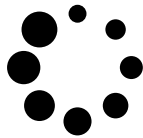


AN-ICON



Screening
the human mind:

A Deleuzian approach
to altered states
of consciousness
in cinema history.

Toward an idea of the virtual
image in the cinema (II)

by Giuseppe Previtali

Deleuze
Cinema
Temporality
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Bergman

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Screening the human mind: A Deleuzian approach to altered states of consciousness in cinema history. Toward an idea of the virtual image in the cinema (II)



by Giuseppe Previtali

Abstract

From its very origins, cinema has demonstrated a particular interest in the representation of altered states of consciousness: memories, visions, nightmares and dreams are a common feature of narrative films and usually interrupt a flow of events by inserting different temporalities in the present of the story. Following the arguments explored by Gilles Deleuze in his groundbreaking works on cinema, this essay will address the issue of how narrative cinema has represented altered states of consciousness. If in early cinema of attractions altered states were represented as physical realities intertwined with the world, classical Hollywood films progressively exorcised the disruptive potential of such images by defining a visual grammar in order to normalize them within the narrative. It will be modern cinema which will focus on this issue in depth, given its new interest in the link between the moving image and the mechanisms of thought. In this regard, the essay will in conclusion address the hallucinations experienced by Isak Borg in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, a complex and highly illuminating case of various forms of altered mental states.

[Deleuze](#)

[Cinema](#)

[Temporality](#)

[Hallucination](#)

[Bergman](#)

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Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950) begins with a shot of a young couple (Jonathan and Eve) in a car. We immediately understand that they are running from the police and they are heading towards a dock. The girl asks the man (who we will later recognize as her boyfriend) what happened and, when Jonathan starts to tell his story ("I was in my kitchen, it was about 5:00") the close-up shot of the two begins to fade out. He explains that earlier in the morning he had received a visit from the singer and actress Charlotte Inwood, who showed up at his house with a dress covered in the blood of her husband. Jonathan managed to sneak into Charlotte's house but was glimpsed by the housemaid and forced to run away. He later received a visit from two policemen, from whom he was able to escape only thanks to Eve. The description of this long sequence, which corresponds to the first fifteen minutes of the movie, would be incomplete without stressing the fact that Jonathan's tale will prove to be a lie, despite the fact that visually it adopts those criteria of clarity, legibility and transparency which were typical of classic Hollywood cinema and in which the spectator usually put his trust.

The exceptionality of this sequence and its exemplarity in showing how the temporal dimension (the sequence is a recollection of a supposed past) and the mental dimension (it is a *false* recollection of a certain character) are linked, is such that Deleuze identifies in it the first appearance of the mental image in the history of cinema. This crucial analysis, programmatically located in the last pages of *The Movement-Image*, explicitly connects the distorted evocation of the past and an altered state of consciousness. It is precisely this relationship which, questioning the omniscience of the spectator, heralds the advent of a new kind of filmic image:

The mental image not only frames the others, but transforms them by penetrating them. For this reason, one might say that Hitchcock accomplishes and brings to completion the whole of the cinema by pursuing the movement-image to its limits.¹

Altered states of consciousness in early and classical cinema

Deleuze's arguments, which will later be discussed more extensively, attempt to address the exceptionality of Hitchcock's movies in the context of classical narrative cinema. However, it is important to recognize that from its origins, cinema has continuously sought to make visible altered states of consciousness. If film theory immediately stressed the role of visual media in preserving the memory of what is absent (thus "presentifying" it),² another of the great obsessions of cinema has to do with "the aspiration to visualize what dwells in the human mind, to represent thought, to exteriorize what is internal".³ As Dagrada acutely pointed out, this urge was not limited to cinema itself, but was rather a common feature in the visual culture of the 18th and 19th centuries. Theatre, magic lantern shows and optical toys were just some of the most common examples of this interest shown in the visual externalization of mental states. Cinema, nevertheless, played a crucial role in this sense, given its specific ability to visualize reality. Long before the institutionalization of classical filmic syntax, early cinema developed a specific way of visualizing mental states. What is peculiar to this historical

1 G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 204. The use of Deleuzian concepts in film studies is an established trend and this paper follows this tradition addressing a perhaps slightly different problem. For a general understanding of this theoretical link, see: P. Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture. Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); P. Maratti, *Gilles Deleuze. Cinema and Philosophy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008); D. Angelucci, *Deleuze e i concetti del cinema* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012); D. Martin-Jones, W. Brown eds., *Deleuze and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

2 I am referring to the fundamental remarks by theoreticians such as A. Bazin, "The ontology of photographic image", in Id., *What is Cinema? Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 204): 9-16 and R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 96. Moreover, see the relevant passages in A. Boschi, *Teorie del cinema. Il periodo classico 1915-1945* (Rome: Carocci, 1998).

