

# THE FOUNDING OF ART HISTORY AND THE INVENTION OF CINEMA: HAPTICALITY AND OPTICALITY

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## A Game of Cards

Paul Cézanne (1838-1906) was a contemporary of the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, and Georges Méliès. And Cézanne passed on to the fathers of filmmaking a fascination with the iconography of card playing. Indeed, modernity itself can be understood as a game of cards, a series of movements with high stakes. The turn-of-the-century was an age of risk and chance, when the only possible unit of experience was the moment.

Regardless of its length, the moment is a finite form of temporality that does not last, because it exists in a world filled with movement and change, in a society obsessed with time running out. The suspenseful atmosphere of the modern age fits the card playing scenario, or the gambling table at the casino. To play one's own hand of cards means to participate in a wheel of chances transforming themselves into a reel of images spinning through the shutter of the filmic projector. By using card playing as an allegory for the mapping of perception, one inclusive of the optical and haptical ways of seeing, I will demonstrate that Cézanne and André Bazin share a common interest in temporality as well as in nature. My premise is that Cézanne and Bazin were both influenced by Henri Bergson's philosophy of temporality as a dimension of experience, highly personal and interior, distinct from space, which defined the social world and public images. While Bazin knew of Bergson through secondary sources, no evidence exists that Cézanne ever read or met the philosopher. Yet Cézanne was interested in the qualitative, psychological aspect of time over its quantitative, conventional measurement; and Bazin was fascinated with the extraordinary, the subjective, and the surreal elements of daily life as compensation for a general sense of alienation in the aftermath of World War II.

The cinema's reel of images plays itself out while it tracks the changing configurations of the modern self, and the shifting arrangements of perception in relation to new forms of space, time, and art. The privileged sites of the close-up shot, namely the face, the hands, and objects – including cards – are nothing but a reminder of a certain hierarchy in the human sensorium. The organization of the five senses is a dilemma which art historian Aloïs Riegl (1858-1905) had invoked to distinguish between haptic and optical ways of seeing. A Viennese art curator, Riegl was one of the founders of art history as an academic discipline. He conceived of vision in terms of the near view, that is, seeing the world as flat, in planimetric, geometric, tactile terms, and a distant view, namely seeing the world in depth, with curving spaces and floating particles of light, dust, snow, and color.<sup>1</sup> While the near, "haptic" way of seeing for Riegl is typical of

Egyptian art and it leads to abstraction, the distant, “optical” view includes Greek art’s penchant for three-dimensional realism, Renaissance perspective, seventeenth-century Dutch painting, and French Impressionism.

If related to Riegl’s concepts of haptic and optical vision, Cézanne’s art and the invention of the cinema share at least one common feature, that is the combination in different degrees of both modes of seeing. In his 1956 essay “Cézanne, Bergson, and The Image of Time,” George Heard Hamilton writes: “From about 1910 to 1930, Cézanne was interpreted as the master of *three-dimensional structural expression* achieved through his exhaustive scrutiny of forms in space and their presentation in *planes of color*.”<sup>2</sup> Hamilton’s statement suggests that the painter transformed Impressionist, optical color particles into haptical surfaces, or “planes of color”. And, with Cézanne, planes of color become forms of movement. The latter vibrate with a level of emotion closer to the imagination or mental abstraction than to the painted world or referent. As a result, Cézanne’s chromatic moment loses its measurable, finite size to become a form of pictorial movement with a qualitative, experiential impact. The scientific motivation of the Impressionist optical space is, thus, overcome by a phenomenological sensitivity according to which the psychological, qualitative aspect prevails over the measurable, quantitative information.

Hamilton’s expression “three-dimensional structural expression” hints at Cézanne’s predilection for three basic forms: the cylinder, the sphere and the cone.<sup>3</sup> These three geometrical figures amount to the three visual dimensions of Renaissance perspective – depth, width and height, respectively. In contrast to classical painting, with Cézanne, the cylinder, the sphere and the cone exchange height, width and depth among themselves, one form turning into another, one dimension potentially swapping places with the other. By reducing the world to be depicted – objects, landscapes, and people – to an on-going permutation of three basic forms, Cézanne specialized in still life, landscapes and portraits, with frequent outings into nudes and occasional flower-painting. But it was especially in his landscapes of Provence that he bypassed, without completely rejecting, the difference between flatness and depth, which correspond to Riegl’s near view and far view. As a result, Cézanne’s images were neither completely figurative nor utterly abstract: they appeared to be characterized by a puzzling internal, proto-cinematic mobility.

