
“If anyone ever tells you there is only one way to make cinema, their way, get away from those fuckers as soon as possible.” – Jim Jarmusch [i]

My Cinema Journal article, “Boundless Ontologies: Michael Snow, Wittgenstein, and the Textual Film,” is part of a larger research project on stillness in cinema that has recently culminated in the publication of a book entitled Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis (Columbia University Press, 2015). I began this research in 2010 and since then, I have had the opportunity to present and discuss my conclusions at a number of conferences and symposia. For the past five years, I have given my scholarly attention to films with little or no movement, films in which stasis, rather than motion, is the default setting. Examples of such static films include Andy Warhol’s Empire (1964), the Fluxus film Disappearing Music for Face (1966), Michael Snow’s So Is This (1982), and Derek Jarman’s Blue (1993). I have had considerable difficulty explaining this research to others, even my colleagues in film studies. For a while when I was asked about the focus of my research, I answered by saying “static films.” However, I realized that this response was causing considerable confusion when an academic asked me if this meant that I studied films that consist solely of television static. [ii] In a bid for lucidity, I began answering the question in a more direct and conversational way: “I study movies that don’t move.”

I received a significant number of bewildered responses to this statement. Some interlocutors simply said, “Oh. That’s…interesting.” (The brief pause between “That’s” and “interesting” is critical here, as it generally suggests that the other party is struggling to say something that is not entirely dishonest while simultaneously sparing my feelings. For a comparable rhetorical strategy, imagine that you have just made coffee for a friend, and when you ask her how she is enjoying it, she responds, “It’s…different.”) Those who decided to follow me down the rabbit hole often responded by asserting, “But if it doesn’t move, it isn’t a movie!” In fact, this kind of essentialist argument has a long history in film theory. To give just one example, in his 1960 text Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, Siegfried Kracauer writes, “There is of course no film that would not represent—or, rather, feature—things moving. Movement is the alpha and omega of the medium.” [iii]

In other words, for many, the very idea of movies that don’t move is as incomprehensible as a square circle. (One should be suspicious of this analogy, however, and for a very simple reason: square circles do not exist; films without movement do.) I generally responded to these kinds of assertions by simply asking why movies are required to move. The most common response I received is revealing: “Because the word cinema comes from a Greek word for movement. So cinema moves by definition!”

The frequency of this response suggests that our conception of cinema is often impoverished by the etymological fallacy. According to this misguided mode of reasoning, the current meaning of a word should be circumscribed by its historical meaning. However, the linguist Steven Pinker skillfully dismantles this line of reasoning in his book The Sense of Style: “[The etymological fallacy] can be debunked with a glance at any page of a historical reference book, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, which will show that very few words retain their original senses. Deprecate used to mean ‘ward off by prayer,’ meticulous once meant ‘timid,’ and silly went from ‘blessed’ to ‘pious’ to ‘innocent’ to ‘piteable’ to ‘feeble’ to today’s ‘foolish.’” [iv] The fact that cinema comes from a Greek...
word for movement is a mere etymological accident, and it need not restrict the way we use the word now. (Along similar lines, we continue to call modern movies “films,” even when they are made and projected without the use of a filmstrip.) To refuse to acknowledge the existence of static cinema because of the origin of the word cinema is silly. (And by silly, I mean foolish, not blessed.)

In other words, one of the goals of my research is to clear the room of the linguistic cobwebs that have obstructed our vision. The fact that the medium of cinema has historically been described in terms of movement (movies, motion pictures, moving pictures, etc.) has prompted many film theorists—either consciously or unconsciously—to see movement as cinema’s essence, and thus to ignore (or dismiss as marginal) experiments in cinematic stasis. But it seems our language has led us astray. What might happen if, when describing films, video installations, and related media, we stopped referring to the moving image and instead referred to the temporal image? (The latter term is technically more accurate, since not all films move, whereas all films do unfold in time.) Whether or not scholars come to embrace such new terminology, I believe that further attention to the language we use in describing cinema is critical in exploring the nature and scope of the medium. And this is one of the reasons I would like to see a more serious engagement with Wittgenstein in film studies. More than any other thinker, Wittgenstein has revealed how often philosophical problems are, at root, linguistic problems. This insight has relevance for film-philosophy, film theory, aesthetics, and a variety of related disciplines. As Wittgenstein notes, “Philosophical problems…are, of course, not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language…. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” [v] Perhaps a closer look at “the workings of our language” can lead us to a more substantive understanding of the workings of cinema itself.

[i] Quoted in Chuck Workman’s 2013 documentary What Is Cinema?

[ii] This might be an interesting project, as well, as such films do exist. For example, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein’s 32-minute structural film 625 (1969) displays nothing more than television static that the Heins had filmed with a Bolex 16 mm camera.

