appears at key moments, once as a witness of a Native American running through a snow field toward his truck, and once at the Independence Day parade. While all these scenes implicate Jerry Black's personal drama, they also function outside of the psychological story. Jerry's perceptual responses to images are dictated by his deeply motivated interest in finding clues to a series of crimes. As a result, he does not isolate the historical dimensions of the landscape within which he is acting.

But the film reveals that to which Jerry is inattentive. When the land- and ethnoscape shots are shown, often in contrast to Jerry's perceptions, Jerry becomes effectively a transparent figure whose movements point to a historical, politically fraught trajectory. As I have put it elsewhere,

> Ultimately, despite the intensity of its foregrounded, psychological drama and the suspense it generates around its crime story, the haunted land- and ethnoscape that The Pledge presents, primarily with images that are often disjunctive with the psychological and crime narratives, reflects a historical crime, the violence attending the Euro American continental ethnogenesis.[13]

A focus on the aesthetic rather than the psychological subject, places an emphasis on images rather than the film narrative, and turns the analysis of a film away from personal drama and toward the changing historico-political frame within which the drama takes place. Cinema is an exemplary aesthetic whose implications derive from the way it produces and mobilizes images. In Jacques Ranciere's terms, its effect is to "wrench the psychic and social powers of mimesis from the grip of the mimetic regime of art," the regime within which the narrative flow was organized to provoke "the audience's identification with the characters."[14] The post

mimetic aesthetic that cinema animates inter-articulates and mobilizes images to provoke thinking outside of any narrative determination, i.e., outside of the dramatic plot. In a gloss on Michelangelo Antonio's *L'Avventura,* the film director, Martin Scorsese expresses well how a critical film articulates a world rather than merely a specific drama within it:

> The more I saw *L'Avventura*—and I went back many times—the more I realized that Antonioni's visual language was keeping us focused on the rhythm of the world: the visual rhythms of light and dark, of architectural forms, of people positioned as figures in a landscape that always seemed terrifying and vast...[15]

Scorsese's observations call to mind the enactment of a more recent cinematic visual language, constituted as the *mise-en-scène* in writer/director Ivan Sen's dramatic rendering of ethnic alienation in his *Beneath Clouds* (2002). The plot is easily summarized:

> Beneath Clouds is the story of Lena, the light-skinned daughter of an Aboriginal mother and Irish father and Vaughn, a Murri boy doing time in a minimum security prison in North West NSW. Dramatic events throw them together on a journey with no money and no transport. To Lena, Vaughn represents the life she is running away from. To Vaughn, Lena embodies the society that has rejected him. And for a very short amount of time, they experience a rare true happiness together.[16]

However, Sen's dynamic imagery transcends the plot. His camera delivers up the emotionally charged and complex ethnic mix of Australia by focusing alternatively on eyes and landscape. Close-ups of eyes, some blue (e.g. belonging to a mixed, Irish-Aboriginal teenage girl) and some dark brown (e.g. belonging to a Murri teenage boy), serve to map the complexity of Australia's ethnoscape. Cuts from eyes to landscape shots, some of which show vast expanses devoid of enterprises, some of which show industrial interventions into the landscape, and one of which shows a looming mountain, filtered in a way that spiritualizes it, demonstrate the multiplicity of ways in which the land is occupied and symbolically experienced. And shots taken from the viewpoints of the different characters, mixed, by dint of cuts and juxtapositions, with images that often contradict the expressed viewpoints, show that subjective perception is not what commands meaning. While delivering up the multiplicity that is Australia, Sen's film is at the same time realistic in a way that enables the kind of rendering of film-space relationships that are at the center of my investigations. With his depth of focus shots of the landscape and his panning shots that locate his characters and interactions in spatial contexts, Sen lends "spatial expression" to his drama to develop political implications that exceed the particular moments experienced by the bodies moving across the landscapes.[17]

From the outset, Sen's film, "establishes a geography."[18] And throughout, by cutting away from the drama of the two young people on the road, Sen makes it evident that the landscape is not merely a domain of sensations to which the characters are meant to react. The landscape scenes reflect, in Deleuze's terms, "environments with which there are now only chance relations" and "the viewer's problem becomes

'What is there to see in the image?' and not now 'What are we going to see in the next image?' "[19] Although there is a drama involving motion and choices, Sen's *Beneath Clouds* is best thought of as a cinema of seeing rather than of action, for, in Deleuze's terms, "The seer [*voyant*] has replaced the agent [*actant*]."[20] The difference is articulated in a critical experience for the viewers. Unlike films that trade in what Siegfried Kracauer famously calls "corroborative images," "intended to make you believe, not see," Sen's film offers visuals in a way that reveals the contemporary "flow of material life" among other things.[21] In short cinema provides edifying glimpses of the world by organizing a world that exceeds the perspectives of its characters and uses it characters "aesthetically," i.e., showing how their movement discloses what can be seen when commanding centers of perception lose their privilege.

ENDNOTES

[1] This discussion is drawn, with some modifications, from the Introduction to my forthcoming book, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (Routledge, 2008), forthcoming.

[2] See Jacques Ranciere, *Film Fables* trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), p 111.

[3] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp 58 and 86).

[4] Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers* trans. John E. Woods (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 541.

[5] See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* trans. Keith Ansell Pearson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[6] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* trans. N.M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 25

[7] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p 64.

[8] Bergson, *Matter and Memory* p. 161

[9] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* p. 58.

[10] The quotations are from L. Bersani and U. Dutoit's introduction to their *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity,* London: BFI, 2004, p. 6.

[11] Ibid., pp. 21-22.

[12] The quotations are from D. Pye's reading of the film, *Lusty Men* (1952) in 'Movies and Point of View,' *Movie 36,* 2000, p. 27.

[13] See M. J. Shapiro, *Deforming American Political Thought: Ethnicity, Facticity, and Genre,* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006, pp. 74-75.

[14] Ranciere, *Film Fables,* p. 24.

[15] M. Scorsese, 'The Man Who Set Film Free,' The New York Times on the web at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/movies/12scor.html obtained 1/13/07.

[16] The plot summary is on the web at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0295876/plotsummary obtained 11/30/06.

[17] I have "spatial expression" in quotes because I have been edified by its use in Daniel Morgan's interpretation of Andre Bazin on Jean Renoir's film *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936): D. Morgan, 'Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetic,' *Critical Inquiry* 32, 2006, p. 460.

[18] The quotation is from T. Conley's *Cartographic Cinema,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 2. In Conley's approach to film, the emphasis is on the ways in which the geography of a film confronts the viewer's own articulations of space.

[19] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 272.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 306.