Despite his generational kinship with the Lumières and Méliès, Cézanne disliked the cold eye of photography which he associated with the artificial space of Renaissance perspective. As far as Riegl’s categories are concerned, his contemporaries in film, the Lumières can be said to lean more towards an optical, or a quasi-documentary style, whereas Méliès became famous for his Orientalist, Egyptianate, but also haptical, proto-surrealist fairy-tales with on screen magic tricks.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1890s, Cézanne produced five versions of *The Card Players*, the only genre painting he ever produced. Cézanne’s *Man with a Pipe* (1895-1900) and *The Smoker* (1895-1900) are portraits. Most likely he was familiar with a previous example painted by Mathieu Le Nain; Cézanne might have seen Le Nain’s *Soldiers Playing Cards* at the Museum Granet in Aix-en-Provence. Cézanne painted five versions of this genre scene. The two earliest variants assemble five and four figures, respectively; this first stage is executed in a perspectival, optical mode with a sense of spatial depth. The three subsequent versions are reduced to two players facing each other. The final result is structured across the two-dimensional picture plane, because space itself has disappeared for the sake of a haptic, quasi-hieroglyphic mode based on the plane.

Besides Cézanne's ties to Le Nain's work, the iconography of card playing is linked to Caravaggio's *The Fortune-Teller* (1595), and to Georges de La Tour's *The Trickster or The Cheat* (1635-1640). The trope of card playing was also restaged in the Lumières' *Partie d'écarte* (1897), a short film with three elderly men sitting outdoors. As the title of the film itself suggests, in *Partie d'écarte*, a game of cards becomes a game of words involving the verb *écarter*, to separate, to distinguish among the family members and friends involved in this home-movie. The cast includes Antoine Lumière, the owner of a photography business in Lyon and the father of Auguste and Louis; Felicien Trewey, a magician famous for his shadowgraphs or shadow plays of historical characters, animals, and funny faces made by his supple use of fingers. Finally, the third player is Alphonse Winkler, a friend of the Lumière family whose two sons married the two Lumière daughters. As a result of this web of family and social relations, one wonders if the title of the film, *Partie d'écarte*, is ironic in the sense that it has become impossible to separate photography from magic tricks, and friendships from newly-acquired in-laws.

In the wake of Cézanne's *The Card Players* and the Lumières' *Partie d'écarte*, Méliès explored the trope of card playing in his trick-film *The Living Play-Cards* (1904). The result is a *tour de force* celebrating the magician-filmmaker's powers.<sup>5</sup> In the Méliès' trick-film, shot in the studio, the emphasis is on the character depicted on the card coming to life and stepping out of the card-frame, only to disappear again or morph into a different individual. The trick of Méliès' film amounts to a parade of inanimate pictures. By so doing, the film equates the game of cards to a moving picture gallery, a museum of ghosts born out of the imagination, if not the unconscious, of the all-powerful filmmaker.

In comparison to these art-historical and filmic examples, the duration of thought and a sort of collective loneliness, or intimacy interlaced with anonymity, characterizes Cézanne's two card players. They sit in front of each other with the same combination of togetherness and indifference which film viewers experience sitting next to each other in the movie theatre. In addition, Cézanne's two players resemble each other, without quite being the same person. Significantly, they are distinguished from each other by their noticeably different hats, two metonymies for their respective faces as the privileged sites of individual identities.

### Cézanne: Sensation as Motion

Art historians agree that Cézanne's still lifes are comparable to motion studies, with objects and fruit nearly falling off the table. By contrast, his portraits require the sitter to be as still as an apple on a table. In *The Card Players* the superiority of the human body over the inanimate object has ceased to function as the binding principle of the classical tradition Cézanne knew so deeply. The wine bottle, for example, looms much larger in Cézanne's composition than in the Lumières' *Partie d'écarte*. As well, in the painting, the figures of the players' themselves are elongated into the shapes of two bottle-like bodies facing each other. The visual echo between the two bodies and the bottle in between them suggests that, for Cézanne, figures can become objects, but this anti-anthropomorphic morphing happens to them without giving up the intensity and duration of their most intimate thoughts. The point here is that the two card players have become abstract presences. Facing each other, they are no more than hap-

tical shapes. They look like two figurines in an Egyptian mural, or two silhouettes of a shadow play by Trewey. Hence, knowingly or not, Cézanne worked in a space right between Riegl's notion of the image in painting and Christian Metz's definition of cinema as an "imaginary signifier," or magic sign with surreal ancestry forged out of an absent presence.<sup>6</sup>

Working by himself in the countryside of Provence, Cézanne wanted to pierce the "veil" of routinist perception as well as the auratic patina of art-historical "taste." Cézanne's ambition was "to see" nature in a new way: in his various depictions of Mont Sainte Victoire, the hierarchy of background and foreground is gone, and distant elements far away from the observer are as visible as the near ones. At the same time, the near ones, at first sight so accessible to the point of being nearly inside of the observer, are as impenetrable as the far away ones. Still the latter as well as the former are first and foremost emotionally felt. Put another way, the observer's eye cannot rest between far and near, depth or plane, as the background and foreground themselves are constructed to be seemingly interchangeable and, therefore, movable, one into the place of the other. This possible swapping between two opposite elements results in the generation of a third state, producing a new, emotional level of perception in the onlooker.

