

Reel time: ethnography and the historical ontology of the cinematic image

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This essay seeks to make a case for the conceptual significance of ethnographic attention to filmmaking practice. Relying upon fieldwork on location with a contemporary south Indian film director, I draw attention to three domains of temporal experience through which cinematic images gain their form – perception, action and affection. I do not argue that such attention will somehow complete or correct the picture we may have of an empirical situation – film production – that remains simply neglected or misunderstood. Instead, I hope to show that there are unresolved problems with respect to cinematic experience that are most effectively confronted through an ethnographic examination of such practices. These problems have most centrally to do with time: the apparent contradiction between film’s static and discontinuous frames, and the continuous flux of reality to which they attest. This essay addresses itself to this persistent impasse by undertaking a ‘historical ontology’ of cinematic images: by attending, that is, to the accidents, eruptions and limits of circumstance through which films are invested with determinate form. Cinema can give us the experience of time in its fluxion only because it is made in such a time. What is expressed both by cinema and by the conditions of its emergence, in other words, is the creative potential of temporal duration. I therefore seek less to locate or contextualize a particular practice of filmmaking than to elicit its temporal textures of perception and action, thought and sensation, chance and intention.

Cinema has long been seen to express a paradoxical relationship to time. In the era of cinema's inception in the West, Mary Anne Doane has observed, capitalist modernity rendered time palpable in two contradictory ways: through its standardization and abstraction in proliferating clocks, schedules, tables, and routines, but also through its celebration as a field for the appearance of the contingent, accidental, and unexpected.¹ 'Time's reality in the cinema' is therefore twofold, Doane argues: 'both that of continuity and rupture'.² On the one hand, from its early portrayal of 'actualities' onward, cinema has continually shown and assured us that 'Something is happening'.³ But on the other hand, running films have done so only by hiding from us what is really happening onscreen: the necessary and relentless fixity and stillness accompanying each shift from static frame to frame. With this distinction between appearance and reality, Doane's argument implies that there is something deeply ideological in the association of cinema with temporal contingency in modern times: 'In the face of the abstraction and rationalization of time, chance and the contingent are given the crucial ideological role of representing an outside, of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable'.⁴ Cinematic time may indeed often be the object and context of such ideological operations, and such operations in and through time may indeed constitute familiar subjects of experience. An essential question nevertheless remains: is the relationship between cinema, time and freedom no more than a chapter in the history of ideology?

Another tradition in studies of the cinema has taken these three terms instead as elements of an ontology of the image and its capacities. André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze and others have argued that the cinematic medium is uniquely poised to convey the flux of time within which living things emerge, exist and evolve, its universe of moving images potentially enabling a perception of time itself as pure becoming.⁵ 'The cinema makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object',⁶ Bazin famously wrote, for example, drawing upon Henri Bergson's influential early twentieth-century distinctions between the creative flux of experience and the spatialized abstraction of time. Each of 'the moments of our life ... is a kind of creation', Bergson had argued.⁷ Time could not be taken as incidental to the process of creative emergence, as an empty interval whose length could be measured independent of what was being made within it. Rather, he suggested, 'the time taken up by the invention is one with the invention itself'.⁸

It is well known that Bergson had explicitly opposed these observations concerning durative time to the image of the early 'cinematographic' apparatus unrolling discrete and measured instants with no more than the illusion of continuity.⁹ Meanwhile, recent work in film studies has also characterized Bergson's interest in time and freedom itself as a symptom of time horizons prevailing in the urban modernity of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe.¹⁰ How then might we think through the

1 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

2 Mary Ann Doane, '(De)realizing cinematic time', in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (eds), *Subtitles: on the Foreignness of Film* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 272.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

4 Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 230.

5 See Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

6 André Bazin, 'The ontology of the photographic image', in *What is Cinema*, Volume I, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 97.

7 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2005), p. 9.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 330–43.

10 See, for example, Bliss Chua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–95.

12 Michel Foucault, 'What is enlightenment?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York, NY: New Press, 1997), p. 315.

13 On the historical ontology of the ethical self in south India, see my 'Interior horizons: an ethical space of selfhood in South India', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2010), pp. 64–83. For an ethnography of self-constitution among reality video cameramen, see Vicki Mayer, 'Guys gone wild? Soft-core video professionalism and new realities in television production', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2008), pp. 97–116.

14 Bazin, 'The ontology of the photographic image', p. 97.

15 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 106.

16 For a useful overview, see Janet Staiger, 'Authorship approaches', in David Gerstner and Janet Staiger (eds), *Authorship and Film* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).

17 André Bazin, 'De la politique des auteurs', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Auteurs and Authorship: a Film Reader* (London: Blackwell, 2008).

18 See Hortense Powdermaker's groundbreaking *Hollywood: the Dream Factory* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1950); John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicki Mayer, John Caldwell, and Miranda Banks (eds), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

relationship between the 'historical' and the 'ontological' – to use a pair of terms usefully put forward recently by Bliss Cua Lim – in the cinematic conveyance of time?¹¹

What I pursue in this essay is less a juxtaposition of the historical and the ontological as disjunctive problems and domains and more an interweaving of these terms, through a pursuit of what might be called the 'historical ontology' of cinematic images. I borrow this method from Michel Foucault, who described its concern in the following manner: 'In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?'¹² While Foucault was concerned here with the ethical practices through which the exercise of selfhood may be taken up as a pursuit of freedom, I suggest that a similar orientation may guide our enquiries into the temporal life and death of the cinematic image.¹³ To grapple most effectively with the paradox of cinema as 'change mummified' – in Bazin's memorable phrase – we may turn our attention from the afterlife of mummified images, so to speak, to the living history of their mummification.¹⁴ With this image of a living history, I aim to draw attention to the singular and concrete circumstances through which, as anthropologist Kathleen Stewart puts it, 'things turn out to be not what you thought they were' – a mode of attending to the quotidian nature of things as a matter of ongoing and incessant transformation.¹⁵

Historical ontology seeks such difference in the fine grain of intimate experience: in the ethical, affective and aesthetic texture of relations with oneself and others. The approach I pursue here therefore deviates from the focus on the productive force of various social, cultural, political and economic structures in many studies of cinematic creation.¹⁶ The figure of the filmmaker as auteur may now appear as an artefact of modernist convention, humanist nostalgia or clever marketing on the part of studio executives and distributors. But while the making of film may no longer seem to reflect ineffable genius – unless one is concerned with the 'genius of the system'¹⁷ – the question of newness and its cinematic elaboration remains a problem worthy of confrontation.

