

Life, Movement, and the Fabulation of the Event

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Introduction

It takes only a little first-hand knowledge of Bergson's texts to enable one to move beyond the stereotypical interpretation of Bergsonian vitalism as a notion regarding some mysterious substance or force animating all living matter. His theory of the *élan vital* has little of the *anima sensitiva*, *archeus*, *entelechy*, or vital fluid of classical vitalisms. This is a critical vitalism focused on life as a thesis concerning time (life is continual change and innovation) as well as an explanatory principle in general for all the life sciences. In respect to the latter, its unique contribution to the philosophy of biology of its day was that it was explanatory in a non-reductive manner, concerning itself with *meaningful* explanation rather than *causal* explanation: Bergson wanted to give biology 'the very wide meaning it should have', so that we stay within the domain of the living when attempting to explain life.¹ This *hermeneutical* thesis leads to an anti-mechanistic approach cautioning us against excessive objectivism in biology. Indeed, his *Creative Evolution* simply describes vitalism as '...a sort of label affixed to our ignorance [as to the true cause of evolution], so as to remind us of this occasionally....' He also adds that it is the mechanistic interpretation of the development of life, such as the neo-Darwinian one, that '...invites us to ignore that ignorance'.²

But there is more to add to this retreat from substance-vitalisms. Amongst the many meanings of the *élan*, what stands out from Bergson's last major work, *The Two Sources of*

¹ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame Press, 1977), p.101, translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter from *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932). Henceforth in notes TSMR.

² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (London, Macmillan, 1911), p.44, translated by Arthur Mitchell from *L'Evolution créatrice* (1907).

Morality and Religion, is its quality as an obstacle to totalising explanation: it stands for the intractability of any complete ‘physico-chemical explanation of life’, for the ‘inadequacy of Darwinism’, the ‘mysterious character of the operation of life’, and finally for ‘what is still unknown’ in our philosophy of life.³ Here Bergson’s *élan* seems to be an *epistemological* corrective. Indeed, Richard Green goes even further, citing the *élan* as an idea that was never intended ‘to explain anything; he [Bergson] merely wanted this poetic expression to mark that about living things which could not be understood in mechanistic (or in finalistic terms)’.⁴ From this approach, it could be argued that Bergson’s vitalism has transformed what was (and perhaps still is) an inexplicable and inexpressible force into a principle of inexplicability and ineffability.

From hermeneutical thesis to epistemological corrective to poetic expression: in such ways one can read Bergsonian vitalism as a philosophy concerning the *representation* of life as much as being one directly about life. In what follows, I’ll be complicating this picture by explaining the origin of our ‘*representation* of life’ in Bergsonian and evolutionary terms, to wit, through his concept of the fabulation of the living event. This is Bergson’s evolutionary epistemology applied to the case of the living – how we perceive movement *as* something life-like, and why we do so. As a type of ‘seeing as’, the fabulation of life is a form of *mediation*, and it is the notion of mediation that will also direct the course of this analysis. Hence, another aim of this essay is to explore a form of mediation, a fabulation of the living event with the concrete example of a film, namely James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997).

Too often, no doubt, films are employed by philosophers merely to *illustrate* a philosophical issue. The challenge for both philosophers and film-theorists has always been

³ TSMR, pp.112, 113, 114, 116.

⁴ Richard Green, *The Thwarting of Laplace’s Demon: Arguments against the Mechanistic World-view* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p.170.

to imagine how film (or perhaps any visual art) *itself* can philosophise without reducing it to textual forms of philosophy. We hope to attempt just that by interrogating the Bergsonian fabulation of the living via a *cinematic event*. Significantly, films (especially disaster films) give us examples of the fabulation of the living as an event that both *illustrate* philosophical views like these as well as *reform* these views in what I deem to be a type of truly filmic philosophy. They don't just reflect philosophy like a mirror held up to its own narcissism, they also refract it and mediate it through its own ideas. Film thinks about events, in its own way, to be sure, but it is still a form of philosophy no less valuable than a traditional, *textually* mediated work.

Though it connotes fabrication, fabulation is not wholly unnatural, nor unfounded: it is not *fictitious* or *purely* relative to individual whimsy. Indeed, Bergson's fabulation of events is connected to the 'paradox of fiction', to the problem of why we feel real emotions for unreal (fictitious) people and the events that befall them. The answer from Bergson is that fiction makes events (and the people involved in events) come *alive* for us, not just in make-believe, but at a very present and real (though primitive) level of our perception. And *filmed* fiction is an exemplary instance of this make-believe because it exploits one of the main conditions necessary for such a 'willing suspension of disbelief', namely *movement*. It is the moving-image, central to the art of cinema, that entices us to turn fiction into a (living) reality.

We will tackle this topic firstly by introducing Bergson's notion of fabulation (Section One). It will then connect fabulation with the idea of an event, in particular, the event of a disaster, which, for Bergson, is an essential pre-requisite for our fabulation of any set of processes into a single, living event: every event has its roots, no matter how distant, in a memory of a past, stressful process, a disaster (Section Two). Section Three will then shift into the field of film theory to discuss themes (such as that of Other Minds) that pertain both to Bergson's theory of fabulation (which is basically a theory of how our imagination sees events

as mindful personalities), and current thinking within the field, such as Gregory Currie's notion of imaginative empathy when watching films. The fourth and final section brings these ideas together through a discussion of disaster films and in particular an empirical study of a central scene from Cameron's *Titanic*. What we will find, however, is that this film not only illustrates the preceding argument but also adapts it through its own filmic reflection, such that we will have to reform our ideas thus far.

