

Animal Flicker

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1. *Thaumatrope*

On two sides of a disc hanging from a string and twirled between the fingers, the drawings of a cage and of a bird quickly overlap one another until they form a single image. Following the example of Marey and Muybridge's work, pre-cinema's optical toys – thaumatropes, zoetropes, and other phenakistiscopes – continuously affirmed an animal tropism by representing the flight of birds, a sea lion's ball or a horse and jockey. The structural link between the invention of the cinematograph and the animal has often been observed, with an insistence on the observation of movement, the plasticity of the living, and plays on expressivity (Bellour [2009]: 417-437). Eisenstein masterfully elaborated on the parallel between animation and the animal in the essay that he devoted to Walt Disney in the 1940s around notions of animism and plasmaticity. «In English, the movie drawings of Disney are called [...] an animated cartoon. In this term both concepts are bound together: both "animation" (*anima* – the soul), and "liveliness" (*animation* – liveliness, mobility)» (Eisenstein [1988]: 121). Endowed with mobility, the unstable, labile animal embodies a continuous line of transformation. In his poetic and visionary lecture on Eisenstein, Stan Brakhage intuitively and brilliantly highlights the Russian filmmaker's interest in quickly skimming through picture books: «He was to become a film-maker from some instant – when he turned the page of one picture over to reveal another [...] from some instant on – when one image replaced another in the flip of a book-image over... from some instant on to another – when a miracle of shifting picture book imagery sent an electrical "chill" down his child spine» (Brakhage [1972]: 57). According to Brakhage (1972: 59), the flipping of the pages also translates a profound fascination for animal metamorphosis: «Later, flipping a book leaf would turn a human into an animal before his eyes, or viceversa, and back again: this image

transformation – subject to the will of the young viewer – would absorb the terrified energies of the earlier occurrence [...] give the childish viewer some seeming grip again, as he'd thought he'd had in the womb, on his destiny being born [...] and replace it with a process he would fulfil ever after». Brakhage's striking remarks reveal to what extent the art of film editing allows the filmmaker to make the animal appear and disappear at will, such as the group of informants assimilated to a fox, an owl, a monkey, and a bulldog in *Strike* (1924), by virtue of a law of physiognomic resemblances. In *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the stone lion stands up by means of match cuts and, in *The General Line* (1929), the coupling of a bull and a cow is figured through a flash of still frames. The passage from one scene to another, even from one frame to another, reveals or produces the animal, dissimulated at the heart of the luminous flickering, appearing and disappearing, between life and death, inertia and movement. Cinema captures and frees the living. Has the animal lodged itself on the interstice isolating each still frame? Or, to use a psychoanalytical metaphor, is it on the censor bar that separates the conscious from the subconscious?

2. Projection

In his text *Le défilement*, Thierry Kuntzel proposes seeing in the projected film a repression of the film-strip composed of those discrete units that are still frames. According to him, it is this interplay between the projection and the still frame that animates the film and defines the filmic:

The *filmic* which will be the object of the filmic analysis therefore will be found neither on the side of motion nor on the side of stillness, but *between* them, in the generation of the projected film by the film-strip, in the negation of this film-strip by the projected film, by the erasing work (itself erased) of the work of signification (Kuntzel [1980]: 241).

To symptomatically illustrate his thesis, Kuntzel analyzes an animated cartoon by filmmaker Peter Foldes, *Un appétit d'oiseau* (1964). This film describes the romantic and violent struggle between a man and a woman, transformed respectively into a lion and a bird through a continuous, highly eroticized metamorphosis, which is itself subject to variation, allowing the prey to escape from its predator. The bird escapes from lion's claws through a game of sidestepping and metamorphoses. The imagery happily entangles masculine and feminine codes: the bodies transform into mouths, lips, and stingers, through effects of compression or co-presence, furtively embodying the «spectator's archaic fantasies». Through the dual sexualization of the forms and the interplay between human and animal avatars, *Un appétit d'oiseau* confirms the relation

between the discontinuity of the filmstrip and the figure of the eroticized, excessive animal that emerges by the roundabout means of still frames, a true return of the repressed. The filmic seems to commingle with the metamorphoses of the animal. Is the latter how we relate to cinema, as Akira Mizuta Lippit (2000: 25) suggests?¹ Cryptically, the animal appears to be dissimulated within the very mechanism of cinema, lodged in the flipping of images and their incessant transformation.