When acts of filmmaking are presented as the outgrowth of structural forces, material conditions or craft conventions, the fact of creation itself is threatened with occlusion: not whether there is in fact something new about a particular film or filmmaker, but how – given that the creation of some form, feeling or mode of life is the inescapable concomitant of any exercise of perception and action – such newness comes to appear in the midst of a directed process of production. It is with an eye to such emergence that I follow a specifically ethnographic endeavour in historico-ontological work, attending to the singular practices, unanticipated circumstances and constitutive accidents through which film images gain their form.¹⁸

Recent anthropological work on creativity has refocused attention on processes of improvisation inhering in 'the onward propulsion of life', through which 'the mind's creativity is inseparable from that of the total

- 19 Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, 'Creativity and cultural improvisation: an introduction', in Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam (eds), *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 3, 9.
- 20 On ethnography as encounter, see John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (eds), *Being There: the Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).
- 21 On the optative horizons of anthropological imagination, see Vincent Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: an Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 22 See Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion and Tobias Rees, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 23 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and *Cinema 2: the Time-Image* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- 24 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 280.
- 25 D. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 17.
- 26 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 153.

matrix of relations in which it is embedded and into which it extends'.¹⁹ In what follows, I hope to show that ethnographic fieldwork with filmmakers in the act of filmmaking offers an especially effective means of engaging the emergence of cinema in an open-ended durative time: the accidental happening of cinema is best grasped, that is, through the incidental happening of ethnographic encounter.²⁰

Situating oneself within the time and space of production allows for the deepest exposure to the temporal duration of filmic creation; to the unpredictable yet effective interplay of multiple elements, accidents and intentions traversing any clear line that may be drawn between the makers of film and the milieu in which their making takes place. It is through a practice of ethnographic immersion in and with the emergence of cinema, in other words, that the present comes to appear most clearly and subtly as a creative temporal horizon.²¹ What I intend to convey in this essay are the possibilities of ethnographic method as a means of confronting the temporal genesis and life of the cinematic image. Rather than taking anthropology as necessarily committed to the anachronistic and allochronic – a reputation still widely borne by the discipline – I explore cinematic practices of emergence as essential elements of what has been described more recently as an 'anthropology of the contemporary'.²²

It is worth marking at the outset, however, that the arguments developed here also bear a certain significance for contemporary concerns in film philosophy – most specifically in relation to the pair of books written on the cinema by Deleuze.²³ In the same way that Deleuze sought to reveal Bergsonian potentials in the cinematic image that had been neglected by Bergson himself, I hope here to convey a series of Bergsonian potentials in the process of filmmaking neglected in turn by Deleuze. Consider the following passage that appears towards the end of *Cinema 2*: 'The great cinema authors are like the great painters or the great musicians: it is they who talk best about what they do. But, in talking, they become something else, they become philosophers or theoreticians.'²⁴ In modern cinema's expression of time, Deleuze found a means of thinking through the emergent potential of thought itself. As D. N. Rodowick elaborates: 'for Deleuze, the cinema of time produces an image of thought as a non-totalizable process and a sense of history as unpredictable change'.²⁵ There is a close relationship here between the becoming-otherwise of thought and the potential for becoming-otherwise borne by the cinematic image of time. At stake for Deleuze in both of these instances is the substitution of one kind of formula for another: from 'Ego = Ego' as a law of identity to 'I is another' as a process of creative and emergent displacement.²⁶ But in what ways might it matter that that this argument is made most explicitly in *Cinema 2* in relation to the work of an anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker, Jean Rouch?

What is most intriguing about Deleuze's engagement with Rouch is its blurring of the line between the filmic and the profilmic. 'If the real-fictional alternative is so completely surpassed it is because the camera, instead of

27 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

28 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 59.

29 Claude Levi-Strauss, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau, founder of the sciences of man', *Structural Anthropology*, Volume II (London: Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 33–43.

30 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York, NY: Dover, 2007), p. 7.

31 This essay arises from a larger project concerning the productive experience of producers, directors, actors and actresses, cinematographers, editors, art and music directors and other film technicians in Tamil cinema. While I focus here on the milieu of directing on location, other directorial practices such as scripting, location scouting, casting, editing and scoring are engaged elsewhere.

marking out a fictional or real present, constantly reattaches the character to the before and after which constitute a direct time-image', he writes, proposing the continual becoming of character and filmmaker alike.²⁷ One might argue that this contamination of the filmic by the profilmic – here, the image by what precedes and succeeds it – is one of the central concerns of Deleuze's work on the cinema. After all, it is precisely this that the time-image in cinema, like Bergson's philosophy, helps us to see: 'the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema'.²⁸ But because Deleuze relies entirely upon first-person narratives, critical reviews and his own film readings to elicit this potential from cinema, it would appear that he is forced to fall back upon the authority of those 'who talk best about what they do': the avant-garde films and discourse of a few 'great cinema authors'. The formula 'Ego = Ego' surreptitiously returns through the back door.

This essay is motivated by a similar interest in the creative potential of 'I is another' – it is no coincidence that Claude Levi-Strauss borrowed precisely the same formula from Rimbaud in order to characterize the work of anthropology.²⁹ However, a more fully ethnographic encounter with the making of film offers a compelling means of confronting not only the creative emergence of cinema in time, but also the potential of cinema to reveal time itself as a flow of creative emergence. Bergson had described the experience of intuition – a vision of reality itself as 'unceasing duration, the uninterrupted up-surge of novelty' – as essential to the work of any artist.³⁰ I hope to convey the significance of such perception not only for the making of cinema but also for our thought of what it makes possible. What might we come to see as we traverse the zone of indistinction between the filmic and profilmic? What if the practice of filmmaking itself – irrespective of the distinctiveness or status of its authors – expressed not the purity of its makers' intentions but instead the immanent potential of the situations in which these images arise? Does the cinema's revelation of time in its flux depend upon the immersion of its makers in the experience of such a time themselves? It is with these questions in mind that I turn now to the temporal thought and practice of one south Indian film director.³¹

The character Sasha first appears in the Tamil film *Billa* (Vishnu Vardhan, 2007) as a figure gliding across the screen with stylized grace. Action is essential to this gangster film set in contemporary Kuala Lumpur, and within a few minutes of Sasha's first appearance we see that she intends one act in particular: murdering the don after whom the film itself is named. In the fluid movement of acting bodies, camera angles and soundtrack rhythms leading up to her murder attempt, however, one sequence stands out for the languid quality of its pacing: the camera slows for a series of shots that reveal first a bundle of yellow flowers carefully laid onto two grey marble slabs, then the wide graveyard where these slabs are found, then the faces commemorated by these graves, and finally the figure of Sasha standing before them. Two brief flashbacks in black

and white disclose the relationship between the heroine and the dead pair – both slain by the gangster Billa – and as our gaze returns to the image of Sasha before the marbled graves, we see these slabs and their flower bundles reflected in the dark of her mirrored sunglasses. As the camera closes in on Sasha's face, the sounds of recollected laughter gradually gain a tinny echo, as if cast from within a deep well. The depths that we find reflected in her mirrored frames are temporal rather than spatial, redoubling her present with living reverberations of the past. It is in the lingering depths of this temporal span that we find this character becoming something different: a would-be assassin bent on revenge. But how did this cinematic image of a creative time itself emerge?