Section One: Bergsonian Fabulation

In Bergson's account from *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, the concept of 'fabulation' concerns the primitive state of mind in us all. It is a 'virtual instinct'⁵ that works by creating rudimentary forms of religion (such as animatism and animism),⁶ as well as relating us to the world as such, by anthropomorphising its processes and activities as events and actions, by creating other personalities, other spirits, in a phrase, 'Other Minds'. It is imprecise to think of fabulation as a species of imagination, still less a form of play, simulation, or pretence, for it is far more primitive than all of these and seems to lie at their source.⁷ Fabulation has precise sociobiological origins and until those origins are fathomed, until its source is analysed, we will not see beyond the general similarities with other faculties that tempt us to confuse it with them.⁸

That said, while fabulation is this quite precise tool for Bergson, what is of interest for us is how its origins are linked to representation *per se* and especially in the notion of disturbance, shock or accident being its stimulus. With fabulation, Bergson tells us, we are dealing with 'the reactions of man to his perception of things, of events, of the universe in

⁵ TSMR, p.110.

⁶ There are *four* stages to Fabulation in the construction of animatism, animism, theism (be it polytheism or monotheism), and finally pantheism. However, we will not be interested in pursuing the religious argument here.

⁷ TSMR, p.107. TSMR, p.195: fabulation is another faculty, not a variation on general theme.

⁸ I won't, in part because I can't, vouch for the originality of Bergson's theological and sociological analyses vis-à-vis the origins of religion. His interest – and mine – is philosophical.

general'.⁹ So clearly, Bergson's discussion of fabulation concerns more than just religion, for this faculty lies at the origin of fiction and a good deal of our more creative representations of the world – he mentions children's play, writing, theatre, and hero-worship in quick succession.¹⁰

There are four stages of fabulation (animatism, animism, theism, and pantheism), that can also be seen as four forms of *mediation*, four forms of creative representation or 'seeing as'. The second form is most interesting as a differential mediation marked by the shift from animatism to animism, the incursion of a dualism in our interpretation of the world, moving us from a vision of the entire universe as animate to one which divides the universe into that which is animated (with spirits) and that which is inanimate. What spurs this first dissociation in fabulation is what Bergson regards as the ultimate disaster for the mind: *the representation of its death*. The evolution of intelligence brings with it the double-edged sword of the foresight of death.¹¹ Intelligence can thereby lead to a 'disturbance of life' and the 'intellectual representation which thus restores the balance to nature's advantage is of a *religious order*', concerning life and death.¹² The traumatic representation of death (and its depressive effects on our animal will to live) must be dampened by the formation of quasi-hallucinations, fictions, myths, and ultimately the whole panoply of religious symbolism which, at source, is a supplement from nature to compensate for the effects of this shock to thought. Myth,

⁹ TSMR, p.162.

¹⁰ TSMR, p.108: that said, all these other forms of representation come back to fabulation in its religious origins. Bergson's investigation foreshadows a type of structural anthropology: by studying the *structure* of myths and myth-making without prejudice, (TSMR, pp.108-9) that is, by taking their content seriously, Bergson hopes to see what function they perform. He is thus critical of Levy-Bruhl's idea that primitive mentality is unique to primitives: the human mind works the same throughout the population, but on different material. (TSMR, pp.103, 104) There is the same 'psychological origin of superstition' for all.

¹¹ TSMR, p.204 man is 'alone in knowing that he must die'.

¹² TSMR, p.129:

understood in the broadest terms possible, is a refinement of a proto-religious faculty of mind to animate nature with intentions and actions.¹³

So, there is the shock generated by an intelligent representation (the vision of death), and there is the reply to that shock, which is also generated as a representation, this time of a spiritual world that embodies the promise of *survival* post-mortem. Our intelligence goes beyond its original function by abstracting death from the particular (certain others) to the general (everyone, including itself). In turning its reflective power onto itself, it interferes with its own infinite vision and purpose (to live), refracting it (through this scene of deadly finitude) such that a distorted view of the infinite is generated: the fantasy of *survival*. Death refracts or mediates life into an image *of* life or sur-vival, a kind of super-life or meta-life. This image *of* life is a spectre that comes in various forms: animatist force, animist spirit, theist person, each one all the more individuated, more integrated, as the felt experience of our body is superseded by its visual image: I quote:

For contemporary science the body is essentially what it is to the touch; ... the visual image of it would in that case be a phenomenon whose variation we must constantly rectify by recourse to the tactile image.... But the immediate impression is nothing of the kind. An unwary mind will put the visual and the tactile image in the same category, will attribute to them the same reality, and will assume them to be relatively independent of one another. The 'primitive' man has only to stoop over a pool to see his body just as it really appears, detached from the tactile body.¹⁴

So this spirit-life is facilitated in part by Bergson's own *mirror-stage*, whereby we see our reflection in water, a false, whole (visual) image that we dissociate from a felt (tactile) image. But what forces the dissociation is the idea of death, the image of our finitude.¹⁵

Fabulation, then, is a 'partial anthropomorphism',¹⁶ an intentionalisation and vitalisation of nature, beginning with diffused, impersonal forces,¹⁷ then crystallising those

¹³ TSMR, p.125: if not yet a full personality

¹⁴ TSMR, p.133.