Cézanne conceived painting as a medium to see nature in a new way, much like Bazin viewed cinema as the medium that could provide a new image of the natural world. The film critic's love of nature is well-known, and many of his film essays include metaphors that have to do with the outdoors, such as the thick vegetation blending with the ruins of Romanesque churches in the district of Santonge, or the bed of small rivers with paths of stones leading from one bank to the opposite side. The connection between Cézanne and Bazin requires a brief detour into their respective versions of experience and realism. At the end of his career Cézanne declared that his agenda was not to replace the past, but only to contribute "a new link," one in which, for Cézanne, the painter's eye can go inside things, while the landscape can think itself in the painter. This dialectic of inside and outside is not only about the back and forth between abstraction and figuration; it is also a form of objectivity in time, a de-personalization of what is external and visible, in order to show the movements of the mind, the painter's psychological absorption of the outdoors into himself. Cézanne's painting, then, is not too far from Bazin's notion of realism as an ontology, a way of showing the world specific to cinema's photographic origins. In other words, Bazin's ontological realism is clearly an artistic style, but one devoted to the revelation of inner life through a penchant for the random, the fortuitous, the debris, the disposable dimension of images which are nevertheless utterly special, if not miraculous, because they seem to be borne out of an accidental click of the camera. If for Cézanne landscape is a mental experience, as well as an experiential record, Bazin stresses that only the cinema can make clear "the importance of an environment which can be inhabited and studied at the same time."<sup>7</sup>

Bazin's interest in cinema's depiction of nature was based on "the subtle perception of an order which seems to emanate from the accidental arrangement of things."<sup>8</sup> For Cézanne painting was no longer a way of seeing or describing or telling, but instead a mode for inner feeling, thinking, stumbling upon and sensing. This transition is most clearly evinced in his abandonment of the static geometry of perspective for the sake of a pictorial element equivalent to motion, namely color. By definition, color is always relational and never stands still. Last but not least, the dialectic of inside and outside for

Cézanne had to find a sort of *unison* between landscape and painter, subject and object, perception and matter. Bazin's film theory was heavily influenced not only by Bergson, but also by the radical Christian theorist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The latter argued that all matter – organic and inorganic – had some degree of consciousness or interiority. This resulted in a “noosphere,” or envelope of intelligence surrounding the earth. In his book on European film theory, Ian Aitken explains:

*A geologist by profession, Teilhard aspired to establish a synthesis of scientific and religious values within his discipline, and this led him to develop a metaphysical theory of geological formation. One of Teilhard's key concepts [...] was that of the noosphere, or “earth spirit.” Here the earth was conceived as possessing a consciousness, the noosphere, and Teilhard argued that the traces of this planetary consciousness could be discovered through the close observation of natural phenomena. Teilhard's mystical, empirical evolutionarism, when combined with the emphasis on social and spiritual renewal [...], was to provide Bazin with the utopian, metaphysical perspective which he would later use as the basis for his theory of cinematic realism.<sup>9</sup>*

Eventually, comparison between Cézanne and Bazin via Bergson may take on an ironic twist. We can read echoes of Bergson's philosophy in Cézanne in order to understand how his painting paved the way toward abstraction. At the same time, combining Bergson's phenomenology with de Chardin's synthesis of matter and spirit helped Bazin to defend photography and argue for realism in the cinema. And, on top of it all, Cézanne associated photography with the most narrow and hopelessly positivistic version of scientific modernity.

## Conclusion

At the end of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” written in 1945, Bazin refers to Cézanne. By then, Bazin had already read Maurice Merleau-Ponty's famous essay “Cézanne's Doubt,” which was also published in 1945. In defence of the photographic origins of the filmic image, Bazin writes: “All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.”<sup>10</sup>

With photography, Bazin points out, the randomness of nature rejects art, but, simultaneously, nature replaces the artist. With Cézanne, the artist replaces nature, by allowing nature to behave like a moving image on the canvas of his brain. For Bazin, cinema is a medium and not an art. With Cézanne, the artist is the medium. Specifically, as art historian Jonathan Crary explains, Cézanne used his own nervous system or brain like a highly sensitive plate on which to record the transient, time-bound sensations of foliage, the thickness of trees, the thinning of grass, the inner movement of the terrain on Mont Sainte Victoire.<sup>11</sup>

Cézanne's attitude toward the landscape is not far from Bazin's definition of cinema as a thinking machine, an observer, an explorer, whose primary task is to imbue with duration, namely to preserve visually, that which is already there, in the world, and subject to decay. Whereas Cézanne disliked turn-of-the-century modernity, Bazin was troubled by post-World War II regimentation and alienation. It is precisely after the death

of God that, for Bazin, the filmic image offers an opportunity to redeem mankind of its sense of emptiness.

