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Life, Movement and the Fabulation of the Event

John Mullarkey

Introduction

It takes only a little first-hand knowledge of Bergson’s texts to enable oneself to move beyond the stereotypical interpretation of Bergsonian vitalism as a notion regarding some mysterious substance or force animating all living matter. His theory of the *élan vital* has little of the *anima sensitiva, archeus, entelechy, or vital fluid* of classical vitalisms. This is a critical vitalism focused on life as a thesis concerning time (life is continual change and innovation), as well as an explanatory principle in general for all the life sciences. With respect to the latter, its unique contribution to the philosophy of biology of its day was that it was explanatory in a non-reductive manner, concerning itself with *meaningful* explanation rather than *causal* explanation: Bergson wanted ‘to give biology “the very wide meaning it should have”, so that we stay within the domain of the living when attempting to explain life’ (Bergson, 1977: 101). This hermeneutical thesis leads to an anti-mechanistic approach cautioning us against excessive objectivism in biology. Indeed, his *Creative Evolution* (Bergson, 1911) simply describes vitalism as ‘... a sort of label affixed to our ignorance [as to the true cause of evolution], so as to remind us of this occasionally ...’ He also adds that it is the mechanistic interpretation of the development of life, such as the neo-Darwinian one, that ‘... invites us to ignore that ignorance’ (Bergson, 2007: 27).

But there is more to add to this retreat from substance-vitalisms. Among the many meanings of the *élan*, what stands out from Bergson’s last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Bergson, 1977), is its quality as an obstacle to totalizing explanation: it stands for the intractability of any complete ‘physico-chemical explanation of life’, for the...
Inadequacy of Darwinism" as an attempt to explain anything; Bergson merely wanted this poetic expression to mark that about living things which could not be understood in mechanistic (or in finalistic) terms (Green, 1995: 170). From this approach, it could be argued that Bergson’s vitalism has transformed what was (and perhaps still is) an inexplicable and inexpressible force into a principle of inexplicability and ineffability.

From hermeneutical thesis to epistemological corrective to poetic expression: in such ways one can read Bergsonian vitalism as a philosophy concerning the representation of life as much as being one directly about life. In what follows, I will be complicating this picture by explaining the origin of our ‘representation of life’ in Bergsonian and evolutionary terms, to wit, through his concept of the fabulation of the living event. This is Bergson’s evolutionary epistemology applied to the case of the living – how we perceive movement as something life-like, and why we do so. As a type of ‘seeing as’, the fabulation of life is a form of mediation, and it is the notion of mediation that will also direct the course of this analysis. Hence, another aim of this essay is to explore a form of mediation, a fabulation of the living event with the concrete example of a film, namely James Cameron’s Titanic (1997).

Too often, no doubt, films are employed by philosophers merely to illustrate a philosophical issue. The challenge for both philosophers and film-theorists has always been to imagine how film (or perhaps any visual art) itself can philosophize without reducing it to textual forms of philosophy. We hope to attempt just that by interrogating the Bergsonian fabulation of the living via a cinematic event. Significantly, films (especially disaster films) give us examples of the fabulation of the living as an event that both illustrate philosophical views like these as well as reform these views in what I deem to be a type of truly filmic philosophy. They do not just reflect philosophy like a mirror held up to its own narcissism; they also refract it and mediate it through its own ideas. Film thinks about events in its own way, to be sure, but it is still a form of philosophy no less valuable than a traditional, textually mediated work.

Though it connotes fabrication, fabulation is not wholly unnatural, nor unfounded: it is not fictitious or purely relative to individual whimsy. Indeed, Bergson’s fabulation of events is connected to the paradox of fiction, to the problem of why we feel real emotions for unreal (fictitious) people and the events that befall them. The answer from Bergson is that fiction makes events (and the people involved in events) come alive for us, not just in make-believe, but at a very present and real (though primitive) level of our perception. And filmed fiction is an exemplary instance of this make-believe, because it exploits one of the main conditions necessary for such a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, namely movement. It is the moving-image,
central to the art of cinema, which entices us to turn fiction into a (living) reality.

We will tackle this topic by first introducing Bergson’s notion of fabulation (Section One). We will then connect fabulation with the idea of an event – in particular, the event of a disaster – which, for Bergson, is an essential pre-requisite for our fabulation of any set of processes into a single, living event: every event has its roots, no matter how distant, in a memory of a past, stressful process: a disaster (Section Two). Section Three will then shift into the field of film theory to discuss themes (such as that of Other Minds) that pertain both to Bergson’s theory of fabulation (which is basically a theory of how our imagination sees events as mindful personalities), and current thinking within the field, such as Gregory Currie’s notion of imaginative empathy when watching films. The fourth and final section brings these ideas together through a discussion of disaster films and in particular an empirical study of a central scene from Cameron’s Titanic. What we will find, however, is that this film not only illustrates the preceding argument but also adapts it through its own filmic reflection, such that we will have to reform our ideas thus far.

