Aesthetics in the Present: Powers of the Moving Image

Research project submitted by Dr. Jacques Aumont, Balzan Prize 2019

This project does not seek a complete overhaul of the notion of aesthetics, even within the parameters of cinema. Instead, more modestly, it aims at promoting a certain number of concrete effects associated not with the place of cinema in society, not with its technological evolution, and not with its relationship to ideological dogmas, but **with the nature, powers, and impacts of the filmic form in its contemporary state**   it thus seeks to rediscover aesthetic inspiration for the present day. Cinema has become diffuse in its practices which are often far from those of major films projected in movie theaters; the notion of the auteur has broadened, at times merging with that of the art practitioner more generally; the filmic object has taken up extremely diverse forms, of which the emergence of the documentary as a genre or the reign of the television series, for example, are telling symptoms. It is urgent, in light of these new developments, to return to the study of this artifact made of moving images and sounds that we call a film.

The title that we have adopted for this project is deliberately imprecise with regard to its objects of inquiry ("*the moving image*"). Indeed, one of the most telling phenomena of the last two decades has been the expansion of the term "cinema," on the one hand in terms of production and mass distribution (especially with series being distributed on television and online), and on the other hand, in terms of the production of works of moving images created by artists (meant to be distributed in contemporary art institutions). It has seemed preferable to resist a priori restrictions of this project to a traditional definition of cinema (i.e., the production of films meant to be projected in specially-dedicated cinemas), in order to place emphasis not on the sociology of productions, but rather on **their capacity for formal invention** (including with regard to narrative forms). Our starting point is the idea that, if images are capable of having a mental or psychological effect on a human subject, it is due to the work that these images do to transform the fragments of the world that they transmit, even when these images are produced by human hands (and not in terms of "natural" images, whose essence and effects are of a different order/class).

This research project thus revolves around the topic of the perceptible, according to several necessarily interrelated axes. Though this list is not by any means exhaustive, three axes will receive priority: the *pixel* (the "substance of images"), the detail (and its relationship to the whole), the present (and the related question of rhythm).

The Pixel

The emergence, and subsequent rapid rise to hegemony, of digital moving image technologies has brought about a certain number of fanciful ideas, primarily that, as today's images are made up of discrete elements   individually imperceptible, yet modifiable by means of computer graphics   , these images no longer entail the capturing of an imprint of reality, and instead are pure and simple fabrications. It is undeniable that the series of manipulations that we call *compositing* allows us to freely transform the appearance of an image (as demonstrated by Alexander Sokurov's often-cited 2002 film, *Russian Ark*). It is nevertheless true that, as with analog technologies, film images imply first capturing an image and then submitting it to a whole range of transformations, and digital technologies have merely expanded on and diversified these processes without changing their inherent nature.

Film images are perceived as being endowed with movement, but are created using a material (celluloid or digital file) that is separate from the image itself. Hence the empirical notion of the "appearance of movement," which despite being studied for more than a century (this notion was addressed by the founders of *Gestalttheorie* starting in the 1910s), is still poorly explained by theoretical accounts even today. Film, in its analog form, referred to the projection of a series of single photograms printed on celluloid at the rate of 24 images per second; this fact/observation gave rise to a large corpus of critical literature, in many instances mired with vast misunderstandings of the intellectual (post-retinal) process that allowed for the perception of movement. When it comes to digital film, despite being phenomenologically indistinguishable from analog film, there has been surprisingly few reflections on this point, however.

Another wide-spread critique sees digital images as bearing a fundamentally different relationship to temporality, often reporting vast differences between digital films and analog films in terms of how temporality is felt/perceived/registered in each. This assessment lacks physiological foundation, and seemingly results from confusing the phenomenal and the structural   as was the case with previous speculations on the film photogram and its relationship to "arrested" movement. This project seeks to locate these questions squarely within the domain of aesthetics and will aim to study **the formal consequences of the digital**, in terms of montage, duration, the rendering of color, and more generally, in terms of all of the characteristics which serve to visually define filmic images.

