

Encountering the Virtual: On Deleuze and the Disappearing Realities of Recent
Hollywood Cinema

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by

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Abstract

Over the last ten years, there has been a persistent tendency among Hollywood films to cast doubt on the “objective” status of their own image-making. Events that we are cued to perceive as having taken place in the physical world are revealed as hallucinations or virtual simulations. This tendency, moreover, transcends issues of genre, budget, and even artistic merit. One finds its vicissitudes in films as diverse as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001). The following thesis will examine Hollywood cinema’s recent proclivity toward visually unreliable narration in the context of key concepts from Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic philosophy. Since Deleuze is particularly receptive towards the film medium’s capacity to trouble the distinctions between various modes of reality, I argue that his work is germane to this development within American cinema.

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Introduction

Over the last ten years, there has been a persistent tendency among Hollywood films to cast doubt on the “objective” status of their own image-making. Events that we are cued to perceive as having taken place in the physical world are revealed as hallucinations or virtual simulations. This tendency, moreover, transcends issues of genre, budget, and even artistic merit. One finds its vicissitudes in films as diverse as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) and *Mulholland Dr.* (David Lynch, 2001) (although this last example, as I will demonstrate, represents a rather unique case). The following thesis will examine Hollywood cinema’s recent proclivity toward visually unreliable narration in the context of key concepts from Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic philosophy.

Significantly, it is also over the last ten years that Deleuze’s two volumes on the cinema – *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, published in France in 1983 and 1985, respectively – have made their way into the landscape of Anglophone film theory. This is perhaps due, in part, to a number of recent publications that furnish a rigorous contextualization of Deleuze’s cinema books in relation to the philosopher’s greater body of work, the most notable of which are D.N. Rodowick’s excellent *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* and Gregory Flaxman’s *The Brain is the Screen*. While Rodowick observed in 1997 that Deleuze’s writings were yet to affect

English language film theory, at present one finds Deleuze being evoked to engage topics as diverse as the Hollywood horror film and third world cinema.¹

But this recent attention toward Deleuze has not always been positive, and a number of major figures within film studies have advanced harsh critiques of the philosopher's theorization of the medium. In *On the History of Film Style*, David Bordwell attacks Deleuze on the predictable basis of producing "grand theory" with a lack of historical rigor. Considerably more objectionable, however, is Bordwell's claim that Deleuze's distinct and complex notion of cinematic duration rehashes theories pioneered by André Bazin and *Cahiers du cinéma*.² In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane situates Deleuze within a quite different matrix of thinkers, namely André Gaudreault and Walter Benjamin, who are all accused of "fetishizing" the cut as "the semiotic imperative of the cinema".³ While it will be made apparent throughout the trajectory of this thesis that such critiques require a reevaluation, this is not to say that certain criticisms of Deleuze are unwarranted. Indeed, Deleuze's discussion of particular films frequently does not accord with the level of detail demanded by film studies (for instance, the inclusion of character names). Further, Deleuze makes cryptic references to concepts from his other writings ("the event", "the machinic assemblage", "simulation"), without ever accounting for the reader's potential lack of familiarity with these ideas.

¹ See Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); and Dudley Andrew, "The Roots of the Nomadic: Gilles Deleuze and the Cinema of West Africa" in Gregory Flaxman, ed. *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

² David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 116

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 184

Such criticisms notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that Deleuze is not attempting to produce a totalizing account of film history, or even of individual films. Rather, Deleuze's inquiry into the film medium is guided by a very specific problem, which, as András Bálint Kovács correctly argues, is not "What is cinema?" but "Into what form(s) of thinking does cinema develop?"⁴ This is why when Deleuze finally does address the question "What is cinema?" at the very conclusion of the two volumes, he realizes that the answer is wholly inseparable from another question, the question he will ask in his final book with Félix Guattari, "What is philosophy?"⁵ Since such early writings as *Kant's Critical Philosophy* and *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze insists that thought cannot be adequately theorized unless its most fundamental condition is accounted for: thought occurs in time. Thus, as an inherently temporal medium, the cinema bears the potential to illuminate relations between thought and time that remain elusive to quotidian perception. Deleuze's discussion of the time-image, in particular, is directed towards the cinema's capacity to produce certain kinds of indeterminacies between what the spectator may regard as physical and mental, past and present, objective and subjective, and above all, *actual and virtual*. The blanket term "powers of the false", Nietzschean in inspiration, is used to designate all of these various modes of indeterminacy, and refers to the way in which the form of time challenges the way we normally think of the true and the false as static, transcendental categories.

Since Deleuze is particularly receptive towards the cinema's capacity to trouble the distinctions between various modes of reality, I argue that his work is germane to the

⁴ András Bálint Kovács, "The Film History of Thought," in *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 153

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 280

recent tendency in American cinema noted above. Although a large and heterogeneous body of films falls within this tendency, they all produce a tension between what is real and imagined, actual and virtual. Furthermore, films like *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* trade upon similar character types, narrative configurations and thematic motifs. The hero is frequently rendered as a neurotic and emasculate dupe who motions toward the realization that his life has been subject to a *conspiracy* in which underlying forces lead him, either explicitly or implicitly, to accept a simulated reality as actual reality. These and a host of other films also stage a profound anxiety about the ontological value of cinematic images and their tenuous relation to industrial capital. The blurring of the real and the imaginary, the rendering of a “global plot” or conspiracy, and a self-consciousness toward the value of cinematic images are all characteristics that Deleuze identifies with a breakdown of the movement-image, which he also calls “the action-image”, particularly when referring to Hollywood cinema. Consequently, I will define this recent tendency within Hollywood cinema as the “the contemporary crisis of the action-image”.⁶

Yet here it is imperative to note that my intention is not necessarily to “apply” Deleuze’s concepts to developments in recent Hollywood film-practice. This thesis is as much “about” Deleuze as it is about the films. Accordingly, I take the points of discontinuity between Deleuze and the films to inform my discussion and its dual focus. Ultimately, it will be argued that the films constituting the contemporary crisis of the

⁶ By referring to this tendency as *the* contemporary crisis of the action-image, I am by no means trying to suggest that it is the only crisis of the action-image taking place across global, or even Hollywood cinema. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, crises of the action-image are constitutive of the action-image’s functioning.

action-image are discordant with Deleuze's understanding of the powers of the false, because they resolve the distinctions they seek to displace – between the real and the imaginary and the actual and the virtual – in the form of fundamental unities. But, again, this crisis takes on a large, trans-generic scope, and so I will also point to how certain films, including *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *The Machinist*, *eXistenZ*, and *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), tend to render only a provisional and unsettling distinction between modes of reality.

Among the distinctions rendered indiscernible by the powers of the false, it is the distinction between the actual and the virtual that is ultimately most at stake for Deleuze. The virtual is one of the definitive concepts of Deleuze's philosophy, cinematic and otherwise, and must be divorced from the popular conception of the term, emblemized by the majority of films I will discuss, as a *substitution* for reality ("virtual reality").⁷ Rather, Deleuze argues that the virtual *is* half of reality or, more specifically, it is what operates in a relationship of reciprocal determination with the actual to constitute reality. This is a particularly difficult concept to grasp, and one of the central ambitions of this thesis will be to confront its implications. The reciprocal determination between the actual and the virtual will be explained relative to concepts that include the pure past, the simulacrum, and "difference in itself". Fortunately, there are two films bearing upon the contemporary crisis of the action-image, David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Dr.*, that give tangible expression to Deleuze's notion of the *reality of the virtual*. It is my claim that Lynch's films emancipate the themes, motifs, and tensions introduced by the contemporary crisis of the action-image by placing them in a direct

⁷ This point is emphasized by Slavoj Žižek's rather unorthodox book on Deleuze, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3

relation to time. Put differently, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render a *falsifying narration* in which all versions of the truth are problematized, rather than an unreliable narration that masks a greater truth. Through the consequences of this distinction, Lynch's films present a unique philosophical exposition of the virtual and, in turn, offer important questions about how the authenticity of identity is affected by the form of time.

Before discussing Lynch's films or the contemporary crisis of the action-image it will be necessary to provide an explication of Deleuze's concepts of the movement-image and the time-image relative to their distinct historical origins, formal properties and philosophical attitudes. As such, in Chapter One I will distinguish between the sensory-motor schema governing the movement-image, and the powers of the false which determine the various relations of the time-image. The movement-image will be revealed as positing a behaviorist relationship between characters and settings, as forging commensurable relations between juxtaposed images, and as maintaining a moral or dogmatic image of thought whose function is to turn encounter into recognition. In the time-image, by contrast, settings are revealed in a literalness or autonomous reality that disturbs habitual recognition, images are related in a probabilistic fashion, and thought is said to confront temporal coexistences and contradictions that defy totalizing, conceptual integration. I will conclude my discussion by demonstrating how the powers of the false are operationalized by Agnes Varda's film, *Sans toit ni loi* (1985).

In Chapter Two, my arguments will turn to the contemporary crisis of the action-image. Here, I will provide a full account of why this recent tendency within Hollywood cinema represents a crisis and, moreover, why crises of the action-image are in fact constitutive of the sensory-motor schema's functioning. Subsequently, I will examine the

crisis and its sub-tendencies relative to concepts that include the “global plot”, the simulacrum, and the virtual. Significantly, it will be argued that the films discussed invoke a misappropriated version of Jean Baudrillard’s theories of simulation. Yet both the films and Baudrillard envision the simulacrum in wholly negative terms, unlike Deleuze who values its capacity to disturb the reality principle, and for its aesthetic rather than moral existence. For Deleuze, simulacra produce an uncanny experience of difference that cannot be reduced to actual, identifiable differences. As such, they tap into the reality of the virtual. Yet the contemporary crisis of the action-image renders both the simulacrum and the virtual as substitutions for reality. It is the hero’s ability to overcome the “phantasmatic” dimension of existence, moreover, that ultimately allows him to discover his true identity and place of agency within the environment. At the conclusion of the chapter, I will argue that the contemporary crisis of the action-image ultimately functions to support the system it purports to transgress, by restoring, or rather, encouraging both a fixed notion of identity and the conceptualization of events into an organic unity.

In Chapter Three, I will synthesize a number of the key concepts and concerns that have emerged throughout the thesis, including the conspiracy, the simulacrum, and the virtual, relative to an analysis of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* The thrust of my argument is that Lynch’s films emancipate the radical possibilities left dormant by the contemporary crisis of the action-image. This is because the films do not posit a dichotomized relation between objective and subjective realities, but a series of temporally incompatible worlds that share an equal phenomenological value. Further, Lynch’s temporal distributions within these worlds confound any attempts to determine a

stable actuality. What remains consistent in Lynch's two films, however, are the feelings experienced by his characters across realities. As such, it will be argued that *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render what Deleuze refers to as a "psychology of pure feeling", in which the viewer is provoked to identify not with a particular character's thoughts and feelings, but with the virtual thoughts and feelings of which the character is an actualization. In my conclusion, I will turn to the rendering of identity in the contemporary crisis of the action-image and in Lynch's films. Here it will be observed that the contemporary crisis of the action-image supports a model of identity in which the individual motions towards its completion. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, on the other hand, defy the notion of an authentic or fixed self, and expose how the individual in time is faced with the imperative constantly to forget and to become.

1

The Breakdown of the Sensory-Motor Schema

But, if our sensory-motor schema jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be 'justified' for better or for worse ...

—Gilles Deleuze¹

In this introductory chapter, I will synthesize the crucial distinctions between the movement-image and the time-image that will inform my discussion of the “contemporary crisis of the action-image” in the subsequent two chapters. Drawing upon both of Deleuze’s volumes on the cinema, and the works of film scholars including David Rodowick and Gregory Flaxman, I will elaborate Deleuze’s “two pure semiotics of the cinema” in relation to their unique origins, formal properties and philosophical attitudes.² I will also analyze both tendencies relative to original film examples and theoretical analogies.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 20

² D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 7

In both of his volumes on the cinema, Deleuze's central preoccupation is to address how different historical eras within our contemporary audio-visual culture render distinct images of time and, more specifically, distinct images of the relation between thought and time. The movement-image and the time-image both render a philosophical image of time, but are distinguished in that the former stands in an indirect relation to time, whereas the latter conveys time "directly". In his first volume on the cinema, *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze theorizes such diverse film practices as Soviet Formalism, French Impressionism and Hollywood "Classicism". Despite their irrefutable heterogeneity, what unites these distinct national film styles, he argues, is their equation of movement with physical action and their subordination of time to models of spatial succession.

As Mary Ann Doane notes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Deleuze is correct in his claim that the antecedent to the movement-image, and to the cinema in general, is not only photography but instantaneous photography.³ Consider the early motion studies experiments of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, in which a series of static photographs – of a man doing a forward handstand for instance – generate the illusion of movement through their rationally divided and equidistantly spaced distribution.⁴ By extracting movement from its serial decomposition, Marey and Muybridge, as Rodowick notes, render time as a constant and linear trajectory of physical action.⁵ The cinema would of course synthesize such static images at a fixed rate of projection, and thus resuscitate centuries old debates surrounding the ancient philosopher

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 179

⁴ Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 9

⁵ *Ibid.*

Zeno's refutation of the idea of "real movement."⁶ Doane observes that "the cinema seems to offer a direct answer to Zeno in insisting that movement can indeed be born from immobility. Cinema works by obliterating the photogram, annihilating that which is static. It appears to extract a magical continuity from what is acknowledged to be discontinuous."⁷

Indeed, in *Creative Evolution* Henri Bergson argues that the cinema embodies two historically distinct yet equally erroneous conceptions of movement and time: "immobile sections + abstract movement."⁸ For the ancients, movement is envisioned as a dialectic between hierarchically "privileged" instants, that is, as the transition between poses which are the embodiment of immutable forms or Ideas. Modern science eschews the notion of privileged instants, instead conceiving movement as the mechanical succession of what Deleuze calls "any-instant-whatevers."⁹ Remarkable points – a horse with four legs in the air, for instance – may emerge from this mechanical succession, but they are immanent to matter rather than the expression of a pre-existing, transcendental pose. In either case, however, Bergson argues, real movement as indivisible change is lost in the interval between spatial segments. Along these same lines Deleuze writes:

... to recompose movement with *eternal poses* or *immobile sections* comes to the same thing: in both cases, one misses the movement because one constructs a Whole, one assumes that 'all is given', whilst movement occurs if the whole is neither given nor giveable. As soon as a whole is given to one in the eternal order of poses, or in the set of any-instant-whatevers, then either time is no more than the image of eternity, or it is the consequence of the set; there is no longer room for real movement.¹⁰

⁶ For a detailed description of Zeno's paradoxes, see Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 172-205

⁷ Doane, op. cit., 176

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 3

⁹ Ibid., 4

¹⁰ Ibid., 7

Nonetheless, for Bergson, the cinematographic illusion taps into the nature of our quotidian perception, which also instates gaps into the acentered variation of the universe, subtracting from perception only those movements that furnish our ends-directed needs. It is precisely this “cinematograph inside us” that the subject must overcome in order to gain an intuition of time as *durée*, that is, as *universal variation* and *creative evolution*.¹¹

It is perhaps ironic that while Deleuze constructs his two semiotic systems of the cinema in the context of Bergson’s notions of movement, time, and memory, he nevertheless rejects the philosopher’s two most fundamental claims regarding the medium. The cinema has neither an affinity with the formula “immobile sections + abstract time” nor any inherent relation to natural perception. Bergson’s first error, Deleuze argues, is to accord cinematic movement to the physical movements of the projector moving the film forward. What is at stake, rather, is the uninterrupted movement that unfolds before the spectator’s eyes. This image is “not the photogramme: it is an immediate image, to which movement is not appended or added; the movement on the contrary belongs to the immediate image as immediate given.”¹² The immediate given is therefore a “mobile section of duration” not an immobile section of space.¹³ Secondly, Deleuze departs from Bergson in maintaining that the formal properties of cinema, mobile framing, montage, etc., are in fact most capable of rendering an acentered, diffuse state of perception that is emancipated from the relative, centered perception of the subject: “If the cinema does not have natural subjective perception as its model, it is because the mobility of its centres and the variability of its framings always

¹¹ Doane, op. cit., 175

¹² Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 2

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23

lead it to restore vast acented and deframed zones.”¹⁴ Although the cinema is relentlessly haunted by the specter of a virtual state (virtual insofar as it cannot be directly perceived by the subject) where images act and react across all surfaces, it is the project of the movement-image to anchor or actualize this state in accordance with natural perception or habitual recognition. The movement-image accomplishes this actualization in three ways, which Rodowick calls the three vicissitudes of the movement-image.

