

Infinite retrogression: backwardforward motions for another life

I.

It is in the very last second of the twenty-minute-long film that one jolts, as if struck by a lightning bolt. It is in the very last action that one is thrown back, loses direction, spins into doubt, and hopes for a rerun, just to check what has just happened before one's eyes. It is in the very last second that the screen is filled, overfilled, with that chrono-narratological-cinematic gadget, the clapperboard – whose function is to clack before the supposedly relevant action is about to start, thus triggering it, and on whose surface all sorts of information is scribbled in order to keep track of the film's order. It is a surprising eruption, of the clapperboard, because until then the film's ten previous scenes had carried us smoothly in a methodic back and forth of the camera, following five dancers, an occasional blue and silver glimmering curtain, and the dancers' singular motions. But in that very last second, as *Moving Backwards* is about to end, or as it actually ends, or as it quasi-ends, or quasi-almost ends, we are given to see what should have been recorded merely in/as its pre-beginning and then left out of the film proper. And thus, here we are, left with a jolt. And, after the clap, after the cut, back to black, in the dark, plunged into *Moving Backwards's* afterlife, retinas still filled with afterimages, we cannot but ask: had the entirety of the previous twenty minutes – the solos, duos, or group dances, the improbable gestures of the dancers, the empty actions (like standing before microphones and yet not uttering a sound), the simple walks (forwards but with the shoes pointing backwards, or backwards but with the shoes pointing forwards), the thick silences, the abstract noises (all of which had been performed in the same empty black space with a slightly reflexive black floor and an opaque black back wall) – had it all indeed, been projected, from the start, in reverse?

It is not even that the film's end has been transported into a displaced beginning. It's as if the clapperboard is performatively operating directly into the world outside the film and instructing or commanding its audience: now *you* go into action. Now it's your turn to start moving, to rebegin it all. But how are we to begin after the end? The film suggests a paradoxical answer: by moving backwards.

Moving Backwards is Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry's latest collaboration, where the two artists once again expand and overflow the boundaries between film, choreography, installation, social sculpture, and performance. In a co-signed letter to the work's "visitors," Lorenz and Boudry conclude by saying: "We will move backwards and think about the ways in which we wish to live with loved but also unloved ones. We will move backwards, because strange encounters might be a pleasant starting point for something unforeseen to happen." Two simultaneous movements then, from the start: backward motions as a way out of the straight arrow of time and history, and strange encounters as starting points for the unforeseen to happen. All bundled up by a backward motion. But backward in relation to what exactly? What exactly gives the "proper" direction, the "right" direction, the "correct" or normative way, so that one can say then that the current movement is not actually a forward one? Moreover: if, as we just saw, actions being projected in reverse are shown in a film that, as the

clapperboard shot indicates, is perhaps also being edited against its “forward,” or “proper,” temporal order, then does it follow that the double temporal negative puts everything back into a forward time line, a temporal forwardness? Clearly it does not. First temporal consequence of the double movement in *Moving Backwards*: a total questioning of the accepted axiomatic that time is a one-way street. (The ultimate conclusion one may also derive from the film is even more radical: that time is that which *is not*. But more on this radical conclusion later.)

II.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed an increased interest in minoritarian critical theory in reassessing how the social-political construction of regimes of exclusion, oppression, and exploitation are actually deeply linked to a whole axiomatic that is supposedly exterior, or estranged, from those social-political regimes: the theoretical premises that support, inform, and give “universal objective value” (i.e., a supposedly transcendental and non-politically relevant character) to the physical sciences. In this reassessment, we can think for instance of Michelle Wright’s proposition of a whole “physics of blackness” (as opposed to the Newtonian physics that allowed for the affirmation of the kinetic project of colonial capitalism and its “ethnoclass” known as “MAN,” to use Sylvia Wynter’s expressions), or of Fred Moten’s affirmation of a “blackness of physics.” We can think of Karen Shimakawa’s recent work on quantum entanglement and butoh, and Karen Barad’s interrogation of the performativity of patriarchal forces in subatomic physics. Or we can also invoke Denise Ferreira Da Silva’s interrogations of mathematics and their algebraic conditioning of (racialized) matters, Kathryn Yusoff’s reformulation of geology in its relation to race and matter, and Sarah Ahmed’s investigations of vestibular and somatic implications in her project of establishing a queer phenomenology.¹

All of these different authors, each with their own projects and sensibilities, and yet all proposing a generalized minoritarian interpellation of the supposed non-political nature of the physical sciences, point us to a crucial fact: we must upheave the entire theoretical premises upon which narratives of time, space, and matter are predicated. We must work towards another kind of relation with the material world. Only by questioning its supposedly “natural laws,” its supposedly “universal laws,” can we finally fulfill the beautiful promise that nature, in its queer, deviant, desiring, untamed, fugitive, and incalculable pulse always already offers us. We must therefore work towards another image of physics, and therefore open ourselves to truly operate under totally different modalities of time, space, and matter.

