Film, Landscape and Political Aesthetics: *Deseret*

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> We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion (Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Meridian. ix)

This essay is an attempt to reawaken the political aesthetics of media, and dedicated to the memory of Paul Willemen, whose persistent radicalism shaped film studies at its emergence in the UK in the 1970s. Though we disagreed on almost everything, and he would undoubtedly have been the first to attack the following arguments, he taught my generation the absolute importance of film – and by implication the audiovisual media – and criticism as political practice. In an influential essay of 1984, Willemen argued that two then recent political films, *Maeve* (John Davies and Pat Murphy1981) and *So That You Can Live* (Cinema Action 1981), with their 'de-structuration of landscape into the traces of political and industrial archaeology, of history both in the past and in the making' could be 'understood as films exemplifying a new mode of discourse'. 'Instead of starting from the question"how to speak?"', Willemen proposed, 'this avant garde starts from the question "how to understand social existence?"' (Willemen 1984: 55). The project of this article is to resituate that question for the 2010s, when the social – especially its relation to landscape – can no longer be understood apart from its environment, in ways already intimated in Willemen's essay.

This article argues that the first thing a film (or any other media artefact) must do is take responsibility for its own existence, an existence premised on the medium's imbrication in circuits of materials and energy. The epigraph from Arendt points to what is at stake: we can neither look backwards for a lost utopia, nor bury the past and hope it will go away. The environmentalist agenda pursued here argues the same: we cannot strive for a lost union with the natural world, nor simply bury the waste products of mediation, as we do daily not only our waste but millions of kilometres of cable. At the same time, we can neither deny the existence of nature simply because it is a word which has been tainted by its history. The ecological idea that everything is connected may be correct as a principle, but it is not true historically or sociologically in the sense that division – in the form of objectification, commodification and expropriation – is ubiquitous. The challenge

for an ecologically-informed political aesthetics is then not simply to convey good ideas to those who need them. It involves tracing the political challenges of identifying the good, and analysing the relation it has with the means of conveying it, always the territory of political aesthetics, but now infused with the revaluation of values demanded by the conjuncture of austerity neo-liberalism with the Anthropocene.

Although ecocritical film studies have attracted increasing attention in recent years (see Ivakhiv 2011 and Rust and Monani 2013 for overviews) eco-political aesthetics is limited when it addresses only those media that are explicitly addressed to environmental issues. James Benning's 1995 film *Deseret* in many respects speaks to and from ecological concerns, eloquently picked out by Scott MacDonald (2001: 338-44), though far less than some of his later films, notably *13 Lakes* (2004; see MacDonald 2013). It figures here as exemplary because it raises those questions of form and its relation to communication and mediation that are most pressing for ecocritical film studies and most revealing for the project of a political aesthetics of cinema. *Deseret* is made up of static shots of landscapes across Utah, each timed to the duration of passages about Utah read by an actor from the pages of the New York Times between 1852 and 1992, the first half, covering the period to 1896 when Utah became a state (and cinema began) in black and white; the second half, in colour. As MacDonald says in his vivid description of the film, 'As the *Time*'s chronicling of environmental damage increases, our sense of the beauty of Benning's imagery evolves' (2001: 343). It is this tension between political urgency and the political functioning of beauty that makes the film a perfect laboratory to test theses about nature, beauty and their political roles.

 Deseret is proof of Martin Warnke's (1994) argument that landscape – the shape of a hill or the line of a woodland's edge – have been written by history. And yet landscape is perversely no longer anchored in place, where place denotes inhabitance. As so often, this specifically modern condition was inaugurated in the colonies, most of all the settler colonies of North America, Southern Africa and Australia. Of the latter Germaine Greer (2013) notes that the ecological crisis of drought and habitat loss is a result of the settler's unwillingness to inhabit: always ready to exhaust the resources of a spot and move on. The settler imagination depopulates the land as resource or wilderness in order to exploit it. That imagination rebounded on the imagination of place in the metropolitan nations, where very rapidly geology, water and the sky itself would be sacrificed on the altar of profit. Today as at the beginning of cinema, mineral extraction, waste attendant on the manufacture and disposal of media products, and extracting and generating the energy to run our machinery all impact far more strongly on indigenous and colonised peoples than on the

metropolitan cities. Cinema is grounded in patterns of global exploitation it all too readily erases under the film as text.

