

## The magic of cinema: time as becoming in *Strangers in Good Company*

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### Abstract

This article examines the ability of cinema to alter our perception and experience of time and ageing by analysing the film, *Strangers in Good Company*, as an example of what Gilles Deleuze called a time-image film in his philosophy of cinema. By looking at the cinematic representation of time as culturally contingent and open to change, and the boundary between representation and reality as thin, Deleuze's theorisation of time-image cinema presents us with a way of understanding time as a kind of magic that can free us to live and become rather than as a succession of equally metered, linear moments. The experience of the older women who "act" in this movie confirms Deleuze's thinking, when their brief filmic reprieve from the exigencies of chronological and linear time spills over into their "real" lives, allowing them to move beyond static representations of old age that tie them to deteriorating bodies and negative identities into an open future of becoming.

Keywords: time, becoming, ageing, cinema, film, magic.

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People look curiously at us as we file into the Riviere Rouge for lunch ... for we look to them just like seven old women ... One day, after three oafish, unshaven men in checked shirts and muddy boots have been too engrossed in staring even to drink their beer, Winnie says wryly, "I wanted to say to them, 'What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen film stars before?'" The three men didn't know that we were film stars disguised as old women; they didn't have the magic power to penetrate our disguise ...

Mary Meigs, *In the Company of Strangers*

Once in a while, a movie comes along that quietly and effectively challenges the assumptions of bodily decline, stereotypes of incompetence and feelings of aversion that mass media images of the old and the ageing generally convey. Rather than present ageing as a relentless march of accumulating losses that gradually erodes one's right to personhood, dignity, respect and a secure place in society, such a film turns growing older into "a 'work of art', something to be achieved" where "losses are turned, reworked, and impression-managed into a variety of gains" (Graham 2010: 179). *Strangers in Good Company* (1991), a Canadian movie filmed using ordinary old women rather than actors, is one such movie. By using the magic of cinema to portray older women in an environment in which ordinary time stops, "has no gravity, ... does not pull you from second to second into the future" (Meigs 1991: 45), we as viewers are given a glimpse of *all* of life as an open-ended and unpredictable process of becoming rather than a rising, then falling staircase or curve (Cole 1992).

To make this transformation in the way we apprehend time and becoming understandable, this analysis of *Strangers in Good Company* first urges us to question what we think we know about time, age, and growing older, unsettling the way we comprehend old bodies and enjoining us to reconsider the spaces, both abstract and material, we construct to contain them. By examining how *Strangers in Good Company* gives form to an image of time that counters the usual straightforward narrative of decline, a story that depicts growing older as occurring in a finite and predictable fashion within an inescapable web of linear and regular moments, this analysis opens our thinking to discourses that explore the idea that time itself may neither be pre-existent nor regular but actually produced by the always unpredictable entwining of life and matter, past and present, virtual and actual, that constitutes our existence. It then, through an exploration of the serendipitous fusion of the "real"

lives of its characters with their “fictional” lives, shows how life, an on-going process of becoming, is linked to art, an on-going process of rendering this becoming intelligible, and ends up not only challenging “the idea that the purpose of [cinematic] art is imitation” (Rodowick 1997: 18) but recasting its purpose as an active and creative manipulation or restructuring of “reality.” By both asking us to question the nature of time and offering us an alternative logic or framework in which to understand it, this examination of *Strangers in Good Company* can enable us to take “a virtual leap into new worlds to come” (Grosz 2011: 191), worlds where time is understood as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon rather than a sequential and unidimensional structure, and where its effects are neither uniform nor predictable (Harro-Loit & Koresaar 2010).

Once we grasp the notion that the gap between the cinematic treatment of time and how time works in the real world may be as thin and transparent as film itself (Smethurst 2000), the boundaries we construct between art and life can be redrawn in ways that allow us to revise the way we think about growing older and to reassess the meanings we give to the bodily changes that accompany it. With this expanded understanding of time, made manifest in this analysis of the changes that occur in both the filmic and the real lives of the women who “act” in *Strangers in Good Company*, we can begin to build a better future for those we love and for ourselves as we age – and possibly experience for ourselves some of the magic of cinema.

### The Porosity of Representation and Reality

A swirling white mist fills the screen. As it lingers, far longer than most movies would allow, we strain to see the indistinct figures that quiver and fade within it, then slowly begin to materialise. Gradually, a group of older women takes shape, at first made recognisable more from the quality of their voices than from their form. Laughing as they amble into view along a dirt road in the wilderness, it seems as if they were just beamed onto a brand new planet or transported into a Narnia-like realm where it is possible that magic could still happen. According to Mary Meigs, one of the group of women and author of *In the Company of Strangers* (1991),

a book about the experience of making the movie *Strangers in Good Company* (1991), magic abounds.

