VISUAL ART IMITATES CINEMATOGRAPHY
HOW OUR PERCEPTION OF STILLNESS HAS CHANGED

CD Is the cinema the art form of the 20th Century?

JW The idea that one could define an art form that way wouldn’t be the most interesting starting point for me. I am much more interested in the interrelationships that emerged slowly, say since the invention of the cinema, between the theatre, photography, painting, cinema itself, and other moving images. You know why they call the cinema the seventh art, because it bypassed all the other arts. But I don’t think you could say it bypassed all the other ones, it is more interesting that very unpredictable relationships slowly emerged and are still emerging. These connections are what interests me more than defining any of the arts actually.

I don’t think it is possible that anybody who is making a picture that is not moving anymore, is making something entirely disassociated from those moving pictures. That is the only premise I will make: before the cinema, all pictures were still and so therefore in some sense, there was no real and extreme self awareness of the stillness of still pictures. I think since the cinema, the stillness of still pictures has become different then it was before.

CD Because of cinema we can now reflect on what stillness is?

JW Yes, I think so. If you wanted to use language in a different way, you could say there were no still pictures before cinema. They were not pictures, they were experiences having to be arrested.

CD As cinema brought to us the idea of movement that changed our perception of stillness as well...

JW Or our relationship to all of this.

CD ...what you do in your photographs is trying to thicken the liquidity of the media, or trying to stop movement.

JW I think that is also inherent in those relationships. Maybe there is a relation between the moving picture and the still picture that has to be somehow expressed by artists and that maybe the movement of cinema into the programs of museums has something to do with the interrelation on that level, that is on the interior level of the art forms themselves, and that is maybe why it can’t be halted. I’m also one of those people who is not terribly convinced by the presence of moving pictures in museum rooms, but I encounter them all the time so I have to come to some relationship with them. That is also the mutation of the relationship between cinema and any of the other arts. It is interesting that the new projected pieces that you see by so many artists, have that hybrid and slightly unpredictable quality. I can’t see for the moment any reason to not at least go through the process of having that experience whatever value it might have.

But personally I don’t have much interest in the problems of museology on this level, partly because I don’t have such great expectations from museums. I realise that artists have spent 20 or 30 years building inside their minds and in their practice what I would call a mimeses, an imitation of the cinema, that it obviously must happen that the museum will have to take on the same imitation. So it has to somehow transform itself into a space that can at least incorporate the problematic of that imitation. My own work evolves through a mimesis of cinema and not strictly as cinema but as cinematography and there is no real possibility for a
museum to present even what I am doing without some-how engaging that problem. In other words, the museums adapt the already existing infiltration of an obligatory model of practice. That seems to have a kind of objectivity to it as a process regardless of critical opinion.

CD How did cinema become so popular with young artists and curators?

JW I think the cinema functioned before other arts for a long time as a global model of an art form that didn’t seem to be really bounded by different cultural characteristics. In other words, we see films just like we can see photography because it is mechanical and anyone can learn it. It is transcending cultural characteristics and forming a kind of image of a cosmopolitan, cultural structure. I think that is something that people had admired about the cinema and probably still do admire: that it is capable of emerging from any culture that we can think of and obviously does as long as the minimal means are there. So it’s a cosmopolitan model of the arts available to any, and that’s one of it’s utopian glimmers.

CD You say one of the things cinema delivers is a kind of global function.

JW In the West our notion of pictorial art was rooted in oil paintings and for many reasons that culture of pictorialism that we are attached to wasn’t really available in a very broad way. One of the things I think we’ve learned historically the last 200 years is the paradox of this great form that Western art admires and even fetishes as one of the great artistic ideals is that how narrowly available it has been in the world. It doesn’t necessarily devalue those forms but it does suggest that they do not have the same potential to be available to every possible part of the globe. For that reason I think the imitation of cinema has set in amongst a lot of artists. So the fact that film festivals and biennials resemble each other is another example of secondary mimeses.

CD When you conceive your work, do you work in a way which could be compared to cinematography or is it a kind of aberration of cinematography?

