

Post-Cinema's Modes of Thought: Capturing the Animated Flows of Capital

Whatever name we may use, that a massive restructuring of space, time, and subjectivity is currently happening seems uncontroversial and the critics mentioned, and many more, are trying to theorize this larger reorganization. But what if we go somewhere other than critical theory to find these answers? My approach may be considered perverse, but I am interested in how movies and related moving image objects may be considered *thinking objects* — a term that I take from Yuri Lotman.¹ Lotman argues that intelligence may well exist elsewhere than the human mind, though Lotman's definition of intelligence is rather formal: intelligence is the capacity to transmit, create, preserve and reproduce information.² Although this is a fine definition of intelligence, Lotman overlooks the importance of energy, or affective intensity if you will.³

Although Lotman's argument may appear controversial, a parallel argument was made decades ago. Jean Epstein argued that human intelligence — sensible continuity and mathematical continuity — may be “substituted for the discontinuity intercepted by machines — the ghost of mechanical intelligence.”⁴ Epstein contends that montage, flexible duration, and varying shot scales produce new ways of understanding the world; ways that could not have been thought prior to the introduction of cinema. In this way, cinema transforms our way of thinking *by presenting us with thoughts we could never have thought*.⁵ Not only, then, do the moving image objects we call movies transmit, preserve, and reproduce information,

¹ Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I.B.Tauris), 2.

² Lotman, 2.

³ Shaviro, “Twenty Two Theses on Nature”

⁴ Jean Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, 16.

⁵ There is a much larger discussion here about how film-philosophy, especially Frampton's filmsophy, extends and concurs with these ideas exactly.

they also *create* new information, thus fulfilling Lotman’s requirement for being “thinking objects.”⁶

Two quick points before we get to these cinematic thoughts themselves. I take it as self-evident that thinking objects include feeling objects, so that we may speak not just of the thinking structures that cinematic objects produce but also the feeling structures. Similarly, since the ways in which cinematic objects transmit, preserve, reproduce, and create information and energy are tied to cinema’s potentials and affordances, I see it as axiomatic that any change in cinema — minor as well as radical — will register as new thoughts. Ends of cinema are simply beginnings of new forms of cinema.

Cinematic thoughts are necessarily expressed in cinematic forms, the expressive materials that moving images have available. Although there are many new contemporary cinematic forms, I will only deal with three here — animacies, control, and flow — forms that I consider congruent with volatility, automation, and the power of information. On a more abstract level, these three forms tie in with a new, pressing conception of time: plastic temporalities. The 2011 movie *Limitless* (Neil Burger) is a good example of post-cinema’s thought in action, disrupting boundaries between life, movement, capital, and spatio-temporal organization.

Animacies

The opening sequence of *Limitless* shows us the protagonist Eddie Morra (Bradley Cooper) about to leap of the skyscraper of his luxury condo before the camera plunges straight down, turns at a ninety degree angle and zooms through the streets of Manhattan, through car wind shields, past people on sidewalks, until the shot morphs into the image of a brain scan, that morphs into an aerial view of Manhattan that morphs into a surveillance view of Eddie Morra months earlier.

⁶ Keep in mind that while movies are made by humans, they are not *only* made by humans — cameras, lights, computers, cloth, and more are all vital aspects of movies and moving images,

This synthetic long take has been dubbed a fractal zoom. The visual effect is not unlike clicking along Google Street View, there is the same pull-zoom effect except here the shot keeps going, cutting effortlessly across space and time. The effect is clearly meant to establish the same form of acceleration that Eddie will undergo when he encounters a new wonder drug NZT-48 that accelerates his IQ and enables him to not only be a successful fiction writer but also a successful business man. Unlike the *Flowers For Algernon* redemption-style narrative structure of the novel, *The Dark Fields* by Alan Glynn, *Limitless* expresses a no-holds-barred economic accelerationst stance: Eddie stays on NZT-48 at the end of the movie and there is no limit to his success: financial as well as personal.

This opening sequence reconfigures indexicality and reproduction. No longer grounded in profilmic reality or even in “perceptual realism,”⁷ these post-cinematic images are grounded in movement. In fact, the opening shows us how the movie camera is obsolete; we only retain the term out of nostalgia and convenience. Today’s moving images are increasingly produced *ex nihilo* in digital workflows and the relationship between profilmic reality and the resulting cinematic image is loser than ever — discorrelated in Shane Denson’s terminology.⁸ Although discorrelated these images are still vital, are still manifestations of movements, even if these movements are increasingly nonhuman.

