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## What constitutes a cinematic event?

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## What constitutes a cinematic event?

This paper takes as its inspiration Catherine Wheatley's talk last year about the role of animals in Philip Gröning's documentary, *Die große Stille/Into Great Silence* (France/Switzerland/Germany, 2005). In brief, Wheatley argued that we tend to overlook animals and their role in the world in favour of human figures. At the time I suggested that when we see the cattle in the film, we cannot also underestimate many other of the details nominally in the film's background and which are fundamental to our understanding of the film – details such as grass and/or an archway. I'd like to think this issue through, then, by asking what constitutes a cinematic event.

For this reason, I shall in this paper look at both Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou's conceptions of the event and ask the question: what constitutes a cinematic event? I shall also draw upon theories of the event, of quasi-causes, and of fractals from contemporary physics to negotiate further this question, arguing that cinematic events perhaps lie somewhere between Badiou and Deleuze's thought, in that every moment in cinema might constitute an event, be they seemingly 'empty' or 'full' moments.

In *The Fold*, Deleuze addresses directly the nature of events. He says that '[a]n event does not just mean that "a man has been run over." The Great pyramid is an event, and its duration for a period of one hour, thirty minutes, five minutes... a passage of Nature, of God, or a view of God... Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes'<sup>1</sup>. In other words, for Deleuze the event is what in everyday life

<sup>1</sup> G. Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley, London & New York 2006, s. 86.

we might call an object: something with extension (it can be located in space), with properties (such as 'height, intensity, timbre of a sound, a tint, a value, a saturation of colour'), and which is 'individual' (in that it possesses novelty, or difference, not just from other things, but from the 'everything,' or chaos, that subtends it)<sup>2</sup>. If the totality of all things is (a) chaos, then the event is an object, or a thing, or a perception, but not a static object, thing, or perception; rather the event is always becoming, or, as Deleuze puts it, '[e]vents are fluvia'<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, events are 'eternal objects, or "ingressions"<sup>4</sup>. 'Eternal objects' are not meant here to signify stable, unchanging things that last forever. Rather, 'eternal objects are pure Possibilities that are realised in fluvia, but also pure Virtualities that are actualised in prehensions'<sup>5</sup>. That is, events emerge from the chaos that is the 'sum of all possibles'<sup>6</sup>, as 'prehensions,' or 'individual unities'<sup>7</sup>. As such, '[e]ternal objects produce ingression in the event. Sometimes these can be Qualities, such as a colour or a sound... sometimes Figures, like the pyramid, that determine an extension; sometimes they are Things, like gold or marble'<sup>8</sup>.

This notion of 'ingression' might be equated to the notion of 'irruption.' Indeed, when Deleuze speaks of 'the irruption of impossibilities on the same stage' <sup>9</sup>as being fundamental to the (neo-Baroque) event, it seems as though he could be talking of the temporal irruptions that Tom Gunning sees as being integral to the 'cinema of attraction(s)' – one scene irrupts into another without there being an obvious logical connection between them – as well as the spatial irruptions that we might identify as being commonplace in digital cinema – suddenly a digital being that has no ontological reality irrupts on to the screen of an otherwise analogue/pro-filmic reality. This equation between 'ingression' and 'irruption' seems apt in light of Deleuze's use of the term 'impossibilities': it is not that all events produce a division in the world, or that they are 'closures'<sup>10</sup>, which is how Deleuze characterises 'classical' thought, but that they are openings, the production not of different worlds, but of differences within the same world. The event, then, is the coming into being of a perception, an object, or an entity from the 'chaos' that surrounds us all. It is the immanent production of difference, rather than the 'melt[ing] into a universal spirit or a soul of the world that could complicate all series'<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, s. 87-88.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, s. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, s. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, s. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, s. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, s. 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, s. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, s. 26.

Deleuze further explores the notion of the event in *Cinema 2*, where the concept of the event, perhaps unsurprisingly, takes on a specifically more temporal nature. Deleuze says that we as humans are ‘passing along different events, in accordance with an explicit time or a form of succession which entails that a variety of things fill the present one after another’<sup>12</sup>. If, however, we ‘plunge into an event,’ we reach an ‘empty’ time, in which ‘there is no longer a future, present, or past in succession, in accordance with the explicit passage of presents we make out’<sup>13</sup>. Instead, within the event itself, ‘there is a present of the future, a present of the present and a present of the past, all implicated in the event, all rolled up in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable’<sup>14</sup>. In other words, rather than seeing the succession of events that we might typically associate with movement-image cinema, time-image cinema takes us ‘inside’ a single event, where all of time co-exists simultaneously, and in which ‘nothing’ happens (if anything did happen, we would still be experiencing ‘time’ as a succession of events – as per ‘normal’ perception). As an aside, I understand this as being the central thrust of Damian Sutton’s consideration of the photograph in his *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time*<sup>15</sup>.