III.

Moving Backwards is particularly successful in detonating normative ideas of time. But this detonation is so radical as to remind us of an observation by Gilles Deleuze, when he once wrote: “Nothing real is produced by time. It is habit that produces: as a system, habit produces the past as rule for the future” (Deleuze

¹ See Wright (2015); Wynter (2003); Moten (2013); Shimakawa (2018); Barad (2003); Da Silva (2017); Yusoff (2018); Ahmed (2006).

2018: 140, translation mine). We cannot then mix up the habits that invest the real with pre-framed possibilities that regulate its approved inhabitations, with the unruly, desiring, and generative nature of the real. Therefore: blast away all regulated notions of living, included regulated notions of time, and we can access directly the actual forces of production of normative reality: habit. It is habit then, as normative, restrictive, imposing, straight force that must be destroyed, undone. Instead of habit then, the “aberrant movement,” to use David Lapoujade’s expression (2018). But once we find ourselves in the middle of already occurring aberrant movements, and with those movements we decide to produce, what is left of time? Rather: what is left with “the topology of time, according to both Newton and common sense,” which sees time as uni-directionally orientated? (Maudlin 2012: 154).

Minoritarian answers to those questions include not only those given by Wright, Moten, Shimakawa, Da Silva, Barad, Yussof, and Ahmed, but also by those performed by Lorenz and Boudry and by their supra-sensorial, temporally paradoxical dancers: Marbles Jumbo Radio, Julie Cunningham, Nach, Latifa Laâbissi, and Werner Hirsch. All co-moving in order to upheave the entire premises upon which narratives and algorithms of time, space, and matter are predicated. All working not only to propose another relation to physics, but to inaugurate another, more concrete, more real vision and experience of the infinite multidirectionality of the physical world, what physicist Tim Maudlin describes as non-Newtonian, “non-orientable space-times” (Maudlin 2012: 156). All proposing an altogether other logic of sense: of direction and meaning, of the direction of meaning, and of the meaning of direction.²

Here, I cannot help but think of Deleuze’s extraordinary critique of normativity-as-unidirectionality when he advances—alongside that other time traveler and dismantler of well-ordered physics, Alice—the proposition that “It pertains to the essence of becoming,” – and here, it is crucial to remember that, for Deleuze and Guattari, all becoming is *always* a becoming-minoritarian³ – “to move and to pull in both directions at once” (Deleuze 1990: 1). Indeed, in the opening pages of *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze follows Alice’s multiple tracks, her essential multi-vectorial spatial and temporal non-orientation, to write: “Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction: but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time” (1990: 1). What better word can we use to describe several scenes in *Moving Backwards* than “paradox”? Not only “paradox” in its etymological sense, of signifying whatever lies beyond the doxa, i.e., beyond common or “normal” sense, but also “paradox” in its most mundane meaning. For instance, when, while watching

² Maudlin proposes certain topological models of the universe, where, even in orientable time, “the temporal structure of the universe is closed in such a way that no event lies uniquely to the ‘past’ or the ‘future’ of any other event: every event lies in both the past and the future light-cone of every other event, including itself” (2012: 159). In the gallery, watching *Moving Backwards*, consider the light-cone of the projector onto the gallery wall, as that amalgamation of past, present, future into queer disorientations.

³ See Deleuze and Guattari, 1982: 291.

Lorenz and Boudry's film we start to realize that, in it, movement is being constantly performed as having no main, or privileged, direction: every single scene in the film calls into question the "proper" direction of the dancer's movement. For instance, in the opening sequence, Marbles Jumbo Radio slowly walk forwards in profile towards the right-hand side of the frame, while their feet are pointing backwards. Hence, in their paradoxical movement, "backwards" and "forwards" become a totally absurd, relative, spatial-temporal-habitual pre-orientation of what is deemed the "proper" or "correct" corporeal and kinetic orientation for walking. Or still, in the extraordinary scene 5, where again Marbles Jumbo Radio dance a sharply virtuoso solo, later joined by Julie Cunningham, and which is entirely rendered "backwards" in the film. (It took me a couple of viewings, and a confirmation from the filmmakers, to be able to state this counter-orientation of the dance, with total confidence).

IV.