**Section One: Bergsonian Fabulation**

In Bergson’s account from The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, the concept of ‘fabulation’ concerns the primitive state of mind in us all. It is a ‘virtual instinct’ (1977: 110) that works by creating rudimentary forms of religion (such as animatism and animism), as well as relating us to the world as such, by anthropomorphizing its processes and activities as events and actions, by creating other personalities, other spirits: in a phrase, ‘Other Minds’. It is imprecise to think of fabulation as a species of imagination, still less a form of play, simulation or pretence, for it is far more primitive than all of these and seems to lie at their source. Fabulation has precise socio-biological origins and until those origins are fathomed, until its source is analysed, we will not see beyond the general similarities with other faculties that tempt us to confuse it with them.

That said, while fabulation is this quite precise tool for Bergson, what is of interest for us is how its origins are linked to representation per se and especially the notion of disturbance, shock or accident being its stimulus. With fabulation, Bergson tells us, we are dealing with ‘the reactions of man to his perception of things, of events, of the universe in general’ (Bergson, 1977: 162). So clearly, Bergson’s discussion of fabulation concerns more than just religion, for this faculty lies at the origin of fiction and a good deal of our more creative representations of the world – he mentions children’s play, writing, theatre and hero-worship in quick succession.

There are four stages of fabulation (animatism, animism, theism and pantheism), which can also be seen as four forms of mediation, four forms of creative representation or ‘seeing as’. The second form is most interesting as a differential mediation marked by the shift from animatism to animism, the incursion of a dualism in our interpretation of the world,
moving us from a vision of the entire universe as animate to one which divides the universe into that which is animated (with spirits) and that which is inanimate. What spurs this first dissociation in fabulation is what Bergson regards as the ultimate disaster for the mind: the representation of its death. The evolution of intelligence brings with it the double-edged sword of the foresight of death. Intelligence can thereby lead to a ‘disturbance of life’ and the ‘intellectual representation which thus restores the balance to nature’s advantage is of a religious order’, concerning life and death (Bergson, 1977: 129). The traumatic representation of death (and its depressive effects on our animal will to live) must be dampened by the formation of quasi-hallucinations, fictions, myths, and ultimately the whole panoply of religious symbolism which, at source, is a supplement from nature to compensate for the effects of this shock to thought. Myth, understood in the broadest terms possible, is a refinement of a proto-religious faculty of the mind to animate nature with intentions and actions.

So, there is the shock generated by an intelligent representation (the vision of death), and there is the reply to that shock, which is also generated as a representation, this time of a spiritual world that embodies the promise of survival post-mortem. Our intelligence goes beyond its original function by abstracting death from the particular (certain others) to the general (everyone, including itself). In turning its reflective power on to itself, it interferes with its own infinite vision and purpose (to live), refracting it (through this scene of deadly finitude) such that a distorted view of the infinite is generated: the fantasy of survival. Death refracts or mediates life into an image of life or survival, a kind of super-life or meta-life. This image of life is a spectre that comes in various forms – animatist force, animist spirit, theist person, each one all the more individuated, more integrated – as the felt experience of our body is superseded by its visual image: I quote:

For contemporary science the body is essentially what it is to the touch . . . the visual image of it would in that case be a phenomenon whose variation we must constantly rectify by recourse to the tactile image . . . But the immediate impression is nothing of the kind. An unwary mind will put the visual and the tactile image in the same category, will attribute to them the same reality, and will assume them to be relatively independent of one another. The ‘primitive’ man has only to stoop over a pool to see his body just as it really appears, detached from the tactile body. (Bergson, 1977: 133)

So this spirit-life is facilitated in part by Bergson’s own mirror-stage, whereby we see our reflection in water; a false, whole (visual) image that we dissociate from a felt (tactile) image. But what forces the dissociation is the idea of death, the image of our finitude.

Fabulation, then, is a ‘partial anthropomorphism’ (Bergson, 1977: 152), an intentionalization and vitalization of nature, beginning with diffused, impersonal forces (1977: 176), then crystallizing those forces into spirits localized in particular places (animism), and then imparting
increasingly more human personality to those spirits while at the same time detaching them from the world, until we have a full-blown monotheism with a divine that transcends its creatures. What follows is Bergson’s depiction of this faculty in operation in the vital second phase, animism, with regard to a water spring. The meaningful action of giving water, for instance, was once a ‘datum provided directly by the senses’ with its ‘own independent existence’. But then it became the ‘spirit of the spring’, localized firstly in a thing and then in a person. It is the ‘persistence’ (or repetition) of this activity of giving water, that ‘set it [the action] up as the animating spirit of the spring at which we drink, whilst the spring, detached from the function which it performs . . . relapse[d] the more completely into the state of a thing pure and simple’ (Bergson, 1977: 180; my italics). So this is fabulation – somewhere near the beginning of a centripetal process that de-animates matter while (eventually) animating immaterial Gods. The activity of the spring – the giving of water – has been extracted as an immobile idea, leaving the spring to ‘relapse’ into a state of inert materiality.

