



The Reality of Illusion

A Transcendental Reevaluation of the Problem of Cinematic Reality

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Abstract. The paper readdresses the parallel considerations of cinema as both access to an essential, true, objective reality and as a device of deception reproducing the fallacies of a biased and reductive human perception. The claim is that the critical consideration of cinematic mediation in these ambiguous terms stems from the traditional association of cinema with the working of mental mechanisms – whose logic, it is argued, follows neatly Kant's transcendental constructivist dualist model of reason and its reality. Kant's idea that our sensible but merely phenomenal experience is produced and projected by our supersensible, transcendental synthetic activity, which 'in itself' is as unrecoverable as is the world that it moulds, describes perfectly the imaginary-symbolic regime of cinematic signification, whose dual nature has been considered both as a hindrance and as a guarantee of objectivity. Throughout the paper, repeated emphasis is given to the significance of Kant's insistence to preserve, and to make palpable through the aesthetic, a noumenal unknown, a pure and never fully assessable objectivity within an increasingly self-referential, self-serving and self-enclosed human reason. It has been this modicum of a humanly inaccessible, yet arguably intuitable 'excess,' the pursuit and the promise of modern art, which an aesthetically biased film theory and practice have sought to foreground. Joining forces with Deleuze, Lyotard, and Žižek, as well as with Cocteau, Tarkovsky, Wenders, and Kieślowski, the paper promotes the necessity of continued belief in a non-human metaphysical dimension, an outside within thought that forever eludes capture.

Introduction

This paper wishes to contribute to the long-standing debate concerning the truth value of the psychological verisimilitude produced and projected by the moving image. Does cinema offer a direct, unmediated – that is, non-humanly processed, objective – access to the world, or does it simply create a perfect, subjectivist illusion of reality? In order to make sense of this question, we need to clarify what assumptions of ‘world,’ ‘reality,’ objectivity and subjectivity we are dealing with. In this paper I will seek to address this problem through the model of Kant’s *transcendental subjective constructivism*, which posits that the world and/or reality as we can know it is shaped by the spontaneous synthetic activity of the mind. In other words, the road to objectivity leads through subjectivity, a transcendently conceived subjectivity, to be sure, which in Kant is keyed to, and delimited by, a pure or transcendental objectivity, the noumenal unknown. Consequently, the closest we can get to an unadulterated objectivity, and perhaps a ‘world-in-itself’ (or the noumenal) is by tracing the workings of the unconscious processes that make the world, and which Kant calls transcendental subjectivity.

In what follows, I will sketch out key points of Kant’s transcendental constructivist conception of mind and world coupled with a reexamination in these transcendental terms of the prominent and steadily recurring concern in European film theory with the ability of cinema to render sensible the unconscious mechanisms of the mind. Kant’s transcendental dualist model of reality, conceived as an inseparably intertwined phenomenal-noumenal couplet, will help us better understand the ambiguity that has surrounded the cinema’s reality effect, which has been hailed as an unmatched access to the core of truth, and decried as a device of deception, a “dream factory.”

Transcendental Subjectivity as Structuring Device of, and Block on the Real

Kant’s insistence to treat transcendental subjectivity as the limits and bounds of phenomenal experience as well as a block on an unattainable noumenal objectivity may be, and has been, said to amount to a revolution in thinking of Copernican proportions. More precisely, Kant’s innovation lies in his “transcendental idealism,” a peculiar synthesis of the empiricist and rationalist philosophical traditions, which makes room for both an unknown “noumenal” nature, approachable but never recoverable “in itself” through the senses,

and an empirically informed and manifest transcendental-ideal synthetic spontaneity, the transcendental subject, which is assumed to provide the criteria of connections that make possible the phenomenal world of experience. This is a system where “the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world,” as Hilary Putnam has put it.¹ The question is, of course (of which Kant was fully aware), where the mind ends and the world begins, and vice versa, according to this scheme.

Predictably, Kant finds that human world making is a two-edged sword. Although mental structuring makes possible and shapes our experience of the world, it also delimits, compartmentalizes, schematizes this experience. Therefore, we never experience things as they are “in themselves,” in their noumenal immanence, only as our mind is prepared, or inclined, to see them, that is, as mere phenomena. As Deleuze puts it, evoking Bergson, “we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are *interested* in perceiving ... by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs, and psychological demands” (Deleuze 1989, 20, emphasis added).