A review article published in *The Hindu* newspaper identified *Billa* director Vishnu Vardhan as one among a number of young directors making a 'new wave' in Tamil film by fusing 'the energy and entertainment of a mainstream film ... with the complexity and sensitivity of an art film'.³² *Billa* was one of two films directed by Vishnu Vardhan whose shooting I encountered in the summers of 2007 and 2008 during five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork. Striking out as an independent filmmaker in 2003, Vishnu told me, the first question he found himself confronting was 'What am I?' He often spoke to me of filmmaking as a means of personal expression: 'it's a medium, it's a platform, it's like a stage, you come up and say what you want'. In the many conversations that we had on breaks between shots, he would describe what had just happened in the first person, as though the mass of bodies, cables, props and tools at work in these situations had been orchestrated as a means of realizing his own personal intentions; as he once said, 'everything is from your own system'. And yet, at the same time, Vishnu also admitted that he had a 'problem' with such words themselves: he often did not know what he was saying, or where these words would lead as he spoke them. In the same way, in working with Vishnu I saw that the unfolding of his work in time also routinely exceeded his intentions, an excess that was not incidental but rather essential to the very mode of his directing.

The kernel of this essay appeared suddenly in the form of a three-minute exchange during the shooting of the graveyard sequence described above, an exchange about time that closely anticipated – in a way that I could not have foreseen – the very experience of time put forward by the cinematic scene itself. The shots of Sasha mourning before a pair of gravestones were composed on a humid summer's day in Kuala Lumpur in June 2007. Nearly six hours were spent that day at a mosquito-ridden graveyard on the outskirts of the city, staging, framing and exposing these shots. Cameraman, art director, assistants and crew worked hour after hour to shift cranes, tracks and cameras, arrange lights, lay out electrical lines, and touch up the colour and texture of the graves themselves, while Vishnu paid close attention to the look of the gravestones and the layout of the frames within the cameraman's viewfinder (figure 1). Here, as was usually the case on Vishnu's shoots, individual shots were blocked and composed on the spot, each leading

32 Pradeep Sebastian, 'Beyond old Kollywood', *The Hindu Magazine*, 13 January 2008.

Fig. 1. *Billa* (Vishnu Vardhan, 2007) graveyard scene: screenshot of Sasha (Nayantara), and the director observing the tracking camera.



into the next through the rhythms of anticipation and satisfaction, enthusiasm and discontent. Meanwhile, it was my fourth day in Kuala Lumpur, and I was struggling with the swarms of mosquitoes and the heavy afternoon heat. As the cameraman coordinated the setup of one of these shots, I asked Vishnu how he coped with the enormous amount of time and struggle it took to create what would amount to no more than a few seconds of the film. 'It's simple', he replied. 'I'm traveling in reel time.'

I was startled by this evocation of a temporal span other than the 'real' time we were apparently sharing in our conversation, and asked him what he meant. He replied that he was always in reel time, whether or not he was shooting, even when he was asleep. Inhabiting this other time, he had not felt at all the long and difficult passage of hours that I had experienced: 'Those four seconds of shots, it is that moment that you're living in. That moment. By the time it's lunch break, fuck! Lunch break and by the time you go, and fuck! It's evening already. You travel in that thing actually. You won't know actually that the time is just flying.'

Vishnu admitted that he had to make it a habit of just looking at his watch to know the actual time. He admitted too that his experience of 'reel time' posed certain challenges in the way that he encountered and engaged other people: 'When I am talking, even when I am talking to my ADs [Assistant Directors] also, suddenly I will go somewhere else. I won't know where I am.' This living in a different time and space seemed essential to his work as a director: 'I have to be there. It's another experience when you just. ... When you are just there. You are there in that space. You are just looking around, no? Fuck! This is what I am going to shoot. And this is what is going to be in the film. Capturing that moment, no?' To travel in reel time was to allow one's own experience to assume the tangible qualities conveyed by the physical medium of the film reel, to lose oneself to the time and space being conjured onscreen. Here was a filmmaker describing his own experience of Bergsonian duration.

While shooting film, Vishnu had no choice but to work within multiple and layered temporal horizons: the rational abstractions of clock schedules and hourly shifts in relation to which labour and equipment contracts were organized; the sacred time of auspicious and inauspicious moments around which the inception and conclusion of work was oriented; the inexorable passage of the sun through a productive milieu oriented largely

around the play of available light; and the time of repetition that animated the pursuit of adequate rehearsals and takes. But working with generous backing from a London-based Tamil corporate entertainment house, Vishnu also had the freedom to engage these diverse horizons from the standpoint of the cinematic reel time he was unraveling, a term that he and other filmmakers typically used to discuss the span of film – ‘two minutes, 400 feet’ – it would take to present a particular shot or scene. What was at stake in his depiction of this unfurling time as a moment in which one could lose oneself? What was it to ‘travel’ in such a time; to take, that is, the projected time of cinema as an open duration within which one could move and create as a living being?

We may find evidence here of modern cinema’s ongoing affair with contingency, the attractive immediacy of the ‘moment’ in the midst of a fleeting and ephemeral rush of experience.³³ Alternatively, one might seek out reverberations here of specifically Indian philosophies of time, the continued salience of insights presented in classical texts such as the *Yoga-Bhāṣya*: ‘the whole universe undergoes change in a single moment’.³⁴ Or, to resist attributing this temporal experience either to the ‘modern’ as such, or to the persistence of vernacular cultural forms, one might find here an instance of the more particular ‘now’ engaged by third-world filmmakers in a postcolonial milieu.³⁵ Scholarship on Indian film has focused for the most part on the ideological constitution of national and postcolonial subjects through the operation of representational narratives, codes, structures and meanings. But I want to suggest that we may do more with Vishnu’s experience of time than to establish its historical, geographic and cultural location or context.³⁶ Like many contemporary Indian directors, his self-described influences were global in their scope, including figures as diverse as Akira Kurosawa, Martin Scorsese, Guy Ritchie and a few ‘Korean’ filmmakers. If there was a ‘culture’ of time at stake here, in other words, it might simply be that of contemporary filmmaking. To propose this possibility is also to suggest that we may find broader textures of experience at work in Vishnu’s filmic thoughts and practices, pertaining to processes of creative and cinematic expression as such.

The ‘moment’ that Vishnu found himself within was not an instant that one could capture and fix all at once in the manner of a snapshot, but rather a temporal horizon in motion that invited the transformation and displacement of those who moved along with its vicissitudes. He had said in the midst of the graveyard shoot that he would often stumble (‘Fuck!’) into an unforeseen situation that would become the milieu of the film itself. Vishnu’s image of reel time suggests that to make a film is to inhabit a time of emergence, and that to live in such a milieu as director is to open oneself to what it might yet become as it is filmed: to move along with the flow of its emergent potential. By thinking with this image of experience, we may therefore find a way of further approaching what I described earlier in this essay as the historical ontology of cinematic images. ‘Each one of us ... is nothing but an assemblage of three images, a consolidate of

33 Leo Charney, ‘In a moment: film and the philosophy of modernity’, in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (eds), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 279–96.

34 Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1999), p. 50.

