

# John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: A Time-Image Filmic Space, Embodying Pure Time as *Durée*

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## Abstract

Exploring literary works based on media theories constitutes a major part of interdisciplinary studies. Gilles Deleuze's notions on time-image cinema, a trend dominant after the Second World War, have provided a suitable platform for investigating postmodern novels. Using his theories as well as the filmic space of John Barth's novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), the present study seeks to present it as a time-image crystalline narrative. No matter from which dimension we look at a crystal, we will simultaneously see the other dimensions, as well. Therefore, according to Deleuze, crystal displays the indistinguishable continuity and unity of the real and the virtual; that is why

what we see in crystal is pure time (*durée*). Inspired by Henri Bergson, Deleuze considers the nature of time as qualitative, rather than quantitative, and sees *durée* as real time that is in continuous becoming. Characteristics such as pure heterogeneity, pure quality, the fusion of moments, incompatibility with determination and identification, and innumerability can be attributed to *durée*, a concept independent of the linear time discussed by Immanuel Kant. Relying on concepts such as crystal-image, the blurring of the boundary between history and fiction, the power of the false, and non-linear flashback, this article considers them as appropriate tools that have already rendered *The Sot-Weed Factor* a time-image cinematic space, embodying pure time and making its characters and readers (spectators) immediately intuit it.

**Keywords:** Crystal-image, History, Flashback, Power of the false, Time-image Cinema, *Durée*

# Pre-print Version

## Introduction

John Barth, across his entire body of works, employs artistic skills, much as a filmmaker does, in terms of ‘camera’ movement and placement in the act of ‘shooting’ his total optical image. In an interview with William Plimely (an American scholar of modern American poetry) published by *Chicago Review*, he states that “[m]y muse, I’ve said somewhere, is not one of those drapery-clad daughters of Zeus who comes and perches on your lap and whispers sweet things in your ear. My muse is more like one of those Hollywood movie monsters who makes guttural sounds that prompt the heroine to say, ‘I think it’s trying to tell us something’” (1994, 18). Thus, influenced by the motion picture, cinematic language and the art of filmmaking pervade the fabric of Barth’s entire *oeuvre*. This writer states that “[we] favor movie techniques like ‘disjunction’” (9); yet, this is not the sole cinematic practice that he adopts in conceiving *The Sot-Weed Factor* because one can, also, find in this masterpiece, diverse ‘camera’ movements and different ‘shots’ such as long and short shots, medium-shots, close-up, and so forth. In addition, the editing techniques including fast cutting and cutaway among others, are already present in his this novel. Therefore,

Barth eliminates the borderline between textuality and visuality and situates his readers in a comparable way to spectators and his fictional text to a filmic space.

*The Sot-Weed Factor* is going to be adapted by Steven Soderbergh into a 12-hour film, a fact suggesting that this Oscar winning filmmaker has recognized something always already cinematic about this original narrative. Accordingly, Barth’s text enjoys the benefit of visual features and the multiplicity of filmic elements, a reality that makes it a desirable option for adaptation. According to *Los Angeles Times* (2013), in an interview with *Los Angeles Review of Book*, James Greer, the novelist who was hired by Soderbergh to adapt Barth’s landmark into a screenplay, compared *The Sot-Weed Factor* and its probable cinematic product to Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s ‘Berlin Alexanderplatz,’ but with pirates and whores and venereal disease and bumptious alcoholics.” Greer maintains that in other words, the final product will be “almost exactly like ‘Berlin Alexanderplatz.’” This statement signifies certain filmic aspects, inherent in the postmodern text that lend themselves to screen adaptation.

Although *The Sot-Weed Factor* does not, directly or indirectly, refer to any film title,

numerous passages in this text are read/viewed like *mise en scène* due to the writer's lighting methods and special effects. It is as if Barth is projecting some images on his textual screen and is drawing his audience fully into his magic show. The proximity of the text to film in method, style, and, especially, in viewpoint and exposition, is amazing because it displays a script-like precision about the notation of gestures; it is, also, full of pictorial images, showcases, and the visual and aural vivacity of films.

