Corporeal Time

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“Give me a body then”: This is the formula of philosophical reversal.
Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2 189

I tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new fleshes, new languages.
Arthur Rimbaud, “Adieu” 302/303

The philosophical aim of Gilles Deleuze’s two-volume study of the cinema can be stated as follows: to reverse the dominance of space over time. The birth of a modern cinema constitutes the coming into its own of time, a shift from the indirect presentation of time (the movement-image) to its direct presentation (the time-image). But Deleuze’s philosophical project becomes more complicated when one examines the role of corporeality. For the cinema books continue a project that is, arguably, present in Deleuze’s entire oeuvre: the deconstruction of the Cartesian image of the body; that is, the deconstruction of the body as degraded and subordinated base of the mind/soul, and the investigation of new potentials for collective forms of the body.1 Conceiving of Deleuze’s two cinema books as a treatise on corporeality is not so difficult, given the way their very structure depends upon an idea of the body. The division between the first and second volumes takes place through what Deleuze refers to as the breakdown of the sensory-motor link. A form of corporeal life characterized by the instrumentalization of potentiality by actuality (the domination of the state of affairs over the virtual) gives way to a form of corporeal life characterized by a surplus of potentiality over actuality, or in Deleuze’s words, “Even the body is no longer what moves; subject of movement or the instrument of action, it becomes rather the revealer of time, it shows time through its tiredness and waitings” (Cinema 2 xi).2 One may go so far as to say that the modern cinema which constitutes the object of Cinema 2 predicates itself upon the transition from one form of corporeal life to another form. Between the end of the first book and the beginning of the second, a new body is born.

For the purposes of this essay, then, the event Deleuze calls “modernity” shall be thought of in terms of the constitution of a cinematic body. But a cinematic body as opposed to what? It is not my desire to produce a corporeal taxonomy of aesthetics. Deleuze’s interest in cinema does not consist in positing the essence of a medium. If it takes the formal dynamics of the cinema to produce the thought of the cinematic body, this body is not, however, confined to the cinema. The cinematic body is a philosophical concept.
A concept, in Deleuze’s terms, possesses autonomy but only in a fragmentary way. The concept remains open to the chaos of things. Its consistency mutates in its encounters (or interferences) with other concepts or with new forms of being. The concept of the cinematic body, then, is an effect of the engagement between philosophy and cinema. It is the effect of the cinema shocking philosophy’s thinking of the subject. But this shock travels; philosophy transmits it like a contagion:

It [philosophy] is a practice of concepts, and it must be judged in the light of the other practices with which it interferes. A theory of cinema is not “about” cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to and which are themselves related to other practices […] It is at the level of the interference of many practices that things happen. (C2 280)

The question thus becomes: where will the cinematic body wander? With what will it interfere? How will it produce new shocks to thought?

In this essay, I stage an encounter between the cinematic body and the poetic work of Arthur Rimbaud. Of course, the question is begged as to why I am discussing this particular poet. Or why poetry at all. Certainly, poetry and the cinema are not the same. They differ in both their technical and conceptual dimensions – to the point where attempting to catalogue the differences would likely prove fruitless. It is rather the intersection between cinema and poetry that is of relevance. For this essay, that intersection is the concept of the subject, conceived of in corporeal terms. It is my contention that Rimbaud’s poetry is one instance of the production of the cinematic body. It unhinges the dominant form of lyrical subjectivity so as to produce a new body, a body characterized by an immediately collective nature, by a surplus of potentiality over actuality, and by its constitution through a series of gestures irreducible to narrative. This body is not similar to the bodies that Deleuze discusses in the second volume of the cinema books. It is the same body. Rimbaud, in other words, produces the cinematic body before the arrival of cinema. Yet the production that takes place in Rimbaud is not an ex nihilo creation but rather an act of displacing and reorganizing a set of given materials, that is, production – and Marx remains the touchstone for such considerations – entails the generation of something new through the transformation of the old.

The cinema, as understood by Gilles Deleuze, and poetry, as written by Arthur Rimbaud, not only share the raw materials of Cartesian subjectivity but also break this subjectivity down and generate a new subjectivity in a homologous manner. This homology, I argue, is not a mere resemblance but the consequence of a shared desire: the desire to break the link between a Cartesian form of subjectivity and capitalist forms of life, the desire not only to destroy a form of subjectivity but to bring about new forms of social life. If this new form of life cannot be termed communist in the typical acceptance of the word, it is, nonetheless, possessed of a desire for commonality, for a power beyond bourgeois social forms, and for a possession of one’s own time or a refusal of the domination of time by the bourgeoisie, which can be considered the corporeal condition of a communist form of life to come. Indeed, it is no coincidence that both Deleuze and Rimbaud write under the imperative of revolution: May ’68 and the Paris Commune, respectively. In both cases, writing and thinking form unities of theory and praxis whose aim is to produce a radical social intervention, to remember a past revolution by exploring the space of possibility for a future revolution. The first part of the essay examines the breakdown of the sensory-motor link in Rimbaud’s poetry. Through an analysis of “Le Bateau ivre,” it shows how a conception of the subject as a bounded ego gives way to a free-floating excess of potentiality. The second part of the essay looks at Rimbaud’s prose poetry in order to show how the crisis of the first part becomes translated into new forms of social life. In this part, I also make the case that Rimbaud’s poetry contributes to Deleuze’s cinematic thought by thickening or elaborating the concept of the cinematic body. The shock to thought produced by the cinema mutates and multiplies as it traverses the “new flowers, new stars, new
fleshes, new languages’’ that go under the name of Arthur Rimbaud.

personality breakdown: dissolving the lyrical subject

Without making too crass a generalization, one may say that the subject of lyrical poetry typically takes the form of the psychoanalytic ego. In Lacanian terms, it occupies the register of the Imaginary, which is composed of a series of reflections that aim to give the subject a sense of wholeness. The ego functions in terms of a supposedly closed circuit of energy, and this circuit would have homeostasis or equilibrium as its goal. Much of lyrical poetry desires this equilibrium, which Freud called the pleasure principle. Even in its transgressions – one thinks of Charles Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal – this poetry tends to return, dialectically and narcissistically, to the closure of a sealed subject characterized by a personal form of individuality. There is always an “I” or a “me,” with its particular case history, which one may derive from lyrical poetry proper. Rimbaud’s verse work would appear to follow this line. It concerns itself with the ego of the young poet finding his way in his world and seeking intense pleasures along the way. Yet, as I argue, such a reading – despite its biographical relevance – fails to account for the way in which Rimbaud’s poetry undoes the lyrical subject. The language of Rimbaud’s verse engages in a process of creative destruction through which the link between the subject and the world and the subject and itself are broken and renovated.

Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau ivre” [The Drunken Boat] deconstructs this vision of the lyrical subject. It releases a flood of pleasure and desire, overloading the relation of the subject to itself and to the world, engendering a surplus of unactualized potentiality. To perform the work of editing, cutting and splicing together the stanzas/sequences which are conducive to a rethinking of the lyrical subject:

I was indifferent to all crews,
The bearer of Flemish wheat or English cottons
When with my haulers this uproar stopped,
subject, one implies that it acts as a center of gravity pulling together the flow of language and a form of closure by which the overflow of language is captured and contained. In this poem, the person explicitly identifies itself with the figure of the poet. The speed at which the poem oscillates between loving sweetness, indignant rage, and bitter sadness would seem to testify to the sensitiveness of the individual. The poet makes contact with the subtlest aspects of the natural and the divine, opening the doors of perception that remain closed to all but the most perceptive soul. His emotional heights are the effect of this contact with the world. The world, especially its exotic reaches, sparks the desire of the poet with the wealth of its phenomena. This desire dictates the movement of the poem: the poet moves away from the crowd, the public, to the loneliest ends of the world in order to pursue the sublime, whether it be in the form of the panther’s animality or the infusion of the sea by starlight. The poet subtracts himself from society in order to encounter a truer reality hidden beneath appearance.

On this approach, the lyrical subject engages in a quite particular dialectic. The self stretches itself to breaking point but only in order to absorb the intensities of the otherworldly or transcendent. Rather than threatening to eclipse the world, these aspects reinforce the elevation of the poet. The poet is the subject supposed to know, that is, the prophet, or one who sees clearly when others are in the dark. The poem’s incessant reference to acts of penetration signals a demystification of appearance and an unveiling of the thing itself. The poet, then, would take on the character of the analyst. Indeed, in a strange inversion of the poetic aura (the confounding depths of mystery that make up the poet’s mind), the poet would occupy the position of Science in Louis Althusser’s understanding of the term: he would negate the Imaginary obfuscations of the Real, producing a language (the Symbolic) of absolute clarity, that is, a language which would entirely coincide with the Real. Lacan, however, has a quite specific term for the identity between the Symbolic and Real: psychosis. The identity between the Symbolic and the Real conceals a narcissistic proliferation of the Imaginary.

