Vision In The Desiring-Image

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Desire must be created, when on screen, since desire is not a pre-existing structure, subject, or object. As Nick Davis notes in his essay on the desiring-image, desire inherently requires production. It is important to note that desire in film does not limit itself within a given structure of identity, but pre-exists identity, as Davis also notes. For Davis, using the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, desiring-machines yield images, objects, subjects, concepts, and relations that cannot be placed into clean binaries. Evidently, as images are created by desire, vision and hearing are thusly impacted in equally unclean ways. To put this into Deleuzian terms, desiring-images bring about disruptions in centers of indetermination. Lighting changes, cameras follow the viewers gaze, film stocks jump and change shape, and sounds of silence become louder than bombs. These disruptions should not be seen as negative though, as it is these stresses brought about by desire that stretch the limits of the center of indetermination, allowing new images to be created and new ways of experiencing to be had through the sensations of vision and aurality. “Any film that formally links intensities of desire to profuse sensations, perceptual density, or expanding modes of “relation” signals this basis in novel production.” With this definition we can also expand our view of films of desire outside of the the queer film canon.

In Wim Wender’s Der Himmel über Berlin (Wings of Desire), the unseen angel Damiel (Bruno Ganz), who cannot be seen by human eyes but can hear and connect human’s thoughts, watches as Marion (Solveig Dommartin) listens to a record of Nick Cave’s The Carny, contemplating her life in Berlin. Marion, unaware of the angel’s watching presence begins to undress, as Damiel graces her bare back. Marion’s longing for connection in the world brings the angel closer. In the film, touch acts as a connection, an expansive connection to grace. As Damiel backs away, the image turns into colour. Their shared desire has transformed the image,
and our view is expanded. As we delve deeper into the film, it is this shared touch, that
connection, which transforms the angel Damiel into a living, breathing human. His participation
in desire has converted him into a producer of images, imperfect and mortal. In our increasingly
connected world, we all are the angels, viewers invisible and yet able to grace the image and turn
human. We are all the humans, in constant motion, desiring and creating.

Invent a story for myself. I want to transform what my timeless downward look has
taught me and learn to bear a harsh sight, a brusque shout, a sour small. I’ve been on the
outside long enough, absent long enough. I’ve stood outside the world long enough. I
want to enter into the History of the World, or even just hold an apple in my hand.

- The Angel Damiel, *Der Himmel uber Berlin*

In a more formally traditional film, such as Luchino Visconti’s *Death In Venice*, desire is
much more clearly pointed. Take for example, the first encounter between Gustav von
Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) and the young, beautiful, and androgynous Tadzio (Björn
Andresen). Gustav sits in solitude as groups of people fill the lounge at the hotel the majority of
the film takes place in. We follow Gustav’s gaze as it sweeps across the room, searching
aimlessly, until Tadzio fills the frame encapsulating our vision. As Gustav, and us too, aim not to
be seen, we continue searching, but are continually brought back to Tadzio’s face. Tadzio
however, never looks at us directly. We are unsure of his perception of our gaze. Finally, dinner
is called and the guests begins to leave the lounge. The final two left in the room are our Gustav
and Tadzio. Upon moving towards the door, Tadzio turns around knowingly and for the first
time gives a direct look back to us and to Gustav. The gaze has been returned, and the gap of
desire bridged and cemented. As Gustav’s obsession with Tadzio mounts, he is struck with images of his past, remembering the faces of his dead wife and daughter, whom he looks at with the same desire as Tadzio. He cannot attain this vision and thus must suspend himself within it. But rather than desire creating links externally, desire can also bridge spaces together, creating worlds. This is true whether it is connecting two atoms next to each other, two rooms, or two universes.

“The virtual past is analogous to our commonsensical understanding of space. Although we cannot see all the objects in the worlds when we are inside a windowless room, we still understand that they exist; their relation to us is thus virtual” (Herzog 125). As Herzog writes mainly on memory (the past), we must orientate her findings around desire (the future). If we aim to exit the room, we know what that which we expect to be outside the room, but we also know that there are a huge number of variables. The weather could be different from when we went inside, objects could have moved. Regardless, we know what we expect to be external, or distanced. Thus, our relation to another object is dictated by the sea of virtualities. We know what circumstances can occur, and this produces pleasurable sensations. We can see this very strongly in *Call Me By Your Name*, as cinematic space functions solely a place of desire and pleasures. Following Elio and Oliver’s first sexual encounter together, the two go for a swim. On their return to the house, they enter their conjoined room through two parallel but separate entrances. We see Elio from Oliver’s side of the room, as Oliver follows his movement across the wall between them. Seeing his bed, still messy from their encounter, he begins to remember. He moves towards Elio’s room and opens it, where Elio is of course standing. He calls him over to the door and performs fellatio on Elio before closing the door on him. In creating these two parallel consciousnesses, distance is created between the two characters as well as the audience.
In the act of remembering, desiring, acting new images are formed. New spaces are made and vision extends beyond that which is flatly there.