This animating impulse is evident both in formal and technological terms with digitally animated shots, but also the logic of animation, that life is a matter of movement, and (post-)cinema is part of connecting, disrupting, inverting, and perpetuating contemporary life.⁹ In fact, movement is the predominant way that our bodies are connected to the screen.

⁷ Stephen Prince, “True Lies”

⁸ Shane Denson, “Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect,” in Denson and Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016). Web. <<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/2-5-denson/>>. ISBN 978-0-9931996-2-2 (online)

⁹ Marie-Luise Angerer, *Ecology of Affect*

Animation is therefore one of the predominant forms of contemporary audiovisual culture, both in Manovich's or Cholodenko's senses of the word.¹⁰

How might we understand animation? Animation is usually understood as as “the general process of activating or giving life to inert matter”¹¹ as Sianne Ngai phrases it. A little closer to my concerns here, Scott Bukatman points to “the transfer of energy from animator to animated,”¹² a transfer that I would like to extend to the viewer of the animated as well. Animation thus disturbs the distinction between animate and inanimate, a process Mel Chen refers to as animacy: “a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness”.¹³

While we might not be entirely used to think of moving images as having qualities of agency and awareness, we should think of it the agency of images along the lines of actants in Bruno Latour's translation schema¹⁴ or for that matter the radical mediation proposed by Richard Grusin as “the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world.”¹⁵ There are clear echoes of Casetti's use of Simondon here.

Limitless as a thinking object allows us a way to think about the distributed agency of contemporary society: the nonhuman world is show to be as animate, as volatile, as any human part and in this way shows the ways in which the nonhuman and the human are

¹⁰ Manovich argues in *Language of New Media* that cinema is now a subset of animation, something that runs parallel to Cholodenko's argument in *Illusion of Life*. Both these arguments find a logical extension both in Bukatman's *Poetics of Slumberland* but also Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*.

¹¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (), 92.

¹² Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland* (), loc 709.

¹³ Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 2012, loc 136.

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

¹⁵ Richard Grusin, “Radical Mediation” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2015), 137-138.

connected through intricate agencies and processes, where, as Marie-Luise Angerer argues, “the relation between human and non-human as a moment of intra-active reversal, an intra-active inversion in which sensation, experience, and perception interest, diverge, ally themselves, or also do *not* meet.”¹⁶ We all move within an ecology of affective individuation, to synthesize Grusin and Angerer, and this movement, this social kinesthetics, is constantly both amplified (Bukatman would say animated) and compressed. This brings us to how animation is captured.

Capture

The limitless, fractal zooms appear effortless to us; despite the somewhat pulling movement of the shots, they display no weight. They are free from “gravity’s dull lure;” exhibiting a liberation from conventional constraints, as Scott Bukatman would argue.¹⁷ The camera goes everywhere and anywhere and we go with it, delighted by its unrestrained movement. Yet this unrestrained movement comes from the complex interplay of cinematographer, animators, motion tracking, and morph editing.¹⁸ All this complex tangle of labor is obfuscated by the animating force of the shots, their sheer production of delight and weightlessness.

Vivian Sobchack terms such obfuscation the invisible labor of animation, where “the viewer’s knowledge of its very laborious production [is] sublimated in the pleasure of ‘magical thinking’.”¹⁹ The free-ranging camera conquers both space and time, morphs space

¹⁶ Angerer, *Ecology of Affect*, 26. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), xii.

¹⁸ “Fractal zooms and other side effects in *Limitless*” <<https://www.fxguide.com/featured/fractal-zooms-and-other-side-effects-in-limitless-2/>> and “Infinite Zoom Lens: How the Opening Scene of 'Limitless' Was Created” <https://www.techhive.com/article/223108/limitless_infinite_zoom.html>

¹⁹ Vivian Sobchack, “Animation and automation, or, the incredible effortfulness of being.” *Screen*, 50(4) (2009), 384. <http://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjp032>

and time into one weightless, seamless, exhilarating movement that produces an affective image-capture. Simultaneously, these animacies capture our attention and translate them into a particular mode of experience — our attention becomes labor becomes value becomes flexible accumulation.²⁰ This is why effortless and weightless animation is a nightmare scenario for both Sobchack and Bukatman — digital animations remove the weight of the lived body. There is another perverse connection here, in relation to Mary Ann Doane's reference to Sloterdijk's spheres, because for Sloterdijk individuals are bubbles. Bubbles are also weightless, but they refer to a certain effect of market forces as well. Indeed, Eddie Moran can be seen as a kind of bubble in the way he has a meteoric rise to the top.