What appears, at first glance, as absolute knowledge turns out to be a paranoid schema, a conspiracy generating a world entirely oriented around the ego. The poet would be that figure capable of reducing every phenomenon to means towards the end of his own pleasure. But this capability is less a divine form of insight than a confusion. In Lacanian terms, it is the confusion between the object and the objet petit a. In other words, the poet takes the images of his fantasies (the flimsy auratic colors he applies to the world: the blues and the reds) for reality itself. He hallucinates; he falls into délires. Rimbaud, the genius, is really Rimbaud the narcissistic psychotic; the relationship between desire and the Real is covered over by fantasy.

But these two readings – the poet as genius or the poet as psychotic – depend upon the same concept of the subject as person and upon a strict opposition between appearance and essence. In both cases, the real emerges as the truth of appearance but only insofar as truth may be conceived as autonomous. One enters a Platonist realm in which appearances are merely the degraded copies, or shadows, of essences/ideas. Most significantly, this opposition also takes on a temporal dimension, since the truth is considered as eternal, and the eternal as atemporal. Time comes to be consigned to the degraded, false level of appearance. In order to reach truth, the subject must extract itself from time, must negate its corporeal existence and render itself spiritual. These two readings, then, presuppose one and the same ontology – a Platonist ontology founded upon the split between essence and appearance (a split which, then, translates into a split between eternity and time, truth and falsity, the divine and the worldly).

This initial passage through “Le Bateau ivre” is unavoidable, despite the poem’s complexities. The ego weaves a skein that overlays the entire poem. The desire for truth, or meaning, supports a vision of subjective wholeness and closure. In other words, insofar as one searches for the meaning of the poem, insofar as one treats literature as a repository of truths, one must also accept the above outlined ontology and the subject corresponding to it (a Platonist-Cartesian subject). I term this initial reading metaphorical,
for it rests upon a thinking of resemblance, where the language and images of the poem are compared to and tested against a vision of truth. But the metaphorical reading deconstructs itself when one recognizes the excess of the language (the enunciated) over the position of enunciation (the lyrical subject). The subtraction of the subject from the crowd becomes an immersion in the waters of the world: “The green water penetrated my hull of fir / And some stains of blue wine and some vomitings / Washed me, dispersing rudder and grappling hook.” The poet’s desire to penetrate to the ends of the earth reverses into a penetration and dispersion of the lyrical subject. The closure of the subject comes undone so that one cannot demarcate the interior from the exterior. The inside and outside wash into each other, shifting places as quickly as the blurring between subject and object pronouns throughout the poem. The poem emerges from the outside of the world (“I bathed myself in the Poem”) but the outside of the world always already includes the interiority of the subject (the thinking of the poem/poet is in, or simply is, the landscape). Interiority reveals itself to be a folded exteriority; the psychic life of the poet constitutes an expression of the world, an eddy in the world’s waters.

The deconstruction of the ego-subject calls for a reading of the poem attentive to the moments when the literal and the figural become indiscernible. Rather than building itself upon an extended metaphor (the poet as boat seeking exotic treasures), the poem constitutes a series of becomings – a process of metamorphosis – in which metaphor is present but present not as a bridge to transcendent truth but as a modification of matter. From this perspective, the poetic is as much an affair of the ceaseless metonymic chain produced by the wanderings of the poet-boat as of metaphorical leaps. The figure of the poet remains in this reading of the poem, but it is no longer a self-identical center or container but rather a recurring eddy in the flows of mutating images and sounds of the poem. It possesses a greater weight than other elements of the poem, as if it were a motif structuring a musical sonata, but this weight – or in the case of this maritime poem, directionality and orientation – is the effect of the lyrical subject becoming other than itself: “I collided, know it, with unbelievable Floridas, / Mixing with flowers eyes of panthers skins / Of humans!” The “I” dissolves into a set of images, without being able to structure them (the lack of commas, the enjambment). The figure of the poet is not an identity to which the language of the poem comes home but rather an effect renovated over and over again by the poem. The poet is an overflowing figure of metamorphosis entirely defined by its immanent and limited becomings.

It becomes apparent in this metamorphic reading of “Le Bateau ivre” that the lyrical subject dissolves when one tries to grasp it. It dissolves not despite desire but because of it. In Lacan’s terms, one could say that the desire of the poet provokes an encounter with the Real – an encounter, that is, with that excess of being that is at once condition of possibility and condition of impossibility of reality, foundation and limit. In the final instance, the pleasures of the poem, its intense formal dynamics and plethora of contents, consume the lyrical subject attempting to hold everything together. Or as Leo Bersani writes of Rimbaud, “The frightening but also most profoundly desired satisfaction which the poet dreams of is to be liquefied” (233). In place of the organic totality of the lyrical subject emerges an impersonal rush of liquid flows. These flows oscillate between the amorphous and the polymorphous, the shapeless coming undone of the penetrated poet-boat and the multiplicitous becomings of panthers, flow- ers, and stars. These flows compose themselves from and into a diverse series of relations. This process of relation moves at high speed, deconstructing and constructing (without reconstruction) the figures of the poem. Rather than a poetry of metaphor, one encounters a poetry of metamorphosis. Identity (the figure of the lyrical subject) becomes a proliferation of differences, or identity is no more than the momentary effect of a blockage of liquid movement.

If one recognizes the language of Gilles Deleuze in my discussion of Rimbaud, it is not due to a mere resemblance of terminology between the poet and the philosopher but rather because of a set of borrowings and appropriations.
by Deleuze, on the one hand, and, on the other, a commonality of a project shared by the two writers, though in different spheres of thought. In “Le Voyant et les ‘enragés’: Rimbaud, Deleuze et Mai 1968,” André-Pierre Colombat argues that Deleuze inherits and renews Rimbaud’s poetic and political project. More specifically, he demonstrates how through the appropriation of well-known Rimbaldian phrases – especially the declaration of belonging to a “race inférieure” in “Mauvais Sang” – Deleuze and the soixante-huitards repeat the tropes of thought found in Rimbaud, especially the parody of racism, the cry of allegiance to the proletariat, the power of destruction involved in creation, and the reconciliation of soul and body. These tropes are especially prevalent in Rimbaud’s prose poems, and, as such, they will be discussed in the next section of this essay, but what merits attention, at this point, is that Deleuze’s philosophical energies are in some part derived from Rimbaud’s poetics. Indeed, this derivaton is evident not only in semantic borrowings but also in the more general stylistic traits that make up what might be termed the Deleuzian aesthetic. However, I would like to emphasize less the stylistic commonality between the two than the commonality produced in the interference between the conceptual and the affective, or the philosophical and poetic. Colombat makes an analogous claim when he writes: “The deep naturalism and Spinozism of Deleuzian thought rediscovers then a ‘Homo natura’ that would be, in part, a new version of the poet seer of Rimbaud” (844). Deleuze recapitulates Rimbaud but does so with a difference, thus producing a “new version” of the “overman” – “a new human form that would develop new types of relations with life itself” (845) – that Colombat identifies as the object of Rimbaud’s desire. There is, then, a common desire animating these two writers, but this desire – like the subject of Rimbaud’s poetry – does not remain identical to itself but mutates in its passage through history. From this perspective, the coupling of Rimbaud and Deleuze is not testimony to a completed rendezvous but rather to an ongoing project whose completion remains to come, which is to say that the Rimbaldian inquiry that Colombat assigns to the soixante-huitards is also our own: “In what measure can the work of Rimbaud be used by us, today, to characterize new forms of thought, to ‘reinvent’ desire and love [and, I would add, the corporeal subject]?” (845).

Rimbaud’s poetry shares in the event which Deleuze alternates between calling the breakdown of the sensory-motor link and the crisis of the action-image, as well as in the movement beyond this breakdown, which occurs in the prose poems. The action-image is simultaneously an aspect of the subject and a historico-logical moment of the cinema. In the first respect, the action-image is the “incurving of the universe, which simultaneously causes the virtual action of things on us and our possible actions on things” (Cinema 1 65). 13 In the ontology that Deleuze constructs in the cinema books, action cannot be separated from the world, as if it were the effect of an autonomous mind. There is only one substance making up the world, which Deleuze interchangeably calls movement and matter. The condition of possibility for action is a particular folding, an “incurving,” of matter itself. Spirit or mind does not consist of another substance but of a “special image,” a particular kind of movement, which engenders an eddy in the stream of becoming, a delay. The action-image takes up movement from a perception-image (a curvature which subtracts some movement from the world, producing the possibility of subjectivity as such) in order to add a new force or power to existence. Action is a translation of movement made possible by delay; the possibility of adding something to the world requires a delay which interrupts the steady course of reality’s reproduction.