Barth's cinematic venture takes its title from the poem *The Sot-Weed Factor: Or, a Voyage to Maryland, A Satyr* (1708) by the English-born poet Ebenezer Cooke (c. 1665-c.1732) about whom few biographical details are known. The poem is a satirical epic set in the 1680s-90s in London and colonial Maryland and tells of Cooke, who is given the title "Poet Laureate of Maryland" by Charles Calvert, Third Baron Baltimore. Ebenezer is commissioned to write *Marylandiad* to sing the praises of the colony. He undergoes adventures on his journey to and in Maryland while striving to preserve his virginity.

Considering *The Sot-Weed Factor* as totally filmic, the present study will demonstrate that it is a Deleuzian cinematic venture, possessing time-image features such

as crystal-image, the power of the false, and being a perfect crystalline flashback, characteristics lauded by Deleuze in his cinema books.

## Literature Review

In *John Barth and Postmodernism* (2008), Brent Clavier quoting from Barth, explores history and historiography in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Clavier states that for Barth, "She [history] is a scattered Sybil whose oak-leaf oracles we toil to recollect, only to spell out something less than nothing: e.g. WHOLTRUTH, or ULTIMATE MEANING" (15). Likewise, the book *Rewriting Early America: The Prenational Past in Postmodern Literature* (2019) by Christopher K. Coffman examines the domain of history and historiography in Barth's fiction. Coffman states that "John Barth's fictions are exemplary instances of metafictional postmodern texts, as they are dazzlingly explorations of the formal and stylistic experimentation [...]. His novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* is no exception to the case" (19). This text focuses on Barth's concern with history and claims that he presents history as a construct: "it is for him a selection and sequence of facts by biased and perceptually and conceptually limited

artificers, none metaphysically superior to his or her fellows” (19). Coffman’s work, like Brent Clavier’s, declares Barth’s novel as a historiographic metafiction and argues that the writer of the *Sot-Weed Factor* “stands as a literary peer of arch historical constructivist Haden White” (19) and he is deft in blurring history and fiction.

In addition, in *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (1971), Charles H. Harris depicts Barth’s novel as a textual machine which “includes a proliferation of outrageous coincidences, a host of caricatures and ‘stock’ comic-figures, irrelevant digressions, and a style that is ornate and purposely exaggerated” (101). This book claims that how receiving shock after shock in the novel, “the scales of innocence drop gradually from his [Ebenezer’s] eyes, until the falseness of his instance becomes evident even to him” (106). When consummating his marriage to Joan Toast, “Eben freely embraces a world stripped of all illusions and ideals. His painful discovery that neither man nor the world can be made to fit any abstract or rational formula, that one must accept ‘what is the case’ without embellishment or hope for understanding it” (106) according to a logical basis.

While appreciating the above-mentioned books and their exploring certain crucial facets of Barth’s *The Sot-Wed Factor*, these works mostly focus on historiography, the nature of time, and the labyrinthine identity that play a significant role in the Deleuzian ontology. However, none of them explore Barth’s textual landmark in terms of cinema. Moreover, they do not focus on Gilles Deleuze’s outlook on time-image cinema or on establishing this novel as a time-image filmic space, a gap which the present study will try to fill.

## Methodology

Inspired by Henri Bergson’s view that the entire universe is a meta-cinema, Deleuze believes that daily life seems to be composed of movement-images in our mind, images that transform and fuse into each other and, quoting his master, he depicts them as perception-, affection-, and action- images. To him, for example, when we look at a red rose whose odor is pleasant for us and we move forward to pick it up from the garden, this sequence is indeed a sequence of mental images comprised of ‘perception image’ (red rose), ‘affection-image’ (its pleasant odor and its red color), and ‘action-image’ (picking it

up from the garden). According to Deleuze, this story is immersed within a grand movement-image called the universe featuring a sensory-motor narrative. It is this narrative that connects the entire images together and its foremost property is Aristotelian organic unity.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1997), Deleuze quotes Bergson that each of us is nothing but an assemblage of these three images. He maintains that it is the connection between these types of images which constitutes the very matter of classical films. This critic maintains that a “film is never made of a single kind of image: thus we call the combination of the three varieties, montage” (70). Nevertheless, he argues that a film, at least, in its most simple characteristics, always has one type of image which is dominant. The action-image, being the fulfillment of the Bergsonian movement, is, in one sense, the movement-image (the image of movement) par excellence. Sensory-motor link is a key feature of the action-image and carries great implications for the type of narration that relies heavily on cause and effect. Deleuze calls this mode of narration *organic narration* or sometimes *organic representation* prevailing the pre-World War II classic films, where mechanical time dominates.