When seven women aged 65–88, Mary, Alice, Beth, Catherine, Cissy, Constance and Winnie, are chosen to “act” as themselves and to include elements of their own lives in a “semi-documentary” (Meigs 1991: 9) that has neither conventional plot, dialogue nor action, Meigs describes the result as “the magnification of every living and growing thing” (38), including themselves. The outline of the story is simple: stranded when the bus they had rented to find Constance’s childhood summer home breaks down in the wilderness of Quebec, the women find refuge in an abandoned farmhouse, and use their store of knowledge, skill, patience and humour not only to survive but also to reveal themselves to each other in a way that allows them to become fast friends both on and off the set. Yet the atmosphere of magic that this story creates is considerably more complex. What kind of magic are we talking about? And how does it come about?

Throughout her book, Meigs variously characterises the magic they feel as a kind of blind faith in their ability to push themselves “beyond [their] known limits” (Meigs 1991: 25), as an atmosphere “of downy nonjudgement” (34) in which nothing reminds them that they “are old except direct comparison with . . . [the film] crew members who are young” (77), and as a place that exists “out of time and logic . . . a magic space where old women have room to exist” (10) and can become “how [they] want to be” (149). Implicitly or explicitly, all of Meigs’ descriptions portray an alteration in their perception of time, and hinge on the ways in which the experience of making this film graces them with a period of time relatively free from society’s ubiquitous imposition of chronological comparison. Ironically, this freedom from the constant reminders of age not only suffuses *Strangers in Good Company* with the hope and life precluded by ageism but also restores the women’s ability to alter their own relationship among past, present and future, giving them the opportunity to flourish and continue to grow and become off as well as on the set. In this magical atmosphere, rather than simply being old women who are acting in a film, they also come to see themselves as “film stars [only] disguised as old women” (34), and they begin to wonder just where the line between representation and reality is drawn.

Meigs' observations about the way this film "magically" modifies how these seven older women experience and understand themselves in time address many of the same concerns that Gilles Deleuze deals with in his philosophy of cinema. In two of his later works, *The Movement Image* (1983) and *The Time Image* (1985), Deleuze seeks to explain the entanglement of inhuman matter (including forces, concepts and sensations) with human life (duration or time in space) by exploring what he calls the special relationship that the (forceful, conceptual and sensational) images of cinema have to our contemporary perception of time and of ourselves. Arguing that since time can never be known in and of itself but only in relation to an image of something else, Deleuze maintains that, since the advent of cinema, contemporary culture has become fundamentally audiovisual, a culture in which we understand and represent ourselves in step with cinematic renditions of time and space. In other words, Deleuze asserts that the way in which cinema presents the passage of time reflects culturally contingent strategies for both imagining and imaging ourselves and our place in the world. For Deleuze, "cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world" (Deleuze 1989: 68) by presenting images that are always "haunted by a past and a future" (37), "a before and an after as they coexist with the image" (38).

In *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (1997), D. N. Rodowick further argues that the way in which Deleuze's books on cinema interrogate filmic representations of time presents both a profound critique of contemporary "concepts of identity and subjectivity" and a challenge to "questions of hierarchy . . . [and the] identity politics" such categorical understandings of the world engender (Rodowick 1997: xiv). "For Deleuze, cinema . . . brings philosophy into contact with life" (Rodowick 2010a: xvi), offering itself "as a medium for an interrogation of ourselves, of our relationship to the world, and to other beings" (Rodowick 2010b: 97). Deleuze's ethics, observes Rodowick, are designed to inspire an examination of the ways we live and of our belief "in this world and its powers of transformation" (99). Deleuze wants to return to us a faith "in the body . . . [and] in this world" (Deleuze 1989: 173), in their ability to perpetuate life as change and becoming, and in the "ever renewable possibility of beginning again" that characterises time (Rodowick 2010b: 112). Rodowick, thus, sees Deleuze's books as an exploration of the "philosophical relation between image and thought"

(Rodowick 1997: xvi) in “service to life—the affirmation of life as the creation of the new—and to resisting those forces that inhibit in life the appearance of the new, the unforeseen, and the unexpected” (xvii).

In *The Matrix of Visual Culture* (2003), Patricia Pisters expands Rodowick’s examination of the connections between Deleuze’s film theories and his philosophy of time to explore the relevance of his work to interpretations of contemporary popular cinema. Starting with Deleuze’s argument that we now live in a metacinematic universe, Pisters investigates how this kind of universe challenges “the borders of selfhood (or subjectivity) . . . in time” (Pisters 2003: 20). By first defining a metacinematic universe, or what Deleuze calls “the universe as cinema in itself” (Deleuze 1986: 59), as one in which our experience of time is altered by our constant exposure to images that are stored on film, to new images that are continually generated by film, and to the way that both these stored and new images mutually influence one another, Pisters then argues that such a universe liberates us from the sequential view of time that tends to fix identity and constrain the becoming that is life. In this metacinematic universe, she continues, we have come to understand our own past, present and future through a “camera consciousness,” or a kind of perception akin to the ability of a camera to freely move or change viewpoints not only in space but also in time (Pisters 2003: 2). This camera consciousness allows us to go beyond movement and description and to enter a realm where “the whole image has to be ‘read’, no less than seen” (Deleuze 1989: 22). In this realm, we have to take into account not only the space pictured but the “internal elements and relations” (22) of an object as well as “the mental connections it is able to enter into” (23) or inspire us to create. By enabling us to jump between non-chronological layers of time, this camera consciousness changes our understanding of the present so that it no longer relies only on bodily and cognitive experiences or traditional interpretations of time, but on the never-ending stream of non-sequential, non-linear, and often remixed or reorganised images to which we are continually exposed as well.