Where landscape is a repository of inhabitations, representations of landscape are records of their annihilation. As representation, film can evoke habitation only by recording its erasure, and in that it is complicit in what it mourns. In what follows, the shade of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) serves as a tool for understanding how this contradiction might lead not to an impasse of complicity but towards a new understanding of film's capabilities. As a technology that both inscribes and erases history and nature, film is a privileged medium for the mediation of landscape, and therefore for a renewed political aesthetics.

Deseret's two sections, pre- and pst-1900, return over and over to stories about First Nations in the first and to radiation, both naturally occurring in uranium deposits and the result of nuclear testing, in the second. With the exception of several shots of Anasazi and Fremont petroglyphs, both Native Americans and radiation are invisible, to the extent that the rock-paintings are reduced to expressions of the landscape, or miniature landscape features, much as the abandoned farms and old road signs are. *Deseret* sets up an intimate dialectic between the landscape as reported and recorded on one side and the null subject of the locked-down camera on the other. Even on the rare instances (two by my count) where humans figure in the film, there is a deep melancholy in the exclusion of subject from land and from its truths, so far as those are voiced-over. The subject of *Deseret*, camera and viewer, fails the test of mastery. Indians and radioactivity escape it.

There is in the landscape of *Deseret* that for which we have no remedy: the unmournable dead, and the toxins we leave for the unmournable future. The fixed gaze of *Deseret* is melancholy because it takes onto itself the burden of shame for these disasters. As Freud described it, melancholia is an extreme form of reproaching the self, but its aetiology traces those self-reproaches back to 'reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego', while those reproaches themselves 'proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia' (Freud 1984: 257). In the first instance, the melancholy gaze on the landscape mourns its failure to master it. In a second moment, however, the work of mourning collapses as the film confronts the victims of that failure. As Mladek and Edmondson phrase it, the melancholic becomes 'a decompleted subject without mastery or agency, fully exposed and appropriated to the event' (2009: 227). The unerased memory of horror marks the landscape gaze, its fidelity to the lost and silenced, to those who died and those who have

never come to exist, actively undoing the self-identity of the self, placing its duty outside itself with the unmourned and excluded.

This melancholia is one of the well-springs of critique precisely because it does not mourn. It does not seek to apologise to or speak on behalf of the dead, because that would be to return them to a Symbolic order from which colonialism and genocide excluded them. Mourning would merely assuage the living without repaying that unpayable debt the living owe the dead. Nor is there anything of the Thoreau tradition that seeks return to a primal utopian pantheism (see Heise 2008), even though that might seem to be the theme of later Benning films like *13 Lakes*. Instead, the film invites us to take up the burden of shame. If the film allowed us to wallow in guilt, it would fail aesthetically; if it succeeds, it demands that we shoulder responsibility, but under conditions of a broken subjectivity. A landscape is evidence of the sacrificial violence on which we can in turn sacrifice our own happiness, but it also opens onto the realisation that the present need not be part of that immense piling of wreckage on wreckage that Benjamin's angel of history gazed at in horror (Benjamin 2003). For this to happen, we must take up the memory and the cause of those excluded from history and therefore from the present, where the present is defined as the one moment in which it is possible to act.

How then might the cinematic landscape become a terrain for action? Action is not optional: media already always act ecologically. Film, digital or analog, depends on geology: on minerals and on oil for energy and plastics, including celluloid. In this sense all cinema, even the least obviously engaged in environmental issues, is politically ecological. Thus Harvey (2003: 99-100) writes that 'Railways, roads, airports, port facilities, cable networks, fibre-optic systems, electricity grids, water and sewage systems, pipelines, etc., constitute "fixed capital embedded in the land"' adding 'that capital perpetually seeks to create a geographical landscape to facilitate its activities at one point in time only to have to destroy it and build a wholly different landscape at a later point in time' (101), a process which also includes establishing near-Earth orbits as an extension of planetary geography, an extension now integral to film and other electronic media distribution. In media ecology, taken literally rather than as metaphor, we can identify three processes: extracting raw materials and refining them; replacing mined ores with dross (including the waste of other materials brought in to aid the refining process); and migrating the refined product to another place where it is concentrated and, sooner or later, often buried as part of a new geology. The refining process mirrors the extraction of pharmaceuticals, often employed in impure form to facilitate mineral extraction, as coca was by Bolivian tin miners, but developed in hyper-refined product to entertain