Deleuze argues that over several centuries from the classical times in Greece up to Kant in the Enlightenment period, movement was perceived as prior to time and that it was with Kant that time was foregrounded. Deleuze’s outlook on time is deeply influenced by Bergson since for the latter, time is not a succession of instants, arrayed according to a spatial conception. In the Hindu philosophy, along with Greco-Roman thought, time was perceived as cyclical and that it was with the Judeo-Christian system that time became flattened and linear. As a consequence, in the new framework, it was defined as composed of some stable past, present, and future; thus, time was conceived at the Genesis and it moves on up to the Judgment Day.

Deleuze argues that it was following the Second World War that cinema valued pure time (*durée*) more than linear movement (validated by classic cinema) as now it was time that was creating paradoxical and juxtaposing movements and gave rise to a new cinema that validated time-image rather than movement-image. According to him, in post-War cinema, movement-images in films were shattered since these more recent movies resurrected from the heart of bombarded and destroyed cities in Europe. Now, there was no longer any harmony bound to direct movement-images; rather,

there emerged a certain type of cinema rooted in time-image, which replaced action-image with pure sound and optical images, or ‘opsigns,’ and ‘sonsigns,’ ripped of any deep meaning and cause-and-effect-based narrative. Therefore, according to Deleuze in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1997), “a cinema of seeing replaces action, where a passive seer, provides us a series of image, deprived of any logical pattern” (9) as we see in Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) and his *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), or Bahman Farmanara’s 1974 *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (*Prince Ehtejab*), for example.

The principal property of this new filmic trend was bound to becoming or difference and its protagonists were often reflective and mentally suspended in time’s state of branching. It is due to this forking that this cinema featured an amalgamating alloy-like nature as it became an aggregation of unpredictable transitions from shot to shot, very similar to the entire universe as a meta-cinema, an issue, also, overrunning *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a time-image crystal where history and fiction as dimensions of crystal blur, reaching the zone of proximity.

### ***The Sot-Weed Factor* as a History-Fiction Filmic Crystal**

Gilles Deleuze argues that one of the problems with historical accounts (and a historical approach more generally) is that it runs the risk of reducing events to the level of the actual. According to Michelle Koerner’s interpretation of this philosopher, “[o]ur relationships to the past becomes one of accumulating facts, tracing references, and supplementing a narrative” (2005, 6). Hence, what history grasps in an event is the way it is actualized in specific historical conditions and “the event’s becoming is beyond the scope of history” (Patton 2012, 200). However, in the context of Deleuzian ontology, the move away from the pace of narrative progression to time itself, “could be considered a threat to the explanatory power of history” (Beckman 2011, 5), a feature taking place in time-image cinema. According to David Rodowick’s interpretation of Deleuze, this trend in motion industry produces an image of thought as a “nontotalizable process and a sense of history as unpredictable change” (1997, 17), an issue found, also, in Barth’s Deleuzian cinematic space.

In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the oedipal logic of the patriarchal time of History “with its relatively uninterrupted pattern of spatial and temporal succession and contiguity” (102) has already vanished. In common with time-

images including Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), in this novel, one does not find, to use Heather Pokotylo's words, "the linear History of progress, but a forking history of *histories*, of coexisting and ever impossible histories" (2006, 105). Thus, the superabundance of meanings and "a multiplicity of virtualities" (105) overrun the entire work. Here, history and fiction assemble and approximate one another, enter the zone of indiscernibility, and with other elements, create a crystalline narrative (history and fiction as dimensions of the entire text as crystal blur) wherein the writer uses so many forms of the double in so many different ways and attempts to give an impression of exhausted possibilities.