3 E. Dagrada, *Between the Eye and the World. The Emergence of the Point-of-View Shot* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014): 193.

period is that those states were not presented as individual and abstract perceptions, but rather as phantasmagorical apparitions, as forms of visual attraction.⁴ Hallucinations, forms of altered perceptions,⁵ apparitions of demons and other creatures were extremely common in early cinema, to such an extent that it is often difficult to differentiate clearly between these various types of altered consciousness. Besides the different ways in which these images are visually presented in early cinema,⁶ what needs to be stressed here is the fact that these forms of alteration possessed a “physical nature”, a “potential interchangeability with the real”.⁷ Consider for instance the case of *Histoire d'un crime* (Ferdinand Zecca, 1901). The film begins with the killing of a bank employee by a burglar and is built on the juxtaposition of self-contained *tableaux*, in accordance with the stylistic conventions of the time. When the burglar is arrested and taken to prison, we see him sleep; here, thanks to an explicitly theatrical solution, Zecca is able to visualize what is at the same time both a dream and a recollection of key events of the character's life. This form of *mise en abyme*, which has more or less the same function as thought balloons in comics,⁸ is typical of the period. It confirms that, while the linguistic status of these “altered images” was still unclear, early cinema already stressed the problematic and still to be analyzed relationship between the mental and the temporal dimension.

4 I use the term in the sense outlined in the influential study by T. Gunning, “The cinema of attractions: early film, its spectator and the avant-garde”, in W. Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006): 381-388.

5 Consider for example the hallucinatory drunkenness represented in *Rêve à la lune* (1905) or the nightmarish consequences of the main character's dinner in *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906).

6 For an inventory of these techniques, see E. Dagrada, *Between the Eye and the World. The Emergence of the Point-of-View Shot*: 197-210.

7 E. Dagrada, *Between the Eye and the World. The Emergence of the Point-of-View Shot*: 198. Later on, the concept is further emphasized as follows: “The objective physical quality forcefully inscribed into the continuity between subjective oneiric space and waking space characterizes all forms of representation of dreams developed by early cinema. It is not surprising, then, that in this context [...] mixing the objective and the subjective, oneiric representation simultaneously assumes both the material characteristics of a physical apparition and the supernatural characteristics of a clairvoyance, as if it constituted a magical way of communicating with somewhere else, a place that is just as real, but also supernatural”, *ibid.*: 205. Even if here the author speaks explicitly of dreams, her argument seems to be applicable to all the types of altered consciousness explored by early cinema.

8 L. Albano, *Lo schermo dei sogni. Chiavi psicoanalitiche del cinema* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004): 93. If not otherwise stated, the translations of Italian texts are always the author's.