¹⁵ Of course, Jacques Lacan sees the visual image in terms of a false *spatial* continuity (ego identity) where Bergson sees it as the false promise of *temporal* continuity (survival). See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan (Tavistock Publications, 1977).

forces into spirits localised in particular places (animism), and then imparting increasingly more human personality to those spirits while at the same time detaching them from the world, until we have a full-blown monotheism with a divine that transcends its creatures. Here is Bergson's depiction of this faculty in operation in the vital second phase, animism, in regard to a water spring. The meaningful action of giving water, for instance, was once a 'datum provided directly by the senses' with its 'own independent existence'. But then it became the 'spirit of the spring', localized firstly in a thing and then in a person. It is the '*persistence*' (or repetition) of this *activity* of giving water, that

set it [the action] up as the animating spirit of the spring at which we drink, whilst the spring, detached from the function which it performs...*relapse[d] the more completely into the state of a thing pure and simple.*¹⁸

So this is fabulation – somewhere near the beginning of a *centripetal* process that both de-animates matter while (eventually) animating immaterial Gods.¹⁹ The *activity* of the spring – the *giving* of water – has been extracted as an immobile idea, leaving the spring to 'relapse' into a state of inert materiality.

But now we must turn from the social and psychological function of fabulation to the aesthetic one. The so-called 'willing suspension of disbelief' in fictitious events and our empathy for fictional characters are proliferations of this biologically determined faculty, deduced, Bergson says, 'from the conditions of existence'.²⁰ When fiction moves us, the result resembles what caused the origin of fabulation in the first place: an 'incipient hallucination'.

¹⁶ TSMR, p.152.

¹⁷ TSMR, p.176.

¹⁸ TSMR, p.180, my italics.

¹⁹ TSMR, p.180. No longer ourselves being animists, we now think of this spirit as an 'an abstract idea...extracted from things by an intellectual effort,' whereas it was originally thought that this spirit *was* that action. It might be truer to say that with the 'spirit of the spring' we already have the beginnings of that extraction, and that our conception of this spirit now as merely one abstract idea amongst others, far from being an innocent description of a tenet of animism, is actually a furtherance of this extractive process (partly effected by our language of 'substance' and 'attributes').

²⁰ TSMR, p.196.

At least at its source, then, fiction is a trauma-reaction. But fabulation is important not simply because it is an interesting pathology (albeit one that is almost universal and naturally acquired), but because of Bergson's own ambivalence towards it, for whilst calling its effects 'a counterfeit of experience', or 'systematically false experience', he also asks whether 'the errors into which this tendency led are not the distortions, at the time beneficial to the species, of a truth.'²¹ In other words, we have what may well be a faculty whose symbolic expression is distorting, but the source of which is illuminating. We will see that the faculty that would so de-animate the world *as a whole* (when it moves from animatism to theism) needs only the *shock* of certain traumatic processes – disasters – to see *parts* of it again intentionally as events.

Section Two: Death, Disaster, and the Gift of Life

Leafing through the pages of *The Two Sources* on fabulation, one cannot miss the connection with trauma, especially the trauma of excess novelty, that is, novelty or difference beyond our foresight. As Bergson explains, primitively, we divide reality into that which, *in principle*, can always be foreseen (the mechanical) and that which cannot: between what we can control and what we cannot.²² In some circumstances, then, between an intention and its execution there is a gap, leaving room for accident. Fabulation, in these cases, acts as a defence against the 'margin of the unexpected between the initiative taken and the effect desired'.²³ It concerns what we have some but not total foresight over: it does not work on what we see as predictable and necessary, but only on what we cannot fully predict, neither radical novelty nor total familiarity, neither pure difference nor pure repetition, but on that *degree* of difference which exceeds our powers.

²¹ TSMR, p.110. Likewise, the original fabulation of taboos is not absurd (p.128).

²² TSMR, p.164

²³ TSMR, pp.139-40, 142.

These novelties or differences are significant, not so much for what they are in themselves – ‘earthquakes, floods, tornados’ or ‘aggression in nature’ (as Bergson puts it), as well as illness, serious accident, and, of course, ‘the greatest accident of all’, death²⁴ – as for our response to them, *how we see them*. Firstly, they are given an intentionality, for if the effect has an importance to us, if the effect has meaning for us (*our death, our injury*) then the same level of significance must be in the cause (on the basis of a primitive logic of ‘like coming from like’).²⁵ Bergson cites the example of First World War soldiers being far more fearful of bullets than of shrapnel, despite the latter being so much more deadly. The reason for this, he argues, is that we fear that which is *prima face* an *intended* effect, and whereas shrapnel may be more likely to hit us, it does so by relative accident compared to the (literal) *aim* of the rifleman. If the effect is to be our death, then we feel it should result from a malicious force rather than an indifferent one. And when there is *only* a force of nature at play (say in a lightning strike), then we animate that nature with malign will.

But what good does this do us? According to Bergson, we do it simply to have an effect ourselves, to have the possibility of effective *resistance* (at least in our imagination). That which is intended, that which is mindful and alive, can be influenced. And processes can be made into mindful events just by giving them a name. Writing of William James’ account of his experience of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Bergson argues that the naming of an event makes it the event, that is, naming it individuates it, for an ‘earthquake’ itself is simply a disparate set of processes. But with a name, we individuate the earthquake as the *cause* of these processes (rather than the set of them), and thereby, are better able to see an ‘intention pervading the act’ that may be served or thwarted.²⁶ As Bergson says: ‘the disturbances with which we have to deal, each of them entirely mechanical, combine into an Event’ with an

²⁴ TSMR, p.153, 146, 138.