The exhaustion of possibilities fractures any cohesive narrative into contingency and chance, deconstructing "Enlightenment-driven precepts of an Alexander Pope: that 'Order is Heav'n first law,' that 'God said, Let Newton be! And all was Light'" (Strandberg 2000, 103). Newton, as a historical scientist, has been portrayed in *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a homosexual man who desires to transgress Henry Burlingame. Thus, he has experienced Deleuzian becoming that "'is not to progress or regress along a series,' Rather, '[w]hat is real is the becoming itself'" (Shores 2019, 87). This

merge of historical and fictional Newton echoes the deconstruction of universal laws and "the realms of cause and effect which is also the world of the organic action-image" (Pokotylo 2006, 107) cinema.

*The Sot-Weed Factor* endeavors to evade "colonization of time and space" (Staes 2010, 535) by demonstrating that labyrinth lies beneath the façade of history. In "The Fold" (1991), Deleuze argues that a "labyrinth is said to be multiple, etymologically because it has many folds. The multiple is not merely that which has many parts, but that which is folded in many ways" (228). Barth's cinematic text is such a crystalline labyrinth with many loops and its elements evade any specific nature. In episode 10 of Part I in the novel, Third Baltimore Baron narrates a tale to Ebenezer about his grandfather's presence in the court of James I and that how he had been knighted. Consider his story:

My grandfather, George Calvert, as you may know, was introduced to the court of James I as private secretary to Sir Robert Cecil, and after that great man's death was appointed-clerk to the Privy Council and twice Commissioner to Ireland. He was knighted in 1617, and when Sir Thomas Lake



was sacked as Secretary of State (owing to the free tongue of his wife), my grandfather was named to replace him, despite the fact that the Duke of Buckingham, James's favorite, wanted the post for his friend Carleton, the Ambassador to the Netherlands. I have cause to believe that Buckingham took this as an affront the more because James sent him personally to notify Grandfather of his preferment and became the first significant enemy to our house. (90)

Baron's narration is a crystal-image because it is not clear whether it is virtual or actual, true or false. It takes several pages, blending fact and fiction, a feature overrunning the entire novel and echoing quaternion numbers, discovered by the Irish mathematician William Rowan Hamilton in 1843.

Quaternion numbers are hypercomplex ones which obey the fundamental formula posited by Hamilton:  $i=j^2=k=ijk=-1$  with  $i$ ,  $j$ , and  $k$  as unit vectors, each denoting one of the three known dimensions of space. Thus, they combine real numbers, as the scalar part of the quaternion, with unit vectors along the axes of these scalars. The quaternion "is the

sum of its scalar and vector parts, which means that it is *both* imaginary *and* real" (Staes 2010, 535). The translation of the Hamiltonian system of complex numbers to social realm is that it "suggests a possibility to somehow undo the unidirectional course that history appears to be taking" (540). Accordingly, one ought to regard "multiple realities and dimensions beyond the visible three" (543), the visibility vivid in movement-image historical films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) or Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), for example.

Barth's visual structure, thanks to its crystalline nature, resonates with the 1966 novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* by Richard Fariña, where the main protagonist, Gnossos, is handed a card. On one side written in inedible purple ink, is the message: "The statement on the other side is false;" on the other side: "The statement on the other side is true" (Éigearthaigh 2022-2023 12). Akin to the salon of mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), when one steps into *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a crystal, because time ranches and captures diverse routes, he/she cannot distinguish between the actual and the virtual. These items like opposite mirrors reflect each other "around a point of indiscernibility" (*Cinema* 2 7). Barth's text is

a mere surface, a grand historical-fictional crystal, featuring myriads of other crystals within its space. This filmic text is, in fact, a perfect manifestation of Barth's claim in *The Paris Review* in 1985 that "[m]y imagination evidently delights in complexity for its own sake," a view, ironically, opposed to the Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō "Ozu's thinking [that] life is simple and man never stops complicating it by 'disturbing still water'" (*Cinema 2* 15), in Deleuze's terms.

