

“JUST TO WATCH THEM IS TO FEEL AGAIN”: FILM & POETRY, TIME & IMAGE

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“I seldom go to films. They are too exciting.”

—John Berryman, *Dream Song* 53

In my retrospective imagining, which is surely inaccurate, I discover them both, film and poetry, on the same day. It's mid-afternoon, sometime in the mid-80s. I am in high school. On this day I am alone and at loose ends, browsing the shelves of my small town's public library, uncertain, as usual, of what I am doing, and my hand, for whatever reason, pulls from the shelf a copy of *The Pisan Cantos*. I open the book. I don't understand what I see. I take it home. And that evening, at a friend's house, he has a VHS copy of *Blue Velvet*, which we watch. I have seen movies before, of course. But not like this. I am fascinated and repulsed, and disturbed in a sickeningly pleasurable way that feels incommensurate with my life up to that point, and perhaps irreconcilable with what I have been taught and told to expect from life. I walk home slowly, haunted by the images. And at home I lie in bed turning Ezra Pound's pages, finding there, too, a delicious weirdness, words I don't recognize, words keeping company with words that seem to come from different neighborhoods entirely, if not different worlds, fragments of thought and language that seem somehow to have survived from a different era, pre-T.V., pre-consumer goods, pre-suburbs, pre-everything I am familiar with.

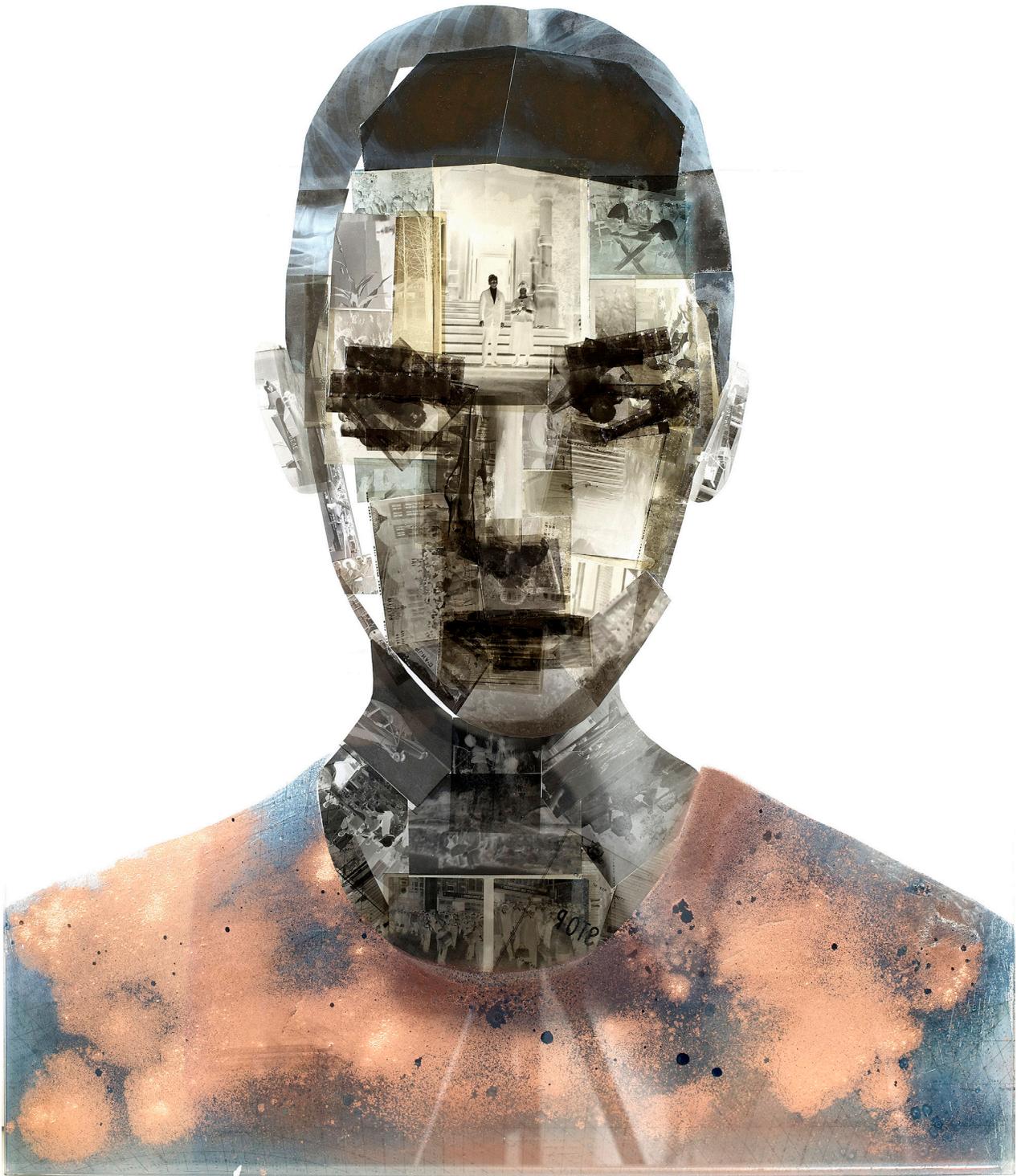
Later: “The Wasteland,” *Apocalypse Now*, *Myths and Texts*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, “Howl,” *My Dinner With Andre*, “The Duino Elegies,” *Solaris*. Each one a new culmination, a new vista opening in a section of the landscape I had not before paid any attention to or even realized was part of the map. The worlds of poetry and film came so quickly to seem so much more important and more real than this thing called life whose hollow tedium assailed me day in and day out. The dream-life of reading poems could barely be distinguished from the dream-life of watching movies; to experience either was to go into a kind of trance, to exit through the invisible portal that, it turned out, was always hovering just to the side of one's field of vision, into a symbolic realm whose refusal to make straightforward sense made more sense than anything conventional existence offered. Those were the films and poems I liked, at any rate, the ones that