Combining these two considerations of the event from *The Fold* and *Cinema 2*, it seems that events are, for Deleuze, ‘poetic’ in that they involve the creation of perceivable unities out of chaos. Deleuze says of an event in *Cinema 2* that it is ‘no longer confused with the space which serves as its place, nor with the actual present which is passing’<sup>16</sup>. And yet, ‘inside’ the event the past, the present and the future all coexist, or are present. We can elaborate upon this via an example of what is not a cinematic event in the Deleuzian sense. Blurred images in a film suggest a confusion of objects, or a confusion of what we might now term events, with the space that surrounds them. Blurred images therefore can invite us to consider ‘space itself’ – to consider both empty and filled space as both being ontologically equal in and as, precisely, space. This consideration of ‘space itself’ does not come at the expense of time; rather it invites us to see not just specific stages of becoming, but becoming itself. That is, the confusion of figure and ground that is the blurred image forces us to acknowledge time, and to see the coexistence of different ‘sheets’ of time. As solid objects lose their weight and individuality in the blurred shot, so, too, does time lose its ‘weight’ and become ‘empty’ at these moments – since blurred images cannot drive the narrative forward, precisely because they are devoid of perceptible unities, or events. During ‘normal’ perception, then, time is contained within the event; the alternative perception that is the blurred image releases us from events, al-

<sup>12</sup> G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, London & New York 2005, s. 97.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> See: D. Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time*, Minneapolis 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

lowing us to see time and space themselves – not as defined, punctuated and indeed made invisible by, precisely, events.

Let us put aside Deleuze now and consider another interpretation of the event and how it relates to cinema. Alain Badiou differs from Deleuze in his conception of the event. *Being and Event* is a dense work in which Badiou outlines the way in which events ‘interrupt’ being<sup>17</sup>. According to Jason Barker, an event for Badiou occurs when ‘something happens which escapes thought’; it is an ‘unforeseen happening... Unlike Deleuze for whom the event as Aeon is the “pure empty form of time” – “Always already passed and eternally yet to come” – for Badiou the event marks a definite break in the situation and heralds a true phase in history’<sup>18</sup>. The event for Badiou is not the more generalised ‘coming into being’ that Deleuze describes in *The Fold* and *Cinema 2*, then, but specific events that are unthinkable – and which induce thought. In this sense, Badiou’s philosophy of the event seems to have more in common with the lay perception of ‘events’ that we might apply to cinema: it speaks of world-changing events such as alien invasions, ecological disasters, and wars. It also speaks of falling in love, and the various other ‘events’ that typically make up cinema.

The different conceptions of the event outlined here can be seen as the basis for Badiou’s contention that Deleuze is, in spite of his claims to be a philosopher of difference, a philosopher of ‘the One,’ who believes in ‘univocity,’ or a single, underlying structure to the universe<sup>19</sup>. For, if Deleuze sees the event as ‘generalised novelty,’ there is a sense in which nothing is ever truly ‘new’; all novelty exists within an a priori universe, or One. Badiou, meanwhile, understands the event as the interruption of the truly new – the previously unthinkable – into the world, meaning that his philosophy admits difference on a more fundamental level: there are truly new/different things out there (and which come in here).

Deleuze does, with Guattari, briefly address Badiou’s work on the event in *What is Philosophy?* Sketchily, Deleuze and Guattari propose that Badiou’s concept of the event, here drawn in relation to the creation of concepts in philosophy, is ‘the return, in the guise of the multiple, to an old conception of the higher philosophy’<sup>20</sup>. That is, if the event-creation of a concept is, in Badiou’s eyes, an interruption from outside rather than an event that takes place within, then philosophy, defined here as the very creation of concepts, is transcendent. That is, philosophy exists on a different plane rather than being immanent, or in the world (even if not visibly so). This, for Deleuze and Guattari, does not hold; philosophy can only exist in relation to the world, such that there is ‘not one

<sup>17</sup> A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, London 2007.

<sup>18</sup> J. Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction*, London 2002, s. 6.

<sup>19</sup> A. Badiou, *Deleuze. The Clamor of Being (Theory out of Bounds)*, trans. L. Burchill, Minneapolis 2000, s. 19-30.

<sup>20</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell, H. Tomlinson, New York 1994, s. 152.

above the other but rather one beside the other, against the other, face to face or back to back<sup>21</sup>. Deleuze and Guattari then go on to reiterate their ‘immanent’ understanding of the event as the emergence of order out of chaos: ‘The virtual is no longer the chaotic virtual but rather virtuality that has become consistent, that has become an entity formed on the plane of immanence that sections the chaos. This is what we call the Event, or the part that eludes its own actualisation in everything that happens’<sup>22</sup>. The event, then, is not the interruption itself, as seems to be Badiou’s understanding, but the relation between chaos and order, such that it ‘eludes its own actualisation in everything that happens.’