### Crystal-Images in *The Sot-Weed Factor*

In *Becoming Other in Time* (2002), David Martin-Jones states that in Peter Howitt's film *Sliding Doors* (1998), the city is shown to be a crystal-image, a "temporal entity that due to its assembling along with its inhabitants, contains the same labyrinthine possibilities as that of its peoples" (188). Likewise, in Barth's cinematic venture, as a crystalline narrative, the lives of Maryland's residents are represented as temporal events and they are crystal-images since they are double becomings and one can perceive both the becoming-city of them and the simultaneous becoming-them of the city. Analogous to the woman in Howitt's film, Maryland's people have formed "an assemblage always in process" (Hough 2019,

64) with this land as they pass through it, forking and forging.

The numerous deceits and trickeries of the inhabitants and their state of being Deleuzian becoming and difference, resonates with Eve's similar situation in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950). Ebenezer, disillusioned by these forkings and trickeries, decides to compose another poem (rather than a poem celebrating Maryland) in the novel:

Condemned by Fate, to wayward  
Curse,  
Of Friends unkind, and empty  
Purse,  
Plagues worse than fill'd  
Pandoras Box,  
I took my Leave of Albions  
Rocks,  
With  
heavy Heart, concern'd that I  
Was forc'd my native Soil to fly,  
And the old World must bid  
Good-bye. (484)

Ebenezer, and Barth's readers, are already thrown into the ballade structure of the text and its splitting of time "as the spiral open" (*Cinema 1* 37) and its forkings. The novel which embodies the rush of pure time, folds upon certain characters, specifically Henry

Burlingame, a Deleuzian event that evades any fixed identity and experiences eternal recurrence and its difference at any instant.

Throughout *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Burlingame, as a crystal-image, mutates everlastingly, takes countless masks, and makes Ebenezer experience thoughtlessness. His mutations, to use Hojat Goodarzi's words, "replete with incessant intensities, create a temporal situation that differentiates at each instant, hence, producing becoming and evoking the Deleuzian concept of repetition and difference" (2021, 56). The same Burlingame is the swarming of surfaces, occupying a great portion of the crystalline novel and generating the feeling of wonder and amazement, marvel, rupture, and even delirium in the passive protagonist. In episode 8 of Part II of the novel, we read that "'REMEMBER,' BURLINGAME SAID AS THE CARRIAGE ROLLED INTO PLYMOUTH, 'I am not Henry Burlingame, nor Peter Sayer either, for the real Sayer's somewhere on the fleet. You'd best not give me any name at all, I think, till I see how lays the land'" (181). He is a crystal, a schizo that rhizomatically switches between points of disjunction since he ceaselessly forges new connections and plays "excess of theatricality" (*Cinema 2* 84) in the novel.

Burlingame passes from one code to the other and "deliberately scrambles all the codes by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never recording the same genealogy, never recording the same event in the same way" (Markle 2019, 140). In episode 7 of Part II in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he says that

Ricaud was a London friend of Cheseldyne's and had ne'er seen Coode before, for all he'd heard of him. The truth is, Eben, no man save Richard Hill, Lord Baltimore, and yourself hath known my name since 1687, when first I commenced to play the game of governments; and the game itself hath made such changes in me, that none who knew me erst would know me now, nor do I mean them to. 'Tis better they think me lost. (180)

In the novel, Bertrand, himself a crystal, tells Ebenezer that

he [Burlingame] hath posed as Baltimore, Coode, Colonel Sayer, Tim Mitchell, Bertrand Burton, and Eben Cooke, to mention no more, and hath ne'er

been found out yet! But what's the chiefest talent of John Coode, if not the same? Hath he not played priest, minister, general, and what have ye? Is't not his wont to travel always incognito, so that his own lieutenants scarce know his natural face? (543)

Burlingame assembles the novel, as a crystal and an “acentered variation of the plane of immanence” (Rodowick 1997, 55) since it twists and forks everlastingly, as do Jean Renoir's or Robert Altman's movies, alongside their characters, for example.