The action-image is, however, doubled by a cinematic form (“the cinema of behavior”) which instrumentalizes the whole of movement. If the universe is an open whole of infinite movements incapable of being entirely totalized by any one order of signs, if movement as a whole, in other words, is always in excess of the local arrangement of movements, the cinematic mode of the action-image, nevertheless, manages to repress this openness, to suture it closed through what Deleuze at one point refers to as the laws of organic composition. Action becomes no more than an emanation of the situation’s...
essence, an attempt to correct an error: "There must be a big gap between the situation and the action to come, but this gap only exists to be filled, by a process marked by caesuras, as so many retrogressions and progressions" (C1 155). The action-image depends upon the emergence of a conflict, usually in the form of a social contradiction, but this conflict necessarily subordinates itself to the reproduction of the state of affairs. This corrective movement usually comes about by way of a subjective mediating figure – the heroic protagonist – but subjectivity, that particular delay in matter, is always already determined in advance by its conditions. It is bound by the sensory-motor link, which assures that its actions conform to the action–reaction series internal to the actual conditions of the situation. Cinema reduces itself to the vehicle of revelation for a set of fixed social and physical laws. It is ideological to the extent that it substitutes a closed set of finite, ordered movements for an open set of infinite movements of variable consistency.14

Rimbaud’s poetry generates what Deleuze calls the breakdown of the sensory-motor link, that is, the deconstruction of the action-image, insofar as it releases affect and action from instrumentalization. Affects – which, here, I understand not as emotions but as shiftings of bodily and mental relations produced by material encounters (in a Spinozist sense) – come loose from the ties of the Cartesian subject and drift through the poetry. In the above poem, water is the universe of movement taken as a whole. The drunken delays of the poet ("deliriums and slow rhythms") are not aberrations of the subject but its very constitution. The dissolution of the lyrical subject, its becoming-other, would be so many sublime acts of perception. But one is hard pressed to find anything resembling action as resolution of conflict in the poem. The dissolution of the poet unravels the world in a process of montage in which the mise-en-scène lacks framing. Images parade themselves in a paratactic slide without abating. The lyrical subject intervenes, on occasion, but this intervention does not produce the vertical integration, or hypotaxis, which would make sense of the poem. From one angle, everything appears to merge together in a single fluid; the subject is eclipsed, vanishing into the landscape. From another, each image seems to form its own autonomous world: the world of the panther, of the flower, of the star, etc. The lyrical subject returns, in a flicker, but only as one image among others.

No cohesive space exists that would bind subject and object in a coherent order, let alone a space that would elevate the subject above its field of action. Instead, the poem unrolls a series of fragmented or disconnected spaces, what Deleuze calls "espaces quelconques" (whatever spaces):

Space is no longer a particular determined space, it has become whatever space [espace quelconque], to use Pascal Augé’s term [...] It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible. What in fact manifests the instability, the heterogeneity, the absence of link of such a space, is a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualisation, all determination. (C1 109)

"Le Bateau ivre" is, indeed, a series of virtual spaces that combine only to break away from each other. The wanderings of the poet-boat bring together the geographical spaces of Europe and the New World, but they do so not by settling in any actual place but in blurring the disparate regions, just as the poet-boat blurs with the objects it encounters. Places in the poem are carved out through singular encounters, that is, through the precarious joining of inequivalent differences, which lends them an absolute contingency. These spaces remain suspended, open to new possible combinations. That Deleuze speaks of conjunction should make one aware that an absence of metric coordination does not mean that there are no relations in this space. Relations, however, always involve an excess of potentiality over actuality. They tend to warp and transform under the pressure of other possibilities, virtual becomings leading to a proliferation of relation at a finer and finer level, until the
poem/film consists of an infinite shudder of micromovements.

The subject also possesses a whatever state. The third aspect of Deleuze’s conception of the subject is the affect-image. This aspect is the in-between of the perception-image and the action-image, the interval constituting the subject as such (the auto-affection which makes the subject distinguishable):

It is quality or power, it is potentiality considered for itself as expressed [...] The affect is impersonal and is distinct from every individuated state of things: it is nonetheless singular, and can enter into singular combinations or conjunctions with other affects. The affect is indivisible and without parts; but the singular combinations that it forms with other affects form in turn an indivisible quality, which will only be divided by changing qualitatively (the “dividual”). The affect is independent of all determinate space-time; but it is nonetheless created in a history which produces it as the expressed and expression of a space or time. (Cl 98–99)

The idea of affect bursts the seams of the action-image insofar as it alerts one to the existence of unactualized potentialities inhering in perceptions, affects, and actions. Potentialities may become actualized in a state of affairs. They may subordinate themselves to the laws of the sensory-motor link, but they may also exist in excess of their actualizations as surplus. This surplus is not a transcendent cloud hanging over the situation. As Deleuze remarks, it, too, has a history, which is to say that it articulates itself in its own way, through its own formal variations. These formal variations are characterized by a series of combinations which do not rely upon division or a separation of parts. What Deleuze throughout his oeuvre refers to as expression is the formation of combinations through becomings in which the distinction between various aspects or affects is not prior to the combination but an effect of it.15 Things singularize themselves, make themselves distinct, only insofar as they emerge from a prior commonality, an indiscernibility or primordial blurring.

Deleuze’s cinematic ontology forces one to rethink the state of the subject in Rimbaud’s poetry. Rather than the lyrical subject dissolving without a trace into the landscape of the poem, it persists as a series of variations of pure potentiality. Images emerge from the common substance of the poem (water). It is, perhaps, in the colors of the poem that this new state is most evident. The greens and blues that penetrate the poet-boat transform into blueness, redness, and greenness, that is, they transition from being attributes of the subject/object to pure qualities which singularize themselves in a theoretically infinite series of particular gradations (aquamarine, evergreen, mauve, etc.). The lyrical subject, even after it merges into the liquid objects of desire, persists in coloring the poem, haunting the lines as so many potential colors of the rainbow. As the poem suggests, the poet mixes with things (“mixing [mélan] with flowers eyes of panthers skins / Of humans!”), but mixing is not vanishing; it is becoming other than oneself, transformation. The surplus of potentiality – the affective aspect of the lyrical subject – keeps the poem spinning on from one image to another, because it overthrows the static coordination of the sensory-motor link, or the possibility of things remaining themselves in identity. The subject weaves things together through a strange movement that Kristin Ross astutely describes as an “almost reptilian combination of absolute torpor and absolute speed” (54). At once too fast and too slow (note how the poem shifts back and forth between an abundance of syntactical pauses and overwhelming enjambments), the poet lashes out, snapping together images at a dizzying pace, only to indolently let them float in a void.

Deleuze’s conceptual framing enables one to recognize that the dissolution of the subject in Rimbaud’s poetry is not an annihilation but a reinvention: “Le Bateau ivre” paves the way for a new formation of subjectivity irreducible to a dialectic between the ego and its other. The inwardness and closure of the ego gives way to the movement of becoming, a necessarily collective process of articulation. In an epoch (Rimbaud’s, Deleuze’s, our own) when subjectivity tends to become wholly colonized by a bourgeois vision of propriety and privacy (subjectivity as rigid differential identity, as
one’s own property), such a process possesses an intense social charge. Kristin Ross has suggested that Rimbaud’s poetics must be viewed in the light of its historical conditions, specifically in relation to the struggle of the Paris Commune. From this perspective, the rush of flows, the wealth of images, and the syntactical chaos constitute the positive side of a refusal: the refusal of labor. Rimbaud’s poetry, Ross argues, asserts a right to laziness (60–61). Laziness, however, is not the refusal of all activity but the refusal of labor ordered by capital. The alternation between torpor and exhilaration breaks with the regular rhythm of capitalist production, or with the instrumental management of time by the action-image, generating a surplus of time or virtual action no longer subordinated to the reproduction of capital. This surplus is the cause and effect of the new form of subjectivity slipping through the gaps of capitalist discipline. This subject is composed of potentiality (or in Marxian language, labor-power), which capital subsumes in exchange for wages. This subsumption depends upon an identification that quantifies the body and mind of the laborer in terms of productivity.

Rimbaud’s verse, however, incessantly dis-identifies. It generates surpluses of potentiality, which, rather than being captured in fixed poetic devices, mutate again and again in streams of becoming. Against the capitalist regime of identification emerges a communist regime of metamorphosis, but, perhaps, one should be more careful and suggest, with Antonio Negri, that this new subjectivity is the condition of communism, and not the thing itself. If communism names the emergence of history and social relations beyond capital, if it names the possibility of a form of subjectivity (proletarian subjectivity) in excess of private property and Cartesian propriety, then Rimbaud’s verse poems express a well-nigh pagan desire to give the subject over to bodily sensation and potentiality, then Rimbaud’s prose poems seek to organize this corporeal excess; they search after a form that would not merely bear witness to this surplus but would reorder it into an emerging world revolting against the weight of the historical present.

I discuss Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer* and *Illuminations* in order to demonstrate how Rimbaud’s turn to the body involves the invention of a people, that is, the construction of a new form of political subjectivity. Particular to this phrase the “invention of a people” (C2 217) – which Deleuze uses, notably, with reference to Rimbaud, as well as to Kafka – is a manifold emphasis on temporality in relation to corporeality: it is not only that this new political subjectivity depends upon a future body, upon a body which, from the perspective of the present, is still to come, but also that this future body depends upon a reorganization of the subject’s relationship to time. Rimbaud’s poems constitute a conquest of time in the name of the subject, a process of de-alienation or of becoming autonomous, not in order to shore up the subject but to reinvent it.

