

WHAT CAN RECALL ITS PAST LIVES¹: BERGSON, BARTHES, AND THE HAUNTOLOGY OF THE IMAGE

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the relationship between memory, time, and the photographic image through a philosophical dialogue among Henri Bergson, Roland Barthes, and the aesthetics of cinema. By revisiting Bergson's notion of *pure memory* and Barthes's concepts of *studium*, *spectrum*, and *punctum*, the essay explores how photography and film can give form to the ontological survival of the past. The analysis culminates in a reading of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* as a cinematic meditation on spectral temporality. Engaging with Derrida's *hauntology* and the idea of the image as a trace of duration, the article proposes that photography and cinema are not merely representations of memory but modes through which the past coexists with the present in affective and sensorial ways. Ultimately, it asks: can an image recall its past lives?

KEYWORDS: Bergson; Barthes; Image; Hauntology

A BRIEF PREAMBLE – BERGSON, MODERNITY, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The emergence of a new technique or form of knowledge always has a decisive impact on other areas of thought and on our everyday lives. Although the intersection of

¹ The reference to the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, is particularly pertinent, as its treatment of time and memory resonates deeply with the Bergsonian idea of the coexistence of past and present. The film presents a cinematic experience in which temporal layers overlap, allowing the past to haunt the present—not as a mere recollection, but as a living presence. This notion closely parallels Jacques Derrida's concept of *hauntology*, introduced in *Specters of Marx* (1993), which explores the spectral persistence of the past within the present. In a Bergsonian context, the Japanese philosopher Hisashi Fujita develops a similar idea through what he calls a "hauntology of memory," where the ghost is understood as a persistent image of time—a mode of temporal coexistence between past and present.

disciplines is often discussed today, the relationship between different domains of knowledge is hardly a novelty. In the arts and engineering, for example, such debates have been ongoing since at least the 1940s². A new technique always brings with it a new form of registering reality—and, more often than not, we can only begin to grasp the full extent of its influence on our experience of the present world retrospectively.

This may be a deeper truth than we would like to admit: the arrival of a new technical apparatus significantly alters how we see and inhabit the world. It also reshapes how knowledge structures its concepts to respond to the demands of these shifts. The influence of photography on painting, or of cinema on our ways of knowing and producing subjectivity, has permanently marked our *Weltanschauung*³.

It would be imprudent, however, to claim that philosophy—or philosophers—remained oblivious to such transformations. On the contrary, many have engaged critically with them, and Henri Bergson is a striking example of such engagement. He responded not only to photography but to the sciences more broadly. The perception of a supposed opposition between philosophy and technological development seems more like a misconception rooted in common sense. Historically, philosophy has always maintained a close—if complex—relationship with the technical and the scientific.

Bergson's philosophy offers a profound view of reality through his key concepts. Although often obliquely, it nevertheless engages with the technical innovations of modernity, deeply influencing both art and science. Bergson was not only aware of such developments; he was one of the first philosophers to reference cinema and photography directly, as we see in his reflections on the cinematic apparatus of thought in *Creative Evolution* (1907) and his discussion of photography in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903). His philosophical project reveals a critical and fruitful openness to new technologies, reworking key concepts—such as *image*—and liberating them from

² To substantiate the claim regarding the impact of new technologies on the arts since at least the 1940s, the book *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, edited by Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, is an essential reference. This volume gathers essays that explore how avant-garde movements—such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism—incorporated emerging technologies, particularly radio and sound, into their artistic practices.

³ *Weltanschauung* is a German term meaning “worldview.” It designates a comprehensive perspective—shaped by cultural, historical, and subjective factors—through which individuals or societies interpret reality. The concept became prominent in 19th- and early 20th-century German philosophy, especially in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey, and later influenced phenomenology and cultural theory.

purely mimetic frameworks, a shift that becomes central in *Matter and Memory*. There, the concept of image takes on a distinctly non-representational character, becoming essential to the philosophical treatment of memory and perception. Bergson's engagement with modern techniques also extended to physics, mathematics, and biology. He envisioned his own work as a *positive metaphysics*—a philosophy actively in dialogue with the scientific and technological transformations of his time.