But now we must turn from the social and psychological function of fabulation to the aesthetic one. The so-called ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in fictitious events and our empathy for fictional characters are proliferations of this biologically determined faculty, deduced, Bergson says, ‘from the conditions of existence’ (1977: 196). When fiction moves us, the result resembles what caused the origin of fabulation in the first place: an ‘incipient hallucination’. At least at its source, then, fiction is a trauma reaction. But fabulation is important not simply because it is an interesting pathology (albeit one that is almost universal and naturally acquired), but because of Bergson’s own ambivalence towards it, for whilst calling its effects ‘a counterfeit of experience’, or ‘systematically false experience’, he also asks whether ‘the errors into which this tendency led are not the distortions, at the time beneficial to the species, of a truth’. In other words, we have what may well be a faculty whose symbolic expression is distorting, but the source of which is illuminating. We will see that the faculty, that would so de-animate the world as a whole (when it moves from animatism to theism) needs only the shock of certain traumatic processes – disasters – to see parts of it again intentionally as events.

Section Two: Death, Disaster and the Gift of Life
Leafing through the pages of The Two Sources (Bergson, 1977) on fabulation, one cannot miss the connection with trauma, especially the trauma of excess novelty: that is, novelty or difference beyond our foresight. As Bergson explains, we divide reality primitively into that which, in principle, can always be foreseen (the mechanical) and that which cannot: between what we can control and what we cannot (Bergson, 1977: 164). In some circumstances, then, there is a gap between an intention and its execution, leaving room for accident. Fabulation, in these cases, acts as a defence against the ‘margin of the unexpected between the initiative taken and the
effect desired’ (Bergson, 1977: 139–40, 142). It concerns what we have some, but not total, foresight over: it does not work on what we see as predictable and necessary, but only on what we cannot fully predict; neither radical novelty nor total familiarity, neither pure difference nor pure repetition, but on that degree of difference which exceeds our powers.

These novelties or differences are significant, not so much for what they are in themselves – ‘earthquakes, floods, tornados’ or ‘aggression in nature’ (as Bergson puts it), as well as illness, serious accident and, of course, ‘the greatest accident of all’, death (Bergson, 1977: 153, 140, 138) – as for our response to them, how we see them. They are given an intentionality, for if the effect has an importance to us, if the effect has meaning for us (our death, our injury), then the same level of significance must be in the cause (on the basis of a primitive logic of ‘like coming from like’; p. 145). Bergson cites the example of First World War soldiers being far more fearful of bullets than of shrapnel, despite the latter being so much more deadly. The reason for this, he argues, is that we fear that which is prima facie an intended effect, and whereas shrapnel may be more likely to hit us, it does so by relative accident compared to the (literal) aim of the rifleman. If the effect is to be our death, then we feel it should result from a malicious force rather than an indifferent one. And when there is only a force of nature at play (say in a lightning strike), then we animate that nature with malign will.

But what good does this do us? According to Bergson, we do it simply to have an effect ourselves, to have the possibility of effective resistance (at least in our imagination). That which is intended, that which is mindful and alive, can be influenced. And processes made into mindful just by giving them a name. Writing of William James’ account of his experience of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Bergson argues that the naming of an event makes it the event; that is, naming it individuates it, for an ‘earthquake’ itself is simply a disparate set of processes. But with a name, we individuate the earthquake as the cause of these processes (rather than the set of them), and thereby we are better able to see an ‘intention pervading the act’ that may be served or thwarted (Bergson, 1977: 156, 169, 175). As Bergson says: ‘the disturbances with which we have to deal, each of them entirely mechanical, combine into an Event with an elemental personality, a mind or interiority.’ We turn the processes into a living Event. This ‘image’ of interiority ‘lends to the Event a unity and an individuality which make of it a mischievous, maybe a malignant being . . .’ (Bergson, 1977: 157, 158).

Events, therefore, have a face, so to speak, but it is one that we impose in order to master our fate through the ascribed identity or identification of the event.

Once named and personalized, the event or events can be effected, if only by magic. Discussing the nature of ‘chance’, ‘luck’ and ‘accident’, Bergson already sees in these names an anthropomorphization of events, which allows us a possible magical influence. When the gambler at a roulette wheel makes a swift gesture with his or her hand at the point where
they want the ball to fall into the wheel, this gesture is ‘a transfiguration of the will to win’ (Bergson, 1977: 141). Bergson calls it a ‘logic of the body, an extension of desire’, as seen in the war dances of (so-called) primitives that will magically frustrate their enemies (p. 167). But these bodily comportments are in everyone – ‘a sudden shock arouses the primitive man dormant within us all’, Bergson claims (p. 176).