So we have seen the effect of these images when suspended within other images of motion, action, and time. But these changes can occur on a more fundamental level, impacting every image and defining the style of a flow of images. In the traditional definition, desiring-images are produced in the moment and produce new images, preparing the schizophrenic viewer’s mind to be capable of experiencing the complex web of emotions produced. Rather than first establishing the sensory-motor schema, and then subsequently breaking free from it, some films, such as Derek Jarman’s *Blue*, are based formally on alternative views based on desiring-images. What Davis’s argument lacks to carry forward from the work of Deleuze is the emphasis on sonsigns. This is to say that Davis’s evaluation of the desiring-image is based on a visual level, but work as well on other sensory levels of touch and hearing. With the whimsical theatricality and performativity of Jarman’s work, it would be easy to argue that any of his films are based in desiring-images. No work of Jarman’s is more formally indebted to the desiring-image than *Blue*. *Blue* matches a dense and laboriously designed soundtrack with a constant wash of International Klein Blue. This blue matches the colour of the director saw in his AIDS-induced blindness. The impact and transference of desire to the auditory has blinded the visuals. They have created a mark, a new image, again preparing the schizophrenic mind for a new experience. In Freudian terms, this would be marked to a trauma, forcing the subject to relive the situations of the trauma until they have fully played them out. But this effect on vision is not destructive. It allows new perceptions through the same performative and highly sensational cinematic audio-visual combination.
The creation of new images by image-machines, thus affects the perception of material images both aural and visual. Sensorial libraries are widened and the perceptual centers of the human brain, or of the film stock or digital sensor, are altered. This effect on sensation does not have to be as extreme as in Blue though. We see it as well more commonly in moments of degradation in the image. The image morphs as a result of the traumatic impact of desiring-images, and degradation signals this. This can be seen in films such as Gus van Sant My Own Private Idaho, when Mike (River Phoenix) experiences moments of extreme desire, he locks up and, being narcoleptic, is struck into a sleep. At these moments the images desaturate, and are clouded in silver-image grain, as though only graced by that which is desired. A link in a chain of desiring-images is produced. A more recent example comes from Luca Guadagnino’s Call Me By Your Name, in which The desiring-image creates an imperfect link between the desired and the viewer, in which Elio, lamenting over his relationship with Oliver (Armie Hammer). At this moment our vision of Elio fades and surges as Elio becomes locked by his desire. Stuck in the rain, we watch him and the film forces us to be aware of its material. It gains a texture, and a new image has manifested. The connection leaves its mark, but the gap between the perception of the image and the proximity of the image results in a desiring-image. The desiring-image acts as Damiel’s graze on Marion’s skin. Both participants feel it but they do not see each other’s presence, and are thus affected and changed in a more radical way.

We can link this to another kind of image, the poor-image. Hito Steyerl uses Dziga Vertov’s idea of the visual bond, in her evaluation of image circulation, and the value that looking places upon the flow of images. For Vertov and Steyerl, the visual bond “links audiences almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety” (43). Similarly, Davis describes the desiring-image as “almost any film that formally links intensities
of desire to profuse sensations, perceptual density, or expanding modes of “relation” (16).

Although Vertov and Steyerl are describing modes of images circulation, desiring-images function in the same manner, creating a visual-bond, or aural-bond, between viewers and the viewed, so that they become one in the same. The desiring-image creates the sensorial-bond, that traumatizes and changes perceptual modes in creating this bond. So when, in Blue, Jarman discusses the gay clubs and SM leather clubs in Berlin, we are transferred to the lights and reflective surfaces of these performative atmospheres, and yet we only see blue. And thus, our relation expands out of space and time, creating a new relation. Thus, the new vision afforded by desire, signals changed perceptions of familiar values, such as home movies becoming bubbling desire, or a shade of blue becoming an entire world. The element of distance, or lack, in the desiring-image keeps these images from being solely in the realm of the real, and thus allows them to create visual bonds.