The Detail

The question of the detail has already been widely studied in the context of painting, and has produced a significant body of critical literature since the 18th century. While some of these works on the pictorial image have become canonical, the most sustained approach   the iconological approach of Erwin Panofsky and his intellectual

descendants   has the disadvantage of construing the meaning of each detail as relating back to a text, exterior to the work itself, and as playing the role of a sort of proof. In film, this topic has only been approached transversally, especially by resorting to niche approaches, such as Roland Barthes' "obtuse meaning" or Jean-François Lyotard's "figural." Each approach involves seizing upon an individual detail and attributing to it a meaning that is dependent on an act of interpretation. There is no lack of attempts to adapt these approaches to the moving image, but each remains too clearly nuanced by the idiosyncrasies of their authors to be truly applicable.

This project will undertake a different approach. Without ignoring the contributions of iconology (especially in its methodologically fundamental effort to never completely separate the detail from the whole from which it is excerpted), and without neglecting what might be learned by privileging the dimension of desire, this project will take as a starting point the double meaning of the detail: as either a constitutive part of a whole to which it owes its entire significance, or else as a fragment that exists on its own, liable to exert, in turn, its own effects on the whole from which it is extracted. This dichotomy can be understood in several ways: as the difference between representative details, which serve an overall fictional logic, and figurative details, which serve a visual logic; through its definition according to various degrees of visibility and signification; by way of its origins, creator or audience; in terms of its intentional or accidental character; etc.

The detail brings both acts of monstration (including meta-monstration: showing that one is showing), and acts of signification (including as an enigma). It is, by definition, at the core of any study of the powers of the image. It will be of particular importance in this project to not neglect grasping its various perceptible dimensions in terms of figured objects, of represented spaces, of imprinted surfaces, of the qualities given to these surfaces (color, for example), but also in terms of temporality, given that the cinema is a medium that produces temporal "details."

The Present

In terms of phenomenological approaches, "the notion of time is not an object of our knowledge but a dimension of our being" (M. Merleau-Ponty); generally speaking, the philosophy of time always trips up against the near impossibility of defining the present as an "arresting of time" (see also the famous meditation of Saint Augustine of Hippo). We will not work in this domain directly, limiting ourselves instead to approaching time, on the one hand, according to how it may be experienced (that is, the experience of change), and on the other hand, as a social construct that is artificial, albeit naturalized by custom (Norbert Elias).

Film is not an instrument for the measurement of time (a clock), but it can resemble one, insofar as it serves par excellence to objectify unobjective experience

(duration) and to "solidify" par excellence labile experience (time). By choosing to focus on the present, we are aware of the paradox: indeed, film exists only as a continuity (as discussions of the photogram or the pixel discussed above have shown *a contrario*) and it is on this point that it is in direct opposition to painting, which is able to extract images out of time as well as to use a form of codified time (Lessing's "most fruitfully chosen instant"). In film, the image is in a permanent state of becoming, as is life itself: this is why, in his 1983-85 book, Gilles Deleuze categorically rejected the very idea that film could even be "in the present" (according to Deleuze, it is always in the past, or, exceptionally, in the future).

There is nonetheless a rather sustained critical tradition which, on the contrary, has highlighted the filmic image's ability to give the impression of a perpetual present. This is, for example, the notion of cinema as the "art of appearance" (Alexandre Astruc, 1950): not only does the cinematographic image appear *ex abrupto* in its environment (contrary to painting or photography, which are permanently present), but it also includes its appearances in its very visual substance "mechanical" appearances in the succession of shots, diegetic appearances with varying degrees of mastery or efficiency, unmotivated appearances, etc. This idea also implies the adjacent notion of surprise, and we could approach it through this lens as well; but it also suggests an insistence on the existence of that which appears, and on its virtual presence, which opens the path toward an in-depth study of the link between the notion of the present and the idea of virtuality in cinema.

In addition to these three primary axes, other approaches or approaches with different nuances may also be proposed by the project participants, as relevant, including by the post-doctoral fellows. The framework of the project, however, remains clearly defined by its focus on aesthetics, as outlined in the introduction to the present text.