This implies that the immanent criteria of connection (the synthetic a priori principles and procedures) that Kant believes constitute our mental make-up, and which he calls transcendental subjectivity, themselves constitute the hindrance to, or *block* on, the immediacy and (self-)presence, the objectivity that the mind seeks to achieve in relation to itself and the world. To put it in Adorno’s succinct terms: “there is nothing in the world that is not mediated” (Adorno, 2001, 85, 66). Uncannily enough, not even the “I,” the thinking, world-constructing subject is exempt from this splitting and duplication of its reality into a phenomenal and a noumenal component. In fact, the sensory experience or self-consciousness of the thinking subject, the I, must be necessarily merely phenomenal, spatially, temporally, and conceptually mediated, that is, discursive, indirect, always displaced in relation to itself as spontaneity. This “scandal of philosophy,” that is, that we cannot grasp the essence of being, our own as well as that of others, beyond the limits of a phenomenal, discursive consciousness is addressed in an inventive and theoretically intricate manner in the *Third Critique*, through the notion of aesthetic reflective judgment.

It must be by now obvious that Kant’s insight that the road to objectivity leads through subjectivity carries within the hazard of tautology, a fact that Kant and his followers were keenly aware of. Kant tried to avert this

¹Hilary Putnam is quoted in Bowie 1997, 68.

epistemological problem precisely *by acknowledging this block*, that is, by limiting the scope of knowledge to the empirical and merely phenomenal, and by emphasizing that this sensible human world is an appearance created by a supersensible (transcendental-ideal) spontaneous thought activity (transcendental subjectivity), in response to sensible intuitions of something unknown. “The effect is,” Adorno explains “that the world can be said to be doubled, in the paradoxical sense that true existence at the same time becomes something wholly undefined, abstract and ethereal, while conversely what we definitely know, positive existence, is turned into the mere duplication of appearances, the mere interconnection of the phenomena at our disposition. And at the same time we are denied the right to reach compelling conclusions about the true nature of existence” (Adorno 2001, 108–9). Adorno goes as far as declaring the Kantian philosophy of duplicate reality similar to the “consciousness of schizophrenics,” who, in their extreme emotional tension, “imagine suddenly that everything that exists, all existing things, are really just signs” (Adorno 2001, 112). It is quite obvious that this comparison brings Kant’s philosophy very close to contemporary descriptions of the state of the word and consciousness in terms of schizophrenia (notably by Deleuze and Guattari and Fredrick Jameson), as well as to theories declaring the impermeability and self-referentiality of human symbol systems. Incidentally, Kant’s duplication of reality shows great similarity to Henri Bergson’s dual system of reference as described by Deleuze, where “the thing and the perception of the things are one and the same thing . . . but related to one or other of two systems of reference.” These two systems are, respectively, the general block of space-time, or movement-image, whose parts relate to one another immediately on all of their facets (the counterpart of the Kantian noumenal dimension), and the special image (a phenomenal human consciousness), which frames the movement image of the thing and retains only a partial action from it, reacting to it only mediately (Deleuze 1986, 63).

As it is becoming apparent, Kant has addressed the problem of referentiality by performing *two kinds* of duplications of the world. On the one hand, as we have seen, and as Adorno acutely observes, “in its entire profundity and effort, [Kant’s] philosophy amounts to recreating anew the world as it presents itself to consciousness, to producing with the enormous power of the productive imagination the world *as it already exists*” (Adorno 2001, 179, emphasis added) – granted this world is based on empirical or sensory intuition. On the other hand, as we also noted, Kant is aware that the more we make nature our own through our automatic, involuntary synthetic-schematic drive, the more we lose its ‘thingness-in-itself,’ the more we forget about the unknown

that our phenomenal world is a human reflection of. This demystification, disenchantment of the world, as Max Weber has called it, seems to strip the world of its disturbing and uncanny aspect, yet, in fact, it makes these repressed (forgotten) fundamental but unknown and unknowable forces more threatening, more uncanny. Kant's *second* duplication of the world, Adorno explains, imposes "an entirely undefined, obscure, and . . . demonic world as a world 'behind' [or within] our [self-made] world, even though we have no way of knowing how it relates to the world of experience that we inhabit" (Adorno 2001, 111).

