

Film Experimentation and the Sublime Experience

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Introduction: Two Routes to Theorizing the Moving Image.

It is most common to think of the motion picture as presenting a moving scene on a stable, flat surface (canvas). It is common as well to attribute perception of the motion picture to perceiving a succession of still images projected at 24 frames per second. These two ways of describing the basic filmic experience exemplify two routes to explaining why moving images can have the effect they have on viewers. These descriptions do not in themselves answer the question but rather formulate it. Thus, in the first case, the problem is what makes it possible that we see a scene and not so much the surface; a problem that arises in painting and has been adequately captured by the term "seeing-in" developed by Richard Wollheim to distinguish between seeing an object in a photo and a scene in a film. The latter cases are then conceptualized as cases of "seeing-through" when we disregard the texture of the surface (as we disregard smudges on our glasses normally) and focus on the unfolding scene. In the other case, the problem is not so much that we *can* see through the surface, but what makes us see through it, what characteristics of the surface (this time not the canvas but the projected images) make this possible. Pointing out that there is a difference between painting and photographed images in that we simply see through the latter is of no avail here. The relevant question to be answered is the relation between the image as *surface* and the image as *scene*. Many approaches trying to answer this question are labeled or self-labeled as illusionist, for there is hardly any other way to conceive of the relation of the image and the depicted object as at least to some extent iconic: there must be something in common in real movement and apparent movement, in the form, shading, texture, etc. of real objects and their depictions, the 3D spatial layout and 2D perspectival layout, etc.

This is no place to summarize existing approaches from ecological and other realism to projective and other illusionism. But there is one thing they all seem to share: an almost obsessive desire to explain why we see a scene this or that way when we are presented with a (moving) surface. Note that this obsession shows a considerable bias toward narrative comprehension. The ability to see the scene presupposes the human incentive to understand his/her environment and even himself/herself narratively. (See for instance theories of narrative identity) The problem of *seeing through* in art can be reformulated as the problem of telling a story: how can the different forms of art like painting, or even the most abstract ones like music, be made to convey a narrative? Films are cherished as the most perfect form of story telling. But if it so, if film is *in itself* the most perfect and the easiest way of narrative comprehension, filmmakers need not, and perhaps should not do more than make use of either the ability of seeing through, or the iconic elements, or perhaps both. There is not much sense in, and room for, experimenting like, for instance, what romantic artists, painters, sculptors and composers, did to investigate the (narrative) expressibility of their medium. Experimenting in film making can only address the conceptual, metaphoric or even sensory aspect of filmic experience. But if it does so, it necessarily results in violation of the basic filmic "rules" and leads to complicating, and eventually blocking of narrative comprehension.

Ecological theory

Following and flouting rules: local and global

The idea that experimental film making does nothing but violate the set of implicit "rules" of the narrative film industry as it was developed in Hollywood is quite straightforward. Rules by means of which the sense of continuity is established in classical films include, as arranged in ANDERSON [1996] according to the level of processing, rules for shot-to-shot transitions, orientational relationships, and hierarchical spatial comprehension. Any or all of them can be disregarded in experimental film making. It is important to note,

however, that it was the non-observance of many of these rules that gave rise to modernism after neorealism in film history. Disregarding for example the classical rule for shot-reverse shot is not specific to experimental film making. In fact, we could hardly find a rule for classical narrative film making that is not flouted in some modernist or post-modernist film. This makes it even more pressing to reconsider the significance of rules of narrative comprehension in film making. Quite simply put, if so many films deviate from the norm, then either there must something wrong with the norm, or the deviations are not *bona fide* deviations. Any third alternative would be tantamount to implying that deviations render the films in question senseless, or at best, that there is some *other* norm they are observing in violating the classical ones. In the latter case, we could even appeal to what Noel Carroll has termed "piecemeal theorizing" and claim that each film demands a specific analysis of its own. Although piecemeal theorizing is quite enticing and fits well into our postmodernist picture (*Weltanschauung*), it unnecessarily complicates our theoretical tools and disregards Ockham's razor. In a more simplicistic vein, one can try to understand the deviations not as *bona fide* deviations, but deriving from some more general principle.

To clarify my position let me recall an analogous case in linguistic pragmatics. It can be summed up briefly as follows: Paul Grice once laid down certain maxims of conversation just in order for the speakers to violate them. (That is why they are maxims!) With this trick, the theoretician makes it that every violation is in fact nothing but the restoration, or further corroboration, of the original maxims. The manoeuvre is warranted by the claimed existence of certain very general principles like that of Co-operation, Relevance, Survival, Cost-Benefit, etc.[1] in terms of which each and every violation turns out to be a genuine case of rule-following. Such higher principles can well be ecological: they contribute to an increase in the fitness of the organism. To cite a famous example, if I am asked if I want coffee and answer that coffee will keep me awake, by not giving a straight reply I am not

necessarily flouting a maxim of quantity, but give an explanation of it. I spare you another question and/or enable you to make a case about what I am going to do. Clearly, they can be quite contradictory: either I am going to stay up late into the night, or I am willing to go to sleep. It is one or the other premise that helps you, together with my reply, to infer a straight answer to the original question. However, the criticism of applying such higher principles soon followed that such an extrapolation of the use of basic principles has apocalyptic results: if every behavior is made to cope with the rules, then there are no violations, hence *no* rules.[2] To avoid the apocalypse, I propose to distinguish *global* and *local* cases of observing or violating a rule. The rationale for this is the idea that violations of a rule can only be "adjusted" in terms of "higher" principles, on the proviso that the instances of violations or rule-following (verbal or non-verbal behaviors) are governed by goals or plans transcending or overriding the aims or reasons inherent in the given instances themselves. In other words, violations of a rule can only be local in the sense that they can be embedded in a larger framework of planning and rule-governed behavior. Still differently put, there is a hierarchy of goals that may eventually warrant violations of a rule on a relatively local level. Here I will concentrate on local violations precisely in the sense that they do not render the higher principles void. On the contrary, the violations are made possible by the very functioning of the principles. Without a principle of relevance there would be no way Global violations, on the other hand, would amount to a radical change in our environment, our biological make-up and their relationship. That such changes are possible is highly debatable; for instance, culture might be looked upon as what necessitates, or constitutes, such a change.