35 See Lim, *Translating Time*. I describe the cultural life of filmic fragments in the Indian postcolonial present in my *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

36 To attribute temporality in Indian cinema to ‘the cyclical temporal worldview of Hinduism’ – as does David Martin-Jones in ‘Toward another “-image”’: Deleuze, narrative time and popular Indian cinema’, *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2008), p. 35 – is to generalize precariously at the level of both Indian culture and its associated cinematic forms.

37 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 66; Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).

38 On the notion of *sarvam anityam* – ‘all is impermanent’ – in Indian Buddhism, see Balslev, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, p. xi.

39 In a notoriously dangerous practice, glass-studded strings are used in kite-fighting competitions in many Indian cities, with rivals seeking to cut away the flying kites of others.

perception-images, action-images and affection-images’, writes Deleuze, elaborating on a trinity of terms that Bergson put forward to articulate a temporal ontology of matter and image.³⁷ In what follows, I will borrow these terms – perception, action and affection – to describe three domains of experience through which directing might be seen to become expressive in its nature: three ways in which time opens as a conduit for the emergence of the cinematic image. In each case, I begin with an image from Vishnu’s films and then work back towards its conditions of possibility, the empirical and temporal circumstances that invest such images with expressive form.

Accidental happenings in time are essential to the unfolding of *Sarvam/ Everything* (2009), Vishnu Vardhan’s most recent film. ‘Everything is very happy, and *dabbak!* The girl dies’, he explained, describing a pivotal event halfway through the film that transforms it from a light-hearted romance into a dark and sombre thriller.³⁸ This death is the unexpected outcome of a bicycle race between lovers Karthik and Sandhya, playfully waged with a borrowed pair of children’s bicycles. Looking backward as they wobble along on these diminutive wheels, the camera presents a series of quick impressions of their avid and laughing faces; not once does the camera look forward along the road from the point of view of the racers themselves. Only we can see what they have failed to notice in the intensity of their chase: a red kite fluttering across the full frame of the screen, trailing the glass-studded string with which it is caught up on a roadside lamppost.³⁹ The kite registers its actuality with lethal force, whipping around the neck of the heroine to deal a sudden wound she will not survive. And yet there is also a virtual quality to our cinematic perception of this object, as a series of previously glimpsed elements – the striped retaining wall along which they race, the lampposts under which they pass, and above all the kite itself as it drifts to rest above this road in an earlier scene – leads us to anticipate the kite’s eventual return. The scene stages a contrast between ordinary perception, limited in its duration and scope, and a more expansive perception made possible through cinema. We see the emergence in time of an event neither seen nor foreseen by its subjects.

The scene of the tragic bicycle race was shot over two days on a wide road fronting Eliot’s Beach in southern Chennai in August 2008 (figure 2). The question of anticipation surfaced in discussions between Vishnu and his cameraman Nirav Shah on the first morning of the shoot: should the actress playing Sandhya lightly kiss Karthik’s cheek and say ‘goodbye’ before taking up her cycle, for example, leaving the latter and the audience to puzzle why? Although no such exchange ultimately appears in the film, I was struck by the extent to which Vishnu’s own perception of the ordinary environment surrounding us had been overtaken by the virtual horizons of cinematic perception they were in the process of staging here. Some of the first shots that morning, for example,

Fig. 2. *Sarvam* (Vishnu Vardhan, 2008) kite scene: screenshot, and actor facing away from cycle-mounted camera.



were framed against the high striped wall dividing the road from sand and sea, as the lovers negotiated with a pair of children to borrow the bicycles for their ill-fated race. As the crew worked to dismantle a crane and move lights and reflectors between two shots composed beside this wall, I caught a sudden and vivid glimpse of how thoroughly Vishnu had come to inhabit the world that was being crafted for this scene. The director was looking at Karthik's car, parked beside the pair of children's bicycles. When an assistant carefully carried a piece of equipment past this car, cutting briefly across Vishnu's field of vision, he provoked a sudden and angry outburst: 'Come man, to the outside, just standing in the frame [like that]!' the director exclaimed. The assistant was startled, as was I. Vishnu was a genial and playful presence on his sets, and the sudden anger in his voice was a surprising eruption. It was always the case that those who stumble into the visual field of a positioned camera risk the ire of director and cinematographer, but here no such shot was as yet established on the scene. Vishnu appeared to be seeing something else altogether – the frame of a shot yet in the making – attesting to the ways in which the ordinary span of his perception had been extended by the process of shooting film.

'The cinematographic character of our knowledge of things is due to the kaleidoscopic character of our adaptation to them', Bergson wrote. We ordinarily perceive the world through a discontinuous series of snapshot impressions because our action in the world is itself necessarily discontinuous in its nature.⁴⁰ Perception, that is, may be taken as nothing more than the virtual action of the body on things, its selective and subtractive quality indebted to the instrumental orientation of our deeds.⁴¹ 'But now and then', Bergson also observed, 'men arise whose senses or whose consciousness are less adherent to life. Nature has forgotten to attach their faculty of perceiving to their faculty of acting.'⁴² Identifying these figures as artists, he argued that the works of their vision showed that 'an extension of the faculties of perceiving is possible'.⁴³ The virtual horizons of their perception, in other words, promised to reveal the real depth of time in its continuous flux, which we tended otherwise to miss. While Bergson looked to philosophy for a means of extending universally such 'satisfactions which art will never give save to those favoured by nature and fortune', philosophy itself has since turned towards the cinema for a creative extension of ordinary perception.⁴⁴ Such potential cannot be expressed by the filmic course of cinema without its expression in the situation of filmmaking.

40 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 333.

41 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 58.

42 Bergson, *Creative Mind*, p. 114.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

45 On *auteur*ity as a cultural formation, see James Naremore, 'Auteurship', in Toby Miller (ed.), *A Companion to Film Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1999).

46 For an account of contemporary film culture in the south Indian city of Chennai, see Lalitha Gopalan, 'Film culture in Chennai', *Film Quarterly* vol. 62, no. 1 (2008), pp. 40–45.

In the Tamil popular film industry of south India, a 'culture' of directors as auteurs emerged alongside the waning dominance of studio production houses in the 1970s.⁴⁵ While film in Tamil and other south Indian languages sustains wildly popular and abiding cults around the signature personality of particular stars, senior Tamil directors such as K. Balachander, Bharathiraja and Mani Ratnam are widely recognized by industry peers, reviewers and critics, and public audiences alike as bearers of distinctive vision and influential style, hailed routinely as *kalai brahmakkal* or 'creator-gods of the arts'.⁴⁶ This image of the director as a creative artist is supported not only by diverse forms of print and televisual media but also by customary practices of film production in the region. Tamil directors often exercise singular influence over their films, typically composing the stories and screenplays they direct but also at times wielding the camera, assuming central acting roles, collaborating on music and editing, or producing the films. On location they are shielded from the sun by umbrellas, cooled by standing fans and plied with constant rounds of fruit juice, exotic teas and favoured snacks by production assistants, as if to annul the distractions of the body. Assistant directors bearing mobile phones, laptops, notepads, cigarettes and other accessories are expected to respond instantly to any improvisational urges on the part of their directors.

