A Thousand Eyes For Perception

A Deleuzian Analysis of 127 hours

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127 Hours (Danny Boyle, 2010) is closely based on the captivating story of Aron Ralston who in 2003, was trapped for 127 hours in Utah’s Canyonlands National Park. His hand was clasped by a rock to the inner wall of Blue John canyon. After days without sufficient food or water he eventually had to cut his arm to release himself. Danny Boyle utilizes a variety of formats such as 35mm film, digital cinema, photography and video for this film. It is one of a few examples in cinema to take advantage of versatility of digital cinematography to achieve an innovative style. In this article we will explore this visual style in the light of Deleuze’s theory of film, specifically his concept of movement-image. Constructed almost entirely from movement-image (as oppose to time-image), the film accents strong cycles of perception-affection-action through applying strong sensory-motor schema. A Delezian analysis of 127 Hours suggests the importance of digital technology in creating new perceptions that leads to new affects. We will see that all three different types of perception-image, as Deleuze categorizes it, are changed in this film by the means of digital cinematography, and how it creates a visual language that corresponds to our time as the triumph era of the camera-eye.

Deleuze mentions a double reference of subjectivity and objectivity for the perception-image.\(^1\) The subjective end is what he calls solid perception, the placement of the body as the center of the camera-eye. Such images form the dominant subject and show us how an individual perceives the world. Point of view shot, shot reverse shot and invisible continuity editing are most common techniques to create a central privileged image around a character.\(^2\) We can recognize this privileged point of view by its qualities: its sensory, active and affective.\(^3\) Looking at 127 Hours we can see how digital technology has enabled cinema to enrich all three of those characteristics. We can start with the point of view shot, on the most subjective end of solid perception. Lighter compact digital cameras made possible a real performance of action rather than a recreation of the character’s point of view. Instead of following the characters from behind or simply have the floating camera move to recreate their vision; we can now attach the camera to the body. This has created a new aesthetic for point of view shot. Sports cameras have gave us maximum level of active and sensory experience of movement, since the real action is performed and captured.
An example of sports camera aesthetic is when Aron is biking and the camera is attached to his bike. The shaky and fast image immerses us into the movement. In another particular shot when he first meets the two girls early in the film, he walks down a slope. In this direct POV shot we can see his shadow on the ground created by the sun, which gets larger as he moves down. But we can’t see any trace of an attached camera to him in the shadow. That means taking the concept of human cine-eye even further to the point where the camera is not external to him like when attached on a helmet or rig, but replaced his physical eye in space. In odds to the visual nature of cinema, this effect can also be used to enrich the rest of our senses other than vision. While running inside the canyon Aron touches the walls of stone as he moves forward through the crack. A small DSLR camera was attached to his hand to capture that while allowing him to move naturally. As a result of such sensory subjectivity achieved by digital cinema, we can almost feel the texture of canyon’s inner surface and his movement the way Aron feels it, and we can even smell the dust.

The next type of solid perception-image, the narrative, constructs a major part of *127 hours*. Deleuze calls it the generalized semi-objective image, as it’s the first step toward the objective image. The emphasis is on camera being ‘with’ the character. We perceive through “the eye of the camera”, or “the anonymous viewpoint of someone unidentified among the characters.” This definition corresponds to conventional continuity narrative e.g. shot-reverse-shot and match on action. Many of the shots from when Aron is trapped in the canyon are in this category. To elevate the qualities of sensation, activity and affection of these perception-images, Boyle has taken us extremely close to Aron in space. Even though the production recreated the crack in the Blue John canyon in studio, it was a one-piece set that couldn’t break down to pieces. This created a natural feeling of being trapped in a confined space both for camera and James Franco’s performance.

For Franco, Danny Boyle and two camera operators to be able to fit in the gap, Boyle used a few SI-2K Mini cameras that are very small for the entire time inside the canyon. They were small enough to use three or four of them simultaneously to capture a scene from multiple angels. Multicamera montage combined with the handheld camera aesthetics has created a very believable and affective movement images. We know it is
well crafted artifice, but we feel the intensity of being there with Aron. This was not possible to achieve with the size of celluloid film cameras. In addition to size, Franco’s improvisations required the cameras to keep rolling sometimes up to 20 minutes, which would be limited to half with a film camera.

One of the cameras was modified with macro C-mount lenses that reduced the size and enabled the camera to be placed inches away from the subject. Shots with Aron’s face under the rope bag or other times when the camera is very close to him are extremely intimate. We can see every detail in his face and any dirt on his hands. His face also becomes an anchor image for montage, going back and forth between his face and memories and illusions. This effect has also faded away the line between perception-image and affection-image, or the Deleuzian close-up, which is the face. The scene happens around Aron’s face, and there is no cut away to any other possible image in the scene.

127 Hours doesn’t limit itself to solid perception. It also incorporates liquid perception, which as Deleuze describes it, has more freedom than human perception because it is not tailored to solids. “A more delicate and vaster perception, a molecular perception, peculiar to a cine-eye”. It is the gray area in between solid and gaseous perception, or when moving from subjective to objective. It is aesthetically different from what the eye of the character, or it’s substitute, the eye of the director might see. While classic forms of liquid perception, hallucinations, dreams and memories are also an important part of narrative structure of 127 Hours, instead I want to focus on particular examples of such molecular perception in light of digital imaging.

