Sublime Moments

by Paul Coughlin

The Wages of Fear
(Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1952)

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Martin Heidegger labels it the moment of vision, Walter Benjamin the shock of sensation, Jean Epstein categorises it as *photogenie*, Paul Willeman suggests it is cinephilia and Walter Pater simply calls it the sublime moment. The *it* that each of these theorists is referring to is that indefinable moment in modern life or art when sensation consumes the spectator with an overwhelming and indescribably profound intensity. The overriding effect of this experience is the inability to verbalise or rationalise the encounter with any certitude. The sublime moment is individual, personal, and subjective, suggesting that it cannot be defined absolutely or resolved conclusively. The theorists who try to talk about it concede to merely 'pointing' at something which they cannot categorically argue even exists. Some commentators tend to apply properties to the sublime moment in an attempt to offer tangible insights into moments that at once seem both empty of understanding yet full of emotion.

The purpose here is to bring these theories together and examine their distinctive properties - to look at what Willeman means when he talks of cinephilia being informed by excess, or Epstein theorising *photogenie* by relating it to issues of defamiliarisation, or Benjamin's concept of shock, or Tom Gunning's theories on the cinema of attractions. The function is to apply personal examples to expand upon these theories and give them a practical perspective.

Shock

Walter Benjamin conceived of modern life as a series of perpetual shocks. He likened it to the notion of walking through an arcade where everything was geared toward securing the spectator's attention. Leo Charney, in interpreting Benjamin's concept of 'shock', suggests that "[t]o experience shock was to experience a moment." (1) Charney suggests that cinema is an accurate reflection of modern life because it epitomises the constant assault on the spectator's senses. 'Shock' is

achieved through the sudden and incessant displacement of images by other images. This in itself is not enough to describe the sublime moment; after all, almost all cinema involves an organisation of image displacement and montage. How then do the peak moments arrive and what privileges one moment over the next as sublime? It seems appropriate that the images, their combination through editing and framing and the film's overall narrative and theme combine to create and define the sublime moment.

Often the most striking moments in film are also the most difficult to explain, but notably the intensity of that moment often depends on the narrative environment surrounding it. One such sublime moment occurs almost at the very end of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1952). The story centres on four men striving to earn enough money to depart a dead-end South American town by driving two trucks filled with nitro-glycerine along a dangerous stretch of road. The film is notable for its accumulating tension - accordingly, in the instance under discussion, any incidental action could cause a catastrophic explosion. In a crucial sequence the spectator effectively witnesses the explosion of the first truck from an indirect, objective point of view through a rapid succession of edits (shocks). As the two members of the second truck are driving along the unkempt road, suddenly tobacco is blown out of a cigarette paper. Jo (Charles Vanel) looks down, Mario (Yves Montand) also looks down nonplussed, a series of flash-like cuts of a blank white frame are interspersed into the sequence. Jo looks up, Mario too, both now understanding that the truck ahead of them along with its driving team has been destroyed. The scene is constructed as a series of rapid cuts. That the first truck has exploded does not entirely account for the shock generated in this moment. Rather, it is the abstract combination of the images, the rapidity with which they are realised and the clever use of sound throughout the sequence that achieves what might be described as sublime, a moment of epiphany. The startling construction of this scene seems to demand a visceral response as opposed to cognitive awareness, echoing Benjamin's notion of the shock-like, "constant assault on the senses" of modern life. Significantly, what also contributes to the sublime-ness of the sequence is its position within the narrative. To suggest that a sublime moment exists in a contextual relationship with the narrative challenges the popular theory that the moment is by nature fragmented and found only in isolation of the narrative and its context. Yet, peak moments are often defined exclusively by the troughs that surround them. However, what is readily apparent in this moment is the total bodily immersion of the spectator. Here the "...split between sensation, which feels the moment in the moment, and cognition, which recognises the moment only after the moment" seems to apply appropriately given the almost abstract construction of the sequence (2).

