

Concept, Sensation, Intensity: Deleuze's Theory of Art and Cinema

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Abstract In *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze & Guattari consider art as a bloc of sensations, composed of percepts, affects and images. Such notions are also crucial to the understanding of Deleuze's idea of cinema, as elaborated by the philosopher in his two books *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* and *Cinema; 2. The Time-Image*, and further investigated in other essays and interviews. In Deleuze's theory, concepts and sensations are forms of intensity, and they are flows, rather than firm configurations. And cinema is, in an exemplary way, a flow of images, a continuous variation of intensity. For Deleuze, intensity may finally be defined as one of the fundamental features of cinema and art. Intensity is dynamism, it is a flow of variable strength and of differential processes, chiefly tied to sensation, but also to forms and concepts, and connected to becoming. And intensity is an essential concept to comprehend Deleuze and his thought.

Keywords Gilles Deleuze, Cinema and Philosophy, Art and Philosophy, Film Theory, Concept, Sensation, Intensity

1. Introduction and Methodology

In *What Is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari assert the centrality of concept and sensation to the work of art (1), and hence also to cinema. In order to better understand the weaving of Deleuze's thinking about cinema, its hidden watermark, it is much more interesting, in my opinion, to investigate his theorization about concept and sensation, rather than limit oneself to the two – however excellent – books he wrote about cinema (2). Such a line of inquiry allows for a full development of the rich conceptual potential of Deleuze's aesthetical reflections, through a research that follows the *montages* of his philosophical experimentation and its nomadic flow. What I find most relevant in Deleuze is not his reconstruction of an anomalous history of cinema, but his ability to trigger forms of conceptual creation originating from cinema.

After all, Deleuze's theory of cinema is itself unusual in its features, as it is more concerned with the doing of cinema, with its operativeness, and less with its being. The background of this history seems to be the idea of *poiein*, considered as the main substratum, the explicit and implicit axis around which it revolves. What matters, for Deleuze, is not to look only at the being of cinema, at its *einai*, but also, and most of all, to its doing, to what cinema produces. How would it after all be possible to actually distinguish the being from the doing? Only an essentialist theory could hypothesize such a separation, with the result of falling into an obsolete idealism or in a new-old metaphysics. In Deleuze, on the contrary, being does not count, it is not there: it is doing, or better, it is becoming. According to his philosophy, we cannot speak of defined entities, but only of processes, of paths, of ongoing metamorphoses. Connected to change and to doing. And therefore to becoming.

But Deleuze's method is more richly articulated, it goes beyond film and branches out to several different horizons. In his books dedicated to Bacon and to Proust, to Sacher Masoch and to Carmelo Bene (3), Deleuze produces a conceptual philosophical dynamics starting from the analysis of certain texts and certain images. Such an itinerary is highly significant in its ability to keep its liveliness and its unpredictable experimental character, in comparison for example to Heidegger's essays (4) about Hölderlin or Van Gogh, which are way too clearly conceived in relation to a predetermined mindset. The path to the creation of concepts is not limited then, for Deleuze, to the approaches of traditional philosophy – on the contrary, it involves an attempt to invent unique routes and trajectories, because such an experimental, non-hierarchical and deductive movement may be able to create new ideas.

2. Discussion

The first aspect of Deleuze's lesson that has to be underlined is hence his method; or, if you prefer, his non-method, an anomalous form of method, an anarchical one, to use Feyerabend's terminology (5) (something

Deleuze himself would have liked). The first point is exactly the anomaly. Deleuze aims at inventing the new, at discovering new concepts in the midst of the live act of reflecting. It is an idea of thinking as something that is created and modified as one speaks, something that moves, is dislocated and takes different routes. It is the opposite of thinking as a systemic and hierarchical activity. To produce a thinking in becoming means to put oneself in the horizon of metamorphosis, of change, of passage from one configuration to the other. It means not to put oneself in the horizon of being, but in that of the flow. And those who tend to connect Deleuze to realism have quite simply not understood a thing about his thinking. It is not a matter of being in Deleuze, but of changes and concatenations.

