

## THE ABYSS OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS-TIME WITHIN THE CRYSTAL-IMAGE: KRZYSZTOF ZANUSSI AND WERNER HERZOG

ALEXANDRA NOEMINA CÂMPEAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** The paper undertakes to analyze the specificity of Gilles Deleuze's concept of crystal-image in two films: *The Structure of Crystal/ Struktura kryszталu* (Krzysztof Zanussi, 1969) and *Heart of Glass/ Herz aus Glas* (Werner Herzog, 1976). The crystal-image offers an insight into the amorphous abyss of consciousness, but it also represents the natural culmination of image in the history of modern cinema. Whereas in Zanussi the crystal of time depicts the figure of the visionary that sees the "self-castration" of time, the non-actor of Herzog, with a hypnotic gaze and a heart of glass, is the only one capable of seeing the inner being of a landscape.

**Keywords:** image, crystal, time, present, past, virtual.

### Introduction

Although they breathe time in a rhythm, cinema and image are never in the present; the image, like the face in its profoundness (*le visage* in French), is not presentified since its *before* and *after* coexist not in a chronological and linear expression, but in an internal time. Nevertheless, images in a film are shown at the present time, but always haunted by the memories of the past and by the possibilities of the future. As faces become time, they become death: the loss of the face (the loss of death) means that the only subjectivity within the image is time itself, *i.e.* a subjectivity which is not limited to the human: "... it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round (...) Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move,

---

\* Independent researcher; Ph.D. in Literature at Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, 2015. Published book *Strindberg and Bergman. Comparative Perspectives on the Pain of the Innocent*, Școala Ardeleană & Eikon Publishing Houses Cluj-Napoca, 2018.

live and change. (...) we are internal to time, which divides itself in two, which loses itself and discovers itself in itself, which makes the present pass and the past be preserved.”<sup>1</sup>

The cinematic image confirms that time is not our interior, but the interiority that encircles our world; moreover, the image represents a repetition of experiences always new and different. “The cinema does not only present images, it surrounds them with a world”<sup>2</sup>, a well-known statement that Deleuze sets at the beginning of his chapter about the crystal-image, claims that in each image, in every film, time is constantly changing or expanding in irrational flashbacks, reminiscences, spirals, bifurcations, fantasies, surreal juxtapositions or dream condensations. Time in modern cinema opens itself towards a thought (more like *a feeling of thought*) that stands outside subjectivity and makes the absence visible. An intriguing issue: Deleuze’s statement also postulates a special relation between an actual image and its virtual context – the crystal-image which mainly represents an “expressive-intensive symbol”<sup>3</sup>, a modulative autocatalysis. I will explain it in a few steps through two particular examples: Zanussi’s film from 1969 *The Structure of Crystal/ Struktura kryszталu* and Herzog’s film from 1976 *Heart of Glass/ Herz aus Glas*.

### Actual and virtual. Reality of the virtual

The crystalline or the inorganic<sup>4</sup> image, the union of an actual image and a virtual image to the point where they can no longer be distinguished, reveals how the direct image of time or the Proustian time appears in film, it is what Deleuze calls the real form of time, “la temporalisation de l’image”: “The direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom”<sup>5</sup>. Returning to the subject of our chapter, for Deleuze, the virtual is not the opposite of the real, but of the actual and, furthermore, concentric circles of past and present compose the crystal-image, an “imagescape”, meaning a landscape of multiple simultaneous worldviews. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press London, 1989, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Flaxman, “Introduction”, pp. 1-57 in *The Brain is the Screen. Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. by Gregory Flaxman, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze adapts the notions of “organic” and “crystalline” to his film critique from the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer – for more details, see *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* and *Formprobleme der Gotik*.

<sup>5</sup> G. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

actual image reflects a virtual image that both highlights and covers the real – a simultaneous emergence of *naissance* (the French for birth) and *connaissance* (the French for knowledge), true and false, thought and un-thought, perception and recollection, physical and mental. At first glance, Deleuze writes about two possible time-images, one with reference to the past, the other one grounded in the presentation (of the present). The crystalline regime comprises time-images related to the present, but also a second category of images: “peaks of the present and sheets of the past” which are time-images related to the past. According to Gregory Flaxman<sup>6</sup>, there are actually three types of time-images: time-images of the present, time-images of the past, and a third kind, which brings together the before and the after in a becoming instead of separating them. We believe the image-that-becomes-and-endures is a constant in Zanussi’s film, since both images and characters penetrate and co-penetrate one another invariably.