Intuitively speaking, there may not be anything wrong with higher" principles as long as we do not lump up "first-sight" violations with instances of direct conforming with the rule. To give a filmic example: films which sustain our attention with slow action, or even with no perceivable action *must* operate differently than those which evoke

the same level of attention with fast, progressing action, although both corroborate the existence of the very same "higher" principles. (The difference can be a difference of genre.) Thus, sustained attention in slow action may be motivated by an involvement in global projects, like war strategies, long-range investments, or bringing up a child are. This points to the dynamic aspect of the evolutionary trade-off between organism and environment. Granted that there is a co-evolution of the two, it is no wonder that man must have learned to modify or switch rules on a relatively local level, if pressed to do so by environmental changes or challenges. Re-adjustments of rule-governed behaviour (be it ecologically or culturally monitored) are one kind of reaction to such challenges. The motivating force behind the involvement in far reaching plans is deeply ecological, and not cultural or intellectual in the strict sense. Think of the trial-and-error strategies in early childhood: there must be some pleasure" in finding the solution as well as in the solution itself. How else can we explain away their eagerness for repetitions, that they want the same tale to be told again and again? Surely, it is not the outcome they crave but the re-living of the whole experience. An interesting difference is to be noted between the non-verbal and the stages (or rather strategies): while trying out different arrangements when playing with building blocks is more the rule than the exception (in fact, it takes more time to teach him/her that certain things can be manipulated only one way: that only the smaller box can go into the bigger one, and never the other way round), with tales and verses it is the opposite: literal repetition becomes the norm. Of course, only until they learn enough language to tell their tales which are nothing but variable.[3] It must be part and parcel of our fitness (or survival value) that we take pleasure in experimenting: it is curiosity. It is not something we learn with culture. On the contrary, my contention is that it is precisely the culture we are raised up in that teaches us to focus on the outcome and its predictability rather than the experimenting process. It is the former that can be sold and bought: it is the objectification of the original pleasure of finding the "proper" way. We are culturally trained to

enjoy the product and not the process. Moreover, it is the ready-made products that feedback to people and prompt them to re-use and set the original strategy as *the* default. The more is being produced, the stronger the feedback, and the more confirmed the faith in the original strategy, which thus becomes a rule. Cultures are nothing but the continuous turning of strategies into rules. But it does not mean necessarily that experimenting loses its pleasure value. Art, for instance, is a common instigator of such a pleasure.

The segregation of experimenting can be also put down to the fact that it might easily jeopardize our existence, deranging our most commonly accepted beliefs. Since most, if not all, of our beliefs have a narrative structure,[4] being confronted with an experience that cannot be narrativized constitutes in itself the greatest challenge. Yet, experimenting is *not* starting from scratch. At least not at the local level. Although many people may agree that viewers necessarily narrativize moving images and compose macro narratives from them, art has always been the terrain where jostling with the rules counts as a major feat. So much so that in certain cultures like the Africa-based Maninka (Mande) people the difference between a master singer and a disciple is that the first has learnt to deviate from the norm, the set meter as much as possible, but not too much for the audience to become unable to perceive it (the meter), even if he (the master) seldom, if ever, accentuates it; he only comes close to the beat but does not play it out.[5] No wonder that jazz with its gliding and amodal sounds and modal changes is so intimately related to African rhythm patterns. 'High' art came to be established as the terrain of the beautiful where imagination connects but does not vibrate between the two other faculties, the conceptual and the intuitive. It is not surprising then that ever since Kant every effort has been made to segregate art (the beautiful) from the sublime, the terrain of the unmeasurable, the abysmal, the excessive, the frightening, etc.; that is, everything that cannot be contained within some pattern, hence is not repeatable, cannot be appropriated. But the question basically is not an aesthetic

one. It is ontological. It is our predicament just as any other species' that we have to remain always open to experiment and question thereby our established ways of behaving and comprehending. The rat, for example, never eats at the same place from the same food: it tastes one and right after, it starts searching for another. This has proved the best strategy of survival for him to avoid eating too much of something poisonous: maximum food with minimum risk.

The moral regarding art and also film theory is that jostling with rules cannot be ranked together with the rules themselves. It may seem to be a long way from evolutionarily beneficial experimentation to experimental film making, but it may not be that long if we take narratives to be the result or the condensation of experience. And an experience need not have a narrative character. Most sensory experience is not narrative: the tasting of a food, the hearing of sound, the seeing of a hill, etc. It is when we conceptualize the sensory experience by embedding it in a narrative structure that it comes to have a narrative "look". We culturally approach and process each and every sensory stimulus by fitting it into a pre-existing narrative structure. Experimenting is nothing but the questioning of such a structure. One can certainly object that the questioning of a structure always presupposes another structure. But saying so is to overlook an important aspect of trial-and-error efforts. It is also to misrepresent the case of experimenting. Certainly we can experiment with strategies. But this implies comparing one strategy to another as to how efficient they are in a particular context. And comparing is overtly functional. This is the case when using something as an instrument. When an ape grabs a stick to reach a banana, he can hardly be said to enjoy the effort itself. The sensory level is simply bypassed. Just like the rat which is not interested in the particular taste of food found at a given place: he just eats a bit and then moves on. Yet it does not do so for some farther, global purpose, unless alleviating hunger is not thought to be that. But surely it is not embedded in global planning and thought. The act yields local success which in turn confers on the individual global advantage

(survival). The nicety of trial-and-error attempts for a child lies precisely in that it is not functional for him: as soon as a given scope is achieved, say, a model is put together, he starts decomposing it. Surely, the exercising of such skills is without a global purpose; nor does it lead to questioning already existing strategies. Its significance is precisely that by trying out several ways as to how things can and cannot be manipulated, the child explores his environment. Not like the rat for some in-built purpose (hunting for food), but to learn to cope with something new. Many people would say to build up a higher order representation of it. In a more ecological vein, I say along with NEISSER [1994] that the child does it to learn how to constantly update schemes and procedures.