*Une Saison en Enfer* and *Illuminations* are, respectively, the initiation and culmination of this reinvention of the subject. *Une Saison* opens up the search for a new form of life; it produces a messianic rupture with the Cartesian domination of the body and intimates the possibility of a worldly form of redemption emerging from the body itself. Yet *Une Saison* remains trapped within a messianic logic wherein it is always another body which is wanted, another life over...
the horizon. *Illuminations* completes this trajectory by replacing messianic longing with ambivalence; it delivers the body over to the world. *Illuminations* transforms the external opposition between a degraded body and a redeemed body into an internal opposition, and oscillation, between radically different relations to time. In *Illuminations*, Rimbaud’s poetry oscillates within one and the same poem between a life lived for capital and a life lived for itself, or between language as a disciplining of corporeal surplus and as its emancipation.

In the well-known letters of the *Voyant* (letters that include poems and theoretical discussions of poetry), Rimbaud produces a manifesto for the project of reconstituting the poetic subject. In the letter to Paul Demeny, dated 15 May 1871, Rimbaud rails against the ego (the *moi*), arguing for a poetry that would release the unheard and unthought potentialities of the body:

If old imbeciles had not found in the Me only false meaning, we would not have to sweep away these million of skeletons that, since time immemorial! accumulated the products of their one-eyed intellects, by claiming to be the authors! [...] It seems simple: in every brain a natural development takes place; so many egoists proclaim themselves authors; there are many others who attribute their intellectual progress to themselves! – But the soul must be made monstrous [...] I say one must be a *seer*, make oneself a *seer*.

The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, immense and reasoned *derangement* [*dérèglement*] of all the senses [*tous les sens*]. All the forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts in himself all poisons in order to keep only the quintessences [...] Because he arrives at the unknown [*inconnu*]! Because he cultivated his soul, already rich, more than anyone! He reaches the unknown, and when bewildered, he would end by losing intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. That he dies in his leap through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other collapsed! (CW 374–77; translation modified; emphasis in the original)

This program can be summed up as follows: the destruction of the centered, stable, and closed body of the ego and the birth of the decentered, monstrous, and inventive body of the poet as seer. The vision of progress held by the “old imbeciles” is narrow (“one-eyed”) in that it reduces production, the writing of poetry, to the proclamation of being a poet. Throughout his work, Rimbaud exclaims against the Parnassian tendency in poetry, which seeks to extract poetry from the world and to enclose it in the autonomous realm of an exotic and pure beauty. This tendency would be the mirror opposite of the production of the factory, elevating itself above the worldliness of capitalist social relations and commodity fetishism only to reproduce the capitalist discipline (the discipline of identity and equivalence, of the “me”) in the tight harness of exactly measured poetry filled with clichéd invocations of the divine. What results from this poetry is a heap of skeletons, an image that one can take as a figure of the subject without body, a subject shorn of the multivalent potentiality of the word as it emerges from flesh.

But the other body, the body of the seer, is not extrinsic to this first body. One cannot overlook Rimbaud’s own claims towards authenticity and fame or his engagement in tightly measured and classical poetics. The monster that Rimbaud invokes lurks within this measured poetry, potentiality pressing against a set of fixed actualities, flesh against bone. The process of making oneself a seer is “a long, immense and reasoned *derangement* [*dérèglement*] of all the senses.” *Dérèglement* can be translated a number of ways: it is an unruling/deregulation but also a madness, thought running away from the strictures of the rational. And yet this madness is also reasoned, a rigorous working through of the ego-bound fantasies that conceal the subject’s powerful monstrosity. But one also needs to insist on the ambivalence of this *dérèglement*, for the monstrosity of deregulated flows of potentiality, or labor-power, can just as well be an excess inhering in capitalism as its very motor of expansion. The question always returns of how one relates to potentiality, of how potentiality is embodied.
If Rimbaud gestures towards irrationality and madness, what is meant is not a lack of thought or sense but the unleashing of an infinite array of senses: tous les sens, that is, in every direction and with every possible meaning. Against the rational economy of thought (thought confined to Deleuze’s sensory-motor link), Rimbaud asserts an exploration of the unknown (inconnu) and unnamable (innomable) already inhering in thought. *A Season in Hell* – one of Rimbaud’s attempts to execute the program of the letter of the Voyant – can be understood as a plumbing of the depths of the unknown and unnamable potentialities of the body and soul. The title of the work suggests an evental quality, a sense that a certain time (“a season”) has arrived, producing a break with the present and the possibility of an opening onto a radically other future. Yet it also suggests a time that one must endure, a season in hell.

Pierre Laforgue is correct in suggesting that one endures not merely the poet’s struggle with self-doubt but, more significantly, the fall out of the Paris Commune (the sense of historical and political defeat, as well as the bodies of the massacred Communards). This obverse side of Rimbaud’s cries for a new epoch is, indeed, a “counter-history of the miserable, the vanquished” or the laissés-pour-compte de l’histoire (254), but in the very act of writing history against the grain there emerges the possibility of another world and history.

Rimbaud writes the counter-history of *Une Saison en Enfer* through the body and in hopes of a body to come. The final lines of the work speak of “possessing truth in one body and soul” (CW 304), but it does so only after a long reckoning with the immanent historical sufferings and joys of the body. The poet goes through hell, suffering not only a sense of historical defeat but also doubts regarding the power of poetry, or language as such. From this perspective, alchemy (referenced throughout Rimbaud’s work and directly alluded to in *Season in the poem “Alchemy of the Word”*) might be understood as the trope, par excellence, of these poems insofar as alchemy is understood not as mysticism but as bodily transfiguration: the base, brute matter becomes glorious not through self-abnegation but through becoming another body, through an immanent development of its own possibilities. In this respect, “Mauvais Sang” [Bad Blood] is exemplary, for in it the voice of the poet becomes a seer by identifying himself with the base, with the proletariat and the subaltern: “If only I had ancestors [antécédents] at some point in the history of France! But no, nothing. It is quite clear to me that I have always belonged to an inferior race” (CW 266/267).

Throughout the poem, Rimbaud not only identifies with workers but also with the colonized in Africa and with the barbarians of France’s past. As the lines above suggest, there is a slippage between inferiority and nothingness, between occupying the lowest point in the social order and being exiled from it. The poet identifies with those who are without proper identity, with those who do not count or who count only as the degraded remnant of the social totality.

This insistent identification with the uncounted other generates its own community, a people to come composed of those who do not properly belong. The poem produces this people through sudden leaps and bounds from one continent to another in a kaleidoscopic global gathering of the multitudes; in one moment the poet speaks of France, in the next, of Africa. Fredric Jameson understands the shift from Rimbaud’s lyrical to prose poetry in terms of this intensification of geographic velocity: “The movement from the verse to the prose poems can largely, but not exclusively, be understood as the displacement of a movement of bodily fermentation or metamorphosis towards that of a metamorphosis of cultural and geographic systems” (249). Jameson is quite right that Rimbaud’s prose poems involve a new geographical imagination, yet the body is not so much displaced as it is reinvented along with the spatiality of the text; in other words, geography does not displace the body but rather geography and the body are coextensive in rethinking political subjectivity. The following passage from “Mauvais Sang” suggests that this rethinking involves a process of corporeal becoming, not dissolution (as in “Le Bateau ivre” and
many of Rimbaud’s verse works) but sudden mutation:

“Priests, teachers, masters, you are wrong to turn me over to justice. I have never been of this people; I have never been Christian; I am of the race that sang under torture; I do not understand your laws; I have no moral sense, I am a brute: you are making a mistake...

Yes, my eyes are closed to your light. I am a beast, a savage. But I can be saved. You are false savages [nègres], you maniacs, ferocious, miserly [...]

Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself? – No more words. I will bury the dead in my belly. Yells, drum, dance, dance, dance! I can’t even see the time when the whites will land and I will fall into the void.

Hunger, thirst, yells, dance, dance, dance, dance! (CW 270/271; translation modified)

The other (in this case, the African) is not a spectacle, or a creature for which one feels sympathy at a distance. Disidentification, the assertion of non-belonging, produces a becoming-other; it generates the poetic montage so well captured by Rimbaud’s famous utterance, “Je est un autre” / “I is an other” (CW 374/375). The other is not the mute specter produced by an abstract compassion but the product of a poetic métissage, or miscegenation, a singular entity (the “inferior race”) emerging from a process of mixture: the voice of the poem becomes Gaul, then nègre, by way of “race,” by way of a shared “bad blood.” Yet bad blood is not the mere reversal of good blood, the inferior race not the mere negation of a noble race. If one understands this singing as a reflexive gesture, then poetry becomes a translation of the flesh, the putting into words of bodily gesture and affect. The final lines of this passage reinforce such a claim, with their cry of “No more words,” followed by an attention to bodily need and the repeated injunction to dance.