²⁵ TSMR, p.145

²⁶ TSMR, pp.156, 169, 175.

elemental personality, a mind or interiority.²⁷ We turn the processes into a living Event. This ‘image’ of interiority, ‘lends to the Event a unity and an individuality which make of it a mischievous, maybe a malignant being....’²⁸ Events, therefore, have a face, so to speak, but it is one *we* impose in order to master our fate through the ascribed identity or identification of the event.

Once named and personalised, the event or events can be effected, if only by magic. Discussing the nature of ‘chance’, ‘luck’ and accident’, Bergson already sees in *these* names too an anthropomorphisation of events that allows us a possible magical influence. When the gambler at a roulette wheel makes a swift gesture with his or her hand at the point where they want the ball to fall into the wheel, this gesture is ‘a transfiguration of the will to win’.²⁹ Bergson calls it a ‘logic of the body, an extension of desire’, as seen in the war-dances of (so-called) primitives that will magically frustrate their enemies.³⁰ But these bodily comportments are in everyone – ‘a sudden shock arouses the primitive man dormant within us all’,³¹ Bergson claims.

What is central for us now is to focus on Bergson’s view that these representations of mythic, supernatural forces always start or end (even in magical thought) with a *real* trauma of accident, illness or observed death.³² They stem from ‘out-of-the-way experience’, excess novelty, or ‘sudden shock’ that paralyses our superficial psychic life.³³ In one example, Bergson writes from his own experience of a ‘vague foreboding’ of what would be known eventually as the Great War. This was an event much discussed and predicted during the forty three years after the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, but Bergson describes how, on

²⁷ ‘Evenement’ is capitalised by Bergson throughout these passages.

²⁸ TSMR, pp.157, 158. TSMR, pp.158-60: ‘events’, e.g., ‘Accidents’ are carved out of ‘the continuity of the real’ by anthropomorphisation.

²⁹ TSMR, p.141

³⁰ TSMR, p.167.

³¹ TSMR, p.176.

³² TSMR, p.144: Referring to Lévy-Bruhl

³³ TSMR, p.160.

the announcement of war with Germany in August 1914, he suddenly felt an ‘invisible presence’, as what was once only an abstract idea gradually became real. As an idea, it had remained both ‘probable and impossible’, a ‘contradictory idea’, keeping an ‘abstract character’ until the very last moment, whereupon, he had this strange ‘feeling of admiration for the smoothness of the transition from the abstract to the concrete.’³⁴

Here, finally, we come to the heart of fabulation as something more general than just ‘myth-making’, for its own source – in the traumas of illness, natural disaster, war and, pre-eminently, anticipated death – begins with disturbance, with interruption, but one that is *felt* as a shock. And the *felt* trauma, ultimately the shock of the idea of death, is what allows us to *see as*, to see x *as* y: it creates a faculty (or virtual instinct) that can see anger in the dark clouds above, spirits in water springs, God’s design in the workings of nature, and reality in fiction, including cinematic fiction. It is to refract rather than reflect. In this vein, Bergson writes the following of our primitive emotional reaction to domestic collisions, such as when we accidentally bang our leg against a table. Naturally, we blame the table. He continues:

Between the identification of the table with a person and the perception of the table as an inanimate object, there lies an intermediate representation which is neither that of a thing nor of a person; it is the image of the act accomplished by the striking or, better still, the image of the act of striking The act of striking is an element of personality, but not yet a complete personality.³⁵

To carve out events from the ‘continuity of the real’, is how fabulation is described in *The Two Sources*, but that is precisely how *all* perception is described in Bergson’s earlier, seminal, work *Matter and Memory*.³⁶ Perception is a form of fabulation: they both fragment our experience of ‘the real’, but to some degree they are also both redeemable, defragmentable (to borrow an ugly word from computing), through art and through philosophy. Only what makes

³⁴ TSMR, p.160.

³⁵ TSMR, p.125; ‘An intentional resistance, and even a vengeance, at first strike us as self-sufficient entities’.

³⁶ See Henri Bergson, *Matter Memory* (George Allen and Unwin, 1911), translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer from *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps avec l’esprit* (1896).

fabulation really interesting is that without it, without the faculty of *seeing as*, we couldn't have the art which redeems the fragmenting activity of perception! The affect, or shock to thought that generates fabulation, that refracts our vision of the real, also creates the very same reality *effects* (or 'illusions') that allows art to (in some degree, but never perfectly) defragment the real. It is this we will examine now as we move into the second half of this essay to see how film reflects and reforms Bergson's theories concerning the origins of fiction.

Section Three: Fabulation, Other Minds, and Film

We can now move on to demonstrate fabulation at work with a film. We'll have to leave aside Bergson's supposed cinephobia (which is much overstated),³⁷ because film offers too good an opportunity to see fabulation operating in the face of *disaster*. Remember that fabulation concerns fiction as well as the principle of Other Minds, going from an attribution of mind to all of nature, to an attribution of it to just a part – namely the most human (monotheism here being read as a narcissistic mirror-image of one's self). Significantly, the 'illusion or fiction of reality' in our experience of cinema has been linked to Other Minds in recent *cognitivist* approaches within film theory, in particular Gregory Curry's imagination theory of the cinematic illusion which also works on an Other Minds model.³⁸ For Currie, however, *imagination* (rather than affect or shock) has the central role and it is a cognitive one.

