

Exhibiting or presenting?

Politics, aesthetics and mysticism in Benjamin's and Deleuze's concepts of cinema

In his famous "work of art" essay, Walter Benjamin places politics at the centre of an aesthetics of modernity. He provides a brisk contrast between the romantic tradition of art philosophy and a politicisation of perception, receiving its training through the experience of the metropolis, in terms of Georg Simmel, and developing its appropriate artistic medium in film. Simmel is also the theorist who provides the backing for Benjamin's concept of "exhibition value": in a modern society individuals have a right and a necessity to be exhibited, precisely because of their individuality; universal egalitarianism requires visual differentiation. To turn the attention to the ambivalence of that social visualization and to refine Benjamin's hegelian-marxist patterns of thought, it is helpful to refer to Michel Foucault's concept of the apparatus (dispositif). In contrast, Gilles Deleuze shifts the point of view. The kind of modern self-understanding, coined by the French Revolution, is questioned 'radically' by him and the French anarchist tradition of so-called postmodernism. Since 'the people' and 'the masses' no longer exist, they can no longer present themselves, including on the cinema screen. At best, they are 'coming soon'. Following an old tradition, the cinema of Deleuze therefore shifts attention from a social theory to an ontology. Based on the dualist epistemology of Bergson, in which 'analysis' meets 'intuition', science meets metaphysics, Deleuze looks for the "time-image" and a "seer" who oscillates between aesthetics and mysticism. It is therefore fair to state, and not only through the lens of Benjamin, that the Deleuzian philosophy of cinema establishes, in a pseudo-revolutionary way, the return of "cult value".