resisted straightforward interpretation while constantly threatening to resolve into meaning, keeping the viewer hooked moment to moment with the unfulfilled promise of the shattering epiphany that was never quite delivered. The artists who had conceived and made these things, and made these experiences possible: they were, I came to believe, my people, my tribe. The task was to escape from the little town, to find them, to try to take my place among them.

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It occurred to me recently that the last few films I have seen that moved me deeply all concerned, in one way or another, the same central subject. The subject was time; the films included *Birdman*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *The Great Beauty*, *Inside Llewyn Davis*, and *Boyhood*. Of course it is hardly possible for a film not to be concerned, to some significant degree, with time; time is *the* central cinematic subject, or we would say so if we had to choose just one. And the same, perhaps, could be said of poetry. Both poems and films are by their very nature highly conscious of time, by which I mean, in part, that we are highly conscious of time when we experience them. A still photograph or painting consists of an image that can, at least in principle, be taken in all at once; while it takes a certain amount of time to experience one—and you might linger before a painting for a very long time, if it captures your attention—the experience is of you, a moving object, relating to a still point that is the artwork. A film, on the other hand, offers us one image, then another, and then another.

This temporal aspect is of course entirely integral to the nature of cinema as an art form; films are not just pictures, they are *moving* pictures. This is true even with respect to a film — Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, for example — that is made entirely or almost entirely of still photographs. Even here, it is the sequence of images, presented in a certain order, each one taking a certain amount of time, that constitutes the film. The film, unlike a sculpture or still photograph, ends at a certain point in time, and during its entire duration it is moving toward that endpoint—a fact that colors our entire experience of the work. The experience of a film



Nick Gentry *Surface* (Film negatives, x-rays, microfilm, spray paint and resin on glass panels in LED lightbox)

is inseparable from the event that is the screening, the viewing, so that a film happens in time and, at the same time, time happens within the film: what the film depicts, what it captures, is, necessarily, things happening in time. “No other art,” wrote Andrey Tarkovsky, perhaps the most poetic of all film directors, “can compare with cinema in the force, precision and starkness with which it conveys awareness of facts and aesthetic structures existing and changing within time.”

Perhaps, and perhaps not; the case of poetry makes me question Tarkovsky’s statement, for poetry also seems capable of bringing extraordinary resources to the consideration of time. I do have poetry in particular in mind; other forms of literary texts—novels, etc.—also take time to read, but prose eschews the line breaks, stanza breaks, and other mechanisms for temporal fine-tuning that poetry makes such rich use of. The questions that arise while writing and editing poetry are very much like those that arise when editing film. Where should the shot be cut? Where should the line be broken? How long should the camera be held on this face, this landscape, this particular image? How long should the poem dwell on this particular thought before it moves on? Cutting shots, and putting them together to construct scenes, and then putting scenes together to make a film, is like breaking lines and putting them together to construct a stanza, and then putting stanzas together to make a poem.