To suggest that 'shock' can be achieved merely through tricks of editing is perhaps a fraction reductive. It is reasonable to assume that Benjamin's concept of 'shock' can be expanded to include moments of various and manifold natures. A very different experience of 'shock' occurs in the final confrontation in Akira Kurosawa'a *Sanjuro* (1962). Like *The Wages of Fear* this work is one of great tension, a tension that is relieved when Sanjuro (Toshiro Mifune) is finally

confronted by Muroto (Tatsuya Nakadai), his arch-nemesis. Reluctantly Sanjuro agrees to a duel with Muroto even though he is preparing to depart the district and the confrontation is unnecessary. In what seems an eternity, the two men stand-off against each other with their swords in their sheathes. When the two finally strike at each other a fountain of blood emits from Muroto's chest and he falls to the ground defeated. The unexpectedness of the event undermines the spectator's ability to deal with the event rationally and s/he sees it only for what it is and not for what it represents. The sublime moment, the long wait or just that instant after they strike when the blood streams forth is difficult to quantify but, once again, is essentially tied to the narrative. The power of the sequence is achieved in part by the build up throughout the film to the confrontation as much as in the construction of the sequence itself, notably a sequence devoid of rapid editing.

Defamiliarisation

The sublime moment may be observed as a flash of insight in which the spectator re-sees something for the first time. This may be a gesture, a look, a movement, an object; the more ordinary, the more profound the process of defamiliarisation. Jean Epstein's theory of *photogenie* closely endorses this idea especially as he seems more concerned with the image rather than with dialogue or sound (Epstein's focus was primarily on silent cinema). The importance of defamiliarisation occurs when the object of attention seems to change 'form' under the steady and prudent gaze of the spectator. Epstein argues that the object "...reveals anew its moral character, its human and living expression when reproduced cinematically." (3) Here the domain of the sublime moment occurs within the spectator, it is the subjective appraisal of the image which is significant. The sensation informed by such a sublime moment is metaphysical, Epstein suggesting the soul can be sought and isolated by a powerful image (4). The concept of defamiliarisation revolves around the concept of seeing an everyday occurrence brought to focus through representation, thus, drawing attention to the act or object which is normally taken for granted because of its perceived banality or ordinariness.

A complex example of an instant of defamiliarisation occurs in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). Noodles (Robert De Niro) racked with guilt after informing on his friends sits alone in a cluttered back room at Fat Moe's place. Presently, his betrayed friend Max (James Woods) enters to talk with Noodles. In a simple, but entirely significant gesture everything becomes clear and obscure at the same time. On entering the room, Max nonchalantly wanders toward the telephone on the desk and simply lifts and turns the receiver 180 degrees. The scene is filmed in medium-long shot undermining the spectator's awareness of the action. This act by Max has special significance to the narrative yet the spectator will only discover this at a later stage. On its own, the moment seemingly holds no specific narrative significance and will seem odd and distracting to some spectators, yet others might see it how Epstein envisaged *photogenie*, as if being re-seen for the first time. That is, the gesture made by Max is unpredictable, yet totally casual and ordinary, and thus offers, perhaps, a glimpse of reality.

This particular moment shares a similar character to the example Paul Willeman

uses to extrapolate his theory of cinephilia. Willeman, with Noel King, identifies the well known glove scene from Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954) to elucidate the sublimity accessible in the simplest and perhaps most unintentional of gestures and images. In this scene Edie (Eva Maria Saint) drops her white glove while talking with Terry (Marlon Brando) which he picks up but doesn't immediately return. King views the sequence-Brando using the glove as a tool in his method style-as sublime, suggesting it is emblematic of the epiphanic moment (5). Yet Willeman's theory differs slightly, instead focusing on a concept of excess. In a superficial sense the dropping of the glove seems unscripted and unintentional so the spectator is witnessing something in excess of the intended representation. Yet, on a different level it can be argued that the moment is in excess of all representation, transcending cognitive meaning and functioning as evidence of the unknown, where a 'truth' is captured on film. Willeman submits that cinephilia might best be considered as those aspects of film that are seemingly un-programmed in terms of artistic strategy, that the moment "...triggers for the viewer either the realisation or the illusion of a realisation that what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown." (6) It is often the case that a sublime moment will eventuate when it is least expected and from origins that cannot readily be discovered.