A conceptual thread linking the two *Cinema* books is what Bergson refers to as the “present image” and what Deleuze calls the “plane of immanence.”¹⁵ The plane of immanence is a heuristic abstraction, a virtual, objective state of the universe in which the image is considered not as that which appears to an individual, but on the basis of its constitution as light. As Bergson explains in *Matter and Memory*:

That which distinguishes it as a present image, as an objective reality, from a represented image is the necessity which obliges it to act through every one of its points upon all the points of all other images, to transmit the whole of what it receives, to oppose to every action an equal and contradictory reaction, to be, in short, merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe.¹⁶

Much as our habitual recognition organizes or *subtracts* from this state of universal variation that which is a function of our needs, the movement-image actualizes the plane of immanence according to three registers: qualities, bodies and actions. Qualities, in the form of visual or sonic impressions, are explicitly situated in a historical and geographical milieu. In *Nanook of the North* (1922), the inter-titles determine the fragmentary visual impressions of the landscape in a specific place, “Hopewell Sound

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 64

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 28

Northern Ungava”, and isolate the “hero” from the collective as “the great hunter that he is.” Yet the milieu does not simply actualize visual impressions, it becomes a locus of motivity, a functional reality that thrusts the hero into a sensory-motor situation: “The milieu and its forces incurve on themselves, they act on the character, throw him a challenge, and constitute a situation in which he is caught up.”¹⁷ Thus the milieu transforms the character into a vehicle (body) for expressing movement as physical action.

Deleuze’s account of the essentially behaviorist relationship between characters and settings in the movement-image provides but one example in the *Cinema* books where the author’s writings take on an arguably phenomenological dimension, echoing Martin Heidegger’s description of readiness-to-hand in *Being and Time*. Heidegger argues that in our pragmatic, “concernful dealings” with the world, we tend to treat objects and settings as “equipment” that “subordinate themselves to the manifold assignments of the ‘in order to’, or ‘the toward which’.”¹⁸ Objects or the “tools themselves” are thus stripped of their material autonomy and valued only in relation to the work they can facilitate.¹⁹ Similarly, Deleuze characterizes the sensory-motor schema governing the action-image in terms of *clichés* that do not allow the spectator to “perceive the thing or the image in its entirety ... [but] rather what is in our interest to perceive.”²⁰ The movement-image’s subordination of the milieu to the exigencies of the narrative is well illustrated by John Belton’s analysis of the first scene from *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) in *American Cinema/American Culture*. Belton observes how over the

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 141

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 69

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70

²⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 20

course of the scene, which depicts “Uncle Charlie” within a dingy rooming house, every single object – the window, the blinds, the whiskey glass, the wad of currency, and so on – “gets used up” as a function of character exposition and the forwarding of the plot: “By the time Uncle Charlie leaves, every prop and every feature of the room has been used to advance the narrative; the room has been narratively exhausted, so to speak, and it is time to move on to the next space.”²¹

This transition to the next space is governed by what Deleuze, appealing to a mathematical analogy, refers to as a “rational interval”. That is, the interval (between shots and sequences) designates the end of one spatial section and the beginning of another; in *The Woman in Green* (1945), for instance, Doctor Watson and Sherlock Holmes tell the cab driver that they are off to the Mesmer Club at the end of shot A and appear at the Mesmer Club in shot B. The rational interval thus forges commensurable relations between adjacent spaces, regardless of whether this is geographically plausible (Kuleshov), and creates a bridgeable gap that characters jump across with their glances and actions (as in *Sherlock, Jr.* [1924]). By extending character action through rational linkage across contiguous spaces, movement as universal variation is replaced with a linear trajectory, and time as duration becomes lost in the interval between the succession of spatial “presents” (between the cab and the Mesmer Club, for instance).²² Yet it is not exactly correct to say that the movement-image *extends* movement. Rather, rational intervals *transform* movement according to an action-reaction schema. Specifically, the interval instates a delay between an action that is experienced and analyzed on one “side” so that there is time to select the appropriate response to be executed on the other side.

²¹ John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1989), 15

²² Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 36

Thus, as Rodowick explains, the interval “no longer allows movement to pass through it unopposed or changed. Whatever movement it receives on one side is reorganized and transformed on the other side.”²³ This sensory-motor schema attains a particular dominance in classical Hollywood cinema, which Deleuze identifies with the formula SAS’: “from the situation to the transformed situation via the intermediary of the action.”²⁴ In *Stagecoach* (1939), for instance, The Ringo Kid defeats the Plummer brothers in the final duel, thus modifying the milieu by restoring order to the community. Accordingly, Deleuze argues that the SAS’ structure embraces the American idea of manifest destiny, “the idea of a unanimist community or of a nation-milieu, melting pot and fusion of all minorities ... the idea of a leader, that is, a man of this nation who knows how to respond to the challenges of the milieu as to the difficulties of the situation.”²⁵

Deleuze’s account of the sensory-motor schema in the “old realism” is superficially similar to David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger’s description of classical Hollywood cinema, insofar as both emphasize economy of expression and character agency.²⁶ Yet as Flaxman argues in *The Brain is the Screen*, Deleuze’s inquiry into the cinema confronts philosophical and ethical problems that have been treated with indifference by recent cognitivist/neo-formalist approaches to film studies.²⁷ Here it is important to note that for Deleuze, the film-practices of a given historical era function like “philosophical machines” or “spiritual automata”, capable of reflecting back to that era the way in which it imagines the world and the way in which it

²³ Rodowick, op. cit., 34

²⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 142

²⁵ Ibid., 144

²⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 2

²⁷ Gregory Flaxman, ed., *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 7

envisions thought itself.²⁸ In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze explains that an image of thought “means not only that we think according to a given method, but also that there is a more or less implicit, tacit or presupposed image of thought which determines our goals when we try to think.”²⁹ Thus, two central questions of the *Cinema* books are: what is the image of thought produced by the classical or “organic” narration of the movement-image versus the “crystalline” narration of the time-image? And, perhaps more importantly, what is the will to power that values a particular image of thought?³⁰

At issue in defining the image of thought produced by a given film is its rendering of *the whole*. Wholes must be distinguished from sets, which are artificially closed spatial systems that can be divided into subsystems. Framing in the cinema, for instance, portions off sections of space into an organized arrangement of parts. While movement within the shot establishes a translation in space between these parts, it is montage which expresses a change in the whole. The whole, as noted earlier, is an indivisible temporal continuity. Its fundamentally open nature is what prevents any set from closing upon itself; thus montage expresses a change in the whole by opening one artificially closed system onto another. In the classical cinema, the whole can be deduced only indirectly since it is masked by the rational intervals that designate the end of one spatial section with the beginning of another, thereby casting time along a stable past-present-future continuum. As Rodowick observes, this process whereby rational linkage forges an indirect temporal connection between sections of space extends from “shots into sequences, sequences into parts, and parts into the moving whole of the film as one great

²⁸ Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 7

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xvi

³⁰ Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 134

clockwork mechanism.”³¹ The overall composition of the film, therefore, projects a vision of the whole as a linear and organic *open totality*.

The concept of the open totality is used by Bergson to designate a classical image of thought, an image that Deleuze argues (late in *Cinema 2*) has been raised to the level of convention by the movement-image. The open totality describes a temporal model of thought which moves along two dialectically related axes – a horizontal axis of association and a vertical axis of integration and differentiation. On the horizontal axis, images are linked through opposition or analogy (an image of a peacock precedes an image of a fascist leader). These images in turn, are integrated into a concept along the vertical axis (the fascist leader is vain). Deleuze argues that the axes meet, because the spectator then projects this concept onto the flow of subsequent images (differentiation) while continuously integrating these subsequent images into a greater conceptual whole (fascist leaders are vain, egocentric, etc). In sum, associated images are integrated into a moving conceptual whole that guides our interpretation of subsequent images. The dialectic between the two axes elaborates a process of infinite, volumetric expansion, where the world is subsumed by a unified, organic image of the True.³²

Yet what is the nature of this model of truth? It is a model based on Being and adequation rather than Becoming and invention. It is a fixed, idealized and Platonic truth that, as Flaxman argues, “is conceived in advance of empirical vicissitudes and thereby projects itself into the future as an anticipative matrix that turns encounter into one of recognition.”³³ And returning to our second question, who is the figure who wills this image of truth? None other than the “man of truth”, who “in the end wants nothing other

³¹ Rodowick, op. cit., 4

³² Ibid., 184

³³ Flaxman, ed., op. cit., 11

than to judge life; he holds up a superior value, the good, in the name of which he will be able to judge, he is craving to judge; he sees in life an evil, a fault which is to be atoned for: the moral origin of the notion of truth.”³⁴ In sum, classical narration expresses what Deleuze calls in *Difference and Repetition* the moral or dogmatic image of thought. Beyond subordinating time to movement, the dogmatic image of thought subordinates *difference to identity*. Indeed, Deleuze’s classification of the ways in which philosophy has failed to acknowledge difference in itself is explicitly related to the dialectic between the two axes described above: “difference becomes an object of representation always in relation to a conceived identity [integration and differentiation], a judged analogy [the man of truth], an imagined opposition or a perceived similitude [association through contrast and resemblance].”³⁵

It is important to note that the transition between the movement-image and the time-image should not be understood in terms of a dialectical or teleological progression in which one superior form of narrative logic supplants another. Rather, organic and non-organic (crystalline) narration refer to conditions of possibility that have been actualized at different rates and intensities throughout the history of cinematic images. As Rodowick observes, “one gets the feeling that, for Deleuze, the cinema of the movement-image has been fully realized while that of the time-image is emergent.”³⁶ Nevertheless, the events of the Second World War and its aftermath precipitated an inevitable critique of an image of thought founded on the stability of action, identity, and morally upright, transcendental truths (a critique that of course extends well beyond the scope of the cinema).

³⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 137

³⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 138

³⁶ Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 89

If Deleuze thus cites Italian neo-realism as positing a crucial break with organic narration, it is because its concentrated focus on the demolished landscapes of post-war Italy reveals the perverse side of the sensory-motor schema and the artifice behind the idea of good “common sense.”³⁷ While the action-image treats objects as equipment and values settings only in their capacity to disclose or prompt actions, De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti depict spaces that have already been conquered and, by corollary, they depict characters with no discernible courses of action. In Deleuze’s now famous words: “These were ‘any spaces whatever’, deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction.”³⁸ Sensory-motor images are based on generalities – “it is grass in general that interests the herbivore” – but any spaces whatever are constituted by the build up of visual and acoustic singularities (*opsigns* and *sonsigns*) which break through the character’s goal oriented perception: “He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or action.”³⁹ In sum, the heroes of the action-image recognize the world as “ready-to-hand”, whereas the new breed of characters found in neo-realism encounter their environments as “present-at-hand”, that is, in an autonomous condition beyond equipmentality. Heidegger argues that in order for objects to be revealed in a condition of presence-at-hand “cognition must first penetrate what is beyond ready-to-hand in our concern.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Deleuze writes that “if our sensory-motor schema jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without

³⁷ Flaxman, op. cit., 41

³⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xi

³⁹ Ibid., 3

⁴⁰ Heidegger, op. cit., 78

metaphor, brings out the thing itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be justified for better or for worse.”⁴¹

Recall the earlier mentioned scene from *Shadow of a Doubt* in relation to the sequence from *Umberto D* (1952), made famous by André Bazin, in which Umberto studies the pregnant maid at work. In the first instance, the milieu is organized into a matrix of functional objects to be acted upon by Uncle Charlie; he drinks from the whiskey glass and tosses it against the bathroom sink, he peers out the window and makes his way toward the door. No “prop” is spared from its inclusion in the sensory-motor schema. In De Sica’s case, however, vision rather than action fills or occupies diegetic space. Umberto and the maid take in a series of disconnected visual and sound impressions: the colony of ants climbing the ceiling, the ceaselessly dripping faucet, the perfunctory motions of washing the dishes and brewing coffee. Since these images persist beyond the time necessary for cognition to extend into action, objects are liberated from their status as referential generalities, and become revealed in a “visual and sound nakedness” that is experienced by both Umberto and the viewer: “the important thing is that the character or the viewer, and the two together, become visionaries.”⁴² Yet this visual and sound nakedness must be divorced from the notion of an indexical bond between the image and its pro-filmic referent. Rather, Deleuze argues that opsigns and sonsigns do not represent a preexisting object, but *replace* this object through formal

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 20

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15

description. Hence Deleuze's frequent invocation of Jean-Luc Godard's comment that in *Weekend* (1967) "it's not blood, it's red."⁴³

Neo-realism's creation of opsigns and sonsigns forged the path for a cinema of direct time. Yet what is potentially of greater importance are the narrative logics made possible by the introduction of opsigns and sonsigns.⁴⁴ The action-image rendered agents who managed to maintain both a singular persona and a stable command over diegetic environments. The hero's goal-oriented nature, moreover, constantly forwarded the narrative toward a future point in space (from the cab, to the Mesmer Club). Any spaces whatever, by contrast, confront characters with situations so extraordinary or banal that any decidable way "to act" (in both senses of the verb) becomes blurred. Caught within such irrational spaces, characters adopt a meditative attitude toward their surroundings, and linear trajectories become displaced by aimless strolls. In this respect, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) is frequently cited as the film that mutated neo-realism's chance narratives into a truly episodic form. The film's initial limit circumstance, the disappearance of Anna, "triggers a sense of suspense to which no action is equal", as opposed to a chain of sensory-motor events.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the remaining characters, Claudia and Sandro, are left to endure periods of "dead time", to find themselves in the course of events that seem hardly to concern or belong to them; Sandro seems as surprised as Claudia by his affair at the film's conclusion.⁴⁶ Since narrative events no

⁴³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 182

⁴⁴ Rodowick, op.cit., 75

⁴⁵ Flaxman, ed., op. cit., 6

⁴⁶ Deleuze makes a similar point about the conclusion of *Taxi Driver* (1976) in *Cinema 1*, 207

longer serve to precipitate a transition to the next space, they take on an autonomous value, allowing “a little time in its pure state” to raise to the surface of the image.⁴⁷

Similarly, the interval between shots and sequences becomes autonomous, ceasing to form a bridgeable gap between associated images. Rather, crystalline narration is governed by “irrational intervals” that subject independent images to the cut, thus combining events in a probabilistic rather than linear fashion. Now Deleuze is not, of course, unearthing any historically new information by noting modernist cinema’s tendency toward discontinuous editing strategies. What is at issue, however, is how these strategies both elucidate and contribute to his Bergsonian-inspired notion of time as the coexistence of past and present, perception and memory and their corresponding categories – *the actual and the virtual*. Consider Agnès Varda’s remarkable film, *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), which is not discussed in the *Cinema* books, but which I would argue constitutes a pure instance of crystalline narration. Superficially, one might argue that the film’s narrative is arranged in a cyclical order, both beginning and concluding with the protagonist’s death in the vineyards of the Languedoc. Yet this bracketing device only reinforces the lack of unity governing what Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has called Varda’s “impossible portrait” of Mona. For Mona’s story is assembled and actualized from the memories of eighteen witnesses who encountered her wandering the south of France in the weeks prior to her death, memories which are scattered in an unpredictable order throughout the film. Mona is, in both an aesthetic and ethical sense, the kind of figure to whom Deleuze obsessively returns in *Cinema 2* and also in his writing with Félix Guattari: a “forger” whose disconnected gestures constantly betray fixed impressions; a “nomad”, whose free-floating movements are antagonistic to a state that

⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 17

would “place” her,⁴⁸ and whose identity “is one of becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant.”⁴⁹

Indeed, it is the film’s eighteen witnesses who attempt to define Mona through the projection of their own values and desires. For Paulo, Mona is a purely sexual object, analogous to the half-naked woman he sees on a sleazy post-card. For Yolande, Mona is an emblem of freedom, whereas the self-righteous Shepherd perceives her as a “witherer” not a wanderer. Such impressions provide, in Deleuzian terms, the virtual germinating seeds for the actual images we see of Mona.⁵⁰ Yet, each sheet of memory corresponding to Mona’s life destroys and replaces the prior description by inventing her anew. As Deleuze writes, “when virtual images proliferate like this, all together they absorb the entire actuality of the character, at the same time as the character is no more than one virtuality among others.”⁵¹ The “objective” images rendering Mona in the film’s “present” are suffused by thought and the past, but this process is still more complicated since no flashback is ever explicitly attributed to a particular character. According to the sensory-motor schema, the “flashback is a conventional extrinsic device: it is generally indicated by a dissolve-link and the images introduced are often superimposed or meshed. It is like a sign with the words: ‘watch out! recollection’.”⁵² Classical cinema employs the flashback in order to demarcate clearly the past from the present, the physical from the mental, thus restoring a chronological and linear sense of wholeness to the narrative. In *Sans toit ni loi*, by contrast, the eighteen witnesses’ memories are

⁴⁸ Dudley Andrew, “The Roots of the Nomadic: Gilles Deleuze and the Cinema of West Africa”, in Flaxman, ed., op. cit., 224

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 361

⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 74

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70

⁵² *Ibid.*, 48

scattered throughout the film, appearing before, during, or long after their interactions with Mona. At first, we logically assume that the episodes of witness testimony occur after Mona's death, yet Yolande appears in the middle of the narrative, wondering what happened to Mona and her lover, only to encounter her again near the film's conclusion. Moreover, the witness testimonials are non-systematically divided into three modes of address: characters either speak directly to the camera, to an unknown figure off-screen, or to a character within the diegesis.⁵³

This leads us to Varda's role in the film, which is to *invent* Mona through a fabulatory process that falsifies any true or definitive version of the character. Indeed, Varda is our first witness, reflecting on the protagonist from a position of uncertainty: "I wonder ... I know little ... it seems to me."⁵⁴ Her presence is constantly felt in the form of a camera consciousness that is caught up in a dialogical relationship with Mona and her witnesses: "questioning, responding, objecting" as opposed to re-presenting.⁵⁵ At times, Varda's camerawork leads to frustration, since it glosses over those moments that would be of most salience within the sensory-motor schema; a tracking shot scrolls by Mona in the midst of being raped, for instance. In shaping the film's indiscernible temporal structure, and its various modes of address – in which characters speak to each other, to "Varda", and to us – Varda strips the spectator of a stable position from which to judge Mona. Consequently, what becomes at stake is not the validity of our judgments, but how Varda's portrait of a woman who lives "without roof, nor law" taps into our moral desire to judge. As Deleuze writes, falsifying narration "shatters the system of

⁵³ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 305

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 289

⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 23

judgment because the *power of the false* (not error or doubt) affects the investigator and the witness as much as the person presumed guilty.”⁵⁶

If the movement-image is governed by the sensory-motor schema, then the power of the false is “the most general principle that determines all the relationships in the direct time-image.”⁵⁷ The powers of the false do not refer to a negation of the true, but to how the form of time forces a re-negotiation of the true and false as static and transcendental categories. Ultimately, falsifying narration, emblemized by Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi*, renders the paradoxical co-existence of the past and present, the real and the imaginary, and most importantly, the actual and the virtual. Thus I will now turn to how the tension between these modes of existence unfolds across a vast corpus of recent Hollywood films that I will call the “contemporary crisis of the action-image.” My aim in what follows is not to illuminate how Deleuze’s concepts are materialized by these films. Rather, I will demonstrate that recent American cinema’s troubling of the relation between the past and present, the real and the imaginary, and the actual and the virtual, produces a series of departures from Deleuze’s notion of falsifying narration. These departures are argued to instruct an understanding of both Deleuze’s difficult cinematic philosophy and the cinematic values that are challenged but ultimately reinforced by the contemporary crisis of the action-image.