What is central for us now is to focus on Bergson’s view that these representations of mythic, supernatural forces always start or end (even in magical thought) with a real trauma of accident, illness or observed death (Bergson, 1977: 144). They stem from ‘out-of-the-way experience’, excess novelty, or ‘sudden shock’ that paralyses our superficial psychic life (p. 160). In one example, Bergson writes from his own experience of a ‘vague foreboding’ of what would eventually be known as the Great War. This was an event much discussed and predicted during the 43 years following the end of the Franco–Prussian War in 1871, but Bergson describes how, on the announcement of war with Germany in August 1914, he suddenly felt an invisible presence, as what was once only an abstract idea gradually became real. As an idea, it had remained both ‘probable and impossible’, a ‘contradictory idea’, keeping an ‘abstract character’ until the very last moment, whereupon he had this strange ‘feeling of admiration for the smoothness of the transition from the abstract to the concrete’ (p. 160).

Here, finally, we come to the heart of fabulation as something more general than just ‘myth-making’, for its own source – in the traumas of illness, natural disaster, war and, pre-eminently, anticipated death – begins with disturbance, with interruption, but one that is felt as a shock. And the felt trauma, ultimately the shock of the idea of death, is what allows us to see as, to see x as y: it creates a faculty (or virtual instinct) that can see anger in the dark clouds above, spirits in water springs, God’s design in the workings of nature, and reality in fiction, including cinematic fiction. It is to refract rather than reflect. In this vein, Bergson writes the following of our primitive emotional reaction to domestic collisions, such as when we accidentally bang our leg against a table. Naturally, we blame the table. He continues:

Between the identification of the table with a person and the perception of the table as an inanimate object, there lies an intermediate representation which is neither that of a thing nor of a person; it is the image of the act accomplished by the striking or, better still, the image of the act of striking . . . The act of striking is an element of personality, but not yet a complete personality. (Bergson, 1977: 125)

To carve out events from the ‘continuity of the real’ is how fabulation is described in The Two Sources, but this is precisely how all perception is described in Bergson’s earlier, seminal work Matter and Memory (Bergson, 1911). Perception is a form of fabulation: they both fragment our experience of ‘the real’, but to some degree they are also both redeemable,
defragmentable (to borrow an ugly word from computing), through art and through philosophy. Only what makes fabulation really interesting is that without it, without the faculty of seeing as, we couldn’t have the art that redeems the fragmenting activity of perception! The affect, or shock to thought which generates fabulation, which refracts our vision of the real, also creates the very same reality effects (or ‘illusions’) that allow art to (in some degree, but never perfectly) defragment the real. We will now examine this, as we move into the second half of this article to see how film reflects and reforms Bergson’s theories concerning the origins of fiction.

**Section Three: Fabulation, Other Minds and Film**

We can now move on to demonstrate fabulation at work within a film. We will have to leave aside Bergson’s supposed cinephobia (which is much overstated), because film offers too good an opportunity to see fabulation operating in the face of disaster. Remember that fabulation concerns fiction as well as the principle of Other Minds, going from an attribution of mind to all of nature, to an attribution of it to just a part – namely the most human (monotheism here being read as a narcissistic mirror-image of one’s self). Significantly, the ‘illusion or fiction of reality’ in our experience of cinema has been linked to Other Minds in recent cognitivist approaches within film theory, in particular Gregory Curry’s imagination theory of the cinematic illusion which also works on an Other Minds model (Currie, 1995). For Currie, however, imagination (rather than affect or shock) has the central role and it is a cognitive one.

For Bergson, by contrast, fabulation at its source is a felt or affective recognition of mindfulness in all of nature that is slowly restricted to an image of the self (that is, humanity and its anthropomorphic God). Moreover, Bergson’s is not an Empathy model of Other Minds like Currie’s, as these tend to be associationist, whilst Bergson’s model is dissociationist, that is, our awareness itself of the other mind (like all our awareness or consciousness) is what remains of the fragmentation (through disturbance) of a prior partial whole. It is a residual affect due to what was always only a partial individuality, an interpenetration: it is not built up by association or analogy between discrete individuals comparing their public behaviour (as in Currie’s view) but what remains after dissociation.

But let’s get back to films. To begin with, there are the findings of the psychologist Albert Michotte, who showed experimentally that people tend to anthropomorphize films of moving dots and squares, with qualities like intention, animation and causality (Michotte, 1963). A lovely example of this can be seen in Mel Brooks’ Oscar-winning animated short, *The Critic* from 1963. James Monaco describes it as follows:

Abstract animated shapes perform on the screen as we hear the voice of Brooks, an old man, puzzle his way happily through the significance of this ‘art’:
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‘Vot da hell is dis?! Mus’ be a cahtoon. Op . . . Mus’ be both. Dis looks like both. I remembeh when I was a boy in Russia . . . biology.

Op! It’s born. Whatever it is, it’s born . . . Look out! Too late. It’s dead already . . . Vot’s dis? Usher! Dis is cute. Dis is cute. Dis is nice. Vot da hell is it? Oh. I know vot it is. It’s gobbage. Dat’s vot it is! Two dollas I pay for a French movie, a foreign movie, and now I gotta see dis junk!’

The first shape is joined by a second, and Brooks interprets:

‘Yes. It’s two . . . two things dat, dat, dat – they like each other. Sure. Lookit da sparks. Two things in love! Ya see how it got more like? – it envied the other thing so much. Could dis be the sex life of two things?’