Bergson’s model of perception takes similar suit (Herzog 121 - 126). For Bergson, consciousness is the point at which the virtual and the actual, or relatedly the spatial and the temporal, meet. This point of consciousness serves also as the point of entry for the discussion of memory. Memory creates a relation between two points of a single consciousness and two points in time, since even a clouded memory stays bound in the present (Herzog 125). Thus, memory always establishes a relation between the actualized present and the virtualized past, resulting in new future virtualities. Similarly, desire is the occupation of the present consciousness with future virtualities. The process in which we remember mirrors the process in which we desire.

The use of this comes when we examine the process of desire, more so than the process of remembering. I find this to be an empowering view of desire. Desire becomes an attempt to actualize the virtual, to align the universe to be in your favour. But again, distance between the
desirer and the desired is inherent in this. The distance becomes just as much a part of desire, but rather than spatially creating negative distance, a gap, the distance is connecting, as a bridge. One is placed in relation to an equal other. Desire acts as consciousness perceiving a virtual future free from prior preconceptions and coding of identity. To reiterate, “film[s] that formally link intensities of desire to profuse sensations, perceptual density, or expanding modes of “relation” signal [a] basis in novel production” (16). Since desiring-images originate as images of virtualities, there is no limit to desire, and it is in constant production. The power of desiring-images to create connections that expand relation, increase perceptual density and create sensations, stems from the origin of these images as virtual. In moments of desire, perception floods with virtualities. The effect of this varies, unbound in its potentiality. Some films aim to hold and suspend us within these moments of flooded perception, as in Blue or Der Himmel uber Berlin, and others that use these moments to lesser degrees. Take for example a scene from Call Me By Your Name, as Elio sits on steps outside of his house, being separated from Oliver for the first time in the film, the image begins to fade in and out in a swirling white fashion. While physically this is caused by an accidental process in development, the effect it creates illustrates this perfectly. Through the milky surface of the emulsion, we see the chain on Elio’s neck, a gold Star of David that Elio has begun to wear after influence from Oliver. It twinkles through this messy, but beautiful, sea of possibility. Separated from the point of his desire, Elio’s perception is flooded with images of possible virtualities, the reference point being Oliver.

Let us return to another example, that of My Own Private Idaho. Although Mike’s narcoleptic visions are of memories, intimacy and proximity trigger the seizures. They signal an inability to reconcile memory and desire. These machines conflict like two gears of unequal size. Although they may turn temporarily, the motion is damaging and chip away at both ends,
removing the existence of virtualities. The two conflict and the perceptual motor freezes shut. In its escape from the flood of virtualities in the desiring-image, the perceptual motor resorts to memory-images, faded and engrained by their distance from the moment of consciousness. The distance becomes the image, and the perceptual motor resets in being overwhelmed. This machinic motion lacks conclusion, but again, we should not experience this as a paralyzing thought. With this correlation between remembering and desiring, consciousness is then the act of actualizing the virtual. Although Mike is overwhelmed by this conflict, it places him in a position to produce virtualities in uneven intervals, interrupting the classical flow of desiring-machines.

*Der Himmel uber Berlin* illustrates this point even more eloquently. The angel Damiel, although a perceiving consciousness in his angelic form, experiences differently in his mortal experience. While the angels are able to see and actively take part in the virtual bonds of desire between peoples, it is only in the position as a mortal human that one is able to suspend themselves in desire. So, when Damiel becomes human and Marion is able to perceive the connection he feels to her at the Nick Cave concert near the films end, we stay suspended in this room of lush red. The two view each other and there are no words. The image is vivid and uninterrupted. Consciousness, memory, and desire are in unity at this moment. Damiel’s journey pertains to all modern consciousnesses, the exception being that we must continually make his journey of angel and mortal. We must constantly create through desire and are constantly at its whims. It is in moments of unity that consciousness creates the present.

The constantly shifting relationship between perception and desire disregards preconceptions of being. “Desires thus remain impersonal in some core Deleuzian sense, passing through or forcing changes within subjects rather than belonging to them as static, innate, or
identitarian fixtures” (Davis 20). As it is this sea of virtualities that forms the bridging-distance in desire, the experience of desire is experienced by all and in all, with different swirls of possibility changing the subject from afar. Queerness is not only for the queer. And that is the appeal in Call Me By Your Name. We want to feel the distance between two characters and be a part of that distance as well, so that when the desire is actualized we become a part of that too. We are asking to be active subjects in desire. We want. We need. And in cinema, we find the tools for this. Cinema audiences, as a spatially and temporally connected group, create ideal situations for the queering of desire. Swarms of virtualities are actualized in larger groups, and potentially-far reaching visual bonds are strengthened like radiation waves, getting stronger the closer they are. In sharing the same cinematic experience, audiences experience changes communally, but to millions of different potentials. Cinema is a force for change in its diversification of human experience through merging different consciousnesses in collective audiences, which then shoot off once more into the sea of virtualities. Cinema acts as an accelerated of experience, creating an $n$th number of experiences, an $n$th number of desires.