The modernization of France, particularly during the *Belle Époque*, finds strong resonance in Bergson's writings. He gained notable recognition during his lifetime, largely for the way his work addressed the crisis of conceptual thought and challenged the dominant deterministic and mechanistic philosophies of the era. That historical moment, marked by profound social, scientific, and technological transformations, directly shaped Bergson's thinking. He positioned himself against the reductionism of contemporary science, advocating for a more fluid, dynamic approach to reality—an approach grounded in movement and duration.

A philosopher of movement and life, Bergson aligned himself with the artistic avant-gardes of his time. He developed a critique of classical notions of concept and temporality, reshaping them through new concepts, images, and metaphors.

For the purposes of this essay, however, memory will be our focal point—specifically in its relationship to duration, to the past that endures. It is through this lens that we may begin to think of an ontology of photography. For, as Barthes insists, photography bears a relation to what has been. It testifies to reality, connecting perception to time and memory.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEMORY IN BERGSON – FROM IMAGE-REMEMBRANCE TO PURE MEMORY, OR FROM PURE MEMORY TO IMAGE-REMEMBRANCE

*A memória é uma ilha de edição*⁴

Wally Salomão

Bergson's approach to memory in *Matter and Memory* is a classic in the philosophical literature¹. The book's central aim is to resolve the longstanding quarrel between

⁴ "Memory is an editing island." — Translation mine. Original verse from "Carta aberta a John Ashbery", in *Algaravias: câmara de ecos* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1996), by Wally Salomão.

idealism and realism⁵, between consciousness and matter. Memory, in this context, emerges as the very element that articulates the terms of this conjunction—indeed, it becomes the key to its resolution.

Bergson begins by introducing the concept of *image* as a mediating category, something that stands between consciousness and matter. In the first chapter of the book, he proposes a kind of reduction of the universe to a set of images in motion—images that are not merely mimetic but dynamic, forming a continuum between matter and spirit.

This procedure has been described by Bento Prado Jr. as a kind of “phenomenological reduction,”⁶ grounded in an initial intuition of perception. That is, what we perceive first—naively, from the standpoint of common sense—is the world as a set of images. Bergson thus identifies a pre-subjective field, what Prado calls a transcendental field, in which subject and object have not yet diverged. In this field, both the world and the self appear as *material images*⁷ that participate in causal relations with other images—similar to the way physics conceives of matter in motion.

Bergson later introduces a decisive turning point: among all the images in the universe, one takes on a privileged role—the perception of my own body. It is from this image that consciousness arises, and with it, the possibility of *free action*, that is, actions that escape the determinism of mere cause and effect. The notion of the *body proper* becomes central, and in the subsequent chapters, Bergson explores how these images are stored and actualized—how they are preserved as memory and reactivated through recollection. This gives rise to two of his most important philosophical concepts: the *virtual* and the *actual*.

To account for how images are registered and reappear in consciousness, Bergson

⁵ Psychophysiology and neuroscience are constant interlocutors in Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*.

⁶ Here, I refer particularly to Bento Prado Jr.’s interpretation in *Presença e campo transcendental*. One of the central aims of *Matter and Memory* is to demonstrate that duration—or time—emerges from outside ourselves, as exterior to us, unlike in Bergson’s first book, where duration is treated as something internal. Duration, in this later work, is also found in matter. It is worth noting that describing Bergson’s method as a “phenomenological reduction” remains a subject of debate. While certain readings may link his philosophy to phenomenology, this association requires a more cautious and nuanced approach. As argued by Mark Kelly in *Bergson and Phenomenology* (2010), Bergson should not be considered a phenomenologist in the strict sense, since his philosophy operates through a more dynamic and fluid conception of perception. As Prado Jr. himself states, Bergsonian consciousness is not of the phenomenological, intentional kind, but rather *is*—because it *retains the past*.

⁷ In Bergson, the term *image* does not refer solely to the visual realm, despite his provisional description of the universe as a collection of images. Rather, image also denotes something beyond the visual. In this sense, a blind person may have an initial intuition of the universe as a set of images drawn from non-visual stimuli.

distinguishes between two types of memory: habit-memory and pure memory³. He gives us the following example:

J'étudie une leçon et, pour l'apprendre par cœur, je la lis d'abord en scandant chaque vers; je la répète ensuite un certain nombre de fois. À chaque lecture nouvelle, un progrès s'accomplit ; les mots s'enchaînent de mieux en mieux; ils finissent par s'organiser ensemble. À ce moment précis, je sais ma leçon par cœur ; on dit qu'elle est devenue souvenir, qu'elle s'est imprimée dans ma mémoire. J'examine maintenant comment la leçon a été apprise, et je me représente les phases par lesquelles j'ai passé successivement. Chacune des lectures successives me revient alors à l'esprit avec son individualité propre; je la revois avec les circonstances qui l'accompagnaient et qui l'encadrent encore; elle se distingue des précédentes et des suivantes par la position même qu'elle occupait dans le temps; en un mot, chacune de ces lectures repasse devant moi comme un événement déterminé de mon histoire. On dira encore que ces images sont des souvenirs, qu'elles se sont imprimées dans ma mémoire. On emploie les mêmes mots dans les deux cas. Est-ce bien la même chose?⁸

Bergson makes it clear that repetition allows the body to incorporate images to the point where recollection becomes unnecessary—they are embodied as habit. By contrast, *pure memory* is lived only once; it has a date, a location, a unique event. Even when we try to recall it, we may never relive it consciously and intentionally. It resists reactivation. It is, as in Proust, embedded in time itself—not a discrete object but a sensitive impression accessible only through signs and sensations. These pure memories may nonetheless be evoked by *image-memories* (souvenirs), which, triggered by present perception, guide us back to the past—whether by resemblance or contiguity.

For Bergson, pure memory is not located in the brain; it transcends the material container. It exists in itself as part of the fabric of time. Could it be, then, that photography also gives us access to this existence of the past in itself—as a kind of

⁸ English translation: “I study a lesson and, to learn it by heart, I begin by reading each line aloud; I then repeat it a certain number of times. With each new reading, there is progress; the words link up more and more; they finally become organized together. At this precise moment, I know the lesson by heart; we say it has become a memory, that it has been imprinted in my memory. I now examine how the lesson was learned, and I recall the phases through which I passed. Each of the successive readings then returns to my mind with its own individuality; I see it again with the circumstances that accompanied it and still frame it; it is distinguished from the previous and the subsequent by the very position it occupied in time; in a word, each of these readings passes again before me as a definite event in my history. These too are called memories, said to have been imprinted in my memory. We use the same words in both cases. Is it really the same thing?” — Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, Paris: PUF, 1939, pp. 75–76 (Translation adapted from Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer).

ontology of the image?

Indeed, for Bergson, memory and the past are the very foundations of existence. His central concept, *duration* (*la durée*), affirms the existence of a time unmeasured by space, better represented as tension or extension—like a rubber band contracting and expanding. Or, in Bergson's own image, like a snowball that grows as it rolls, always carrying the accumulation of what has passed. Time is not a series of isolated moments; it is a continuous interweaving of past and present. The notion of a discrete instant is, for Bergson, an illusion of the intellect.

Bergson's treatment of consciousness as emerging from exteriority in *Matter and Memory* is striking. He proposes that all consciousness is, in fact, memory. But in this book, he reverses the usual approach and starts from the outside: our perception is a kind of organ of exclusion, reminiscent of an optical device. We do not perceive the whole of reality—our perception has limits—but reality itself is composed of light and images. The consciousness that emerges from this perceptual field is formed by selecting what can be acted upon; everything else is excluded. This selective mechanism applies to memory as well.

This is why Bergson's account of perception often reads like a theory of cinema⁵. Images are actualized or recalled according to the same principle of selection: my body, as a sensory-motor apparatus, chooses what is relevant for action and adaptation. I remember how to swim when needed; I recall that an electric socket can shock me when I reach toward it. But memory also contributes to free action, to the formation of a self not determined by causal chains. In this sense, what distinguishes the human subject from material objects is precisely freedom.

To model this dynamic between past and present, Bergson offers the famous cone-shaped diagram of memory: its wide base in the past, narrowing toward the apex of the present. All moments coexist within this structure, preserved as virtualities and actualized through free acts. The further we move from the present and from immediate action, the more we access the *pure past*, detached from sensory-motor utility. Thus, paradoxically, the past is what sets us free.