According to Deleuze, in a metacinematic universe structured by camera consciousness, this stream of images does not *represent* the world, but literally *shapes* us and the world around us (my italics). “Instead of representing an already deciphered real,” this stream of images aims

“at an always ambiguous, to be deciphered real” (Deleuze 1989: 1). Existing concurrently on what Deleuze describes as a “plane of immanence,” or “an infinite set of all images” where “each image exists in itself” (Deleuze 1986: 59) and where the identity of each is defined by the constant movement between images that prevents them from being closed, both filmic and real-life images of the past and the future, or what Deleuze calls virtual images, and those of the present, or what he terms actual images, are equally real. “In fact,” says Deleuze, “there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same reaction” (Deleuze 1989: 69). Being reversible, Deleuze continues, the actual and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, the present and the past, represent two facets of a “crystal image” whose sides, though distinct, are indiscernible due to the ability of “each side [to take] the other’s role” (69). Since all virtual and actual images are readily accessible to us through our camera consciousness, we are able to rearrange them, interact and play with them, and use them to construct a life (Pisters 2003).

When we look at *Strangers in Good Company* through the lens of Deleuze’s concept of the equality and reversibility of virtual and actual images, the women in this film are not *representing* themselves through one kind of image when on screen and *being* themselves with another kind of image when off screen, but are becoming, creating themselves anew in the crystallisation that takes place between the two. According to Deleuze, due to the way in which the present “actual image and its contemporaneous past [or] . . . virtual image” always show the two aspects of every moment of our lives (Deleuze 1989: 79), cinema and the images it produces are never a reflection of a real-life world set apart from and prior to its representation, but are an integral part of the very construction of the world and its subjects.

### An Indirect Image of Time

Deleuze’s ideas about the simultaneous existence of virtual and actual images and the creation of the new through their constant interpenetration and crystallisation presents a challenge to traditional film theory and its reliance on the concept of film as a representation of “a supposedly pre-existing reality” (Deleuze 1989: 126). When film is thus seen as a

representation of reality, difference can be signified only in relation to an already existing identity by making a comparison through the “laws of association, continuity, resemblance, contrast, or opposition” (276), like the comparison the women make between themselves and the young film crew. Since comparison generally expresses identity in binary form, such as young/old, male/female or good/evil, representationalism is a restrictive image of thought that negates both pure difference, or differences in themselves, and the concept of becoming, or constant growth and change, in order to maintain a stable concept of the world, the subject and the image. Representationalism is therefore based on a Newtonian, static or spatialised universe in which the “I” who judges difference in relation to identity is transcendent, before and beyond perception and experience, and ontologically separate from the object it judges. It is also Cartesian, a “consequence of the Cartesian division between ‘internal’ and ‘external’” (Barad 2007: 48), mind and body, that presumes our representations are more accessible to us than the objects they represent, and Lacanian in the assumption that subjects both on and off screen are motivated to construct their subjectivity through a desire for identification with an other who possesses what they lack rather than through becoming other (Pisters 2003).

In *The Movement Image*, Deleuze argues that representational thinking informs the way the greater part of cinema has been produced and viewed from its inception up through World War II. Projecting the largely deterministic universe that mainstream culture espoused at that time, cinematic events structured by representational thinking are linked by a chronology in which the past leads inevitably to the present and the future emerges predictably out of the present. When time is subordinated to movement, no matter how disordered the events, time remains “a consequence of action . . . dependent on movement . . . inferred from space [and] . . . in principle a chronological time” (Deleuze 1989: 128). Whenever cinema halts time in this way, then reconstitutes it as linear and successive by extracting and stringing together segments of motion in a representative fashion, the result is what Deleuze calls an indirect image of time. Such an indirect image, argues Deleuze, recomposes movement as a mechanical succession of instants which causes one to miss “the movement because one constructs a Whole [in which] one assumes that



'all is given', whilst movement only occurs if the whole is neither given nor giveable . . . . As soon as the whole is given . . . time is no more . . . [and] there is no longer room for real movement" (Deleuze 1986: 7). Movement-image cinema thus imposes an order on life in which truth is unchanging, identity is pre-existing, the whole is always the sum of its parts, and movement is linked by rational, predictable and successive intervals.