the wealthy, and in newly weaponised forms to assault the poor. As with drugs, so with energy and metals. The last shots of the pre-1900 segment of *Deseret* shows a suburban street with parked cars beneath far-off mountains; the next sequence, dated May 30, 1900, shows several mines and a freight train laden with ore in the foreground, and a distant truck heading the opposite direction in the mid-ground, with snow-dusted hills behind them, evoking Gary Snyder's lines 'the train down in the city / was once a snowy hill' (Gary Snyder, *The Back Country*, 51). Harvey's creative destruction of landscape includes the intensification of selected features and their migration to other landscapes, borne by transport or media technologies which are themselves products of the land.

Film, whether analog or digital, is made of land, both what we can see in terms of buildings and equipment, and in terms of the geology we cannot see but whose formation is the structure of landscape. This is why self-consciously landscape genre films like Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), those that push landscape into the background, like Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938), make it a character like Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) or raise it to mythic proportion like Ford's Cavalry Trilogy (*Fort Apache* 1948, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* 1949, *Rio Grande* 1950) each in their way, cynically or triumphantly, nostalgically or comically, recount the tragedy of capital's interference in the processes of inhabiting surfaces and geologies.

Deseret picks up on Harvey's insight into communications technologies, transport and media alike, as integral elements of the landscape. Far from deserted, his vistas are frequently populated by cars and trucks, telegraph and power lines, gas stations and other physical evidence of communications, such as the immense highways infrastructure built to defuse one of many crises of over-accumulation following Eisenhower's Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 (Lewis 1997). That massive expenditure, regarded as the world's biggest public works project, rested on the ideology of private freedom, embodied in the car. Film played its role in making visible and in the vanishing of the automobile. In *Deseret* we are confronted with the evidence that neither the road movie's presentation of the highway as figure of existential freedom nor Hollywood's assimilation of the car as magic carpet of volition, whisking protagonists instantly from scene to scene under the invisible cloak of editing, are defensible.

The poles of visibility and invisibility of the oil-based economy of Hollywood freedom provoke an analogy with the political analysis of cinema. Comolli and Narboni's (1971) categories of political film are remarkable in hindsight for not addressing the environmental impact of cinema technology, even as they pointed forward to analysis of its capitalist structuration in apparatus theory. Indeed

they failed to notice the materiality of media as integral to their aesthetics and politics. Nonetheless they do point us towards a key concept of political aesthetics: that it is precisely those films which are ostensibly least engaged in politics that most require political analysis. It is not, or not only, 'eco-cinema' that requires interpretation but those films that assume and ignore their own environmental deficits. As feminism declined to draw the line at representations of women and women's roles in industry but advanced by pointing to their absence, eco-critique has to go beyond depictions of environmental themes to unpick the ecological assumptions operating beneath the obvious surface of the text, even as it enquires into the material substrates that produce that surface.

Critique founded on the ecological principle of the interconnectedness of everything is by that token necessarily and permanently incomplete. But that very incompletion demands that we rethink the premises of much of our aesthetics, most notably the autonomy of the artwork and what we can hope to understand of its freedom. As Freud remarked of the work of mourning, when it is complete, 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (1984: 253). But if, as argued above in relation to *Deseret*, that work is aesthetically and politically refused, we have two options: one identified by Freud as clinical melancholia, an inhibited withdrawal from the world (a permutation of which is familiar from the Thoreau tradition); or on the other grasping in melancholy our unfreedom as political form.