⁵⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 133 (my emphasis)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 131

2

Beyond the Contemporary Crisis of the Action-Image

But it is less a state of the imaginary than of a deepening of the problem of time.

- Gilles Deleuze¹

In the final chapter of *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze addresses the rather ambiguous breach separating the movement-image from the time-image. This historical division has been subject to abundant criticism, one film historian likening Deleuze's sense of cinema history to an oversimplified "Hegelian dialectic" in which one superior form of narrative logic supplants another.² Deleuze's career-lasting antagonism toward Hegel's theory of history as an ever-expanding process of contradiction and synthesis notwithstanding, such criticisms also demonstrate little sympathy toward Deleuze's view of the sensory-motor schema governing the movement-image. For the sensory-motor schema produces and is produced by a greater cultural logic of power that seeks to regularize the dynamism of the singular event within a reproductive (rather than

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 102

² David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 117

inventive) network of forces.³ In its relation to the cinema, the sensory-motor schema domesticates images by configuring them into predictable, linear trajectories, disguising the fact that “narration is only a consequence of the visible images themselves and their direct combinations – it is never a given”.⁴ Since films continue to be generated within a capitalist mode of (re)production, “people *continue* to make SAS’ and ASA’ films: the greatest commercial successes *always* take that route, but the soul of the cinema no longer does”.⁵ It becomes apparent that what is at stake is not the historical succession of the movement-image by the time-image, but the continuous struggle that the two networks of forces represent for and against the irrational linkage of images, and the concomitant emancipation of time from movement. What follows is that as long as the movement-image maintains its position of commercial dominance over the distribution of cinematic images, it will experience not one, but a series of crises throughout its history. Dudley Andrew, for instance, notes that a number of film theorists pointed to a subsequent crisis “at the end of the Vietnam War at home and abroad, when the promises of modernism, including the political ones of May ‘68, had soured”.⁶ One of the theses to be advanced in this chapter is that over the last ten years or so commercial Hollywood cinema has faced a new incarnation of the crisis of the action-image. This crisis is made manifest in a series of films that seek to confound the binary oppositions that define organic narration, specifically, that of the real and the imaginary, and the actual and the virtual.

³ This definition of power as a reproductive and distributive network of forces is taken from Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 19

⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 26

⁵ *Ibid.*, 206, my emphasis

⁶ Dudley Andrew, "The Roots of the Nomadic: Gilles Deleuze and the Cinema of West Africa" in Gregory Flaxman, ed. *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 216

An historical crisis of the action-image will invariably take on a distinct shape, and pose distinct challenges to the sensory-motor schema. In characterizing the first crisis (“around 1948, Italy”), for instance, Deleuze points to the ways in which the linear trajectory fragments into aleatory strolls and dispersive situations.⁷ He also suggests, however, that what “consolidates” the particular characteristics of a given crisis “are the current clichés of an epoch or a moment”.⁸ For Deleuze, a cliché is a sensory-image of a thing whose function is to discourage thought. It is what we perceive “by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands”.⁹ Thus the action-image in crisis becomes unbearably self-conscious of the ways in which its images are in fact an assemblage of clichés, and the sense of unity guiding organic narration reappears in the form of a “global plot” or conspiracy.¹⁰ Indeed, it is this over-arching condition which is perhaps most present in the current of films that constitute the contemporary crisis of the action-image.

Precisely because we are referring to a “current”, which is not confined to a generic structure, its characteristics are difficult to pin down. At first, one is tempted to place the matter at the level of narrative and spectatorial address. Put simply, Hollywood has produced a multitude of films over the last ten years with conclusions that render past narrative events as false (i.e. hallucinatory, simulated, staged, etc), thus leaving the spectator to mentally reconfigure what has “actually happened”.¹¹ This crisis, however,

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Brabara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 211

⁸ *Ibid.*, 208

⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 20

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 209

¹¹ Here is a brief list of some of the films over the last ten years that demonstrate some variation of unreliable narration: *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Lost Highway* (1997), *The Game* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *American Psycho* (2000), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Frailty* (2001), *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), *Adaptation*

cannot be reduced to a common narrative configuration. A number of recent Hollywood films, including *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, *American Psycho*, *Vanilla Sky*, *The Truman Show*, and *Memento* have achieved critical and commercial success by taking a transgressive stance toward corporate America, and by rendering the corporate male hero – the insurance investigator, the corporate vice president or Mogul, etc. – as an insane, emasculated and neurotic dupe who eventually realizes his life is controlled by underlying mechanical forces. And to return to the issue of clichés, this is a cinema that purports to respond to the ways in which our contemporary audio-visual culture has, in Gregory Flaxman’s words, “reduced us all to the feeling that we are unwilling repositories of and accomplices in a plan to populate the world with mindless images”.¹² The film industry is wholly complicit in producing this cultural condition that Deleuze calls “the civilization of the cliché”, and thus the contemporary crisis of the action-image, much like the crises of the past, stages an anxiety about the ontological value of cinematic images and their relation to industrial capital.¹³ Yet recent American cinema has renewed these anxieties in a unique fashion, specifically, through its explicit appeal to the notion of *simulation*.

Jean Baudrillard, whose influence on the films to be discussed is incalculable, is of course the contemporary cultural theorist to have devoted the most thought to the topic of simulation. Baudrillard claims that we live in a screen culture in which the increased proliferation of images has spiraled into an epidemic process that has exterminated the real, and left the subject to wander in a virtual state of utter indeterminacy. In an

(2002), *Minority Report* (2002), *High Tension* (French, 2003), *Identity* (2003), *The Brown Bunny* (2003), *The Machinist* (2004), *Palindromes* (2004), *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) *The Forgotten* (2004).

¹² Flaxman, ed., *The Brain is the Screen*, 8

¹³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 21; Flaxman ed., *The Brain is the Screen*, 9

excellent essay entitled simply “Simulacrum”, Michael Camille notes that Baudrillard’s “pessimistic visions arrived at the moment of highest anxiety and nostalgia, ... stimulated by new technologies that had totally transformed traditional ways of communication, not least in the field of vision”.¹⁴ Since the publication of Baudrillard’s watershed article, “The Precession of Simulacra”, the mediation of reality by new technologies of the visible has rapidly accelerated. Paul Virilio, for instance, bemoans the ways in which instantaneous “real time” telepresence technologies have obliterated the “real space” of geophysical distances and proximities.¹⁵ Do we not find this kind of “on-the-spot tourism” rendered in a film like *The Matrix*, where characters transfer themselves across cybernetic environments, acquiring instantaneous, simulated knowledge that is indistinguishable from “real” knowledge? One question, therefore, is whether or not this contemporary crisis of the action-image should be read as an allegory for the plight of our times in which simulation and speed substitute for the real and duration. There can be little doubt, I think, that films like *Fight Club*, *The Truman Show*, *Vanilla Sky*, and *The Matrix* posit themselves as diagnosing a sort of postmodern malaise. Yet this is precisely why such films pose only a marginal “danger” to the sensory-motor schema. The real and the subject’s (male) identity are rendered as those once-stable categories of being that have “suddenly” been compromised by the mass media’s strategies of simulation. Ultimately, fixed truths are posited as something lost so that they may undergo a powerful restoration. In this respect, the contemporary crisis of the action-image marks a betrayal of Baudrillard’s ideas, but also points to ways in which his theories of simulation

¹⁴ Michael Camille, “Simulacrum” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 38

¹⁵ Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Verso, 1997), 22-34, 58-68

are a “reactionary lament, truth and reference remaining unproblematized as things lost”.¹⁶ Yet this is not the whole story.

In Chapter One, I described how the sensory-motor schema posits, among other things, an attitude of authority toward knowledge, a Platonic confidence in the stability of action, identity, and Truth. Thus for Deleuze, a challenge to the sensory-motor schema must illuminate how such fixed conceptions of reality have *always* been convenient illusions that close thought off from the experience of difference as change and becoming. While the topical films discussed above employ unreliable narration as a means to affirm a conventional notion of difference based on negation and division, others, however, tend to polarize the real and the imaginary, the true and the false in such an unsettling fashion that their clear distinction by the film’s conclusion remains provisional. Accordingly, in the first half of this chapter, I will address both of these subtendencies within the larger crisis of the action-image. Here, I will also introduce three concepts that will be of sustained importance throughout the remainder of this thesis: the plot, the simulacrum, and the virtual. At the conclusion of this section, I will discuss the contemporary crisis of the action-image in general terms to describe how, even in its more radical instantiations, the image of wholeness described in Chapter One as the open totality tends to be maintained.

In the next chapter, however, I will focus on two films, David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, that reconfigure the recent trend toward unreliable narration into what Deleuze calls *falsifying narration*. All of the elements found within the contemporary crisis of the action-image are present in both films: the global plot, the shifting of reality, the theme of the double, the uncanny moments of *déjà-vu*, etc. Yet as

¹⁶ Camille, op. cit., 39

the epigraph to this chapter suggests, Lynch has transformed these themes and motifs entirely by placing them in relation to time. Rather than positing an objective reality against a subjective reality, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render what Deleuze calls “impossible worlds” that are consistent in themselves but temporally paradoxical in terms of each other.¹⁷ There is no longer clarification in the present through a revisiting of the past, but only undecidable alternatives between the past and inexplicable differences in the present. The virtual ceases to function as a simulated substitution for reality, but is rendered as that which operates in a reciprocal determination with the actual to constitute reality. As such, it will be argued that *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* deepen the problems introduced by the contemporary crisis of the action-image toward contemporary incarnations of the time-image.

The Plot, The Simulacrum, and The Virtual

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze reconsiders the crisis of the action-image in relation to one of its principal characteristics, the film within the film. It is tempting, he suggests, to read this trope in terms of the action-image’s “melancholic Hegelian reflections on its own death: having no more stories to tell, it would take itself as object and would be able to tell only its own story”.¹⁸ However, the cinema’s self-reflections ultimately do not, as Fredric Jameson and Baudrillard argue, connote a stalled sense of history, but “just a method of working”, a means to create new kinds of images that are justified from

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 101

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76

“elsewhere”.¹⁹ Here, Deleuze observes that the trope of the work within the work, from Shakespeare to Gide, has frequently been linked to the idea of a global plot, a conspiracy or a surveillance. In the cinema, and particularly in the crisis of the action-image, the work within the work and its associations with the conspiracy obtains a specific depth that stems from the medium’s inherent relation with a “permanent conspiracy”. “This conspiracy”, Deleuze writes, “is that of money; what defines industrial art is not mechanical reproduction but the internalized relation with money”.²⁰ In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Deleuze notes that cinema as art lives in a permanent tension with the demands of industrial capitalism, since no real work of art attempts to correspond with the receiver’s expectations, whereas industrial capital is premised on a “rapid turnover”, which operates to condition and exploit the public’s “prefabricated emotions.”²¹ The film within the film and the conspiracy take on a higher justification, Deleuze argues, when they serve as a means to interrogate the medium’s subordination of time not only to movement, but to the demands of capitalism. The contemporary crisis of the action-image, I argue, has employed the idea of a “simulated reality” – Baudrillardian in inspiration – to fulfill the film within the film’s critical function.

Here, it must be noted that Baudrillard’s writings on the simulacrum in the 1980s broke from the positive connotations accorded the term by Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and especially Deleuze in the previous two decades. In fact, Baudrillard’s descriptions of the simulacrum as immoral and demonic are more consistent with the Platonic sense of the term that the French theorists of the sixties sought to reverse. Under

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 77

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Marie Therese Guirgis, trans., “The Brain is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze,” in *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 369

the great duality of Idea and image, Plato, in his Greek dialogues, distinguished between two kinds of images: the icon, or in Deleuze's terms "the good copy," versus the simulacrum, phantasm, or false claimant to being. Unlike the icon, the simulacrum pretends to resemble the model without passing through the Idea, and distorts the model's proportions so that it only appears to be endowed with resemblance to the observer. As Deleuze writes in "Plato and the Simulacrum": "The simulacrum includes the differential point of view; and the observer becomes a part of the simulacrum itself, which is transformed and deformed by his point of view. In short, there is in the simulacrum a becoming-mad".²² The purpose of Plato's method of division, Deleuze argues, is not to classify images (according to genus and species, for instance) but to select lineages, to distinguish the good copies from inauthentic, manipulative, and immoral pretenders.

Plato's insistence that the simulacrum must be repressed informed the ways in which the term would be invoked for centuries to "define things that were deemed false or untrue" among the various discourses on the visual arts.²³ It was not until the 1960s, the moment of Pop Art in America, that figures like Bataille, Foucault, and Deleuze would celebrate the simulacrum's capacity to produce an uncanny effect of difference that could not be reduced to the copy's departure from the ideal original. Consistent with the powers of the false discussed in Chapter One, Deleuze argues that the simulacrum renders irrelevant the distinction between the real and its representation: "The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*. At least two divergent series are internalized in the simulacrum – neither can be assigned as the original, neither as the

²² Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum" in Constantin V. Boundas, ed., *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 258

²³ Camille, op. cit., 31

copy”.²⁴ Rather than a poor representation of reality, the simulacrum is an encounter with another order of reality altogether, and an affirmation of felt experience and affective intensities.

In short, Deleuze defends the simulacrum for its challenge to the reality principle and for its aesthetic rather than moral existence. For Baudrillard, however, these are precisely the qualities that make simulacra sites of danger, able to deter and manipulate the “conforming masses.”²⁵ Writing from a distinctly Marxist point of view, Baudrillard observes the presence of the simulacrum not in works of art, but in the barrage of media images that constitute our daily lives. Like Plato, he fears the simulacrum’s capacity to seduce the viewer with its artificial likeness. In the era of late capitalism, however, the issue is said to be far more grave, since simulation has become the dominant medium (McLuhan) of communication. As such:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every process by its operational double, a metastable programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all of its vicissitudes.²⁶

Once our modern media images begin to anticipate the real (as in the privileged case of *The China Syndrome* and the Harrisburg incident, for instance)²⁷ they can no longer be said to represent or be involved in an exchange for meaning. Signs refer only to other signs, and as such, they strip the observer of his ability to judge the real from its simulation. This indiscernibility is for Baudrillard, unlike Deleuze, what makes the masses susceptible to complete control and manipulation by the capitalist mode of

²⁴ Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum", 262

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute, 1987), 14

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker, eds., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 254

²⁷ Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 19-22

production: “Everywhere, in whatever political, biological, psychological, media domain, where the distinction between poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into absolute manipulation”.²⁸ Clearly, it is this vision of simulation, with its accompanying anxieties over the turn of the millennium, that has been appropriated to varying degrees by films like *The Truman Show*, *Fight Club*, *Vanilla Sky*, and, of course, *The Matrix* – the only film so bold as to have its protagonist flaunt a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* before the camera.

