

On Deleuzian Fabulation and the Problem with Story-telling

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders the use of the term story-telling in the place of fabrication with regard to Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-image* (1997b). In the English translation of *Cinema 2*, the concept of "*l'affabulation*" (p. 325), which is central to Deleuze's later-period philosophical engagements, is rendered as "story-telling" (p. xvii), and without much further explanation as to why. As such, what appears to be a simple error in translation now marks a conceptual displacement—one that has significant implications for how Deleuze's cinematic project is received, particularly in English-language scholarship where fabulation is commonly understood through its elaboration in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* (1994). By tracing the elision of fabrication in *Cinema 2*, this paper argues that what is assumed to be an absent or underdeveloped concept in Deleuzian philosophy is, in fact, already structurally operative in relation to film philosophy. The implications of this displacement are also explored through a critical engagement with Ronald Bogue's *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (2010). While Bogue's work on fabulation is central to anglophone understandings of the term, it, too, risks treating fabulation more as thematic content and less as temporal structure. This paper therefore proposes a re-reading of story-telling and/or fabulation as an interpretive delay that haunts the break between the *Cinema* books.

Keywords: affect, Bogue, Deleuze, fabulation, philosophy, story-telling

Of all the challenges that come with reading Deleuze in translation, one of the most persistent is the sense that something essential has been lost or obscured along the way. While some of these difficulties arise from the nuances of French philosophical vocabulary, others stem from deeper uncertainties about how key terms are situated within Deleuze's (still) evolving conceptual terrain. This paper focuses on one such instance: the English rendering of Deleuze's use of *fabulation*. In *Cinema 2*, translators Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta translate *fabrication* simply as "story-telling" (p. xvi). At first glance this choice seems innocuous enough, especially given their broader efforts to navigate the semantic ambiguities of terms like *récit* and *histoire*. As Tomlinson and Galeta explain, "'*récit*' is commonly translated as 'story', 'account' or even 'narrative' but is often used in conjunction with 'histoire' which is also translated as 'story', but also has the sense, 'history'. We have rendered '*récit*' as 'story' with the French word in brackets where appropriate." (p. xvii). In other cases, such as their translation of *englobant* as *encompasser*, Tomlinson and Galeta offer notes clarifying their interpretive choices, but with *fabulation*, no such explanation is provided: "The word 'fabulation' has been translated as 'story-telling'" (p. xvii). Notwithstanding, fabulation functions as a critical hinge in Deleuze's later-period philosophical work, while its apparent absence in *Cinema 2* has led many to assume the concept emerges primarily (and thus, more importantly) later on in Deleuzian philosophy, or

plays little to no (other) role in Deleuze's thinking on the cinema. As this paper will argue, however, fabulation is already structurally operative in *Cinema 2*, and its mistranslation as story-telling has contributed to a broader interpretive delay in understanding how Deleuze conceives the relation between time, image, and the powers of the false.

True to form, fabulation, like many of Deleuze's most enduring concepts, finds its philosophical origin not in Deleuze, but in Henri Bergson. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935), Bergson introduces the idea of the fabulation with regard to the difference between closed and open societies, describing it as a psychological function that generates the stories necessary for maintaining social cohesion in such a way that "We cherish or we dismiss a story which may have been found necessary for inducing or propagating a certain feeling, but religion is essentially that very feeling [...]. The mistake is to believe that it is possible to pass, by a mere process of enlargement of improvement, from the static to the dynamic, from demonstration or fabulation, even though it bears the stamp of truth, to intuition" (p. 231). Very little of Deleuze's curiosity with fabrication can be gleaned from such a context, though. For Bergson, fabulation (barely) names a compensatory or even deceptive function—a mythic detour on the way to moral intuition within religious sects and circles. Bogue even reinforces this reading, suggesting that "Fabulation, then, has as its goal the creation of hallucinatory fictions that regulate behaviour and reinforce social cohesion" (p. 16). For Deleuze, by contrast, fabulation becomes something far more generative: an aesthetic and political force of invention that reconfigures belief precisely when stable coordinates, objective knowledge, and historical truth, have penultimately broken down.