3. *Flicker*

Although the projected film represses the film-strip, certain experimental filmmakers have worked towards “laying bare the device” through the use of flickering, plays on variations in lighting, and flashes of still frames. They work at the heart of the filmic, to use the concept proposed by Thierry Kuntzel, by exposing the intermittent nature of the filmstrip. *Flicker* is undoubtedly one of their preferred processes. Filmmakers such as Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, and Tony Conrad masterfully explored it in the course of the 1960s (Michaud [2006]: 121-134). The term *flicker* designates the fluttering produced by a rhythmic and regular succession of flashes whose frequency, between eight and ten impulses per second, can alter the spectator’s cerebral rhythm through the emission of alpha waves, provoking visions of colors or landscapes. In 1960, poet Brion Gysin, with Ian Sommerville, built his *Dreamachine*, a cylindrical optical machine with slits and a central light source which can provoke cerebral relaxation in the spectator, the goal being a suprasensorial mental experience, within the range of images produced by the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs (Joseph [2011]; Gysin [2010]: 120-125).² Made in 1965 by the artist Tony Conrad, *The Flicker* extends this pursuit through a stroboscopic effect that acts directly, closed-eye, on the spectator’s cerebral rhythm. «The effect I wanted to get was moving continuously from an absence of smashing stroboscopic effect into an area where the brain would be inundated with the dramatic quality of the patterns that were going on, and to move gradually, almost imperceptibly away from this back to the point where reality would shine through again» (Conrad [1966]: 4). The film becomes an emitter of luminous frequencies. According to Gene Youngblood (1970), this modality recalls one of expanded cinema’s psychedelic goals of acting directly on the spectator’s perception

¹ According to Lippit, cinema can be considered as a technological supplement, in the Derridean sense, of our subjectivity, of which the animal is an equivalent in nature. Humans have established themselves in their supplemental relation to the animal.

² Conrad and Gysin are influenced by Grey Walter [1952].

like a psychoactive drug in order to liberate an «oceanic consciousness». «Everything can be used as a screen, the body of a protagonist or even the bodies of the spectators; everything can replace the film stock, in a virtual film which now only goes on in the head, behind the pupils, with sound sources taken as required from the auditorium. A disturbed brain-death or a new brain which would be at once the screen, the film stock and the camera, each time membrane of the outside and the inside?» (Deleuze [1989]: 215). Is the animal still present in the simple flickering of light? Is it the agent of our relation to machines? Has it become a third term between film and brain? I propose to observe the relation between *flicker* and the animal in a film by Italian artist and filmmaker Paolo Gioli, *Farfallio*, made in 1993, which brings together flicker, drive, and pulsation through iconography taken from works about butterflies³.

4. *Farfallio*

Gioli is familiar with *flicker*. Made with basic tools (16 mm black and white film, mechanical movie camera), his films produce flickering effects through the use of photographs, found in albums, books or bought in second-hand stores, filmed image by image, subjected to rhythmic jerks and sudden accelerations. Although *farfalla*, in Italian, means «butterfly» and *sfarfallio* is commonly translated as «flicker», (even though the term *farfallamento* would be more appropriate), *Farfallio* is Gioli's neologism. Removing the letter S allows him to associate flicker and the butterfly with a portmanteau. Indeed, he makes regular use of portmanteaux for the titles of his films.⁴ A portmanteau can be considered the linguistic equivalent of a thaumatrope, superposing two words in the reader's consciousness, like with the name *Dreamachine*. *Farfallio* establishes a link between animation (the linking together of still shots) and the animal (the flight of butterflies). The *flicker* effect mimes the flapping of wings. The idea is simple, but magnificently executed. Through the simple use of photographs found in natural history books, Paolo Gioli reconnects with young Eisenstein's fascination for picture books. The book's pages come to life like the wings of a butterfly.⁵ Animation presupposes reanimation. In the midst of the insects'

³ Born in 1942, Paolo Gioli is the author of about thirty films as well as a singular corpus of photography and plastic arts. Cf. Toffetti, Licciardello (2009).

⁴ We can cite *Anonimatografo* (1972), *Hilarisdoppio* (1973) and *Traumatografo* (1973).