Looking at *Strangers in Good Company* in terms of a representation in which action is the master of time, the passage of time, rather than offering the possibility of the new, is spatialised in "frozen . . . poses, aligned on a linear and irreversible continuum" (Rodowick 1997: 21). Time is envisioned as a straight line on which events occur, placing events in time (or on time) rather than seeing events as constituting time. This representational or indirect image of time as linear, abstract and predictable underlies fixed constructions such as the stages of life and inflexible narratives such as ageing as decline, deterioration and lack. It also provides a continual stream of static and pervasively negative images of who and what the old are, images to which the old have ready access through their camera consciousness, that can increase anxiety, contribute to incapacity, and lead to social inertia, a situation in which the perception of having access to a steadily decreasing amount of linear time is felt as social pressure and results in an inability to entertain new ideas or to struggle against perceived limits (Brennan 1999).<sup>1</sup>

We can see the effects of this indirect image of time on the construction of old age in *Strangers in Good Company* in the scenes that stress the physical limitations that the women's medical conditions impose on them, such as when they pass a cup of water around so that they can take medications for high blood pressure, water retention, heart trouble, and the aches and pains of arthritis, or when the women agree that Catherine, despite her arthritic feet, is the only one who has any chance of walking

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<sup>1</sup> In "Social Physics: Inertia, Energy, and Aging," Teresa Brennan argues that the effects of social pressure to conform appear as physical differences in the way we age. Since life is about change and becoming different, the constant demand to conform to age-related norms can bring us closer to death by impeding our ability to take on fresh ideas and grow. Similar to Deleuze, Brennan sees the power of images to be real material forces in the way we construct our lives.

out for help. Rather than encourage confidence in their ability to act, innovate and survive, these scenes create fear for their safety, a concern reflected in Cissy's terror of becoming destitute and unwanted as she grows older, and in the dread Constance expresses at the thought of dying in a hospital or a nursing home. Representational images like these also naturalise problems and fears that are rooted in the cultural and the social, and impose chronological limits (what Meigs described as known limits) on character and spectator alike, crushing the creative nature of existence under a medicalised view of ageing that is built on conformity to the image of the same and on the inherent predictability of life.

The reality of social pressure as a debilitating force and its connection to movement-image cinema is particularly well illustrated in the scene in which Michelle, the young bus driver who has sprained her ankle and thus is even more incapacitated than the older women, encourages 80-year-old Beth to take off her wig and give herself a chance to look "natural." When Beth refuses, admitting that she's afraid to look like an old lady with a wrinkled neck and thinning hair, and comments that she does not have much time left anyway, implying that it is not worth the effort to change now in any case, the consequences of imagining and imaging ourselves in a world ruled by Newton's static and linear universe, Descartes' splitting of mind from body, and Lacan's construction of desire as lack congeal. For Beth to reimagine herself now would force her up against the "truth" of old age and the forms of subjectification that command "you will be One" and that One will be marked, "once and for all, with a known and recognizable identity" (Rodowick 1997: 201). Representational thinking boldly declares Beth to be an old lady only disguised as a film star, a judgement with which she herself may concur through internalisation of the decline narrative, even though film star and old lady are obviously the same.

Thus, to view *Strangers in Good Company* in the tradition of movement-image cinema with its indirect conception of time as linear, orderly, knowable, and predictable – spatialised – makes it difficult to move beyond the negative and disparaging representations of old age that emphasise limits and make derogatory pronouncements about what those within the category can accomplish. It leads both viewer and character to interpret the meaning of a movie in a way that is particularly detrimental

to the construction of old age and leaves both spectator and actor with a store of negative images on which to draw as they, themselves, grow older. Since this perspective is unlikely to be the source of the empowering magic to which Meigs so often refers, rather than succumb to this anaesthetising image, we need to look at the movie from another point of view.

### A Direct Image of Time

Deleuze accomplishes this perspectival shift when, instead of thinking in terms of representations, he proposes a more open, immanent way of thinking he calls rhizomatics. Rhizomatic thinking leaves behind the transcendental, static "I" and its binary judgements and opens up the concept of life as perpetual becoming. Contrary to representationalism, knowing, in the immanent tradition, "does not come from standing at a distance and representing the world but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*" (Barad 2007: 49), a world of which we are a part and an engagement with it that involves mind and body as a whole. Deleuze's rhizomatic thinking, like Karen Barad's later theory of agential realism that theorises the natural and the social or the material and the intelligible together, characterises matter and meaning, time and space, as neither determinate nor unchanging, but as mutually constituted through dynamic and on-going intra-actions in which individuals, whether objects or living beings, emerge through specific discursive and material practices. Identity is, therefore, neither essential and pre-existing nor constituted through comparison with another, but is in "constant formation, always changing through multiple encounters" with the world and with others, and always open to the emergence of "unexpected possibilities" (Pisters 2003: 22). Signification is not a discovery but a process in which "each era thinks itself by producing its particular image of thought" (Rodowick 1997: 7). Desire is not based on a fundamental lack of original wholeness, as Lacan argued, but on what Spinoza characterised as a wish to live and preserve our lives by making connections with people and things that will affirm our power to act and give us joy (Pisters 2003).