A French critic (6) has underlined how the courses Deleuze taught at Paris 8 University really looked like a sort of exhibition of thinking in motion, because they invented concepts and often transformed them while talking, giving the impression of modification permanently underway. The possibility for cinema (and for art and literature) to create concepts is evidently a crucial point of Deleuze's reflection. In my book *Microfilosofia del cinema* (7), I developed a meditation on the production of concepts in cinema, through hermeneutics, making a connection between meaning and concept as two interrelated intellectual developments. Yet Deleuze does not locate himself in the universe of interpretation, but in the horizon of experimentation, which imposes new montages.

Hence, if a hermeneutical reading of Deleuze understands concepts as mechanisms internal to verbal language, an analysis starting from Deleuze's own philosophical texts has on the contrary to consider concepts as paths developing otherwise, through multiple mechanisms connected to the event, to the force and to specific concatenations, of which verbal language is only one of the aspects.

Deleuze does indeed develop his research as a continuous experimentation engaged in creating new concepts. Differently from Heidegger, who asserted that "meaning is an existential of Dasein, not a property that is attached to beings" (8), Deleuze thinks of molecular machinal processes interweaving images, objects, languages and anthropological presences in a continuous movement. Sense appears as shown by the proposition, yet distinct from it: sense is what in a situation allows for the event to be grasped. Outside of any signification, sense emancipates itself from the linguistic form to be immanent to the reality of forces expressing it.

Along this line, the question of the concept has also to be dealt with in more complex terms. Deleuze asserts that cinema produces concepts. But how does it do it? And before that, what is a concept for Deleuze?

3. Interpretation

Deleuze and Guattari do not shy away from defining the concept, but they do opt for an undoubtedly murky

formulation: "The concept is defined by *the inseparability of a finite number of heterogeneous components traversed by a point of absolute survey at infinite speed*" (9).

The concept is hence a multiple, hybrid intellectual set displaying itself in becoming through a high and absolute gaze. It is the intellectual vibration of an irregular contour of different components, or, if one wants, an anomalous set of components endowed with an intrinsic force of vibration. The openness to heterogeneity and infinity distinguishes concept from sense, but the possibility to grasp and understand the event puts them in relation with each other. "The concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come" (10). Also, it "consists (...) in setting up an event that surveys the whole of the lived" (11). The concept hence seizes the event, it understands it, but at the same it is also something more. It is the taking possession of an event, letting it live again, extending it infinitely, placing it in intemporality. (The event is "eternally that which has just happened and that which is about to happen" (12). And it is not just the concept that has this ability. Cinema too is made to seize the event and objectify it with a new force, activating in itself the potentialities of the concept.

Then again, Deleuze underlines the importance of the event to his philosophy several times: "I've tried in all my books to discover the nature of events" (13). The event is not the happening in its immediacy, but its eternal and non-contingent side, it is something that goes from the moment to the future, overcoming mere temporality. The concept that seizes the event is hence an opening on the ideational and the incorporeal (14). "The event is (...) inside what occurs, the purely expressed. It signals and awaits us" (15). And the concept grasps the event in all the complexity of its resonances, transposing it onto an open temporal plane and a most relevant horizon.

The concept seizes the event in its vitality, it is a motion capable of creating a unique intellectual vibration. The ability to produce concepts (in thinking as well as in cinema) is the intensive force of creative and meta-creative vectors. Through images, these vectors define conceptual vanishing lines and modes of connection among different elements, revealing new paths. We're talking about body-brain ties (16), about the "crystals of time", in which the image looks back at the past and announces the future, the opening to an "eidetics of the spirit" contained in symbolic configurations, the affirmation of the "power of the false", the "automaton" and the determination of automatic paths that condensate the flows, bring them to temporary montages, and then open them to detours and centrifugal drifts, or favor cuts and radically new perspectives.