It seems then that we are better off if we distinguish between two senses of curiosity, or exploring the environment. The first presupposes an evolutionarily developed built-in purpose. Adaptation allows for only this weak kind of exploration. But there is another sense, a strong version of curiosity: exploring in this sense includes encountering the entirely new, facing the challenge that the completely unknown poses. And it can go as far as tasting something strange, that is, something never tasted before. In other words, the strong sense of curiosity may well require that the individual jeopardize his existence, or at best his safety, and expose himself to potential danger.

Two senses of experimenting: bona fide curiosity

A critique of adaptationism

It is a most common rendition of behavior in Ecological Theory (ET) that an organism "explores his/her environment" (See e.g. Gibson[1979], Turvey et al. [1981], Anderson [1996], O'Regan & Noë [2001]). But what does "exploring" mean here? Roughly it means two things:

i) retrieving *some* information (cf. the difference between an "externalist", like the world is an external memory as in O'Regan & Noë [2001] and an "internalist" approach, like the retrieval of a given representation as in Truvey et al. [1981]).

ii) investigating a *new* field and/or discovering *new* data, as it is described in O'Regan & Noë [2001]:

The situation may be similar to what happens when you move to a new town and attempt to orient yourself. It takes some time before local and global landmarks merge into a coherent representation of the town. Until this happens (and it may never happen), you may make gross mistakes. For example, you may be perfectly able to orient yourself locally, but be unable to correctly indicate the direction of a well-known global landmark (footnote. 27). Note that in the second sense committing mistakes is allowed and expected. Call the first case exploration in narrow sense, the second exploration in wide sense. However, the latter is exploration proper, or *strictu sensu*, for only this can be a candidate for learning.

Let me hasten to add: this *is* experimenting.

My contention is that exploration is hopelessly ambiguous between the two senses. The reason may be the circularity of the so-called *organism-cum-environment* conception of behavior: the niche. By that I mean that what counts as niche cannot be determined by spatio-temporal unity, but rather by selective sensorimotor interactions between organism and environment, that is, by behavior. Interactions are based on *selectional process*. It has two sides: a) the organism is *attuned* to the field (disposed to behave in certain ways), and b) the field contains all the necessary information to evoke the given behavior. That is, the organism is selective, while the world is rich in possibilities. So, to get the interactions, it is not enough to define a spatio-temporal unity, but the *habitat* is constitutively determined by means of pairing given states of the organism with "cues" in its field. (Cf. incoming tide and "laws" in TURVEY ET ALII [1981]: 298) It is obvious that such cues can be found, in principle, anywhere, provided the world is rich enough. But then the concept of behavior as exploration is tautological or empty: it consists of finding information (a pattern) which is cued in a particular context (state of the world) in such a way that it elicits the response in question. Either or both parties are pre-wired: the originally rich texture

of the world is reducible to the proper cues, while the organism is attuned to just those cues. This means there can be no genuine cases of learning new situations or data, but only pairings of states of the world and the organism: an organism-cum-environment. No wonder that these pairings are called *lawful correlations*.

Exploration in the strict sense can then be defined as cases when correlations are not *given*, but acquired or learned. Behavior is not tautological in the sense that "cues" are not given, at least not in an "organism-friendly" way, but in a challenging *new* form. Note that I am not denying that information is "out there", or that the organism is attuned to certain cues; I am only saying that response has more of a trial-and-error than a lawful character: "gross errors" are tolerated *at this stage*.

Simulation Theory modified

A paradigmatic case: tasting

There are, however, two ways to account for successful learning: on the one hand, there can be a gradual selection of adaptive behavior (based on trial-and-error). This is what happens in species that lack the ability to *mentally* represent and compare cases, but are rather disposed to behave in a certain way.[6] On the other hand, experimenting can consist in the *discovery* of proper behavior (pattern). In the latter case, it is presumed that the individual starts to investigate the challenging new situation. The response is then mediated or delayed. The investigation process can be broken down into two stages: in the first stage, one *analyzes* the situation. By analysis I mean a search for an underlying *finer-grained* level at which the new situation can be re-conceptualised. The properly analytic phase implies decomposing or "enlarging" the original situation and finding a micro-level. The term "analytic" may be misleading here, since it presupposes on the part of the individual (or in our case, the film maker or viewer) a special attention paid to sensory qualities. Whether this process is conscious or not depends on how qualia are understood. For the sake of the argument propounded here at this stage the problem of

consciousness is not relevant. What matters is that experimenting in the strong sense consists, in the first place, of presenting or being presented with a stimulus that is not processable by the acquired or built-in patterns or schemes. It makes them run "off-line". While, as in ET, direct pick-up of information (smooth surface) "cues" our understanding that an object is, for instance, a chair, the entirely *new* can only appear as a *percept* that does not cue an immediate response. Certainly, the individual can disregard any such stimuli (they appear simply as noise). But *if* it gathers his/her attention, it can only do so by means of its sensory or material presence. Something can be challenging only as long as it is not categorized, not even under the rubric of "transcendental", „mystical force", etc. It is in this sense that Kant introduces the term "sublime": it causes a discordance among the faculties, which otherwise function in harmony. It is frightening in that it blocks sensorimotor response. Kant tried to domesticate the sublime or the entirely new by restricting encountering it to cases where one feels safety or is somehow protected from its effect. With this maneuver he displaces the whole problem of perceiving something new onto a level of "pure" abstraction where the imagination is "playing freely". In other words, Kant cuts the link between intuition and imagination: for the imagination to roam freely perception should become idle: it is precisely by not falling down that one can imagine the sublimity of the abysmal "experience". Experiencing the abyss is tantamount to not experiencing but *imagining* experiencing it. The difference between imagining experiencing something and experiencing it is crucial to the idea of the sublime. Note the difference between imagining tasting something strange and tasting it. One would hardly want to say that it is the same experience. On the other hand, it is quite common to assimilate, or at least liken, the seeing of the visual image of something like a bear to the seeing of a real bear. By assimilating the two, their similarity is highlighted.