In Bergson, everything is framed by the tensions of time: perception and memory are always intertwined. Our being is a being that endures and changes, always linked to recollection. As he puts it:

En fait, il n'y a pas de perception qui ne soit imprégnée de souvenirs. Aux données immédiates et présentes de nos sens nous mêlons mille et mille détails de notre expérience passée. Le plus souvent, ces souvenirs déplacent nos perceptions réelles, dont nous ne

retenons alors que quelques indications, simples « signes » destinés à nous rappeler d'anciennes images.⁹

What Bergson ultimately shows is a gradation between zones of time, from the most concrete to the most ineffable: at one pole lies *pure memory*, elusive and inexpressible; at the other, *perception* and the material world. Between the two, we find the *image-remembrance*, a bridge that allows memory to be embodied and to produce action:

Nous distinguons trois termes, le souvenir pur, le souvenir-image et la perception, dont aucun ne se produit, en réalité, isolément. La perception n'est jamais un simple contact de l'esprit avec l'objet présent; elle est entièrement imprégnée des souvenirs-images qui la complètent, l'interprètent. Le souvenir-image, à son tour, participe du souvenir pur qu'il commence à matérialiser, et de la perception dans laquelle il tend à s'incarner: considéré de ce dernier point de vue, il pourrait être défini comme une perception naissante. Enfin, le souvenir pur, certes indépendant de droit, ne se manifeste normalement que dans l'image colorée et vivante qui le révèle.¹⁰

Image, then, serves as a medium in which memory takes on form and movement. Dance¹¹, for example, has often been analyzed in light of this Bergsonian view. In his *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Bergson himself alludes to this: the body can both recall and express memory through movement. Memory, in this view, becomes a *corporeal act*—materialized in action.

Having outlined Bergson's theory of memory, we will now turn to authors and thinkers whose reflections on photography resonate with his work.

⁹ "There is no perception that is not impregnated with memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle countless details of our past experience. Most of the time, these memories displace our real perceptions, of which we retain only a few indications, mere 'signs' destined to recall old images." — Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, Paris: PUF, 1939, p. 30 (Translation adapted from Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer).

¹⁰ "We distinguish three elements, pure memory, image-memory, and perception, none of which appears in isolation in reality. Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the present object; it is entirely impregnated with image-memories that complete and interpret it. The image-memory, in turn, partakes of the pure memory it begins to materialize, and of the perception into which it tends to incarnate: considered from this latter point of view, it could be defined as nascent perception. Finally, pure memory, though independent by right, normally manifests only in the vivid, colored image that reveals it." — Translation mine. Based on: Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 171.

¹¹ On this theme in Bergson's work, we recommend the book *Ruminações* by Maria Cristina Franco Ferraz. In this work, she discusses choreographers—such as Steve Paxton—who apply procedures inspired by Bergson's method to the development of movement in dance. Ferraz, Maria Cristina Franco. 2004. *Ruminações: Ensaios sobre arte, filosofia e literatura*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.

PROUST AND REDISCOVERED TIME – BRIEF CONSIDERATIONS

*Eu não vivo no passado; o passado vive em mim.*¹²

Paulinho da Viola

Proust does not conceive of memory as a mere reactivation of an image in the common, representational sense. Memory, for him, is not simply the evocation of a visual perception, a taste, a tactile impression, or even a word that recalls something past. If the past can take hold of the body—as opposed to some interpretations of Bergson that emphasize the continuous re-signification of the past, thus its impossibility of returning exactly as it was—then the image (in the visual sense) cannot represent the experience of the past without falling into *simulacrum*, a mere copy.

Nevertheless, the way the past manifests itself in Proust is closely aligned with Bergson's thought. For both, if the past is accessible at all, it cannot be grasped as a fragmented, spatialized representation—as if seen through a kaleidoscope. Such fragmentation, offering only glimpses of what once was, would reduce lived time to isolated instants and dissolve the continuity of temporal experience.

In this regard, Proust's exercise of memory mirrors Bergson's philosophical effort. Both seek what is essential in time: its power to connect us to the depth of lived experience. In Proust's narrative—as in Bergson's philosophy—it is not the representation of past experiences that matters, but their affective reality, their reactivation in *duration*. The past is not a gallery of visual memories but a resonance of sensibility that enables us to live again what was once lived, as in Bergson's concept of *souvenir pur*.

Despite this, the relationship between memory and photography in Proust remains significant and explicit. He writes: “Car je ne gardais dans ma mémoire que des séries d'Albertine séparées les unes des autres, incomplètes, profils, instantanés.”¹³

This link between Proust and photography has been widely explored by scholars and even by photographers. In *Proust et la photographie*, Brassäi observes that photography deeply influenced Proust's writing, suggesting a strong correspondence between his narrative and the photographic trace of memory:

¹² “I do not live in the past; the past lives in me.” — Translation mine. Statement by Paulinho da Viola in the opening scene of the documentary *Meu tempo é hoje*, directed by Izabel Jaguaribe (Brazil: Ijá Produções, 2003).