JW No I think it is an imitation of cinematography. When I started thinking seriously about what I was doing, I realised that cinema had become such a model for practice for artists and myself and in a way for everybody, that it would be possible to create, what I think of, as an imitation of the cinema; as a means to make still pictures. And it also had to do with recognising the technical fact about cinematography which was that motion pictures are only one possible outcome of cinematography and that it was possible to use the means of the technics to make still pictures or even pictorial art if you like. So for example with a big project like Dead Troops Talk (fig.1) which was a test in a way of the imitation I have been working on because it was a more challenging project technically. I had to think about making production plans the way one would properly do in a film production: divide my time and also work with people who would take care of different parts of the production, such as the set, the costumes which all had to be manufactured like they would do in a film, the pictorial compo-
sition separate from that and other technical aspects all which have to be worked through in a very systematic way. I had a feeling as if I, was in a miniaturised way, functioning the way a film production company would function. You know Andy Warhol had the idea of making a factory and his calling his studio a factory was a novelty or an innovation that made clear that he was in a state of imitation of another production. In his case it was like a commodity production. I think Warhol was interesting because he recognised that art often did have to come into that imitation of relationships. I think also that cinematography has possibilities that photography ignored for a long period of its history. That may be a slightly different question but I can say that photography as an aesthetic was based upon recording what already existed, that is the aesthetic of straight photography, art photography; that this thing exists and one makes a beautiful picture of it. But cinematography was based upon that, or upon making things that didn’t exist until they were assembled somehow artificially by the cinematographer, the film production in general, as a whole, and made visible. So what we call fiction, is the making of something that doesn’t pre-exist. To me that is cinematography or part of cinematography. I like the fact that in that sense cinematography brought the notion of what photography could do, in ways that photographers weren’t so interested in pursuing when I began to get interested in the medium.

**CD** You bring in the element of choosing just like a filmmaker does. Your choices are even more complex because it is not just choosing the moment of the cut; it is also choosing the moments of cutting within the field of an image itself through the use of computer. This procedure brings in the whole idea of prospective memory, in that categories of the past, present and the future, through the use of computers become mixed. Maybe that is the fiction of Jeff Wall.

**JW** Yes, that is part of it because you know photography is dominated by the shutter. That is, in the real sense photography is determined by the fact that the shutter of the camera sees this one moment in time and if there is one dominant phenomenon that we identify with the photograph, I think it is that. Because there are other ways that lenses form images either in motion pictures or otherwise. But the real dominant thing is the way the time is cut. When I started using the computer I realised that that took into two directions. One was the notion of editing as you say, that is a still picture, a single picture could contain actually an assemblage of different moments. So that in a sense that brought film editing as
an element into what I was doing. But the other aspect was of course to go back closer to painting which has no sense of the single moment. Any painting that you see, any pictorial painting that you see that picks a moment in time whatever it might be, is obviously a fiction because no painter could paint quickly enough to see a moment in time even though the impression is trying to give that feeling. So painting is about the fiction or the illusion of that moment made from many moments. However the whole work with the computer in different moments in time and is an assemblage of moments in time so its relation to time and the way photography cuts time has been altered. Technically speaking it contains a past, and a future or at least some spread of time because it takes time for the actual different pieces to have been made. That opens up the idea that the medium changes its way to the moment, to chronological time, to mechanical time.

CD What do these different categories of time do to the idea of memory?

JW There is a simultaneity of different possibilities that simply can’t be perceived somehow. I think that a computer picture probably looks different to a certain extend than a straight photographic image, and part of that difference is the presence of this synthetic hybrid time concept within it. However more recently I got more interested in making computer pictures that are closer to photographs.

CD Computer images also negate in a way effects of the lens.

JW No, I can’t agree with that, they do not. It is not possible to make what I do when you are negating the unifying element of the lens. Everything has to be completely organised by the lens.

CD What was the decision for you to go larger and larger to the point that Dead Troops Talk starts to look indeed like a 19th century painting?