For Bergson, by contrast, fabulation at its source is a *felt* or affective recognition of mindfulness in *all* of nature that is slowly restricted to an image of the self (that is, humanity and its anthropomorphic God). Moreover, Bergson's is not an Empathy model of Other Minds

³⁷ Bergson himself wrote: 'As a witness to its beginnings, I realised [cinema] could suggest new things to a philosopher. It might be able to assist in the synthesis of memory, or even of the thinking process.' Georges-Michel, 'Henri Bergson nous parle au cinema', *Le Journal* (20 February, 1914), p.7, as cited in Paul Douglass, 'Bergson and Cinema: Friends or Foes?', in *The New Bergson*, edited by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.209-227: p.218.

³⁸ See Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

like Currie's, as these tend to be *associationist* whilst Bergson's model is *dissociationist*, that is, our awareness itself of the other mind (like all our awareness or consciousness) is what *remains* of the fragmentation (through disturbance) of a prior partial whole. It is a residual affect due to what was always only a *partial* individuality, an interpenetration: it is not *built up* by association or analogy between discrete individuals comparing their public behaviour (as in Currie's view) but what *remains* after dissociation.³⁹

But let's get back to films. To begin with, there are the findings of the psychologist Albert Michotte who showed experimentally that people tend to anthropomorphize films of moving dots and squares, with qualities like intention, animation, and causality.⁴⁰ A lovely example of this can be seen in Mel Brooks' Oscar-winning animated short, *The Critic* from 1963.⁴¹ James Monaco describes it as follows:

Abstract animated shapes perform on the screen as we hear the voice of Brooks, an old man, puzzle his way happily through the significance of this 'art':

'Vot da hell is dis?! Mus' be a cahtoon. Op ... Mus' be boith. Dis looks like boith. I remembeh when I was a boy in Russia ... biology. Op! It's born. Whatever it is, it's born.... Look out! Too late. It's dead already.... Vot's dis? Usher! Dis is cute. Dis is cute. Dis is nice. Vot da hell is it? Oh. I know vot it is. It's gobbage. Dat's vot it is! Two dollas I pay for a French movie, a foreign movie, and now I gotta see dis junk!'

The first shape is joined by a second, and Brooks interprets:

'Yes. Its two ...two *things* dat, dat, dat-they like each other. Sure. Lookit da sparks. Two things in love! Ya see how it got more like? – it envied the other thing so much. Could dis be the sex life of two *things*?'

The scene changes again and Brooks's old codger begins to lose interest:

'Vot is dis? Dots! Could be an eye. Could be anything! It mus' be some symbolism. I t'ink ... it's symbolic of ... junk! Uh-oh'. It's a cock-aroach! Good luck to you vit ya cock-a-roach, mister!'

As the artistic short comes to a close, the critic passes final judgment:

'I dunno much about psych'analysis, but I'd say dis is a doity pictcha!'⁴²

³⁹ To discuss the origins of this dissociated whole any further would bring us too far off into Bergsonian metaphysics.

⁴⁰ A. Michotte, *The Perception of Causality*, trans. J. R. Miles & E. Miles (Methue, 1963)

⁴¹ Mel Brooks and Ernest Pintoff, 1963.

⁴² James Monaco, *How to Read A Film* (Oxford University Press, 1981) p.309.

On the topic of cartoons, we might even say that *all* films are *animations*.⁴³ By saying they are animations, we mean that, in giving movement to still images, there is also the gift of life: animation is both giving movement and giving life. Indeed, the film theorist Richard Allen has argued that movement is vital in filmic projective illusion, or the reality effect.⁴⁴ Consider also the following passage from Colin Radford's classic essay on the paradox of fiction, or why we are moved by characters and events we know to be unreal, such as the fate of Anna Karenina. His own argument is that it is irrational, but then in a note he adds:

... A man has a genre painting. It shows a young man being slain in battle (but it is not an historical picture, that is, of the death of some particular real young man who was killed in a particular battle). He says that he finds the picture moving and we understand, even if we do not agree. But then he says that, when he looks at the picture, he feels pity, sorrow, etc., for the young man in the picture. Surely, this very odd response would be extremely puzzling? How can he feel sorry for the young man in the painting? But now suppose that the picture is a moving picture; i.e., a movie, and it tells a story. In this case we do say that we feel sorry for the young man in the film who is killed. But is there a difference between these two cases which not only explains but justifies our differing responses?⁴⁵

Radford offers no answer, but I would suggest that what adds life to this projection, what makes it plausible, is the addition of *movement*. Movement animates. Admittedly, *any* movement seen in film is literally just that, 'seen' or 'apparent movement'.⁴⁶ And in much film theory, the basis of cinema in an illusion – *apparent* movement – along with its ideological basis in Capitalist industry, has often left it seeming invidious. But one can also give a positive spin to some aspects of the illusory dimension of cinema.⁴⁷ The fabrications of fabulation, the

⁴³ Stanley Cavell and Andre Bazin notwithstanding (they've argued that cartoons are not films, so God alone knows what they would make of CGI).

⁴⁴ Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.112.

⁴⁵ Colin Radford, 'Why are we moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume XLIX, pp 67-80: p.79n3.

⁴⁶ This is a virtual instinct: so it is not incidental, as Nelson Goodman tells us, that engineers and physicians comprise a disproportionately high number of those who are unsusceptible to the phenomenon of apparent motion – the 'phi-phenomenon'; they are 'unable to *see* what they *know* is not there' [Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett 1978) p.92]. Indeed, apparent or seen movement is not universal. But do these engineers and physicians go to the movies?