In *The Time Image*, Deleuze argues that since World War II and "the rise of situations to which one can no longer react, of environments with which there are now only chance relations" (Deleuze 1989: 272), the immanent

tradition has begun to replace representationalism in cinema so that movement, rather than constructing time, has become subordinated to time. In this reversal, where "time is no longer the measure of movement but movement is the perspective of time" (22), time-image film, instead of projecting a deterministic universe, reflects a culture influenced by ideas such as deconstruction, chaos theory and quantum physics, and it presents a more probabilistic world. With what Deleuze calls a direct image of time, the temporal relationship between events is nonlinear and undecidable beforehand and the future remains open rather than being determined by the present and the past. This situation allows "the connecting of parts . . . to take place in many ways" (129), so that identity is no longer based on being but on a becoming that is constantly changing due to the thinking and the action that time and change provoke (Grosz 2005). And rather than subscribe to a notion of truth that is based on repetition as the eternal return of the same and that "poses change and differentiation as deception" (Rodowick 1997: 137), the direct image of time "puts the notion of truth into crisis" (Deleuze 1989: 130) by picturing repetition as "recurrence and differentiation" (Rodowick 1997: 137). Since life is temporal and durational, "which means that within it, there can never be any real repetition but only continual invention insofar as the living carry the past along with the present" (Grosz 2011: 31), recurrence refers to the return that affirms the on-going existence of a being and differentiation to the process of that being becoming other through time. Direct time-image cinema, thus, shows that truth "has to be created, [that] there is no other truth than the creation of the New" (Deleuze 1989: 146–7), and presents images that are expressive of the creative possibilities of life rather than representative of an abstract, ideal life.

When we look at movies in terms of immanent or rhizomatic thinking, time is no longer subordinated to movement but is an element in itself. With no straight line to constrain it, time becomes series of "irrational intervals that produce a dissociation rather than an association of images" (Rodowick 1997: 143), and that stress the differentiation that is the essence of all that exists. Direct time-image film does not link action and reaction by producing "an uninterrupted chain of images each one slave of the next" (Deleuze 1989: 190), but creates a sequence of images "whose aberrant movements unveil the force of time as change" (Rodowick 1997: 136).

This concept of time positions truth as temporal rather than fixed, freeing both protagonist and viewer to create something new. Thus, direct time-image cinema may help empower the old to push beyond the limits imposed on them by negative discourses and narratives, and to reject the judgement that construes old age as an ending when the world, as Deleuze characterises it, is always and ever only a “becoming . . . [a] potentialization . . . [a] power of the false” that brings “every model of the true into question” (Deleuze 1989: 275).

In *Strangers in Good Company*, if we conceive of the situation in which the stranded women find themselves as an example of the way in which time can force change by generating problems for them to solve that will ensure “that they . . . transform themselves” (Grosz 2005: 49), then Catherine’s attempts to fix the bus engine with an emery board, Alice’s conversion of a pair of pantyhose into a fish net, the making of a herbal poultice for Michelle’s injured ankle and even Constance’s decision to throw away her pills take on new meaning. Understood in the context of direct time-image cinema, this repair, these inventions, and this decision become creative acts that bring memory (virtual images) to bear on perception (actual images) in a way that reveals the complicity of mind and matter, virtual and actual. Catherine, Alice and Constance all search out virtual memories in order to make their actual perception of the situation or problem meaningful. In this process, present perception, affecting the actual body in space, combines with memory, stored virtually in nonchronological layers of past in the mind, to bring “ever more complex and numerous points in time into relation with each other” (Rodowick 1997: 88). Each time a virtual image is called up in order to relate to an actual perception, an object, concept or idea, is “de-formed and created anew, widening and deepening the mental picture it inspires” (90), making “time and thought perceptible . . . [and] visible” (Deleuze 1989: 18).

For example, when the series of images of the women’s younger selves flash across the screen or when they share parts of their life stories with one another, they are not just making present connections, but are changing themselves through the act of revising both past and present in their becoming. One evening in the old farmhouse, when Mary is writing before sleep, she comments on how quiet it is and mentions how silence can sometimes be frightening. Cissy responds by telling how the night-time

silence was burst by the sounds the bombs made while she was in an underground shelter in England during World War II. As they listen to each other's stories, their present perception of quiet searches out virtual memories in order to make the actual perception of quiet more meaningful, and the notion of what constitutes quiet evolves for both of them. The object quiet "does not extend into movement, but enters into relation with a 'recollection-image' that it calls up" (Deleuze 1989: 46), bringing up different images, "creating anew not only the object perceived, but also the ever-widening systems with which it may be bound up ... [in] a higher expansion of memory ... [and] deeper strata of reality" (Bergson qtd. in Deleuze 1989: 46). Thus, body and perception, brain and memory, interpenetrate to fuse matter and meaning, substance and significance, present and past into something unexpected and new (Pisters 2003; Barad 2007).