Because *Deseret* might be apprehended as straddling these positions, while in its formal procedures establishing its aesthetic distance from its own content, it is worth placing it against the towering statement of the concepts of aesthetic autonomy and freedom, and the most melancholy, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Though Mckenzie Wark has mounted a significant attack on the irrelevance of critique to the demands of the Anthropocene (Wark 2015), Adorno's thought has been increasingly influential among environmentalist thinkers in recent years (Beck 1995, Biro 2011, Cook 2011, Luke 1997, Morton 2007, Nelson 2011), perhaps precisely because, in advance of the scientific evidence, Adorno had intuited the intellectual construction of 'nature' and its simultaneous material destruction as intrinsic to the emergence of Enlightenment, modernity and capital. Wark's vitriol is reserved for the kind of social constructivist theories also pilloried by Meillassoux and object-oriented philosophy that cannot explain, in Meillassoux's famous example, the 'arche-fossil' whose existence predates and confounds the argument that everything is constructed by human invention. Rather than argue for Adorno's exemption from these strictures, the following pages concern what use his proritisation of aesthetics might have for environmentally informed media studies.

The section of the *Aesthetic Theory* (hereafter AT) headed 'Natural Beauty' (AT 61-78) is grounded in Kant's belief that human freedom liberates itself from the realm of natural necessity (the laws of physics and the contingency of natural events driven by them). Adorno characterises nature as 'what is not made' (AT 62), and distinguishes it from natural beauty, which is the way nature appears, how it presents itself to us, a distinction which *Deseret* makes every time it intersperses shots accompanied by sync ambient sounds with others juxtaposed with voiceovers. Even when repressed in aesthetic philosophy after Kant and subordinated to artificial reconciliation in art, natural beauty remains the essential complement, Adorno argues, of artificial beauty, both as the model of unmediated beauty and as the antithesis of art's forms and techniques, echoed in the simultaneously self-conscious artifice of the locked-off camera and its subordination of viewing to the landscapes portrayed. The post-Kantian assertion of human freedom and dignity, the core of post-Romantic art, brought about 'a desiccation of everything not totally ruled by the subject' (AT 62). At the same time, the constant return to nature in artworks is driven by the poverty of 'the subject thrown back on himself in a mangled and administered world' (AT 63). Appreciation of natural beauty is then historical: only when a society abandons agriculture as its central experience of organic life does 'nature' appear as an object of contemplation rather than of action.

This disinterested interest in nature is in the first instance indistinguishable from the disinterested quality of art in Kant. Art can only respect nature by giving it form, which is to betray it by re-making it *for* the subject, a process in which, no longer an object of action, natural beauty becomes an object of expression, in both of which cases it exists not for itself but as raw material. The pre-artistic experience of natural beauty recalls a world without domination but also that contingency out of which humanity had to dig itself in order to become free, and therefore capable of making a free world. Freeing itself from myth, the amorphous condition of humanity under natural law, art has the task of rescuing socially-constructed nature from its own contingency, its lack of freedom from its own laws. This cannot mean representing nature because natural beauty is already a presentation, an image, even a caricature of itself (AT 67) and 'a deceptive phantasm' (AT 68), which in turn is a result of the social formation of 'nature'. At best, nature functions as an allegory for what lies beyond the commodity relation. If anything more is ascribed to it, most of all anything like reconciliation, nature is instantly degraded to a cloak for the lie of immediacy.

At its best, in turn, art seeks to emulate a particular poignancy of natural beauty, understood as 'suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill' (AT 71): its ephemerality, its emergent indeterminacy, its contingency. Natural beauty as mediated in art is then 'the trace of the non-

identical in things under the spell of universal identity' (AT 73). Consciousness of natural beauty, like art, is in opposition to natural beauty, but only on the condition that both mediate one another. Aesthetic objectivity – the self-fulfilling mastery of form which separates art from instrumental domination – mirrors nature's being-in-itself, in both instances articulating, in their aporias and failures to exist or achieve identity, that which is not-yet. 'Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human expression' he concludes, while 'Mediate nature, the truth content of art, takes shape, immediately, as the opposite of nature' (AT 78). The essence of natural beauty is that it is not an expression, while art tries to express it. This impossibility hinges on the ephemerality of natural beauty, an ephemerality which art must embrace but which contradicts art's mission to make durable.