Indeed, Deleuze's emphasis on belief in *Cinema 2* emerges precisely at a point where the sensory-motor schema of the old cinema collapses. When perception and action no longer link up in the expected ways and time begins to assert itself directly, stable co-ordinates fall away completely. Objective knowledge and historical truth blur into the indeterminate terrain of what Deleuze calls these "'any-spaces-whatever' [...]. situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (p. xi). Yet, fabulation—at least in name—does not appear here, nor in the opening chapters on the crisis of the image. It enters belatedly, when Deleuze turns to the powers of the false and the "Two regimes of the image ... an organic regime and a crystalline regime" (p. 128). That fabrication is introduced in connection with falsity, rather than belief, has only expanded the interpretive delay around the role of story-telling in cinematic thought. For it is here, in between the two regimes of the image, that fabulation begins to take shape not as mere deception or narrative embellishment, but as a means of co-ordinating what is no longer objective about the image, "passing the frontier between the real and the fictional (the power of the false," as Deleuze puts it, and "the story-telling function)" (p. 153). One might also point to a more fundamental misapprehension around the word 'power' itself, whose inconsistent translation across *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* obscures its original Spinozist origins—what Antonio Negri and their translator Michael Hardt foreground in *The Savage Anomaly* (1991, p. xi-xvi). This paper will not pursue that issue directly. Suffice it to say, for Deleuze, power is perhaps best understood (or rather underestimated) through Spinoza's distinction between *potestas* and *potentia*: between externally imposed authority (*potestas*) and the immanent capacity to affect and to be affected (*potentia*).

While Bogue does engage with *Cinema 2* in their account of fabulation, their treatment is relatively brief and largely subordinated to the broader trajectory of their argument in anticipation of several unrelated close readings of Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*; Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*; Roberto Bolaño *Amulet*; Assia Djebar's *So Vast*

the Prison; and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*; none of which are films (or philosophical frameworks, for that matter). Even their analysis of the same passage where fabrication as story-telling is introduced in connection with the two regimes of the image comes *after* Bogue has established their framework through Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* For example, Bogue opens not with a rectification of *Cinema 2*, but with a 1990 interview in which Deleuze describes fabulation as an act that belongs to those who supposedly "create" a people in such "a way that links up with something in art ... or links up art to what it lacked. Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of a 'fabulation' in which a people and art both share" (qtd. in Bogue, 2010, p. 14). By repositioning a political and aesthetic definition that is thematically resonant, albeit temporally and philosophically downstream, Bogue risks framing fabrication not as a structural function emerging from the crisis of the image, but as a rhetorical motif tied to questions of collective identity and artistic invention. In doing so, Bogue potentially flattens the cinematic and temporal conditions that necessitate fabrication in *Cinema 2* as an objectifying function, especially when the emergence of a direct time-image demands its own belief in the presence of the absence of continuity, referent, and historical certainty.

I refer to fabulation here as an objectifying function for two reasons. Firstly, because fabulation steps in where objectivity, as formerly secured by the action-image, no longer holds any sway. The sensory-motor schema of classical cinema, in other words, provided a form of practical objectivity: aligning perception with action, such that the world could be grasped through the coherent sequences of cause and effect. What is seen onscreen corresponds to what is seen in the world. With the arrival of the time-image, this relationship collapses. The powers of the false emerge not as distortions of (objective) truths, but as generative forces that replace the certainty once held by the actual of the real—when what is seen onscreen no longer corresponds to what is seen in or as the world. In this sense, fabulation does not restore objectivity *to* the image, nor does it subjectify what Deleuze might otherwise apprehend actually or virtually. Fabulation reconfigures the action of story-telling as a function in the place of the old perception-affection-action schema, producing belief instead of knowledge, and story instead of fact. Deleuze captures this transition succinctly when he describes how a method of fabulation "can be developed only where the camera is constantly reaching a before or an after in the characters which constitute the real, at the very point where story-telling is set in motion" (1997b, p. 154). Again, story-telling becomes a structural necessity that emerges from the temporal disjunction of the image itself; jump cuts, false continuity, these so-called *false movements* merely exacerbate the need for fabrication.