It is at this point that experimental films and films in general can be said to exemplify the Kantian sublime. The connection between

visual experience (visual sensory stimulation) and imagination is evidenced in psychological research to the extent that the relevant brain areas seem to be overlapping.[7] The crucial insight for our argument is, however, the idea of simulation elaborated by Greg Currie to explain how the visual experience of a fictional bear (visual representation) can have a similar effect on us as when we encounter a real one. Currie contends that the visual image of a fictional bear triggers a simulative visual processing which is parasitic of ordinary visual processing with the difference that "the visual system is driven off-line, disconnected from its normal sensory inputs and experiential outputs. [...] [T]he inputs to simulative vision will come in late in the visual process, perhaps in the form of representations drawn from visual memory." [8] Thus Currie concludes that inputs from the relatively early stages of visual processing could be fed into a simulative process. It seems that Currie's solution to how imagination is implied in visual processing is on a par with the Kantian answer. The fact that early stages of visual processing cannot enter into simulation of vision is tantamount to saying the perception of sensory qualities (in Currie retinal stimulations) cannot be simulated: perceiving the abyss is imagining perceiving to the extent that the *representation* of the abyss, but not the sensory experience of it (in Kant the intuition), becomes the object of simulative processing. No wonder sensory stimulations, or what are called "qualia" cannot be simulated. What can be simulated is the image of the object "behind" the sensory stimulations, or which is constructed out of them. Thus, Simulation Theory, just like the Kantian, sidesteps the so-called analytical stage and moves right to the stage of synthesis, a level at which conceptualizations and re-conceptualizations occur. More of this stage below.

The manifold of sensory experience bears the mark of singularity. As long as the issue is how to extract information from the environment, this singularity remains both inaccessible and irrelevant. The point of most ecological approaches is to highlight the fact that perception is direct precisely in the sense that it does not require phenomenological

consciousness to mediate between physical states of affairs and intensions.[9] It is in this sense that affordances (phenomenological properties) are directly perceived before sensory qualities, "the substance, the surface, the color and the form are seen as such." Or: "sensations triggered by light, sound, pressure and chemicals are merely accidental." [10] Without going into the debate between direct perceptionists and inferentialists, I would like to point out the distinction between perceiving physical or occurrent properties and perceiving affordances. My contention is that the detection of shape, color, texture, etc. in the sense of being specific of the environment (or optic array) can be identified with the Kantian manifold of experience (irrespective of the fact that the first are properties of the environment, whereas the second are secondary qualities pertaining to the perceiver).

If something new can be challenging only if it appeals to the senses, that it, if it causes a specific sensory experience that is not categorizable in terms of pre-existing categories, it follows that there must be an intrinsic relation between substances and perceived qualities. This relationship is called exemplification: substances like food or musical sounds exemplify properties that they both possess and refer to such as flavor or being in a key. (GOODMAN [...])

Tasting is a paradigmatic case. Pure qualities are internally related to, or dependent on, supporting substance. While the language of tasting allows for identification of the four basic tastes, which can be correlated with adaptive behavior,[11] they are not blendable. "To claim that the four basic taste types mix to make all the tastable flavors is to commit a category mistake." That taste types are not blendable like color types also points to its sublime character in opposition to the Kantian beautiful.[12] Moreover, paying attention to the specificity of taste is possible only at the expense of adaptivity: one cannot taste novel food without running the risk of getting ill, or even of dying. In other words, one has to stop subsuming tastes under conceptual types (see the second phase of analysis above) and focus on the pure quality, which, remember, does not mean that it is detached from its substance. In

tasting, the given qualities are not represented, but presented as such. This presence is, however, perceivable only if proper attention is paid to it: "attention to exemplified properties is attention directed to the object of perception via the taste sensations that it is capable of delivering." (KOSMEYER [1999]: 128) That is, any re-conceptualization of the (new) object of perception is inseparable from the felt qualities or the sensory experience. This applies not specifically to taste sensations, but to any kind of experience. However, taste can provide a neat example of the intrinsic relation of physical substances and sensuous qualities. The lesson taught by tasting is that if there is any aesthetic to it, it is due to the fact that particular chemical substances produce flavors specific to them; to categorize their flavors is to do away with their singularity, which is to "violate" them. Interestingly enough, this does not mean that tastes are wholly subjective, since the specificity of the flavors is due to the particular interaction of chemical substances. In the art of the kitchen different substances interact with each other in qualitatively different ways. By this it is meant that the so-called primary categories of taste (sour, sweet, bitter and salt) do *not* represent substances to be mixed. Salt as a substance is different from salt as a category of taste, for it "usually enhances sweetness, but may decrease it, depending on the *substance* in question; sugars reduce the sourness of acids, but acids do not reduce sugar tastes. Caffeine, rather than blending its bitterness with sour substances, increases their sourness. *The alchemy of the mouth is unpredictable.*" (KOSMEYER [1999]: 77 - italics mine)

This unpredictable alchemy applies to all kinds of sensation as long as they are understood in terms of exemplification. It also points to two important facts concerning the experience of the sublime. Firstly, "unpredictable" indicates that it brings real challenge to the experiencer, since it cannot be categorized. Secondly, "alchemy" refers to the ineliminability of "felt quality" or sensuousness: the "free play" of the imagination is intrinsically linked to the sensory experience as such. In other words, being sheltered from the pounding rain *pace* Kant cannot convey a sublime experience: one needs to be exposed to the "felt

quality" of rainfall, one must *feel* it haptically for the experience to qualify as sublime.