In sum, by imposing a "boundary concept" or "block" (the noumenon) on the schematic auto-production of reality, Kant has wished to set a limit to the tautologous mechanical duplication of knowledge by itself, and to ease up somewhat the necessarily resulting *imprisonment in ourselves* and our self-made world² by leaving open the possibility of there remaining something humanly unknowable and unrecoverable, something unexpected, untouchable, new. It is not a coincidence that we discover a similar logic in Lacan's diagnosis of the process of alienating specular identification as the trading of the subject's being or "life" for the spectre of meaning. For Lacan, as for Kant, "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the *murder* of the thing."³ Deleuze's time-image aims to undo, or, at least, alleviate, this symbolic murder by showing us the process of its happening, that is, the process of distinction, or splitting, between perception and recollection, in other words, the indiscernible yet distinct twin poles of transcendental reality production.

Cinema's Transcendental Duplication of Reality and its Concern with Objectivity

The Kantian, and Lacanian, anxiety felt over the dissipation of life from a purely habitual, schematic existence – and its momentary recapture through a defamiliarizing aesthetic, as Kant proposes – is reenacted by the experience of the lonely cinema spectator evoked by Siegfried Kracauer, whose self is "shrinking in an environment where the bare schemata of things threaten

²According to Adorno's well-known adage, this self-made world "is the world of exchange, the world of commodities, the world of reified human relations . . . presenting us with a facade of objectivity, a second nature" (Adorno 2001, 137).

³Lacan 1977, 104, emphasis added. Kaja Silverman explains, paraphrasing Lacan, that the subject's being, his/her life, is given up through the assumption of language since there is no direct connection between the phenomenal world and the signifier. See Silverman 1988, 8.

to supersede the things themselves” – and who is redeemed by “images of life as such” presented by cinema’s “camera reality” (Kracauer 1960, 170). Indeed, Kant’s dual reduplication of reality – the appearance that is its own simultaneous auto-production – brings to mind the cinema, whose photographic duplication of psychological reality has always been thought of as withholding or adding, but in any case containing, and in certain cases making manifest, something excessive: a nondescript “fellow traveller” (in Barthes’s apt formulation, 1977, 64), a shadowy *Doppelgänger*, or an interstice, a splitting, as Deleuze has it. The noumenal block appears to be very much at stake here. To quote Kracauer again, “Through their very definiteness films . . . define the nature of the inarticulate from which they emerge.” Films, for Kracauer, “look more like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects – as if the camera had just now extricated them from the womb of physical existence” (Kracauer 1960, 164).

It is in the same vein that Tom Gunning diagnoses a strange duality within the photographic image, an excess that cannot be suppressed: “If photography emerged as the material support for a new positivism, it was also experienced as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to *undermine the unique identity* of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating parallel worlds of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism” (Gunning 1995, 42–3, emphasis added).

Equally, André Bazin’s statement that photography “produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, a hallucination that is also a fact” (Bazin 1967, 16) is squarely within the Kantian idea of transcendental reflective reality production, which projects a human nature out of sense impressions of an *unknown* nature. In aesthetic considerations of photography and cinema, this residual strangeness, this present yet unsurpassable horizon of a “first” nature stunningly evoked, flashed forward, through the photographic moving image has been alternately referred to as *photogénie*, third or obtuse meaning or the filmic, excess, accent, *punctum*, and time-image.⁴

Four memorable cinematic representations come to mind that target this ever-receding noumenal horizon of a true unknown nature and its human correlate, “life as such,” or “life in excess,” as Slavoj Žižek has called the