¹³ “For I retained in my memory only a series of Albertines, each separate from the others, incomplete, profiles, snapshots.” — Translation mine. Based on: Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 6, *Albertine disparue* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1987), p. 24.

À la lumière de la photographie un nouveau Proust m'est apparu, une sorte de photographe mental, considérant son propre corps comme une plaque ultrasensible, qui sut capter et emmagasiner dans sa jeunesse des milliers d'impressions et qui, parti à la recherche du temps perdu, consacra tout son temps à les développer et à les fixer, rendant ainsi visible l'image latente de toute sa vie, dans cette photographie gigantesque que constitue *À la recherche du temps perdu*.¹⁴

This possibility of revisiting the past and constructing imagined spaces in Proust's writing suggests something close to a photographic experience of time—a kind of affective recollection in which the past becomes once again alive, much like when we revisit old family photographs.

By contrast, Susan Sontag offers a critical reading of this connection. In *On Photography*, she claims that Proust's realism actually distances itself from photography:

Proust's strategy of realism assumes distance from what is normally experienced as real—the present—in order to reanimate what is generally accessible only as something remote and hazy, the past—which is where the present becomes real in Proust's sense, that is, something that can be possessed. In this effort, photographs were of no help. Whenever Proust mentions photographs, he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to be made by responding to cues given by all the senses—the technique he called “involuntary memory”.¹⁵

Still, it is worth noting that Proust, while critical of photography in some respects, was undeniably fascinated by it. His descriptions of scenes, locations, and the fine details of characters often recall the still precision of photography. Even the madeleine episode—central to his theory of involuntary memory—could be seen as analogous to the affective impact of an image: an experience that evokes the past through sensorial intensity.

One might even say that the hidden precursor that most inspired Proust was photography itself. Numerous metaphors in *À la recherche du temps perdu* liken memory to photographic processes. He writes:

Les impressions véritables de notre vie, — c'est-à-dire celles qui sont enregistrées en nous,

¹⁴ “In the light of photography, a new Proust appeared to me, a kind of mental photographer, considering his own body as an ultra-sensitive plate that, during his youth, captured and stored thousands of impressions, and which, beginning with *In Search of Lost Time*, devoted itself entirely to developing and fixing them—thus revealing the latent image of his entire life in this gigantic photograph that is *À la recherche du temps perdu*.” — Translation mine. Based on: Brassai, *Marcel Proust sous l'emprise de la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 20.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 164-165.

– y restent, dans une grande majorité, inconnues de nous. Elles ne se développent qu'à l'état de photographie négative. On tâchera de les apercevoir plus tard, quand on aura des clichés sous la main, en positif.¹⁶

And further: “La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c’est la littérature.”¹⁷

Such metaphors reinforce the idea that, even if Proust distances himself from photography as a superficial visual device, he nonetheless uses its logic—particularly the idea of latency, development, and revelation—as a way to approach the unconscious depths of memory.

In this light, whether or not one agrees with Brassai or Sontag, photography functions in Proust not simply as a mimetic device, but as a structural and compositional analogy: the literary image becomes a suggestion, not a duplication, of reality. Like literature, photography can suggest what something was—but never be that thing itself.

BARTHES, THE ONTOLOGY OF THE IMAGE, AND MEMORY

*Ce que la photographie reproduit à l’infini n’a lieu qu’une fois: elle répète mécaniquement ce qui ne pourra jamais plus se répéter existentiellement.*¹⁸

—Roland Barthes

Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* (*La chambre claire*) remains one of the most influential philosophical reflections on photography. Written shortly after his mother’s death, the book unfolds as a kind of phenomenology of mourning, but also as an ontology of the photographic image.

The photograph, for Barthes, resists traditional models of representation. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it presents the real—not as fiction, nor as constructed

¹⁶ “The true impressions of our life—that is to say, those which are recorded in us—remain, for the most part, unknown to us. They develop only in the form of negatives. We shall try to perceive them later, when we hold the positives in hand.” — Translation mine. Based on: Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Pléiade, 1987), p. 62.