One may find in all of this further evidence of the forms of hierarchy that have long been imagined as pernicious and pervasive in Indian social life. What I seek to emphasize here, however, is the significance of such practices for the experiential texture of the films they yield. The break from the staccato demands of active life effected by the milieu of shooting sustains the modes of virtual perception through which these films are gradually invested with their own capacity to extend the horizons of ordinary perception. I was sometimes reminded forcefully of this myself, as an ethnographer and an intermittent force of perceptual distraction on Vishnu's sets. One day during the shooting of *Billa*, for example, at a lorry repair yard in Kuala Lumpur I found Vishnu sitting quietly alone at several points during the complicated shoot. When I tried to turn one of these instances of apparent relaxation into an occasion for a question, Vishnu gently warded me off. 'Not now', he said, pointing to his own head to explain. 'I'm letting it wander.'

I would come to learn that what Vishnu saw in such moments was the narrative flow of an incipient film that slowly coalesced through the accumulation of isolated shots. 'The film is running through me', he said, describing how *Sarvam* had seized his imagination even while he was working on *Billa*. 'I have been living with it for two years.' But more subtly as well, this image of a moving film gestures towards the temporal depth of the cinematic frame itself, as it is imagined, perceived and realized in the midst of a shoot. Certainly, framing was an act of selective perception in support of action. 'I am looking only at what is in the frame', Vishnu said one afternoon, explaining how he filtered out the bustle and chaos of those working around him on a shoot. And yet I came to see that

this moment of which he spoke extended far beyond its instantaneous actualization in the bodies, tools and location working to make it present.

We were chatting that afternoon on the balcony of his hotel room high in the south Indian hills of Munnar, the day before another shooting schedule for *Sarvam* was due to start. Vishnu gestured with his hands towards a stand of tall eucalyptus trees rising before us, cutting vertically through the sight of a hillside covered with tea estates and low buildings in the distance. 'When you look here, I almost see this frame like this. With just this half branch inside, this is the full thing, and just a little on the right edge of the frame. Now this is the frame for me. It's like that. That's how it is.' His language that day underscored the static fixity of the frame through which he saw this quotidian landscape, as if it were the photographic record of an instant. But when he spoke of similar matters in the midst of an ongoing shoot, the contours of the frame were far more elusive. Working from shot to shot, he suggested on another occasion – during a break in the shooting of a song sequence for *Sarvam* – he had come to anticipate and even perceive those that would eventually follow beyond successive cuts. 'In one frame you actually see another frame ... another frame of the same thing, another perspective of the same thing.' This was a matter not only of how these shots appeared on location, and how they would look as an edited course of film, but also how they would appear on a movie hall projection screen. 'That's what is in your head.' To live with a film in the midst of its fashioning was to perceive, even in this present of discontinuous takes, the virtual horizons of a whole world. 'It becomes like a habit, actually.'

Like the potential frame that he alone had seen at Eliot's Beach, this visceral embodiment of a more creative perceptual faculty was more clearly evident in what Vishnu did than in what he said. On location for *Sarvam*, he would enact its scenes each day with his own body, working out, take by take, the movements that he envisioned for his actors. And pacing about restlessly as equipment was shifted and rearranged between successive shots, Vishnu would often stop to crouch and compose his own body in the manner of an imagined camera, framing a potential visual field through the stasis and movement of his own arms and hands (figure 3).⁴⁷ Did such gestures represent a subjective and personal appropriation of cinematic vision, or the loss of oneself to a 'cine-eye' lodged within the impersonal substance of matter itself?⁴⁸ With Vishnu, I saw that these gestures were exploratory rather than imperative in character, often sustaining questions posed to the viewpoint of others – 'See if this would look good?' – rather than the authority of his own singular vision. They may be taken, that is, to prepare a field of action whose potential movements extended far beyond the person of the director. With this observation in mind, Let us turn to the forms of temporal openness at play in directed action.

47 On such gestures as modes of coordinating action, see Emmanuel Grimaud, 'The film in hand: modes of coordination and assisted virtuosity in the Bombay film studios', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2007).

48 On Dziga Vertov's 'eye of matter', see Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 81.

Fig. 3. *Sarvam*: Camera facing actor, and the director 'becoming camera' in virtual perception.



49 Ibid., p. 141.

50 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 66.

51 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. 243–4.

Vishnu Vardhan's 2007 *Billa* was a gangster film that remade an immensely popular 1980 Tamil film of the same title, directed by R. Krishnamurthy. The starring hero in each of these films plays a double role: first the glamorous and cosmopolitan gangster David Billa, and then the ordinary local man who is hired and trained by the police to impersonate the don and infiltrate his gang when, unbeknownst to its members, Billa dies. The plot fits the 'situation – action – modified situation' scheme that Deleuze offers as a formula for the movement of the 'action-image' in cinema: in Vishnu's film, petty pickpocket Velu finds himself thrown into the milieu of an encompassing situation, that of the gangsters, where he must 'raise his mode of being to the demands of the milieu' so that he may overturn it altogether.⁴⁹ Stylized scenes of preparatory target practice and physical training foreshadow the 'possible action' he will exercise. However, Velu first infiltrates Billa's gang in a much more subtle manner, slipping along an audiovisual current into an uninterrupted flow of action and imagination. The film shifts smoothly into the third of its song sequences soon after Velu appears in Billa's garb. The gangster's former lover addresses Velu and the camera with ardent gestures of passion, the spectacular quality of the scene conveyed by white sands and blue waters, teams of breakdancers disappearing into wisps of smoke, and the image of Velu himself on a leather couch on the beach, sunglasses hiding his reaction to the spectacle. Action slips into dream: Velu need only watch coolly as the world he has entered moves as a 'wave' around him.⁵⁰

We find here a temporary suspension of possible action, the flow of the song maintaining the pure virtuality and openness of a world's activity. The narrative movement of the film expresses a tension that Bergson had sketched between two ways of conceiving action in time: 'The duration *wherein we see ourselves acting*, and in which it is useful that we should see ourselves, is a duration whose elements are dissociated and juxtaposed. The duration *wherein we act* is a duration wherein our states melt into each other.'⁵¹ For Bergson, the first of these modes of action corresponded to the discontinuous operation of the cinematographic apparatus, while the second expressed more directly the durative flow of time. In the film *Billa*, however, we find both of these modes at work simultaneously: we see Velu acting as a possible Billa by matching him up against a series of images of what the don would do; and we find Velu in the film *becoming* Billa by slipping into the flow of the world of

Fig. 4. *Billa* bridge shot: screenshot, and the director/crew shooting on location.



52 On such hybrid forms, see Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 270, and David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

his life. In Deleuze's language, we have here a hybrid cinematic form, alternating and even confounding the distinction between movement-image and time-image.⁵² What is interesting about this form is the image of action it puts forward: activity as inactivity, as a suspension of agency in a continuous course of transformation. More importantly, when we turn to Vishnu as director of this film, we find no better image to express the paradoxical mode of his own action.