Adorno's description of the mimesis of natural beauty in landscape art as 'the trace of the non-identical in things under the spell of universal identity' (AT 73) catches the paradox of *Deseret*: its struggle to identify the uniqueness of each shot within the universality of the standard film frame moving at a standard 24 fps. But if landscape is, in Adorno's version, 'the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past' (AT 64) then art is only true to it 'where it makes landscape present in the expression of its own negativity' (AT 67-8). Yet it is one role of art to anticipate a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, so that we must conclude not only that the exclusion of nature from the human is purely ideological, but that the negativity of landscape is to be reconciled in a future which its adumbration in art also points towards. Historically subjugated, landscape in this sense seeks its redemption in an art of which it is the truth but which betrays it at every turn. We can only sentimentalise, imagining a pantheistic integration, or invent nostalgia for an impossible return to the formless state of nature, or emulate natural beauty's own intrinsic instability: its bifurcation of being and appearing, its scarring by the historical process that gave it birth, and its failure to exist.

Deseret's melancholy is premised on just such non-identity, marked in the difference between the texts and images, and therefore also in the moments when they seem to coincide, since those moments appear as arbitrary as the moments of non-coincidence. The space between the voice of actor Fred Gardner reading from the *New York Times* and the location sound; and most of all the anonymity of the static camerawork mark the lack of what Gaudreault and Jost (1999) would call a 'filmic meganarrator'. Yet the absent subject of *Deseret*, which structural film analysis would place on the side of the spectator, also fails to emerge. We confront the amorphousness not of primal nature and myth but of

history as a process without subject, that the dialectic at work in history is not the work of any Subject whatsoever, whether Absolute (God) or merely human, but that the origin of history is always already thrust back before history, and therefore that there is neither a philosophical origin nor a philosophical subject to History. Now what matters to us here is that Nature itself is not, in Hegel's eyes, its own origin; it is itself the result of a process of alienation which does not begin with it: i.e. of a process whose origin is elsewhere (Althusser 1971).

Thus too here. The film is a process of alienation and subsumption: *Deseret* tells itself from two incompatible positions, sound and image; it draws together two incompatible processes, organic and artefactual; and its subject is the failure of the land to rid itself of history or history of the land. At the same time as it loses the mega-narrator, it constructs a formal system of locked-off shots whose duration is controlled by extraneous features (the length of grammatical units in the voice-over) which in its own way establishes both formal unity and at least an attempt to control the flux of every individual shot and bring it within the aesthetic order of the whole. Either these contradictions are reconciled in the contemplation of a necessarily omniscient spectator, or the film is without a subject. The first produces the irreducibly partial position of a subject who considers himself to be the centre of the universe, a subject, however, who sacrifices the right to speak for the universe by distinguishing itself from it, the perennial contradiction of the colonist. The second, contemplation without a subject, would be the condition of an artwork undertaken under the aegis of ecological perception, for which there is no perspective, no position from which the whole makes perfect sense, and which thus either dissolves into mythic immersion, as Adorno feared, or, and this is the political avenue which opens from it, recognizes in its ecological intrication that it is no longer non-identical but necessarily distributed and therefore plural. It is this dialectic that both Adorno and Benning miss, the one in his account of natural beauty, the other in his of environmental predation.

Although generally scathing about film, and especially montage, Adorno argues in a later passage of the *Aesthetic Theory* that 'Oppressed nature expresses itself more purely in works criticised as artificial, which with regard to the level of the technical forces of production, go to the extreme, than it does in circumspect works whose *parti pris* for nature is as allied with the real domination of nature as is the nature lover with the hunt' (AT 208-9). As advanced technological medium, film is engaged in the oppression of nature as directly as any other technological industry, and this goes for films made outside the studio system but nonetheless with tools – cameras, batteries, celluloid – that are intrinsically industrial. The relation between landscape and film must embrace celluloid's