Now how do these two facts apply to visual or filmic experience? Obviously, filmic images cannot be identified with what they depict: images of a bear can be frightening without being identical to real bear-experience. Thus, there seems to be a caveat in projecting the modified Kantian sublime to visual images: images do not exemplify visual sensations as food substances exemplify tastes. Or if they do, they are akin to hallucinations, which most film theorists are prone to deny: seeing a real bear and imagining seeing one are two different kinds of seeing. Although Simulation Theory has it that simulational processing is parasitic on normal visual processing, it does not allow for early simulation on the grounds that it is "unlikely that the brain is able to calculate the required pattern of retinal stimulations for every imagined object." [13] In other words, seeing the image of a monster cannot qualify as a sublime sight, since the retinal stimulations resulting from a physical confrontation with a monster, the felt qualities in question, the subjective experience, cannot be simulated. This may be true, although not necessarily, for the visual imagery of unknown or fictive objects. Let us grant for the sake of the argument that seeing frightening scenes in movies are not sublime *just because* they are subjectively experienced (because of the respective qualia). It can be consistently held that one is not exposed to the frightening effect *physically* for one feels safe in the movie theatre. This does not mean that one cannot feel frightened in seeing those scenes, as the viewers of the coming train of the Lumiere brothers did harken back. But unless one votes for the illusionary quality of the moving image, the exposure to the object of perception cannot be *via* the sensations it can deliver. (If here is a gap between tasting a food substance and imagining tasting it, by analogy there must be a difference between seeing a bear and imagining seeing it.) However, there may be another way for the sublime to appear in filmic experience. It is at this point that experimenting comes into the picture.

Analysis: pure perception and experimentalism in film

If we understand experimental film making as defined in the first part of this paper, the question arises: can the filmic experience be such that "attention to exemplified properties" occurs "via sensations the object of perception can deliver"? I am going to argue that it can. The first and foremost condition, we have seen, is that it constitutes a challenge as to its categorizability: it must be unpredictable. Basic or higher-order categorizations are of no avail. In Currie's terminology, the visual system is driven off-line but not because it is "disconnected from normal sensory inputs", nor are the inputs "drawn from visual memory". Experimental visual imagery somehow bypasses the problem of "late simulated vision", since the inputs to such processes are already, if only basic, concepts or categories. The second condition related to the first is that such images have a sensuous quality which cannot but be "felt" by the viewer. In other words, there is no way for one to be sheltered from the primarily sensory effect. Indeed the exposure to such an effect is a necessary condition for the second stage of experimenting in the strong sense: the synthesis which is to re-conceptualize the entirely new.

There is no denying that one way to handle novel cases is reduction. There are many kinds of reduction. Here I am interested in two: ecological and phenomenological reduction. Ecological reduction consists in the fact that the necessary information for basic and other categories is extracted from the structure of ambient light. Phenomenological reduction is to reduce "felt" qualities like colors, brightness, shape, etc. to subjective experience. When I talk about felt qualities in this paper I mean "pure" qualities in the sense of C. S. Pierce. So I do not want to enter into a discussion concerning the status of sensations or qualia as such. Deleuze develops Pierce's idea precisely in the sense of this paper that there is an a-significant matter that is perceived and this perception predates languages. Films are especially important because they bring us into perceptual contact with this matter. Although it is highly controversial whether we can and indeed do perceive pure qualities, or instead propertied things, my

contention here is that exploration as experimenting always implies analysis in the sense of magnifying.

Experimental filmmaking provides a bunch of similar procedures. We can list here only a few of them. Surely, the most common procedure is *magnifying*. This happens when the texture of the image draws attention to what is called the surface (*vis-à-vis* the scene). This procedure yields a granular structure that takes the view well beyond the recognizability of the depicted objects and thus causes in one a specific sensation that is neither close to hallucination, nor can it be said to belong to some late stage of visual simulation. Its specificity derives from the singular, irreducible character of the magnified texture: the result of a uniquely physical, chemical change. The case can be likened to the unique dissipating structures caused by drops of ink upon the ink paper. In fact, the difference between analogue and digital coding is constituted by the difference between the unique and singular character of chemical changes effected on some physical surface like the celluloid, the vinyl record or even the palate *vis-à-vis* the binary units of digital systems. Dissipating structures are like the crystallization of snowdrops: they are different from each other and cannot be repeated.[14] It is for this reason that they can be used to "code" the specificity of sunlight, shades of color, overtones of musical instruments, tastes of particular food substances like wines, etc.[15] There is an intrinsic relation between the physical substance and the "felt" quality. The contention here is that without entering into this intrinsic relation we cannot have a sublime experience, even if, or precisely because, we expose ourselves to the unknown (physical) effects that may well result from such a "sensory" encounter with the entirely new. The granular structure of the filmic image is just one way to accomplish such an encounter. Other procedures include examples such as the refraction and dissipation of sunlight, extreme close-ups like the surface of the skin in *Woman of sand*, interweaving textures of human figures and flowers like the love scene in *Seven Samurai*, the mirage figures in Bill Viola's *Light of Desert*, etc.

I have been arguing that experimenting in the strong sense implies entirely new sensory experience which cannot be adequately categorized in terms of already acquired schemes and patterns. Being exposed to such stimuli then calls up the Kantian sublime experience with the important difference that it highlights the discordance of faculties, that is, it demands the independent working of each, but first and foremost, sensation or intuition. The free play of imagination is inconceivable without the "felt" quality of the object of perception. To look for shelter from the direct sensory effect is *eo ipso* to reduce the experience to a case of categorical or judgmental thinking, with the dominant operation of understanding or aesthetic judgment.

To sum up: pure perception is sublime in the following five senses: i) it highlights physical, substance-related singular properties, ii) it resists conceptual interpretation, iii) it exemplifies the given properties, iv) it carries a threat to the perceiver, iv) it appeals to phenomenal consciousness (one has to pay attention to it for its own sake). That attention has to be focused on the percept or the sensory qualities of the object is a condition that requires phenomenal consciousness, which demonstrates once again the difference between Gibsonianism and experimentalism as proposed here. Indeed, the direct perception of sensory qualities is not only *not* incidental, but is essential to the sublime feeling. If direct perception is accomplished by the phenomenal consciousness, one can easily argue for the ethical dimension of the sublime. To pay heed to sensory qualities *per se*, and to expose oneself to imminent danger at the same time is tantamount to questioning oneself (at least the Self as it appeared to be before the undertaking of the experience).

With this we have cleared the ground for the second stage of experimenting when imagination is to play a role.