On location with Vishnu, I found that a dynamic relationship between these two modes – between the virtual action of a world and the possible action of those within it – was essential not only to the images at work in his films, but also to the way in which they were fashioned, shaping what could be captured when the director himself would call for 'action' at the outset of each take. The song sequence that stages Velu's return as Billa, for example, cuts to three brief shots panning across a white suspension bridge from far below, coming to rest on Velu's assured face and the confident poise with which his arms grasp the steel railing. I was with the crew as these shots were taken one afternoon at the Malaysian national administrative complex of Putrajaya (figure 4). Riding here with the director and cinematographer Nirav Shah, I asked why they had chosen this location. 'Very simple: it looks good', Vishnu said, to which Nirav added: 'If you want to intellectualize it, it's the seat of power: Billa should be here'. Nirav smiled broadly as he said this, and Vishnu, delighted with the thought, held out his hand for a low-five.

Although these comments could be taken as a forecast of possible and intended action, I encountered the limits of their power as the shoot itself unfolded. The specific spot below the bridge from which these and several other shots were taken, for example, was found only by accident that afternoon as Vishnu took a quick walk with his assistant director Gokul, scouting locations for another montage sequence for the film: 'When I went there I was walking. Something told me ... "OK", I said, "I'll just take a walk". I walked out, I saw something strike. I walked down, I don't know how I went there, I just went down, I said "Fuck!" Suddenly, there you go, "Holy shit, look at this! It can happen here." We move in there.' Shifting register from the playful declaration of intentions that he and Nirav had made earlier, Vishnu spoke of this moment as though this possibility for action had erupted from the place itself. He was, I found, deeply open to such encounters with an active world. Time and again,

Vishnu returned to one expression to make sense of this manner of work and life: 'Go with the flow'.

We spoke more about this phrase beside another bridge that night, waiting for the lighting crew to set up equipment for a night chase sequence. 'Go with the flow of your thinking process', he explained: 'You thought of something. You can shoot it. Do it.' At first I took him to be talking about an imagined act that somehow had to be actualized in the environment of the shoot, and I asked how he would reconcile this flow of his thought with the flow of filmmaking circumstance. But Vishnu resisted the dualism of my question, insisting that there was only a single continuous flow of thought, action and reaction at stake here: 'When you come there, the whole place is giving you another idea altogether. You don't cut that flow.' I found his language fascinating, not only in its apparent defiance of the piecemeal fashion in which he was eliciting action himself here – 'Don't cut ... Don't stop' – but also in its embodiment of the very current he was describing: 'My whole flow is ... like a stream, you just go, you just go with it, you know. You just go with the flow. Either you flow with the location, or you flow with the nature, or you let everything blend together and you just ... It's like a gushing thing, it's not like a planned thing, no, you just gush along, you just go.' What was at stake in avidly expressing a mode of acting *with* the world so antithetical to the image of the director as an orchestrator of possible action *on* the world?

The familiar English cliché that Vishnu could not avoid expressing may perhaps be indebted to the popularization of East Asian Zen and Taoist philosophy among diverse western-educated, English-speaking peoples in the 1960s. Consider, for example, the 'temporal flow' of the tea ceremony in Japanese Buddhism, in which 'each act wholly fills the present, yet must at the same time dissolve and give way to the next'.⁵³ I do not wish, however, to characterize this orientation as an outgrowth of a specifically Asian or Indian philosophy, but instead more simply as a way of relating oneself to the emergent potential of time. Bergson calls this orientation 'intuition': a mode of action – a 'laborious, even painful, effort' – through which thought might bend itself towards the continuous flux of indefinite states that he associated with durative time.⁵⁴ Bergson's interest in 'supple, mobile, and almost fluid representations, always ready to mould themselves on the fleeting forms of intuition' bears a striking resemblance to way in which Vishnu sought as a filmmaker to relate himself to the world in which he was working: 'No matter whatever happens, no matter if everything goes wrong, you make sure that nothing stops'. Here was a practice of directing aimed not at mastering the situation to suit one's intended action, but instead towards finding a means of expression within the flow of its social, technical and natural contingencies.

Directing on location always brings into play a diverse field of unpredictable circumstances: the vagaries of weather, crowds and permits in outdoor locations; the challenges of coordinating and sustaining disparate bodies of creative, technical and support staff; the essential unpredictability

⁵³ Dennis Hirota, *The Wind in the Pines: Classic Writings of the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path* (Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1995), p. 25. I am grateful to Charlie Hallisey for this reference.

⁵⁴ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 32.

of the equipment itself. Like many other Indian directors, Vishnu engaged with these circumstances through a cultivated openness to their temporal flux. Take, for example, the way in which a situation was established for the shooting of one crucial scene in *Billa*: the staging by police of a fictitious arms deal, whose collapse would open the chase sequence in which the gangster meets his death. Although the director had envisioned and requested a vast factory space for the enactment of this scene, a series of verbal misunderstandings led the film's Malaysian location managers to scout and reserve a technically impossible space for the shoot. A fierce quarrel ensued, but Vishnu ultimately consented to the producer's wish to use instead a local lorry repair yard that had been offered for free by its Malaysian Tamil owners. 'That's my job – to make it look good', he resolved, and spent the night reimagining the scene with his assistant directors.

The shoot itself, a few days later, was complicated and carried on well beyond sunset. 'I'm fighting with this bugger all day', Vishnu complained, referring to the sun, the struggle arising to a great degree from the limitations of budget and the need to do as much as possible with the available light. The most elaborate aspect of the scene involved an opaque glass panel through which Billa would burst in a hidden car, scattering a phalanx of startled police officers. Here too was a problem, as one of the police officers mistook his cue, leaping away in surprise a full second before the exploding glass was supposed to have alarmed him. Because the production could afford no more than one of these elaborate setups, however, the director substituted a series of wide, mid and close shots for the single shot with which he had hoped to capture the eruption of the car and its aftermath. 'I could have made it a Bond film', Vishnu said wistfully at the end of that day, reflecting on the financial limits of the 'south Indian regional cinema' within which he worked. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the creative potential of the action he staged arose precisely from such open-ended engagements with situations amenable to little control. There was something akin to a formula for the way that Vishnu faced these circumstances: 'What is the best I can do now? That will be running always in the mind.'

The temporal index borne by this continuous question to oneself – *now* – is crucial to my argument here. For Vishnu, as for many Indian directors, working on location was far from a matter of simply giving form to the existing intentions and ideas that one has. The situation established by the location within which Vishnu directed cannot be understood, therefore, in spatial terms alone; there was a temporal dimension essential to its openness. To 'go with the flow' – that is, to acknowledge and allow the virtual action of things upon oneself – is to submit to the unexpected forces, elements and arrangements that time may introduce at any instant. It is to recognize that one is always subject to time: if not in the contingency of an active present, then in the insistence of a memory – '*Ayyoo*, I should have done that, no ...' – that would seek always to return to what could have been done in a situation long since lost.