Jan (the actor Jan Myslowicz) and Marek (Andrzej Zarnecki), the main characters in Zanussi’s film *The Structure of Crystal*, two men of science, examine and exchange faces in a mirror like Alma and Elisabet in Bergman’s *Persona* and, later, walking in a cemetery, they read the following lines written on a headstone epitaph: “I was what you are. I am what you will be. Remember me so that someone might remember you.” Zanussi sets in contrast not only the clothes of the male characters, but also their states of mind. The crystal formed by the two characters in Zanussi’s film, one cloistered/ solitary, the other one quite opposite, resembles a never completed honeycomb or an amphitheater with multiple faces, labyrinthine scenes. It represents an interpersonal and interchangeable crystal within an intellectual or *cerebral* cinema that objectifies the thoughts of the protagonists. Jan dedicated his last years to the research at the state meteorological station, he has a claustrophobic and reflective existence, complaining that the contemporary human is no longer absorbed by the idea of infinity, since it became a mathematical concept. When Kawecki tells him: “You have to do something. You’re in your best years”, Jan responds that “pausing for breath” has become a way of life for him and his family. Nevertheless, his existence is like a spiral that encloses itself in a snail or, in other words, he portrays a visionary figure that sees, according to Deleuze, the division of time within the crystal of time, the self-castration of time itself: to see the division of time signifies that the world becomes a “proliferation of reflections” (Ronald Bogue), crystallizing relations and dramatic tensions. The characters of modern cinema do not act, they are not theatrical, they simply see; their narration is reclusive and ascetic, without direction or resolution.

---

<sup>6</sup> G. Flaxman, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

Therefore, Zanussi, alongside with other Polish directors like Agnieszka Holland, Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Kieślowski, is often associated with the *cinema of moral conscience*. Articulating an individual and, more importantly, a political choice, Jan belongs to this new race, he is a “pur voyant”. He doesn’t see the time itself, but the effects of time, he finds himself in the wound of time, in a image cut in two: a schizophrenic image par excellence. Deleuze writes: “It is time itself which arises in the crystal, and which is constantly recommending its dividing in two without completing it, since the indiscernible exchange is always renewed and reproduced. The direct time-image or the transcendental form of time is what we see in the crystal...”<sup>7</sup> We should also add that: “the image has to be present and past, still present and already past, at once and at the same time. If it was not already past at the same time as present, the present would never pass on. The past does not follow the present that is no longer, it coexists with the present it was.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it is often difficult to decide what image is actual and what is its reflection, taking into account that the crystalline substance of this film is doubled by a crystalline sound, a kind of a glass bell that repeatedly interrupts the so-called narration of the film, the segmented time of the narration in imaginary pieces – time after time, scene after scene... but it is also a time that connects the created images by means of memory and thoughts.

The crystal of time announces the crisis of the (traditional) action-image that lasted until 1940 – it is the title of the first book of *Cinema 1. The Action-Image*; we may consider that modern cinema consists of a crystalline network of direct time-images that emerges from the metamorphosis of the movement-image. “Each film, then, is a kind of ‘image’ made up of movement-images and time-images (an image, that is, of the cinema), but at the same time the cinema itself is an image or ‘system of crystal-images’ – in other words, an image synonymous for Deleuze with modern cinema, such that this history depends on its own imagination of history as having culminated.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, the crystal of time breaks the narration and functions like the image in a mirror, that is to say that the crystal-image contracts the object instead of dilating it. The narration in film, at the intersection of movement, montage and time, functions like a relation that speaks through filmic images (that derive from the Image in its general sense), signs and characters.

---

<sup>7</sup> G. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Andras Balint Kovacs, “The Film History of Thought”, pp. 153-170 in *The Brain is the Screen. Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, *op. cit.*

Representing, as we have seen before, our interiority, this form of time that the crystalline and pure cinema discovered is discontinuous and restores the possibility of an instant which can last forever – the eonic instant – although the character (each character has his own and different present) repeats the same words: “une fois de plus” (from *L’année dernière à Marienbad/ Last Year at Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, Alain Robbe-Grillet, belonging both to *le nouveau roman* and *la nouvelle vague*: “une fois de plus” actually means “un plus de rien”, since nothing happens); other repeated words: “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima” (*Hiroshima mon amour/ Hiroshima my Love*, Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras), “ingenting” (the Swedish for nothing in Ingmar Bergman’s films, stressed and ritualized). Repeated constantly, these opaque words disappear among the layers of the image or in the irrational machine of the memory – they represent an artifact of symbiotic imprints and impressions. In fact, Deleuze’s famous statement “the brain is the screen” refers to a cinema of the mind emerged directly from the thoughts of the characters, from their Unconscious, thoughts that are projected by a “camera-consciousness” into images in which the distinction between the real and the virtual is blurred: “The exploration of the nonchronological dimension of time became the vocation of cinema, of a cinema that demands more and more thought.”<sup>10</sup> This hyperreality of thought involves the molecular body of the film, which is similar to the chemical formula of the crystal, *i.e.* a proliferation of visions, but a body created in a liquid form according to Deleuze’s concept of the “body without organs”, a literal/ schizophrenic relationship. The body of the time-image in film recalls, according to Deleuze, the “ceremonial body”<sup>11</sup>: introducing the body into a glass cage or a crystal to the point that the visible body disappears. Thus, the time-image connects the visible-hidden-body to the unthought, the unseeable and the unsayable. Last but not least, the generic crystal also involves an ethical stake with reference to Poland’s national political perspective, combining (a twisted) social realism with moments of magic realism.