Synthesis: a loophole of re-conceptualizing

That an encounter with something that can only be sensually perceived is a prerequisite for *thinking* the new, is an essential part in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Although the idea that the concept of

the sublime undermines the harmonious working of the faculties in Kant is quite common, Deleuze adds that with the sublime Kant pushes all the faculties to their limit: each and every faculty contributes to the bringing of the other faculties to their extremes, to a limit that questions all limitations and boundaries. Thus, to perceive the entirely new is a way of forcing the understanding to think the unthinkable (or the limit of thinkability), the imagination to imagine the unimaginable or the formless in nature. The discordance of the faculties is always due to the sensible which is the locus of discordance for the sensible, the "felt" qualities can never be integrated by some purely intellectual pre-comprehension. This is so, for the problem for Deleuze is not the conditions of the possible objects of experience but those of concrete experience. Deleuze replaces the spontaneity of thought with experimenting, creation or production.[16] The main task of philosophy is the thinking of the singular, the radical difference that is confronted *through* and *in* sensory experience. It is the latter that can only introduce discordance into the working of the faculties, hence the ineliminability of sensations, which Kant tried to neutralize in the idea of the sublime. When we come to speak about a possible second stage of experimenting as synthesis, it should be emphasized that it is not to be thought of as a sequel to the first. The two may occur in tandem with the difference that the second stage is accompanied by consciousness, while the first need not to. Neither is it the case that the second must "follow" the first. There is no logical or empirical necessity that we have to sensorimotor process, and react to, the challenge brought to us by the sensible. In fact, it is highly counterintuitive that people do so. Were it otherwise, experimentalism would entertain a much wider popularity in all fields, not only in art. Analysis is Janus-faced: on the one hand, it points toward abstraction, it is a "figurative process" (it is an incentive to give face to, or represent, the non-figural), on the other, and on the contrary, it may be closed under sensuous activities, when the manifold of experience simply cannot be subsumed under conceptual understanding.

It may well be that experimentalism in the strong sense, in itself no longer contributes to survival, although experimenting is inherent in the Gibsonian approach. How else could the senses of our ancestors operate (let alone change), when they first came out of the trees and walked erect. Their eyes, among other things, had not been made for that condition either. (I do not want to say, however, that *all* experimenting is advantageous or effective.) It may play a significant part during the ontogenesis, but it is to be suppressed with social and cultural adaptation. This line of thought is most reasonable, for our habitat is not changing that quickly and essentially. On the contrary, with globalization a certain increase in entropy is foreseen: in a globalized world the range of entirely new stimuli is rather restricted, else the increasing sense of safety so dear to the globalized Man could be guaranteed. Is there a sphere still open to sublime experience then? I think there is, and it is the domain of ethics.

There are two major assumptions we can formulate about experimental art. First, that it is parasitic on an aspect of ontogenesis which may or may not reflect our evolutionary history.[17] Second, experimental art enhances the need for an ethical stance *vis-à-vis* other individuals (animals or even objects of Nature). It arouses an ethical consciousness better than other forms of art. The latter it does by calling into question our pre-existing patterns of thought and instigates a new way of thinking, provides new insights. This instigation is impossible, however, without putting the ego in question -- the transcendental ego in Kant as well as the ego of individualism.

At this point we can set up a working hypothesis (H1). Using Currie's terminology of simulation but with the proviso that low level or early stages of processing can be activated as well as higher ones simulated, we have the following maxim:

(H1) The more stages of visual processing activated and/or simulated, the greater the emotional effect achieved.

The Kantian idea that there is an analogy between the contemplation of some real scene of sublime natural phenomenon *and* a corresponding

representation of it is grounded on the condition of one's feeling safe while contemplating the scene. But if according to (H1), simulation may yield an intensified level of, say, fear when imagining (simulating the perception of) *being close* to a bear, one's feeling safe may gradually evaporate. Thus, even unrealistic points of view can be seen as instances of loss of safety.

But why does not the simulation of the entire process of visual perception activate unconscious or automatic sensorimotor reactions, eliciting, or accompanied by, emotional responses?[18] My answer is that medium consciousness feeds back onto simulated perception (low level): one is made (even if sort of self-made, self-consciously made) to "see-in" (or imagine seeing) the fictional events. The low level "simulated" visual processes get extra emphasis, or are foregrounded, so much so that the fictional content is pushed into the "background." A second working hypothesis may then be formulated as follows:

(H2) The emotional response derived from a medium consciously elicited simulation of low level perception is different from the "same" response automatically driven, precisely in the sense that it is not the actual content (e.g. the closeness of the bear) that is responsible for it, but rather how such a content is made "available" perceptually. (It is not a kind of telescoping the bear like observing an interstellar phenomenon. See WARBURTON [1988]) Another way to put it would be: how the viewer is made aware of a visual fiction forms part of the content. However, I would like to go beyond the idea of seeing-in as it is introduced by Wolheim to account for seeing a scene in a painting. Most, if not all, film theorists seem to converge on the point that films do not make a case for seeing-in.[19] But if H1 and H2 are accepted, as I argue for them here, there is a kind of loophole effect that modifies the usual scene/surface dilemma. There is not only a loss of safety (according to H1), but a need to re-conceptualize the content, say, the bear: it is no longer the bear that the viewer is afraid of, but some hardly conceptualizable stuff (which arouses an uncanny feeling in him/her). It leads to a kind of loss of thought. Next, however, in terms of H2, the

viewer is urged to "add" to the content (the bear itself) the processing which yields such a content. In a straight, but slightly misleading parlance, one has to, in a way, integrate act (processing) and content. Such a re-conceptualizing might well amount to erasing pre-existing content, (pre-existing in the sense of the simulated visual process which would have been accomplished had attention not been given to low level perception of "pure" qualities, that is, without the loophole effect). Of course, the viewer can evade the loophole effect by not re-conceptualizing. In this case we can say one escapes integrating act and content: one only feeds back medium consciousness to the simulation of low level perception (e.g. special camera angle), but does not arrive at rethinking the content. (One is not influenced in her understanding the narrative otherwise than by identifying the special view with a diegetic position occupied or not by some character.) Can we say that one is blind to a new insight?