For Vishnu, this deference to the time in which action unfolds was essential to the experience of its creativity. Speaking of the shots from under the bridge, for example, he reflected: 'It's that moment, you know. If I thought "That is where I am going to shoot", if I had stood there [on the bridge], I wouldn't have got what I got there [below the bridge]. Understand? I definitely wouldn't have got what I got there.' In inhabiting this moment of emergence, Vishnu sought to allow himself to be moved or displaced by what erupted within it. This was an ethos reflecting both a temporal relation to the place in which one worked, and a temporal relation to one's own potential for expression. 'I feel happy when I am shooting it. That's all that matters', Vishnu said. Let us call this latter mode of relating to oneself a matter of 'affection'. It is this domain that must be further explored to grasp the temporal articulation of perception and action in the creative practice of filmmaking.

Sarvam cuts directly from the scene of Sandhya's accident to the image of her bloodied body being rushed by stretcher along a narrow hospital corridor, Karthik leaning over to assure her that she 'will be fine' as she is carried beyond a pair of glass doors. But looking back through these doors shortly afterwards, he senses that this may not be the case, as he sees a couple crumpling in grief in the distance. Everyone around him also begins to weep loudly when the doctor comes out to share the news, but he alone remains strangely composed and volubly meditative. Apparently unfeeling, Karthik is caught in a spiral of time. 'Just now *daa*', he tells his friend Krishna, 'a little while before, she was laughing happily and riding a cycle. That laughing face is still there, just like that before my eyes.' Each time Karthik looks down or away from his friend as he paces around the hospital waiting area, he turns back again to give voice to a slightly different recollection: that such a tiny string had caught around her neck ... that it was coated with glass ... that she had sped ahead on the larger cycle ... that the pair crying in the distance must be her parents ... that someone must sign for her body ... that it cannot be him as they are not yet married. Krishna finally pulls Karthik away as he keeps talking, mostly to himself, and it is only when he leans his head against a long white wall that we see and hear him break down in tears. This feeling of grief erupts almost as a surprise; as though to feel it Karthik must be reminded of what is happening at that very moment; as though it could be felt only through the return of time to itself.

It is not easy to grasp what Bergson might have meant by suggesting that we may 'place ourselves ... in the concrete flow of duration'.⁵⁵ He sought, after all, to contest the many ways in which we tend to spatialize time, to treat it as an empty interval within which thought and action takes place. What then does it mean to find oneself *in* a duration such as this:

Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more probably,

55 Ibid., p. 36.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 26–27.

57 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 310

58 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 83.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older.⁵⁶

We relate to ourselves, Bergson seems to suggest, through the relation of time to itself: past to present, present to past, quality to successive quality. Duration appears here, in other words, as a reflexive relation, an open-ended and transformative relation of something to itself. Another name that Bergson proposes for this kind of reflexive relationship is ‘affection’: the action of a body upon itself.⁵⁷ What we find in duration is time split against itself, acting upon itself, affecting and being affected by itself; to say that we are in time is perhaps to imply more profoundly that we *are* time, that our freedom to act otherwise amounts only to the difference that time makes to itself.⁵⁸

This affectivity of time is something that cinema can show us, Deleuze argues: ‘how we inhabit time, how we move in it, in this form which carries us away, picks us up and enlarges us’.⁵⁹ But again we may ask whether it can do so without its makers being affected themselves by the time in which they work. Take, for example, the shooting of this hospital scene from *Sarvam*. Vishnu and cinematographer Nirav speculated that it would be the most intense scene in the film. ‘They should cry’, I heard Nirav saying confidently to Vishnu as they flicked through digital stills of the completed scene two days after they had shot it. At the outset of the shoot, however, quite what the scene might make anyone feel remained unclear. Like the spiraling course of Karthik’s grief within the film, the affective power of the scene would only develop through a recursive encounter with its own unfolding.

On the first morning of the shoot, Vishnu walked me through the hospital corridors constructed by his art director on the ninth floor of an unfinished Chennai office block, the narrow passages in blinding white designed to convey the anxiety with which Karthik would rush Sandhya into the operating room. As the shoot proceeded, the director demanded feeling more than anything else from his actors. ‘Let me feel it now!’, he yelled, as the trolley raced through the narrow hallway for the first take rehearsal, camera mounted backwards to frame the hero’s panicked face. ‘Come on! Mood, mood!’, he would exclaim if the cinematographer found such feeling lacking from the standpoint of his camera lens. Accidents erupting in the midst of takes throughout the day – a glass door cracked by an errant nurse, a open doorway exposing set equipment to the frame, pieces of the stretcher-mounted camera falling away as the cart was raced along the halls, and above all emotional misfires on the part of the actors themselves – underscored the essential contingency of the enterprise. ‘We don’t even know what is going to happen ... we don’t even know how it will look’, Vishnu had told me that morning, just before they began to rehearse the first take. But crucially, he forecast as well that if he ‘felt it’ in the shots taken that day, this would come as a kind of *deja vu*: ‘when you see it, that is a feeling of watching something which you’ve seen inside’. A successful scene, in other words, would echo or revive

Fig. 5. *Sarvam* hospital scene: screenshot, and director viewing the live video feed.



something that the director – like his cinematic character – had already felt before.

Affection is essential to Indian popular cinema, which expresses and provokes felt intensities to seize and absorb the attention of its audience.⁶⁰ This glimpse of the cinematic conjuring of one such scene, however, reveals affection as an open and indeterminate horizon of expression in the present that nevertheless relies for its force upon some semblance of the past. Although this might appear to represent a contradiction, Bergson's work on time suggests that this apparent impasse depends upon the basic, and erroneous, presumption that the past must precede the present. Anomalous states of consciousness such as *deja vu*, Bergson argues, attest instead to the simultaneous coexistence of past and present: 'It is a recollection of the present moment in that actual moment itself. It is of the past in its form and of the present in its matter. It is a *memory of the present*.'⁶¹ His explication of this argument puts forward an image of time itself as twofold in nature, composed in the manner of a pair of 'jets': 'one of which falls back towards the past whilst the other springs forward towards the future'.⁶² This image offers another way of articulating the essential creativity of temporal duration: each perception of an actual present, selective and prospective in its identification of fixed objects, coincides with a virtual memory of itself as emerging from the flow of time.⁶³ Sensations of doubled consciousness such as *deja vu* make perceptible what is always invisibly the case.