The four films noted above tend to play upon rather similar narrative configurations and thematic motifs. The white-collar hero becomes suspicious of the world after encountering both strange moments of déjà-vu and rather unambiguous signs that there are underlying processes at work behind his reality. He is eventually led to the discovery, usually at the same time we are, that his entire life has been a simulation, a staged event or a virtual dream devised by an ominous network of corporate architects within the film’s broader diegesis. Hence the new incarnation of the film within the film and its accompanying relation to the conspiracy. In *The Truman Show*, for instance, Truman (Jim Carrey) the insurance investigator senses that something is awry about his reality – an excessively ironic depiction of mythified, 1950s consumer culture in the vein of *Leave it to Beaver* – when events begin to repeat with a clockwork precision (the circulation of traffic), and when three characters explicitly tell him that he is under surveillance. Truman does not have his obligatory moment of realization, however, until he crashes through the simulated blue sky in an attempt to escape from his hometown by boat. Here Truman learns that, since birth, he has been the controlled subject of a grand reality television show that generates profits equivalent to the Gross National Product of

²⁸ Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", 275

a small country through opportunistic *product placements*. In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden (Edward Norton), a recall coordinator, laments that he experiences life as “a copy of a copy of a copy” within a larger monologue expressing similar fears about a corporate takeover of reality: “When deep-space exploration revs up, it will be the corporations that name everything: the IBM stellar-sphere, the Microsoft galaxy, planet Starbucks.” And in *The Matrix*, there is Zion, the ascetic, real world of the rebels, versus the simulated, capitalist world of the Matrix with its “Mega-cortex” corporations and virtual “Mr. Smiths”. There is also, of course, *Vanilla Sky* ...

In the film’s delirious opening sequence, David Aames (Tom Cruise), a vain and arrogant magazine mogul, finds himself thrust into an abandoned Times Square. He sprints across the empty streets until he is completely overwhelmed by the various billboards and scrolling headlines. Rapid cuts begin to intermingle these “objective” images with David’s subjective memories of ads created in his past until the difference between the two becomes indiscernible. It is difficult to deny the relevance of this sequence (leaving the issue of its sincerity notwithstanding for the moment) to Deleuze’s characterization of the civilization of the cliché in his chapter on the crisis of the action-image:

They are these floating images, these anonymous clichés, which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world, so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés by which he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among the others in the world which surrounds him.²⁹

Vanilla Sky is about how our contemporary audio-visual culture cannot keep up with its own circulation of mindless images, and proceeds by unrestrained means from the opening sequence onwards so as to emphasize this point. Throughout the trajectory of

²⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 208

the narrative, David encounters an assault of simulated images, be it in the form of holograms or telepresence communications. He constantly mistakes the identity of the two women in his life, one who is dead and phantasmic, the other who is alive and “actual”. He awakes from dreams that are enveloped within other dreams, until he finally learns, much like Neo, that the last one hundred and fifty years of his life have all been but a computer-generated dream turned nightmare. This bizarre state of affairs is the result of David having volunteered to be cryogenically frozen by the corrupt “Life Extension” corporation, who, for an additional price, facilitate the sleeper’s dreams during the incubation period; dreams are fashioned into an assemblage of the customer’s favorite memories and pop culture references. Fortunately for the film’s director, David has signed up for the package in which occasional events can be rendered through a barrage of jump-cuts so as to complement the gratuitous *Jules et Jim* (1962) poster in the backdrop. It is precisely at such moments that we must pause to question whether such meta-commentaries on the simulacrum do not in fact provide an alibi for its most banal proliferation.

One imagines that Baudrillard would look askance at these films for denying what is perhaps his most crucial claim: “Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible”.³⁰ Consider, for instance, his frequent invocation of Disneyland. Disneyland is of the order of the hyperreal not only because it redoubles America’s myths in miniaturized form, but because it said to obscure the fact that America is itself a colossal simulacrum. Does one not see this “imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter” in the films

³⁰ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 266

discussed above?³¹ The hero is invariably presented with the chance to accept his simulated reality, or to access a more “authentic” exterior reality that is beyond the simulation’s reach. He leaves the simulated world behind, moreover, by simply walking off the set, or unplugging from the machine. Yet we will recall that for Baudrillard the real and its simulation are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, simulation “contaminates”, “telescopes into” and “seduces” the real: “To begin to resemble the other, to take on their appearance, is to seduce them, since it is to make them *enter the realm of metamorphoses despite themselves*”.³² Simulation has irreversibly transfigured the texture of reality itself, leaving no one, not even the evil corporate architects, immune to its all-pervasive influence.

Yet if this strand of the contemporary crisis of the action-image has “misunderstood” Baudrillard’s theories of simulation, such misunderstandings are arguably the corollary of Baudrillard’s claim that simulation marks a “brand new problem” exclusive to our time.³³ His writings also mirror the nostalgia in these films for a reality that we are “less and less able to grasp,” and that is “no longer what it used to be”. Ultimately, as Brian Massumi argues, “Baudrillard sidesteps the question of whether simulation replaces a real that did indeed exist, or if simulation is all there has ever been”.³⁴ Deleuze suggests an alternative vision of the issue in which simulation is not anathema to the real, but rather a process that both appropriates and produces the real.³⁵ Accordingly, Deleuze does not draw a primary distinction between the real and its

³¹ Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 262

³² Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, 15 (my emphasis)

³³ Jean Baudrillard, interview. Retrieved from “http://www.empyree.org/divers/Matrix-Baudrillard_english.html”, February 12, 2005.

³⁴ Brian Massumi, “Realer Than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari”. Retrieved from “http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/realer.htm”, July 29, 2005.

³⁵ Massumi, “Realer Than Real.”

simulation, but between two modes of simulation. One mode is hierarchical and regularizing, while the other (which will be of importance to my discussion of Lynch) is “horizontal”, sweeping up both of its terms in a “double becoming”.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari state that the first mode of simulation “carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced”.³⁶ Simulation extrapolates an ideal image from reality and then forces that ideal back “down” onto the things and bodies who must conform to its restrictive standards. In *Fight Club*, for instance, the hero, staring at the sculpted male body displayed on a Gucci billboard, sarcastically asks his spectral double if that “is what a real man is supposed to look like?” The humour, of course, stems from the fact that the hero has fashioned his hallucinatory double (Brad Pitt) in the likeness of such impossible images of male-beauty. The double figure (abstract ideal), in turn, impels the hero to transform his “cookie-dough” body into a “block of wood”, or, in other words, to conform to the very ideal he superficially resists. *Fight Club* is rich with examples in which “the real is carried beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced,” as when a page from the Ikea catalogue (itself a prior simulation) is transposed as if by magic into the hero’s apartment. Accordingly, *Fight Club* is distinguished within this subtendency, since simulation as a process pervades the film’s entire reality and inscribes itself at the level of the hero’s body; Tyler must attempt suicide to exorcise his “phantasm.”

In the final analysis, however, all of the films discussed thus far communicate the subject’s alienation from the self and the environment primarily at the level of metaphor. *Fight Club* renders a de-centered subject, but only within the bounds of a blunt division between the hero and his imagined double – who remains a perfectly consistent entity

³⁶ Massumi, “Realer Than Real.”

across time and space. The Matrix and Zion are both metaphors for our enslavement and obliviousness to capitalist power, and so on. Deleuze argues, however, that “If bankers are killers, schoolchildren prisoners, photographers pimps, if the workers are being screwed by their bosses, this has to be shown, not ‘metaphorized’, and series have to be constructed in consequence”.³⁷ Is there not something counterintuitive, however, about the claim that cinematic images can ever stand as something other than metaphors for the independent reality recorded by the camera?³⁸

Organic narration, for its part, is designed to uphold the independence of the settings and objects it describes. Yet Deleuze argues that there is another form of cinematic description, *crystalline description*, that constitutes the object rendered, continuously erasing and recreating it. In this case, cinematic description no longer represents the object since it is at play in its very genesis and destruction. Crystalline description is of radical importance for Deleuze because it taps into the cinema’s capacity to affirm the reality of the *virtual*. Deleuze’s notion of the virtual must be divorced from the popular, contemporary understanding of the term, emblemized by the films discussed thus far, as a substitution for reality.³⁹ Rather, for Deleuze, every moment of our lives is simultaneously actual and virtual, and these two “halves” of the event operate in a reciprocal determination to constitute reality.

In the cinema books, Deleuze’s discussion of the virtual re-engages with his earlier work in *Bergsonism*, where the virtual is considered in relation to Bergson’s concepts of memory and the pure past. Recall that for both Bergson and Deleuze, time

³⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 183

³⁸ We have already discussed one way in which Deleuze will respond to this question: cinematic images are equivalent to movement-images on the plane of immanence where image=matter

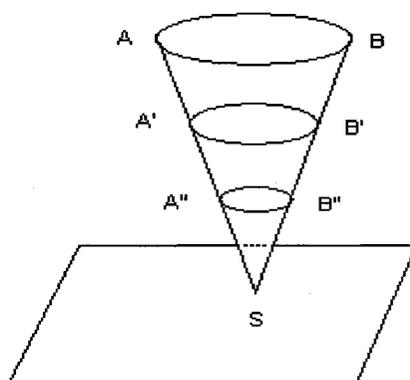
³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3

cannot be conceptualized as a linear model of spatial succession in which the past, present and future represent blocks A, B, and C. In order for the present to pass, the present must in some fundamental respect be already past: “The present does not follow the past that it is no longer, it coexists with the present it was”.⁴⁰ Thus every “moment” is marked by the contemporaneity of a present of the past, a present of the present, and a present of the future. The present of the present is actual, perceptual and physical, whereas the past of the present is virtual, the present’s “image in a mirror”.⁴¹ This recollection image that is contemporaneous with the present is virtual because it is yet to be *actualized* in the form of a psychological memory. Rather, it is passively synthesized into the “pure past” or “pure memory” – the virtual condition that makes a psychological experience of the past possible. As Deleuze writes: “The virtual image (pure recollection) is not a psychological state or a consciousness: it exists outside of consciousness, in time, and we should have no more difficulty in admitting the virtual insistence of pure recollections in time than we do the actual existence of non-perceived objects in space”.⁴² As we must place ourselves where objects are in space in order to perceive them, so we must “leap” into the pure past to actualize a former present in the form of a recollection image. This idea is based on Bergson’s schema of the inverse cone:

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 79

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 79

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80



The tip of the cone (S) represents the most contracted degree of the present, the body of the cone as a whole stands for the pure past as non-chronological time, and its various layers or sheets (A'' B'', A' B') define particular regions of the past that can be considered successive in relation to the former presents that mark their boundaries.⁴³ Like the aiming of a telescope, we direct our memories toward the pure past in general, and then attempt to focus in on the particular sheet that holds the virtual image of a former present. In Chapter One, I described how each witness in *Vagabond* attempts to actualize a particular sheet of memory relevant to Mona's life. Yet each new recollection image necessarily erases the last, making it virtual once again. It must also be noted that the individual does not recognize images from the pure past in a consistent fashion. Accordingly, Deleuze appeals to Bergson's notions of habitual and attentive memory to correspond to organic and crystalline description, respectively.

Habitual recognition recalls an image from the past in order that perception can extend into action – I recognize my friend Peter and shake his hand, Uncle Charlie sees the men outside the window and makes his way to the door, etc. In this case, we do not

⁴³ D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 100

recognize the object itself, but only what it is in our interest to perceive. We associate the image with like, but different, images on the same plane; “it is grass in general that interests the herbivore”.⁴⁴ Attentive recognition, by contrast, interrupts the flow of the sensory-motor schema. The individual seizes on some particular contour or detail of the object, and recognition no longer extends into action but “returns to the object” and “leads back to perception”.⁴⁵ I am introduced to Judy who has a face identical to my former love, Madeleine (*Vertigo* (1958)). I project my image of Madeline onto Judy’s face, as my mental image of Madeleine becomes contaminated by the actual image of Judy. What is at issue is no longer the association of the actual image (Judy) with others on the same plane, but how the actual image itself oscillates between expanding circuits of physical and mental reality.⁴⁶ Attentive recognition is thus not a re-cognition proper, but a description that constantly erases and recreates its object – Madeleine’s face transforms my perception of Judy, and vice-versa. Attentive recognition typically “succeeds”, however, when a recollection image is able to link up with a perceptual image (Judy is Madeline!), thus restoring the teleological orientation of habitual memory. There are more radical instances, however, when the present perceptual image cannot establish sufficient contact with a *unified* recollection image. In such cases the actual image “enters into relation with *genuinely virtual elements*, feelings of déjà vu or past ‘in general’ (I must have seen that man somewhere ...), dream images (I have a feeling that I saw him in a dream ...), fantasies or theatre scenes (he seems to play a role that I am familiar with ...)”.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 45

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43, 47

⁴⁶ This is Bergson’s first schema of the expanding circuits from *Matter and Memory*

⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55 (my emphasis)

Through the failures of attentive memory the individual gains a profound intuition of the reality of the virtual. For the virtual is not only a reservoir for the pure past, it is a “pool of potential” that is made up of “difference in itself”, or “pure becomings”.⁴⁸ Pure becomings are Ideas and intensities that, like the past and the future, cannot be said to exist but only to insist or subsist. The individual comes into contact with transpersonal intensities through encounters with actual things that express them in a unique variation. Moreover, the individual’s experience of these intensities is essentially passive. That is, before conscious reflection, individuals synthesize or contract chance experiences into rigidified structures that drive their behaviour in the form of habit and expectation. As Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*, synthesis is constitutive but “it is not, for all that, active. It is not carried out by the mind, but occurs *in* the mind which contemplates, prior to all memory and reflection”.⁴⁹ This is not to say that the individual is a passive receptacle of experience, but rather that it is only against the backdrop of passive synthesis that the active faculties of memory and intelligence can be deployed. Active synthesis in the form of memory is for Deleuze a “reproduced particularity.” It is the agglomeration of the virtual past into a unified representation. When memory fails, however, this agglomeration dissipates across sheets of past that express common thoughts, sensations, and emotions. The time-image lends dynamic expression to this process.

Consider the repeated attention that Deleuze devotes to Alan Resnais’ *Je t’aime, Je t’aime* (1968), and Roberto Rossellini’s *Europa ‘51* (1952). In *Je t’aime, Je t’aime*, the

⁴⁸ Massumi, *A User’s Guide*, 66; James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 199

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 71

hero, Ridder, is subjected to a time-travel experiment that will thrust him back to the exact same minute one year ago – a moment spent on the beach in Midi with his now dead girlfriend, Catrine.⁵⁰ The experiment creates disastrous effects, however, since Ridder is displaced across sixteen years' worth of memories that share common intensities with this one minute of the past. He attempts to remember the ocean, for instance, but connects to a series of what Deleuze would likely call “becoming-wets”: a miserable day spent in the rain, an absurd dream he had in which a man is locked within a phone booth filled with water.⁵¹ Hence Deleuze's assertion that in Resnais' cinema, “It is *feeling* which stretches out on a sheet and is modified according to its fragmentation”.⁵² And in *Europa '51*, the heroine directs her attention toward particular details of a factory and is overcome by a strange impression: “I thought I was seeing convicts.” Deleuze insists that the woman does not evoke a mental image of a prison in place of the factory since “that would simply be pointing out a resemblance, a confused relation between two clear images”.⁵³ In other words, the prison is not a metaphor for the factory. We have already discussed how the contemporary crisis of the action-image takes route through metaphor; in *The Matrix*, an image of humans used as cattle by machines is meant to *represent* our enslavement to technology, to corporate power, etc. In *Europa '51*, on the other hand, the heroine experiences the factory as a prison precisely because she cannot project a unified representation from memory onto the chaos before her. The factory has the potential to express a variety of virtual intensities, and it is the heroine's *receptivity* to particular details that allows her to intuit a real power formation that runs through both

⁵⁰ Rodowick, op. cit., 108

⁵¹ Ibid., 114

⁵² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 124 (my emphasis)

⁵³ Ibid., 20

factories and prisons.⁵⁴ Again, receptivity can only come about through forgetting and the inability to represent adequately the perceptual image, which leads to Deleuze's radical conclusion that: "it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition".⁵⁵

I have devoted particular attention to the virtual because certain of its attendant concepts, including the pure past, becomings and intensities, receptivity, and the failures of attentive memory, are crucial to an understanding of Deleuze's cinematic philosophy. These concepts, moreover, will figure prominently in my discussion of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* in the next chapter. Prior to discussing the rather complex rendering of the virtual in the work of Lynch, it must also be observed that a number of films within the contemporary crisis of the action-image play upon the idea of failed memory, or memory as a radical reconstitution of the pure past. *Memento*, for instance, does not pose a challenge to the sensory-motor schema at the level of its tedious and overtly formulaic narrative structure, but because the hero's perception of the actual is founded upon a radical manipulation of his long term memory. *Memento*'s broad story-line is well-known: Lenny is on a quest to find the man who "murdered" his wife and who left him with permanent short-term memory loss. Lenny's "anterograde memory loss" functions as both a trope for the film's superficially fragmented plot configuration and as a device for comic sensory-motor situations (is he chasing me or am I chasing him?). The real importance of Lenny's short-term memory loss, however, is that it prevents him from realizing the extent to which his supposedly dependable long-term memory is a complete

⁵⁴ Flaxman, *op. cit.*, 11, 39

⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55

fiction. Lenny's wild manipulations of his long-term memory are emblemized in the figure of his phantasmic double, Sammy Jankis. Sammy is an assemblage based on a reconfiguration of the various details or "sheets" of Lenny's past. For instance, Lenny has led himself to believe that Sammy is a man who shares his mental condition, and who has also lost his wife. Sammy is believed to have accidentally killed his wife by giving her a series of insulin shots; she allows the shots to continue to test whether Sammy is faking his condition. At the conclusion of the narrative, we learn that Sammy was a con-man that the hero encountered through his work as, of course, an insurance investigator, and that it was in fact the hero who killed his own wife in this fashion. Sammy is but one example of the ways in which the hero has reconstituted his memory to prevent himself from discovering that his quest is futile – he avenged his wife's murder well over a year ago and has been killing "innocent" people ever since. *Memento* is thus distinguished from the films discussed thus far in two significant respects. First, the hero is immersed in a plot, but it is a plot that is almost entirely of his own making. Second, when he learns at the film's conclusion that his life is an "illusion", unlike the heroes discussed hitherto, he decides to keep this illusion going because it is only by projecting the fictions of memory toward the future that he can maintain his teleological orientation towards the world.