Burlingame's tales deterritorialize the borders of Ebenezer's consciousness, making him- and the readers- experience “nomadic becoming” (17) and time as *durée*. Thus, Ebenezer becomes a perpetual Deleuzian seer, with no specific reaction to the pure optical and sound situations he faces. In the novel, we read that “Now the earlier portions of this long narrative had elicited from Ebenezer such a number of *ah's*, *marry's*, *'sheart's*, and *b'm'faith's* that he had come during this last to sit for the most part wordlessly, mouth agape and brows a-pucker in a sort of permanent God! as one amazement tripped on another's heels” (180). This situation is very similar to Roberto

Rossellini's *Europa '51* (1952), where, according to Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, “a bourgeoisie woman, who following the death of her child, crosses various spaces and experiences the tenement, the stum and the factory: ‘I thought I was seeing convicts’” (2). Ebenezer, like this oman, is a seer, bereft of any agency and any reaction to the situations that he encounters.

From the very first few lines, Ebenezer is plunged into the Bergsonian time to which characteristics such as pure heterogeneity, pure quality, the fusion of moments, incompatibility with determination and identification, and innumerability can be attributed. Barth's gigantic crystal is similar to certain time-image movies such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), *L'Eclisse* (1962), or *La Notte* (1961), for example. In these films, according to Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, “[e]ven the body is no longer exactly what moves; subject of movement or the instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer [*révélateur*] of time, it shows time through its tiredness and waitings” (xi). *The Sot-Weed Factor*, its readers, as well as its protagonist, experience this exhaustion, because in a futile way, they wait for a fixed significance to be conceived somewhere in the womb of the text.

In Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), the jigsaw puzzle is interwoven with the entire narrative and it has folded upon the film, twisting it like a *Möbius*. Also, in Barth's falsifying narrative, the gambling played by Poseidon's passengers has twisted upon the entire novel, forming a rhizomatic cinematic event that experiences Deleuzian becoming and difference at any instant. In the text, we read that

[t]he basic gamble was the pool five to ten shillings a head, usually, for the gentlemen and ladies; a shilling or less for the servants but the more ambitious speculators soon contrived a variety of side bets: a maximum or minimum figure, for example, could be adjusted for virtually any odds desired, or one could gamble on a maximum or minimum differential between each day's run and the next one. (225)

All the characters in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, except Ebenezer, are somehow gamblers playing falsifying roles. Burlingame, Bertrand, Captain Pound, Captain Leech, Joan Toast, Captain Mitchell, and many others, are, in fact, myriads of crystal seeds

which grow layer by layer. These fleeting characters emerge and then evaporate, abruptly shifting from topic to topic, rendering their surrounding crystallize forever. As seed crystals, Burlingame and these and many other forking characters are very analogous to the protagonist in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Man Who Lies* (1968) who "is not a localized liar, but an unlocalizable and chronic forger in paradoxical spaces" (*Cinema 2* 132). They manifest the question asked by Camilla in Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach* that "[w]here then, does theatre finish and life begin?" (86)? The answer is nowhere because they are dimensions of the characters as crystal, merging forever.

In common with these movies' personages, Barth's characters, in many possible worlds, slip through time because to them, the universe is fluid. Consider this passage in the novel:

Burlingame raised a tutorial finger. "The world can alter a man entirely, Eben, or he can alter himself, down to his very essence. Did you not by your own testimony resolve, not that you were, but that you'd be virgin and poet from that moment hence?

Nay, a man must alter willy-nilly  
in's Sight to the grave, he is a  
river running seawards, that is  
ne'er the same from hour to  
hour." (140)

Burlingame maintains that the "world's indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared; the very universe is naught but change and motion" (140). Burlingame and many other characters do not move across the unified space of one universe; rather, they moves across the Bergsonian *durée* as they pass from one universe to another due to their power of the false, that is "the will to power in the cinema of the time-image" (Rodowick 1997, 138). It is due to this power that beneath any of their mask, there is another mask and their self is performance and difference from itself at any instant.