dependence on an organic chemistry derived from petroleum (whence Gulf + Western's involvement in Paramount 1966-1989); while analogue photosensitive chemistry is based on silver, especially from the Andean mines where the Spanish developed so many of the formative techniques of colonialism (Robins 2011). It must also embrace the media of distribution, equally integral to film culture, and the environmental impacts of the electronic media on which we now typically receive and view audiovisual media. To undertake interpretation of the cinema-landscape relation, we have therefore to re-define our understanding of the index. Indexicality no longer concerns just what we can see *through* film, but the film itself, not as immaterial surface but as material apparatus in which appear not just sprocket holes but the complex and nefarious extraction of materials and labour at the expense of landscape and its indigenous inhabitants, their redistribution across the planet and above it, and their return through circuits either of economy or environment, recycling or dumping. The fact that Utah provides neither silver nor oil only emphasises the ideological construction of the landscape as object, the export and concentration of geology, and the concentration and export of natural beauty in *Deseret*.

There are shots in Benning's film where the camera is either not securely locked or handheld, rocking so that we have the sense that there is a person in the film. That inference however merely instantiates a universal already in operation as a function of the lenses used throughout, the function of perspective, which presumes a universal subject[1]. It is through the vanishing point constituted by this universal subject that the landscape passes, the appearance disappearing in order to generate, on this side of the screen, its becoming-landscape. In its passage through the vanishing point, it takes with it the apparatus of observation and representation, and with them the whole imbroglio of industrially exhumed and refined materials. The silence with which the respectful appreciation of nature is conducted in the inter-segment shots in *Deseret* respects 'the disinclination to talk about' natural beauty which in Adorno's account 'is strongest where love of it survives' (AT 69) while also remaining silent about the artifice by which it is captured and communicated. Neither Adorno nor Benning reach here for the sublime, the wordless rapture of confrontation with awe in the face of natural beauty, yet these passages share with the sublime not only the asocial repression of language but also its denial of history, the natural history of vulcanism and glaciation as much as the unnatural history of agriculture, mining and middens. The film saves itself from the rapture of the sublime by embracing the grammar of form, which presents itself as rigorous, if not structuralist, but

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[1] The problem might be illuminated by reflecting on the purportedly universal subject of human rights who turns out only to have the rights of the citizen to the extent that her country adopts the UN Universal Declaration (Hunt 2008). Far from universally valid, this subject is only the subject of public administration, and therefore not of the political considered as emancipatory.

in doing so veils another formalism, the material form imposed by the apparatus. By distinguishing itself from what it shows by avowing its own structure, the film disguises the operation of perspective as construction of a universal subject, even as it critiques that subject in the form of the ironically neutral voice of East Coast journalism.

This problematic mediation of subjectivity throws opens three questions: Can film communicate natural beauty? How can natural beauty form a subject capable of action? And if it cannot, and instead produces the melancholy subject, is that subject incapable of truly decompleted subjectivity if it is produced not from non-identity but from vanishing, and therefore by being distinguished from the world? The answer to the first of these intuitively must be 'yes': at the close of the segment of *Deseret* for May 1, 1857, after a particularly lurid account of a killing, we cut to a long shot of a mesa seen from across a placid lake, a wall of rock that seems to boast its capacity to endure even such scenes as that we have just heard described. But to the extent that its endurance appears *for* us to express such a thing, it becomes a communication, it positions the natural feature as interlocutor. When nature's appearance as natural beauty vanishes into expression, a mediation that converts it into message, communication produces a subject capable of receiving the message rather than the referent, a subject therefore divorced from the alienated nature that constitutes the truth of the message. This subject, constituted from vanishing rather than non-identity, experiences itself as the decompletion of the receiver's certain status in communication, and to this extent is no longer the subject of communication but of mediation. If by mediation we understand the ecological principle of interconnection, we remove the problem of 'decompletion', since there is no complete subject distinct from the world to lose its completeness. This however describes the primal pantheist mediation of everything by everything, not the fallen state of the world in which the separation, hypostasis and domination of nature is the model for the division of sender and receiver and the dominance of the former over the latter. When however non-identity appears as a quality not only of nature but of the circuit of its representations including the mediation of spectatorship, we have left the sphere of myth and entered that of history, a history pointing beyond the autonomous artwork, and thus beyond human freedom.