The scene changes again and Brooks’s old codger begins to lose interest:

‘Vot is dis? Dots! Could be an eye. Could be anything! It mus’ be some symbolism. I t’ink . . . it’s symbolic of . . . junk! Uh-oh. It’s a cock-aroach! Good luck to you vit ya cock-a-roach, mister!’

As the artistic short comes to a close, the critic passes final judgment:

‘I dunno much about psych’analysis, but I’d say dis is a doity pictcha!’

(Monaco, 1981: 309)

On the topic of cartoons, we might even say that all films are animations. By saying they are animations we mean that, in giving movement to still images, there is also the gift of life: animation is both giving movement and giving life. Indeed, the film theorist Richard Allen has argued that movement is vital in filmic projective illusion, or the reality effect (Allen, 1997: 112). Consider also the following passage from Colin Radford’s classic essay on the paradox of fiction, or why we are moved by characters and events we know to be unreal, such as the fate of Anna Karenina. His own argument is that it is irrational, but then in a note he adds:

A man has a genre painting. It shows a young man being slain in battle (but it is not an historical picture, that is, of the death of some particular real young man who was killed in a particular battle). He says that he finds the picture moving and we understand, even if we do not agree. But then he says that, when he looks at the picture, he feels pity, sorrow, etc., for the young man in the picture. Surely, this very odd response would be extremely puzzling? How can he feel sorry for the young man in the painting? But now suppose that the picture is a moving picture; i.e., a movie, and it tells a story. In this case we do say that we feel sorry for the young man in the film who is killed. But is there a difference between these two cases which not only explains but justifies our differing responses? (Radford, 1975: 67–80, 79 n. 3)

Radford offers no answer, but I would suggest that what adds life to this projection, what makes it plausible, is the addition of movement. Movement
animates. Admittedly, any movement seen in film is literally just that, ‘seen’ or ‘apparent’ movement. And in much film theory, the basis of cinema in an illusion – apparent movement – along with its ideological basis in capitalist industry, has often left it seeming invidious. But one can also give a positive spin to some aspects of the illusory dimension of cinema. The fabrications of fabulation, the making of consoling myths in the face of death, can equally be seen as a response to the truth of death with an attempt at making (other) further truths: out of the affect of trauma, fabulation creates.

Of course, we all suffer some ‘false consciousness’ when we sympathize with events we normally deem politically or morally reprehensible, as when in Hitchcock’s Psycho we want Norman to succeed in clearing up the mess after the first murder committed by his ‘mother’ and then later again in his attempt to sink the victim’s (Marion Crane’s) car. But it is the events, physical and minute, that gain our empathy, not any ‘wicked’ character: it is his movements, as well as the cars’ and that of the changing perspective (due to the camera’s movement) that affect us; or so Bergson would argue, I believe. Taking a Deleuzian line on this, one might say that cinematic images are events rather than representations, because sensation and affect are not wholly or intrinsically cognitive (Shaviro, 1993: 26–7). We will expand on the meaning of this next, as we look at a disastrous event as it is represented in one film.

Section Four: Fabulation and Titanic
In one scene from Cameron’s Titanic we witness the night-time events just before the Titanic collides with an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Lookouts, helmsmen and engineers do their best to turn the ship from its course and we watch, with them, the final moments of the ship drawing closer to the iceberg, edging slightly to port, but nevertheless eventually hitting the obstacle.

In attempting to apply some social science to this investigation, I showed this clip to a group of 31 first-level film studies students, all of whom had seen the film before. They were then asked the following question:

On a scale of 1–10, to what extent would you agree with the following statement (1 equalling no agreement and 10 equalling full agreement): ‘When watching the sequence – especially as the ship nears the iceberg – I felt myself hoping that it might miss, and/or felt myself willing it to turn in time to miss.

Of the 31 responses I received, there were eight scores of 10, three scores of 9, eleven scores of 8 and nine scores of 7, averaging out at 8.3, a statistically significant result.

Disaster films are very good at this individuation of events, especially in their early parts – steam from the volcano in Dante’s Peak, the portentous smoke or small flames in The Towering Inferno: these all work as signs
of the danger to come, of an event that is looming, stalking the characters (almost like another character) as they go about their business, oblivious to the threat. According to Bergson, by anthropomorphizing processes as an event, we reify them and give them a personality such that we can use our will and action against them. We think we can prevent some of their effects. We can imagine all that we might do or (in a film), all that might occur or might be done to forestall the eventuality. This is why we feel we can change or hope to change the course of the Titanic, despite our knowledge of its fate. It is not that the iceberg is made human, but the collision with the iceberg is made into an event with intentionality – and what has intent can have that intent thwarted.