There is a growing literature on applying aspect seeing to film viewing. I cannot recapitulate my argument against such an application here.[20] Yet drawing upon the loophole effect, we could end up stating that what happens in the re-conceptualizing stage of experimental film viewing is not simply finding or creating some new concept for the challenging sensation, the "manifold of experience", but rather a continuous shifting or vibration between the sensory and the (re-conceptual). It is the awareness that there is no closure, no way to cut the loophole once it has been established. For lack of a better term, and for the sake of symmetry, I would call such a visual experience to seeing the surface of the screen.

Narrative closure

Although not a closure, vibrating between the sensory and the intelligible may not be the whole story. Experiencing such vibrations may have an ethical consequence. There are two possibilities. The first and the more straightforward one is related to narrative identity and narrative understanding. Of course, wholly experimental films usually lack a narrative, but since I am using the term in a broader sense here,

in which it includes certain technical procedures, modern narrative films can well offer us sublime experience. Let me first formulate a third hypothesis to indicate how classical film theory could explain the phenomena in question.

(H3) The narrative conception of experience and identity is a particular type of re-conceptualization of visual content in that it does not foreground the low level perceptual process, neither does it integrate it into the content, but rather fits and extends it into a sensori-motor scheme (e.g. the bear is no longer thought of as something dangerous to flee from, but as potential food, or helper, fetish, tribal ancestor, etc.).

In other words, it expresses an experience, which can be part of common heritage, or personal experience. At first go, what H3 seems to say is that experimentalism in film provides a view with different aspects among which a viewer is to choose the one that can be most easily integrated into a corresponding narrative interpretation. But this is an oversimplified understanding. The case that H3 argues for is that the different aspects under which certain scenes can be perceived form the basis of any narrative interpretation. A narrative in this sense is nothing but - *pace* Allen - a continuous *changing* of aspects. While aspects like the duck/rabbit figure normally exclude each other and are in a paradigmatic or vertical relation, aspects in a film become horizontal: they are projected along a narrative line. For example, in the opening sequence of the film *Sweet Hereafter* by Atom Egoyan we see a family (father, mother and a child) lying asleep and naked on the floor; since the scene is photographed from above and is preceded by a long pan with the camera running parallel to the floor surface, we have the sense of seeing a vertical, not horizontal surface. When the camera frames the family, the two "aspects" linger somehow and yield the uncanny feeling that characters are sliding off the "floor" which we interpret as if there were something "wrong" with this scene. At the same time, the picture of the naked sleeping family creates a sense of a paradisiacal condition, which is enhanced by the musical score. The two "aspects" that we see, the ideal or a less than ideal human condition, are

preserved until the most dramatic sequence of incest in the film, which is shown in an overly-idyllic manner. The two different aspects of the opening scene are projected onto the incest scene by means of an overarching story line that cues us to change aspects from the idyllic to the less than ideal, and then back to idyllic.

What H3 tells us can be formulated as a definition of the narrative. A corollary of H3 is the following:

H3' An action is narratable if there are at least two different descriptions of it, and they can be integrated into a common narrative by means of the "as-structure." Otherwise, the action remains unintelligible.

(Tengelyi)

What seemed to be a source for experimentalism turns out to be in fact a constituent of narrative understanding. In this sense, narratives are nothing but a way to solve conflicting visual content by creating a sequence of images that mediate between the different aspects. That such a solution has a moral overtone is shown by the fact that the viewer cannot arrive at the narrative interpretation in question unless he/she re-conceptualizes visual content with respect to pre-existing patterns and schemes. And sometimes such re-conceptualization can be very hard to get. (Note the example of the incest above.) It is also clear that the "narrative" solution is grounded on a conception of aspect-seeing applied to visual imagery.[21] As indicated, I cannot argue here against the technical details of such an approach.[22] But even if it stands, the narrative solution is a clear way of treating experimentalism as *local* violations of rules for classical filmic narration. It integrates the problematic scenes into a *global* framework of thought and action. To put it once again in Currie's terminology, the narrative solution simulates real-life experience: the way and the motivation that one tries to reconcile conflicting descriptions of the "same" scene is a *simulation* of how one seeks to integrate his actions, and in particular, responses to new challenges, into a narrative self-conception. New challenges can be met only at the expense of reviewing pre-existing narrative interpretations. Seeing films as continuous aspect-changing

may be a catalyst to redefining self-identity. Thus, it may be a means to fight prejudices, pre-conceptions, etc.

Narratives are interpretations. When a new challenge comes up and creates a need for action, narratives may appear too rigid to provide a proper action scheme. It is, then, the manifold of experience that yields a new interpretation, an interpretation that has been suppressed in the pre-existing narratives. *It connects action and narrated story through the experience it conveys.* It expresses experience as narratable. This experience is individual; it is somebody's experience, but always in terms of the narratable. Note, however, that what is narratable can be repeated. But what is experience? The flowing manifold? A source of hidden meanings? And if it is pre-narrative, or a source of aspects, how can it serve as a bridge to something totally different: protensive action? Experience is modeled on a problem solver machine, even though there is no predefined algorithm. If the idea is that experience is protensive and retensive at the same time, it cannot be taken to instantiate one or to express many! By integrating actions into "new" narratives, and analogously, by reconciling different aspects in a filmic sequence, experience must be Janus-faced: it preserves both former challenges (actions or requirements to act in a given way?) as suppressed (that is narrative) meanings and their pre-narrative structure. Hence the ambiguity of the manifold of experience!

The ethical solution

The solution I am proposing here is different. The idea that experience is a kind of common denominator of actions and narratives gets around the problem of actions as responses to entirely new challenges. Or it includes them; it empties out the meaning of experience. Can all experience be narrative or pre-narrative in kind? Are actions wholly narratable and thus, repeatable? I think not. Experimenting in the strong sense constitutes a challenge that cannot be met simply by drawing upon experience and suppressed meanings in it. The sublime as an instance of self-exposure and a need for re-

conceptualizing is not exhausted by narrative identity. The loss of safety and the demand for re-conceptualizing ourselves, together, lead to genuine ethical responses. I call them genuine because they are not personal in the sense of narrative identity, but they constitute a singularity modeled on the singular and unique character analogue "coding" in the form of chemical changes, which was treated as a source for experimentalism. Surely, the fact that experimentalism makes use of singular and unique structures does not in itself argue for ethical singularity that actions are intrinsically ethical and not (pre-narrative) and mediated by experience. We need an independent argument for the relevance of singularity in the first place. Only then could it be argued that experimental filmmaking is unique in that it makes ethical singularity accessible to the viewer. Only then could I hope to round up my argumentation here to the effect that the perception of "pure" qualities as a means of losing safety models ethical singularity. There is no place here to develop such an independent argument.[23] I can only hint at the directions such an argument could be propounded and thusly conclude the argumentation of this paper.