What is palpably 'felt' in such sensations, in other words, is the affective intensity of a spiraling relation between the actual and the virtual, between the present and the living pasts that make it otherwise. 'When you see it, that is a feeling of watching something which you've seen inside', Vishnu reflected. 'Feeling it', for Vishnu, is a matter of affective displacement in time: the sense that one's own feelings are returning to presence in some other time and from somewhere else, an encounter with the virtual horizons of the film as they came to surface 'out really in reality'. It is essential to note that this return from elsewhere is effected both by the milieu of its making and by the screen on which it registers (figure 5). Vishnu insisted that seeing the hospital space constructed by his art director that day, for example, was not in itself sufficient for the essential feeling of *deja vu*: he was only affected by the eventual appearance of the scene within the frame of a screen.⁶⁴ 'It's like I am watching a film. The monitor is like watching a film', he said, describing

⁶⁰ See Anand Pandian, 'Landscapes of affective expression: affective encounters in South Indian cinema', *Cinema Journal*, forthcoming 2011.

⁶¹ Henri Bergson, 'Memory of the present and false recognition', in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1920), p. 167.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶³ Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'The reality of the virtual: Bergson and Deleuze', *MLN*, vol. 120, no. 5 (2005).

⁶⁴ On the constitutive passivity of the Deleuzian spectator, see Richard Rushton, 'Deleuzian spectatorship', *Screen*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2009), p. 48.

his experience of the video feed through which the scene would first gain a form independent from him as an actual frame. Throughout the shoot, Vishnu's eyes were glued almost exclusively to this small screen as the action unfolded immediately around him. 'Wild, huh?', he asked me as we watched together an establishing shot for the entire scene framed without a hitch late that afternoon. Its affective power returned to him in the form of a surprise: 'I felt it in the first take itself'.

These feelings, always anticipated and sometimes attained, cannot be taken, therefore, as a simple external expression or realization of oneself as director, routed and refracted as they were through a complex and unpredictable apparatus of enactment. There was an essential indeterminacy to the time opened by this play of affections, an uncertainty that no amount of intentional planning and staging could overcome. Vishnu reflected: 'If it is the same dialogue, with the same emotion, with the same way he is doing, everything is the same, then it should work. But sometimes, it won't work. You won't know, something is wrong but you won't ... you can't understand what is wrong. That always happens. "It's ok, but something is ... let's do one more".' To exercise directorial judgment as a matter of affection is to submit to the contingency of time, to rely upon the temporal duration of practice for the actual emergence of something new. Each take may thus be understood as a certain kind of gamble with time, wagering the potential affective response of an eventual audience. This outcome cannot be understood or expected but only intuited, by following the play of one's own affections as they engage what appears onscreen. For the filmmaker, just as for those who confront what they have fashioned, 'a time is revealed inside the event'.⁶⁵ And like the cinema, ethnography promises us a means of its perception.

Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Mystère Picasso/The Picasso Mystery* (1956) presents a compelling cinematic scene of artistic creation, unfolding largely as a series of anonymous lines that extend along the surface of the screen without forecasting where they are going. André Bazin suggested that the film attested to the continuous *life* of duration: 'Each of Picasso's strokes is a creation that leads to further creation', he writes, 'not as a cause leads to an effect, but as one living thing engenders another'. Confronted by the 'pure waiting and uncertainty' with which Clouzot's work presents us, we are led to conclude that 'only film could make us see duration itself'.⁶⁶ Seen in retrospect, however, some of the most telling moments in the film are instances of *discontinuity*, such as the moment that arises when Picasso has finished one work and suggests making another, even while Clouzot tells him that he has no more than five minutes of film stock left to shoot with. Their exchange is captured by a different camera than the one that has guided our looking thus far: suddenly the men themselves, rather than the emergent strokes and works, are pictured onscreen, and they speak too of the hiatus. What will Picasso do with this

65 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 100.

66 André Bazin, 'A Bergsonian film: *The Picasso Mystery*', trans. Bert Cardullo, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2001), pp. 2, 4.

small interval of available reel time? ‘We will see, it will be a surprise’, he promises, while Clouzot retorts with a threatened interruption of his own: ‘Just remember. If anything at all happens, you stop, and I’ll stop.’ What follows is a series of cuts back and forth between painter, canvas, director, camera and footage counter, the pace and direction differing sharply from the openness through which Picasso’s works otherwise gain form onscreen. It is as though the film cannot capture the continuity of its own happening in time.

It is precisely this limit – the point at which happening *in* film stumbles over the happening *of* film – that I have sought to engage by working ethnographically in the space and time of cinematic production. I have tracked back and forth here between emergent scenes of becoming in a pair of popular Indian films and the emergent situations from which they arise. The notion of ‘reel time’ that has oriented these scenes and situations calls our attention to the durative horizon of creative expression through which film gains its capacity – as Bazin has it – to reveal duration itself. We may therefore find a way here of grappling with a temporal conundrum that has haunted cinema almost since its inception in the early twentieth century: rolling film’s staccato presentation of an only apparently continuous reality. ‘Real time’ in cinema can only be illusory, many critics have insisted.⁶⁷ We may find, however, that this is the case only insofar as one begins one’s critical work with the ‘mummified’ body of film rather than the living process of its ‘embalmmnt’. From the standpoint of this process, film loses the clarity of its form as a fixed reel of discontinuous images, coming to appear instead as a ‘way station’ in the flux of being: a temporary point of affective resonance between the being of a maker, that of a milieu of filmmaking, and that of a film viewer.⁶⁸ Zeno’s paradox, at least in respect to cinema, finds a means of resolution here.

It is as an ethnographer that I have tried to convey the temporal texture of such experience; I too have sought fleeting resonance in time with a flux of circumstance other than my own. The disposition to time at work in this essay is therefore rather different from the orientation of certain other recent calls for more production ethnography. ‘In screen production cultures’, John Caldwell writes, for example, ‘human behaviours and personal disclosures are systematically choreographed and preemptively staged for public analysis.’⁶⁹ The difference in our respective conclusions may express differences of empirical setting, conceptual predilection or modes of ethnographic attention. In any case, it is the sense that nothing *happens* in a time of encounter – be that the encounter of filmmaker with profilmic world, or the encounter of ethnographer with a world of filmmaking – that I have sought to counter here. Through these glimpses of one director becoming otherwise – becoming character, becoming camera, becoming image, becoming world – we may glimpse how the present may be lived as a creative horizon of emergence. And as films and filmmakers alike gain unanticipated forms, the historical ontology of the cinematic image resurfaces as a historical ontology of the contemporary

67 On the ‘allure... of a mobility that is, in film, quite simply not there’, see Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 205.

68 On ‘way stations’ along an unfolding line of continuous passage, see Tim Ingold, *Lines: a Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007).

69 John Caldwell, ‘Screen studies and industrial “theorizing”’, *Screen*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2009), pp. 167–79.

70 On the metacinematic quality of contemporary life and its ethical horizons in rural south India, see my 'Cinema in the countryside: Tamil cinema and the remaking of rural life', in Velayutham (ed.), *Tamil Cinema*, pp. 124–38. On cinema and a 'livable' world, see Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze*, pp. 78–93.

self. Examining the making of cinema, we ultimately confront the cinematic nature of the present as an *ethical* question: how best to live in a world become film?⁷⁰ In attending to this time as a horizon of creative perception, action, or affection, we may come to appreciate further not only the cultural conditions of contemporary life, but also the arts of existence best suited to bending them.

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