⁴“Excess” is a term used, for example, by Kristin Thompson. See Thompson 1986, 130–142. “Accent” appears, for example, in Hamid Naficy’s work on exilic and diasporic filmmaking, as a sign of “otherness.” See, Naficy 2001, 10–39. Punctum is Roland Barthes’s contribution, who has also coined the notions of third meaning and the filmic. (See Barthes 1981, 25–6, 43–60, as well as Barthes 1977, 64, 65.) *Photogénie* is associated with the French Impressionist filmmakers, most specifically with Jean Epstein. (See Epstein 1988, 314–8.)

transcendental drive or the synthetic a priori of transcendental subjectivity, which ceaselessly zeroes in on its unreachable goal (Žižek 2006, 62, 63-4), to wit, the noumenon (and itself as noumenal), the limit, the objective. I have in mind Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (*Orphée*, 1950), Andrej Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), Ildikó Enyedi's *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, 1989), and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995). All films have male searcher heroes, who enter into some kind of an undead zone of "life in excess," a "magical domain of suspended animation," in which "the linear progress of time is suspended in a repetitive loop," as Žižek writes (Žižek 2006, 63).

Cocteau's *Orpheus* offers a memorable zone, harking back to his early avant-garde film *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930). The "Zone" in *Orpheus* is truly a transcendental sphere, the realm of an 'undead' life or pure drive, whose drift the mortal hero can barely keep up with, and on whose fringe "the bare schemata of things" (Kracauer 1960, 170) are shown to drive the unthinking human automata in mechanical, repetitive loops ("vitriére!"). Seen from this side, so to speak, the young glazier whom Orphée had encountered a little while earlier in 'real life' appears to be a shadowy apparition, one who only thinks that he is alive as he performs schematically the gestures of his trade. In the deeper, reflexive layer of the Zone, things and figures come in doubles, for example through twin characters, mirrors, *trompe-l'oeil* effects. Finally, the room of the tribunal where one can only say the truth limits truth (that of subjectivity) to the realm of feelings, and especially the feeling of love – following the logic of Kant's aesthetic reflection. The closest the film gets to objectivity is through the relegation of the Princess, the personification of judgment, and her servant, the transcendental imagination, to the void of the unknown, to oblivion.

The "Zone" in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* is another poignant portrayal of the transcendental sphere, "a magic domain of suspended animation," whose logic defies those of a linear time and a three dimensional space, and where every route seems to loop around and lead to the Room, the mysterious source of inspiration and knowledge, which, however, humans are well-advised to keep their distance from. The Room appears to reanimate the idea of the noumenal block on knowledge, being an artificial construct(ion), and quite dilapidated too, yet somehow all the more sinister and repellent. Those few who have entered the Room have all taken leave from their senses and ended up taking their own lives. For Tarkovsky, it is eventually not the Room that holds the promise of the survival of enchantment in an unbearably drab, soulless world – which looks very much like the outer fringe of Cocteau's Zone in *Orpheus*, filled with zombies going mindlessly on their routine businesses. It is the Stalker's

crippled, ‘abnormal’ daughter who is the depository of the inexplicable, the parapsychological, through her telekinetic abilities.

Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* too sets up a zone, the Frontier, which like a huge mutual mirror brings together and shows as almost indiscernible doubles Whites and Native Americans, personified by an ambiguous, dreaming, dead, or dying protagonist, William Blake, and his improbable, off-kilter travelling companion and *doppelgänger*, Nobody. Equally, the beginning and the end of the story, which seems to be going in circles, appear as mirror images of one another. In fact, this circular or static journey epitomizes the Western’s quintessential, and doomed, aspiration: its endless (and endlessly futile) search for origins. The staple Western tropes of the “frontier” and the “horizon” mark the fringes of the impenetrable ‘beyond’ (the noumenal block on human appropriation of a first nature) that this genre is obsessed with. The stunning black and white last image of the film shows William Blake’s final drifting away – on the mirror of water that makes up and down indiscernible – to a place where the sea meets the sky, that is, to the origin of distinction, the indistinct. We find a very similar ending in Ildikó Enyedi’s *My Twentieth Century*, where the black and white image shows a boat drifting on a river, whose two banks meet in an infinitely receding vanishing point, suggesting the reverse movement, the splitting in two and duplicate birth of twin daughters in the beginning of the film. This grainy, washed-out, grey image fading into white is a stunning rendering of the fantasy of *being born back*, of being reunited with one’s *doppelgänger*, the lost (maternal) object, and becoming ideal, non-differentiated, in one and the same time.

