Lou Cantor

Crystal Words

Text by Elena Vogman and Patrick Riechert

> *The truth is we change without ceasing […] there is no essential difference between passing from one state to another and persisting in the same state.*[1]

When Henri Bergson opened the linear notion of time towards multiple paradoxical instances – mobility embracing stasis, or the "same state" endlessly prolonged – he introduced an orthogenetic, vitalist model of temporality in opposition to mechanism. His influential study, *Creative Evolution* (the title of which would resonate well with today's neoliberal élan), applies such a creative principle to life itself. Gilles Deleuze would later crystallise the Bergsonian *durée* as "time's abyss" in the concept of *crystals of time*. The perception of time caught in an actual image is reflected, mirrored by its double, the virtual image, allowing each image to be simultaneously present and past. "The present is the actual image, and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror."[2]

Crystals of time thus refer to aesthetic instruments for describing complex operations of memory and perception in cinema. Moreover, for Gilbert Simondon – another crucial reference of Deleuze's – crystallisation points toward a core operation of *nature naturing*: the process by which entities individuate themselves[3]. Here, crystals constitute a crucial component of a philosophical program substituting the union of matter and form characteristic of Occidental ontology with ontogenesis, a radical temporalisation of substance and a thorough embedding of contingency into being.

> *… what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state, … the gushing forth of time.*[4]

Rendering tangible and visible the complexity of time, crystals assumed their place in 20th century Western aesthetics as figures of an endless, non-progressive temporality suspended in the present. Robert Smithson, for instance, developed a visual language of crystals exploring nature's production of heterogeneous and conflictual temporalities: the deep time of geology; the chronologies of mythology; the "entropic time of a suffocated lake."[5] Transparent and opaque, irregular and symmetric, mystical and scientific: crystals, containers of "the powerful, non-organic Life which grips the world,"[6] grow without living, and condense time into extension.

> *"My, that is a beauty!" Dr. Sanders reached forward to take the ornament she had exposed, but the woman held back his hands.*[7]

J. G. Ballard's novel *The Crystal World* describes the crystalline beauty of geometrically pleasurable attraction:

> *Glittering below her in the sunlight was what appeared to be an immense crystalline orchid carved from some quartzlike mineral. The entire structure of the flower had been reproduced and then embedded within the crystal base, almost as if a living specimen had been conjured into the center of a huge cut-glass pendant. The internal faces of the quartz had been cut with remarkable skill, so that a dozen images of the orchid were refracted, one upon the other, as if seen through a maze of prisms.*[8]

Yet, similarly to the crystals' endless internal spatiality, this beauty is a trap. The science fiction narrative transfigures crystals into the *fleurs du mal* of an apocalyptic ecology: progressive crystallisation of the Cameroonian rain forest decelerates the flow of time, arresting an expanding zone in glacial suspension.

With its multilayered temporal manipulation, *The Crystal World* lays out a kind of metafictional prefiguration of the digital. Altering time, crystals consign objects and bodies to a paradoxical, impossible spatiality, a crystallised anxiety of edges, facets, reflections, and transparency. This constellation corresponds to the disorienting n-dimensionality of statistical models – such as those of machine learning – folding data of past logistics, transactions, and intimate affects into novel features for predictive data derivatives. This

structural concordance raises the question of whether crystals may offer an inverted "optical machine"[9]: could crystals camouflage from computer vision, for instance by introducing patterns which break or multiply the features learned by algorithms? Or, in the other direction, how does the crystal inscribe the paradigm of the face? What gaze or sight does it construct, and how?

In their *Plateau* "Year Zero: Faciality" Deleuze and Guattari ask "How [to] dismantle the face?"[10]. They describe a movement that applies in every respect to the operation of the crystal when they delineate "two figures of destiny, two states of the faciality machine"[11]: on the one hand the "despotic" countenance of the Pantocrator in Byzantine icons and mosaics, which follows the viewer with his omnipresent gaze; on the other the Renaissance faces of the Passion, which "cross glances and turn away from each other," like the Christ of the Quattrocento, "with sidelong glances drawing multiple lines," taking up a complex spatiality, "integrating depth into the painting itself."[12] In this typology Deleuze and Guattari are not interested in the front or the profile as such, but in an in-between, a transition. It is this turn (*le détournement*) to the profile as an instance of unrecognisability that distorts the omnipotence and identifiability of the face. It produces a fissure, as it were: not the one that reproduces antiquity, that brings forth a new Passion figure, but one that momentarily fills and transcends the order of the representation with disparate "life lines."

Lou Cantor's *The Crystal World* is an attempt to capture the face in such movement of crystallisation: towards its non-anthropomorphic yet non fully virtual features. A face "seen through a maze of prisms."[13]

1. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell, New York: The Modern Library, 1944, p. 4.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galet, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979, p. 79.
3. Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins, Posthumanities 57 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
4. Gilles Deleuze, *The Time Image*, p. 82.
5. The most famous examples of this 'visual language' are his Yucatan *Mirror Displacements* (1969) and *Spiral Jetty* (1970) comprising an ensemble of works and a 457 metre long earthwork in Great Salt Lake, Utah. See also Amelia Barikin and Chris McAuliffe, eds., *Robert Smithson: Time Crystals*, Monash University Museum of Art Series (Caulfield East, VIC, Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2018).
6. Gilles Deleuze, *The Time Image*, p. 81.
7. J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*, Macmilan, 1966, "The Jeweled Orchid".
8. Ibid.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
10. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). p. 187
11. Ibid., p. 184.
12. Ibid., p. 184f.
13. J. G. Ballard, *The Crystal World*, "The Jeweled Orchid"