

Nature Caught in the Act: On the Transformation of an Idea of Art in Early Cinema

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In a well-known anecdote, Georges Méliès, an audience member at the first screening of projected film in the Grand Café in Paris, 1895, is said to have encountered the potential of cinema and his own destiny as a filmmaker in the detail of moving leaves in the background of the Lumières' film *Le Repas de Bébé* (*Baby's Meal*).¹ In 1944, in what was to be his final interview, delivered from a hospital bed, D. W. Griffith claimed, '[w]hat the modern movie lacks is beauty – the beauty of the moving wind in the trees . . .'.²

What do Méliès, the figure most associated with the introduction of illusion, special effects, and fantasy into cinema, and Griffith, the figure most associated with the development of film as a story-telling medium and enhancement of its narrative codes and conventions, both see in this detail whose attraction may seem to derive from precisely its resistance to manipulation or codification?

To begin to answer this question, let us first note the gap between Méliès and Griffith. For Méliès, the wind in the trees was an image of the future of cinema, a sign that the new medium offered something that needed to be harnessed and explored. For Griffith, nearly fifty years later, this same image has come to stand for what the cinema has lost. What happened to this image within this half-century?

In the first volume of his *Histoire générale du cinéma* (1946), Georges Sadoul comments on the fact that in the surviving reports from the 1895 screening at the Grand Café, seemingly minor details tended to be of greater interest to the audience than the supposed main attractions of

the ten films on the Lumière programme. Sadoul is struck by the fact that newspaper reports of the time made repeated reference to incidental details like smoke, waves and, especially, 'the trembling of the leaves through the action of the wind' ('le frémissement des feuilles sous l'action du vent') when, as he claims, these are images that would no longer make an impression.³

The lure of the incidental detail in the margins of the frame complicates Tom Gunning's description of the aesthetic of early cinema as delivering 'a brief dose of scopic pleasure'.⁴ The train arriving in the station remains the archetypal image of early cinema as the primal scene and an image of the shock effect of the early attractions. Smoke, waves, and the wind in the trees seem to provide a rather different sense of the viewing habits of early spectators, albeit a sense just as unavailable to us today. The phrase Sadoul highlights from an 1896 write-up singling out the leaves is, '[i]t's nature caught in the act' ('c'est la nature prise sur le fait').⁵ Unlike Griffith, Sadoul does not lament the loss of this experience but explains it by proposing that it derived from sheer amazement at the novelty of cinema. But this does not take us very far. Why would the novelty of cinema be made visible in images of smoke, waves, or leaves moving in the wind and not in the images of people moving or, for that matter, anything else? And why, on the other hand, would cinema be needed to catch nature in the act?

On the surface, Griffith's claim looks just as mysterious. Whatever his opinion of the value of location shooting over sets, surely he did not mean in any literal sense that nature was not and could not be filmed anymore, that one could not find wind in the trees (even if sometimes in the form of rear projection) in the background of films being shown on screens across America in 1944. Let us take a look at precisely what he says: 'What the modern movie lacks is beauty – the beauty of the moving wind in the trees.' He continues, '[t]hat they have forgotten entirely – the moving picture is beautiful; the moving of wind on beautiful trees is more beautiful than a painting . . .'.⁶ What Griffith claims that movies have lost is *beauty*, a specific form of cinematic beauty, exemplified in the wind in the trees, that exceeds the beauty of painting, presumably even the painting of the same image.

Griffith makes no distinction between 'the moving picture' and 'the moving of wind on beautiful trees'. The beauty of the moving picture is equivalent to the beauty of nature. In *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant makes a categorical distinction between the beauty of art and the beauty of nature. It is often remarked how Kant reserved the

sublime for nature and denied it to art, and how modern art can be demarcated by the introduction of the sublime as an effect of art. The train entering the station in the Lumière film *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* or Edison's *Black Diamond Express* can be used to link early cinema to this development of aesthetic modernity. But this narrative ignores the fact that Kant's definition of the sublime was based on a more fundamental distinction between art and nature that was equally significant for the question of the beautiful. For Kant, an interest in the beauty of nature directs the individual to the ultimate purpose of humanity, the morally good. This is decidedly not the case for the beauty of art, which commands only a judgement of taste but has no bearing on morality. The nature/art distinction highlights the fact that aesthetic experience for Kant is not a matter of mere appearance but is dictated by the origins and ends of the aesthetic object. It is in this sense that beauty is 'purposeful' despite Kant's famous claim that, at the same time, it is 'without purpose'. Indeed, Kant goes so far as to claim that if the man of good soul who has been taking a direct interest in the nature around him were to discover that the wild flowers he contemplated were actually fake flowers artfully crafted to deceive him, his direct interest and the accompanying moral feeling would 'promptly vanish', leaving him either without interest and just a judgement of taste or with a vain interest that comes from society.