Like all of the films discussed hitherto, *Memento* concludes by resolving a tension between the real and the imaginary. Yet it also reflects a distinct sub-tendency within the contemporary crisis of the action-image, a sub-tendency in which such resolutions are rendered provisional. *The Machinist*, for instance, fits squarely within the crisis insofar as its hero, Trevor Reznik (Christian Bale), is an amnesiac and an insomniac who is

followed by a spectral double, who experiences involuntary moments of repetition (the time is always 1:30), and who suspects that there is some kind of conspiracy behind his existence. At the conclusion, we learn that the film's entire diegesis functions like a colossal "Sammy Jankis." Specifically, the hero's world is loaded with the markers of a traumatic hit-and-run accident in which he killed a young boy: the accident occurred at 1:30, the boy's mother reappears as a waitress, etc. To a certain extent, this ending must be viewed as a concession since the effaced distinction between the real and the imaginary is neatly clarified. What prevents the film from sinking to the level of clichés, however, is that the hero's deathly emaciated *body* expresses the passage of *real time*. Thus while we may have been watching a hallucinatory, "suspended" reality, the film suggests that for the last year Trevor has been leading a real life that is inaccessible to the spectator. David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* creates a similar impression of a blocked reality that operates beneath or along side the film's explicit texture. The film's two central characters, Allegra and Ted, play a simulated game in which one virtual world opens onto the next at a relentless pace. When they finally arrive at a "stable actuality" at the end of the narrative, unlike in *The Matrix* or *Vanilla Sky*, a peripheral character cues us to believe that they are still firmly in the realm of the virtual (albeit a virtual that is defined in opposition to reality).

In *American Psycho*, by contrast, director Mary Harron goes to great lengths to render Patrick Bateman's reality – a parodic invocation of 1980s yuppie culture set against the backdrop of the Iran-Contra affair – as no less artificial than his murderous hallucinations. As Deborah Knight and George McKnight argue in their close analysis of the film: "Whether we are talking about the presentation of foods at trendy restaurants,

the décor of Manhattan apartments, or the couture and glasses and business cards of upscale bankers, we find that everything is surface and everything is artifice”.⁵⁶ *American Psycho* resonates with both Deleuze’s concept of humour, “the art of surfaces”,⁵⁷ and with a consistent theme throughout Slavoj Žižek’s work, that of the inherent transgression. Both Deleuze and Žižek argue that a too literal identification with an ideological system can precipitate its unraveling – Bateman’s murderous desires are a logical extension of his unmediated identification with the “cutthroat” business world. Accordingly, it is in fact the individual’s ironic distrust of an ideological system – “beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person” – which functions as that system’s “positive condition of possibility”, the inherent transgression that allows it to work.⁵⁸ Bateman, who lacks such distance, perceives himself as only a “mask”, and “something illusory.” But now we touch upon what has been one of the implicit theses of this chapter so far: the contemporary crisis of the action-image *is itself* an inherent transgression. It is represented by a corpus of films whose challenge to a system of cinematic values that Deleuze would identify with “the sensory-motor schema” has ultimately reinforced that system’s functioning.

“watch out! recollection”: The Whole as Open Totality

Thus far, I have argued that a dominant trend within contemporary American cinema has rendered itself in opposition to the sensory-motor schema. It has not been my

⁵⁶ Deborah Knight and George McKnight, “American Psycho: Horror, Satire, Aesthetics, and Identification”, in *Dark Thoughts: Philosophical Reflections on Cinematic Horror*, eds. Stephen Jay Schneider and Dan Shaw (Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 219

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 9

⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 21

intention to engage in any sustained way with the historical circumstances that provoked this challenge to emerge over the last ten years. Certainly, one could point to the interrelation of a number of conditions: the acceleration of telepresence communications that have undermined geophysical distances and their accompanying sense of a “here and now”;⁵⁹ the Hollywood film industry’s increased commercialization and horizontal integration with ancillary markets; pop culture’s appropriation of Jean Baudrillard’s theories of simulation; the threats posed by digitalization to the ontological status of the photographic image as an archive of the past; an increased ambiguity surrounding the topic of masculine identity; the influence of new American novels (*Fight Club*, *American Psycho*), and so on. Having noted these conditions, my inquiry is inspired less by the question of “why” this current has emerged, than by “how” or in what sense it has transgressed the sensory-motor schema.

As I have demonstrated, the sensory-motor schema is a system that maintains a behaviorist relationship between characters and environments, that subordinates time to movement, that polarizes the real from the imaginary, that presents settings as pre-existing their cinematic description, and that renders the out of field as both an exteriority in space, and a conceptual whole that changes in time. Moreover, these formal principles have philosophical consequences in so far as they support a “model of the True as totalization”.⁶⁰ I have argued that the contemporary crisis of the action-image has *staged* a critique of this system in a variety of ways. First, the films clearly evoke the final two criteria that Deleuze believes essential to any crisis of the action-image: the consciousness of clichés, and the reconfiguration of organic unity in the form of a global

⁵⁹ Virilio, *op. cit.*, 64

⁶⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 277

plot. Second, all of the films within our corpus render heroes who encounter those specific “mental phenomena” that the sensory-motor schema has never been able to contain adequately: “amnesia, hypnosis, hallucination, madness, the vision of the dying, and especially nightmare and dream”.⁶¹ Finally, by revealing narrative events to be virtual, hallucinatory, or simulated, this recent trend has undermined our belief that cinematic images represent an objective or pre-existing reality. However, the films’ pervasive tendency to conclude their narratives in the form of a revelation or discovery is what also marks their ultimate limitation, if not conformity, to the sensory-motor schema and its accompanying organic narration.

As Rodowick emphasizes, we can examine whether a film exhibits organic or crystalline narration by determining how it mobilizes the real and the imaginary in relation to one another. These modes of existence are either rendered in opposition (organic narration) or in super-imposition (crystalline narration).⁶² The films within our corpus typically conclude through a series of flashbacks that abolish all doubt concerning what is real and what is imagined. This applies even to those films that show reality to be supported by fantasy since one mode of existence is always privileged over the other – Lenny may believe he is on a quest to avenge his wife’s murder, but he is *really* the true murderer. The films’ conclusions thus lend particular credence to Deleuze’s remarks about the inadequacy of the flashback. We will recall that, for Deleuze, the flashback is “like a sign with the words: ‘watch out! recollection’”.⁶³ It prompts a digression into the past and the virtual but only to clarify matters in the present and to restore the sense of linearity and wholeness constitutive of organic narration. Recent American cinema has

⁶¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55

⁶² Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 91

⁶³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 48

played out this process time and time again: “so I am Tyler Durden!”; “so there is no Kaiser Soze!”; “so I have been living in a virtual dream!”; “so I did not commit the murders!”; “so I did commit the murders!”, and so on. Beyond compartmentalizing the real and the imaginary, such conclusions endorse the hero’s discovery of his true and stable identity. “Know thyself”, *The Matrix*’s chosen proverb, becomes the defining philosophical message of the contemporary crisis of the action-image as a whole. In the final analysis, therefore, these films should not be noted for casting doubt upon the truth of past narrative events, but for restoring “the form of the true which is unifying and tends to the identification of a character (his discovery or simply his coherence)”.⁶⁴

If the real and the imaginary have been put in their proper places, and if the hero has exorcised all doubt regarding his true identity, then why are these films constantly marketed, if not received, as requiring multiple viewings? The answer is so that we may construct a whole in reverse order. In the second viewing, we can project what we now know onto the films’ flow of images (differentiation) and have our impressions confirmed by the directors’ gratuitous acts of “surplus enunciation” (integration). One could certainly provide a lengthy list of such acts of authorial commentary, but this point can be amply demonstrated by referring to the films’ excessive use of the jump cut. In *Fight Club*, director David Fincher flashes “subliminal” images of the phantasmic Tyler Durden all throughout the first quarter of the film. *Memento* uses a jump cut to momentarily substitute Lenny in the place of Sammy. In *The Machinist*, a series of jump cuts render the original traumatic hit-and-run accident when Trevor boards an amusement park ride that has the same name as the road by which he made his escape. *American Psycho* is peppered with bizarre jump cuts in which the hero admits his homicidal desires

⁶⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 133

to characters who are coincidentally too distracted to hear what he is saying. Of course, one could argue that these jump cuts reflect both the director's presence and the hero's psychology "bursting" through the film's surface, but I do not think an assemblage of enunciation is what is at stake here. Rather, such instances are like signs with the words "watch out! dubious imagery", they are cues that, as Knight and McKnight argue, warn the spectator "not to mistakenly make inferences on the basis of epistemically underdetermined images".⁶⁵ Yet while contemporary American cinema has mocked the way organic narration (as it is instantiated in "classical" realist cinema) leads us to create conceptual wholes on the basis of juxtaposed images, it has by no means broken free of this system. In other words, the films still rigidly guide interpretation ("take the hint from these jump-cuts and read what you are seeing as imaginary"), and encourage the integration of associated images into unified conceptual wholes.

Thus the contemporary crisis of the action-image's transgression of the sensory-motor schema must be viewed as an inherent transgression that restores, if not bolsters, the system's functioning. One could certainly extend this critique beyond the terms I've laid out here. For instance, *Fight Club* is replete with monologues that attack the Hollywood star system, but it is only through his identification with a star-like figure that the hero is able to actualize his potential. *The Matrix*, as noted by *Le Nouvel Observateur*, is a film "intending to denounce technistic [*sic*] alienation while making complete use of the fascination toward the digital world and computer graphics".⁶⁶ And, of course, *The Matrix* also exploits the digital world to spread its influence in the form of cross promotional video games, websites, etc. Yet perhaps no film is more instructive in

⁶⁵ Knight and McKnight, op. cit., 224

⁶⁶ Baudrillard, "Baudrillard Decodes Matrix."

terms of this trend's undeniable cleverness but ultimate conservatism than Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*. The film renders a fictional Charlie Kaufman (Nicholas Cage) in his desperate attempts to write a screenplay that would depart from the clichés that characterize mainstream American cinema. Charlie's acute awareness of these clichés is evidenced by his many speeches against writing a film in which the hero "overcomes obstacles", or which uses banal symbolism such as split mirrors to express a fragmented psychology – the very kind of symbolism that is all-pervasive in the films we have discussed! At the conclusion of the film, director Jonze takes the plot in the direction of every formula his hero has rallied against – explosive action sequence, love triangles, characters discovering their true identity – so as to emphasize how offensive such clichés appear within the context of an otherwise sophisticated narrative.

Critics tended strongly to defend *Adaptation* (it received perfect reviews from a range of publications including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*), by arguing that spectators who were dissatisfied with the conclusion failed to recognize its parodic content. It must be objected, however, that it is precisely because the film is satisfied only to mock the obscenity of the American cinema that it fails to traverse the threshold toward a genuinely counter-cinema. And this kind of complacency, moreover, is at the kernel of what we have called the contemporary crisis of the action-image. To ridicule the clichés which circulate around us is not to demand real change. As Deleuze emphasizes: "the rage against clichés does not lead to much if it is content only to parody them; maltreated, mutilated, destroyed, a cliché is not slow to be reborn from its ashes".⁶⁷

Today, it seems unthinkable that this critique was originally directed against films as ambitious as Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975). Deleuze's aristocratic tastes and

⁶⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 211

impossible standards no doubt prevented him from fully engaging with the ways in which the sensory-motor schema insinuates itself at the level of commercial cinema, which is what I have tried to do thus far. But it is also my contention that Hollywood cinema over the last ten years has produced instances that fully actualize Deleuze's hopes for the medium – that it should liberate time from movement, express multiple registers of existence, and tap into the reality of the virtual. Thus we turn to two such instances: David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* Both films are of the utmost importance, not only because they channel the themes and motifs of the contemporary crisis of the action-image toward a cinema of direct time, but also because they have been subjected to the criticisms that should have been reserved for the majority of films discussed hitherto. This was particularly the case with *Lost Highway*, which, as Žižek notes, was generally dismissed for its rendering of an “intertextual” and “ironically clichéd” universe.⁶⁸ However, if clichés are understood as sensory-motor images that function against thinking, then such reviews could not be more mistaken. For among all of the films I have chosen to theorize, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render the most thought provoking relation between the virtual, time, and the identity of the self.

⁶⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2000), 3

3

Encounters with the Virtual

...aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the quality of feeling.

—Sigmund Freud¹

Characters are of the present, but feelings plunge into the past. Feelings become characters.

—Gilles Deleuze²

In this final Chapter on David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, I will further develop, but also join, the two main conceptual threads that have emerged throughout this thesis. The first thread designates the topics of the global plot, the simulacrum, and the virtual, and the other, more implicit thread is "the encounter." I have focused on the

¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964), 219

² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 124

simulacrum and the virtual in particular, not only because these interrelated concepts are accorded a sustained role throughout the trajectory of Deleuze's philosophical career and are crucial to his account of the cinema, thought, and existence, but because they bear an immediate relation to the corpus of films I have chosen to theorize. In Chapter Two, I argued that the contemporary crisis of the action-image renders both simulation and the virtual, in contrast to Deleuze's understanding of these concepts, as *substitutions* for reality. It will be recalled that for all its digressions, this trend within American cinema reinforces a Platonic orientation toward the True as totalization. That is, the films tend to conclude with the hero discovering his coherence through an ability to distinguish the actual from its phantasmic veil or virtual supplement. Further, I argued that these films make rather bold appeals to Baudrillard's theories of simulation, and that while they have no doubt misappropriated Baudrillard, this misappropriation is the corollary of what is left ambiguous by the theorist's later writings. Indeed, Virilio suggests that "substitution" would serve as a more accurate definition for what Baudrillard terms "simulation".³ In Chapter Two, I also began to elaborate the concepts of the simulacrum and the virtual in the context of Deleuze's philosophy. According to Deleuze, the simulacrum is a paradoxical figure that overturns the distinction between the model and the copy, and that expresses an uncanny experience of difference through its effect on the individual's sensations. The virtual, moreover, was described as a "pool of potential" that operates in a reciprocal determination with the actual to constitute reality, rather than as a substitute for reality. As Ronald Bogue states, it is "the chaos of chance which impinges on thought as an imperative (the violence of the idea as provocation to

³ John Armitage, "From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond: An Interview with Paul Virilio," in *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. J. Armitage (London: Sage, 2000), 43

thought)”.⁴ I claim that this positive yet intangible quality that Deleuze attributes to both the simulacrum and the virtual is lent forceful expression by Lynch’s two films.

My elaboration of the concepts of the simulacrum and the virtual will converge with the topic of the encounter, established since the beginning of the thesis. This type of encounter can only be rendered by the time-image, since the liberation of perception from the sensory-motor schema is its condition of possibility. In Chapter One, I described the encounter in terms of Heidegger’s notion of “presence at hand.” The protagonists of Italian neo-realism were argued to experience Italy’s war-torn landscape in a corporeal plenum that resists all signification. In Chapter Two, I developed this idea further through a discussion of the failures of attentive memory in relation to Resnais’s *Je t’aime, Je t’aime* and Rossellini’s *Europa ‘51*. There it was argued that through a failure of the attentive faculties of representation, the individual becomes receptive to details in the environment and thought that escape goal-oriented perception. In this Chapter, I will give the encounter its most precise definition, that is, as an uncanny sense event, in which an intensity communicates an expression of difference that is always masked by actual reality. The themes of the encounter, the simulacrum and the virtual converge, because the intensity is argued to be a simulacrum which illuminates that which is only virtual.

Prior to addressing how these concepts take on a unique expression in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, I will demonstrate how Lynch’s two films, although superficially similar, are nonetheless fundamentally distinct from the films discussed in Chapter Two. First, neither film can be divided into real and imagined components, although a number of strong essays have argued that this is the case. Indeed, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* are marked by radical fissures midway through their

⁴ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze and Guattari* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 65

narratives, encouraging interpretations which stress that some portion of their reality is phantasmic. I argue, however, that Lynch's temporal distributions *within* the halves, divided by each film's break, undermine any attempt to determine a stable actuality. Through a brief segment analysis of *Lost Highway*, it will be established that these autonomous sections render distinctions between the real and the imaginary indiscernible, alternatives between past events undecidable, and difference in the present inexplicable. Put differently, Lynch's manipulations of time prevent us from referring to any section of either film as real or imagined.