After working for a while on moving the rock, Aron becomes thirsty. His mind-eye, which is replaced with mind-camera, flies back the whole path he has taken from his car to the canyon. The mind-camera compresses the long movement into few seconds, and in a flash of time finds the bottle of energy drink in his car that he was thinking about. This image is in fact a series of digital photos pieced together to create a time-lapse, an effect our eye cannot experience. Therefore it’s closer to vision of mind, which is free from limitation of time and space. Another examples of time-lapse are landscape images of speeded up sunrise and clouds passing by.
The mind-eye not only shows us his reference of thinking in his physical space, but also his visual trajectory shaped from multimedia. For example when Aron remembers old drink commercials, models by the beach drinking cold beverages. The image is low quality to resemble old televisions. We can also see influence of the live television graphics as he performs an imaginary morning show for his camera. His co-worker pops into smaller frame in the image of his show to say hello to the audience. Again as he is preparing for the coldness of the desert night, a graphical thermometer appears on the screen to show the temperature dropping rapidly.

Such diverse visual format and style are also extended to his illusions and imaginations. Most of them are shots consisted from lagging frames, as they are a series of digital photos shot at the speed of 11 frames per second. This is utterly different from conventional 24 fps or speed manipulation of analog film. They resemble footage from cellphone cameras, but in cinematic quality. For example the shot when he talks about eight men that would come to move the rock. Danny Boyle observes in his interview in relation to mixture of formats and using digital cinema: “I think that language is really appropriate in a world where just about everybody is carrying around cameras and cellphones that shoot video. It is also a language that is developed through YouTube. Rather than being locked in the liquid beauty and smoothness of celluloid, people are prepared to see an image fractured by a mix of formats.”

Moving from mind-eye away to vision of matter, Boyle has placed the camera in places that our eyes cannot reach. Visually striking shots of inside of objects, like inside the water bottle that repeated multiple time. Again using compact digital cameras and special macro lenses made it possible to take such effect even further. While some of them, like showing inside elements of Aron’s video camera, are simply innovative ways to perceive movement, the rest create very strong affects. The shots from inside the water bottle that shows the urine flow as Aron drinks it are very repulsive. There seem to be no stronger way possible to put audience in touch with sensory effect of drinking urine. These images still cannot be considered as Deleuzian gaseous perception, which will be discussed shortly. The reason is that they are in fact, a substitute of senses. In an image of this kind Aron’s stabs himself and we see inside of the arm where the knife starts
touching the bone. This creates pain affection and it is still centered around our hero’s senses and therefore, subjective.

Finally the last type of perception image, gaseous perception, is used in the opening and ending sequences of 127 hours. In them, a three part split screen image is collaged out of seemingly unrelated imagery which in the end relates to the bigger picture of the film thematically. In the opening sequence we see humanity in numbers, wherever large amount of people are gathered or busy transporting: Stock markets, metro stations, marathons, festivals, etc. They form an amalgamation of altered newsreel, time-lapse, stock/YouTube footage and public surveillance video. This is in every way a modern resemblance of what Deleuze quotes from Vertov as the definition of pure cine-eye:

It is that which couples any whatsoever of universe in any temporal order whatsoever. Everything is at the service of variation and interaction. Slow/highspeed shots, superimposition, fragmentation, deceleration, micro shooting. This is not human eye, even an improved one. For although the human eye can surmount some of its limitation with the help of contraptions of instruments, there is one which cannot surmount, since it is its own condition of possibility.¹⁰

Cinema overcomes the limitations of our eyes (or similarly limitations of camera) through montage, which “at the dawn of ourselves” creates “the pure vision of non-human eye.”¹¹ In case of this film, it is almost as the cine-eye -as defined above- is looking back at us: humanity in crowds. Here we see a different cine-eye from what Cézanne called “world before man”. It is an eye looking through glass of our collective visual perception at this era, which not just includes cinematic image, but also contains archive/web video, newsreel and surveillance camera aesthetics. This is not how we see the world through our eyes therefore it is objective. But it is also not the vision of matter entirely. It is rather an expanded of vision of matter, to something that also contains how we perceive the world. At this time we not only perceive the world through our eyes but also all other altered aesthetics mentioned earlier have entered our visual unconscious.

The conclusion chapter of the film is again a split screen of similar gaseous perception-images in combination of liquid perception-images of Aron’s life after the whole incident is over. The footage of crowds of people is assembled with images of all
people Aron knows standing beside each other, reporters and photographers surrounding him after the incident and lastly his future wife and son.

This time the ambiguity of gaseous perception-images is resolved for us. It connects us to the central theme of the film and what Aron learned at the price of loosing his arm: mankind by design is meant as a multitude and can’t function as a solitary individual. Thus the imagery appeared in the opening and ending scene is no longer an objective imagery beyond and free of narrative causality. It is to reinforce the content of privileged focus on Aron, yet still in form a gaseous perception-image.

In a way Aron’s obsession with documenting the moment has entered the unconscious of the film through perception-image. He preserves, if not recreates his present, and the way he does it has formed the visuals of 127 hours. But why the media/YouTube/consumer camera aesthetics has become so dominated in the way we perceive the world? The answer might be in the desire for creation. We not only preserve what has just turned from virtual to actual, but also create an image, which is equally real. As Pisters speculates: “it should be clear that, from a Deleuzian perspective, images (cinema included) are realities in their own right, not something of a second order.” The illusion of superiority over time and plane of immanence gives us ultimate pleasure. To create another layer of reality is what makes Aron, and many of us, pose for cameras several times a day. We keep bringing more and more from virtual to actual, in a similar way 127 hours perceives with more eyes than cinema before it.

References:


2. *Cinema 1*: p72

3. *Cinema 1*: p76


5. *Cinema 1*: p72
6. American Cinematographer: p58-60
7. American Cinematographer: p53
8. Cinema 1: p80
9. American Cinematographer: p53
10. Cinema 1: p80-81
11. Cinema 1: p81