I have sympathy for both Badiou and Deleuze’s arguments, but this is in part because I would like to propose a synthesis of the two. If Deleuze is, in Badiou’s eyes, fundamentally a philosopher of the singular, and Badiou a philosopher of the plural, perhaps a ‘third’ way is to philosophise the ‘singular plural.’ I wish, therefore, to work between Badiou and Deleuze by looking at chaos theory as a model for understanding what constitutes a cinematic event. Deleuze and Guattari seldom make reference to chaos theory: they refer twice to James Gleick’s book, *Chaos* (1998), and twice to the work of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, in *What is Philosophy?*, but only in footnotes<sup>23</sup>. Deleuze mentions Prigogine and Stengers again in a footnote in *Cinema 2*<sup>24</sup>, while he also makes brief reference to them in *Negotiations*, where their work is related to Alain Resnais’ cinema<sup>25</sup>. But overall, Deleuze does not engage at any length with chaos theory, even if it does feature somewhere in his thought.

Chaos theory can be understood in terms of systems the directionality of which is irreversible as a result of entropy, which lies at the heart of the second law of thermodynamics. With regard to events in cinema, however, we should perhaps start with chaos theory’s most famous example: ‘a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking [sic.] can transform storm systems next month in New York’<sup>26</sup>. The point of this example is to suggest that the universe is not governed by a direct, linear notion of cause and effect. Note that Gleick does not suggest – as some people might interpret it – that the butterfly causes the weather in New York; he simply says that it can transform it. For, in addition to the Beijing butterfly, there are countless other butterflies, and flies, and birds, and humans, and animals, and plants, which are beating their wings, breathing, or photosynthesising, such that there is a constant flux of air in the world. It is not that the butterfly causes a tornado or some such, then; it is that the weather in New York is the result of so many simultaneous and intertwined phenomena

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, s. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, s. 225, 229, 233.

<sup>24</sup> G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2...*, s. 291.

<sup>25</sup> G. Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. M. Joughin, New York 1997.

<sup>26</sup> J. Gleick, *Chaos. Making a New Science*, New York 1998, s. 8.

that we cannot find a true, linear cause. The system is nonlinear. This is not to say that the Beijing butterfly does not have a part to play in New York's weather patterns; but it is only a quasi-cause as opposed to a cause.

Of quasi-causes, Brian Massumi writes that they are 'the condition of newness or anomaly'<sup>27</sup>. Massumi explains that '[c]lassical, linear cause pertains to the generally predictable context within which newness erupts'<sup>28</sup>. That is, classical notions of cause and effect, by being linear, are predictable, reversible, and repeatable: there is a stimulus followed by a response, an action followed by an equal reaction. Quasi-causality, meanwhile, 'is sensitive-affective [as opposed to reactive/active-passive], or creative... It expresses a global ability to sense and be affected, qualitatively, for change. It injects a measure of objective uncontrol, a margin of eventfulness, a liveliness'<sup>29</sup>.

Massumi is a noted Deleuzian, and so it is perhaps no surprise that Badiou's thoughts do not feature in his *Parables for the Virtual*, from which this definition of quasi-causes is taken. Nonetheless, the famous 'butterfly effect' from chaos theory implies that we cannot tell the cause of an event, because there is no 'single cause' as per classical physics. In a sense, quasi-causes see the linear temporality of cause and effect distributed in space (multiple/infinite quasi-causes), such that time becomes spatialised. More importantly, though, our ability to tell where or when an event begins and where or when it ends is also upended: all 'points' in space and all 'moments' in time contribute to the 'event,' such that the event is inseparable from the whole flux or change of the entire universe. The universe is in a certain sense 'fractalised.' As per the discovery of fractals in nature by *Benoît Mandelbrot*<sup>30</sup>, and from which chaos theory also draws inspiration<sup>31</sup>, space and time both become self-similar at all scales. At no matter what scale we view a fractal, it always retains the same structure. Similarly, then, the 'fullest' time is in fact as full as the 'emptiest' time, depending upon how/from where we look at it. The micro is inseparable from the macro, such that the totality of the universe is interconnected across the entire space and time of its being. With regard to events, then, they are happening everywhere and everywhen, on no matter how macro- or microscopic a scale we wish to look at them: in the driftwood beach moments of *Five Dedicated to Ozu* as much as in the fight sequences of, say, *Battle: Los Angeles*. If Deleuze argues that we can see the presence of the past, the present and the future 'within' the event, then he is, given the above argument, in certain senses correct; but only inasmuch as there are only events – even if typically we humans prioritise large-

<sup>27</sup> B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durnham–London 2002, s. 225.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> See: B. Mandelbrot, *How Long is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractal Dimensions*, „Science” vol. 156 (3775) 1967, s. 636-638.