⁴⁷ See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton UP, 1992), p.17: contemporary theory (most of its feminist and/or neo Marxist in approach) has focused on the essentially deceptive, illusionary, tautologically recursive, and coercive nature of the cinema, and on its psychopathological

making of consoling myths in the face of death, can equally be seen as a response to the truth of death with an attempt at making (other) further truths: out of the affect of trauma, fabulation creates.

Of course, we all suffer some ‘false consciousness’ when we sympathise with events we normally deem politically or morally reprehensible, as when in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* we want Norman to succeed in clearing up the mess after the first murder committed by his ‘mother’ and then later again in his attempt to sink the victim’s (Marion Crane’s) car. But it is the processes, physical and minute, that gain our empathy *as event*, not any ‘wicked’ character: it is his movements, as well as the cars’ and that of the changing perspective (due to the camera’s movement) that affect us. Or so Bergson would argue, I believe. Taking a Deleuzian line on this, one might say that cinematic images are *events* rather than representations, because sensation and affect are not wholly or intrinsically cognitive.⁴⁸ We will expand on the meaning of this next as we look at one disastrous event as it is represented in one film.

Section Four: Fabulation and *Titanic*

In one scene from Cameron’s *Titanic*,⁴⁹ we witness the night-time events just before the *Titanic* collides with an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Lookouts, helmsmen and engineers do their best to turn the ship from its course and we watch, with them, the final moments of the ship drawing closer to the iceberg, edging slightly to port, but nevertheless eventually hitting the obstacle.

and/or ideological functions of distorting existential experience. Such theory elaborately accounts for cinematic representation but cannot account for the originary activity of cinematic signification’.

⁴⁸ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.26-7.

⁴⁹ Four minute clip from *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) of collision with iceberg: (DVD Chapter 16): 1.33.28 to 1.37.40.

In attempting to apply some social science to this investigation, I showed this clip to a group of thirty one first level Film Studies students, *all of whom* had seen the film before. They were then asked the following question:

‘On a scale of 1-10, to what extent would you agree with the following statement (1 equalling no agreement and 10 equalling full agreement): “when watching the sequence – especially as the ship nears the iceberg – I felt myself hoping that it might miss, and/or felt myself willing it to turn in time to miss”.’

Of the thirty one responses I received back, there were eight scores of 10, three scores of 9, eleven scores of 8 and nine scores of 7, averaging out at 8.3, a statistically significant result.

Disaster films are very good at this individuation of events, especially in their early parts – steam from the volcano in *Dante’s Peak*, the portentous smoke or small flames in *The Towering Inferno*: these all work as signs of the danger to come, of an event that is looming, stalking the characters (almost like another character) as they go about their business, oblivious to the threat. According to Bergson, by anthropomorphising processes as an event we reify them and give them a personality such that we can use our will and action against them. We think we can prevent some of their effects. We can imagine all that we might do or (in a film), all that might occur or might be done to forestall the eventuality. This is why we feel we can change or hope to change the course of the Titanic, despite our knowledge of its fate. It is not that the iceberg is made human, but *the collision* with the iceberg is made into an event with intentionality – and what has intent can have that intent thwarted.

Naturally, there are many other ways to describe what is going on when we unpack the vague notion of ‘willing disbelief’ as it may be operating in this case. To begin with the most obvious, it could be that we simply *identify* with the characters and their desires. Yet it is odd that most of the characters who occupy the screen (especially with close-ups and point of view shots) during this sequence are unsympathetic, being the overconfident, arrogant

representatives of a Victorian culture that was doomed because it put too much faith in machinery and not enough in nature (the simple moral of Cameron's tale). Moreover, work by Murray Smith on optical alignment and affective allegiance complicates that traditional response, given that we are not allied with the characters we are optically aligned with in this scene.⁵⁰ One might also mention here Vivian Sobchack's use of the notion of 'reversibility' in cinematic perception. She too argues that point of view shots do not necessitate the adoption of a character's mind-set, because film-perspective is not, at heart, a first-order adoption of another's perspective but the showing *of* perspective – a second-order awareness of seeing as such:

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood.

[...] That is to say that the signs and meaning of signification and significance of vision, as they are doubly and reversibly articulated in the dialect of the film experience are constantly negotiable. ... As our embodiments differ and our situations change, so the film's activity of sign production and its meaning change for us in our differently situated activity of looking, in our different intentions towards it.⁵¹

Another alternative explanation for this illusion of reality watching the scene from *Titanic* is that the narration is one of suspense, either by proxy of the characters' situation or even directly, as in Susan Smith's notion of 'direct suspense'.⁵² Yet suspense works through not fully knowing the outcome of events, and we certainly do know the outcome of the *Titanic*'s story (that's why I find our response to it intriguing).⁵³ Nor is this a matter of anxiety in the face of an *unsure* future, or even a probable one: this is an affect created despite the future being absolutely *certain*: and unless one is to invoke exotica such as alternative

⁵⁰ See Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵¹ Sobchack 1992, pp.3-4, 305.

⁵² See Susan Smith, *Hitchcock: Suspense, Humour and Tone* (British Film Institute, 2000).