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If we take seriously this idea—that the cinematic shot is analogous to the poetic line, and the scene to the stanza—we might find ourselves thinking that prose, with its absence of such devices, most closely resembles the cinematic long take, the single camera shot that holds continuously without a cut, allowing time to pass, to flow through it. (From a different vantage point, the long shot approaches the condition of theater, where the actors are living, behaving, and *being* in real time.) This feels true, perhaps, to the experience of watching Alejandro Iñárritu’s *Birdman*, a sequence of long takes intricately edited together so that

most of it appears to have been filmed in a single shot: its relentless and exhausting rush of aural and visual babble is similar in texture to a novel like Robert Bolaño’s *By Night in Chile*, the whole of which is constructed without a single paragraph break.

I loved *Birdman*, and in general I’ll admit to being a sucker for the long take, not just because it gives a director like Iñárritu the chance to display his technical virtuosity, but also because it gives its audience the chance to see something that has become uncommon in the movie theater: real human beings exhibiting real human behavior. These days most actors onscreen are so briskly and radically edited that one feels one is watching a flip-book rather than a living person. And when shots are habitually hacked into stunted segments before an actor is allowed to deliver an entire line of dialogue or have a complete sequence of facial expressions, the result is that we do not really have the experience of watching actors *act* at all. We might as well be watching computer simulations of human action and behavior—which, indeed, more and more filmmakers seem happy to offer us, and more and more audiences seem content to accept.

The pleasure of a long take is comparable in some ways to the pleasure a reader might take in the very long lines of certain poets: Ciaran Carson, for instance, who got his long line largely from C.K. Williams, who got it largely from Whitman. Or the long lines of Ginsberg’s “Howl,” again Whitman-derived; or those of D.A. Powell. There is a luxurious spaciousness in such a line, a capaciousness that is ready to admit anything the world might offer; to cut off such a line before it has reached its natural breaking point can only feel like an act of editorial violence. After all, the actions of human beings are performed, and can only be understood, in context. Or, to put it another way, it takes a certain amount of time to think certain thoughts, to feel certain emotions and experiences, and the form of the poem, or of the cinematic scene, must be flexible enough to accommodate itself to the deep facts about human nature and action that shape our behavior.

To think about the importance of time in film or poetry is not to discount the importance of images, for time and

image are radically bound together and cannot be isolated from each other. When Tarkovsky, in his book *Sculpting in Time*, wants to discuss the cinematic image, he begins by talking about haiku, which he saw as embodiments of “pure observation,” of what he refers to as “the living image” which, he writes, “is the key to poetry in cinema. For the cinema image is essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time.”

Think of the scene in Richard Linklater’s *Before Sunrise* in which Jesse and Celine (Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy) listen to a record in a listening booth, the whole time sneaking silent surreptitious glances at each other. It’s shot as a single take, a little over a minute long, and the characters, trapped in the small space of the listening booth, have few options for movement, so that looking at the scene is almost like looking at a still photograph. Except of course that it isn’t like that at all, because their faces, shot from below and quite close up, change throughout the scene; we can see, in and through their faces, what is going on behind them, that each wants to look at the other, and wants to see if the other is looking back, but at the same time they don’t, and also do, want to be caught looking. The shot bears certain resemblances—not only in terms of content, but in terms of form—to C.K. Williams’ poem “Love: Beginnings” (from his 1987 book *Flesh and Blood*):

They’re at that stage where so much desire streams between them, so much frank need and want, so much absorption in the other and the self and the self-admiring entity and unity they make—
[...]
she almost wretched upon him as they intertwine again, touch again, cheek, lip, shoulder, brow, every glance moving toward the sexual, every glance away soaring back in flame into the sexual— that just to watch them is to feel again that hitching in the groin, that filling of the heart, the old, sore heart, the battered, foundered, faithful heart, snorting again, stamping in its stall.

Like many of the poems in *Flesh and Blood*, “Love: Beginnings” takes the form of a single long take: an unbroken, continuous sentence that unspools without interruption over a period of a minute or so, so as to represent, and express, a single complex thought. The time it takes to think this thought, as well as the time it takes for the thought’s prompting incident—the external event

whose happening incites the thought and is reflected and analyzed in it—are essential elements of the piece: a shorter-lined poem, or a more fragmented poem, could not have done the work necessary to capture the shared glances and shared desire of the two young lovers, nor the mentality of observing consciousness whose train of thought constitutes the happening that is the poem.