According to Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, "It is Nietzsche, who under the name of 'will to power,' substitutes the power of the false for the form of the true, and resolves the crisis of truth, wanting to settle it once and for all, in opposition to Leibniz, in favor of the false and it artistic, creative power." He maintains that "[t]he power of the false is also the most general principle that determines all the relationships in the direct time-image" (131). In Barth's falsifying text, it is *falsity* which

ensures the openness of the Whole and the rushing of Bergsonian *durée* because it diverges or forks down an unexpected path; thus, it imposes a new break in causality, which "itself forks from the previous one, in a collection of non-linear relations" (Shores 2019, 97). In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze argues that the "formation of the crystal, the force of time and the power of false are strictly complementary" (132), an issue manifested in *The Sot-Weed Factor* as a crystalline gigantic flashback.

### ***The Sot-Weed Factor* as a Time-Image Flashback**

In classic cinema, flashback takes the audience back to the first cause and the organic trajectory of the movement-image maintains its linearity. According to Deleuze's interpretation of Henri Bergson in *Bergsonism* (1988), whenever we try to recover a recollection, to call up some period of the past, "we place ourselves not simply into the element of the past in general, but in a particular region, that is, on a particular level which [...] we assume corresponds to our actual needs" (62). Deleuze maintains that "it is the recollections of memory that links the instants to each other and interpolate the past in the present" (25), as in classic

films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) which illustrates the way in which the past returns whilst always retaining the superiority of the singular linear present and a self-same, organic subject.

In Jorge Louis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), according to Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, "it is not space but time which forks, 'web of time which approaches, forks, is cut off or unacknowledged for centuries, embracing every possibility.' It is here that the flashback finds its justification: at each point where time forks" (49) due to falsification. This feature overruns Barth's cinematic *The Sot-Weed Factor*, where characters experience their existence as temporal event, and their becoming-other is enabled by their falsifying the past or their recognition of many virtual pasts. Deleuze states that flashback, when "used by great authors, it is there only to show much more complex temporal structures" (xii). This sentence is applicable to John Barth because his gigantic flashback is the expression of the mutual existence of the actual and purely virtual, of the present and the past that is, rather than the present and a past that was. Therefore, it refuses temporal continuity and the spectators' apprehension of what comes next, "is equivalent to a dice throw"

(Rodowick 1997, 4-5), never being predictable.

Bergson visualizes the virtual past as a cone, with its point representing the past's coincidence with the present, and its widening volume representing the ever-growing expanse of coexisting past events. Barth's mirroring labyrinthine, akin to Alain Resnais' *Je t'aime Je t'aime* (1968), which "does present duration as a force of memory" (114), delves into the Bergsonian virtual cone of time, where the past and the present cannot be distinguished from each other as they have entered into the state of being crystal. In episode 3 of Part II in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Ebenezer tells Burlingame that "I know not what I am, but I know that I am, and have been, because of memory. 'Tis the thread that runs through all the beads to make a necklace; or like Ariadne's thread, that she gave to thankless Theseus, it marks my path through the labyrinth of Life, connects me with my starting place" (141). Ebenezer believes in the colonized time that, like Arian's thread, guides him through his entire life. However, Burlingame, as a crystal-image ripped of any organism, tells Ebenezer that "[y]ou did not recall sleeping on my shoulder on the way home from Pall Mall," Burlingame reminded him. "This demonstrates the first weakness of your soul-saving thread, which is, that it hath

breaks in it” (141). Similar to Bergson who sees “memory [... as] essentially difference” (Deleuze 1991, 92), Burlingame perceives a reservoir composed of nonchronological strata, and “the pure form of time as change” (Rodowick 1997, 186).

*The Sot-Weed Factor* is, to use Deleuze’s words, a “gigantic memory” (1991, 100), made up of nonlinear sheets of past which are not necessarily true. According to Deleuze’s interpretation of Bergson in *Bergsonism*, “[i]t is clear that memory is identical to duration, that it is coextensive with duration” (55) and Barth’s cinematic narrative demonstrates this point. In Jacques Rivette’s time-image *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), the girls make their past not-necessarily true and render their lives “be a repetition of the same and becomes-other” (Martin-Jones 2002, 127). Likewise, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, memory becomes multiple because the past is falsified and the pasts of characters become contingent because they are falsified over and over, rather than being the singular past and constraining the subject within a linear view of time.