Kant explains the distinction: 'Art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is from acting or operating in general (*agere*); and the product or result of art is distinguished from that of nature, the first being a work (*opus*), the second an effect (*effectus*).'⁷ This distinction has its roots in Aristotle, who claimed in *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'Action [*praxis*] and production [*poiesis*] are generically different. For production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely to do what is right.'⁸

Art is a matter of doing or making and it takes the form of a work. Nature is an effect of acting or operating in general. Art has an end other than itself unlike nature. Art, grasped as developing out of mimesis or play, from Aristotle to Schiller, implies an intention. As Hans-Georg Gadamer proposes, even the avant-garde's attempt to make the 'effect' a 'work' implies intention because 'something is *intended as something*, even if it is not something conceptual, useful, or purposive, but only the pure autonomous regulation of movement'.⁹ Duchamp's ready-made is a 'work' because there is a minimal difference between the object as effect and the 'something' it is intended as that makes it a work, even if this

‘something’ is not specifiable. This idea of art in terms of mimesis does not imply resemblance, as is often claimed, so much as a gap between *agere* and *facere*.

‘La nature prise sur le fait’ has been translated as ‘nature caught in the act’, but this does not reverse the distinction we find in Kant between *agere* and *facere*, in that ‘act’ in the phrase ‘caught in the act’ implies that the act was intended by a doer, as in a crime. The statement ‘la nature prise sur le fait’ literally means nature grasped as fact or deed – as that which was done or made, nature apprehended as crime or artwork. This is then another way of stating André Bazin’s cryptic claim in ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ that ‘nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist’. In the cinematic image, it is as if making and operating, work and effect, can no longer be distinguished. Bazin went on to claim, ‘[a]ll the arts are based on the presence of man. Only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty’.¹⁰ Photography takes on the beauty of nature not just because it shows nature as it is, but because it takes on the qualities of nature itself. Photography, he claims, ‘contributes [...] to natural creation’. Bazin continues by saying, ‘photography can even surpass art in its creative power’, suggesting that photography is not an art, not because it is not creative, but because the creativity is out of man’s hands.¹¹

In the image of the moving leaves, nature was confronted as doing or making itself, participating in its own self-presentation. Art, at the same time, became an effect rather than (just) a work. The spectators of the first films were not like Kant’s fictitious spectator thrust out of their moral contemplation of nature by the recognition that what they were watching was only a movie. Instead, they were encountering a simultaneous transformation of both nature and art. Recall Jean Epstein and Louis Delluc’s claims in the 1920s that the art of cinema was encountered in something called *photogénie*, defined as the enhancement of the ‘moral aspect’ of things through their ‘filmic reproduction’.¹² The moral aspect that the French Impressionists recognized in film evokes Kant’s definition of natural beauty. In a sense, faces and objects were revealed as nature.

Walter Benjamin would grasp in film this mutual transformation of the Kantian categories of nature and art, but derive a different conclusion. For Benjamin it was not that art had acquired a moral aspect by becoming nature, but that nature had lost its moral aspect by becoming art. Art,

in turn, became a question of politics because what Epstein identified as *photogénie* was in fact ‘the optical unconscious’, which was not a revealing of the mysteries of nature through art, but a neutralization of the mysteries of art through an elimination of art’s distance from nature.¹³ This is how I grasp Benjamin’s famous claim that film was the most significant sign of the decay of the ‘aura’ of the work of art. Recall that the ‘aura’ of the work of art, defined as a ‘unique existence in time and space’, has its origins for Benjamin in man’s experience of nature. In a fragment, Benjamin writes: ‘Derivation of the aura as the projection of a human social experience onto nature: the gaze is returned.’¹⁴ For Benjamin, film did not bring art closer to natural beauty, but rather the opposite: it severed the relation between the two.