⁵³ Narrative could be said to be enjoyable in general because it *suspends* us between expectations that are both fulfilled and flouted with each new event (or as Bergson says of the event, between the probable and impossible).

universes where the film (and/or history itself) has a happier ending, the fact remains that the Titanic will sink, because, as one character tells us knowingly, it's 'made of iron'.⁵⁴ The music too contributes its own rhythm to create suspense, but again, will not on its own generate the sense of *actuality* we feel when watching the scene.

I won't go on much more, for we could engage with a host of other explanations concerning the reality effect in fiction (both filmic and general), some aggrandising, like Nelson Goodman's notion of *worldmaking*, which bears considerable comparison to Bergson's fabulation (as I will note at the end of this section), some more prosaic, such as Kendall Walton's concept of mimesis as make-believe.⁵⁵ But each of these other explanations, while relevant, are not wholly adequate, either individually or collectively. One of them, however, merits a few words. Torben Grodal's idea is that cinematic fiction directly stimulates physiological and cognitive responses hardwired into us by our evolutionary history.⁵⁶ These responses are 'innate and universal', and often sub-conscious, and it is these that generate the 'reality effect'. For example, the narrative of near disaster ('Indiana Jones is about to be crushed by a huge rolling boulder' *et cetera*), becomes a 'push-pull' machine, mobilising '...powerful mental motivational mechanisms [based in our 'special frontal brain modules'] used by humans to perform complex tasks'.⁵⁷ The reality status of an image is analysed on the basis of various physical parameters – the intensity of the image, its temporality and so on – and processed within the brain even as we devote our conscious mind to enjoying the minutiae of the narrative in isolation from the physical nature of its medium.

⁵⁴ Douglas Pye's notion of foreboding when rewatching a film won't fit either because it lacks a full analysis of the temporal differences between repeating the past (re-watching) and seeing a *present* (even only in fantasy), which is the key to my own final answer to the paradox, discovered through film.

⁵⁵ Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard UP, 1990).

⁵⁶ Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition* (Clarendon, 2000).

⁵⁷ Torben Grodal, 'Emotions, Cognitions, and Narrative Patterns in Film', in Plantinga and Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (John Hopkins UP, 1999), pp.127-145: pp.133, 144.

The problem with Grodal's approach is that 'reverse engineering' is very evident here (his explanations – like so many in cognitive science – are retrodictive rather than predictive), and we are given little indication as to *why* we are so susceptible to the reality effect, that is, why we have this faculty for proto-empathy. Another problem is *how* we are able to see these images as real, or even quasi-real, for it remains a mystery how a two dimensional phenomenon depicting a pretence of reality can convey, however fleetingly, the impression of reality. One might answer the second question, a biological issue, with biology (our brains just are able to tell the pictorial apart from the real – though Grodal denies this), but the first issue (of why we have this faculty in the first place) requires a more *psychological* answer, however rooted in biology it may also be. In other words, Grodal confuses levels, answering a psychological question with a biological mechanism rather than an psychobiological explanation. Oddly enough, the same criticism can be turned to other Classical explanations of the paradox of fiction – such as the theory of catharsis – for, while they provide a description of the emotional *function* of art (the 'how' issue), they omit an explanation of the *source* of our sensitivity to art, that is, *why* we are able to 'see as'.

Of course, the sinking of the Titanic did actually happen, which, perhaps, makes it a less than ideal choice (it might be easier to confuse fiction with fact when the fiction is *based* on fact). Yet I feel that it works well as an example *because* it is a real event that we *know has past and yet which we feel is present*. In fact, I'm not so interested in whether any belief (in fiction as fact) is present or absent, rational or irrational at all, so much as the roots of that belief if it is there. Naturally, nobody confuses art with reality and interrupts Macbeth on stage before the first murder. But there are degrees in which we have to resist that impulse to intervene, a bodily impulse perhaps. Returning to Colin Radford again, we see another illuminating point at the end of his paper that echoes Bergson's description of the gambler's gesture at the roulette wheel:

...a tennis player who sees his shot going into the net will often give a little involuntary jump to lift it over. Because he knows that this can have no effect, it is tempting to say that the jump is purely expressive. But almost anyone who has played tennis will know that this is not true.⁵⁸

Beliefs, if we must talk of them, come in degrees: we *do* try to push the ball into the roulette wheel, we *do* try to lift the tennis ball over the net, and we *do* try to get out of the way of the train arriving into the station (though without running out of the cinema, as was claimed of the audience at an early screening by the Lumiere brothers). We don't run away entirely, but the bodily desire to do so is there, if only in degrees, as in our desire to move the Titanic out of the direction of the iceberg by shifting in our seat or by pointing our shoulders in the direction it must go. A desire and logic of the body, Bergson calls it.

In other words, cinematic perception differs from and undermines our normal, everyday perception. I am shocked by the image 'of' the train approaching me, not because I believe it is a train (if I did, I would leave my seat and run), but because of the *material* impact of the image itself (so I hide my eyes). We are now habituated to such images and blasé in their presence, which has been dampened by repetition and the standardisation of film stock, *mise-en-scène*, editing, and rules of exhibition. But cinema still has the potential to shock with new images – visual ones yes, but also with sound, music, and speech;⁵⁹ unforeseeable and unthinkable images that reawaken, for a while, our sensitivity to it. But the non-referentiality of the image does not indicate its *lack* (of referent), but its own visceral immediacy, *not as an object but as an event*.⁶⁰ As Steven Shaviro puts it:

this immediacy or speed [or film] is not authenticated by any illusion of concrete or actual presence. The immediacy of cinema is always excessive: it is too strong, too insistent, to be contained by any 'metaphysics of presence'. [...] I have already been touched and altered by these sensations, even before I have had the chance to become conscious of them.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Radford, p.78.