Secondly, fabulation, or rather the very act of story-telling itself, functions not unlike a prosthetic operation within the image, generating a belief (system) not by asserting a coherent alternative world, but by inviting the viewer to fill in what the image itself lacks: continuity, coherence, and causal (meaning through) direction. In the gap left by the collapse of the sensory-motor schema, furthermore, that Deleuze observes that "Even the body is no longer exactly what moves; subject of movement or the instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer {*révélateur*} of time, it shows time through its tirednesses and waitings" (1997b, p. xi). It is through the revealing (*révélateur*) of this time that fabulation operates as a narrative intention that arises from the image's own disjunctions. Not invention in the sense of narrative fabrication or some fiction imposed from without on the viewer, but as a generative attunement to time. Fabulation reinstates belief through the story not unlike a structural proposition. The image, in this formulation, does not strictly demand a belief through its representation, but it could be said to elicit such a belief *affectively*—that is, through its very disjunctions. Fabulation therefore serves as a kind of perceptual glue, allowing the fractured

temporality of a direct time-image to persist as something more than a pure void of meaninglessness. Here, the resemblance to Sara Ahmed's notion of affective "stickiness" is uncanny, but my argument diverges from Ahmed's view that it is "the role of repression [that] makes objects 'sticky'" (p. 11). Fabulation is more speculative than this; it is a structural act of in(ter)vention, at once affective, cinematic, and political, situating the viewer's own sense-making as co-extensive with/in the temporal construction of the image itself.

This reading differs in emphasis from Bogue's account of fabulation as "first a form of 'legending', of creating larger-than-life 'giants', hallucinatory visions of future collectivities, and second, a means toward the invention of a people to come" (p. 19). To be clear, I am not disagreeing with Bogue's interpretation of fabrication as a political and collective force. If anything, I would argue that fabulation, at least in the context of the *Cinema* books, functions not unlike Walter Ong's claim that *The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction* (1975): a projected presence necessary for the structuring of address. If nothing else, Fabulation is the closest Deleuze ever really comes to theorising about the terms and conditions for the concept of the audience in much the same way as Ong, even if only implicitly. Rather than oppose Bogue's reading, however, I am interested in how Deleuze co-opts this phenomenon at the level of cinematic temporality. Not only does Deleuze utilise it as a mythopoeic act that invents (or fictionalises) a much-needed people in order to fabulate, but as an almost affective structuration of time through which the power of belief can emerge in the presence of the absence of continuity itself. Prior to any mythopoeic legending of a people to come, fabulation must operate as a prosthetic interface that allows the fractured temporality of the time-image to cohere at all. Only then can the viewer's attunement to disjunctions in time give rise to something political or collective, and only once the conditions of continuity have been affectively reconstituted through the power of belief can they take shape as image. Or, as Deleuze puts it in "Bergsonian terms, the real object is reflected in a mirror-image as in the virtual object which, from its side and *simultaneously*, envelops or reflects the real: there is 'coalescence' between the two" (1997b, p. 68). My emphasis on *simultaneously* here, in that the viewer must believe in the continuity offered by the image for fabrication to operate as a structuring prosthesis. To the extent that the very act of believing retroactively undoes the directness of the time-image through the paradox of its own co-emergence; so much so, that fabulation relies *first* on a belief in directness that cannot remain intact once it is recognised *as* fabulation. The time-image, in other words, is only temporarily direct insofar as the viewer does not know *what* makes it direct. Once that directness is parsed and reflected upon as 'time-image', the illusion dissolves.

Two possibilities emerge from this outcome; although I should stress that they are not the only possibilities that can or do arise, but rather two of the more compelling interpretive directions opened up by the paradox of fabulated belief. A third, less developed possibility might appear in situations where neither the movement-image nor the time-image is recognised as such—where they simply *experience* without categorisation—but there is nothing in the secondary literature surrounding the *Cinema* books to suggest that such a lay perspective carries any theoretical weight, or that it might provide some other meaningful account of the image's temporal logic. The two possibilities I am concerned with, then, are as follows. Firstly, that the time-image is a temporary phenomenon: affectively structured, and yet ultimately unsustainable once it is recognised *as* time-image. Secondly, that what we call the time-image may in fact be a variant of the affection-image: one that draws its apparent temporal rupture not from directness per se, but from the powers of the false not unlike its own "mendacious" expression (1997a, p. 97). Each route implicates a different kind of illusion, the one rooted in temporality, the other in affect, and each reframes the role of

fabulation as either the stabilising prosthesis of continuity, or the seductive deception of directness.