Naturally, there are many other ways to describe what is going on when we unpack the vague notion of ‘willing disbelief’ as it may be operating in this case. To begin with the most obvious, it could be that we simply identify with the characters and their desires. Yet it is odd that most of the characters who occupy the screen (especially with close-ups and point-of-view shots) during this sequence are unsympathetic, being the overconfident, arrogant representatives of a Victorian culture that was doomed because it put too much faith in machinery and not enough in nature (the simple moral of Cameron’s tale). Moreover, work by Murray Smith on optical alignment and affective allegiance complicates that traditional response, given that we are not allied with the characters we are optically aligned with in this scene (see Smith, 1995). One might also mention here Vivian Sobchack’s use of the notion of ‘reversibility’ in cinematic perception. She too argues that point-of-view shots do not necessitate the adoption of a character’s mindset, because film-perspective is not, at heart, a first-order adoption of another’s perspective but the showing of perspective – a second-order awareness of seeing as such:

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood.

[...] That is to say that the signs and meaning of signification and significance of vision, as they are doubly and reversibly articulated in the dialect of the film experience, are constantly negotiable . . . As our embodiments differ and our situations change, so the film’s activity of sign production and its meaning change for us in our differently situated activity of looking, in our different intentions towards it. (Sobchack, 1992: 3–4, 305)

Another alternative explanation for this illusion of reality watching the scene from Titanic is that the narration is one of suspense, either by proxy of the characters’ situation or even directly, as in Susan Smith’s notion of ‘direct suspense’ (Smith, 2000). Yet suspense works through not fully knowing the outcome of events, and we certainly do know the outcome of the Titanic’s story (that’s why I find our response to it intriguing).
this a matter of anxiety in the face of an unsure future, or even a probable one; this is an affect created despite the future being absolutely certain: and unless one is to invoke exotica such as alternative universes where the film (and/or history itself) has a happier ending, the fact remains that the Titanic will sink, because, as one character tells us knowingly, it’s ‘made of iron’. The music also contributes its own rhythm to create suspense, but again, will not on its own generate the sense of actuality we feel when watching the scene.

I won’t go on much more, for we could engage with a host of other explanations concerning the reality effect in fiction (both filmic and general), some aggrandizing, like Nelson Goodman’s notion of world making, which bears considerable comparison to Bergson’s fabulation (as I will note at the end of this section), some more prosaic, such as Kendall Walton’s concept of mimesis as make-believe (Walton, 1990). But each of these other explanations, while relevant, are not wholly adequate, either individually or collectively. One of them, however, merits a few words. Torben Grodal’s idea is that cinematic fiction directly stimulates physiological and cognitive responses hardwired into us by our evolutionary history (Grodal, 2000). These responses are ‘innate and universal’, and often subconscious, and it is these which generate the ‘reality effect’. For example, the narrative of near disaster (‘Indiana Jones is about to be crushed by a huge rolling boulder’ etcetera), becomes a ‘push–pull’ machine, mobilizing ‘. . . powerful mental motivational mechanisms [based in our ‘special frontal brain modules’] used by humans to perform complex tasks’ (Grodal, 1999: 127–45, 133, 144). The reality status of an image is analysed on the basis of various physical parameters – the intensity of the image, its temporality and so on – and processed within the brain even as we devote our conscious mind to enjoying the minutiae of the narrative in isolation from the physical nature of its medium.

The problem with Grodal’s approach is that ‘reverse engineering’ is very evident here (his explanations – like so many in cognitive science – are retrodictive rather than predictive), and we are given little indication as to why we are so susceptible to the reality effect, that is, why we have this faculty for proto-empathy. Another problem is how we are able to see these images as real, or even quasi-real, for it remains a mystery how a two dimensional phi-phenomenon depicting a pretence of reality can convey, however fleetingly, the impression of reality. One might answer the second question, a biological issue, with biology (our brains are just able to tell the pictorial apart from the real – though Grodal denies this), but the first issue (of why we have this faculty in the first place) requires a more psychological answer, however rooted in biology it may also be. In other words, Grodal confuses levels, answering a psychological question with a biological mechanism rather than a psychobiological explanation. Oddly enough, the same criticism can be turned to other classical explanations of the paradox of fiction, such as the theory of catharsis, for while these provide a description of the emotional function of art (the ‘how’ issue), they omit an explanation of the source of our sensitivity to art, that is, why we are able to ‘see as’.
Of course, the sinking of the Titanic did actually happen, which perhaps makes it a less than ideal choice (it might be easier to confuse fiction with fact when the fiction is based on fact). Yet I feel that it works well as an example because it is a real event that we know has passed and yet which we feel is present. In fact, I am not so interested in whether any belief (in fiction as fact) is present or absent, rational or irrational at all, so much as the roots of that belief if it is there. Naturally, nobody confuses art with reality and interrupts Macbeth on stage before the first murder. But there are degrees in which we have to resist that impulse to intervene, a bodily impulse perhaps. Returning to Colin Radford again, we see another illuminating point at the end of his paper, which echoes Bergson’s description of the gambler’s gesture at the roulette wheel:

[A] tennis player who sees his shot going into the net will often give a little involuntary jump to lift it over. Because he knows that this can have no effect, it is tempting to say that the jump is purely expressive. But almost anyone who has played tennis will know that this is not true. (Radford, 1995: 78)

Beliefs, if we must talk of them, come in degrees: we do try to push the ball into the roulette wheel, we do try to lift the tennis ball over the net, and we do try to get out of the way of the train arriving into the station (though without running out of the cinema, as was claimed of the audience at an early screening by the Lumière brothers). We don’t run away entirely, but the bodily desire to do so is there, if only in degrees, as in our desire to move the Titanic out of the direction of the iceberg by shifting in our seat or by pointing our shoulders in the direction it must go. A desire and logic of the body, Bergson calls it.