In this activity of dancing, one encounters what the tortured figure of this poem means, when it asserts “But I can be saved.” If the “but” produces an opposition between the outcast and the community of law and Christian morality, the “I can be saved” asserts the possibility of an immanent redemption. Immanent redemption signifies a coming to the body against its theological-moral negation in the concept of an afterlife or by a Christian-inspired work ethic. As Kristin Ross argues, “Mauvais Sang” is at once an “éloge to laziness” and testimony to the “intact body”: “The intact body, the body unmarked by work, is the body that experiences intense sensation; paresse [laziness] is linked throughout Rimbaud’s work to intensity of physical sensation and, at the same time, to a kind of weightlessness affiliated with pure speed” (53). The refusal to make use of one’s body at the poem’s beginning (“Without making use of my body even to live, and lazier than the toad, I have lived everywhere” (CW 266/267; translation modified)) does not stand in opposition to the intense frenzy of the dance but paves the way for it, for dance might be understood as precisely the paradox that Ross identifies as a simultaneous “pure speed” and laziness. Laziness signifies not lack of activity but negation of capitalist discipline, or in this case, negation of moral and colonial strictures regarding the racialized body of the nègre.22

What comes to light is that the discipline of capital, of Christianity, and of the law is at once an incitement to productivity and a narrowing down of it, a channeling of productivity into the “one-eyed” order of good workers, good souls, and good citizens. Against such propriety, “Mauvais Sang” unleashes the frenzied movements of dancing, of an art that is a channeling of the body. Paradoxically, then, the pure repetition of “dance,” which occurs twice in these lines, is not a resignation to sameness, to a vision of otherness as homogeny, but rather the assertion of a difference in excess of the equivalence produced by capitalism and colonialism, with their necessity for proper identification (boss and worker/colonizer and native). While the poem begins with a negation of proper identity (“I have never been of this people”) and an identification with subalternity (“I am a beast, a savage”), it ends with dis-identification or non-identity (“Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself? – No more words”) predicated upon corporeal excess (“Hunger, thirst, yells, dance, dance, dance, dance!”). The transcendence-oriented structures of law and morality give way to the
immanence of the body, to the tactility of flesh in movement.

Yet this moment of liberation is passing. While the voice in this section pleads blissful ignorance of encroaching oppression (“I can’t even see the time when the whites will land and I will fall into the void”), the next section begins, “The white men are landing. The cannon! We will have to be baptized and put on clothes and work” (CW 270/271). Liberation seems to be but the temporary leap of a body bound to return to the sordid realities not of earth but of the transcendent negation of the earthly: “We will have to be baptized...” However, the sense of evental eruption does not end with this poem. While a sense of failure, of historical and poetic defeat, pervades Season, it would be to neglect the text – whose final poems end in the future tense and in the imperative, that is, in a prospective modality – to reduce the work to a biographical record of Rimbaud’s farewell to poetry. (Rimbaud ceases writing poetry approximately a year later.) The break which opens the door to hell begets another break, a messianic turn of events: “Where shall we go beyond the shores and the mountains, to salute the birth of the new work, and the new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, and be the first to worship Christmas on earth?” (CW 300/301). The messianic quality of these not quite final words must be understood in light of the alchemy of the flesh described above. “Christmas on earth” is precisely on earth, which is to say that worship is directed not skywards but towards the bodies of the earth. Rimbaud’s counter-history of the Paris Commune, proletarian, or universal subaltern is the testimony of a persisting desire for revolt, for Christmas on earth implies a cessation of work and an Edenic moment, a bearing witness to the possibility of another world through the presence of the body.

Break begetting break and the emergence of the body as condition of possibility for immanent redemption: these are also the formula of Deleuze’s journey through the cinema, as he passes from the first to the second volume, from movement to time-image. The breaking of the sensory-motor link or action-image is a break with, and yet within, the order of capital. For better or worse, Deleuze uses the rather vague term of modernity to refer to this event. (But so does Rimbaud: “Il faut être absolument moderne!” (CW 302) – one of the most well known of Rimbaud’s slogans – is at one with Deleuze’s ambivalent rendering of cinematic modernity.) Modernity, in this instance, is not merely another name for capitalism but an ambivalent structure characterized by the emergence as object of social and political struggle of potentiality qua potentiality (time as such, in Deleuze’s words; labor-power in Marx’s). Deleuze calls this object the time-image, which constitutes the focus of the second volume of Cinema.

The ambivalence of Deleuze’s and Rimbaud’s “modernity” lies in its modes of materialization, or corporealization. It is a biopolitical ambivalence, which is to say that it is a question of the incarnation of potentiality and the struggles over forms of incarnation. Modernity and its forms, such as cinema or poetry, can produce capitalist corporeality and communist corporeality; bodies of action and bodies of time. These modes of corporealization make up what I am calling the cinematic body. Capitalist corporeality relates to time in what one might call a metric fashion: the time of the body (its capacity for activity and persistence in being) delineates itself as a closed set of discrete equivalences, which can be exchanged through money without friction. What a body can do depends entirely on determined and determining conditions, which is to say that the essence of a body is wholly calculable according to a cycle of action and reaction, that is, according to the sensory-motor link. Potentiality is wholly reducible to an effect of the actual.

Communist corporeality, on the other hand, relates to time in an excessive manner: the time of the body does not delineate itself through equivalence but through an abundance of potential which expresses itself through actual conditions without ever exhausting itself. If potentiality may be actualized, its nature, nevertheless, involves existing as a surplus inhering in action.
It is always the possibility to do an activity otherwise, or not at all, even as one is in action. The time of this body, then, is immeasurable. It is finite in that it manifests itself in particular modes of activity, but in-finite in that it operates through a process of relation that is open, composing itself through contingent, inventive combinations. I would add that communist corporeality must be understood as prior to capitalist corporeality – in the same way that for Marx, living labor is prior to capital. Capitalist corporeality feeds off communist corporeality but, at the same time, represses its wealth of potentiality. Capitalist corporeality separates communist corporeality from itself, by translating the infinite and common into the equivalent and privative; it transforms time into a ticking of the clock. Communist corporeality, on the other hand, takes the form of a process distributing and redistributing the surplus of potentiality in a construction of the common, a field of equality and a domain of wealth that refuses equivalence; time becomes the very power of activity.

Like Rimbaud, Deleuze conceives of an immanent utopia of the body, or a body to come, which would generate new historical possibilities. This new body is not the opponent of the intellect but its partner: “The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is, life” (C2 189). Echoing Spinoza’s cry that one does not yet know what a body can do, Deleuze demands that one plunge into the body in order to map the complex relations, affects, and intensities that make up corporeal life. The guidelines of this cartography (the cartography of the communist aspect of the cinematic body) can be specified in three points. First, this body must be defined in terms of the emergence of “gest”: “What we call gest in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, insofar as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot, or action-image” (C2 192). The term “gest” designates the possibility of an immanent social organization. It negates a transcendent direction of bodies by minds, introducing a completely relational mode of self-management. This form of corporeal life lacks a script or blueprint; the story emerges through the coming together of gestures in particular arrangements. The second point is that corporeality does not exhaust itself in the particular arrangements of the gest. There is an “undecidability of the body,” a co-implication of virtuality/potentiality with actuality, which upsets any reduction to a simple means–ends relationship: “The obstacle [the ‘undecidability of the body’] does not, as in the action-image, allow itself to be determined in relation to goals and means which would unify the set, but is dispersed in a ‘plurality of ways of being present in the world’, of belonging to sets, all incommensurable and yet coexistent” (C2 203). This surplus of potentiality over actuality, or the excess of ways of being over an actual situation, does not signify the end of activity. Activity continues but is no longer completely defined by its goal; it carries within itself the capacity to pose new goals, to reorient action according to other ways of moving and gesturing. Like the dance of “Mauvais Sang,” it is an activity of the body exceeding the moral-legal scripts of capital.

Deleuze, however, makes a key qualification of the above points: the body implied by the immanence of the gest and the surplus of potentiality is not in itself presentable. The third point of this corporeal cartography introduces the “‘unknown body’ which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible which is still hidden from view” (C2 201). Deleuze makes reference to this body in terms of a “cinema of constitution,” a “genesis,” and a “primordiality,” but in every case the body emerges as incomplete, as the seed, and not the actual emergence, of another world: “The problem is not that of a presence of bodies, but that of a belief which is capable of restoring the world and the body to us on the basis of what signifies their absence” (C2 202). It is not that bodies are not present but that they have not yet produced an actual form adequate to bearing the range of their potentials. Adequacy requires a restoration of potentiality through a decomposition of actuality. One must crack open the
transcendent domination of the action-image to reveal the powers it conceals. Despite Deleuze’s allusion to beginnings (“genesis,” the “primordial”) this restoration is not a return but the generation of the possible from the impossible. It is a process of constituting new forms that are capable of translating once foreclosed potentials into indiscernible circuits of actuality and virtuality. It is not so much that one must break open the closed set of the world (capitalist corporeality) in order to birth the monstrous seer of which Rimbaud speaks (communist corporeality) but that one must incorporate the monstrous excess of potentiality into a project which is at once antagonistic – refusing capitalist order – and creative – experimenting with new ways of sharing potentiality, without falling into old or new inequalities.