Let's think for example of some vertiginous conceptual overturns operated by Deleuze & Guattari. The root –schizo (indicating separation, split) is freed from the negative meaning the psychiatric and psychoanalytical tradition ascribed to it (–schizo as in schizophrenia); it becomes schizoanalysis (17), a path to the deconstruction and

dismantling of the mechanisms of functioning and repression of desire in contemporary society: and the “schizzes”(18) are cuts in the flow and unexpected concatenations creating new ways to experiment with the new. As for nomadism (of lives, of thinking), from the nomadic drift, a geographical, existential and intellectual gliding, it becomes, in the aggregation of people, the construction of war machines (19).

And these conceptual flows, these contours of heterogeneity also avail themselves of cinema, as cinema becomes a privileged mode of figuration for the concept itself. Think for example of the concepts of “another” [*autrui*] in *What Is Philosophy?* (20), and of movement. The idea of *autrui* is illustrated through cinema's off-screen space. And movement is perfectly exemplified by the filmic image (21), which is for Deleuze movement *per se*, not just a recording of it but an objectification of movement as such, and hence an image of becoming.

4. Cinema and Art: An Analysis

Cinema fulfills then a privileged function within Deleuzian thinking. And – contrary for example to what Eisenstein claims when he theorizes intellectual montage as the mode of production of the idea (22) – Deleuze links cinema and concept to automatism, going back to the ideas of automatic movement (23) and automatic subjectivity as expressed by Epstein and by a thinker like Faure. Deleuze claims that cinema as automatic movement arouses in us a spiritual automaton (24). This idea of the spiritual automaton is clearly of great interest. What does it mean? According to Deleuze, the fruition of cinema produces in our minds a mechanism characterized by automatism and intellectuality. It is hence a practice that sees the spectator involved in a mechanism which stimulates the possibility to develop thinking and elaborate concepts. According to Deleuze, the automatic movement of cinema, i.e. the vision of movement-images, provokes mental processes and intellectual vibrations of a radically new kind in the spectator. In this sense, Deleuze says that cinema produces a shock, communicating vibrations to the cerebral cortex and touching the nervous system directly. This process drives the spectator to think, it almost forces him/her to do so, through some sort of intellectual shock, a noo-shock. According to Deleuze, cinema has the possibility to unleash an autonomous intellectual activity, which may then of course develop in different ways depending on the specific intellectual abilities of each spectator. Cinema hence activates a conceptual automatism, an ability to think. (I would like to recall that the idea of shock is connected, by Benjamin (25) for example, to the avant-garde. These are very significant convergences). Automatism, shock, spiritual automaton: these are the determinations characterizing the functioning of cinema and its relation to concept.

And yet, to read Deleuze above all in relation to the

concept and the brain would be reductive. Because in his studies on art Deleuze also gave great importance to sensation.

In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari talk about the work of art in the terms of a being of sensation. “The thing or the work of art – is a *bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*” (26). “Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (27). And further: “The aim of art is (...) to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations” (28). That is, to create a set that functions as a vector of sensations, a coordinated accumulation of sensations. To produce something that is first of all sensation. And in the horizon of art we can see realized “some great monumental types, or “varieties,” of compounds of sensations: *the vibration*, which characterizes the simple sensation (...); *the embrace or the clinch* (...); *withdrawal, division, distension*” (29). These are movements, different processes that at once mark the producing of the sensation and diffuse it through absolutely unique paths and tensions. It is significant that the concept of vibration is also one of the most relevant knots in Kandinsky's reflection on art, albeit it pointed towards an absolutely different direction (30). The vibration conceived by Kandinsky is a deep spiritual adventure investing the soul, not something operating on the senses. Nonetheless, it is a unique psychic configuration underlining the creation of dynamic-intensive effects provoked by art and its fruition.

The sensation is always a complex process because it entails a constitutive difference of levels, an increase and decrease in tension, a nervous gait similar to that of a rope. And the multiple sensation is a binding of energies, a resonance of elements uniting in a clinch. Deleuze and Guattari assert that sculpture presents these kinds of sensation almost purely, from the sensations of vibrating stone or marble or metal, to the blending of the full and the empty, the air that carves and is carved. This acknowledgment of the exemplarity of sculpture is also an option on bodies in movement, on the plasticity of the figure, on the vitality of the anthropomorphic and on its immersion in space. It is something that strongly marks the dynamic modes of sensation in relation to the figure and that for this exact reason, can also find a strong terrain of objectification in film (it is not by chance that cinema has been describes as sculpture in movement (31)).

