Bergson: Cine-Perception

This course explores Henri Bergson’s meditations on moving image machines, screens, and “cinematographic consciousness”, also tracing the impact of his philosophy of perception on avant-garde film theory, from Jean Epstein to Gilles Deleuze. Vivian Sobchack has argued that figures shape and transform the very problematic they try to portray. How do moving image metaphors, thought-figures and optical technologies like the cinematograph, stereoscope, kaleidoscope, shadow play, ‘dark screen,’ panorama, high-speed photograph, phantasmagoria, and magic lantern dissolving views structure Bergson’s thoughts on the spectator’s sensory apparatus/awareness? What does the vitalist philosopher have to say about the human mind and perception as a “cinématographe intérieur”? The course will lay a critical foundation for understanding the relevance of Bergson’s work for contemporary film and media theory. Course readings include Bergson’s translated works Creative Evolution and Matter and Memory, lectures, and interviews, and seminal texts on Bergson’s media epistemology. Other theorists include Jean Epstein, Georg Lukács, Germaine Dulac, Walter Benjamin, Jakob von Uexkuell, Gilles Deleuze, and Elizabeth Grosz.

Requirements:

Seminar Participation: 30%

Presentation plus written summary (5 pages): 25%

Final Research Paper (20 pages): 50%
Tentative Readings:


Henri Bergson - *L'évolution du problème de la liberté. Cours au Collège de France 1904-1905* [translated excerpt]


Elizabeth Grosz, “Deleuze, Bergson and the Concept of Life” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2007/3 (no. 241)


Lecomte du Nouy’s *Biological Time* (New York: McMillan Company, 1937) [excerpt]


Tentative Outline

Week 1: Bergson’s Bodies/Machines: Time, Perception and the “Attention of the Spectator”


[Suggested Reading: “‘Fantômes de vivants’ et ‘recherche psychique’” (1913)] in *Henri Bergson: Intégrale des œuvres*

Week 2: Bergson’s Bodies/Machines cont.: Kaleidoscopic Shifts and a “Photographic View of Things”


**Week 3: Screening Movement, Scientific Film and a “Cinematographical Consciousness”**


Paula Amad on the “Bergsonian” Screening Room at Albert Kahn’s *Archives de la Planète* - Paula Amad, “The Counter Archive of Cinematic Memory: Bergsonism, la durée and the Everyday” in *Counter-Archive: Film, Everyday and Albert Kahn’s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).


**Week 4: The ‘Unrolling’ of a Cinematic Film**


**Week 5: Life, Environment and Élan Vital: From Bergson to von Uexküll**


[Suggested: Elizabeth Grosz, “Deleuze, Bergson and the Concept of Life” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2007/3 (no. 241)]

**Week 6:** Cinema and Eternal Variability: German Bergsonians Georg Simmel and (Early) Georg Lukács

Georg Simmel, “Sociology of the Senses”, excerpt and “The Berlin Trade Exhibition” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 2000); short translated excerpts from his work on the philosophy of history [1905], Rembrandt [1916], Kant, naturalism and historical understanding referencing “living pictures,” cinematography, panopticon wax pictures, stereoscopy, and instantaneous photography


**Week 7:** “The Plastic Form” and Photogénie: French Impressionism/Symbolism


Edgar Allan Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher” (1839); Tom Gunning, “Loïe Fuller and the Art of Motion” in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida* ed. Richard Allen and Malcom Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 75-90


Screening: Jean Epstein, Fall of the House of Usher (1928); Germaine Dullac Thèmes et variations (1929)

**Week 8: Bergsonian Vitalism at the Bauhaus: Miracle of Flowers**

Janelle Blankenship, “Film-Symphonie vom Leben und Sterben der Blumen”: Plant Rhythm and Time-Lapse Vision in Das Blumenwunder', Intermédialités no. 16 (Autumn 2010), pp. 83–103

Rudolf Arnheim on the film’s interior world: Rudolf Arnheim, “Accelerated Motion” and “Slow Motion” in Film as Art [1932], Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006: 114-117


Screening: Miracle of Flowers (1926)

**Week 9: “Cellular Tissue” and “The Optical Unconscious” – Walter Benjamin**


**Weeks 10-12:** “The Brain is the Screen”: Deleuze’s Bergsonism


**Week 13:** “Nervous Magic Lantern”: Experimental Filmmaker Ken Jacobs’ Bergsonism


**Screening:** *Nervous Magic Lantern* (Ken Jacobs, Spiral Nebula, 2005), *Anaglyph Tom* (2008: anaglyph with 3-D)