Needless to say, cinema has offered us many horrifying visions of “The Thing,” the phantasmatic unknown transcendental object (noumenon), whose true nature is exactly its unrepresentability. After all, objectivity, or thingness, is nothing but relation, that is, the various, both habitual and unexpected, novel, ways of combining and connecting givens, data as well as a priori criteria. Cinema, it has been argued, reduplicates to a marvel the mimetic impulse of the imagination to (re)create the world both as it is known *and* as it is imagined or desired to be – which includes the unknown. Adorno’s adage that “Art is actually the world once over, as like it as it is unlike it” (Adorno 1997, 336), appears to describe both Kant’s and cinema’s double reduplication of reality by an imagination that, moreover, has stunningly cinematic characteristics in Kant.

Given that the immanent criteria of connectivity (the synthetic a priori) that make possible experience are supersensible and beyond the limit of sensible experience, it may not be an image but, rather, a *shock effect*

that best conveys the idea of the Kantian “block” or noumenon that the transcendental subject as imaginary focus seeks (and fails) to grasp in one – as Kant himself spells out in his conception of the sublime. It is the sudden upsurge of something utterly shocking that is at stake here, to wit, the limit of the imagination as a synthetic force and the ground of expectations. An unexpected break in the continuity of the habitual, the commonsensical brings to the fore an immanent uncanniness in our subjective reality construction. These unexpected breaks and ‘malfunctionings’ of the transcendental imagination are wonderfully demonstrated by Jean Cocteau’s animistic cinema, and most notably in *Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la bête*, 1946) where inanimate decorative objects unexpectedly and eerily come to life. Candelabra with human arms that suddenly move, disembodied arms that wait on tables, candle lights that turn themselves on and off, as well as a gallery of balefully motionless, shadow-play like frozen animal statues alert us to the shocking, defamiliarizing power of probing and jamming the automatic, mechanical activation of our schematic judgments (animals move, stone decor is inanimate and motionless) in a world whose familiarity, predictability, and anthropomorphic nature we too easily take for granted.

Cocteau’s strange animistic universe recalls, in turn, the undead forces of vampire narratives, memorably portrayed in Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), where a realistically (if somewhat expressionistically) established room décor suddenly reveals an unexpected “blot” – a profound blind spot of vision – through a mirror that fails to show the reflection of a character whose physical presence has been previously established through encounters and exchanges with other characters whose empirical factuality we had no reason to question. This lacking reflection, where we have expected one, calls attention to the non-phenomenal source of *all* reflection, lending an uncanny air to the entire scene. Shadows that detach themselves from their physical sources and acquire an agency of their own in Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) further illustrate the power of cinema to evoke a demonic and uncanny double, (“a kind of *Doppelgänger*, a mere spectre of illusion”⁵), which, however, is not simply a phantom among real objects, but rather, a non-sensible ‘material’ phantom within a phenomenal phantom world of our own creation, whose ‘unreality’ and immateriality, whose constructed and projected nature, however, we repress and do not like to be reminded of.

⁵Adorno writes, “The world does in fact become a way of concealing something unknown, a kind of *Doppelgänger*, a mere spectre of illusion” (2001, 111–2).

The intuitive association of cinema and vampirism, noted, for example, by Thomas Elsaesser, may very well be based on cinema's recreation, restaging, of Kant's duplicate (and duplicating) transcendental imaginative reality production, which is in one and the same time a phenomenal and sensible product and a supersensible (subconscious) spontaneous process of "desiring production,"⁶ an "undead urge" or pure drive – as, again, Žižek describes the focal transcendental subject – which persists beyond the individual biological cycle of life and death, and which endlessly circles around its unattainable object. The indiscernible, inseparable intermingling of a sensible symbolic reality and a non- or supersensible imaginary-ideal drive that constitutes it is indeed schizophrenic, as illustrated by Deleuze's two-sided, mutually indiscernible yet distinct actual-virtual time-image.