In other words, cinematic perception differs from and undermines our normal, everyday perception. I am shocked by the image of the train approaching me, not because I believe it is a train (if I did, I would leave my seat and run), but because of the material impact of the image itself (so I hide my eyes). We are now habituated to such images and blasé in their presence, which has been dampened by repetition and the standardization of film stock, mise-en-scène, editing and rules of exhibition. But cinema still has the potential to shock with new images – visual ones, yes, but also with sound, music and speech (Shaviro, 1993: 34): unforeseeable and unthinkable images that reawaken, for a while, our sensitivity to it. But the non-referentiality of the image does not indicate its lack (of referent), but its own visceral immediacy, not as an object but as an event (Shaviro, 1993: 36, 38). As Steven Shaviro puts it:

this immediacy or speed [or film] is not authenticated by any illusion of concrete or actual presence. The immediacy of cinema is always excessive; it is too strong, too insistant, to be contained by any ‘metaphysics of presence’. . . . I have already been touched and altered by these sensations, even before I have had the chance to become conscious of them. (p. 46)
The image is not only specular (as Lacan and the film theorists who follow him would argue), but also tactile: as an event, it is incorporeal, yet thereby all the more physical in its effect – it attacks our physiology, agitates our flesh.

A final point. Perhaps our ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in fiction lies not simply in the artifice of fabricating fact, but also in fabricating time, bringing to the image (constructed in the past) the ‘illusion of the present tense’. But this phrase, the ‘illusion of the present tense’, which James Agee used to describe Italian neo-realism in particular, may also be generalized. Hoping to change the event of the Titanic’s collision doesn’t come only from making the event live and feel, but also from having it present, reliving its present, and so reopening its future. We believe we are seeing it happen now, and it is from this temporal state of actuality that our paradoxical beliefs, desires, and so on, may follow. One could argue that fiction-making is, by the same token, present-making, for the present, broadly understood, is what is alive for Bergson: movement is actuality and animation (literally), for to move is one condition of being alive that, primitively, allows us to animate things even further.21

But note that, according to Gilles Deleuze, the ‘sonsigns’ and ‘opsigns’ of Italian neo-realism augur in the time-image, Vittorio de Sica creating purely optical situations in Ladri di biciclette and Umberto D that fragment the rational cause and effect flow of time in the movement-image (see Deleuze, 1986). Is not fabulation itself of this ilk, making matter live, just as Jacques Tati’s sonsigns in Les Vacances de M. Hulot turn matter (sound) into a living character? Think only of the swinging kitchen door in the film’s ‘Hôtel de la Plage’ which becomes a person, a tired and bored person, no less than the waiters themselves.

So what is fabulation doing? Is it an individuating, an anthropomorphizing, or is it also a giving of life, or even a making present? I think it is all of these. These presents are made, or rather, in fabulation, an intuition of the alien presence of another – its life and movement – is given a partial or distorted expression. A living, actual present is created in these ‘efficient presences’, as Bergson calls them. In fabulation, we are moved to move other movements further and to make them others’ movements, the movements of others (which sometimes they are). And every movement can be animated (the artist can see life even in a plastic bag caught in the wind),22 only some processes – ones in extremis, concerning death and disaster – are commonly vitalized by all of us (at least primitively into events). In a crisis, we are all artists.

Conclusion

And here is where we go beyond merely illustrating Bergson’s philosophy of the living event such that the experience of film can both illustrate and reform his ideas, adding something to a philosophy by making us think philosophically. In this way film offers itself to applied philosophy, not simply as an illustration of a philosophy of the event, but actually by making us think about events – asking us the question: ‘Why do we want to move
the ‘Titanic’? These events are real for us on account of the power of film – through its moving images – to stimulate thought out of paradoxical feelings. It is an example of what creates philosophy within an ‘applied’ sphere, an experience that forces us to philosophize about our perception of the world as such.