¹⁷ “The true life, life finally discovered and illuminated, the only life truly lived, is literature.” — Translation mine. Based on: Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁸ “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: it mechanically repeats what can never again be existentially repeated.” — Translation mine. From Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1980), 17.

narrative, but as a certitude of being-there. He writes: “La photographie ne dit pas (forcément) ce qui n’est plus, mais seulement et à coup sûr ce qui a été.”¹⁹

In this sense, the photograph is not merely documentary; it serves as proof of existence. Every photograph, regardless of its subject, bears witness to what once was, to what happened in front of the lens. The temporality of the photograph is thus not only past-oriented—it is ontological: something has been.

Barthes coins the concepts of *studium* and *punctum* to articulate this experience. The *studium* refers to the general field of cultural interest, the conventional reading of an image. The *punctum*, by contrast, is what wounds, what pierces: the detail that breaks the frame of convention and touches the viewer directly.

In addition to these, Barthes introduces the spectrum, which refers to the photographic referent—the ‘thing’ that has been placed before the lens. The term *spectrum* maintains a linguistic kinship with ‘spectacle’ but also with the idea of a ghost or the ‘return of the dead’, as it marks the moment when the subject is turned into an object, a preserved trace of existence. It is this indexical character of the *spectrum* that allows the photograph to function as a site of spectral persistence

“Ce que je peux nommer ne me touche pas. Le nom m’arrête, mais l’aphasie me pousse.”²⁰

The *punctum* is ineffable—it cannot be explained or named without dissolving its intensity. It is not a symbolic element, but a sensorial, affective one. It moves the image from representation to affective presence.

This conception allows Barthes to suggest that photography does not belong to the order of language, nor even of the visible. Instead, it belongs to what he calls the “that-has-been” (*ça-a-été*), a structure that escapes both narrative and meaning. He writes: “Devant la photo de ma mère enfant, je me dis: elle va mourir: je frémis, tel le psychotique de Winnicott, d’une catastrophe qui a déjà eu lieu. Que le sujet en soit déjà mort ou non, toute photographie est cette catastrophe.”²¹

¹⁹ “Photography does not (necessarily) say what is no longer, but only and certainly what has been.” — Translation mine. Based on: Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1980), p. 120.

²⁰ “What I can name does not touch me. The name stops me, but aphasia pushes me forward.” — Translation mine. Based on: Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 56.

²¹ English translation: “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott’s psychotic, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is

What interests Barthes is not merely the image of his mother as a child, but the fact that she once stood there, in front of the camera, and that this presence now survives in the image—not as memory, but as *spectral existence*. He seeks not resemblance, but *reality*. The photograph, for him, is not a signifier of memory but a trace of being, irreducible to the symbolic.

This is where Barthes resonates most with Bergson. Although he makes no explicit reference to *Matter and Memory*, his analysis touches on the same question: can a material image preserve the being of a moment?

Photography does not speak in the same way memory does; it does not retell a story. Instead, it *fixes* the unrepeatable. But even in this fixation, it reveals the past not as closed, but as something that insists—that haunts the present with its persistence.

It is no coincidence, then, that Barthes's notion of photography anticipates Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology (*hantologie*). In both, we are dealing with a temporality that is not linear, a presence of the past that is neither memory nor simple representation.

Photography becomes, in this framework, a form of temporal coexistence—a mode of *being-with* what has passed without reducing it to nostalgia or narrative. It shares with Bergson's *pure memory* the condition of non-utilitarian survival, outside the regime of utility or function. Both are modes of presence without immediacy.

Thus, Barthes offers us a way to think of photography not merely as visual recording, but as a metaphysical encounter. His contribution lies not in aesthetics alone, but in ontology. He allows us to ask: what kind of time is preserved in a photograph? What kind of being survives in the image?

THE GHOST AS A TEMPORAL FORM

"The time is out of joint."²²

Hamlet

If the past endures, it does not do so merely as memory or as psychological recollection. Rather, it persists as a presence that was never fully present, a trace that continues to affect the present even in its absence. This is the essence of Jacques

already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe." — Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*, Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Gallimard, 1980, p. 150 (my translation).

²² Act I, Scene 5 (quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Galilée, 1993, p. 19).

Derrida's notion of *hauntology*, introduced in *Spectres de Marx*, where the ghost is not a being from the past, but a being of time, a temporal anomaly.