The Reality of Illusion and the Problem of Transcendental Difference through Cinema

Kant was aware – as was Freud – that the impulsive, at once self-propelling and self-immolating, transubstantiating objective drive (Eros-Thanatos) of the transcendental subject needs to be disavowed, suspended, and sublimated in order to attain a normal, "meaningful" experience of self. Kant's recreation through "the enormous power of the productive imagination" of the world "*as it already exists*" (Adorno 2001, 179, emphasis added) has served precisely this goal, to wit, to confirm the realm of the habitual. According to Kracauer, films do exactly the same thing, replicating the work of the creative imagination: films "make the world our home" by showing us "products of habit and microscopic interactions," the texture of everyday life (Kracauer 1960, 98). When André Bazin describes photography and cinema as the culmination and perfection of the history of plastic arts, as a story of resemblance and realism, he does so with the Kantian dual reality-production in mind. Bazin makes the important distinction between realism understood in the *psychological* (pseudorealistic, deceptive and illusory) and the *aesthetic* (truly realistic, essential) sense (Bazin 1967, 10. 12). On the one hand, cinema has a reality effect that is unmatched by other arts, and which is fully comparable to Kant's first duplication of reality by the imagination, which creates our phenomenal, everyday world, Bazin's psychological pseudorealism. On the other hand, cinema appears to have privileged access to the criteria of the auto-production

⁶"Desiring production" is Deleuze and Guattari's term to describe the process of social production. See Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 29.

of the psychological or phenomenal real – that is, to the formative functioning of transcendental subjectivity as imaginary focus trained on objectivity, which would correspond to what Bazin calls the true, the aesthetic realism of cinema.

It is the first aspect of the transcendental imaginary duplication of reality that has made Kant's philosophy the direct predecessor of the bourgeois experience of reification and alienation. It is this automatic, unthinking reduplication of the already known, this innate tendency to exclude, to suppress (or repress) anything that is incompatible with a self-propagating, habitual and conventional worldview (the status quo), which has been decried by defamiliarizing, distancing, deconstructive aesthetic and social criticism as "the blunted consciousness of the bourgeoisie," as mis(re)cognition (*méconnaissance*), or the *habitus* (in Bourdieu). The representational paradigm of classical Hollywood cinema can be, and has been, tied to this first Kantian regime, Bazin's psychological "pseudorealism." In fact, this cinematic practice can be said to replay to a marvel the Kantian logic of a transcendental imaginary reality production insofar as it constructs and projects a world evolving in a Cartesian space and a linear time according to a cause-effect logic through a "transparent" or seamless continuity system that effaces – yet cannot completely dissimulate – the mechanism of its auto-production. This is exactly the issue pressed by the neo-Marxist ideology criticism that informed much of film theory in the 1970s and early 1980s. Yet, as it has been pointed out by *mise-en-scène* and auteur criticism, as well as by a plethora of innovative and sensitive studies of the classical Hollywood paradigm, we can encounter numerous surprising manifestations of excess, that is, uncontained, inexplicable, unmotivated, ambiguous, unexpected narrative and stylistic elements within Hollywood's preordained, standardized, and formulaic system of representation. In this respect, I have already made a mention of the circular, limit-oriented, and unfinalizable, rather than progressive, discretely goal-oriented narrative structure of the western.

It has by now become a truism that our own age has brought to completion the process of self-enclosure in an auto-produced imaginary-symbolic world, or "second nature" by abolishing the distinction between surface and depth, by eradicating the idea of a "first" nature, and of ontological difference. Current claims of the flatness, the superficiality, the one-dimensionality of reality feed on a host of deterministic theories that have declared language, culture, the unconscious, ideology, the text, as well as the simulacrum, global corporate capital and electronic media networks as absolute enclosures, interfaces with no outside, no "hors de texte." In other words, there seems to be no place left for the instance of *non-identity* or excess that Kant strove to preserve, to keep

open, by putting a “block” on speculative reason through the boundary concept of the noumenon as the idea of a real, but in itself unattainable objectivity.