For Rimbaud, as for Deleuze, the process of constituting communist corporeality (the “unknown body”) does not end. Neither thinker presents one with the communist body itself. Instead, they gesture towards ruptures in capitalist systems in order to reveal the seeds of the future, the conditions of possibility of another world. This incompletion is evident when Rimbaud, in the letter to Demeny quoted above, displaces the centrality of the poet in the name of the coming multitude of workers: “That he dies in his leap through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other collapsed!” The poet’s death is not a fruitless sacrifice but an encounter with collective potentials too intense for the measured rule of capitalist corporeality, an encounter with a people to come. It is a question, as Deleuze puts it, of restoring belief in the world, which is to say of locating the possibility of a revolutionary transformation of the world within the world itself. Believing in the world means refusing to locate power in a transcendent elsewhere; it means that the voice of A Season in Hell discovers the possibility of “possessing truth in one body and soul” not in a delivery from the world but in a delivery to it.

Rimbaud’s Illuminations is the consequence of this delivery of poetry over to the world. This collection of mostly prose poems plays on the interference between the worldly and the otherworldly in content and form. Even the title suggests the point at which the transcendent and immanent blur together, alluding as it does at once to the long tradition of illuminated manuscripts associated with Christian theological publications and to the illuminations, or illustrations, that became popular in nineteenth-century France in the mass publications of magazines and fiction, as well as storefront advertising. In addition, the seriality of the volume, with each poem an autonomous entity at once equivalent to and yet incommensurable with the poems following and preceding it, lacking any overall framework, would appear homologous to the logic of commodities. The poems are commodities, attractions or spectacles offered up to the reader in exchange for attention and, perhaps, cultural capital. The poet is as much salesman as seer, or as Jacques Rancière puts it:

Rimbaud does not belong to the avant-garde. He does not believe that one can extract the qualities of things and purify the words of the tribe. For him, things and the language of commerce do not allow themselves to be separated from things and the language of poetry. (65)

If there is an opposition between capital and something other than capital within Rimbaud’s poetry it occurs, in this instance, not as an external opposition (an opposition between distinct entities; between commerce and poetry) but as an internal opposition (an opposition between the valences or relations involved in one and the same entity; the co-implicated struggle of capitalist and communist corporealities).

Rimbaud maintains the possibility of opposition, of antagonism, by subsuming the transcendent or theological in the worldly or secular. Illuminations completes the trajectory of A Season in Hell by de-narrativizing the messianic, by unhinging the desire for another world, from the passage out of this one. The transcendent becomes a surplus within the world, and this surplus acts as the condition of possibility for the radical transformation of the world through language. Absolutely central – and distinguishing Illuminations from Season – is
that in reaching the terminal point of immanence, in finally closing off any road to transcendence, the surplus of potentiality no longer appears as another substance but can only be the intensely ambivalent shifting of negative and positive charges of one and the same substance. Of course, the collection of writings that makes up this volume is highly disparate and uneven. It is not possible to find a single spirit inhabiting these poems. I am interested, instead, in marking the extreme point of the trajectory traced in this essay, that is, the limit and culmination of the emergence of the body as subjective and poetic force in excess of Cartesianism.

The poem “Solde” [For Sale] is a striking instance of the ambivalence of the body. In this poem, the capitalist and communist forms of corporeality identified above are revealed to be co-implicated and intertwined. The communist body inheres as the unthought of capital, the monstrous other threatening to give birth to another world. The monstrous potentiality of the body is also present in A Season in Hell, yet it takes the form of an otherness separated out into different bodies (the Christian vs. the Savage, French vs. African), even though the poet is characterized by his capability of passing between them. In “Solde,” on the other hand, the struggle between different forms of corporeality takes place in one and the same body:

For sale what the Jews have not sold, what neither nobility nor crime have enjoyed [gouté], what the fatal love and the infernal honesty of the masses do not know: what time and science need not recognize:

Revised Voices [reconstituées]: the brotherly awakening of all choral and orchestral energies and their immediate applications; the unique opportunity of freeing our senses!

For sale bodies without price, outside of all race, all world, all sex, all descent! Riches bursting forth [jaillissant] at every step! Sale of diamonds without control! […]

For sale Bodies, voices, unquestionable immense opulence, what will never be sold. The salesmen are not at the end of the sale! Travelers do not have to render their accounts immediately! (CW 356/357; translation modified)

The poem immediately begs the question of genre: is it a poem parading the language of the market? Or is it the language of the market rendered poetic? The distinction may seem subtle, but the implications are profound. Where the former option preserves the possibility of poetry as the negation of worldly commerce through ironic distance, the latter suggests that poetry possesses no autonomy but is rather a particular mode of languages and bodies. It is only the latter, I would argue, which accounts for the corporeal becoming-other of Illuminations and which avoids a relapse into the “one-eyed” egocentrism Rimbaud condemns in his Voyant letters. There is, finally, no poet in this poem, no impression of an autonomous position from which one might act as a conduit between the worldly and otherworldly. (In Season, this position is present as an after-image: corporeal metamorphosis remains predicated upon the decomposition of the poet-figure.) There is no framing within the body of the poem that would mark the language as parody; in fact, one might say the poem, with its abundance of exclamation and incessant parataxis, indulges in the clamorous excitement of the market. Nor does the serial logic of Illuminations allow one to qualify “Solde” by way of the other poems in such a way that would make it a moment of linguistic tomfoolery. If parody and satire depend upon the possibility of an external subjective position, then “Solde” is neither; it would seem to completely inhabit the discourse of the market.

Yet to speak of a rendering poetic requires that one retain some sense of a non-identity between poetry and commodification. This non-identity is not a question of separate realms of language but rather of distinct modes or uses of language. As Marx makes clear in his discussion of commodity fetishism in Capital, one of the key characteristics of commodification is the simultaneous negation and persistence of the sensuous body: corporeality, or use value (the sensuous material qualities of a commodity which satisfy a human need), becomes the degraded other of exchange value (the product considered in quantitative terms as abstract container of labor-power). From this perspective, the “theological niceties” for which Marx condemns capitalism is
not so much a total departure from the world as it is the world’s spectralization; the commodity disembodies the world, even as the body persists as hollowed-out bearer of value. Thus, in “Solde,” bodies and diamonds, workers and objects, occupy one and the same syntactical plane, each an equivalent instance of capitalist exchange capable of sustaining the hysterical exclamations of the salesman.

Radical difference and antagonism open up, however, on the poem’s semantic plane. In “the brotherly awakening of all choral and orchestral energies and their immediate applications; the unique opportunity of freeing our senses!” one hears an echo of the Paris Commune and, more generally, of the long history of revolutionary struggle in France. “Fraternal awakening” stands in opposition to the solitude of private property, the enforced individualism of commodity exchange. Indeed, the “choral and orchestral energies” emerging from “reconstituted voices” locate this possibility of collectivity in corporeal presence, in the strength of the breath of a body producing song. This collectivity is coupled with the evental quality of a “unique opportunity,” or a singular moment of time through which might occur the reparation of damaged bodies, an immanent redemption saving the body from capitalist exchange. There is, then, a time of the body that breaks with capitalist exchange, a moment correlated with “freeing our senses,” which is to say remembering the senses of the body against their abolition in the abstraction of value.

Yet “unique opportunity” also resonates with the hysteria of the market, or free market rhetoric, which views every act of exchange as an exercise of free will. The semantic difference opened up is just as easily consumed by the poem’s anaphoric repetition. Indeed, one might argue that what one witnesses, here, is but the commodification of revolution: the desire for another world that is the life-blood of revolutionary movements and Rimbaud’s poetry becomes the never-kept promise of the new purchase.

And yet, I would argue, this sense of defeat is ambivalent in the same way that Marx viewed capitalism as ambivalent insofar as it frees workers’ bodies from feudalism’s bondage to the soil only to deliver them to the bondage of wage-labor’s clock. The freedom of the market echoes, if in a grotesque fashion, the freedom promised by social struggle, and the commodity still channels the dream of a life delivered from labor to the pleasures of the body. The spectral bodies of capitalism are, nonetheless, modes of corporeality; they are bodies caught between the past of bodily self-possession and the future of bodily liberation. If they do not dance like the figure in “Mauvais Sang” they nonetheless manage to find a moment of fleshy pleasure in excess of commodification; thus, the appearance of “jaillissant” to qualify wealth – a word which implies orgasmic release, an overflowing of the body – suggests a rupture, though not an absolute break, with capitalist exchange. It bears witness to the persistence of the body’s power over and above its transformation into the abstract labor of capital’s reproduction. This sense of surplus is echoed in the non-identity implied by the inability to classify bodies according to race, gender, sex, etc. (“bodies without price, outside of all race, all world, all sex, all descent”). If one may read this unclassifiability as symptom of capital’s abstraction, one may just as well read it as exodus from capital’s determinations, as homologous to the eruption of the body into dance in “Mauvais Sang.” Communist corporeality inheres in capitalist corporeality as radical unthought.