This disjunction places the ghost outside the regime of chronology. It returns without origin, not as a repetition but as an interruption of time itself.

In Bergson, although the term *ghost* (*fantôme*) does not appear explicitly in this ontological register, his concept of pure memory already opens a path toward understanding memory as a coexistence of temporal planes. Past and present are not sequential; they interpenetrate. The past, in this sense, is not gone—it survives as virtuality, waiting to be actualized.

This echoes the reflections of Hisashi Fujita, who proposes that the ghost should not be understood simply as the return of a past figure, but rather as the persistence of an intensity—a remnant of time that endures invisibly within the present. In this sense, the specter is not a representation, but a mode of temporal survival: a trace of duration that haunts the real.²³

This way of thinking disrupts the modern epistemology of memory as representation or storage. In both Fujita and Bergson, memory is not a matter of archives—it is a dynamic process, a creative return that transforms the present.

The ghost, then, functions not as nostalgia but as temporal resistance: it breaks the continuity of linear time and suggests that what has passed is still at work. Photography, in this framework, becomes a privileged medium for such hauntological presence.

In Barthes, as we've seen, the image is a site of spectral persistence. The photograph wounds us because it brings us into contact with what has been, with a presence we cannot reclaim. In Derrida, the ghost haunts because it is neither present nor absent—it insists without being fully there. In Bergson, memory haunts because it endures; it is the very force that makes the present possible.

Thus, the ghost emerges not as a supernatural being but as a mode of temporality, a way of inhabiting time differently. It reminds us that to think memory philosophically is to confront the instability of time itself.

²³ See Hisashi Fujita, *Khorologia da memória*, 2009. Although not a direct quotation, this interpretation is closely aligned with Fujita's analysis of the spectral dimension of memory.

WHAT CAN RECALL ITS PAST LIVES — SURVIVING IMAGES

*“I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee’s story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time destroys the line dividing them.”*²⁴

— Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, 2010) invites us into a radically different experience of time—one in which the past, the dead, and memory itself cohabit with the present in fluid, porous ways. The film does not merely depict reincarnation as a metaphysical theme, but stages a cinematic coexistence of temporal planes, a poetic realization of what Henri Bergson called *la coexistence des couches de la mémoire*.

In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson affirms that time is not a succession of moments but a coexistence of durations. The past endures—it is never erased. Each moment carries within it the totality of the past, like a snowball that retains all previous layers as it rolls forward. In this regard, *Tio Boonmee* offers more than narrative: it becomes a sensorial image of duration.

In the film, ghosts and spirits return not as dramatic apparitions, but as gentle presences that share space with the living. There is no rupture between worlds; the boundaries between human, animal, and ghost dissolve into a continuum. The past haunts the present not as psychological trauma, but as ontological residue, a persistence that can neither be seen nor forgotten.

Such a temporal logic echoes Jacques Derrida’s concept of *hauntology*, where presence is always split by what has been and what is yet to come. The ghost in *Tio Boonmee* does not seek resolution—it simply is, coexisting with memory, landscape, and family. As Derrida (1993) suggests, haunting (*la hantise*) defies rational explanation; it can only be lived or experienced (*elle s’éprouve*).

At the same time, the film’s use of long takes, ambient sound, and natural light

²⁴ Apichatpong Weerasethakul, in a director’s statement included in the press kit for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). Translation mine.

creates a cinematic time that resists linearity. The experience of the viewer is not one of narrative unfolding, but of temporal immersion—a being-with the layers of time that silently accumulate.

The image here ceases to be mimetic. It becomes ontological: a vibration, an echo, a residue. We might even say that *Tio Boonmee* transforms the cinematic image into pure memory—not remembered from within, but arising from without, as Bergson described.

This aligns with the notion of a hauntology of memory, as proposed by Hisashi Fujita, where the ghost is a temporal intensity rather than a symbolic figure. It also resonates with Roland Barthes's idea of *ça-a-été*, the ungraspable force that makes the photograph affective: not representation, but survival.

In this sense, Weerasethakul's cinema touches on a deeply Bergsonian intuition: the past does not return—it remains. What we call the present is not a discrete point, but a tension of durations, haunted by what has been and open to what may come.

Thus, what can recall its past lives is not a subject, but an image—a living image of time, where memory, matter, and spirit merge into a single plane of experience.

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