Improperly moving then, queerly deviant, chrono-kinetically dissident, the dancers in *Moving Backwards* demonstrate before our eyes, and thanks to their entangled interactions with the backwardforward movements of the tracking camera, and of the backwardforward movements of the editing table, and finally, of the backwardforward movement already constituting reality itself, "a veritable becoming-mad, which never rests" (Deleuze: 2). The dancers, the camera, the film, all conglomerate into a multiple totality "that moves in both directions at once." In moving backwards and forwards at the same time, the dancers in *Moving Backwards* "elude the present, causing future and past [...] to coincide in the *simultaneity of a rebellious matter*" (Deleuze 1990: 2).

Thus, assessing and working from-and-as "rebellious matter," physics stops to be revered as a rarified realm exterior to the social, the political, the sexual, the corporeal, and endures a radical operation of joyful liberation: a sublevation, an uprising of all matters it supposedly explains, or sets in order. Particularly minor or minoritarian ones. In this queer choreo-chronic operation, reality is no longer given privileged direction, and even less a uni-direction. Rather, reality is that which constantly goes in every possible direction. Thus, temporality frees itself from the notion of linear progression, and every matter is now necessarily perceived as constantly crisscrossing past, present, future. In this radically open universe, the task of the dancer, of the actor, of the minoritarian subject, of the fugitive, of the deviant, of all whose existence plunges into the singularity of non-pre-orientated queer-becomings, is then to move through all these dimensions. Not as characters of some utopian science fiction. But as concrete agents inhabiting a very real here and now, the daily hyper-reality to which we are all bound, a "non-orientable space-time," to invoke again Tim Maudlin (2012: 156): dancers moving as rebellious matter into the "infinite identity of both directions or senses at the same time – of future and past, of the day before and the day after, or more or less, or too much and not enough, of active and passive, of cause and effect" (Deleuze: 2).

Dancing backwardforward into the indeterminate condition of existence totally reconditions the potentials already embedded in the real and which habit and common sense, normative time and normative physics, imprison. Because, in the

end, the question of time has always been the question of order. The question of ordering the time of the social as “temporally orientable” (Maudlin 156). The more one reifies and extracts ordered time and places it as a supposedly a-social reality, the more one is unable to create a true science of time. In that science, obviously, one would finally find the most concrete of physics: one that is predicated on the very simple reality principle that time is that which is not.

V.

In *Moving Backwards*, the question of time is explicitly made coterminous to the political question of tracking movement. As Lorenz and Boudry state, the whole choreographic premise that informs the five performers’ movements throughout the whole film derives from the strategy developed by the “women of the Kurdish guerrillas [who] wore their shoes the wrong way round to walk from one place in the snowy mountains to the other. This tactic save their lives. It seems as if you are walking backwards, but actually you are walking forwards. Or the other way around.” Which way then, which way? This is the question preoccupying trackers. Hunters on their prey, occupying forces on local guerrillas, e-commerce on citizens-turned-preyed-upon-24/7-potential-consumers, border patrols on migrants: all want to know in advance your direction, where you are headed. No wonder then, that Boudry and Lorenz fold this question of tracking and turn it into an insisting compositional device, as their sole camera movement in the whole of *Moving Backwards* is the tracking shot. Here, we can think of what Sara Ahmed calls “the paradox of the footprint,” as essentially (queerly) disorientating tracking technologies of power and subjective interpellation: “So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon. A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (Ahmed 2006: 16).

The tracking shot names filmed sequences where the camera moves forwards and backwards alongside whatever is moving along. The twenty minutes of *Moving Backwards* are divided into 10 tracking sequences, more or less equally split into two minute spans, where the camera slowly travels along a horizontal line, stops at a certain limit, and moves back again, following the motions of whomever might be dancing in each scene. In this measured, persistent, and calculated back and forth, another political element that links the question of time directly to the question of tracking emerges. An element that is also crucial to the art privileged in *Walking Backwards*: dance. That chrono-choreo-political element linking time and tracking is the concept of the trace. But what Lorenz and Boudry make clear with their exclusive use of the tracking shot, with the camera slowly rebounding back and forth along the horizontal line of the stage, where all the backwardforward dancing actions take place, is that the trace is, just as time, *what is not*: “The trace must be thought before the entity. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation” (Derrida 1997: 47). Thus, the guerrilla fighters can imprint their disorienting tracks in the snow, since those imprints trace nothing other than a fundamental self-occultation. In these occultural arts – of dance, of guerrilla warfare, of minor-cinema, of queer life, of love making – backwardforward motions infinitely turn “disadvantage into a tool,” as Lorenz and Boudry write in

their letter to the visitors. This turn, this return, this folding, this singularity is an already non-orientated, multi-directional, “pleasant starting point for something unforeseen to happen”: another life.

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