This interpenetration leads Deleuze to assert that there is no difference between matter and image, object and perception; "the thing and the perception of the thing are one and the same" (Deleuze 1986: 63). They are identical not because the object or concept somehow preexists the perception of it, but because perception creates the object by taking from the whole only what interests it or what serves its needs (Rodowick 1997); "we perceive the thing, minus that which does not interest us as a function of our needs" (Deleuze 1986: 63). As Barad explains, objects are not already there (Barad 2007); they are formed by "contingent and partial picturings of matter ... samplings of a continuous flow" of everything that exists on the plane of immanence (Rodowick 1997: 35). For Deleuze, the continual reorganisation of actual and virtual images, whether from a movie or from "real-life," around "a central nucleus of bodily interest and activity" is what life is (Grosz 2005: 98). And human consciousness of life, according to Deleuze, comes about during the gap between perception as interest and reaction as activity, an interval that gives the body "time to select ... elements, to organize them or to integrate them into a new movement which is impossible to conclude by simply prolonging the received" perception (Deleuze 1986: 62). The time that passes before choosing how to combine remembered (virtual) information with perception (actual) information allows the "past which is preserved and retains the seeds of life" to influence the "present that passes and goes to death"

enabling us to begin again with “the bursting forth of life” (Deleuze 1989: 92) that creates a new reality.

The new beginning or reality created by life bursting forth is well illustrated by the way Constance, the oldest and most frail of the seven, is often depicted in *Strangers in Good Company*. Whether on the porch of the house where they are staying, walking slowly and gingerly down to the lake, or sitting as if she were a still life on the white-railed porch of her old summer home, she is time and again isolated by a fixed shot. Apart from the others, lost in thought, she is detached from the “horizontal succession of presents which pass” (Deleuze 1989: 91) and which characterise indirect images of time, and is instead immersed in the vertical system of correspondence that unites “every present . . . at a deep level with its own past, as well as to the past of other . . . presents” and makes them contemporaneous (91). Due to her stillness and isolation, our perception of Constance’s image is no longer linked to action, to movement in the world, but to virtual movement in time and to the new and uncertain relations that she may make there. When her character, rather than act through movement, is swallowed up in layers of the past where “the child . . . is contemporary with the adult, the old [woman] and the adolescent” (92), we can see how her memories of being a young girl at the lake, or of the birdsong she can no longer hear, or of her earlier life in the photos we see projected on the screen, though virtual images, are just as real and just as influential to her state of mind and to her future actions as are the actual images of her present condition. In these scenes, for Constance, as for Deleuze, life and consciousness of life are not special substances different in nature from matter; they are the result of the amalgamation of mind and matter. And the primary function of the brain is not to be a repository of ideas, freedom, and creativity, but to insert a delay between the stimuli produced by all the actual and virtual images to which the brain has access through our camera consciousness and our reaction to them, granting us freedom from predetermination and making an open future inevitable.

Elaborating on Deleuze’s ideas, philosopher Alva Noe in *Out of Our Heads* (2009) argues that the brain is not an information-processing organ that constructs a mental representation of the world, but it is more like a traffic cop whose job is to coordinate our bodily dealings with the environment and the others within it. “It is thus only in the context of . . . embodied

existence, situated in an environment, dynamically interacting with objects and situations, that the function of the brain can be understood" (Noe 2009: 65). Perceptual consciousness is not in our heads, but is a learned relationship to and a skillful integration with both objects and the environment, shaped and structured by our body's ability to adjust our relation to the world around us.<sup>2</sup> We are not world representers, but are "dynamically spread-out world-involving beings" (82) in whom matter and life entwine by dynamising the forces of matter in order to suffuse the actual material present with the virtuality of the past (Grosz 2011). It is this entwining of life and matter, enabled by the delay or hesitation in which we have freedom of choice, argues Deleuze, that constitutes time itself, the generation of the future through the reactivation of the virtuality of the past in the actuality of the present (Grosz 2005).

### The Magic of Time

Time, looked at in this way, is neither a succession of equally metered moments nor a uniform background against which movement or stillness can be measured. It is neither linear nor absolute. It is non-chronological in that it can be found in "the pre-existence of a past in general" as "sheets" of time that appear to succeed each other only "from the point of view of former presents" (Deleuze 1989: 99). It does not leave a mark and then march on, but is produced through the uneven and often discontinuous enfolding of historical practices and agencies in the sedimented mattering of the world. Matter, including our bodies, carries within it the evidence of the intra-active practices through which it is produced thus giving time a history which can be read in the differential and on-going becoming of the world (Barad 2007). Contrary to what many of the discourses and

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<sup>2</sup> Alva Noe argues that the idea that the brain is the thing inside of us that makes us conscious is not a new idea exemplified by brain scans but a simple substitution of a physical object, the brain, for the nonphysical stuff inside of us, our essence, that Descartes believed gave us consciousness. According to Noe, consciousness is neither located inside of us nor fundamentally neural, but is a work of improvisational relationships achieved in the processes of living in and with and in response to our environment, including the human and nonhuman others within it.



narratives surrounding ageing would have us believe, time is neither a cage that imprisons us nor a finite quantity of linear moments that will run out more or less on schedule. It is not only something within which we exist, but is constituted by the very fact of our existence.