As I see there are two directions. One scientific and one philosophical. The philosophical direction is discoverable mostly in the writings of two French philosophers: Gilles Deleuze and Emmanuel Lévinas. To cut a long story short, the idea is that only actions are singular. Actions however derive in a particular way from the relation between the Self and pure exteriority in which the wholly Other presents itself. In fact, only the Other can be singular in the first place. Our singularity derives from, or is assigned to us by, the other. This "derivation" is made possible only by entering into a perceptual contact. In Lévinas the *par excellence* form of this contact is the *caress*, the touch. I have used taste for I think it expresses more (but not differently) the ineliminability of perceptual contact. To get the modeling clear, by foregrounding "pure" qualities of the surface, experimentalism propels us to focus on low-level perception or, as it is put above, the sensations the surface can deliver. It is with this perceptual contact that the Self

becomes exposed to the entirely new or the wholly Other. Or in Lévinasian terms the Other summons the Self. Because the Self is summoned by the Other, the relation that establishes between the Self and the Other is a relation between incomparables. It is an asymmetrical and *therefore* ethical relationship. Experimentalism leads to the establishing of an ethical relationship with the re-conceptualized visual content (the scene in which the surface is seen) by exemplifying a situation which jeopardizes the Self and deprives us of the possibility of closure. In one word, it puts the self into question.

The scientific direction in a way parallels the philosophical. It begins with the problem of what has been called the loss of safety in perceptual experience. Is there any scientific reason why we should risk our safety and be moved to jeopardize our existence? Is there an evolutionary reason for experimenting in the strong sense? I have already alluded to certain positive answers. Adaptivity to continuously new challenges may have been necessary at an evolutionary stage when our habitat was constantly changing by migration. It is still beneficial in early childhood. Arriving at a culturally trained stage, however, we are no longer rewarded for our adaptivity to a constantly changing environment. Sure an incentive to invent new methods to tackle technical problems remains, but inventions in this sense are essentially of digital and algorithmic character and do not make use of singular and unique structures of physico-chemical changes. One can only speculate at this point. My guess is the following. Drawing upon a parallel with the pleasure most people get out of horror films and the representation of horror in general, I would venture that experimenting in the strong sense is, or may be, canalized into human personal relationships. While enjoying horror may be explained by the fact we have to keep our alarm system trained even if living in a world based on, or aimed at, computability and safety, exposing ourselves to entirely new challenges, or what comes down to the same, the sublime experience could keep us trained to establish human relations, relations of intimacy in particular, such that they are not modeled on our relations

with objects which are technically speaking computable. For the other person is never computable. Discovering this may yield frustration and lead to the seeking out of another partner. But the challenge inherent in the non-computability of the Other might as well lead to, and keep us forever-entangled in, passion (in the sense of radical passivity, renouncing of initiatives, pre-existing patterns and what not). It might even make way to altruism. Experimentalism may be said to be moving into a gap in the human adaptive potential left open by the increasing computability of a globalized world. Let us seek to be and keep being trained by it.

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- ¹ Cf. SPERBER & WILSON [1986].
- ¹ Cf. WOODS [1992].
- ¹ Cf. DE BEAUGRANDE & COLBY [1979].
- ¹ The most common reference is undoubtedly to Daniel Dennett.
- ¹ See BIRD [1976].
- ¹ MILLIKAN [1990] speaks about the evolutionary history of behaviour.
- ¹ See THOMAS [1999] and CURRIE [1995].
- ¹ CURRIE [1995]: 26-7.
- ¹ See, in particular, possibilities for action in Turvey et alii [1981] and O'Regan & Noë [2001].
- ¹ GIBSON [1979]: 134 and 246..
- ¹ See. the distribution of taste buds in KORSMEYER [1999] forming a gradual defensive line.
- ¹ No wonder that Kant banned taste from the domain of aesthetics, despite the fact aesthetics as a new discipline was to a considerable extent modeled tasting.
- ¹ CURRIE [1995]: 27.
- ¹ pattern recognition
- ¹ The difference can be illustrated by the ways how a shade of grey can be obtained from combining black and white. In a digital system black and white patches or points function as minimal units to compose a sufficiently fine-grained mosaic structure, a heterogenous grey surface, since every single unit is either black or white. The analogue counterpart consists in mixing black and white colours to yield a homogeneous grey surface.
- ¹ For a good summary of Deleuze's kantianism see ANTONIOLI [1999]: 79-92.
- ¹ At this point I am thinking of a period when migration formed an essential part of man's niche. A period when always investigating new terrain was a way of living. Migration contrasts with settling down, „taking a position”, constructing a house and forming an enclosure within which life activities can be retained. It is like fixing a proper habitat. Migration may have demanded a higher level of experimenting in the sense of adapting to a continuously changing habitat. One can cite the (verbal and non verbal) art of folklore of migrating people to indicate a corresponding high degree of variability like the Maninka people mentioned further above in the main text.
- ¹ Note also that sensorimotor brain areas may get activated simultaneously with the visual centers (see for details. CHANGEAUX [1998].
- ¹ See especially ALLEN [2001].
- ¹
- ¹ Psychological data seem to show that neural activity in IT and STS forms the neural correlate of the experience. Leopold and Logothetis suggest that to understand perceptual reversals of the kind encountered when we view an ambiguous figure, or when we undergo binocular rivalry, it is necessary to consider not only neural activity in visual cortex, but the animal's capacities for thought and action.
- ¹ I did argue elsewhere; see TARNAY & PÓLYA [2001].
- ¹ Certain ideas can be found in TARNAY [2001].

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