⁵ In one of Jerry Lewis's films, *The Ladies Man* (1961), Herbert H. Heebert, played by Lewis, maliciously opens a butterfly frame while dusting. The insects escape, flying away, much to his chagrin. He manages to get them back into their frame by angrily blowing a whistle.

flickering flight, their aphrodisiac and nuptial parade, Gioli inserts images of a pornographic nature – it is possible to fleetingly distinguish scenes of fellatio or penetration – favoring transformative effects between the butterfly's body, an erect penis, and a woman's labia, which recall the plays on sexual transformation in Peter Foldes's film. The stages of the butterfly's life cycle – egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, imago – favor a generalized metamorphosis. Let us enumerate a few of the technical procedures used by Gioli which establish a structural link between the morphology of moths and the art of dissimilitude. One is the difference between white and black butterflies, which creates an effect of graphical flickering, like a signal, recalling the opposition between positive or negative film images, frequent in Gioli's films. Another, the image's symmetrical separation produced by the butterfly's two wings, which evokes a split screen, is also a technique well known to the filmmaker. Finally, the eyespots associated with looks of fright or fascination by means of the superposition of human expressions taken from classical painting or filmed portraits. In these, we find the three categories of animal mimetism proposed by Roger Caillois (1960): transvestism, camouflage, and intimidation. But we can wonder about the presence of the animal. What is its place in the film, if not that of an intermittent presence, at once appearing and disappearing, subject to *flicker* variations that animate and obscure, free and capture, reveal and hide? «There is for each animal as if an oscillation between a sort of denseness and a penchant for evanescence, between the free affirmation of its difference and a tendency to hide» (Bailly [2013]: 111). The intensity of the film, however, does not seem to obey the rule of a dramatic or rhythmic rise, contrary to Conrad's film, but instead results in a mechanical compulsion for repetition without resolution. This recalls the fate of drives that, according to Freud, allow the physical body to recover its stability through a discharge of intensity and to reach towards inertia or death. The photograph of framed butterflies that concludes the film seems to corroborate the grievous destiny of drive (Bullo [2013]).

5. *Moths*

The Italian filmmaker has said that *Farfallio* is a tribute and a response to Stan Brakhage's film. Made in 1964, *Mothlight* is one of the most famous films by the American filmmaker. The film's title condenses the words *moth* and *light*, suggesting a light emission unique to moths. In this stunning and poetic four-minute film, Brakhage used the filmstrip as a transparent medium onto which he stuck natural fragments from

the animal and vegetable world: moth wings, blades of grass, plant dust, elytra. Although the fragments are continuously laid out on the filmstrip, the segmentation of the projection window produces a chaotic and disorganized vibration. Nature flutters. With its mixture of plants and moth wings, its translucent broken plant parts, its small veins and small fibers, the film produces the sensation of a sort of flickering herbarium. The idea of the film was born, Brakhage (2002) says, of the contemplation of moths burning themselves in electric lamps:

Over the lightbulbs there's all these dead moth wings, and I [...] hate that. Such a sadness; there must surely be something to do with that. I tenderly picked them out and start pasting them onto a strip of film, to try to [...] give them life again, to animate them again, to try to put them into some sort of life through the motion picture machine.

The film offers mechanical survival to the moths attracted by an incandescent and deadly light source. Life is performed by dead flesh, producing an "electric shiver." On cinema, Brakhage writes: «Oh, slow-eyed spectator, this machine is grinding you out of existence, its electrical storms are manufactured by pure white frames interrupting the flow of the photographed images» (Brakhage [1998]: 24). By exhibiting moths' wings stuck directly to the film, the film is at once the translucent tomb and the electric mime of moths that have become ghosts, or even symbols of the soul. Didi-Huberman (2013: 10) has recently proposed considering the moth as an emblem of the appearing image and to consider the stages of butterflies' life cycles as so many regimes of images. «The butterfly – particularly the moth, this nocturnal butterfly that slips through the half-opened door, dances around the light, and ends up throwing itself into it, being burned by it – appears to be the animal emblematic of a certain relationship between the movements of images and the movements of reality, even a certain, naturally quite unstable, status as the appearance of the image's reality». We can, however, detect the ambivalence present in the figuration of the animal in *Mothlight*. Life actualizes itself through the activation of death: fragments of cadavers, pieces of scales, wings. This situation is likely related to Lippit's hypothesis regarding the disappearing status of the animal within our modern world. According to Lippit's hypothesis that is to say, modernity is contemporary to the withdrawal of the animal. Cinema offers a technical solution to its disappearance. Where do we stand today? The border between human and animal has been greatly reduced in light of recent discoveries in biology and anthropology, and our outlook has changed thanks to work in animal ethics. The animal is in a position to become, gradually, a person (see Lestel [2004]).