As Slavoj Žižek astutely observes, the problem today is that “one can no longer count on the Void” (Žižek 2000, 26–7), that is, the empty place of the Kantian thing-in-itself. In other words, Žižek and other critics of today’s all pervasive consumer and electronic culture suggest, we and our world appear to have attained immediacy, insofar as we have caught up with ourselves as process, and not only as product, of mediation or reality-production, which Kant has attributed to a schematically driven yet also reflexive synthetic imagination. We have attained the technology, precisely through cinema, as film theorists from Münsterberg on have made clear, to emulate the ability of the imagination to be in several places at the same time, and to reproduce the world as it exists, as well as it is desired to be. Through this mechanical and photographic simulation of the transcendental functionality of the imagination, cinema, as Walter Benjamin reminded us early on, has become a key agent of the destruction of the “aura” or belief in an essential, unattainable, transcendental-noumenal humanity, humanity-in-itself, as well as a world-in-itself, in its never quite exhaustible and humanly ungraspable objectivity. The digital has just brought this erosion of the reverence for the unattainable, the unknown, to completion.

Returning to the versatile example of *Orpheus*, it may be said that today’s global electronic culture has managed to put time on a hold – as does Heurtebise, the embodiment of the imagination in the film – and to fill the lingering moment with a multiplicity of scenarios evolving in “varied and multifarious” virtual spaces, which may even be considered as the sought-after holistic experience of transcendental subjectivity, and which Paul Virilio has called an experience of sensory overload in which physical dimensions lose all meaning, making spatial relations “abstract and ungraspable.”⁷ Put differently, we have entered the Zone of mind-speed or consciousness stream, again, that of the spontaneity of the synthetic imagination, which, however, has a strong tendency to move in repetitive loops – as illustrated by the ‘soullessly’ and habitually acting zombies at the fringe of the Zone in *Orpheus* – unless forced to stop to recognize, to pay attention to, and to reflect on, objective or limit conditions. Losing our sense of and our belief in limits and boundaries – our belief, that is, in a distinction, marked by Kant’s noumenon, between what can be humanly grasped and what should remain objective, untouched and

⁷Paul Virilio is quoted in Abbas 1997, 9.

untouchable nature – has resulted in what Lyotard has pessimistically called the “exitless nothingness” of the “global zone” that the West has given birth to.⁸

The problem today, we may conclude, is no longer that of Orpheus and the modern artist, who breaks through the mirror or plane of consciousness from a phenomenal empirical world sustained by disavowal and repression, in search of a truer, more authentic reality. The problem – if indeed it is a problem – is that the supersensible intelligible realm, the assumed code and condition of sensible empirical reality, has been laid bare, has been declared decoded, with little or no sign of an irrecoverable objective residue left behind.⁹ This demystification of the unconscious, of myths, of the idea of something unattainable, has in turn changed basic assumptions of reality. We now believe that we are living in a world of codes, in a world that is encoded, and is, thus, artificial, manipulated and manipulable, mutable, clonable, mechanically and digitally multipliable and remasterable. This “decoding of flows and the deterritorialization of the *socius*” in capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari tell us (1983, 34), have been responsible for creating schizophrenia as the characteristic malady of our age, where we have begun to imagine, and to believe that, to quote Adorno again, everything that exists, all existing things, are really just signs” (2001, 112). The schizo is the “subject of the decoded flows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 34). And tautology and solipsism appear to be the order of the day.

Consequently, Žižek argues, the task of art today is to *create* the Void of the unattainable object that has been denied, to reinstall it, rather than to create works of art that serve to fetishize this void away. It is my conviction that Deleuze’s cinematic time-image aims to do precisely this. Through the time-image, Deleuze wishes to offer a proof, a sensible evidence, so to speak, of the existence of such an objective (noumenal) limit, an instance of non-identity, within thought. The nostalgia palpable in much of high-modernistic European filmmaking (e.g., in the work of Tarkovsky, Wenders, Kieślowski), as well as some contemporary film art (e.g., Wong Kar-Wai) – which, again, Deleuze will characterize as time-image cinema – echoes, if I may say so, the “metaphysical mourning” that Adorno diagnoses already in Kant’s “vacillating” thinking, torn between the old notion of an authentic world slipping from his grasp and a dawning positivist adherence

⁸Deleuze’s yearning for “something possible, otherwise I will suffocate” is another poignant expression of the solipsism, the self-imprisonment, by and within the imaginary-symbolic cognitive system and its constructs. See Lyotard 1997, 23, as well as Deleuze 1989, 170.