“Vibrating sensation – coupling sensation – opening or splitting, hollowing out sensation” (32). The sensation produced by art seems to be a metamorphic process, a rope stretching suddenly, an openness that becomes a figure. The language of Deleuze-Guattari invents paths, is enriched with metaphors, it becomes a metaphoric line itself to account for the metamorphism of the being of sensation.

Then again, Deleuze had already delved deep into his reflection about sensation in his essay about Bacon, analyzing the painter's modes of production. Sensation is a wave of alteration that comes from outside and causes an

internal determination. “Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (...) and one face turned toward the object (...). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other” (33). The sensation is an experience in which the pressure from outside provokes a mutation in the perceptive subject, creating a temporary unity between two dimensions, and achieving “the unity of the sensing and the sensed” (34). This process unfolds through the entrance of the spectator inside the painting or film, an entrance fostered by the emotional wave produced. In his essay on Bacon, Deleuze reflects of course on the modes through which works of art create sensations, underlining the relation between sensation and the presence of the body. It is “the body (...) experienced” (35) that is painted on the canvas and causes the sensation. It is the dynamic body, in its sensitive nature (a body traversed by sensation itself), that activates the sensation in the user, while on the contrary the forms of abstract painting act upon the brain. Human body and the body of the object seem to constitute a radiating potential that expresses itself producing sensation. The figure – Deleuze writes – is “the form related to the sensation” (36). But the figure is not the figurative, on the contrary it is its overcoming (as Lyotard also maintains in *Discourse Figure*, where he distinguishes three kinds of figures: the image figure, the form figure and the matrix figure (37)). The figure’s strength and its ability to produce sensation are correlated with the overcoming of mere data. The figure is a deformation of the naturalistic profile, a distortion of the visible. Deformation is the way to go for the production of sensation. But at the same time deformation is “the agent of bodily deformations” (38). Such a process is fundamentally an interaction, an interfluence, a return upon itself. It has a circular gait.

At the same time, another determination of the work of art becomes crucial to Deleuze in the wake of Bacon: not just the work’s ability to blend different levels, its strength of integrating multiple dominions, but also and most of the disposition to continuously create passages from one level to the other, from one horizon to another. The blending of dimensions or the passage from one horizon to another is precisely what grants the work of art its force and fluidity, and what provokes sensation. Deleuze does not fully develop this theoretical knot, but it is right here that the centrality of sensation should be individuated. The sensation is linked to the passage, the jump, the change of register. It is deformation and mutation. Deformation and mutation are the intensive, as they presume a strong variation in the texture of signs and in the communicative process.

The idea that it is in the deviation from norm that lies the possibility to produce ruptures and intensities is an idea originating from the Russian formalists and the Avant-garde: from the Russian formalists’ theory of deautomatization of perception to Marinetti’s discourse on the “double bend” as

the highest form of speed (of the body and the spirit) (39). Deleuze’s theory of sensation does not follow the formalists or the Avant-garde closely. Yet, some aspects of those theoretical systems centered on linguistic and perceptive rupture pass through to his philosophy, in the individuation of the modes and the centrality of sensation. In order to have sensation, there must be an accelerated or slowed down movement, a departure from any neutral regime, an intensification of something, a passage from something to something else. There must be the vector of a force that produces a change in what is normally visible, introducing an otherness, an anomaly of some kind. A correlated difference, a variation that does not completely lose its similarity, can act more effectively on the level of sensation, because it grasps the force of the body, the force of the specific, unique, non-normal presence, within the symbolic horizon.

But in art as in cinema – and in thought itself – sensation is correlated to intensity, or rather it is intensity.