How do we reconcile these apparently opposing conclusions? It is worth returning to Griffith’s claim that the moving image of the wind in the trees was more beautiful than any painting. This desire to preserve transient nature unadorned was already part of late-nineteenth-century painting before the invention of the *cinématographe*. In 1878, Theodore Duret in his study ‘The Impressionist Painters’ wrote that Monet

has succeeded in setting down the fleeting impressions which his predecessors had neglected or considered impossible to render with a brush. The thousand nuances that the water of the sea and rivers take on, the play of light in the clouds, the vibrant coloring in the flowers and the checkered reflections of the foliage in the rays of the burning sun that have been seized by him in all their truth.¹⁵

For the Impressionists, fidelity to nature meant a turn away from the sublime landscapes of mid-nineteenth-century French painting and toward nature in its diurnal or ordinary manifestation. To use the terms adopted by Deleuze in his *Cinema* books, nature was to be conceived as ‘any-instant-whatever’ rather than a transcendent pose and was subject to the same interest as man-made spectacle and fashion.¹⁶ As Meyer Schapiro and T. J. Clark have emphasized, the subject of Impressionist painting was often the bourgeoisie in nature – not only the play of light on the leaves of trees but picnics, promenades, and boat trips, but these images of bourgeois leisure were to be rendered *as nature* insofar as nature was understood as the transient world of appearance.¹⁷

Monet made no distinction between completely surrendering to nature and painting what was on his retinas. The Impressionists adopted an anti-representationalism in the name of optical truth. For Monet, line was to be dispensed with in favour of vibrations of colour in order to, as Jules Laforgue put it at the time, ‘render nature as it is’, not in

its permanence, 'but in the fleeting appearances which accidents [...] present to him'.¹⁸

But how pure was the seizing of sensation in such a way that it preceded cognitive processing or, as Henri Bergson might say, 'cinematographical perception'?¹⁹ As T. J. Clark has proposed, it came at no small effort in which the 'normal habits of representation [...] must somehow or other be outlawed'.²⁰ In other words, the Impressionist painter was not merely the neutral vehicle for seizing the immediacy of external appearance. As Laforgue put it:

one's work will never be the real equivalent of the fugitive reality but rather the record of the response of a certain unique sensibility to a moment which can never be reproduced exactly for the individual, under the excitement of a landscape at a certain moment of its luminous life which can never be duplicated. [...] In the flashes of identity between subject and object lies the nature of genius.²¹

Indeed, the legibility of Impressionism as art derived from the very impossibility of the stated project. It was the impossibility of a surrendering to *opsis* and evacuating representation that was both mobilized by its detractors to suggest that the paintings looked unfinished and seen by its defenders as making possible the expressive mark of the artist and revealing his genius. According to the latter, what was recorded ultimately was not nature in some generic sense but rather the unique sensibility of the artist. In Laforgue's comments we can see two reasons for this impossibility that makes Impressionism an art: time and movement. The artist is always limited by the fact that nature and sensation are always in flux, and the attempt to seize hold of the transient in a static painting is never pure. No matter how many paintings Monet makes of haystacks or the Rouen Cathedral, he will never have a movement-image. But this becomes a strength of Impressionism as an art. Ultimately, objective nature and subjective genius are seen as inextricable, but if these contraries could be synthesized, this synthesis was justified by a tension thought to be captured in the paintings themselves. In other words, if a Monet painting was said to seize the beauty of ephemeral nature without interpretation or adornment, it nonetheless remained clear that it was Monet and not nature that was the artist.

What happens with the advent of cinematography is that film actualizes an Impressionist axiom to render the artist passive in the face of nature. But if this is true, and if, as Bazin claimed, nature truly becomes the artist in film, and if nature here is what the Impressionists mean by

nature, which is nothing other than transient optical appearance, then why isn't this equally true of all films? What is special about a cinematic image of wind blowing through leaves, and how is it that whatever is special about this image is visible in the 1890s in a way that is no longer visible in the 1940s?