JW In my opinion my pictures are always as small as they can be because I think I work from actually one important element. The real fundamental element is the pictorial tradition if you like to call it that. That is at least at some cultures like ours, picture making has been such a central aspect of art. Pictures have to be seen by people in rooms usually, they have to be experienced by the whole body, not just the eyes, by the fact that you are standing in a space and encountering an image which has a scale and a size in a physical relation to you. The emphasis on the physical, I think, comes right out the tradition of painting more than any other art form, it has been effected by later media and imitated by later media but I feel I picked it up fundamentally from that pictorial tradition. The pictorial tradition contains a range of sizes from maybe the smallest thing you could hold in your hand, a size of a book to the largest which is something like just below a mural. Jackson Pollock said his pictures were just somewhere in between the easel and the mural. That definition is an important one for the upper register of the pictorial. The other aspect that is important for me is the size of the human body itself. When you encounter an image that is at the scale of the human body, it is a very special relationship. So all my pictures are designed in relation to life scale and in relation to the pictorial size and the whole phenomenology of that experience. I think photography changed when it became clear that it was possible for this medium to be experienced not the way that graphic arts were experienced in a book or publication, but to be experienced the way a painting was experienced in real space by people in rooms often especially designed to see pictures like a museum. So I think that photography became bigger partly when artists recognised the possibilities of extending the pictorial by means of photography and of course in process of doing so, they innovated technically what photography ought to or could be, as art. Until the middle of the sixties an artistic photograph tended to be in black and white and to be about the size of a reproduction on a page of a printed book. Photography was in a sense part of the printing art. I also think that art photography in that sense as it appears in books, was the last moment of in a way a kind of symbolist idea defined by Mallarmé when he said: “all the real that exists only ends up in a book”. I think that in some ways that kind of small photography has its affinities finally in the world of the book. A lot of artists wanted to move away from that and were more impressed by other things, derived from painting and sculpture, and photography had to become larger. And becoming larger it made use of new technologies often developed in commercial fields like advertising and publicity because that was where larger pictures and coloured pictures were made, and where new materials were tested out. My material, the lightbox and all that, people say it derives from advertisement. I think that it derives from the entire range of what was being experimented as photographic materials beginning already in the twenties and even earlier.
CD But it derives also from the whole idea of projection.

JW To a certain extent it resembles projection. Yes, in a sense it is an enlargement as involved in projection. I don’t think that projection is a direct analogy to what I am doing though cause...

CD Yes but what I mean is that it says just like in the cinema “Let there be light”, “Lumière”!

JW The electrification of the image is obviously a reference. The enlargement has something to do with it, electricity has something to do with it, the use of light has something to do with it, the change in scale has obviously to do with it. All these things are involved. It has an intensity that probably has to do with the ignition of light actually.

CD You spoke often in articles and essays about trying to soften the boundaries between different media making connections possible, to make transitions, passages as it were.

JW I think I am interested in the nature of the media like a lot of modernists, that is, some things must happen in your work because of the nature of the medium you are using. The complicated thing I think for photography or cinematography is that the medium seems to have such range of possibilities that to find even the boundaries seems to be difficult. That search for the boundaries is maybe the way photographic art happens. When I started to work with the computer I realised that the boundaries of the photography were in some way being infected. I don’t know whether you say they were being broken but they were being infected somehow. So as I said before, computer brought my technical work closer on the one hand to painting and on the other hand to assemblage or film editing and of course my pictures are just seamless photomontages. So in that sense the boundary between photography and whatever we want to call the new media evolving through computer, has been softened.

CD I think A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai) (1993) (fig. 2) is a very good example of that.
Well A Sudden Gust of Wind was an imitation of a woodcut print by Hokusai (fig. 3) so it already is a source you know outside photography. And once in a while I made these pictures that have actual been remakes of existing images as I did years ago with The Thinker (fig. 4). The notion of taking the subject that another artist has treated and redoing isn’t very original. I mean it is done all the time in one form or another. But certainly there was a sense in which you would be interested to transfer the characteristics that Hokusai had achieved in his medium. There were only two ways to make that picture: One was to make it absolutely spontaneously and see what happens, that is to go there on an actually windy day and somehow let the event happen. Not very likely to be successful, but certainly that would be the only other option. Or to do it as I did it, which was as a photomontage done rather laboriously in order to assemble all the pieces. The fact that one could assemble the work fragment by fragment did allow a relationship to the original print to emerge that would never have been really possible within the boundaries we call photography, at least it would have been extremely unlikely. So to me that was a new relationship that seemed interesting.