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In any artwork that combines visual and temporal elements—as do both film and poetry, in their own distinct ways—time and image work together, and the tension between the work’s forward motion, its drive toward a conclusion, and the internal striving of each image to stand apart from time—to resist that relentless temporal drive, to make time stand still—is responsible for a good deal of the work’s power. The tension is generated by the competing demands of, on the one hand, the experience of time, change, and motion, our awareness of the irresistible forward movement of the film; and on the other, the brain’s tendency to internalize each image as if it were suspended in an isolated timeless moment, a slice of eternity disconnected from the surrounding world. The image is over as soon as it appears, and yet, to the degree that it is memorable, threatens to persist forever in one’s mind. Or, if not forever, then at any rate as long as you yourself survive.

“It must be kept in mind that works of art are alive,” writes Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*. “Over time, great works reveal new faces of themselves, they age, they become rigid, and they die.” Most works are not great, and many are dead before they are born; but even those that are not are doomed to die, either by aging out of their power to move and change their audiences—the world changes around them, leaving them inert and unremarkable—or simply and straightforwardly through the processes of physical destruction. Films are more overt about their own mortality than are poems, in that they are more closely bound to the physical medium that sustains them. One can preserve a poem by memorizing it, or by copying it by hand onto any available sheet of paper, whereas more sophisticated technology is required to produce a copy of a film. And a film on celluloid sustains damage and degradation each time it is projected, so that the act of experiencing it is inseparable from, and an element of, its eventual disappearance.

That said, the human brain that memorizes the poem is as much a physical medium as any other, and as mortal. All

art aspires to the eternal, but as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" reminds us, art can only move us by entering into life, which means it must move, and hence must change, and hence must die. Artworks may outlast us, but they will not last indefinitely. Each performance of a work enacts, in miniature, the larger drama of that work's career on this planet, beginning with its creation, enduring through whatever length of time it manages to persist, ending in the annihilation of the last existing copy by the agents of time and decay, who will eventually seek it out no matter where it might happen to be found.

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A single, striking image can alter you, can open a new life that you fall irresistibly into. It might haunt you and shape your life forever, or another image might arrive and set you on a different course. Think of the opening line of *La Jetée*: "This is the story of a man marked by an image from his childhood." Is there any narrative of which this could not be said, any artwork for which this—substituting *person* for *man*, at any rate—could not serve as an opening statement?

If I make a list of the images that have marked and haunted me, what strikes me is how diverse they are, and how peculiar; how little they have in common with each other, perhaps even how little they seem to say about me. Perhaps this is why we so rarely talk to others about the images that have moved us, and why we feel so vulnerable when we do. In his poem "To the Film Industry in Crisis," which consists largely of a flurry of cinematic images, Frank O'Hara mentions "Mae West in a furry sled, / her bordello radiance and bland remarks..." Joe LeSueur, in his memoir of O'Hara, writes that this line "describes a scene from *Klondike Annie* (1936), the least of her comedies, so obviously it was the image of her smothered in white fur that caught Frank's fancy and remained locked in his memory bank through the years." The image of a woman "smothered in white fur"—no more or less intelligible, perhaps, than the image of Orson Welles dropping a snow globe that shatters on the floor, or of Kim Novak bathed in green light in a hotel room wearing that iconic grey suit, or of an orange tabby cat staring out the window of a subway car at the rapidly passing stations on the Greenwich Village line. "I remember a little girl," Joe Brainard writes in *I Remember*, "who had a white rabbit coat and hat and muff. Actually, I don't remember the little girl. I remember the coat and the hat and the muff."

"What will die with me when I die?", asks Borges in the parable he called "The Witness." He answers with a list of

sights and sounds: "The voice of Macedonio Fernandez, the image of a red horse in the vacant lot at Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulphur in the drawer of a mahogany desk?" I cannot fully understand the significance of these things; they are Borges' experiences, not mine. But then, would Borges have said that he understood them? Can I say that I understand, many years on, what goes on in the *Cantos*, or in the films of David Lynch? Or why the images from these and certain other works have lodged themselves in me irremovably and wounded me irreparably? There is no theory that explains why some images are immediately forgotten, while others seem to us unforgettable and profound; and the business of art, which consists largely in the act of offering images to one another, is therefore a risky enterprise. Human beings are diverse, different under the skin, not always moved by the same things. Being moved by the same thing, finding out that we have compatible idiosyncrasies, that our arbitrary weirdnesses are shared, takes a good deal of luck. It is the luck on which the gamble that is art depends, without which art is nothing but a game of metaphysical solitaire.

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