Yet the decision to read it one way or the other is undecidable. The promise of communist corporeality and the equivalence of capitalist corporeality fade into each other, without losing analytical or practical distinction. Instead of the alchemical leap from a degraded to a vital body, one and the same body is ambivalently possessed by diverging modes of material expression. Which is not to say that Rimbaud gives into the market: the poetic labor, here, is not merely the recognition of oscillating modes of corporeality – though it is certainly that – but also a refusal to surrender to capitalist corporeality: “For sale Bodies, voices, unquestionable immense opulence, what will never be sold” (emphasis added). The breakdown of syntax and the future tense negation of the inevitability
of exchange bespeak a persistent desire for a monstrous unleashing of all the senses that would not be recuperated by the next best buy. Under the name of Rimbaud, one witnesses the steadfast desire for another world, without every giving up the belief in this one.

**corporeal poetics**

To expose the subject to the body and give the body over to the world: this is the common project of Rimbaud and Deleuze. Each renders immanent the power to overcome the present world. Rimbaud breaks up the moi of an egocentric lyrical poetry, bathing it in the excess of bodily potentiality. The oceanic forces of the world do not simply abolish the subject but rather render it immanent; the subject becomes a process of corporeal metamorphosis, an ebbing and flowing of matter whose organization is contingent, yet full of force. Deleuze, on the other hand, discovers the possibility of belief in the world in the slowness and quickness of cinematic images. The passage from classical cinema to modern cinema gives birth to a body for which time is not merely a cross to bear but the constitution of life itself.

In both Deleuze and Rimbaud, the breaking up of the subject is not the final word. A red thread runs through the work of both, like an arrow in flight, indicating the possibility of not merely destroying the subject but reinventing it. In contrast to the dismissal or the deconstruction of the subject, these two figures indicate that the subject conceals within itself the fleshy potential for other forms of life, or other modes of being and becoming in the world. From this perspective, one is able to speak of a corporeal poetics, a space in which language and body interfere, a space in which signification is not merely a cognitive process but a prosthesis of the body. In Deleuze and Rimbaud, word and image are not separate from the body; they are the play of the body, the body in becoming but also the body coming undone and giving way to the possibility of new bodies, or as Deleuze suggests:

> What is certain is that believing [“belief in the world”] is no longer believing in another world, or in a transformed world. It is only, it is simply believing in the body. It is giving discourse to the body, and, for this purpose, reaching the body before discourses, before words, before things are named […] Give words back to the body, to the flesh. (C2 172–73)

It is not a question of giving up language in favor of the body; rather, it is a question of mapping the emergence of language from the body. This fleshy cartography would not treat the body as univocal source of the word but as an intersection through which the traffic of words and of images not only passes but also shapes and transforms.³⁰

As I have shown, the space of corporeal poetics entails a rethinking of the political in terms of a struggle over the incarnation of potentiality, or time. It entails a biopolitical conception of social relationships dealing with the production of forms of life. This insight is really a remembering, since it already bears the name of Marx and is carried down to us through a number of thinkers, ranging across diverse philosophical and literary traditions. Yet what sometimes gets lost in the turn towards the body is the power of the signifier, the power of poetry in the widest sense of the term. If there is a people to come, if subjectivity is irreducible to the suffering of a world held over the body, then a necessary condition of this political body to come is the capacity to articulate a linguistic utterance, or image, in such a way that it homes in on the fissures running through the world; subject and world are cracked open through language and exposed to their own potentiality to be otherwise. When Rimbaud writes “Quick! are there other lives?” it is an act not of revelation but an interrogation, the posing of a question that strikes at the foundations and which invokes the possibility of a radically other future (CW 272). Corporeal poesis dwells not in the world as it is (being as such) but in the world as it becomes (being otherwise). Which is not to say that poetry is a theological supplement to the world, for to quote Rimbaud, there must be “no hymns: hold onto what’s been gained [tenir le pas gagné]” (CW 302/303). For Rimbaud and Deleuze, corporeal poesis strips the world of the dream of transcendence, delivering the world over to
itself with a severe finality. But this finality is not resignation. Instead, it is the beginning of a struggle in which words and bodies, images and flesh, are all one has for resources.

notes

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1 To name only a few of Deleuze's works where this attempt to rethink corporeality is present: Expressionism in Philosophy, Anti-Oedipus, and The Logic of Sense. The Logic of Sense is especially useful in this regard, as it quite explicitly centers on the displacement of a body characterized by depth, centrality, and a dualistic split between mind and matter in favor of a decentered body of nonsense characterized by impersonal singularities which articulate themselves as surfaces. See especially The Logic of Sense 196–234.

2 Hereafter cited parenthetically as C2.

3 See Deleuze and Guattari, “What is a Concept?” in What is Philosophy?


5 But whether such a proper lyrical poem even exists is questionable. Indeed, I am suggesting that Rimbaud negates less the complexities of lyrical poetry than the simplistic mode of reading which would tie it to fixed forms of the ego. That being said, Théodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin articulate, each in their own way, how the ego-bound quality of lyrical poetry is symptomatic of historical conditions. The lyrical poem responds to the shocks of modern life (the hustle and bustle of the crowd; the overabundance of commodities; etc.) with formal strategies designed to preserve the subject from dissolution. On the other hand, these two thinkers suggest the way in which lyrical poetry intimates a certain beyond of the ego-subject through the objectifying (or language-fetishizing) aspects of modernist poetry. See Adorno, especially 42–46; and Benjamin, especially 316–32.

6 Of course, one would also want to discuss the colonial aspects of this poem, the geographic imaginary which underlies the structuring of its desire. For analysis of this aspect of Rimbaud's work, see especially Jameson, “Rimbaud and the Spatial Text” in Modernist Papers 249–54; and Ross chapter 3: “Spatial History.”

7 See Althusser and Balibar, Reading Capital, especially 58–63; and Althusser, “Lenin and Philosophy” in Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays.

8 In Lacan's words in Seminar: Book III: The Psychoses:

For want of being able in any way to re-establish his pact with the other, for want of being able to make any symbolic mediation whatsoever between what is new and himself, the subject moves into another mode of mediation, completely different from the former, and substitutes for symbolic mediation a profusion, an imaginary proliferation, into which the central signal of a possible mediation is introduced in a deformed and profoundly asymbolic fashion. (87)


9 Throughout Deleuze's work there are two primary philosophical opponents: Plato and Hegel. Deleuze generates a counterattack on Plato or, more accurately, on the ontological legacy of Plato in “Plato and the Simulacrum” in Logic of Sense, where he argues not that simulacra are more important than essences but that there are nothing but simulations, that the notion of an original is the effect of a coagulation, or a blockage, in the movement from simulation to simulation.

10 A number of critics note the manner in which Rimbaud's poetry is metamorphic, or characterized by a shifting series of incarnation of the lyrical subject. Especially notable is James Lawler's Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self, which analyzes Rimbaud's “project of self-dramatization” in relation to “a poet conditional yet absolute” (5). Lawler's analyses are often quite compelling.
especially insofar as they challenge a series of received oppositions (active–passive, reality–dream, etc.), yet I do not feel that he adequately unpacks the implications of Rimbaud’s language for subjective form. See especially “The Poet as Transgressor: ‘Le Bateau ivre’” in Rimbaud’s Theatre of the Self.

11 In “Rimbaud’s Simplicity,” Bersani articulates some of what I aim to show in this essay. Specifically, he argues that Rimbaud imagines an alternative form of lyrical subjectivity, defined by an anonymous, impersonal, and fragmentary form of desire. He also suggests the collective aspects of this subjectivity. Bersani, however, pays little attention to the historical conditions or political implications of this emergent subjectivity, nor does he seem to recognize the importance of temporality in Rimbaud’s work. Finally, Bersani states that the language of Rimbaud’s poetry, especially his prose poems, is in some sense “superfluous.” I disagree. The language of the prose poems operates in a completely different fashion from verse but is absolutely necessary.

12 Rimbaud is, in many senses, a Spinozist. Identity, or the ego, is the effect, rather than the cause, of sets of multiplicities (forces, images, sounds, colors, etc.). In addition, I would add that desire drives Rimbaud’s poetry in much the same way that conatus drives human life in Spinoza’s Ethics. The subject is recomposed through encounters with other beings and with events in the world, encounters which either increase the power of the subject (its ability to multiply its capacities to act or to be acted upon) or decrease it. See Spinoza, especially Books II and IV.

