

Iconoclastic Delights, by Boris Groys

Film has never stood in a sacred context. From its very inception film proceeded through the murky depths of profane and commercial life, always a bedfellow of cheap mass entertainment. Even the attempts to sacralize film undertaken by twentieth-century totalitarian regimes never really succeeded – all that came out was the short-lived enlistment of film for their respective propaganda purposes. The reasons for this are not necessarily to be found in the character of film as a medium: film simply arrived too late. By the time film emerged, culture had already shed its potential for sacralization. So, given cinema's secular origins it would at first sight seem inappropriate to associate iconoclasm with film. At best, film appears capable only of staging and illustrating historical scenes of iconoclasm, but never of being iconoclastic itself.

What nonetheless can be claimed is that throughout its entire history as a medium film has waged a more or less open struggle against other media such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even theater and opera. These can all boast of sacred origins that within present-day culture still afford them their status as high, aristocratic arts. Yet the destruction of precisely these high aristocratic cultural values has been repeatedly depicted and celebrated in film. So, cinematic iconoclasm operates less in relation to some religious or ideological struggle than it does in terms of the conflict between different media; this is an iconoclasm conducted not against its own sacred provenance but against other media. By the same token, in the course of the long history of antagonism between different media, film has earned the right to act as the icon of secular modernity.

In historical terms the iconoclastic gesture has never functioned as an expression of a consistent aesthetic or skeptical attitude. Such an approach is mirrored more in dispassionate curiosity towards a plethora of religious aberrations, compounded by the well-meaning museum conservation of the historical evidence of such aberrations – and it is certainly not accompanied by the destruction of this evidence. By contrast, the desecration of ancient idols is performed only in the name of other, more recent gods. Iconoclasm's purpose is to prove that the old gods have lost their power and are subsequently no longer able to defend their earthly temples and images.

Now, as a medium of motion, film is frequently eager to display its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. At the same time, this tendency also demonstrates film's adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa*. Every kind of iconophilia is ultimately rooted in a fundamentally contemplative approach and in a general readiness to treat certain objects deemed sacred exclusively as objects of distant, admiring contemplation. This disposition is based on the taboo that protects these objects from being touched, from being intimately penetrated and, more generally, from the profanity of being integrated into the practices of daily life. In film nothing is deemed so holy that it might or ought to be safeguarded from being absorbed into the general flow of movement. Everything film shows is translated into movement and thereby profaned. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of *praxis*, of *Lebensdrang*, of the *élan vital* and of desire; it parades its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, mesmerized the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries – in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation capable of shaping ideas rather than reality was displaced by celebration of the potent movements of material forces. In this act of worship film plays a central role. From its very inception film has celebrated everything that moves at high speed – trains, cars, airplanes – but also everything that goes beneath the surface – blades, bombs, bullets.

Likewise, from the moment it emerged film has used slapstick comedy to stage veritable orgies of destruction, demolishing anything that just stands or hangs motionlessly, including traditionally revered cultural treasures. Designed to provoke all-round laughter in the audience, these movie scenes of destruction, wreckage and demolition are reminiscent of Bakhtin's theory of carnival that both emphasizes and affirms the cruel, destructive aspects of carnival. Of all preceding art forms, it is no surprise that the circus and the carnival were treated with such positive deference by film in its early days. Bakhtin described the carnival as an iconoclastic celebration that exuded an aura of joy rather than serious, emotional or revolutionary sentiment; instead of causing the violated icons of the old order to be supplanted by the icons of some new order, the carnival invited us to celebrate the downfall of the status quo.

At the same time Bakhtin's carnival theory also emphasizes just how inherently contradictory iconoclastic carnivalism is in film. Historical carnivals were participatory, offering the entire population the chance to take part in a festive form of collective iconoclasm. But once iconoclasm is used strategically as an artistic device, the community is automatically excluded – and becomes an audience. Indeed, while film as such is a celebration of movement, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of immobility compared to traditional art forms. So while it is possible to move around with relative freedom while one is reading or viewing an exhibition, in the movie theater the viewer is cast in darkness and glued to a seat. The situation of the movie-goer in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very *vita contemplativa* that film itself denounces, because the cinema system embodies precisely that *vita contemplativa* as it surely appears from the perspective of its most radical critic – an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say – namely as the product of a vitiated lust for life and dwindling personal initiative, as a token of compensatory consolation and a sign of individual inadequacy in real life. As Gilles Deleuze correctly observes, film transforms its viewers into spiritual automata: film unfurls inside the viewer's head in lieu of his own stream of consciousness. Yet this reveals film's fundamental character to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, film is a celebration of movement, the proof of its superiority over all other media, on the other, however, it places its audience in a state of unparalleled physical and mental immobility. It is this ambivalence that dictates the majority of filmic strategies, including iconoclastic strategies.

Criticism of audience passivity first led to various attempts to use film as a means of activating a mass audience, of politically mobilizing or injecting movement into it. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political propaganda in an endeavor to rouse the viewer and wrench him from his passive, contemplative condition. But later-day cinema is not revolutionary any more, even if it still feeds off the tradition of revolutionary iconoclasm. Since the currently dominant humanistic iconography has placed humanity itself in the foreground, the iconoclastic gesture is now inevitably seen as the expression of radical, inhumane evil, the work of pernicious aliens, vampires and deranged humanoid machines. The traditional iconoclastic gesture is now increasingly ascribed to the realm of entertainment. Disaster epics, movies about aliens and the end of the world, and vampire thrillers are generally perceived as potential box-office hits – precisely because they most radically celebrate the cinematic illusion of movement.

As time passed, it became clear that it was precisely the illusion of movement generated by film that drove the viewer towards passivity. This marks the beginning of an iconoclastic movement against film, and consequently of the martyrdom of film. This iconoclastic protest has the same root cause as all other iconoclastic movements; it represents a revolt against a passive, contemplative mode of conduct waged in the name of movement and activity. But where film is concerned, the outcome of this protest might at first sight seem somewhat paradoxical. Since film images are actually moving images, the immediate result of the iconoclastic gesture performed against film is petrification and an interruption of the film's movement. The instruments of film's martyrdom are various new technologies such as video, computer, and DVD. These new technological means make it possible to arrest a film's flow at any moment whatsoever, providing evidence that a film's motion is neither real nor material, but simply an illusion of movement that can equally well be digitally simulated. Moreover, the information technology is constantly changing nowadays—hardware, software—simply everything. Already because of that the filmic image is also transformed with every act of visualization using a different, new technology. Today's technology thinks in terms of generations—we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where there are generations, there are also generation conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone who attempts to transfer his or her old text files or image files onto new software can experience the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology—many things are lost in the process, many things are destroyed, many things get lost in darkness, become obscure. The biological metaphor says it all: Not only life that is notorious in this respect, but also technology, which supposedly opposes nature, has become the medium of non-identity. And beyond that: The film if it is running on the TV, or in the exhibition space, or on the computer screen can be not only interrupted but also overlooked.

In our culture we have two fundamentally different models at our disposal that give us control over the time we spend looking at an image: the immobilization of the image in the museum or the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both models founder when moving images are transferred into the exhibition space or in the space of everyday life. Today, the film becomes – at least partially – invisible. Or to say it in another way: The film became iconoclastic toward itself.