Though *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* cannot be explained in terms of real and dreamed sections, the logic of dreams is implicated in their narrative strategies, and I will appeal to Deleuze's notion of "the implied dream" to account for their "movements of world."⁵ Here, I will also address how these movements of world or shifts in the films' reality appear to be motivated by specific, ambiguous figures: *Lost Highway*'s Mystery Man and *Mulholland Dr.*'s Cowboy. Both figures are deeply associated with the noir universe, but more importantly, the trope of the film within the film. Here, I will re-engage with the topic of "the global plot" introduced in Chapter Two, to argue that the theme of the conspiracy obtains a higher justification in Lynch's films, since it becomes an *explicit* vehicle to confront the film medium's relation to capitalism. Moreover, the role of the figures behind the plot is also said to be distinct, since they do not dupe the hero into accepting an imagined reality as actual, but effect the way in which time splinters into a series of incommensurable presents or worlds. These worlds are consistent in themselves but temporally paradoxical, or impossible, with one another. Characters appear as distinct versions of themselves within these worlds, but they

⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 59

experience the same uncanny sensations across these worlds. As such, “feelings become characters” and the virtual side of existence insinuates itself amid all of the films’ various realities.

The Powers of the False, The Implied Dream, and The Plot Behind the Picture

As a number of film scholars have observed, it is difficult to note a film other than Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) that exhibits the kind of radical caesura found in both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* Indeed, the breaks marking the middle of Lynch’s two films are potentially more unsettling than the death of Marion Crane, since Lynch’s heroes do not die, but in Deleuze’s terms “pass into the void”, their absence conferring a virtual weight or insistence upon the “second half” of the narrative.⁶ Initially, it is tempting to interpret both films, in accordance with the contemporary crisis of the action-image, as being divided into real and imagined components; their conclusions do provide evidence to support this argument. Nearing the end of *Mulholland Dr.*, Lynch employs a series of eye-line matches to emphasize Diane’s impressions of the various figures and objects that appear prominently in the first half of the film. Perhaps, as in *The Machinist*, Diane has assembled these impressions into a coherent dream world that offers a respite from her actual, social reality. And at the conclusion of *Lost Highway*, the picture that earlier contained both Alice and Renee reappears with Alice notably absent. Two of the strongest, and most frequently cited essays on *Lost Highway*, Žižek’s “The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*” and Todd McGowan’s “Finding

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland also observe this point in their cognitive based interpretation of *Lost Highway*: Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (London: Arnold, 2002)

Ourselves on a *Lost Highway*: David Lynch's Lesson in Fantasy" take this detail as irrefutable evidence that the second half of the film is "wholly phantasmic."⁷ "We can grasp what is happening in *Lost Highway*", McGowan claims, "if we see the sudden transformation of Fred Madison into Pete Dayton as phantasmic: Pete Dayton is Fred Madison within Fred's fantasy."⁸

Both Žižek and McGowan argue that the first half of the film represents the social world of desire, whereas the second half exhibits the hero's delving into fantasy as a means to stave off the enigmas and anxieties of desire, an argument which could also be rearranged to suit *Mulholland Dr.* My aim in this chapter is not to produce a critique of either Žižek's or McGowan's arguments, which are rooted in psychoanalysis, or to address the problematical relation between Deleuze and psychoanalysis, which varies throughout the philosopher's career and cannot be reduced to a simple antagonism.⁹ It is sufficient to say that both essays use *Lost Highway* to furnish nuanced explications of the psychoanalytic concepts of desire and fantasy, but for this very reason they tend to cast the film's images along clear oppositions – between the subjective and the objective – and into rigid analogies – peripheral characters serve as symbols of the hero's unconscious, etc. To interpret either film in this fashion, however, is to neglect what distinguishes Lynch's work from the ubiquitous tendency in contemporary American cinema discussed in Chapter Two. For *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* "are no longer in the domain of the real and the imaginary but in time, in the even more alarming

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2000)

⁸ Todd McGowan, "Finding Ourselves on a *Lost Highway*: David Lynch's Lesson in Fantasy," *Cinema Journal* 39.2 (Winter 2000), 52

⁹ Film studies must resist the temptation to invoke Deleuze's work with Guattari willy-nilly as a means to debase psychoanalysis and its immense contribution to the discipline.

domain of the true and the false”.¹⁰ It will be recalled that the form rather than the content of time puts truth in crisis. Accordingly, we cannot argue that one section of either film represents reality and the other fantasy, because Lynch’s temporal distributions *within* these sections already render indiscernible distinctions between the subjective and the objective, past and present, and even character consciousness and camera consciousness. The section of *Lost Highway* that begins with Fred’s dream and ends with Renee’s murder is particularly instructive of Lynch’s proclivity towards *the powers of the false*.

Fred’s “dream” follows a scene in which he, for reasons that are left ambiguous, fails to satisfy his wife Renee in bed (“it’s okay, it’s okay ...”). This failed sexual encounter is accompanied by a number of the visual and sonic motifs that will recur throughout the film during peaks of emotional intensity – a white fade, and “The Song of the Siren.” Moreover, it should be noted that in both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, what we will later call “movements of world” tend to circulate around moments of sexuality and death. In this respect, Lynch is close to Bataille, for whom sex and death are events which put the individual into contact with a “continuity” that is otherwise inaccessible to him or her as a “discontinuous” being.¹¹ In the unsettling aftermath of this scene, Fred narrates his experience of a recent dream in which he comes across a figure who looks like Renee but is not Renee (“Ceci n’est pas une Renee”). Fred’s story continues in voice-over, as the film cuts to a series of disconnected images, some of which take a mobile point-of-view perspective that traverses the various hallways and red curtains found in the couple’s home, others which render Fred moving in and out of dark

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 104

¹¹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962)

voids. Since Lynch uses only medium and close-up shots to describe the dark hallways and corridors of the house, the dream milieu is transformed into an any-space-whatever of the second variety, that is, a space which marks the character's absence from himself as much as from his environment.¹² Further, the pacing of these shots is intolerably slow, making the force of time a tangible quality of the image. Eventually, Renee's voice is faintly heard calling out "Fred, Fred, where are you?", and shortly thereafter a point-of-view shot rushes toward her in violent fashion. Renee's screams provoke Fred's awakening in the next shot, but when he turns to make sure his wife is still alive, her face is replaced by the terrifying visage of the "Mystery Man." This superimposition is only momentary, and with Renee "back in place" there is a fade to black. What is remarkable about the conclusion of this scene, however, is that it does not return to the originating image of Fred narrating the dream, signaling one of the film's many displacements of our sense of a here and now.

The "next morning", Fred and Renee receive the second in a series of videotapes that are placed outside their doorstep – this story line is a clear inspiration for Michael Haneke's remarkable film, *Caché* (2005). The couple dismissed the first tape, a panning shot surveying the exterior of their house, as a solicitation by a real estate agent. They are quickly disabused of this hypothesis, however, as the second tape renders a series of point-of-view shots taken from within their home, and a final shot of them asleep in bed. Yet Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland point to another feature found on this tape that implies something considerably more alarming than the idea of an intruder breaking into one's home.¹³ Indeed, the shot passing through a hallway mimics the exact framing

¹² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 9

¹³ Elsaesser and Buckland, *op. cit.*, 192

and movements of an image from Fred's dream. It is after this shot, moreover, that Lynch cuts to an extreme close-up of Fred's eyes and that the score becomes chaotically dissonant. Fred and the viewer have witnessed impossibility: the film image not as a reproduction of physical reality, but as an actualization of thought (and as Massumi argues, "actualization is always translation").¹⁴ This coexistence of a necessarily objective and subjective presence within a single image is what Deleuze calls an assemblage of enunciation or, following Pasolini, a cinematic form of free indirect discourse.¹⁵ Through free indirect discourse, Deleuze writes, "the distinction between what the character sees subjectively and what the camera sees objectively vanishes, not in favour of one or the other, but because the camera assumes a subjective presence, acquires an internal vision, which enters into a relation of *simulation* ('mimesis') with the character's way of seeing".¹⁶ This encounter with the simulacrum is no doubt related to Fred's remark to the police in the film's following scene that he does not own a video camera because he likes to remember things "his own way". Further, while the image on the tape presents a rather bold instance in which a character's perceptions are "brought onto the scene" by an exterior agency that makes itself felt, I will argue that *all* of the images in both of Lynch's films obtain the status of a free indirect discourse.

Following Fred and Renee's meeting with the predictably inept police detectives during the day, Lynch dissolves to the "following night" when the couple attend a party hosted by Andy, the smarmy porn filmmaker. I put "the next morning" and "the following night" in quotation marks because Lynch's systematic shifts between day and

¹⁴ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 55

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 148 (emphasis in original, changed to present tense)

night, along with the chronological succession of the three tapes, confer a surface effect of linearity onto the film's flow of images that masks what are in fact a series of false continuities. For instance, at the party, Fred encounters the Mystery Man for the second time in the film, but rejects the dark figure's claim that they met before at the hero's house. This encounter resembles Adam Keshner's meeting with the "Cowboy" in *Mulholland Dr.*, both scenes exhibiting the stylistic markers – an absence of background noise in the former, and a short-circuiting light in the latter – that Michel Chion describes as alarms in Lynch's cinema, "when separate worlds come into contact".¹⁷ This meeting of distinct worlds or "presents" is made evident in *Lost Highway* when the Mystery Man insists not only that he has been to Fred's house before but that he is there "right now." The Mystery Man prompts Fred to phone home, and then, although standing before the hero, answers the call with the line, "I told you I was here." Lynch's use of sound thus produces a cut or an interstice *within* the visual framing that gives rise to two inexplicable differences in the present.¹⁸

Unnerved by his encounter with the Mystery Man, Fred makes a hasty exit from the party with Renee to inspect their home. While pulling into the driveway, he catches a fleeting glimpse of two shadows that move violently in the frame of their bedroom window. Having checked that the coast is clear, Fred lets Renee into the house and what unfolds is an uncanny repetition of the events from Fred's dream. Again, the camera swoops past shadowy corridors and red curtains, and renders Fred in the same clothes, making the same purposeful movements in and out of black voids. Again, Renee's voice

¹⁷ Michel Chion, *David Lynch*, trans. Robert Julian (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 171

¹⁸ Indeed, the Deleuzian interstice can occur within the frame and not only between frames. It is for this reason we must reject Mary Ann Doane's claim that Deleuze should be classified among film theorists who tend to "fetishize" the cut, since Doane interprets the cut to be synonymous with editing. Rather, the cut can occur between zones of framing in depth, between sound and image, but most importantly, "the cut", as we shall see, refers to a figure of thought that prevents us from thinking the whole.

is heard calling out “Fred, Fred, where are you?” After a prolonged stare into a mirror without a visible frame, Fred emerges from the dark, and there is a fade to black. In the next scene, Fred alone views the third and final tape, which depicts him hovering over his wife’s dismembered body. The fuzzy images of the tape intermingle with more crisp (recollection?) images of the murder, until an abrupt ellipsis leads to Fred in the office of the two detectives from earlier in the film.

Thus while *Lost Highway* is marked by a radical before and after, we cannot assign a stable character to either half of the film, since, as this brief segment analysis demonstrates, no single interpretation can negotiate between the contradictory possibilities provoked within these sections. Consistent with Deleuze’s notion of the powers of the false, the segment discussed renders distinctions between the real and the imaginary indiscernible, differences in the present inexplicable, and alternatives between past events undecidable. Does Fred dream that he murdered Renee, or imagine that he tells her about such a dream? How can we account for the Mystery Man’s dual presence in two places at once? And has Fred met him before? Do the images found on the second tape represent or prophesy Fred’s dream/Renee’s murder? In contrast to the contemporary crisis of the action-image, the film does not drive toward the moment of truth which resolves such ambiguities, but only deepens “the metamorphoses of the false which replace the form of the true”.¹⁹ Indeed, one could easily demonstrate the presence of similar temporal paradoxes in either the Betty and Rita or Diane and Camilla sections of *Mulholland Dr.* Yet while neither *Lost Highway* nor *Mulholland Dr.* can be reduced to the “it was all a dream” motif that tends to govern the films described in Chapter Two,

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 134

the *logic of dreams* is nonetheless central to both films' compositional strategies, and is what I will first consider in addressing their radical fissures.

According to Deleuze, dream-images, like flashbacks or recollection-images, tend to reinforce the sensory-motor schema insofar as they prompt a digression that ultimately restores linear causality and clear oppositions between the real and the imaginary. Put simply, "The dream-image is subject to the condition of attributing the dream to the dreamer, and the awareness of the dream to the viewer".²⁰ One notable exception to the explicit dream sequences found in the movement-image is what Deleuze refers to as the *implied dream*. In the case of the implied dream, emblemized by Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), the film does not represent a character's dreams but adopts a dream logic in which there are "movements of world." As Deleuze writes, "The frightened child faced with danger cannot run away, but the world sets about running away for him and takes him with it, as if on a conveyor belt. Characters do not move, but, as in an animated film, the camera causes the movement of the path on which they change places, 'motionless at a great pace'".²¹ The radical transitions marking the middle of Lynch's two films are characterized by such *depersonalized* movements, since the hero is literally swallowed or summoned by another world.

In *Lost Highway*, Fred's cell opens onto the image of a cabin in the desert, which is rendered as exploding in reverse time. Subsequently, the Mystery Man is seen exiting and re-entering the cabin in a series of shots that are repeated identically at the end of the film when Pete "transforms" back into Fred. Thus, the images of the cabin and the Mystery Man are, in a sense, simultaneously of the past, present, and future, constituting

²⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 58

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59

them as what Deleuze calls “peaks of present”.²² In the chaos of the ensuing moments, a violent point-of-view shot taken from within a car stops before the film’s “new” protagonist, Pete. This shot is first layered overtop an image of Pete’s parents and girlfriend screaming in the background, and then over a bloodied Fred writhing on the floor of his cell. “The Song of the Siren” is briefly heard in the background before an abstract shape literally envelops the frame. In the next scene, Pete is mysteriously found in Fred’s cell, and Fred has simply passed into the void. Similarly, *Mulholland Dr.*’s amnesiac protagonist Rita is sucked into the mysterious box found in her purse. To recall our earlier remarks about “continuity”, this event occurs shortly after her first sexual encounter with Betty. Once Rita has disappeared, the film moves to the house of the dead woman, Diane Selwyn, whom Rita and Betty chanced upon in their investigation into Rita’s identity. Subsequently, a series of fades break apart three brief episodes in which the Cowboy enters and exits Diane’s room. In the first of these episodes Diane is found sleeping, in the second she is dead, and in the third she is alive again, but it is the character we formerly knew as Betty who now lies in her place.²³ It now becomes apparent that the movements of world constitutive of the two films are not exactly “depersonalized”, since the figures of the Mystery Man and the Cowboy appear to play a formative albeit vague role in their occurrence. Not incidentally, these two men are strongly associated with the “*noir* universe” and the trope of the film within the film.

Indeed, it is not difficult to enumerate Lynch’s various “citations” of the vague phenomenon called *film noir* in both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* Both films take place in Los Angeles and render those “transitional spaces” that Vivian Sobchack

²² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 100

²³ This scene alone should prompt us to reject the “fantasy hypothesis”, unless we are to believe that Diane is able to imagine exactly what her dead body will look like following her suicide.

believes crucial to *noir*, including lounges, diners, and motels.²⁴ Events are frequently rendered with “choker” close-ups, high contrast lighting, and wide angle lenses that create a distorted visual effect. Both films are replete with flashbacks, dream sequences, or instances that render the hero’s uncertain state of consciousness. Further, Lynch taps into *noir*’s thematic preoccupations insofar as *Lost Highway* may be argued to render a “crisis of masculinity” and both films contain versions of the “femme fatale.” For example, Žižek convincingly demonstrates that *Lost Highway* evokes both the classic femme fatale (Renee) who is explicitly punished at the level of composition and narrative, and the neo-femme fatale (Alice) who subverts the male hero’s control by directly staging his desire.²⁵ Here it must be noted, however, that the rejection of *noir* as a definable genre, cycle, or style is a commonplace within film studies. Steve Neale takes the rather aggressive stance in his chapter on *noir* from *Genre and Hollywood* that “As a single phenomenon, *noir*, in my view, never existed.”²⁶ Neale observes that the stylistic and thematic characteristics noted above do not appear in uniform fashion across the nebulous *noir* canon, and, moreover, do appear in other genres such as the gothic woman’s film. One point that Neale does not and would be remiss to deny, however, is that in the majority of films he discusses – be it in “quintessential” noirs like *The Big Sleep* (1946) or in neo-noirs like *Chinatown* (1974) – the circulation and the corrupting influence of money tends to play a definitive structural, if not philosophical role. It is this aspect of *noir*, moreover, that I claim is most essential to Lynch’s two films.