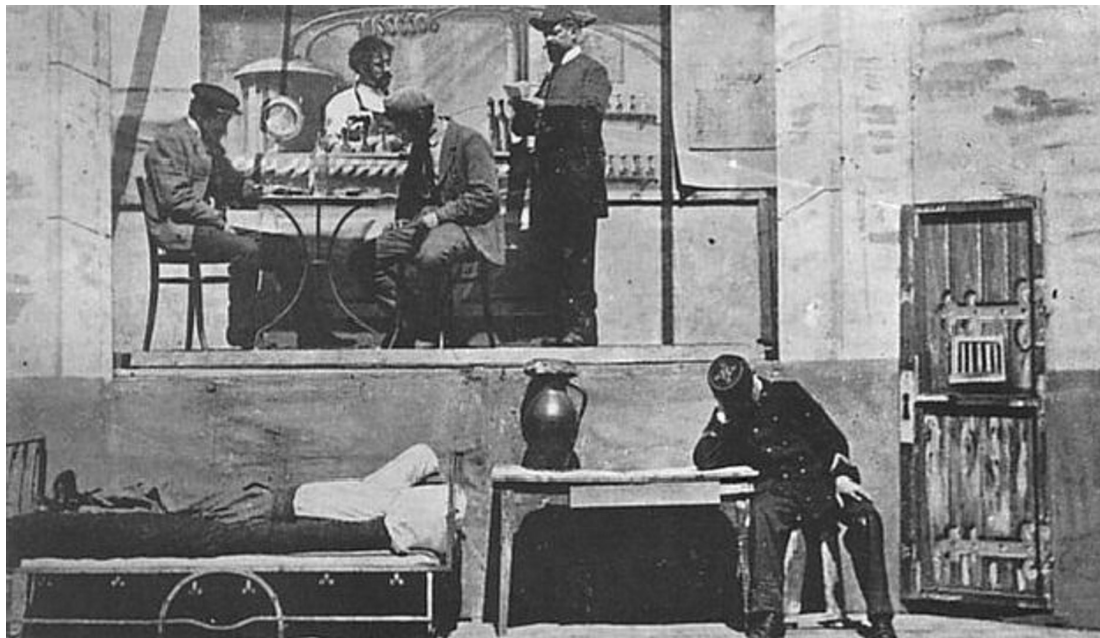


Fig. 1. Ferdinand Zecca, *Histoire d'un crime*, 1901

With the institutionalization of the film industry and its language, the various manifestations of the mental in early cinema were progressively neutralized and reduced to figures of altered temporality.⁹ The variety of mental states encountered in the cinema of attractions, and the different stylistic devices used to present them, were replaced by recurrent and recognizable linguistic elements which neutralized the subversive potential of mental images in a context in which a clear and coherent narrative was required.¹⁰ The case of *A Letter to Three Wives* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949) is emblematic in this sense. The protagonists of this sentimental drama are three women who receive, from a fourth woman, a letter stating that one of their husbands has run away with her. Haunted by doubt, each of the three gives rise to a flashback in which she remembers a specific episode of her life. The second flashback, which has as its protagonist Rita (a radio writer married to a modest but proudly intellectual teacher), is highly instructive

9 I am specifically referring to the flashback as a form of visualization of the past. On the various types of flashback, see at least: Y. Mouren, *Le flash-back* (Armand Colin: Paris, 2005); F. Centola, *Il flashback nel cinema. Il tempo riavvolto nell'eterno presente cinematografico* (Novara: UTET, 2019). For a theoretical and historical introduction to the topic, M. Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013). On the role of flashback in literary theory see the quintessential study by G. Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).
 10 It should be noted that, according to many theoreticians such as Balázs and Bluestone, the only temporality of narrative cinema is the present. On this topic, S. Ghislotti, *Film Time. Le dimensioni temporali della visione* (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2012): 54-63.

of the way in which classical cinema connects the mental and the temporal dimensions. Rita is laid on the grass, and while the camera delicately zooms in on her face, we hear her thoughts in voiceover (she obsessively repeats a couple of troubling questions: “Why couldn’t George go fishing? Why the blue suit?”). Then, a crossfade marks the beginning of the flashback, a sequence that tells the story of a highly problematic and unhappy marriage. The long flashback will then be visually presented according to the conventions of classical narrative cinema: a set of objective shots connected through the use of linear and transparent montage.

Beyond Classicism: from Hitchcock to Resnais

When confronted with the ways in which classical cinema elaborated the theme of mental images – reducing them to forms of altered temporality – Hitchcock’s exceptionality becomes even more apparent. As already mentioned, Deleuze identifies the false flashback of *Stage Fright* as a crucial moment for overcoming the movement-image. Indeed, the falseness of this sequence radically challenges the idea that memories can be objectively visualized, without the deforming effect always implicit in subjectivity. Even more problematically, in the final sequence of *Marnie* (1964), Hitchcock shows the emergence (or rather re-mergence) of a traumatic mental image of the protagonist, which she experiences not just optically but in a much more radically bodily sense. Influenced by the circumstances and as if hunted by a younger version of herself, Marnie actually re-experiences the dramatic events of her childhood. While being presented to the spectator through objective shots, these images – marked moreover by a chromatic alteration – have a material consistency for Marnie and she finds herself re-immersed in a past that she has already lived through. The discussion on the ways in which cinema reflected on the tension between the mental and the temporal dimension has shown that, while

in early cinema a variety of altered states of consciousness was represented as hallucinatory but “physical” realities, classical narrative cinema progressively institutionalized figures of temporality¹¹ within canonic filmic syntax.¹² The link between mental and temporal will become crucial in the context of so-called modern cinema,¹³ specifically because – according to Deleuze – in this cultural context cinema will finally be able to assign a central place to thought and its mechanisms: “the essence of cinema [...] has thought as its higher purpose, nothing but thought and its functioning”.¹⁴ This process will be made possible by the emergence of the category of mental image, which will on the one hand reassume and re-signify other kinds of images (such as the action-image) and on the other hand unleash the “modernist potential” inscribed in the flashback.¹⁵