In his conclusion to “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin credits Cézanne for having solved a problem of form through color, and, in so doing, summarizes the argument I have just outlined:

*Only when form ceases to have any imitative value can it be swallowed up in color. So, when form, in the person of Cézanne, once more regains possession of the canvas there is no longer any question of the illusions of geometric perspective.<sup>12</sup>*

By overcoming the difficulty of rendering time through artistic form, the ever-shifting sensations of color and paint, Cézanne’s work amounts to “subjectivity” in space, while it eschews the addiction to the static illusions fostered by Renaissance perspective. Due to this subjective emphasis, Cézanne’s painting marks the turning point from realism to abstraction, to painting as a medium reflecting on its own properties. By contrast, for Bazin, cinema is “objectivity in time,” because its origin is photographic. Cinema can be simply the world in time, life moving along, in its full temporal dimension of time passing, the object “mummified” in front of the camera, or embalmed by the cinema. But Bergsonian time always involves perception, the same way memory lives in matter, and matter would not exist without memory. Thus Bazin’s objectivity lives in the subject, while his emphasis on the indexical dimension of the cinema leaves plenty of room for symbol and icon. Bazin’s realist orientation accommodates both Orson Welles’ baroque, off-centered opticality and Robert Bresson’s stern hapticality, as long as abstraction remains either above or below the figurative image. In other words, abstraction is not about the loss of figuration in the film image, but, as Jacques Maritain understood, its most profound inner secret: “An ideogram of the mystery of things – of some interior aspect and meaning caught in the reality of the visible world.”<sup>13</sup> And this sense of mystery, inside the organic as well as the inorganic world, is that which photography is privy to and which cinema brings out most forcefully.<sup>14</sup>

- 1 Aloïs Riegl, “Leading Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*,” in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 169-176.
- 2 George Heard Hamilton, “Cézanne, Bergson, and The Image of Time,” *College Art Journal*, no. 16 (Fall 1956), p. 3 – emphasis is mine.
- 3 Cézanne discusses the function of the sphere, the cylinder and the cone in his letter of 1904 to Émile Bernard, as stated in Richard Verdi, *Cézanne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 147.
- 4 The best source to understand Méliès’ orientalist inclinations is: Antonia Lant, “Haptical Cinema”, *October*, no. 74 (Fall 1995) .
- 5 On Méliès, see Elizabeth Ezra, *Georges Méliès* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). Most importantly, Méliès’ *The Living Play-Cards* was a radically different studio-based, proto-surrealist remake of his previous *Une partie de cartes*. Méliès shot this first version outdoors in Montreuil, thus aligning himself with the Impressionists and the Lumières.
- 6 I am here referring to the title of the famous groundbreaking book by Christian Metz, *The*

- Imaginary Signifier: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
- 7 Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin*; foreword by François Truffaut (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 8 D. Andrew, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
- 9 Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 181-82. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a geologist, anthropologist, paleontologist, philosopher and a Jesuit priest. His most important book is *The Human Phenomenon* (1955).
- 10 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in Hugh Grant (ed.), *What Is Cinema?*, Vol. 1; foreword by François Truffaut (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 13.
- 11 On Cézanne, movement, Deleuze, early cinema and perception, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990). On Cézanne, see also Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).
- 12 A. Bazin, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- 13 D. Andrew, *op. cit.*, p. 24. The quote here is from Jacques Maritain, *Rouault* (New York: Abrams, 1969 [1954]).
- 14 My conclusion warrants expansion in a longer and forthcoming version of this article. In fact, my reading of Bazin's film theory in this version of the essay does not deal with the question of animation cinema as discussed by David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997): "Bazin's ontological realism is suspect as a candidate for film's essence: cinema can exist perfectly well without photography. We have cartoons which are animated drawings, or which are drawn directly on film, or which are generated on computers" (p. 74). On animation and cinema as the art of the index, see also Lev Manovich, *What Is Digital Cinema?*, <<http://jupiter.ucsd.edu/~manovich/text/digital-cinema.html>>.