Attraction

In his research of early cinema and the myth of the perplexed spectator Tom Gunning describes the era as "...a cinema of instants, rather than developing situations." (7) Gunning's analysis of this period in cinema history demonstrates the validity of arguments for film as a series of fragmented moments. Early cinema experiences were presented among more diverse programs of public entertainment in which short film sequences were presented in conjunction with music, magic and skits. This format, as Charney notes, forecast the modern cinema experience in which moments of attraction are incorporated into the continuity of longer length film (8). The sequences of film that were shown at these exhibitions were often compared to a music hall number, a peak moment in a show, holding a largely autonomous relationship to the rest of the presentation. This approach to viewing the peak moment that stands apart from continuity applies to the process of cinephilia in which certain scenes and sequences are abstracted from the narrative for fetishistic analysis or celebration. The analogy made to the music hall number is a salient one, constructive in the analysis of the sublime moment in cinema. Where Epstein, restricted primarily to silent film, argued for the glorification of the image as indicative of *photogenie*, the advent of the sound film permitted an expanded analysis of the moment, acknowledging the importance of audio elements. The marriage of image to sound, regularly to music (often popular), has provided numerous examples of moments in film that transcend easy explanation.

Leos Carax's *Mauvais Sang* (1986) is a film of fragments evidenced by its loose continuity, abstract structure and alternative style. One particular sequence deserves special consideration in its use of image and sound to achieve sublimity in the moment. The scene is an extended tracking shot of Denis Lavant running, jumping,

dancing and falling along a deserted street accompanied aurally by David Bowie's 'Modern Love'. Crucially this scene stands apart from narrative causality, yet remains quite exhilarating, overwhelming and strangely affecting. Like a music hall number it is the peak moment in the presentation. Its position within the narrative of *Mauvais Sang*, a position of independence, suggests the moment here is quite non-contextual and unrelated to continuity. The sublime moment in Carax's film recalls Gunning's cinema of attractions at the turn of the century, where the epiphanic moment was sought amongst a collection of fragments.

While Denis Lavant's run in *Mauvais Sang* can easily be divorced from the continuity of that film this is not always the case with sublime moments. A similar sequence occurs in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1967) as Tuco (Eli Wallach) races spontaneously through the Sad Hill Cemetery searching for the grave of Arch Stanton. Tuco inadvertently stumbles upon the cemetery with the knowledge that one grave contains a cash box of $200,000 in gold and he sets out on an extended search of the thousands of headstones. The sequence marks the conclusion of months of searching and its power is unequivocally tied to the context and positioning of this culmination. Like Lavant, Eli Wallach is accompanied by music, this time a constructed film score composed by Ennio Morricone, the title of the piece is *L'etasi Dell'oro*. Where the sequence in *Mauvais Sang* was primarily a protracted travelling shot, Leone uses fast pans and cuts which give the moment a euphoric representation. Both sequences adopt movement as a key element especially in its relation to the rhythm of the music. The prominence of movement in these two scenes seems to be crucial to their entitlement as sublime moments. Movement conceptually exemplifies the impossibility of the present; the present is continuously displaced by a new present. Jean Epstein identifies cinema as the only artform that can directly depict the presence of the present, enabled by its ability to capture movement through its continuous displacement of space and time (9). However, it is the continuous function of movement and displacement that capacitates the construction of the sublime moment. Fragments are always contrived into a structure of continuity and context.