The mental image is for Deleuze something profoundly related to the issue of time, but in an extremely complex and problematizing way which implies

11 More specifically, classical narrative cinema tried to visualize almost exclusively the past and it is probably no coincidence that Hitchcock was one of the few directors who tried to imagine an image in the future. I am referring here to the sequence of *Sabotage* (1936) in which the protagonist sees the water of a fish tank in the city aquarium dissolving and acting as a sort of screen on which is prefigured the brutal outcome of a bombing. It is worth noticing that in this case the future is considered as a time of pure possibility, because the imagined event will take place in a completely different way.

12 Deleuze insists on the rhetorical function of the flashback in a poignant passage of *The Time-Image*: “We know very well that the flashback is a conventional, extrinsic device: it is generally indicated by a dissolve-link, and the images that it introduces are often superimposed or meshed. It is like a sign with the words: ‘watch out! recollection’. It can, therefore, indicate, by convention, a causality which is psychological, but still analogous to a sensory-motor determinism, and, despite its circuits, only confirms the progression of a linear narration”. G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 48.

13 For a critical definition of this concept, see the still relevant remarks by G. de Vincenti, *Il concetto di modernità nel cinema* (Parma: Pratiche, 2000): 11-24.

14 G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 168.

15 M. Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History*: 189. On the same issue, Ghislotti points out: “While in the classical flashback the scenes became part of the coherent narrative of the movie, that is of a set of knowledges that helped the public to have a trustworthy idea of the story, in the case of modernist flashback this aspect falls short: the flashback often becomes the subjective vision of a fact, and is consequently a possible version of the events, but not the definitive one [...]. At the end of the film, the public is unable to have an idea of the story free of doubt and is forced to choose between this or that version of it”. S. Ghislotti, *Film Time. Le dimensioni temporali della visione*: 130-131.

the coexistence of different temporalities.¹⁶ In modern cinema, the visualization of mental states is made possible by the collision of /clash of /conflict of different temporalities that not only coexist, but can merge to the point of becoming indistinguishable:

The images have to be present and past, *still present and already past*, at once and at the same time. [...] The past does not follow the present that it is no longer, *it coexists with the present it was*.¹⁷

Take for instance a movie such as *Mirror* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975), in which the continuous oscillation between various states of consciousness (from memory to dream and beyond) would be inconceivable in the context of classical narrative cinema, especially when we consider that in the movie “there is a constant retroactive reverberation of almost every scene”.¹⁸ The memorial act of the protagonist Aleksej generates a flux of memory and visions that will involve not just his own life but also the life of his son and even collective and historical memory (both in an allusive form and through the insertion of historical visual documents).¹⁹ In this sense, *Mirror* seems to fully resonate with the Deleuzian idea of time as a topological construct, a field composed of peaks and sheets which continuously involve each other and are freely explorable. This idea becomes even more explicit when we consider the cinema of Alain Resnais, in which both the association between

16 “There is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come. Simple succession affects the present which passes, but each present coexists with a past and a future without which it would not itself pass on. It is characteristic of cinema to seize this past and this future that coexist with the present image”. G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 37 (emphasis added). The use of the term “haunted” is specifically interesting here and seems to foreshadow the arguments of J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London-New York: Routledge, 1994).

17 G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 79 (emphasis added). Also, on this point: S. Shaw, *Film Consciousness. From Phenomenology to Deleuze* (Jefferson-London: McFarland&Company, 2008): 147.