Limitless, then, seems to be making what amounts of an accelerationist argument in Nick Land's sense: we will accelerate beyond the limits of the state and human capacities into an unfettered future of algorithmic trading and derivatives finance. The camera is unfettered, set loose by digital animacies, and even on a diegetic level Eddie Morra escapes capture by somehow circumventing the negative effects of NZT-48.²¹

As a thinking object, *Limitless*' animacies capture an ethos of endless growth that will break down boundaries and limitations. Everything accelerates beyond limits and it is glorious. The only problem, as Eddie discovers, is that if he does not keep moving forward, he would go crazy. The notion of sharks in suits to describe investment bankers seems almost too obvious here, but the camera takes on a very similar role through its expansive movements.²² Scale comes in here again in the movements of the camera as shot scales constantly change and morph.

²⁰ I suppose I'm arguing for some form of post-cinematic mode of production, following Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*.

²¹ This evasion becomes even more evident in the transmedia extension of the *Limitless* tv show, where Morra is now a senator with an antidote to NZT-48.

²² The argument here is akin to McCosker and Pisters' camera consciousness — the camera movements produce a particular mode of thought.

Flows

As Shaviro showed in *Post-Cinematic Affect*, we currently live in a “space of flows,” following Manuel Castells outline.²³ This flow-space is relational, defined by information flows, which clearly connects to Mason’s notion of the power of information — the power of information is the power to define actionable space.²⁴ Evident in the many zoom shots that conquers space, *Limitless* has a similar flow-space defined more by relations than positions. But *Limitless* pushes this space further and suggests a new temporal form as well — a relational flow-time not contingent on fixed positions of past, present, or future.

One instance of relational flow-time is the morph montage sequence of Eddie improving himself. On the one hand a recognizable montage sequence, the shifts in spacetime are done in one synthetic long take, morphing distinct temporal moments into one unified experience.²⁵ Time is reorganized visually according to an intensive logic rather than an extensive. That is to say, time becomes post-continuous, interested in immediate impact rather than following conventional temporal logic.

Such a logic is entirely congruent with the current logic of capitalism that Jeffrey Nealon identifies in *Post-Postmodernism*: “no longer primarily ‘extensive’ (seeking new markets, new raw materials, untapped resources), but rather has become ‘intensive.’”²⁶ New technologies, new forms are developed to “deepen and saturate” the affective modulations of post-cinematic works. This is a change without change; known components are intensified, made more abundant but with no other apparent updates. The future becomes a function of the present and ceases to be dangerous.²⁷ Of course, that is exactly the way Eddie begins to

²³ Shaviro, 36.

²⁴ Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*.

²⁵ A similar morph montage is evident in Joseph Kahn’s *Detention*.

²⁶ Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 26.

²⁷ Cf. Whitehead.

make money: trading in futures. A recognizable, controllable, and predictable future is pulled into the present as profit. Eddie's entire mode of working is precisely to recognize the future that will happen, thereby converting potential or virtual futures into actual presents as commodities. Time, for Eddie and for *Limitless* in general, becomes plastic.

Plastic Temporalities

Something is happening to time here that I haven't had time to talk about.

Increasingly, in our post-cinematic ecology, time is becoming unruly. Carol Vernallis describes digital visual media as precisely unruly because they exist in a swirl of acceleration and global flows of capital.²⁸ For *Limitless*, the future is a derivative of the present: immediate impact of a recognizable pattern.

Another way of saying this is to argue that time is plastic, borrowing the concept from Catherine Malabou's work on plasticity. For Malabou, plasticity is what receives form, gives form, and explodes form.²⁹ Digital image technologies allow for new modulations of time, but these modulations are not defined by external relations. This is not Deleuze's movement-image, where time is indirectly represented through movement and action, nor is it time-image, where we get a direct representation of duration. We are instead faced with a morph-image where things change yet do not change.

²⁸ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford University Press), 3.

²⁹ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.