In the modern world, people are faced with ceaseless waves of stimulation. It is truly a never-ending sea of virtualities. As I have said, cinema gives us the tools to navigate these waters. If desire is the journey to a destination, memory replaces the compass, desire the rays of light from a lighthouse cutting through fog. Queered desire, suspends the subject in a free-float of these virtualities. It is only in immersion that new modes of being can result. Within Benjamin’s theory of innervation, we understand that human movement and codes of interaction are affected by technologies (134). Similarly, experiencing new types of images effects perception, and new types of images can modify pre-existing cultural codes and create new norms. For Eisenstein, the use of polyphonic montage could orchestrate the senses toward
different associations, creating affects in the viewer (Pisters 74-75). As all things are made of desire (Davis 14-15), montage can be repositioned as an orchestration of desires toward new associations, possibly queered associations with unlimited possibilities and permutations. This is what Jarman does in Blue, utilizing the colour blue to call into question the societal frameworks of late 80s British Conservatism. Deleuze’s evaluation on Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin tells of the affection-image (Pisters 89) and the use of close-up and expressive qualities of bodies or objects relating to the sensation of touch, similarly I believe that in the desiring-image we have a similar sensation of touch, but are suspended in the moment before the touch. We are soaked with affection to the point that it becomes the meaning of desire. Blue captures this in its colour-soaked images. We are bathed in Blue, in affect, and in desire. We do not touch, but feel nonetheless. Just as with montage, desire designates a goal in a sea of endlessness.

Take for example the grandfather of queer film, Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising. This film uses images with distinct cultural connotations such as chrome, chains, leather, pop music, Nazi paraphernalia, and skin and merges them into combinations that would defamiliarize these images and force the viewer into new associations. These associations bubble below the surface of consciousness, as the familiar is called into question. We are forced to not know that which we have a memory of. This is how we are able to find new images in the reproduceable art of cinema. Estrangement of consciousness results in new consciousnesses, and effectively there is nothing better than not knowing and purely desiring. Colour is used to great in moments of desire, relating another queering of vision to desire. Scorpio Rising flashes red, tints blue, shines crimson, and shines white. While Blue is decidedly more pointed in its use of colour, I believe that it not only signals desire, but points our perceptions towards new desires. Similarly, in My Own Private Idaho, the switch in Mike’s mind from the lurid colours of the 35mm world to the
faded home movies of Super 8 is a similar change in colour signalling queered desires. The world changes from black and white to colour in Der Himmel uber Berlin. The world of Jacques Demy takes the Technicolour dream from Hollywood musicals and creates estranged desires, and missed connections (Herzog 118). Desire’s link to consciousness forms affective connections and sensations that override previous remembering’s, while being based in them.

To return to the quote from Der Himmel uber Berlin, in which the angel Damiel tells the angel Cassiel he would to become human, I believe it is the role of the viewer to navigate and create desires. A viewer must view and be viewed, but the resulting diversification of images frees the world from prior associations and frees new images from the boundless sea of virtuality. In the digital world in which all are creators and viewers, the diversification of desires carries with it the ideal that these desires will be sought after and carried out. In Berlin, there is a building called the Berliner Philharmonie, or the Berlin Philharmonic. This building, designed by Hans Scharoun. Located next to no-mans land, it was created as a symbol of hope from West Germany to the newly separated East. With a design that resembles a circus tent, and a grand-stage that does similarly, the building places the orchestra at its center, with the audience broken up into viewing stages around the circular hall. In its grand spaciousness, each seat has its own perspective, and viewing the orchestra means viewing other audience members on the other side of the hall. This also means to view yourself as a part of this integrate whole. Decorated in gold, the building has calls to Eisenstein’s connection of mirror-touch and the colour yellow. Desires, in our circus tent of a modern age, function much like this building. Housed in history, it urges its participants and viewers to see themselves as more, to want more and to see themselves as part of a whole with others. Desire is at the root of all things, sensation (viewing, hearing, touching) is the connection to the desired.
Works Cited


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