PAINTERLY ASPECTS

Kunsthalle Bern's BERNARD FIBICHER on Mark Lewis's New Films

Mark Lewis began to work with the analytical concept of what he refers to as "cinema in parts" in 1995. For the past few years, his focus has shifted away from its purely film-historical reference and towards film's greater autonomy as a medium. It is a qualified autonomy, however, since Lewis's work displays an ever closer relationship to painting. In contrast to his earlier film *Centrale*, which narrated the impossible encounter of two people, his new films no longer pretend to be (fragments of) stories. Moreover, they are often relatively static and/or consist of a single, uncut sequence. Their eminently painterly effect is due to a recourse to familiar paintings, classical motifs and genres, and also to the transfer to film of other media-specific characteristics. The films in Lewis's "synthetic" period, particularly those produced in North America (does Lewis equate North America with nature, and London with society/culture?), therefore draw the viewer into an association with images—a problematic association, as we shall see.

Jay's Garden, Malibu has the effect of a painting by Arnold Böcklin or Karl Blechen, with fauns and nymphs in a Mediterranean setting made tangible and intimately captured by the camera, a so-called steadycam, gliding through and brushing against some plants. The result is an almost ironic erotic transfer between the garden and its inhabitants, who, without exception, are actors and actresses from pornographic films. The bower with its glass grapes alludes to Bacchus/Dionysus, to sensuality and debauchery. They are, however, the gods not only of wine but also of the dramatic arts. In *Jay's Garden, Malibu* everything is artificial and staged, down to the most minor detail, starting with nature—this is the garden of Jay Griffith, the American landscape architect—and ending with the actors' and actresses' sculpted bodies. These fauns and nymphs—alone, in pairs, or in small groups—flit across the Californian scenery, suddenly appearing at a bend in the footpath, or setting out on a playful chase, and vanishing again into the shrubbery. The film is a modern idyll. An artificially "natural" world is also presented in classical bucolic poetry, with reality taking on an uncertain character, its action consisting mainly of mild erotic scenes. The motif of the boat

ABOVE: *Jay's Garden, Malibu* 2001 All works 35mm film transferred to DVD 5 min, 41 sec Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland
RIGHT: *Algonquin Park, Early March* 2002 4 min Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland Photos Dominique Uldry

Algonquin Park, September 2001 2 min, 31 sec
Tate Liverpool, England Photo David Lambert/Rod Tidman

ride and the appearance of an island (figured as the ideal landscape feature) are further bucolic topoi. In Mark Lewis's work, however, they have acquired epic dimensions.

Algonquin Park, Early March and *Algonquin Park, September* are two films that unite extremely disparate painterly influences. At first sight, they are reminiscent of the North American tradition of sublime 19th-century landscape painting, as exemplified by the Hudson River School. *Algonquin Park, Early March* consists of a slow, almost endless zoom-out, which starts with a monochrome white surface and only at the end reveals the location, the subject and the viewer's standpoint. The lozenge-shaped ice surface cleared of snow, with one corner touching the right edge of the screen, seems to be inspired by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565). In both works, a distant ice field with frolicking children, animals and adults is a symbol of man's resilience and unconcern about his vast and merciless natural environment. Bruegel's wintry landscape is part of a series of paintings of the seasons—and time and the seasons are also salient concepts for Lewis. In Bruegel's painting, the skaters on the polished lozenge contrast with a humpbacked group of unsuccessful hunters and dejected hounds. The painter wants us to identify with the hunters by bringing us into their diagonal journey across the painting—he wants to draw us into the painting, into his "story." Lewis's camera adopts an elevated point of view, similar to that of Bruegel's hunters, but one that is completely devoid of emotion. He distances the viewer from the scenery. Without leading to a revelation, the camera draws a cool, straight line to the optimal, minimal frame. The gradual, regular opening of the zoom is in inverse correspondence to the gradual narrowing of the visual field. Even though *Algonquin Park, Early March* is a clear echo of Bruegel's winter landscape, this short sequence is not a painting. It is an approach to painting; that is, the film is a potential painting. In the first minute of the March version of *Algonquin Park* we are alerted to the difference between the two media (film and painting): the shimmering white surface appears not as a monochrome image, but as a pure projection of light—or even as a disturbance? However it is interpreted, it suggests a *missing* image. When the film is viewed in a gallery, the surface upon which it is projected quite evidently serves as a receiver of images rather than a pictorial support.

Another painting that is both a precursor of *Algonquin Park, Early March* and a means of transcending this work is Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Looking over the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1818). Lewis has studied this painting closely, as we can gather from a location still in which the Canadian artist can be seen turning his back to the viewer. He stands on a snow-covered rocky outcrop, looking out across the lake at his feet. Like Friedrich's wanderer, his body forms a dark outline in the centre of the composition, with his head touching the upper horizon. The two figures stand both above and inside the landscape, which—due to the fog, or the snow cover—partially eludes them. In Lewis's location photo, the camera and tripod emblematically replace the walking stick. In the film, the camera replaces the wanderer, or the artist regarding the landscape: an objective recording supplants the subjectively Romantic contemplation of nature. No human figure stands in the picture—the landscape presents itself without an intermediary. The camera defines the fixed point of the image, while the zoom motion defines the axis to the viewer. The focal point of Friedrich's painting is the wanderer, while Lewis's film envelops the viewer so completely that the viewer can interpret it as a painting.