6. *Disappearance of fireflies*

In his essay *Survivance des lucioles*, Georges Didi-Huberman comments at length on Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 newspaper article on the disappearance of fireflies (Pasolini [1975]). The Italian poet decries the way in which the neo-capitalist world rekindles the menace of fascism through the disappearance of the people, a leveling of behaviors, a general acculturation, and the cultural genocide of a tradition that had managed to persevere in spite of historical fascism. The light of spectacle dissipates all shadow and all resistance. The disappearance of fireflies throughout the countryside is for him a symbol of this situation. The animal is envisioned, according to Didi-Huberman's interpretation, as a metaphor for human resistance. «Therefore we must understand that the improbable and minuscule splendor of fireflies, in Pasolini's eyes [...], is a metaphor for no less than humanity *par excellence*, humanity reduced to its simplest strength to signal us in the night» (Pasolini [1975]: 25). While he recognizes the acuity and bitterness of Pasolini's remarks, Didi-Huberman (2003: 138) highlights the contemporary survival of acts of resistance, by means of images, which continue to emit signals, shaded from the blinding light of the projectors and of the reign of commodity and spectacle: «Images, therefore, to organize our pessimism. Images to protest against the glory of the reign and its beams of light. Have fireflies disappeared? Of course not». We continue to emit, he says, intermittent signs of resistance like so many fireflies in the night. Has the animal left the status of the simple metaphor to invite us to metamorphosis? Are we ourselves from this point forward appearing and disappearing in the darkness to the rhythm of our electric shivers? Does our salvation come through a becoming-animal?

7. *Leviathan*

It is striking to analyze Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel's 2012 film *Leviathan* in this light. Aboard a fishing trawler in Atlantic waters, the filmmakers produce a captivating feeling of immersion by placing digital GoPro cameras on the foreheads or bodies of the fishermen, on the ship's bow, or the nets, undoing the primacy of the human gaze in exchange for a multiplicity of points of view at unexpected heights and in unexpected positions. The film shows the reality of a night trawler at work: vertiginous plunging shots of the ship's deck, flocks of seagulls against a somber sky, a gelatinous mass of fish sliding on the deck floor, rays sliced in two with a knife, the mechanical work of the fishermen, a swirl of dark waves, the confrontation of bodies, the stream of

blood running off the bow, the sailors' silent breaks in their cabin, the twitching of fish taken from their environment. The procedure does not fail to recall Michael Snow's *La région centrale*, filmed in 1970 with the help of a remote-controlled camera, in a desert landscape in northern Quebec. Although Snow's film took into account possibly changing planets (it is contemporary to the first mission to the moon), *Leviathan* exposes the conditions of industrial work and the relation of human to animal. The choice of point of view brings up many questions. Who is watching? Where does this impossible point of view come from, passing the water line, traversing space, diving, on the deck floor, sometimes making us feel like we are occupying the gaze of the trawler or that of the animal? For that matter, the end credits list the names of the different animal species present in the film. The means of filming seems to proceed, in principle, from a "flat ontology". It highlights the totality of beings and things in this era of the Anthropocene which is seeing the accelerated disappearance of numerous animal species with no prospective for survival. Curiously, this fact only accentuates the hallucinatory nature of the vision. Hence the fantastical, even psychedelic, quality of the film, due to the grain of the image and to the sound track mixing favoring infra-basses. In addition, the multiplication of points of view produces a feeling of democratic immersion recalling expanded cinema's goal of attaining an oceanic consciousness within the noosphere. Where does the living live from now on? Perhaps a face-to-face encounter between human and animal will forever be deferred. The animal joins a continuum between human and machine. In doing so, it favors the production of a new brain, which is at once screen, film, and camera. Promise of expanded communication? The animal always presupposes a *flicker*.

[Translation Nicole Dunham]

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