Time, as understood by Deleuze, does not trap us but is more like a kind of magic that can free us to live, continually opening up possibilities for becoming by giving us chance after chance to combine our past with our present in all sorts of new and unexpected ways. "It is we who are internal to time, not the other way round" writes Deleuze, and it is time "in which we move, live, and change" (Deleuze 1989: 82). Time and the virtual world to which it gives us access, says Deleuze, is our subjectivity, the place where we go to look for the pasts that will influence our present and equip us to construct a new future. And cinema, "because it gives material form to varieties of . . . time, and change" (Rodowick 1997: 140) by providing us with images of other ways of being and becoming, can aid in the actualisation of these virtual possibilities. When Meigs writes that the magic they feel during and after filming allows them to push beyond their limits in a nonjudgemental atmosphere that gives old women room to exist; when she says that they benefit from conditions on a set that "denies the passing of clock-time" (Meigs 1991: 77); when she describes the "lining up of self- and film images" (78) that forces them to let go of all their preconceived ideas about who they are and how they look, she is referring to the experience of becoming that a direct image of time can bestow.

Unlike indirect time or movement-image cinema, where the body is always acting, reacting and gaining its perspective in a world organised by the totality of Newtonian predictability and Cartesian separation, direct time-image cinema returns to us an undecidable body for which "becoming-other in thought is the prelude to becoming other" (Rodowick 1997: 168). It replaces a cinema of action with a cinema of seeing that brings the "senses into direct relation with time and thought" in order to make them perceptible (Deleuze 1989: 17). Direct time-image cinema, therefore, points us to another world, a science-fiction-like world that can, as Deleuze says, "affirm life and its untimely forces of creation" (Rodowick 1997: xviii). When Meigs writes that the film is still "living in us" (Meigs 1991: 169), her words demonstrate an innate understanding of the porosity of representation and reality that Deleuze is talking about.

She comprehends that filmic and real-life images together conspire to unlock the life hidden away in old women (Meigs 1991), to allow them to move beyond static representations of old age into the freedom of an open future of becoming.

"Nothing happens," says Winnie. "We are what happens. The film is about seven ... old women ... happening," answers Mary (Meigs 1991: 78). And Mary is right. As Mary correctly perceives, and as Deleuze argues, direct time-image cinema can take the most banal situation and, by "extending the force of contemplation ... across daily life" (Deleuze 1989: 19), can produce "knowledge and action out of pure vision" (18). In such a situation, "the character has become a kind of viewer" (3), a non-actor "capable of seeing and showing rather than acting ... or following a dialogue" (20), someone who belongs "to the real and yet play[s] a role" that makes "life in its entirety ... spectacle" (83–4). Thus, these seven women, and the way in which they combine the unfolding story of their lives with the unrolling narrative of the film, embody exactly the new type of actor that direct time-image cinema requires and that can succeed in bringing philosophy and cinema together in the creation of life.

Near the beginning of the movie, when the women find a strange object whose use is unknown to most of them only to discover that it's a boot jack in the form of a voluptuous woman, what one of them laughingly calls 19th-century pornography, our view of them as old women may begin to change. And when they later talk of the times they were in love, of that feeling of walking on air, of being in heaven, a feeling that they would gladly experience all over again if given the chance, we add to their character the dimension of still desirous and sexual beings. Later, when Alice, after confessing that she ended up hating the man she married, admits that she still has hopes, dreams, and feelings, that she is still alive and would welcome the right man if he came along, we can tell from her body and her face that, when Deleuze says that "people ... occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space" (Deleuze 1989: 89), it is true. As Alice speaks of love, we begin to understand how the body, as a container of time, can force thought into various "categories of life" in order to "relate thought to time" (189) in the interest of life, hope, and the creation of the new. And when we grasp that "memory is not in us; it is we who move in ... memory" (98), then we can

start to recognise that cinema possesses the ability to form an alliance with the depths of time in order to reveal not just what happens to the image but “around the image, behind the image and even inside the image” (125). Thus, in the brain as on the screen, movements become expressive rather than representative, “feelings become characters” (124), and both are freed to show the interactions among the past, present and future, between the inside and the outside, that take place in all of us whenever we imagine differently the story of our lives.

When looked at in this way, as time-image cinema where “the image no longer has space and movement as its primary characteristics, but topology and time” (Deleuze 1989: 125), *Strangers in Good Company* is ultimately “a film about life” (Meigs 1991: 86), about the resistance of life to the forces that would exhaust and deplete it, forces that often render the lives of the old not worth living. As these seven old women laugh, dance, sing, dream of new love, and splash in the lake together, as they share their food and chores, their worries and fears, their hopes and dreams with each other, as they accept and celebrate their differences as Englishwomen, black, Mohawk, Roman Catholic nun, lesbian, and French Canadian, and become bound to each other both in the film and in life, they embody the power of the direct image of time to invent a new reality and to create joy. They demonstrate that old age, with its vast store of memories (or virtual images), often used to characterise the old as behind the times and unchanging, and with its physical and cognitive limitations and disabilities (or actual conditions that provoke change), often drawn on to represent the old as slow and unimaginative, are in reality precisely the circumstances that can make the old even more creative in their ability to combine the virtual and the actual in order to survive and grow.