The work of reason through which Kantian subjectivity gained its freedom from the contingency of natural laws may not however be simply wasted effort, nor merely ideological illusion. As Adorno argues, natural beauty 'is better known through unconscious apperception', but then, 'If nature can in a sense only be seen blindly, the aesthetic imperatives of unconscious apperception and remembrance are at the same time archaic vestiges incompatible with the increasing maturation of

reason' (AT 69). From this Adorno derives the thesis that the child's unconscious appreciation of nature is essential to later analytical, conscious aesthetic experience, but only on condition that it is abandoned as ideological. The contradiction, as he notes, is ineluctable. The rational adult's aesthetic experience arrives at the same place as the child's unconscious appreciation of beauty, but cleansed by the reason which separates the human from the natural. If so, then what is the point, from the perspective of aesthetic reason, of the detour through rationality?

It is firstly that the process of liberation from nature is never complete: this is the centre of Freud's account of the drives, socialised but yet operating according to biological imperatives. In the case of *Deseret*, the construction of a universal subject is an intrinsically incomplete project, not because its incompletion is inscribed in the film as text, but because the presence of the film as material stands as both a screen separating the viewer from the viewed, and as material evidence that the two have never been separated except in the deracination of the commodity form. Marx was the first to point out the fetish character of the commodity that stands in for and masks the underlying social relations congealed in the object of exchange. What eco-criticism adds is the assertion that the commodity also and equally stands in for and conceals congealed relations between human and natural worlds which, however, as in the purely economic sense, it works to sever one from the other. Moreover, because film shares in the structure of the commodity-based society that gave it birth and sustains it (Beller 2006), it too partakes in the process of congealing and concealing environmental mediation. At the same time however it is important to go back to Adorno's surmise that the most technologically advanced arts are the ones that, precisely because they stand at the greatest distance from and have difficulty in retracing nature's non-identity, have the greatest opportunity to do so. If nature's being-in-itself, even as a memory or a portent of being-in-itself, is intrinsically incommunicable, the relation that technical arts can have with it is not to reproduce its appearing (as natural beauty) but to mediate what cannot be communicated. The commodity form is certainly contradictory, but it is not by that token non-identical. The technical arts are similarly internally contradictory but they are also potently non-identical.

We can trace this feature in three successive sequences from *Deseret*, the entries for November 19, 1915, February13, 1917, and May 2, 1920, speak directly of clearances: the first, on the occasion of the execution of IWW leader Joe Hill, of driving out 'outlaws', a segment that concludes with a gated grave; the second of the exclusion, exploitation and eventual departure of a group of Hawai'ian Mormons, concluding on a shot of a hillside bisected by two rows of some kind of barrier; and the third a mass slaughter of predators in whose final shot we see a dead wolf by a gated track.

The oscillation between territorialised places and open range in these segments is spoken in what appears increasingly, on multiple viewings, as an imprecise but discernibly allegorical audiovisual phrase when the words 'Early in its history . . . ' are accompanied by a shot-up sign warning of a winding road ahead. Like the dead coyote, the imbrication of word and image seems contrived, too literal[2]. Yet it is in such moments of extreme artificiality 'with regard to the level of the technical forces of production' that the non-identity of the audiovisual moving image makes itself explicit. The word 'image' itself points to a lack in being, and has since Plato: the image refers to what it is an image of, and to that extent admits its incompletion. The moving image should be understood, even when it imitates photography in the stillness of the camera, as bounded by its duration in a way no photograph, print or painting is; while the audio track, itself divided between voice-over and ambient sound, offers itself as a supplement but, in *Deseret*'s case one that does not try to suture over the gap between images, but cuts abruptly whenever there is a grammatical break – signalling the writtenness of the text and therefore a further referent outside the film itself – while simultaneously cutting the sonic landscape as abruptly as it does the visual. Even when, in the predator slaughter segment, we see deer react to an offscreen gunshot, the stitch between images and sound effects is as if fictional, though Benning's long-term commitment to recording simultaneously with Bolex and Nagra is well documented (Nesselman 2003; Benning moved to digital equipment only in 2008: Bradshaw 2013). To the viewer, they are synchronous, but at the same time transparently recorded, not least as the images jump from season to season as well as location to location. The phrase 'Early in its history' as written in 1917, voiced in 1995 and viewed today points up this slippage, intrinsic to film's phenomenology but here brought to bear not on simulation but non-identity, the condition of mediation.