The image of wind in trees has a history in Romantic poetry and literature as a generic image of familiar romantic tropes: interiority, melancholic longing and temporal dislocation. In Hegel's *Encyclopedia*, he uses the word '*Rauschen*', or rustling, as an example of the kind of word in the German language mistakenly thought to have profound implications because it evokes what is 'sensuous and insignificant'.²² Thomas Pfau in *Romantic Moods* suggests that the recourse to rustling trees had become so overtly clichéd in the German Romantic lyric that repetition of that image in Joseph von Eichendorff's poetry of the 1820s and 1830s functions as a thematization of the lyric form – that is, as a kind of proto-modernism that draws our attention to the rustling not of leaves, but, in Roland Barthes's phrase, of language itself. Pfau emphasizes that in Eichendorff it is an acoustic-image and suggests that 'the poetic sign here assumes the character of a simulacrum, a copy (or pseudo-memory) for which no original can ever be produced'.²³

If Eichendorff and Monet may seem to have little else in common, in both examples rustling or moving leaves and other images of transient nature were indices for the returned gaze or mute speech of the material or physical world that found their truth in aesthetic abstraction. Whatever their vast differences, both German Romantic poetry and French Impressionist painting share a nineteenth-century idea of art that believes in an interiority and subjective perception that was only grasped by the murmur or gaze of an indifferent external world. Both Eichendorff and Monet attempt to neutralize this belief without escaping from it by returning us to the materiality of their respective mediums. In the German lyric, the rustling of leaves was to be reduced to an acoustic image indexing the materiality of language, and in French Impressionist painting transient nature was to be reduced to pure varying intensities of colour.

If this image of nature found its truth in sound and colour, these were both absent from the earliest Lumière films. Maxim Gorky's famous response to the Lumière programme emphasizes precisely this fact: 'Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped

in monotonous grey. [...] Noiselessly, the ashen grey foliage of the trees sways in the wind.’²⁴ Colourless and noiseless, for Gorky, cinema drained nature of its beauty. For this very reason, it was an artless medium. Yet for Benjamin this loss of ‘beautiful semblance’ was the key to what cinema could reveal about the transformation of aesthetic experience.²⁵ Following Benjamin, we might see that Gorky’s image of cinema suggests its potential to go further than Eichendorff or Monet to neutralize a proto-Fascist Romantic idea of art that sought in the link between art and nature a mysterious beauty that harboured the secret to authentic interiority. If so, it did this not through what it added to the image of transitory nature but what it subtracted from it: not only sound and colour, but the expressive hand of the artist.

But is this truly what Méliès or Griffith grasped in this image? We should remind ourselves that during the early years of cinema, the era dominated by what Tom Gunning refers to as ‘the cinema of attractions’, no film was ever made in which wind moving through leaves was the express attraction. As noted at the start of this essay, the film Méliès saw and remarked on was called *Le Repas de Bébé*. Far from being a film centred around nature, *Le Repas de Bébé* – a film of Auguste Lumière and his wife and child dining outside on their estate – distinguishes itself from the other nine films on the first Lumière programme by being the only film in medium shot as opposed to long shot and the only film to feature human figures facing the camera for its duration. Though the theatrical staging evokes the family snapshot more than any genre or tradition of painting, its subject matter bears some relation to those images of bourgeois idylls so common to Impressionist painting.

Many recent studies of early cinema have emphasized the importance of the indexical sign to an idea of cinema that was especially relevant to the genre of actualities that dominated the industry’s first ten years, and of which the Lumière films are the prototype. The claim is that cinema, by bearing the trace of the pro-filmic, a past event that precedes the viewing of the film and exceeds the control of the filmmaker, harboured an anarchic potential through what Mary Anne Doane calls contingency or Dai Vaughan calls spontaneity. The index, as formulated by C. S. Peirce, signifies through an existential bond between the sign and the object. It is directly caused by its object but cannot be mistaken for it. According to Doane, the index is ‘evacuated of content; it is a hollowed-out sign’.²⁶ It testifies to an object’s existence, but offers only its effect. Not only is a film an index for a pro-filmic event, but moving leaves are an index of the wind. According to Peirce, ‘an index is a sign which would,

at once, lose the character that makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant'.²⁷ In other words, the index harbours a potential meaninglessness by being a mark of only the mere fact of existence. Nature leaves its mark whether or not a subject perceives it. To modify a familiar riddle, wind blows the leaves of trees even if no camera is there to film it. To catch nature in the act is thus thoroughly ambiguous. It is a proof or evidence of mere brute fact, but says nothing about meaning.