The first possibility presents a destabilisation of Deleuze's sensory-motor schema. Rather than functioning as a distinct and enduring cinematic mode, the time-image becomes a transitory modulation: an affective threshold whose apparent directness dissolves the moment it is recognised as such. In this light, the time-image is not just a perceptual rupture, but an oscillation suspended between belief and reflection whose coherence depends on a precarious mode of spectatorial attunement—one that can only persist so long as the image's fabulated continuity remains unscrutinised. This position diverges from readings advanced by Allan James Thomas, in which the movement- and time-images are treated as structurally irreconcilable paradigms within a rigorous taxonomy. Thomas also, somewhat paradoxically, gestures towards a more recursive logic when he suggests that "the time-image is indeed anterior to the movement-image, in that it effaces it altogether, so that the time-image was always already there from the very beginning. However, it is only so *retrospectively*. It is a process of *re-reading* which reinscribes the movement-image as the time-image only after the break in which the time-image begins to appear" (p. 42). My departure from Thomas here is to emphasise that such a retrospective emergence is not only a matter of re-reading, but of affective suspension. That the time-image might only be perceived through the illusion of directness, which collapses under the weight of its own recognition. It is less a formal rupture than a mythopoeic construction—one that *Cinema 2* itself participates in fabulating. Story-telling, in this context, is simply the prosthetic interface that briefly sustains the illusion of its own temporal directness.

The second possibility takes a much more provocative turn, suggesting that the time-image is not an ontologically distinct category at all, but rather a form of affective misdirection. What appears as a rupture *in* temporal logic may instead be the affection-image operating *at* the level of directness—itsself just another layer of duration animated by the powers of the false. In this alternative light, the time-image becomes a kind of cinematic mask, drawing power from its own affective capacity in order to persuade through illusion. This reading also (retrospectively, if not retroactively) paints the affection-image as more of a mendacious expression, further problematizing iconicity as the site where Power or Quality itself sustains the illusion of rupture. "But now we are no longer in the domain of the affection-image," Deleuze might say, "we have entered the domain of the action-image. The affection-image, for its part, is *abstracted* from the spatio-temporal co-ordinates which would relate it to a state of things, and abstracts the face from the person to which it belongs in the state of things" (1997a, p. 97). My emphasis on *abstracted* here, in that it is precisely this removal from spatio-temporal co-ordinates that allows the affection-image to stage the *illusion* of rupture without requiring any actual ontological shift. That is to say, the image's own affective force—its capacity to detach the face from context, to float free of narrative consequence—*becomes* the very condition through which the time-image appears to emerge. Such a reading only deepens Bogue's description of fabulation as "becoming-other" through "a passage between categories, modes of existence and discrete entities such that stable elements are set in metamorphic disequilibrium" (p. 9).

What binds these two possibilities, despite their divergence, is that each turns on the illusion of directness as an affective force that both masks and enables cinematic temporality. In either case, fabrication becomes not the narrative endpoint of belief (through story-telling), but its recursive infrastructure: the prosthetic relay through which the time-image can be sustained or misrecognised. Whether one views the time-image as a fleeting structure of

affective delay or as a ruse staged by the affection-image under the sign of rupture, the stakes remain the same. To fabulate is to stage a continuity where none yet exists, and it is through this staging—this suspended act of (dis)belief—that cinema performs its most radical temporal gesture. “Not the myth of a past people,” as Deleuze puts it, “but the story-telling of the people to come” (1997b, p. 223). In doing so, fabrication is not only a function of cinema, but of its criticism. To interpret the time-image—to mark its emergence, to believe in its coherence, to assign it a categorical name—is to participate in its fabrication. The critical gesture, like the cinematic one, always stages a continuity where none such exists, retroactively composing the image’s temporal force as if it were always already there. Belief does not therefore *follow on* from fabulation. Belief is the condition that allows the very concept of time to appear as something that could be thought through cinema in the first place.

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