<sup>31</sup> J. Gleick, op. cit., s. 96-103.

scale happenings, such as wars or falling in love, as the events that hold the most significance for us.

In this way, both *Battle: Los Angeles* and *Five Dedicated to Ozu* are equally full of events. We might distinguish specific mid- or human-level scales of events as the most significant, such that *Battle: Los Angeles*, with its fighting and explosions, seems the more 'event-full' film, while *Five Dedicated to Ozu* seems 'event-empty.' But really both films are equally full (and empty) of events. We might prioritise the heroics of the soldiers in *Battle: Los Angeles* as being the most important, but all that takes place onscreen is interlinked, such that the ground of the image, which typically we might ignore, has a quasi-causal role to play in the film. The quasi-causal, or what we might also term the quasi-agential, role played by the ground is made more clear in Kiarostami's movie, because 'little' happens such that the viewer spends her time considering the ground – the beach, the sea, the sky – of the image. But in both films, the ground is at work. What is true of space is also true of time: the (brief) moments of repose that *Battle: Los Angeles* offers are also playing a quasi-causal part in the film, be those minutes, seconds or fragments of seconds in duration. For, within even a fragment of a second there is, or we can understand there to be, as much significance as in an eternity.

Damian Sutton might argue that it is the very taking of the photograph, or the decision to start filming, that is the event: the two-way irruption of the camera into reality and of light into the lens constitutes the becoming of a photograph or film. But while this may be so, I have been discussing what constitutes a cinematic event, rather than what constitutes the event of cinema, or cinema-as-event. My argument has been to suggest that if we consider that all elements of the image and all moments of the film play quasi-causal roles in the events that happen on screen – explosions, fights, births and deaths – then we begin less to prioritise those events; indeed, we begin to think of cinema as not being about events per se – even if cinema is an event. The blurred image, with its empty time and confused space, exemplifies what we might term a holistic mode of viewing here: while the image is blurred, it in fact brings into focus space and time that themselves are typically 'out of focus' or invisible to us as we watch typical events unfold in films. Nonetheless, if we appreciate that those events cannot take place without the invisible whole that subtends them, then we perhaps come closer to understanding the full ecology of the cinematic image, in that not just some but all of its constituent parts are important. If we can begin to see 'whole' in this way, then perhaps we can also begin better to understand through film the way in which we are ecologically rooted in, or better with, the world.

The reference to a 'whole' would, at the last, seem to favour Deleuze over Badiou, in that it refers to an underlying unicity that Badiou sharply criticises. However, the chaos theory model is also pluralistic in that from a chaos of quasi-causes emerges a new situation that is more than the sum of its parts in that it is,

precisely, an event (in the famous example, a hurricane). In other words, we do not live in a static, singular universe; the multiverse is instead singular and plural.

To finish, I shall say that Badiou defines love as an event that fills the void<sup>32</sup>. Perhaps we can modify this by saying that to move beyond the event shows us that the void is already filled with love; that to look with love upon the void the event, the becoming conscious and making visible of what previously was unconscious and invisible. It is learning. It is wisdom.

### **What constitutes a cinematic event?**

The article concerns the question of cinematic event through the discussion of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou's different conceptions of the event. Drawing further upon theories of the event, of quasi-causes, and of fractals from contemporary physics it proposes a synthesis of the two concepts, suggesting that cinematic events perhaps lie somewhere between Badiou's and Deleuze's thought, "in that every moment in cinema might constitute an event, be they seemingly 'empty' or 'full' moments." Thus, rather than making the distinction between the singular and plural in the understanding of the event, the article offers a third way – to "philosophise the 'singular plural.'"

### **Co stwarza wydarzenie filmowe?**

Autor stawia pytanie o status wydarzenia filmowego, odwołując się do różnych koncepcji pojęcia wydarzenia wprowadzonych z dyskusji Alaina Badiou z myślą Deleuze'a. Kreśląc dalsze możliwe teorie wydarzenia, opierając je też na pojęciu fraktali zaczerpniętym ze współczesnej fizyki, proponuje ostatecznie syntezę dwóch pierwotnych konceptów, wykazując, że zdarzenie filmowe leży być może pomiędzy myślą Badiou i Deleuze'a, a „kino w każdym momencie może ustanowić wydarzenie poprzez pozornie puste lub pełne chwile”. Artykuł zamiast podtrzymywać rozróżnienie na pojedyncze i zbiorowe rozumienie wydarzenia podpowiada trzecią drogę: filozofii „pojedynczej zbiorowości”.

<sup>32</sup> A. Badiou with N. Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. P. Bush, London 2012, s. 20.