### **The crystalline substance of the heart**

In Herzog’s strange film and abstract “essay” from 1976 *Heart of Glass/ Herz aus Glas* the implied dream of cinema lies in the glacial quality of the

<sup>10</sup> Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze. Cinema and Philosophy*, The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> G. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-190. See also: “ ‘Give me a body then’ is first to mount the camera on an everyday body. The body is never in the present, it contains the before and the after, tiredness and waiting. (...) This is a time-image, the series of time. The daily attitude is what puts the before and after into the body, time into body, the body as a revealer of the deadline. The attitude of the body relates thought to time as to that outside which is infinitely further than the outside world.”

image, in its crystalline structure which is double by nature (Fr. *l'image biface, l'image mutuelle*) – the search for the alchemical red heart crystal doubled by the search of cosmic limits, universal powers: “I want to be that man who looks to the horizon and decides to set out to discover the shape of the Earth himself.”<sup>12</sup> As we have already mentioned, Deleuze argues that what the crystal-image ultimately presents is the most important operation of time: “The crystal always lives at the limit, it is itself the ‘vanishing limit between the immediate past which is already no longer and the immediate future which is not yet... [a] mobile mirror which endlessly reflects perception into recollection.”<sup>13</sup> To briefly summarize the story, in a Bavarian village in the late of 18th century, a glass-maker dies and takes to his grave the secret of his ruby glass. The loss of an origin or of a memory is similar here to the transition to industrial modernity. The glass factory owner (the actor Stefan Güttler) tries to unearth the formula and to read Mühlbeck’s brain: without this formula no one will protect him anymore from the evil of the universe; moreover, the sun and the chaos of the stars are already hurting him: “I need a glass to hold my blood or it will drain away.” The human heart represents a container for the heart of the glass. Consequently, the loss of the alchemical secret implies the loss of the body which can no longer hold the blood nor stand the light of the sun since the light of the ruby glass has vanished. Similar to the time-image and to the crystal itself, glass has a fragile, soundless and immaculate (German) soul, descending traditionally from Goethe’s theory of colors, like *another* light from beyond; at the same time, the truth that lies in the heart of glass is the only version of truth: “I’m after something that you find in great poetry. When you read a great poem, you would instantly notice that there is a deep truth in it. You don’t have to analyze the poem in academic ways and all this. You know it instantly. It passes on to you and becomes part of your inner existence, and it’s the same thing in cinema. In great moments in cinema, you are hit and struck by some sort of enlightenment – by something that illuminates you, and it’s a deep form of truth, and I call it an ecstatic truth – the ecstasy of truth. And that’s what I am after, and I am after that in documentaries and feature films.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the immutability of the glass crystal puts viewers and actors in a psychedelic trance: the metaphor of the red lake in which all the ruby glass should be thrown away refers to a

---

<sup>12</sup> Herzog on Herzog, ed. by Paul Cronin, Faber and Faber, 2002, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> G. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Werner Herzog, “Interview with Dave Davies” in *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, WHYY, Philadelphia, 28 July 2005.

dreamy consciousness or a “somnambulistic absentmindedness”<sup>15</sup> that must pass from ruin to metamorphosis, from the remnants of memory to the finished crystal when virtual becomes actual. In the same time, it is a somnambulistic or nostalgic passage into the sunset of a village, the sunset of a people, with inevitable allusions to the works of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich.