⁵⁹ Shaviro, p.34.

⁶⁰ Shaviro, pp.36, 38.

⁶¹ Shaviro, p.46.

The image is not only specular (as Lacan and the film theorists who follow him would argue), but also tactile: as an event, it is non-corporeal, yet thereby all the more physical in its effect – it attacks our physiology, agitates our flesh.

A final point. Perhaps our ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in fiction lies not simply in the *artifice* of fabricating *fact*, but also in fabricating *time*, bringing to the image (constructed in the past) the ‘illusion of the present tense’. But this phrase, the ‘illusion of the present tense’, which James Agee used to describe Italian neo-realism in particular, may also be generalised. Hoping to change the event of the Titanic’s collision doesn’t come only from having the event live and feel, but also from making it present, reliving its present, and so reopening its future. We believe we are seeing it happen *now*, and it is from *this* temporal state of *actuality* that our paradoxical beliefs, desires, and so on, may follow. One could argue that fiction-making is, by the same token, present-making, for the present, broadly understood, is what is alive for Bergson: movement is actuality and animation (literally), for to move is one condition of being alive, that, primitively, allows us to animate things even further.⁶²

But note that, according to Gilles Deleuze, the ‘sonsigns’ and ‘opsigns’ of Italian neo-realism augur in the *time-image*, Vittorio de Sica creating purely optical situations in *Ladri di biciclette* and *Umberto D.* that fragment the rational cause and effect flow of time in the movement-image.⁶³ Is not fabulation itself of this ilk, making matter live, just as Jacques Tati’s sonsigns in *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* turn matter (sound) into a living character? Think only of the swinging kitchen door in the film’s ‘Hôtel de la Plage’ which becomes a person, a tired and bored person, no less than the waiters themselves.

⁶² Again, at least primitively and under certain pressures.

⁶³ See Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Time Image*.

So what *is* fabulation doing? Is it an individuating, an anthropomorphising, or is it also a giving of life, or even a making present? I think it is all of these. These presents are made, or rather, in fabulation, an intuition of the alien presence of another – its life and movement – is given a partial or distorted expression. A living, actual present is created in these ‘efficient presences’, as Bergson calls them. In fabulation we are moved to move other movements further and make them others’ movements, the movements *of* others (which sometimes they are). And every movement *can be animated* (the artist can see life even in a plastic bag caught in the wind),⁶⁴ only some processes – ones *in extremis* – concerning death and disaster – are commonly vitalised by all of us (at least primitively) into events. In a crisis, we are all artists.

Conclusion

And here is where we go beyond merely illustrating Bergson’s philosophy of the living event such that the experience of film can both illustrate and *reform* his ideas, adding something to a philosophy by making us think philosophically. In this way film offers itself to applied philosophy, not simply as an illustration of a philosophy of the event, but actually by making us think about events – asking us the question: ‘why do we want to move the Titanic’? These events are real for us on account of the power of film – through its moving images – to stimulate thought out of paradoxical feelings. It is an example of what creates philosophy within an ‘applied’ sphere, an experience that forces us to philosophise about our perception of the world as such.

If it seems counter-intuitive to give fabulation such primacy given its connotations of falsity and artifice, remember that fabulation is not error for Bergson, but lies in the verisimilar expression of an intuition: *qua* what is expressed, fabulation creates *static* products no doubt (myths, superstitions, fictions and so on), but *qua* source or process, that is, the *movement of*

⁶⁴ I’m referring here of course to Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999).

expression, it is dynamic (and what is dynamic for Bergson is never wholly wrong) and creative – it creates new actual events. In this respect, Bergson's aesthetics approaches that of Nelson Goodman, for whom 'fictioning' is a making of new worlds, of new actualities, rather than finding an underlying or alternative dimension to just the one world (ours): it is a pluralism of the most radical sort that remakes the world into new versions rather than merely copying it. In the chapter of *Ways of Worldmaking* entitled 'The Fabrication of Facts', Goodman writes as follows on fiction:

Fiction, then, whether written or painted or acted, applies truly neither to nothing nor to diaphanous possible worlds but, albeit metaphorically, to actual worlds. Somewhat as I have argued elsewhere that the merely possible – so far as admissible at all – lies within the actual, so we might say here again, in a different context, that the so-called possible worlds of fiction lie within actual worlds. Fiction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction. Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable ... ways.⁶⁵

The same can be said of the fabulation of (living) events: it is not an act of pure whimsy, creating nothingness (mis-representations) *ex nihilo*, but a creation of worldly entities that are subjective, and yet, as creations, real.

⁶⁵ Goodman, p.104.

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Filmography

American Beauty (Sam Mendes, USA, 1999, 122mins)

The Critic (Mel Brooks and Ernest Pintoff, USA, 1963, 4mins)

Dante's Peak (Roger Donaldson, USA, 1997, 112mins)

Ladri di biciclette (Vittorio de Sica, Italy, 1949, 93mins)

Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1960, 109mins)

Raiders of the Lost Ark (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1981, 115mins)

Titanic (James Cameron, USA, 1997, 194mins)

The Towering Inferno (Irwin Allen and John Guillermin, USA, 1974, 165mins)

Umberto D (Vittorio de Sica, Italy, 1952, 91mins)

Les Vacances de M. Hulot (Jacques Tati, France, 1953, 114mins)