If it seems counter-intuitive to give fabulation such primacy given its connotations of falsity and artifice, remember that fabulation is not error for Bergson, but lies in the verisimilar expression of an intuition: qua what is expressed, fabulation no doubt creates static products (myths, superstitions, fictions and so on), but qua source or process, that is, the movement of expression, it is dynamic (and what is dynamic for Bergson is never wholly wrong) and creative – it creates new actual events. In this respect, Bergson’s aesthetics approaches that of Nelson Goodman, for whom ‘fictioning’ is a making of new worlds, of new actualities, rather than finding an underlying or alternative dimension to just the one world (ours); it is a pluralism of the most radical sort that remakes the world into new versions rather than merely copying it. In the chapter of Ways of Worldmaking (Goodman, 1978) entitled ‘The Fabrication of Facts’, Goodman writes as follows on fiction:

Fiction, then, whether written or painted or acted, applies truly neither to nothing nor to diaphanous possible worlds but, albeit metaphorically, to actual worlds. Somewhat as I have argued elsewhere that the merely possible – so far as admissible at all – lies within the actual, so we might say here again, in a different context, that the so-called possible worlds of fiction lie within actual worlds. Fiction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction. Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable . . . ways. (p. 104)

The same can be said of the fabulation of (living) events: it is not an act of pure whimsy, creating nothingness (mis-representations) ex nihilo, but a creation of worldly entities that are subjective, and yet, as creations, real.

Notes
1. There are four stages to fabulation in the construction of animatism, animism, theism (be it polytheism or monotheism), and finally pantheism. However, we will not be interested in pursuing the religious argument here.
2. (Bergson, 1977: 107, 195): fabulation is another faculty, not a variation on a general theme.
3. I won’t, in part because I can’t, vouch for the originality of Bergson’s theological and sociological analyses vis-a-vis the origins of religion. His interest – and mine – is philosophical.
4. (Bergson, 1977: 108). This said, all these other forms of representation come back to fabulation in its religious origins. Bergson’s investigation foreshadows a type of structural anthropology: by studying the structure of myths and myth-making without prejudice (1977: 108–9) – that is, by taking their content seriously –
Bergson hopes to see what function they perform. He is thus critical of Levy-Bruhl’s idea that primitive mentality is unique to primitives: the human mind works the same throughout the population, but on different material (1977: 103, 104). There is the same ‘psychological origin of superstition’ for all.

5. Man is ‘alone in knowing that he must die’ (Bergson, 1977: 204).

6. If not yet a full personality (Bergson, 1977: 125).


8. No longer ourselves being animists, we now think of this spirit as an ‘an abstract idea . . . extracted from things by an intellectual effort’, whereas it was originally thought that this spirit was that action. It might be truer to say that with the ‘spirit of the spring’ we already have the beginnings of that extraction, and that our conception of this spirit now as merely one abstract idea among others, far from being an innocent description of a tenet of animism, is actually a furtherance of this extractive process (partly effected by our language of ‘substance’ and ‘attributes’: Bergson, 1977: 180).

9. (Bergson, 1977: 110). Likewise, the original fabulation of taboos is not absurd (p. 128).

10. ‘Event’ is capitalized by Bergson throughout these passages.

11. ‘Events’, e.g. ‘Accidents’, are carved out of ‘the continuity of the real’ by anthropomorphization (Bergson, 1977: 158–60).

12. ‘An intentional resistance, and even a vengeance, at first strike us as self-sufficient entities’ (p. 125).

13. Bergson himself wrote: ‘As a witness to its beginnings, I realised [cinema] could suggest new things to a philosopher. It might be able to assist in the synthesis of memory, or even of the thinking process’ (cited in Douglass, 1999: 218).

14. To discuss the origins of this dissociated whole any further would bring us too far off into Bergsonian metaphysics.

15. Andre Bazin notwithstanding (who argued that cartoons are not films, so God alone knows what he would make of CGI).

16. This is a virtual instinct: so it is not incidental, as Nelson Goodman tells us, that engineers and physicians comprise a disproportionately high number of those who are unsusceptible to the phenomenon of apparent motion – the ‘phi-phenomenon’; they are ‘unable to see what they know is not there’ (Goodman, 1978: 92). Indeed, apparent or seen movement is not universal. But do these engineers and physicians go to the movies?

17. See Vivian Sobchack (1992: 17): ‘contemporary theory (most of it feminist and/or neo-Marxist in approach) has focused on the essentially deceptive, illusionary, tautologically recursive and coercive nature of the cinema, and on its psychopathological and/or ideological functions of distorting existential experience. Such theory elaborately accounts for cinematic representation but cannot account for the originary activity of cinematic signification’.

18. Four-minute clip from Titanic (Cameron, 1997) of collision with iceberg: (DVD, Chapter 16): 1.33.28 to 1.37.40.

19. Narrative could be said to be enjoyable in general because it suspends us
between expectations that are both fulfilled and flouted with each new event (or, as Bergson says of the event, between the probable and impossible).

20. Douglas Pye’s notion of foreboding when rewatching a film won’t fit either because it lacks a full analysis of the temporal differences between repeating the past (re-watching) and seeing a present (even only in fantasy), which is the key to my own final answer to the paradox, discovered through film.

21. Again, at least primitively and under certain pressures.

22. I’m referring here of course to Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* (1999).

References


*Dante’s Peak*, film, directed by Roger Donaldson. USA: Pacific Western, 1997.


*Umberto D*, film, directed by Vittorio de Sica. Italy: Dear Film, 1952.


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