Most importantly, all actors (meaning non-actors, puppets with an estranged voice) performed under hypnosis and they were hypnotized by Herzog himself, apart from Hias (the actor Josef Bierbichler), the seer that descends from the mountain and walks into the valley below. Therefore, the gaze of the actors is liquid, unfocused and points far off into an unknowable or marble existence, outside the frame of the screen. Herzog wants to produce non-actors to play not in an anti-film, but in a nude film. All in all, these non-actors seem to embrace the sense of chaos and the blind destiny that Herzog develops not only here, but also in other films like *Aguirre, Wrath of God/Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972), *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser. Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (1974) or *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). In fact, only the visionary Hias, who resignifies the role of the blind prophet Tiresias or the chorus from the Greek tragedy, has a heart of glass since he is the only one capable of seeing the inner being of a(n indefinable) landscape – although Herzog describes himself as a non-Romantic –, a kind of hypnotized or apocalyptic crystal-image as he describes it: “I look into the distance, to the end of the world. Before the day is over, the end will come. First, time will tumble, and then the earth. The clouds will begin to race, the earth boils over; this is the sign. This is beginning of the end. The world’s edge begins to crumble... everything starts to collapse... tumbles, falls, crumbles and collapses. I look into the cataract.” According to Herzog, Hias and other specific characters from his own work, like Aguirre, Fini Straubinger, Stroszek, Kaspar Hauser, Woyzeck or Fitzcarraldo, are eccentric centers that do not fit in any pattern. In addition, looking into the cataract of time, Hias and Zanussi’s Jan, both characters outside the world, are witnessing the chaotic and ambiguous world, although they do not know what they witness – the reservoir of the virtual or, more precisely, the interstice of two kind of cinemas, two kind of in-between-time-images: the hallucinatory and the dream-like image. The crystal-image points to the residual traces of a labyrinthine and segmented time and, what is important to underline is the division or the pulverization of chronology implied by the crystalline dimension of the image –

---

<sup>15</sup> Herzog on Herzog, p. 128.

the image like the two faces of the mirror, one reflecting light, thoughtful, the other one darkened and overshadowed, one face launched into the future, the other one collapsed into the past. In the event of the cataract, the seer (“le voyant, non plus l’actant”) becomes one with the screen of thought, a material and Bergsonian connection between the body of the brain and text of the body – text as script and language of thoughts in the European post-war cinema, for example Alain Resnais and the image of thought replicated *ad infinitum*.

### The polished crystal

For Herzog, an artisan-metaphysician who conceives visions that become ideas, film is not analysis, it is the agitation of the mind. His crystal-image, shadowy, but in the same time translucent, descending from the painting of Georges de La Tour and with faces in close-ups like the ones in *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc/ The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) by Carl Theodor Dreyer, is, as Deleuze writes, the greatest in the history of cinema. Even so, the mirror in Zanussi’s film absorbs not only the actuality of the character, but also his virtuality<sup>16</sup>, undergoing a process of continual exchange, made up as we have already seen of layers of the past and peaks of present. Deleuze again: “Zanussi attempts to bring the whole cinema under the influence of these various aspects of an uncertainty principle.”<sup>17</sup> Besides, the actor is caught in a pure optical situation and he embodies a character which looks mesmerized into the abyss of the time by means of a mirror that is filmed by the lens of the camera. Finally, the mirrored lenses reveal the double crystalline appearance of the image that gives birth to a new Real beyond the actual and the virtual, but also to a renewed heart, ideal and organic, present and simultaneously absent, always making reference to a transfigured past, since the past overtook the present in modern cinema. A modern cinema, both narrative and “dysnarrative”<sup>18</sup>, creating mental images independent of any logic and in the same time searching for “the soul of the cinema” that Deleuze was interested in.

---

<sup>16</sup> As Deleuze defines it: virtual – the aspect of reality that is ideal, but nonetheless real.

<sup>17</sup> G. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> For Alain Robbe Grillet, dysnarrative does not mean the rejection of the narrative, but the suspension of the narrative and of the traditional mechanism of identification.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, Routledge, 2003.
- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press London, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, 1989.
- Werner Herzog, "Interview with Dave Davies" in *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, WHYY, Philadelphia, 28 July 2005.
- Yann Laporte, *Gilles Deleuze, L'épreuve du temps*, L'Harmattan, 2005.
- Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze. Cinema and Philosophy*, The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008, trans. by Alisa Hartz.
- Anna Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007.
- \*\*\* *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Cinema*, ed. by Ian Buchanan and Patricia McCormack, Continuum, 2008.
- \*\*\* *Gilles Deleuze: Image and Text*, ed. by Eugene W. Holland, Daniel W. Smith and Charles J. Stivale, Continuum, 2009.
- \*\*\* *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. by Paul Cronin, Faber and Faber, 2002.
- \*\*\* *The Brain is the Screen. Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. by Gregory Flaxman, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Struktura kryształu*, Director: Krzysztof Zanussi, 14 October 1969 (Poland), 74 min, Black and White.
- Herz aus Glas*, Director: Werner Herzog, 17 December 1976 (West Germany), 97 min, Color (Eastmancolor).