After the movie became a success,<sup>3</sup> Meigs writes that Beth, then aged 82, who during filming was afraid to remove her wig and show her wrinkles, was “reborn,” finally “become the actress of her dream” (Meigs 1991: 167).

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<sup>3</sup> *Strangers in Good Company* not only won critical acclaim but also won the 1991 Genie Award for best editing. In addition, Alice Diablo and Cissy Meddings were nominated for the 1991 Genie Award for Best Actress, Winifred Holden and Catherine Roche were nominated for the 1991 Genie Award for Best Supporting Actress, and the movie was nominated for the 1991 Genie Award for Best Picture.

Flying to New York and London, appearing on TV, seemingly ageless and inexhaustible with all disguises and preconceived notions of who she was gone, Beth became a shining example of the creative possibilities of life provided by the crystallisation of filmic and real-life images. By refusing to differentiate between representation and reality, and by daring to combine the virtual with the actual in a new and unpredictable way, out of the swirling mists of a conventional and predictable old age, Beth made film star and old woman truly one. And, in the process proved that magic, as a becoming through time, really does happen.

## Conclusion

Films such as *Strangers in Good Company* that present life as becoming implicitly ally themselves with emerging critical theories of ageing such as critical and social gerontology that seek emancipation from “normative assumptions about ageing, particularly as they are imposed by various agents of social control” (Graham 2010: 177). The stories these movies tell and the characters they create, therefore, present a challenge to the myriad ways in which contemporary ageism is made manifest. They make us think about ageism as not only oppression – the systemic, often unintentional, constraints imposed by institutional, bureaucratic, and collective assumptions and reactions to people within a certain category resulting in the inability of those within that category to develop and express themselves fully – and domination – the institutional conditions that inhibit those within that category from fully determining their actions or the conditions of their actions – but as interference with the differential becoming of the world itself (Barad 2007; Young 1990).

*Strangers in Good Company* also lets us see how older people exceed the limitations imposed on them by their categorical affiliation, and even their own internalised ageism, in order to remain an integral part of the becoming of the world – how life exceeds the model (Kirby 2011). When the women call on a lifetime of virtualities in order to improvise and survive in the actual present, and when they create a sense of community marked by kindness, respect, and time for really listening to each other’s stories despite the exigencies of survival, in the process, they give both themselves and the viewer an opportunity to see time as a creative force

that inspires becoming rather than the ominous ticking of a universal mechanical clock. Similar to Mary, an artist both in real life and in the movie, who admits that the real art of her pictures lies in knowing what to omit, what to leave to the imagination, this film challenges us to imagine cinema not as a way to present a perfect illusion or a representation of the real, but as an exercise in inventing new realities, an opportunity to confront the virtual other of pure time, that is both outside us as sheer force or non-human potential and inside us where we live and think, in order to “pitch us into becoming” (Rodowick 1997: 210).

Finally, *Strangers in Good Company* may help us understand how the way we conceptualise and measure time affects the way we constitute and “practice” ageing and old age. Taking a cue from the quantum phenomenon of decoherence, which posits that when a quantum system such as a single atom, existing in a superposition, or being in two or more places or states at the same time, is “caught” and separated from its entanglement with the world by a macroscopic object through an act of measurement or a cut, it decoheres, meaning its wave-function collapses and it becomes a distinct particle in a particular location (Al-Khalili 2004), we might think of becoming in somewhat the same way. Although this is certainly not an accurate analogy, if life can be seen as somewhat like a superposition in that it is neither linear nor fixed but full of possibilities, then decoherence suggests that finding ourselves “caught” in a culture in which old age and old bodies are persistently and deliberately measured, described, and devalued can, in some sense, cut the elderly off from the continuum of life, eroding their ability to continue becoming in a way that can even hasten death.<sup>4</sup> Yet, just as a wave-function that has collapsed into a determinate particle does not cease to be a part of the “mattering” of the world, in another sense, death may be simply another step in the process of becoming that *is* our entanglement in the world.

When Deleuze argued “ that the virtual worlds created by screen forms intervene in all aspects of things in the worlds on screen and the bodies in the worlds external to that screen,” producing “new concepts that change

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<sup>4</sup> A 2002 study conducted by Dr. Becca Levy, a professor at the Yale School of Public Health, found that those who viewed ageing as a positive experience lived an average of 7.5 years longer than those who viewed ageing in a negative way.

how we perceive and interact with the world" (Colman 2011: 1), he wanted us to understand that the concepts that cinema gives rise to are "not 'about' cinema, but about . . . a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice" (Deleuze 1989: 280). To the extent that watching and analysing *Strangers in Good Company* can open our minds to alternative concepts and practices of time and becoming that encourage us to fully incorporate old age and even death back into life, then, as Deleuze believed, the ability of cinema to call forth a new and different reality may truly change the way we construct and value the last years of our lives. By enabling us to see our chronological age and our changing bodies as more or other than markers of decline, the magic of cinema might even help us learn to experience ageing not only as loss, but as part of the abundant and unpredictable growth and becoming that is life itself.

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