²⁴ Vivian Sobchack, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 129-170.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, 8-14

²⁶ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 173

In *Lost Highway*, but especially in *Mulholland Dr.*, it is the gangsters who, through their control of money, control not only the fate of other characters but also the direction of the film being made within the film. Here we are reminded of Deleuze's theory of "the global plot" discussed in Chapter Two, which is dramatized rather literally by *Mulholland Dr.* According to Deleuze, the trope of the film within the film is most justified as a means to confront the medium's "indispensable enemy" or "permanent plot", that is, its internalized relation with money. "Money", Deleuze writes, "is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place, so that films about money are, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film."²⁷ It is important to note that throughout the trajectory of his career, Lynch's creative ideas and energies have been violently impinged upon by the Hollywood industry. It was network executives who forced Lynch to reveal Laura Palmer's murderer, turning what was always a philosophical problem into a crass matter of "whodunit." Accordingly, it was not long after *Twin Peaks*' "revelatory" episode that the show lost a profound element of its mystery and would be removed from the air. And, *Mulholland Dr.* as a film is of course the product of *Mulholland Dr.* the television show being cancelled. So it is perhaps fair to say that in Lynch's world, producers *are* criminals and he is not afraid to show this literally, rather than metaphorically.

In *Mulholland Dr.*, Adam Kesher is making a film, "The Sylvia North Story", and in a scene worthy of the later Buñuel, is set for a meeting with the film's executive producers to recast his lead actress. The executive producers are revealed as unreasonable, black-suited Mafia-like figures, who distress everyone in the room with their blank stares and rather obvious dissatisfaction with a subordinate producer's choice

²⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 77

of espresso. They inform Adam in uncompromising fashion that Camilla Rhodes, an unknown actress, “is the girl.” When the mystified director attempts to re-exert creative control over his film, he is abruptly told, “It is no longer your film.” The entire meeting, moreover, takes place under the acoustic surveillance of a dwarf named Mr. Roque! Administering orders from behind a glass wall, Mr. Roque exacerbates the film’s aura of conspiracy through his unexplained control over the film within the film and, by extension, the film itself. Later in the narrative, when Adam tries to resist the criminal producers’ stranglehold over his film, they respond by clearing out his credit cards and savings accounts. Destitute, he agrees to the aforementioned meeting with the “Cowboy”, who is somehow connected to Mr. Roque. The Cowboy impresses that he is the one “driving this buggy” and that the choice of lead actress is no longer under the director’s jurisdiction. Adam concedes, the Cowboy appears to walk through a gated fence (movement of world), and Lynch revealingly cuts to a prolonged shot of the Hollywood sign.

Lynch’s particular treatment of the *noir* universe and the trope of the film within the film should prompt us to reject criticisms of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* as vapid exercises in pastiche, or blank parody of the order of the films discussed in Chapter Two. Those films tend to intermingle past cinematic traditions without any visible ulterior motive or higher justification than blank parody: a stack of tumble weed passes through the frame during an urban street fight in *The Matrix*; a barrage of jump cuts invokes the stylistic inventions of the French New Wave with the polish and sincerity of a Gap advertisement in *Vanilla Sky*, etc. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, on the other hand, interrogate the extent to which films *noir*, as films about the corrupting influence of

money within California city-settings, were “already, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film”²⁸ Thus in opposition to the contemporary crisis of the action-image’s tiresome rendering of a genre’s clichés, Lynch repeats a past cinematic tradition in a manner which unearths its latent impulses, and invests his own films with the means to interrogate the cinema’s immanent relation to industrial capital.

Further, the theme of the “global plot” takes on a distinct function in Lynch’s two films. In the contemporary crisis of the action-image, agents of institutional power dupe the hero, either explicitly or implicitly, into accepting a simulated or imagined reality as “actual” reality. The hero’s discovery of a reality beyond the bounds of simulation at the film’s conclusion is what permits him to reestablish a coherent picture of the world, and by corollary, his place within it. However, the various figures behind the plot in Lynch’s films are dispersed into a “dissociative force”, which manipulates the protagonists’ lives in an unpredictable fashion. Above all, this force has a splintering effect on the distribution of time.

What we know for certain is that both the Mystery Man and the Cowboy are involved in the process of casting. Literally, they place characters in and out of the picture. At the conclusion of *Lost Highway*, Alice and an unwitting Pete drive to the desert to meet the Mystery Man who is now revealed not only as the filmmaker producing the tapes, but as a *fence* who makes exchanges for stolen goods. After entering the cabin to meet the dark figure, Alice vanishes from both the film and the photograph in which she earlier stood beside Renee, a point to which I will return. And I have already noted how *Mulholland Dr.*’s Adam is coerced by a vague network of forces to cast Camilla Rhodes in the lead role of “The Sylvia North Story”. Yet just before he

²⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 77

utters the phrase “this is the girl” at the film’s casting call, the director is caught mysteriously off-guard by Betty’s presence at the back of the set. Lynch renders a prolonged series of eye-line matches between the two to emphasize their moving and unfathomable connection. Adam proceeds with the plan, however, and it is not incidental that Betty encounters what is potentially her own dead body in the film’s following scene. These casting decisions illustrate how a single moment can give way to what Jorge Luis Borges calls “a garden of forking paths”, that is, to divergent possibilities or “to a plurality of simultaneous worlds; to a simultaneity of presents in different worlds”.²⁹ Such presents or worlds are possible in themselves but temporally incompatible or, following Leibniz, “impossible” with each other. As Deleuze writes: “Two people know each other, but already knew each other, but already knew each other and do not yet know each other ... in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend.”³⁰

Indeed, both of Lynch’s films express the ways in which impossibles “vice-dict” each other, or play out a life in distinct ways.³¹ In one world Betty and Adam are strangers, in another they vie for the love of the same woman. In one world *Lost Highway*’s hero is a middle-aged man enveloped by despair, in another he is young, virile and open to experiencing life and its intensities. Moreover, these impossible worlds are folded within the *same* present: “Betrayal happens, it never happened, and yet has happened and will happen, sometimes one betraying the other sometimes the other

²⁹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 45, 103

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101,131

³¹ James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 72

betraying the first – all at the same time.”³² At the beginning and the conclusion of *Lost Highway*, Fred delivers the failed message to himself that “Dick Laurent is dead.”

Within a single present, he has and has not killed his wife, been arrested, escaped prison and so on. And in *Mulholland Dr.*, the circulation of phone calls that lead to Diane’s house travel not through space but through time. And when the phone rings, Betty-Diane is just arriving in Los Angeles but, as the cliché goes, has already “lived and died in L.A.”

Now what gives the Mystery Man and the Cowboy their privileged status amidst this chaos is not only their ability to effect the present moment’s splintering into divergent worlds, but their capacity to remain ontologically consistent *across* these worlds. In Deleuze’s terms, they “constitute a sheet of transformation which invents a kind of transverse continuity or communication between several sheets.”³³ Indeed, this is precisely the kind of figure in literature and film that has fascinated Deleuze throughout his philosophical career. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze frequently invokes Lewis Carroll’s *The Snark* since the Snark escapes common sense as a paradoxical entity that “sets all series in resonance and itself traverses all series.”³⁴ An analogous figure in the cinema is the character of “M” from *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Deleuze argues that the film’s two main characters, “X” and “A”, seem to correspond to distinct but incommensurable presents or ages, but that M, like the Mystery Man and the Cowboy, is able to transcend these ages. This leaves open the possibility that “M would be the dramatist-storyteller of whom X and A would be simply the characters, or better the two

³² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 101

³³ *Ibid.*, 123

³⁴ Bogue, *op. cit.*, 76

sheets from which he will draw out a transverse one.”³⁵ While the hypothesis that M is the creator of events in *Last Year...* is at best a provocation – and Deleuze implicitly acknowledges this – it is a compelling possibility for the roles fulfilled by the Mystery Man and the Cowboy, who are explicitly associated with the act of filmmaking. It is in this respect, therefore, that all of the images in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* obtain the status of a free indirect discourse. We must always question the extent to which the heroes’ situations, if not thoughts and perceptions, are being contaminated by an exterior agency, by *a transcendental subject*, whose presence is deeply felt but can never be localized in time (the very being of the divided *cogito*). Here, the distinction between the felt authorial presence in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* and the impoverished attempts at “reflexivity” demonstrated by the films discussed in Chapter Two becomes clear. In the case of the latter, the film tends to foreground its narration as a means to direct interpretation (watch out, dubious imagery!) and make us think the whole. In Lynch’s films, the question of authorship invents yet another mode of indiscernibility, which disturbs our ability to think.

The Uncanny Connection

At this point, I would like to turn to how the various modes of indiscernibility rendered by *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* cast the films in a unique relation to the concepts of the simulacrum and the virtual introduced in Chapter Two. As an inroad to

³⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 124

this discussion, we must consider one of Deleuze's most ambiguous claims regarding the relationship between impossible worlds in the cinema: "These are not subjective (imaginary) points of view in one and the same world, but one and the same event in different objective worlds, all implicated in *the event, inexplicable universe*."³⁶ The concept of "the event" takes on a very particular meaning within Deleuze's philosophical work, referring not simply to that which occurs, but, as James Williams observes, to an "uncanny connection."³⁷

One of the most regrettable aspects of Deleuze's *Cinema* books is the philosopher's persistently cryptic style of prose. Deleuze simply takes for granted that the reader is familiar with his philosophical oeuvre, prompting a series of idiosyncratic allusions throughout both volumes on the cinema. For instance, he makes a rather abrupt and singular reference to the movement-image's "machinic assemblage" in *The Time-Image*; a reference that would be meaningless to any reader not familiar with *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. Thus when Deleuze speaks of "the event" in relation to impossible worlds, we must realize that he is elaborating concepts that date back to such early writings as *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. At its kernel, the Deleuzian event refers to an anomalous occurrence that affects the individual at the level of the senses, prompting a shift in the way he or she usually perceives the world.³⁸ Put differently, the event is an encounter with what I described in Chapter Two as the intensity – and the virtual is constituted of ideas and intensities. The intensity is a strand of an idea that expresses itself in a physical quality or stable state. Much like how the past remains virtual until it is actualized in the form of memory, an idea remains

³⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 103 (my emphasis)

³⁷ Williams, *op. cit.*, 154

³⁸ *Ibid.*

“difference in itself” until it is *expressed* or *individuated* by an intensity in a sense event. Here, two immediate points of clarification are wanting.³⁹

First, according to Deleuze ideas *enfold* a variety of dimensions and as such they are by nature *problematic*. No singular expression or unfolding of the problem can wholly represent an idea in its totality or the way it is enfolded in other ideas. For instance, the problem posed by *Citizen Kane* (1941) is, of course, who was the ambiguous figure named Charles Foster Kane? Each witnesses’ testimony brings some aspects of Kane’s life into clarity, but at the expense of obscuring others: Kane was a failed politician, a brilliant publishing mogul, an adulterous husband, and so on. Second, the intensity is what motivates a profound philosophical intuition of an obscured dimension of the problem-idea through its unsettling effect on the individual’s sensations in an event or encounter. Yet what an intensity masks is always greater than what it expresses. This is because the intensity explicates only a dimension of the idea, and is clouded by its relation to dimensions of other ideas, or other intensities. Accordingly, we can never fully represent in thought the idea of which the intensity is an expression because this idea is still for the most part only virtual. However, Deleuze argues that in moments of disequilibrium, when our unified faculties (memory, understanding, imagination) fail to co-align, we can sense in an intensity a difference which is typically

³⁹ These concepts from *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* are deeply implicated in Deleuze's theorization of the film medium. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze argues that the time-image puts us in the realm of the problematic rather than the theorematic, “in that the theorem develops internal relations from principle to consequences, while the problem introduces an event from the outside” (174). Moreover, the cinema allows Deleuze to reinvigorate his hypothesis from *Difference and Repetition* that the actual simultaneously clarifies and obscures the virtual realm of Ideas: “When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid ... But the actual image becomes virtual in turn, referred elsewhere, invisible opaque and shadowy ... The actual-virtual couple thus immediately extends into the opaque-limpid, the expression of their exchange” (70).

masked.⁴⁰ Thus the heroine's encounter with the workers leaving the factory in *Europa* '51 is an event because an intense difference that can only be sensed ("I thought I was seeing convicts"), motivates a reconfiguration of an established idea (the idea of factories as institutions of imprisonment becomes clear whereas the idea of factories as institutions of employment becomes obscure).

There is a profound link between Deleuze's concepts of the simulacrum and the intensity, and Ronald Bogue goes so far as to argue that "*the simulacrum is the intensity.*"⁴¹ Both the simulacrum and the intensity confront the receiver with a difference, or an idea, that can only be sensed rather than represented. For instance, the uncanny effect produced by Gus Van Sant's remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* cannot be reduced to identifiable resemblances or differences – both films employ the same credit sequence font but Van Sant introduces the colour green into the picture. What simulacra make apparent through their superficial resemblance to another set or series is that actual things are an amalgamation of pure differences or pure variations that can never be identified by quotidian perception. Simulacra carry over some of the pure variations contained within another actual thing but in a new amalgamation. It is the masked difference, rather than the surface resemblance, that invest simulacra with their unsettling quality.

We are now in a better position to address what gives the simulacrum its uncanny aura. Like Freud's "the uncanny", the simulacrum marks something "repressed which recurs ... something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light."⁴² But what recurs and comes to light is not a trauma latent since infancy, but the virtual side of

⁴⁰ Bogue, op. cit., 63

⁴¹ Ibid., 64 (my emphasis)

⁴² Freud, op. cit., 241

the idea which was necessarily betrayed by its actualization. For Deleuze, *repetition* is the condition under which the new effectively emerges, but systems like the sensory-motor schema are commercially invested in the obfuscation of this fact. Actual occurrences, things, and identities perish, but their virtual side always bears the potential to return in a new setting or quality.⁴³ Žižek, for instance, explains this concept in terms of Walter Benjamin's claim that the October Revolution succeeded where the French Revolution failed through a repetition of the same ideas and impulses.⁴⁴ Ultimately, the simulacrum expresses the way in which pure differences return and never stop returning, hence Deleuze's claim in *The Logic of Sense* that "between the eternal return and the simulacrum there is such a profound link that one cannot be understood in terms of the other."⁴⁵ So at this stage, the obvious question is what does all of this have to do with Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*? Both films are composed entirely out of sense encounters with intensities and simulacra, in which the virtual side of identities returns in a new and uncanny light.

I began my discussion of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* by rejecting the idea that the films' various worlds represent either objective or subjective realities. In turn, no incarnation of the films' protagonists can be regarded as imagined or phantasmic. There is no "true" self in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* but only masks or expressions of the same self. Fred Madison and Pete Dayton, for instance, are the same person in different worlds. And both characters "vice-dict", "counter-actualize", or play out this person's life in different ways.⁴⁶ Yet to say that Fred does not imagine Pete is not to

⁴³ Williams, op. cit., 103

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 264

⁴⁶ Williams, op. cit., 202

deny that Fred experiences, intuits, and senses Pete's existence (insistence) and vice-versa. A kind of telepathic or subliminal reality traverses the impossible worlds that constitute Lynch's two films. And consistent with Deleuze's notion of the intensity, characters experience this reality (of the virtual) during moments of disequilibrium, or a distortion of the senses.

Consider the remarkable scene that begins with Pete working beneath a car at Arnie's Garage. Until now, Fred has simply vanished from the film, although some unfathomable remnant of his character seems to haunt Pete's thoughts and perceptions. In this scene, however, Fred's virtual specter *explicates* itself in a physical quality: the saxophone music heard on the radio. Fred improvises the same music at the Luna Lounge earlier in the narrative right before he phones Renee – who is, not incidentally, nowhere to be found. The sound of the saxophone affects Pete with a dizzying, intolerable headache, much like the headaches experienced by Fred in his cell. In short, the music on the radio is an intensity, something which allows Pete to sense, rather than represent, the idea of himself in another life. Pete abruptly turns off the radio and what follows is the impossible, “magic moment” in which the dead Renee returns as Alice; a hint of the eternal return. The reincarnation of Patricia Arquette's character lends forceful expression to Deleuze's claim that what returns in the eternal return is never identity, but difference and becoming.⁴⁷ Despite the fact that Renee and Alice are identical, minor variations in hair and costume notwithstanding, the two characters' auras remains wholly distinct. This is because their actual similarities disguise a profound difference. Immediately, we sense that Alice is more aggressive and direct than Renee

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 41

since she stares the mystified Pete directly in the eyes, whereas Renee is almost always rendered with a lowered head and an averted gaze. Yet although Alice assumes a more open disposition, she nonetheless retains certain dimensions or variations of Renee's character: a quality of mysteriousness and impenetrability. From the perspective of Deleuze's philosophy, it is the return of these virtual differences or "continuous variations", rather than actual, detectable differences, that give simulacra their uncanny effect. That Alice is a blonde and Renee is a brunette is not the most relevant difference. The real difference rests in the fact that Alice expresses variations of Renee's character in a new amalgamation (the same mysteriousness enfolded within a new disposition).