Revelation

Paul Willeman's conception of cinephilia assigns the phenomenon two key properties, the first is the subjective, fleeting and variable composition of the encounter with a moment of film; and the second is the subsequent 'moment of revelation' (10). Willeman also talks about the concept of excess in this context, suggesting that a kind of truth is available in moments that exist outside the parameters of normal representation. 'Truth' in one form or another has often been the desired objective of filmmakers attempting to undermine the fundamentally illusory properties of cinema. Dziga Vertov wrote extensively on capturing this 'truth' in cinema and his words seem appropriate to the investigation of the sublime moment. He spoke of the possibility of "making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted non-acted; making falsehood into truth...an attempt to show the truth on screen - Film truth." (11)

Vertov's idea of *Kinopravda* beckons the question of what kind of truth can be captured on film? Truth is subjective here, it is what the spectator wants to believe, like Noel King's example of Brando and the glove from *On the Waterfront*. Yet, the revelation component of Willeman's cinephilia points toward something quite unique in the context of the sublime moment.

Shortly after Tuco's run in the cemetery in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, a moment of revelation occurs that fulfils both Willeman's and Vertov's theories and that, for me, is a moment defined by its sublimity. At the climax of the famous three-way Mexican stand-off involving Tuco, Blondie (Clint Eastwood) and Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef), the latter is killed by Blondie. The significance here is difficult to explain but it seems to be a combination of the context of events and the subtlety of the representation. Here the stand-off is a bravura demonstration of Leone's directing style in which he uses many cuts (around eighty, within the space of four minutes) in a rhythmic manner, utilising the music of Morricone to dictate the tempo. Leone's framing begins with long-shots which gradually move closer and closer until the last few images of the set-piece are close-ups of the character's eyes. This monumental build-up will be significant in understanding the relevance of Angel Eyes' death as a sublime moment. As the accelerated editing reaches its peak, Blondie guns down Angel Eyes who dies with a whimper. For Leone, this representation of death is so subtle and understated that it achieves something in excess of the typical theatrical display of death, which these set-pieces generally seek. This moment is just that, a moment, Van Cleef emanating a laboured utterance of pain and then falling; it only exists for a fraction of a second. There seems to be 'truth' and revelation in this scene, not strictly a documentary truth-this is how a man dies-but a revelation of something original in this context. The build-up warrants a climax of high drama yet it doesn't occur. There is very little sound, no music and the framing is static. The scene is reminiscent of the death of Kyuzo (Seiji Miyaguchi) in *The Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, 1954). Here the invincible samurai is killed by a stray bullet, his death presented as a moment of complete evacuation as Kurosawa's swirling and panning camera stops for a moment, in shock. There is no sound, no movement within the frame only a moment of complete disbelief and sublimity. The comparison of these two scenes adequately defines the process of cinephilia, where the spectator collects, analyses and fetishises specific moments in isolation. Epstein noted that *photogenie* was like collecting moments, resembling the process of collecting inanimate objects like books and trinkets (12).

The only fact of the sublime moment, whether it be *photogenie*, cinephilia, a moment of vision or an experience of sensation, is that - as a moment - it cannot be defined, categorised or understood. Sometimes it is fragmented and without context, sometimes it is achieved through excessive stylistics, sometimes it appears as a moment of authenticity. And, just as often, under contrary conditions. There is no adequate definition of the sublime moment and there is no simple method for identifying its properties or contexts. It is in fact indefinable, obscure and ambiguous; yet quite ironically, it is always available and achievable for the willing, desiring spectator.

Endnotes:

1. Leo Charney, "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p.285
2. Charney, "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity," p.279
3. Jean Epstein, "For A New Avant-Garde," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, New York University Press, New York, 1978, p.29
4. Epstein, p.29
5. Paul Willeman, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," *in Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, Interview with Noel King, B.F.I., London, 1994, p.234
6. Willeman, p.237
7. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text*, 34, 1989, p.38
8. Charney, "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity," p.289
9. Jean Epstein, *Ecrits sur le Cinema*, cited in Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998, p.155
10. Willeman, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," p.236
11. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 42
12. Epstein, "For A New Avant-Garde," p.29

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