⁹Lyotard, for example, is expressing his hope that there is something left behind in today’s exitless global zone. See Lyotard 1997, 32.

to the given” (Adorno 176, 177). However, again, it needs to be emphasized that the *metaphysical* element being mourned is not something conceived as spiritual or ideological in a mythologizing sense of the word, but rather, as something *held* to be ungraspable and unknowable for thought, something that should remain a promise, a residue never to be used up, a limitation within thought set or constituted by the nature of thinking itself.

Exemplary of the disorientation overtaking the fin de siècle (that of the twentieth century) is the desperate fight of Wim Wenders’s heroes against a dread of self-enclosure and the loss of an ‘outside’ reference. The motif of obsessively taking Polaroid pictures of oneself and the surrounding objects, prominent in *Alice in the Cities* (*Alice in den Städten*, 1974), and *The American Friend* (*Der Amerikanische Freund*, 1977), is a strategy to combat “the unbearable lightness of being,” the dissipation of substance, a substantial difference, non-identity, and puzzling discrepancy between sensible and intelligible. Both Philip in *Alice* and Ripley in *The American Friend* have lost their bearing in a world where everything looks the same, where nothing ever changes, and where instant photos are used as proofs of existence, those of the perceiving protagonist who in fact does see, or so the photos suggest, what he thinks he may only be imagining. And yet, as Philip complains, the finished film never quite catches up with the perceived reality, so the doubt lingers.

Kieślowski’s misanthropic old judge in *Red* (*Rouge*, 1994), possessed by his most prized possession, his intricate technology of surveillance, is another wonderful example of the hopelessness and meaninglessness invading the self-absorbed, skeptical subject, redeemed (as Philip in Wenders’s *Alice*) by his (grudging) willingness to open himself to, and be rejuvenated by, the unaffected wonderment and unassuming self-assurance of an ingénue, a child-woman, a “becoming-woman,” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term. The hopeful message of Kieślowski’s *Red*, the director’s most personal and last film, is that even in this age of electronic omnipresence and omniscience we do not and cannot know all, that there remains a modicum of the unknown and the undecidable in our all-too-predictable, largely self-made human universe. It is, Deleuze would chime in, cinema’s mission to convey this objective illusion to us.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have readdressed the parallel considerations of cinema as both access to an essential, true, objective reality and as a device of deception

reproducing the fallacies of a biased and reductive human perception. I have argued that the critical consideration of cinematic mediation in these ambiguous terms stems from the traditional association of cinema with the working of mental mechanisms – whose logic, I have shown, follows neatly Kant’s transcendental constructivist dualist model of reason and its reality. Kant’s idea that our sensible but merely phenomenal experience is produced and projected by our supersensible, transcendental synthetic activity, which ‘in itself’ is as unrecoverable as is the world that it moulds, describes perfectly the imaginary-symbolic regime of cinematic signification, whose dual nature has been considered both as a hindrance and as a guarantee of objectivity.

Throughout the paper I have emphasized the significance of Kant’s insistence to preserve, and to make palpable through the aesthetic, a noumenal unknown, a pure and never fully assessable objectivity within an increasingly self-referential, self-serving and self-enclosed human reason. It has been this modicum of a humanly inaccessible, yet arguably intuitable ‘excess,’ the pursuit and the promise of modern art, which an aesthetically biased film theory and practice have sought to foreground, to keep alive. I have joined forces with Deleuze, Lyotard, and Žižek, as well as with Cocteau, Tarkovsky, Wenders, and Kieślowski, to promote the necessity of continued belief in a non-human metaphysical dimension, an outside within thought that forever eludes capture. Cinema’s at once proverbial and contested reality effect – its presence absence, its ability “to represent the absent in detail” (Metz 1982, 61) – should be harnessed to remind us of this ineffable reserve, and to allow us to keep our hope in the possibility of chance, of the unexpected, in the seemingly endless world of electronic simulations.

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