Mediation however falls into the an-aesthetic when it becomes pantheism. We cannot simply rescind the freedom that scientific rationality forced upon us, any more than we can bring back the victims of colonialism, or pour metals back into the ground whence they came. The human subject capable of communication and domination, the human subject whose trace appears in *Deseret* in the height of the camera from the ground, is an abstraction; but a real abstraction, that is to say one which arises historically from specific conditions and which operates on those conditions as if it were

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[2]   It is worth noting however the leakage even of this brief convergence of voiceover and image: *coyote* is slang for illegal migrants from across the Mexican border, a border established in the massive land-grab effected in the Mexican-American War of 1846-8 in which Utah, along with New Mexico, southern Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and California, was seized from Mexico. The alien migrant, unnamed in the film, constituted in a process entirely comparable to that which constitutes nature as Other, is caught in the *coyote* joke, 'we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us' (Solnit 2007: 76).

a universally valid truth. In Marx, the classic example of the real abstraction is money, the universal equivalent; in cinema we might say that any given aspect ratio proposes itself as a universal, even though its universality is belied by its temporal coming into existence and, in certain instances like European wide-screen, its geographical boundaries. Thus too the subjectivity enounced by Benning's film distinguishes itself from other modes of subject: the author as autonomous agent or the authorial corporation (as Marvel Studios are the meganarrator of Marvel franchise films). What is left is not the missing Absolute Subject dismissed by Althusser but its shadow, the spectating subject who takes on the role of subject of history as a persona because without that subjectivity, however illusory and ephemeral, there is no possibility of acting, no chance of fulfilling the curtailed destinies of the unmourned. In full knowledge that we are enmeshed in a planetary ecology implicating human and non-human agents in one another's worlds, and at the same time acknowledging our alienation from them as the heirs of European Enlightenment, we confront ourselves as radically incomplete.

It is exactly this incompletion that enables the act of taking responsibility for the past as its presents itself to us in the landscape; and that likewise drives us to action when it does not encourage us to withdraw from selfhood in favour either of a depoliticised environmentalism slumping into the indifference of primal mediation, or of a depoliticised formalism premised on the indifferent differences of objective rationality. In the 1984 essay, Willemen argued (citing Régis Debray)

> As far as class positions are concerned, artists must be seen as middle-class intellectuals, and the divergence between avant garde and modernism as opposing tendencies within the middle-class intelligentsia, each tendency engaging in a politics for social change. One, as its name indicates, is a politics of modernisation, i.e. a bringing up to date of values and procedures in order to establish, maintain or preserve a bourgeois hegemony. The other is a politics of negation and transformation aligned with a process of change in a socialist direction, i.e. transformation instead of modernisation (Willemen 1984: 58).

To bring Willemen's arguments into the 2010s we would have to say: Film betrays itself when it seeks the autonomy of art: betrays its formal dependence on referents beyond itself and its material dependence on oil, metals and energy. Film matters only because it is matter; only because it is matter can it mediate between fallen nature and fallen humanity. Only because it mediates can it take up the broken past and carry it into the future where alone its multiple failures to exist can be remade. This is only one of many reasons why a film studies without a political aesthetics is empty

formalism. The eco-critical agenda takes its place alongside feminist and decolonising critiques against the original sin that divided human from natural and so reduced them both. Its product is the proposition that for the terminally incomplete subject there can never be an 'I' that can truly occupy the position of subject of history, only a 'we', a 'we' which is always to be constructed, and in which we can dimly discern a polity in which the non-human is an active agent of historical change.

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