The wind arrested by the film is an index of an index, and as such drew attention to the potential of this new medium. The inscription of the moving leaves visible in the projection of the filmstrip provides an image of cinema's ability to make visible an absent cause, but no recipe for what to do with it. Art acquired the qualities of nature at the same time that nature lost the capacity to testify to an experience outside the life of man. The fascination of this image that is now lost to us was tied to the potential of cinema and as such, its meaning could not be explicitly stated because it remained to be determined. If the image is now an image of loss, it can be resuscitated to still harbour a certain potential as long as we do not return to Griffith's Victorian sensibility and link that potential to a nostalgic desire to restore natural beauty to art, but rather see it for the opposite effect – the linking of art to politics by freeing art from both moral and occult projections. The importance of this image is its transformation over time: its role in the history of film and the meaning derived from film in the history of aesthetic experience. We can revive its potential only by deflating its mystery. Louis Lumière famously claimed that cinema is 'an invention without a future', and so it is no accident that the moving leaves can be found in a film depicting the domestic comfort of one of cinema's inventors, lodged in the margins of the frame outside his field of vision.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 177. The film is alternately known as *Le Déjeuner de Bébé*, 'Baby's First Meal', 'Baby's Breakfast', and 'Baby's Lunch', among other variants.
- 2 Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 19.
- 3 See Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, vol. 1: *L'Invention du cinéma 1832–1897* (Paris: Denoël, 1948), pp. 291, 294. The reference is found in Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton

- University Press, 1997), p. 31. Kracauer cites Sadoul, who in turn was citing journalist Henri de Parville.
- 4 Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Cinema and the (In)Credulous Spectator', in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, edited by Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 121.
 - 5 Sadoul, *Histoire*, p. 291 (my translation here and elsewhere unless otherwise stated).
 - 6 Goodman, *The Fifty-Year Decline*, p. 19.
 - 7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 170.
 - 8 See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, translated by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), p. 154. The original source is *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 6, 1140b.
 - 9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, edited by Robert Bernasconi, and translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 24. Italics in original.
 - 10 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 13.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 - 12 Jean Epstein, 'On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie', translated by Tom Milne, *Afterimage* 10 (Autumn 1981), p. 20.
 - 13 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3: 1935–1938, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 117.
 - 14 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 173. For Benjamin, arguably, the distinction between film and photography is quantitative rather than qualitative. The decay of the aura is defined as something that is happening in 'present day perception' (p. 104). The first example given of the masses' desire to overcome the uniqueness and distance of objects is 'the reproduction [of an object], as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels'. This example seems to include both photography and film. See *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 104–106.
 - 15 *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874–1904: Sources and Documents*, edited and translated by Linda Nochlin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 30.
 - 16 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 6.
 - 17 See Meyer Schapiro, 'The Nature of Abstract Art', *Marxist Quarterly* (January–March 1937), 77–98, p. 83; and T. J. Clark's comments on Schapiro's essay in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 'The few lines [of Schapiro's essay] devoted to Impressionist painting still seem to me the best thing on the subject, simply because they suggest so tellingly that form of the new art is inseparable from its content—those "objective forms of bourgeois recreation in the 1860s and 1870s"' (p. 5).
 - 18 In Nochlin, *Impressionism*, p. 17.
 - 19 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), p. 306.
 - 20 Clark, *Painting*, p. 20.

- 21 In Nochlin, *Impressionism*, p. 18.
- 22 See Hegel's *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Part 3 of *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, edited and translated by M. J. Petry (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), p. 181.
- 23 Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma and Melancholy 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 255–256.
- 24 Maxim Gorky, review of the Lumière programme at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair (4 July 1896), in *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema*, edited by Colin Harding and Simon Popple (London: Cygnus Arts, 1996), p. 5.
- 25 See Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 127.
- 26 Doane, *Emergence*, p. 94.
- 27 Quoted in Doane, *Emergence*, p. 94.