In *Algonquin Park, Early March*, Mark Lewis seems to have assimilated the effects of Caspar David Friedrich's most radical work: in *Monk by the Sea* (1808–09) the viewer—and his/her representative in the painting, the monk—faces what seems to be unlimited space. Friedrich's contemporary Heinrich von Kleist made the following apt comment on this painting: "and since [the painting] in its uniformity and boundlessness has no other foreground than the frame, looking at it is as though one's eyelids had been cut off." Mark Lewis has both multiplied and inverted this experience. In his work the foreground consists of nothing but scenery. The lakeshore is the frame. It is only when this frame has been captured in full that the white surface can be identified as a frozen lake. To adopt Kleist's observation, our "eyelids" are first stuck together and then are "cut off." At first, one sees nothing—nothing but shimmering white light. Then one sees a small section of what is most likely an immense landscape. The moving image of the film allows Lewis to empty the landscape both inwards and outwards, from the inside out.

In or around 1821, Friedrich painted a series of small-format landscapes in the fog, *Boat on the Elbe in the Early Fog* among them. A critic made the following comment: "It is undeniable that nature occasionally appears in this way, but then it is not picturesque. It would only have become a picture some quarter of an hour later, when this shroud of fog would have sunk or been lifted." In other words, the painting represents a moment "before the picture," on whose development one can only speculate. The veil of fog promises to be raised. In majestic CinemaScope, *Algonquin Park, September* shows a foggy landscape with a canoe eventually entering from the right. In the background hovers the vague outline of an island or a spit of land. But the shroud of fog does not begin to lift until the end of the film. The viewer's eye has to feel its way across the image, with its roiling fog, phantom-like island and ruffles of water. Nothing is revealed except these delicate sensations. It is possible to perceive Friedrich's foggy landscape as an image before the painting. In contrast, thanks to the movement and despite a lack of action, Lewis's autumnal scene is not a film before the film—that is to say, a film clip—but an autonomous spectacle. The display of subtle atmospheric movements creates a fascinating, eminently painterly effect that is much closer to Turner than, as one might expect, to Böcklin—the Böcklin of the second version of the *Toteninsel* (*Isle of the Dead*) (1883).

Although Mark Lewis's most recent works establish a very close relationship to painting, they are not paintings but films: they do have a beginning and an ending. They have a duration; they contain movement. This movement is achieved in three different ways, which are occasionally combined. There is the travelling camera (as in *Children's Games, Heygate Estate*, or the steadycam in *Jay's Garden*). Then there is a static camera that is, however, moved technically (the zoom in *Algonquin Park, Early March*). And, finally, there is the fixed camera, resigned to capturing moving objects or people: children playing soccer, the setting sun whose last rays touch a playground, blades of grass and wind turbines set in motion by the wind, a horseman riding across the scenery from left to right, minute skaters, trees swaying gently in the wind, eddies of fog or water, a canoeist. There is always some figure moving about somewhere. It is the filmic equivalent to the "extra" in classic landscape painting, which not only provides the human dimension but also signals movement. In Lewis's films, the human figure is the most explicit indicator of time; that is, of movement in space: it may even define the beginning or the ending of a film. *Airport* consists of an apparently endless, more than eleven-minute-long recording of the movements of planes, trucks and other vehicles on a snow-covered airport through a huge window. The diagonal window framing the unspectacular scene reminds one of the lozenge of ice with the skaters in *Algonquin Park, Early March*. Nothing happens, or rather nothing special: only micro-movements on the ground, barely a plane taking off or landing. Finally, a plane approaches the gate, stands still. But nobody gets off, or the film is finished before the first passengers disembark. *Airport* is the complete opposite of its title's implicit promises: no heroic action, no dynamic movements, no catastrophe, nothing more than what any passenger waiting in the departure lounge can see. Instead of propelling us into other worlds, these planes keep us in place, or propose a kind of perpetuum mobile: movement collapsing in on itself, velocity ending in immobility.

Airport (location photo no. 7) 2003
11 min, 13 sec

Circular movement is a recurring motif in Lewis's work. Although *North Circular* consists of a zoom-in, the take ends in a close-up of a gyroscope, its movement an allusion to the eponymous interchange in London where the film was made. In *Smithfield*, the camera traces a triangular facade with a semicircular entrance. *Wind Farm* presents a ballet of dozens of rotating wind turbines that appear to imitate the film reel in the 35mm camera. In *Algonquin Park, Early March*, trees gradually encircle the white expanse. Lewis's films are all relatively short loops: as soon as they have ended, they start afresh. Indeed, he is often concerned with movement itself, with temporalizing the image through movement.

A film is both more and less than a painted image. As Luc Tuymans recently stated in an interview, "...painting is like the reverse of film because a painting contains all images: painting can make something appear and disappear at the same time." The expression "at the same time" is relevant here: in the film, something appears and disappears gradually, albeit frame by frame. Here, it is possible to witness the appearance and disappearance of an image—didactically, as it were. Lewis's films address Becoming and Passing, their own becoming and passing; they show time, their own time, prescribing a time that is different from time—a time that passes too slowly, a time that is turned in upon itself.

Might Mark Lewis be attempting to restore to film the aura that it has lost because of its unlimited reproducibility? Or is he demanding that viewers be contemplative rather than distracted? Walter Benjamin makes the following remark in his famous treatise *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. It is most often quoted in the context of photography, although it identifies film as *the* achievement of the technical age: "Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise." The perception that Lewis's films demand is the opposite of distraction; it is perhaps comparable to the perception that a painted image would require. ■