18 S. Shaw, *Film Consciousness. From Phenomenology to Deleuze* : 94.

19 T. Masoni, P. Vecchi, *Andrei Tarkovskij* (Milan: Il Castoro, 1997): 72-74.

mental and temporal,²⁰ and the conflict between various temporalities are quintessential. In his movies, the temporal oscillations do not involve issues of narrative clarity – as in classical cinema – but are rather used to visualize contradictory mental states that are always on the verge of undecidability. As pointed out by Deleuze, it is pointless to discuss Resnais' cinema dissociating the issue of time from that of mental states:

It is not difficult to show that dreams and nightmares, fantasies, hypotheses and anticipations, all forms of the imaginary, are more important than flashbacks.²¹

It is possible to identify a trend in Resnais' cinema which, from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) to *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (1968) through *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) and *Muriel* (1963), questions and problematizes the mental dimensions of perception and their link with temporality. Consider for instance the emblematic case of *Last Year in Marienbad*: the claim of the man to have met a woman the year before could have easily offered the chance for a chain of illustrative flashbacks. On the contrary, the baroque setting of the hotel in which the two characters meet triggers a series of obsessive repetitions, uncertain memories (whose are these memories? Are these facts real or just imagined?), while the continuous and uncanny immobility of the bodies generates “a space-time in which there is no before or after, past or present, here and elsewhere, real and imaginary”.²² The film is structured by the connection between ambiguous and confusing mental states, altered forms of experience that continuously merge with hallucination. Deleuze sums up the issue as follows, underlining

20 According to Ishaghpour, the great issue of Resnais' cinema is to understand “the way the mind functions”. Y. Ishaghpour, *D'une image à l'autre* (Paris: Gonthier, 1981): 182; quoted in G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 121. Shortly after, Deleuze comes back to this argument, stressing that “Resnais is always saying that he is interested only in what happens in the brain, in cerebral mechanisms – monstrous, chaotic or creative mechanisms”, *Ibid.*: 125.

21 *Ibid.*: 122.

22 L. Albano, *Lo schermo dei sogni. Chiavi psicoanalitiche del cinema*: 113-114.

once again the inextricable interweaving of times and perceptions offered by the movie:

In *Last Year in Marienbad* it is X who knew A (so A does not remember or is lying), and it is A who does not know X (so X is mistaken or playing a trick on her). Ultimately, all the three characters correspond to three different presents, but in such a way as to complicate the inexplicable instead of throwing light on it; in such a way as to bring about its existence instead of suppressing it: when X lives in a present of past, A lives in a present of future, so that the difference exudes or assumes a present of present (the third, the husband), all implicated in each other.²³

The hallucination of Isak Borg

Even if Deleuze never discussed Ingmar Bergman directly in the pages of *The Time-Image*, his cinema seems to benefit from the aforementioned theorizations, especially if compared with the new possibilities provided by virtual reality in terms of immersivity. Indeed, the presence of altered mental states is recurrent in his movies, which continuously address the link between temporality and perception. Consider for instance the hallucinatory visions of *Persona* (1966) or the nightmares that haunt the painter Johan in *Hour of the Wolf* (1968). The explicitly meta-filmic opening of this movie,²⁴ as a matter of fact, seems to suggest that for Bergman cinema is defined precisely by its specific ability to visualize altered states of consciousness. This idea becomes even more explicit (especially in connection with time) in *Wild Strawberries* (1957), in which Bergman sets out what is probably his most acute reflection on the topic. As is well-known, the protagonist is the elderly bacteriologist Isak Borg, who is about to receive his doctorate. The night before the celebration he has a terrible nightmare and decides to travel to the event by car, together with his daughter-in-law Marianne. During the trip,

²³ G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 101.

²⁴ While the initial credits are running, we see voices that we can unmistakably associate to a film set: “Quiet all! Rolling! Take! Camera... and begin!”.

Isak will experience a whole set of daydreams, hallucinations and visions which will shed a new light on his former way of life. At the end of the day, after the celebration of his career, something will be changed in him, and he will start to approach life with more joy and respect for those around him.

Wild Strawberries is a movie that reflects on memory and on the possible link between various temporalities and forms of perception; thus, the fact that it has almost no flashbacks is even more striking.²⁵ None of the sequences in which Isak experiences some altered form of consciousness can be considered flashbacks, since Isak physically takes part in them with his old man's body "almost as if he was observing the world to finally understand it".²⁶ This is true for the oneiric scene that opens the film but also for the quintessential sequence in which Isak – taking a break from the trip near the house where he used to spend the summer during his youth – has a strange and highly interesting experience. We see him sitting under a tree, watching in close-up the old and now abandoned house, while we hear his thoughts in voiceover:

Perhaps *I got a little sentimental* [...]. I don't know how it happened, but the day's clear reality dissolved into the *even clearer images of memory*, which appeared before my eyes *with the strength of a true stream of events*.²⁷

Then we see him in counter-shot and, through a crossfade, we see the old house regaining its former appearance. With a subsequent series of rapid crossfades we take part in what at first sight may be considered a flashback. Here, we see his beloved cousin Sara picking strawberries for her uncle. However, we immediately understand that what we are experiencing is not a flashback, for at least two different reasons. First of all, Isak takes part in this particular

25 The only real flashback in the film is in fact not experienced by Isak Borg but by his daughter-in-law, who confesses to the old professor an argument that she had with her husband about the child she is expecting.

26 P. Baldelli, *Cinema dell'ambiguità. Bergman e Antonioni* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1969): 95.

27 Emphasis added.

“presentification” of the past with his elderly body and is able to move in this hallucinatory experience with a certain degree of freedom; secondly, the events that Isak is seeing are not his memories, because it is immediately clear that (as a young man) he never saw what he is experiencing now (Sara and Sigfrid flirting).



Fig. 2. Ingmar Bergman, *Wild Strawberries*, 1957

Albano rightly argued that we cannot conceptualize this important sequence in terms of a flashback:

*We may speak of rêverie éveillée, of daydream or — in German — of Tagtraum, of conscious fantasy. A reverie that shares with a dream [...] the sense of living [...] what is being dreamt.*²⁸

Isak knows very well that he is experiencing an impossible past, because he addresses his young and beautiful cousin in an unmistakable way: “Sara, it’s your cousin Isak. Well, I’ve become quite old, of course, so I don’t look the same. But you, you haven’t changed at all”.

28 L. Albano, *Lo schermo dei sogni. Chiavi psicoanalitiche del cinema*: 76. On this point, see also: R. Campari, *Film della memoria. Mondi perduti, ricordati e sognati* (Venice: Marsilio, 2005):16, 22-28.

In this passage, we are confronted with a configuration of temporalities that is far more complex of those addressed above: it is a sort of double temporality because the present of the old Isak overlaps with a past that is – moreover – nonfactual, but rather seeped in the perceptions, regrets and hopes of the young Isak. This conflictual combination of temporalities seems to resonate perfectly with a crucial passage by Metz:

Memory is in effect the only vision [...] that posits its object as *simultaneously real and imaginary*, that is, *real in the past and imaginary in the present*.²⁹

What Isak sees really happened, but the way in which he experiences it is hallucinatory and gives the spectator no reassurance about the fact that it happened *in that way*. It is worth noticing here that Deleuze actually theorized this kind of situation, even without referring to Bergman: “the present is the actual image *and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image*, the image in a mirror”.³⁰

Finally, it seems important to notice that, despite his being immersed in an altered perception in which he can more or less freely move, Isak has no possibility of interacting with it. He “stands before the theatre of his life as a spectator-voyeur, terribly attracted, morbidly intrigued, but never seen, in complete isolation”.³¹ Both the dialogue between Isak and Sara and the subsequent scene in which he hears her confessions after the family lunch are highly instructive in this regard. It is symptomatic, in this respect, that this long sequence ends precisely when Sara moves to the garden to meet with the Isak of the past. The perception of the old Isak grants him the possibility to experience a time that he never lived and probably only imagined but

29 C. Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): 96 (emphasis added).

30 G. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*: 79 (emphasis added). It is worth noticing that the situation that Deleuze imagines (the simultaneous presence of past and present within a *mirror image*) is explicitly visualized in *Wild Strawberries*, during a subsequent passage in which the old Isak sees himself reflected in a mirror held by a young Sara.

31 L. Albano, “Il posto delle fragole”, in A. Costa ed., *Ingmar Bergman* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009): 77.

he is at the same time confronted with an insurmountable limit: he is precluded from every contact and any chance of interaction with this time that is not his own. Only in his present will he be given the chance to undo his mistakes, thanks to the apparition of a sort of double of the beloved Sara. The specific way in which Bergman approaches the representation of altered mental states, working on the dialectic between absence and presence, nostalgia and desire, seems to have more than one similarity with the contemporary form of immersivity promoted by various technological desire. In this sense, a wider archaeological account of the issue of virtuality should be developed, in order to establish a more complex theoretical framework to address this kind of images.

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