5. Conclusion: A Theory of Intensity

The concept of intensity is a relevant one due to its dynamic-metamorphic character. It is a concept that carries a sort of Deleuzian imprinting, and is able to easily cross several different borders, for example that of concepts and that of sensations. Deleuze talks about intensity first and foremost in *Difference and Repetition*, as well as in his essays with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze strongly links intensity to difference and variability. He writes: “The expression ‘difference of intensity’ is a tautology. (...) Every intensity is differential, by itself a difference” (40); “Intensity is difference” (41). And again: “Between the intensive and thought, it is always by means of an intensity that thought comes to us” (42). The connection between intensity and thinking is crucial to Deleuze and Guattari, who reaffirm it in *What Is Philosophy?*: “the concept (...) has no energy, only intensities” (43). “It does not have spatiotemporal coordinates, only intensive ordinates” (44). And intensity is a determination of thinking, distancing it from the dangers of any dogmatic mindset, which is asseverative and repetitive. Intensity is hence a multifarious dynamism concerning both sensation and concept: it crosses the work of art and grants its action in the horizon of difference. It is something that underlines the differentiability of beings as well as their transformability, and it therefore emerges as a crucial element in a thinking focused on the idea of becoming. From this point of view it is a horizon that seems to be structurally linked not only to dynamism, but also (or above all) to cinema. Intensity appears then as something that does not exclude excess or disproportion, but does not entail them either. Quite the contrary, in its most sophisticated and maybe more subtle and pure forms, intensity goes in the opposite direction, that of difference, of movement and of transformability, rather than assuming extrinsic and easy determinations (45).

At the same time, the concept of intensity is also connected to another important Deleuzian notion, that of flow (46). And the flow does not concern intensity only, but also the functioning of the work of art, the way it is perceived, and the way its elements arrange themselves in the texture of expression. The flow goes against the idea of the work of art as a structure, and favors the process of creation, the infinite flowing of things, the succession of sensations one after another, as they matter more than the interaction among the components, and more than harmony. The construction of the film is hence thought of as the creation of a route of sensations, of intensities. The film does then construct its spectator through intensities. The film slides, throbs, vibrates, fires up, arches over, closes itself off. It works as a living organism (this idea can also be found in Eisenstein (47)).

And, even more, cinema is flow, it is a succession of images and sounds, a continuous processuality developing in time through the visual and the aural. Much more in depth than many notions that have been used to talk about film, it is the flow that constitutes the deep and at the same time immediate being of cinema, the way the film is perceived and the way it is thought and built: the flow, i.e. the potentially infinite concatenation of multiple components succeeding themselves on screen to capture the spectator. Cinema is movement, of course. But its movement is continuous flow, effected through recomposed and remodeled discontinuities. It is flow because it is a more or less effective orchestration of intensities. It is flow because it is an art of becoming. It is flow like “the real” that “continues to flow” (48). And in its flow opacities and dynamisms, intensities and energies blend and intertwine constantly through the shots, the editing, the movement effects and the use of sound. Cinema is flow: that is, it is intensity.

And intensity is then difference, movement, transformability, flow. As synthesized by Juliette Simont, intensity is for Deleuze the “dynamism of differential processes constituting the being as pure difference” (49). It is a precise reading hypothesis, which we cannot fail to take into account. Therefore, in our perspective that focuses on cinema – and that in its more general aspects refers to the works of art, and hence pertains to the realm of aesthetics – intensity may finally be defined as one of the fundamental features of cinema and art. Intensity is dynamism, it is a flow of variable strength and of differential processes, chiefly tied to sensation, but also to forms and concepts, and connected to becoming.

Intensity is indeed a peculiar quality of Deleuzian reflection, which is a thinking of intensity. And it is also a fundamental aspect of cinema and of its functioning.

In Deleuze's thinking the interactions and interfluences between cinema and art are then continuous and extremely fruitful, although cinema sustains an additional theoretical relevance, as it guarantees, among other things, the relationship with movement and continuous change. And in this process, intensity is the place where art theory, film theory and philosophy all converge, a point of absolute

incandescence.

(translated by Lorenzo Marmo)

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- [2] G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986 and G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989.
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- [5] P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, New Left Books, London, 1975.
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- [21] Cfr. G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, cit. The whole first volume is dedicated to the movement-image and its functioning.
- [22] S. M. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Dobson, London, 1951.
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