Barth’s ‘actors’ have the opportunity to falsify the past in the present, at any moment, due to the continual splitting of time (that constructs the text as a cinematic labyrinth)

and its will to falsehood. In the novel, one can observe the temporal coexistence of Burlingame, Third Baron Baltimore, Sayer, Captain Mitchell, John Coode, as well as Bertrand’s being Ebenezer and their amalgamation of impossibilities that include “a set of non-coherent events which, due to the lack of internal events, exist in two [and many] different universes” (Mansouri 2019, 240). Such a virtual amalgamation manifests the continual possibility or rewriting the past in the present, expressing Bergson’s claim that perception (the actual) and memory (the virtual) are equal.

In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, like in Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) or Orson Welles’ *The Trial* (1962), one narrational schema involves discontinuous leaps through sheets of the past, layers which are not chronological, and undecidable alternatives that are between these sheets constructed. As a result, once chronology is cancelled, the colonized time is fragmented like “so many facets of a shattered crystal” (Rodowick 1997, 4). Similar to *Citizen Kane*, where a point in the present “determined the launching pad for leap to a layer of the past” (100), in Barth’s novel, these centers disappear. Moreover, in common with *Last Year at Marienbad*, which generates variable and discontinuous distributions of narrative



space that keep forking without resolving any single linearity, in Barth's cinematic space, the labyrinth of parallel universes in a rhizomatic manner, creates simultaneous virtual pasts.

According to Deleuze in *Bergsonism*, to Bergson, memory "is always a case of virtuality in the process of being actualized, a simplicity in the process of differentiating" (94). This feature in Barth's falsifying flashback make the spectators' dissipation into myriad labyrinthine selves, leading them enter a rhizomatic flux "in which multiple becomings are potentially available" (Bryden 2007, 5) and these selves experience difference at any instant. Gregory Flaxman's phrase in *The Brain Is Screen* (2000) that "memory-a vast reservoir of images," (32) is applicable to Barth's novel due to its power of the false which produces so many circuits. This cinematic space proves that "contrary to the form of the true which is unifying and tends to the identification of a character" (Rodowick 1997, 136), the power of the false cannot be separated from "an irreducible multiplicity" (137). Accordingly, the process of crystallization allows Barth's subjects to slip into the past by infinitely deferring the actualization of the past that occurs in the recollection-image, forming a crystalline

flashback, where the characters and readers experience time as *durée*.

## Conclusion

*The Sot-Weed Factor* is a masterpiece where the language of motion picture substantiates its narrative structure and establishes it as a cinematic space. The sign system of literature and film approximate each other in this novel since John Barth employs the language and visual conventions of film as his literary technique. In common with some time-image films, *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a cinematic space about the indiscernibility of history and fiction as certain dimensions of the entire novel as a grand crystal. In this text, there exists no linear history of progress and past and present, true and false have already entered the state of being crystal. Thus, one does not find the linear History of progress, but a forking history of *histories*, of coexisting and ever impossible histories. Consequently, the novel forms a *Möbius* strip whose outer surface folds its inner one so that they are indiscernible from one another.

Moreover, all the characters in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, except Ebenezer, are somehow gamblers playing falsifying roles. Burlingame, Bertrand, Captain Pound, Captain Leech, Joan Toast, Captain Mitchell, and many others, are, in fact, myriads of

crystal seeds which grow layer by layer. They have already folded the ballade structure of the text with its splitting of time as the open (W)hole. The characters, mutate everlastingly, take countless masks; they are the swarming of surfaces, occupying the crystalline novel and generating the feeling of wonder in the passive protagonist. Accordingly, with their linear motor already suspended, the distinction between the imaginary and the real, life and theatre is impossible.

In addition, Barth's time-image venture, as a falsifying flashback, has created many not-necessarily true pasts. The novel manifests the characters' movement through virtual temporal sheets and the potential for dispersal of their self into myriad of virtual becomings. Due to the power of the false, they dissipate into temporal labyrinthine selves and are splitting everlastingly, hence, embodying *durée*. It is *falsity* that ensures the openness of pure time and its divergence and forkings in the novel. This and other features, mentioned in the present study, have caused Barth to be labelled as the New Hollywood 'auteur' since he has enriched the literary canon with certain time-image crystals such as *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

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