13 Hereafter cited parenthetically as CI.

14 Yet as I discuss below, the open set can be as ideological as the closed set, for it is the open set (the set which constantly displaces its own limit) that is the very model of capital, which accumulates and reproduces by displacing its own limit. One needs, then, to distinguish between open sets of equivalents, where each member of the set belongs by virtue of an abstract, formal equality to every other member, and open sets of singularities, where members are wedded through a movement of differentiation and relation that resists formal equality in favor of commonality, or the expression of difference through the differentiation of a common space.

15 Deleuze’s discussions of expression are scattered throughout his oeuvre, sometimes appearing under other names such as “folding,” but see especially Expressionism in Philosophy 43–49, 180–86, 321–37; Logic of Sense 12–28, 142–48. The term expression suggests the multiplication of form at every level of content, which is also to say that it suggests that content and form do not exist in terms of a one-to-one correspondence, since form might be said to always suggest at least a bifurcation, the possibility of moving in many directions. The term expression also suggests univocity or monism, which means that it is not thought in terms of a subject–object relationship but in terms of the organization of a plane of immanence in which figures emerge through horizontal relations. Finally, material substance is exhausted in expression so that there is no excess of content hanging over form, yet without losing a surplus of potentiality or the virtual, which enables the possibility of change. Indeed, the expressed is that which inheres in a proposition as surplus to denotation, manifestation, and signification, that which opens on to a sense that is the virtual of the actual.

16 Negri argues for an understanding of time as surplus over space. He explicitly identifies such time with corporeality, a point which I shall turn to in the next section of the essay. Time, then, if it becomes unleashed from the spatializing tendencies of capital, may foment a revolutionary or liberatory movement. The affinities with Deleuze, here, are great. Deleuze argues in the second volume of the cinema books that the time-image arises the moment when time becomes “its own boss” (42). See Negri, especially chapters 7.3 and 9.1.

17 In “Literature and Life,” Deleuze writes, “Health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people who are missing” and “The ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of health or this invention of a people, that is, the possibility of life” (Essays 4). That this description is fitting not only for Deleuze but also for Rimbaud is indicated by their shared term délie, or delirium, which suggests that the production of life is not a mere regulative function stabilizing a preexisting homeostasis but an immanent utopian and biopolitical affair of producing new forms of life. See especially Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature 17–20, 84–88; Deleuze, Cinema 2 150–55, 215–24; and
“Literature and Life” in Essays Critical and Clinical; but see also Smith’s nuanced synthesis of Deleuze’s relationship to literature, “A Life of Pure Immanence: Deleuze’s ‘Critique et Clinique’ Project” in Essays Critical and Clinical.

18 For two useful discussions of these letters, see Whidden 119–31; and Murphy chapter 6: “Le 15 Mai 1871: Politiques du voyant.”

19 On Rimbaud’s relationship to Parnassian poetry, see Whidden, especially I19–38. Whidden argues that Parnassian poetry is characterized by a specific relationship to time and space, one which privileges the tightly ordered and enclosed capture of beauty. He argues that Rimbaud’s poetry engages in a rebellion against these standards. Whidden, however, does not elaborate the social or political implications of this verse but remains, for the most part, concerned with the formal dimensions abstracted from their material conditions. In addition, Whidden tends to view Rimbaud as escaping time, whereas I would argue that he does not escape but rather reorganizes time in relation to the body/subject.

20 Laforgue 252–54. On Rimbaud and the Paris Commune, see also Fowlie; and Murphy, especially chapters I–4.

21 Frey argues that the sense of this phrase involves a giving up of discursive authority as a productive act. The other speaks not as a mere reflection of the self but as an overthrow of selfhood as such, an argument which lines up well with my own, though Frey does not analyze the socio-political implications. See Frey, “Rimbaud” in Studies in Poetic Discourse, especially I18–24.

22 Rimbaud’s simultaneous identification with workers (“I will be a worker” (CW 370/371)) and refusal of work (“Work now, never, never: I am on strike” (CW 370/371)) in his letter to Georges Izambard, dated 13 May 1871, is a homologous gesture, bespeaking, at one and the same time, a refusal to engage in the classicism which would guarantee him cultural capital, or a literary wage one might say, and a refusal to take up a proper métier in society. That Rimbaud would shortly thereafter take up a proper career and forsake poetry does not annul the significance of these words but rather testifies to the intense difficulty of maintaining a self-chosen exile from the capitalist lifeworld.

23 Froment-Meurice argues that the entirety of Une Saison may be understood in terms of an attempt to harness the break of modernity, an attempt to produce an absolute break, or “radical caesura,” disrupting the fashion cycle of commodification. Froment-Meurice understands this absolute break as a self-deliverance, which is to say a break that is also an opening onto an abyss. I would only add that this opening is not so much onto an abyss as it is to the powers of the body. See Froment-Meurice, especially 33–41, 53–56.

24 Deleuze himself makes this homology (break with capital: break with the action-image) in several places. In the second volume of the cinema books, Deleuze, drawing on Marxist rhetoric, says that the time-image is that moment when time becomes “its own boss” (C2 42). See also Cinema 2 77–78, where Deleuze discusses the relationship between cinematic time and money. One must be careful to note Deleuze’s insistence on the “inequivalent” in his discussion of circulation, for it is that word which names the corporeality called communism.

25 In making this connection between material ambivalence and biopolitics, I draw on the work of Paolo Virno. Virno argues that biopolitics is the effect of the emergence of labor-power or potentiality qua potentiality in history. Biopolitics names the struggle over forms of embodying potentiality. Capital produces technologies of control, various forms of discipline which attempt to make potentiality calculable and equivalent. These technologies (which can range from medical apparatus to techniques of education) are the means towards the end of the reproduction and expansion of capital. Of course, Virno also indicates the possibility of a liberation of this potentiality from capital, what he calls “exodus.” But he wants to insist, as do I, on the ambivalence of the biopolitics, for there is no necessity of liberation, no teleological guarantee of an emergence of a non- or post-capitalist social form. See Virno, especially 81–84. See also Casarino, “Time Matters: Marx, Negri, Agamben, and the Corporeal” in Casarino and Negri.

26 The communist form of corporeal time is also Deleuze’s crystal-image. The crystal-image is an organization of time defined by a splitting into the virtual and the actual. This splitting doubles itself in Deleuze’s writing as a number of other oppositions, creating the following chain of homologies: virtual and actual; past and present; preservation and passing; subjective and objective. These
oppositions are not, however, as rigid as they would appear. Each pairing involves elements that are “distinct and yet indiscernible.” They form circuits that indiscernibly exchange one element for another. It is important, I would argue, to assert the priority of the virtual over the actual, as the matrix from which the actual emerges. Indeed, Deleuze says as much in “The Virtual and the Actual” (in Deleuze and Parnet), where he states: “Actualization belongs to the virtual. Actualization of the virtual is singularity, whereas the actual itself is constituted individuality” (181; translation mine). The actual emerges from the actualization of the virtual. There is, then, a surplus of virtuality, or potentiality, over actuality at the ontological level. This surplus is precisely what the action-image attempts to repress— but it can only repress it, not eliminate it.

What I am calling communist corporeality may be understood as an extension— but also a presupposition and implication— of the concept of the common. Communist corporeality is the embodiment of the productivity of the common, which I understand to be, at once, the ontological substratum of life and condition of possibility for a specific form of struggle. As ontological substratum, the common consists of relating to and through others. It is composed of singularities which are inseparable from their relating and exposing themselves to others. Commonality, rather than the individual or the organic community, is being. As a condition of political struggle, commonality implies its opponent— by whatever name it goes under— which seeks to capture and limit potentialities, or the relations that compose commonality, to privatize and enclose the common. The common names the antagonistic attempt to multiply the potentialities for production without the subordination of either capitalist exchange (equivalency) or any other form of political heteronomy (whether it be that of representation or dictatorship). It is a concept of collective political creativity. On the common, see Hardt and Negri 196–219; Casarino, “Surplus Common” in Casarino and Negri; Virno 35–45; and the special issue of Rethinking Marxism entitled The Common and the Forms of the Commune.

For an excellent analysis of this ambivalence— in terms very different from my own— see Rancière’s “Rimbaud: Voices and Bodies” in The Flesh of Words. Rancière argues that the primary tension driving Rimbaud’s work is one between the commonality of exchange and socialization more generally (Rancière is especially interested in working-class culture and the commodities of the entertainment industry) and the messianic dimension of a people to come or a body of salvation.


Deleuze performs this cartography of the flesh in a number of places with regards to a number of aesthetic forms, but see especially the repeatedly discussed emergence of language from the body in The Logic of Sense 181–86, 210–51, 280–335; and Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, plateaus/sections 3–6. The entirety of Essays Literary and Clinical is also, arguably, devoted to this mapping, but see especially in this work “Literature and Life,” “Louis Wolfson; or, The Procedure,” and “Bartleby; or, The Formula.” I would also add that corporeal poetics is already being pursued by others, especially in relation to the discourse of biopolitics. See, for example, Casarino, “The Southern Answer,” as well as the special issue of Polygraph entitled Biopolitics, Narrative, Temporality.

bibliography


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