Another characteristic of your work is the whole idea of the grotesque. I think that Dead Troops Talk is a very good example of that. It seems that there are many artists – Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney, Mike Kelley – investing in the grotesque. What is that current interest in the grotesque? You expressed it once to us as a kind of maybe the only hope for survival. Dwarfs, people from outer space, they have to do with the idea of the saviour.

That is an interesting way of looking at it. The grotesque is a modern category in the sense of a modern way of thinking. Even a modernistic way of thinking because the great aesthetic idea is based on the beautiful, the sublime and maybe the pictures of earlier times those things still exist, but something new had to express the unpredictability of modernity, the inclusions of elements of life that were edited out in earlier art because of the sense of decor that had to be maintained with the high arts. In fact certain aspects of life appeared very seldom or even marginally for a long time. And when they began to be able to be shown, then of course the whole landscape changed. People, landscapes, spaces, situations which were deformed or malformed by the developments that we are experiencing made an appearance. And that appearance brought in a whole range of moves that were in some ways, not absent from earlier art but presently very marginal. So the grotesque which is based upon the badly formed or misshapen element has become important for that reason. The badly or misshapen element is in a way all of us under the circumstances we have to live. You would have to say that there is a sense of failure, injury, suffering, damage and so on that is essential in serious art. The grotesque is the sign you use if you like, for an attention for those elements of life. As Adorno said: “Art is only interesting if it can somehow express suffering” and the grotesque is in a sense the form that is the closest to the experience of suffering.

Isn’t it interesting that modernity – maybe in order to be authentic – needs the deformed, needs the misshapen?

I agree, but I think that these forms resonate more with a way we are obliged to live since usually the desire for achieving a form is frustrated, we don’t have the forms of things we can imagine, we couldn’t live the way we could imagine ourselves living. The way we actually live is inferior and full of contradictions and failures even catastrophes. So the unformed or the shape which arrives from both the impulse to make a form and the necessity to show failure to achieve that is what we talk about as the grotesque. I think that is a fundamental element. It appears also where you don’t necessarily think of it, so for instance the soldiers in Dead Troops Talk are in a sense obviously all within this notion of the grotesque, some more and some less but all are within it. Pictures themselves could be grotesquely formed, that is not just say figures in them but the actual picture, its shape, its composition, the space in it can also be
formed along those lines. Hokusai was a great example of forming pictures by means of arrhythmical rhythms, complicated shapes, slightly out of balanced elements. In some ways I see them as the Bruegel of the orient and Bruegel is a great example of an artist who forms the picture itself along the lines of the slightly grotesque or even the very grotesque.

CD And Jheronimus Bosch.

JW Bosch is less so because the actual plasticity of the picture is less determined. With Bruegel you see the actual plastic notion of spaces changing. For example today the interest in these strangely complex spatial events that scientists and some artists are interested in. They have that sense in space and time and their curvatures contain oddly shaped event structures and so you could say there is already a kind of scientific reflex of the notion of the grotesque, which is maybe that sense of realism, that is what space is really like, that is what organisms really are like that is what events really are like.

CD Is that maybe also the difference between lets say your pictures and the pictures of Toscani for Benneton?

JW Advertising is based upon making the world prettier than it really is so that you can identify with it in ways we don’t all know about. So of course, publicity is about beauty or at least about prettiness which has to do with regulising the unregular bringing things into harmony and all the classical things. Once the notion about the grotesque becomes dominant however, the beautifully shaped and the symmetrical can be looked at as only a special case of the grotesque and sometimes beauty can be looked at as only an excess of symmetry.

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