As James observes, actual differences between two terms – the various shades of red in a Warhol Marilyn series, the black and white versus colored credit sequences in the two *Psycho* films – are "signs of a re-arrangement of an infinity of other actual and virtual relations ... *because they differ, these pictures are different in all respects.*"⁴⁸ James's claim here is key to the issue which opened our discussion of *Lost Highway*: the relation between the photograph with Alice and the photograph without Alice. That Alice is missing from the second photograph is not evidence that the Pete section of the film is "wholly phantasmic". In fact, I think Lynch is careful to dissuade us from this interpretation by emphasizing the detective's remark at the end of the film that Pete's fingerprints are all over Andy's house, thereby affirming that Pete actually exists. Rather, Alice's absence from the picture is another sign of how a small variation in one world can have reverberating, incalculable consequences across the film's entire reality. If Alice was not present when the photograph was taken, then it is possible that she was elsewhere, producing changes in time that we cannot measure or detect. Similarly, we

⁴⁸ Williams, op. cit., 27, 28

cannot account for how the film's series of events would be altered had the police or Pete encountered opposite versions of the photograph (*because they differ, these pictures are different in all respects*). Thus it is impossible to assemble *Lost Highway*'s narrative into a unified conceptual whole, because the film renders only a series of contingent events, which are linked, or rather, *de-linked*, in an irrational and probabilistic fashion.

It is difficult to make the same claim for *Mulholland Dr.*, since the scene involving Diane at Adam's party could imply that the first half of the film represents the heroine's fantasy life. In this scene the sensory-motor schema breaks down entirely. A helpless Diane encounters a number of the people, objects, and sounds that constitute the first half of the film: the espresso cup and a mobster-producer from the casting meeting; the first incarnation of Camilla Rhodes; the remark that "this is the girl"; and the Cowboy. The prospect that Diane has assembled these objects and figures into a coherent fantasy world, however, is not particularly compelling, and more importantly, does not account for their uncanny, simulacral quality. Rather, just like the saxophone that Pete hears on the radio, these impressions are signs – opsigns and sonsigns – that put Diane into contact with another version of the self. Each encounter is analogous to a failure to recognize one's own image in the mirror. Consider Freud's anecdote from "The Uncanny" in which he recounts the experience of meeting his own image "unbidden and unexpected."⁴⁹ Caught off guard when the door to his train compartment opens onto a mirror, Freud is unable to project a unified self-image onto the image before him, and, as such, experiences himself as an other: "I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance".⁵⁰ Similarly, the images and sounds that Diane encounters at Adam's

⁴⁹ Freud, *op. cit.*, 248

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

party reflect a foreign, virtual trace of her identity, of her past as it potentially could have been. The producer, Camilla, and the Cowboy return as “harbingers of death”, precisely because they are the figures who thwart the actualization of Diane’s potential life as Betty. As the Freud and Diane examples illustrate, both the uncanny and the simulacrum take the form of an *aggression* because their nature is to disrupt our prefabricated beliefs, including our belief in the self as a fixed and knowable entity. Simulacra confront us with the virtual side of identities, prompting an “encounter that is outside knowledge and opinion.”⁵¹

While I have described the above examples involving Pete and Diane as analogous to a moment of failed recognition before the mirror, it should be noted that Lynch also employs this trope explicitly in *Mulholland Dr.*, and particularly in *Lost Highway*. Before murdering Renee, Fred walks into a black void and gazes toward a mirror with no visible frame. Later, Lynch will repeat the conditions of this image identically, only with Pete in Fred’s position. Given my earlier remarks about the simultaneity of events in the narrative, it is plausible to think that these mirror moments occur at the *same time*. Indeed, both characters “mirror” each other’s gestures and share a similar puzzled disposition. Though Fred and Pete belong to different presents, to different worlds, in these scenes they share an uncanny connection, a synergy of feeling that extends across all worlds. What they see in the mirror is less important than what they feel or sense – again, the virtual idea of the self as an other. And for Fred, this encounter with the virtual takes on an ethical imperative, provoking him to think of an alternate version of the future before he murders his wife. Thus while certain figures

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum” in Constantin V. Boundas, ed., *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 258

transverse the impossible worlds rendered by *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, it is, in the final analysis, *feeling* which constitutes the ultimate “sheet of transformation” in Lynch’s two films. Feelings become liberated from their relation to any preordained self or consciousness and, as such, obtain an “autonomy effect”.⁵² Lynch’s positing of transpersonal or impersonal feelings, moreover, is operationalized at the level of film style.

The scene portraying Betty and Diane at Club Silencio provides an analogue for the way Lynch engenders feeling with an autonomous existence. Here, the sounds that seem to emanate initially from a particular person or object suddenly detach from their physical source, entering into a floating and unstable state. Similarly, Lynch employs a number of visual and sonic motifs in both films that, like the floating sounds, are not attributable to any one character or source.⁵³ These motifs, moreover, tend to recur during peaks of emotional intensity. An explicit example in *Lost Highway* are the flashes of electricity that appear when Fred or Pete are caught in moments of disequilibrium. Flashes of electricity occur, for example, when Fred learns that he murdered Renee, during the moment of transformation in Fred’s cell, and when Pete sees the picture of both Renee and Alice. I have already noted the presence of other such motifs in the film, including the white fade and “The Song of the Siren,” and how they become associated with the dissolution of the self during sex and death. In *Mulholland Dr.*, the most pronounced motif is a complete blurring of all the images within the visual frame, and again, this motif recurs when the sensory-motor schema breaks down and characters

⁵² Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 6

⁵³ Žižek describes how the motif of the single eye from *Ivan the Terrible* tends to function in the same way: Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 6

experience a profound sense of helplessness – for instance, before Diane’s suicide, on the trip to Club Silencio, at Adam’s party, etc.

Since these motifs, and the feelings they evoke, traverse the films’ multiple realities, it becomes impossible to localize their meaning in any one character. The flashes of electricity in *Lost Highway*, the moments in which the visuals lose all shape in *Mulholland Dr.*, do not “represent” the psychology of one of the film’s particular heroes. Rather, like the Mystery Man and the Cowboy, these pure variations constitute a sheet that traverses all worlds, and more importantly, constitutes a link *between* the feelings experienced by Fred *and* Pete, Betty *and* Diane, and so on. Thus Lynch approaches a model of feeling that extends beyond the psychology of any one character, towards what Deleuze calls a “psychology of pure feeling.”⁵⁴ This psychology of pure feeling provokes the viewer not to think in terms of a particular character’s thoughts or feelings, but in terms of the transpersonal thoughts and feelings (ideas and intensities) of which the character is an expression (the virtual). In turn, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render a vision of the individual that is distinct from the films discussed in Chapter Two. The films that constitute the contemporary crisis of the action-image tend to resolve a tension between the real and the imaginary by positing an authentic version of the hero. The hero *completes* his identity (“know thyself”) and, in most cases, discovers his place as an agent of his environment. The protagonists in Lynch’s films, by contrast, are expressions or manifestations of a dissolved, virtual self. There is no “authentic” version of this dissolved self, only manifestations of its *potential*. As such, Fred and Pete, Renee and Alice, Betty and Diane, Rita and Camilla, falsify each other’s existence. Each character brings certain aspects of a greater dissolved self into clarity, while necessarily obscuring

⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 124

others. Further, Lynch's films shatter the notion that the individual has complete agency, by demonstrating how his characters are *subject* to intensities that evoke feelings and express ideas. Intensities provoke thought to question the self's potential to be other, but in order to respond to the intensity's imperative, the individual must forget rather than fulfill a static notion of identity. It is this issue of forgetting, or a letting go of one's identity, to which I will now turn in my concluding remarks about the contemporary crisis of the action-image as a whole.

Conclusion

Forging and Forgetting

There is a fundamental reason for this new situation: contrary to the form of the true which is unifying and tends to the identification of a character (his discovery or his simple coherence), the power of the false cannot be separated from an irreducible multiplicity. 'I is another' has replaced Ego = Ego.

—Gilles Deleuze¹

In almost all of the films that constitute the contemporary crisis of the action-image, the hero suffers from some sort of mental condition that prohibits his and, occasionally, her recognition of actual reality: amnesia, a psychotic overvaluation of the imaginary, ignorance, etc. Frequently, his tenuous relation with the actual becomes the material for highly comic sensory-motor situations – Lenny’s uncertainty whether he is doing the chasing or being chased, Tyler’s improbable obliviousness toward his enduring sexual relation with Marla, David Aames’ marginal suspicion when the world halts at his command and when characters approach him with sayings such as, “It’s a revolution of the mind” (albeit this latter example was perhaps not intended as comedy). More importantly, however, the hero’s inability to recall or perceive events accurately restricts his (and the viewer’s) access to the information that would place a perspective on his “true identity.” Accordingly, for at least some of the narrative, he must proceed with uncertainty, inventing his identity along the way. In short, he must become what Deleuze

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 133

calls a “forger”.² For instance, in *Fight Club*, Edward Norton’s failure to recognize that he has deeply aligned himself with a purely phantasmic figure is what allows him “little by little” to *become* Tyler Durden. And in *eXistenZ*, Allegra and Ted are displaced across foreign, “virtual” environments, requiring them to invent whatever persona suits their context. However, this process of reinvention, this exchanging of masks, motions toward a telos. The hero eventually discovers the occluded facts, divorces the actual from the virtual, and settles upon a particular mask. By the conclusion, Edward Norton’s character *is* Tyler Durden, Mr. Anderson *is* Neo, and so on. Yet the contemporary crisis of the action-image is not a homogeneous body of films. As I have noted, when Lenny learns that his life is an illusion, he allows the fiction to continue in order to avoid the uncertainty of a perpetual nonidentity. Further, Patrick Bateman gains “no deeper knowledge of self” by learning that his double-life is a fantasy, because the actual world of 1980s yuppie culture is itself supported by a pathological fantasy framework. But among this corpus of films, it is only in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* “that the forger becomes *the* character of the cinema.”³

Admittedly, the amnesia suffered by Lynch’s heroes also serves as a device for comic sensory-motor situations, and to restrict narrative information. Pete’s inability to remember what happened “that night” blocks some detail that might alleviate the film’s impossible ambiguity. In certain important instances, however, the failure of memory is rendered as the ultimate source of invention, the means through which the hero connects with intensities. For Deleuze, difference is that which happens to the individual, and so it cannot be experienced if one projects a prefabricated notion of the self against life and its

² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 132

³ *Ibid.*

vicissitudes. Receptivity requires a forgetting and a dissolution of the self. This idea is expressed clearly by the first sex scene involving Betty and Rita in *Mulholland Dr.* Betty asks “Have you done this before?” to which the amnesiac Rita responds, “I don’t know.” I don’t know, *invent!* The question is not “Are you homosexual?”, because like the distinction between the objective and the subjective, there “is no longer even a place from which to ask.”⁴ Neither Rita nor Betty experiences an epiphany, like the figures of the contemporary crisis of the action-image, but a becoming. Becoming, as Massumi argues, “begins as a desire to escape bodily limitation.”⁵ Becoming is the affirmation of a difference that cannot be reduced to a negation. As such, Betty and Rita’s actions do not negate their “straight” identities. If they leave this part of themselves behind it is only as an afterthought; they do not consciously forget that they are heterosexual to be together, but when they are together they forget that they are heterosexual. Betty and Diane become forgers in a process of becoming other, in a liberating and momentary fictionalization of the self. And the goal of becoming other, or *creative evolution*, is its continuation and protestation against the categorical labeling of identity. As Deleuze writes, “What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real or fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to ‘make fiction’.”⁶

It is also Pete’s limited ability to forget Fred, and his associations with the death-drive, that leads to a *receptivity of world* in *Lost Highway*, in which the film’s very mise-en-scene appears to open onto colour and depth. Yet here one confronts the greater

⁴ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 7

⁵ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 94

⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 50

difficulty of ever defining the film's images in terms of a representation of a particular character's subjective states.⁷ This is not only because Fred and Pete share a kind of clairvoyant intuition of the other, but because the Mystery Man as potential dramatist-storyteller seems to "contaminate" both characters' thoughts and perceptions. By identifying *Lost Highway's* Mystery Man and *Mulholland Dr.'s* Cowboy as potential author figures, however, I am not suggesting that they function as loci for meaning or centers from which the whole can be totalized. Rather, both characters elude meaning through creating a presence in time that can never be localized in space. During Adam's meeting with the Cowboy, for instance, the latter both appears from and disappears into nothingness. And when Fred attempts to fix his perception on the Mystery Man, the dark figure instantly disappears and reemerges "elsewhere", or he is simultaneously "here" and "there". Thus the Mystery Man and the Cowboy constitute a scattered consciousness that operates with or alongside the characters' thoughts and perceptions, casting the films' images in the aesthetic form of a "free indirect discourse."

I have already discussed how the contemporary crisis of the action-image tends toward gratuitous acts of surplus enunciation that encourage the spectator clearly to distinguish between character consciousness and narrational commentary. What is at issue in the case of free indirect discourse, on the other hand, is the tension between the simultaneous coexistence of two subjects within a singular enunciation: "*she will rather*

⁷ Here it might also be noted that *Lost Highway's* two worlds cannot be divided along a desire-fantasy axis. This is because Alice does not provide the phantasmic answer to Fred's desire for Renee; and even Žižek seems to acknowledge this implicitly when he notes that the two heroines are equally as enigmatic. Both Renee and Alice are desired. Further, Fred and Pete's desiring cannot be divorced from the "assemblages" or the worlds that surround Renee and Alice. Deleuze is quoted in an interview as saying, "desire for a woman is not so much desire for the woman as for a *paysage*, a landscape that is enveloped in this woman." (Charles Stivale 4)

endure torture than lose her virginity.”⁸ Drawing upon Bergson, Deleuze argues that this differentiation of two subjects within a single enunciation or image illuminates the way in which the subject is itself divided by the form of time:

And the Cogito of art: there is no subject which acts without another which watches it act, and which grasps it as acted, itself assuming the freedom of which it deprives the former. ‘Thus two different egos [*moi*] one of which, conscious of its freedom, sets itself up as an independent spectator of a scene which the other would play in a mechanical fashion. But this dividing-in-two never goes to the limit. It is rather an oscillation of the person between two points of view on himself, a hither-and-thither of the spirit...’, a being-with.⁹

In Chapter Two, I described how both Bergson and Deleuze argue that the present is divided into an actual image (the present of the present) and a virtual image (the present of the past). Bergson suggests that if one becomes conscious of this recollection image that is contemporaneous with past, he will liken himself to an actor automatically performing his role. This is because the individual is fractured into a passive ego that endures in time, and an active “I” that reflects and divides continuous change into a past, present, and future.¹⁰ Yet the ego and the I cannot be compartmentalized into a stable dualism, because the form of time constantly blurs their boundaries. As Rodowick observes, “I contemplate thought, but within my self reflection thought changes and keeps on changing; its movements are nonlocalizable. Is my thought in the ego or in the I? It is rather in the division that constitutes them both in the impersonal form of time.”¹¹ Again the form of time puts truth in crisis, in this case by preventing the individual from conceptualizing the self and its temporally-divided facets into a unified, conceptual whole. It is thus apparent that Deleuze’s philosophy stands in stark contrast to the

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73, 74

¹⁰ D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 128

¹¹ Rodowick, *op. cit.*, 129

imperative put forward by a number of the films constitutive of the contemporary crisis of the action-image: “know thyself.” Lynch’s two films, by contrast, are wholly engaged with, if not defined by, the impossibility of ever capturing the self in time. *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.* render this tension not only through the multiple, irreconcilable thinkers implied by their imagery (free indirect discourse), but at the level of their story-lines. It is the impossibility of encountering oneself in time which prevents Fred from ever being able to relay the message that “Dick Laurent is dead.” And in order for Betty to “find” her other self in time, this other self must be dead.

Yet Deleuze’s claims about the fundamental restrictions underlying self-knowledge and free will should not be interpreted as nihilistic. The philosopher perceives the notion of the individual as a fixed, knowable entity endowed with radical agency to be not only impossible, but undesirable. Such an individual would be static to change and to the metamorphosis of becoming. In order to intensify life, Deleuze claims that one must forget rather than uphold a stable notion of identity, and be receptive to the virtual and the difference which is its constitution. Difference is expressed through intensities, and intensities are signs of an idea that eludes habitual recognition. The pursuit of an idea that fails to confirm what one already knows is always a “dice throw”, but a dice throw that may lead toward a becoming other. Furthermore, Deleuze’s call against thinking in the form of totalities is what guides his theorization of the cinema. Thus the powers of the false, and the various paradoxes they express – indiscernibility, undecidability, impossibility – are valued since they disable the conceptualization of the whole. Like the intensity, the powers of the false confront spectators with the “impowers of thought” and the ways in which, following Heidegger, “we are not yet

thinking.”¹² Deleuze suggest that a powerlessness to think “is part of thought, so that we should make our way of thinking from it, without claiming to be restoring an all-powerful thought. We should rather make use of this powerlessness to believe in life and to discover the identity of thought and life.”¹³ Cinema as art bears the potential to invent new thoughts, and create new emotions. This potential, however, is always in tension with the sensory-motor schema and the capitalist system of which it is a function.

¹² Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 167, 170

¹³ *Ibid.*, 170

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