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"THE OUTLOOK THAT WOULD BE RIGHT." WALLACE STEVENS'S CINEMATIC VISION

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ABSTRACT. ***"The Outlook That Would Be Right." Wallace Stevens's Cinematic Vision.*** Drawing on the premise that a fundamental characteristic of modernist art is the convergence of various expressive and technical modes, this paper provides an examination of a selection of texts by Wallace Stevens in which the poetic vision and method intersect with the principles of cinematic montage, with a view to demonstrating the persistence throughout his oeuvre of a particular form of "sight", employed for tackling a series of epistemological and aesthetic issues.

Keywords: *Wallace Stevens, cinema, montage, painting, perception, modernism.*

REZUMAT. ***"Perspectiva care ar fi potrivită." Vederea cinematică a lui Wallace Stevens.*** Pornind de la premisa că o trăsătură fundamentală a artei moderniste constă în convergenţa unor variate moduri expresive şi tehnice, în lucrarea de faţă ne propunem să examinăm un segment de texte din opera lui Wallace Stevens în care viziunea şi metoda poetică se intersectează cu principiile montajului cinematografic, cu scopul de a demonstra prezenţa constantă în opera acestuia a unei forme specifice de "vedere", utilizate în abordarea unei suite de probleme de natură epistemologică şi estetică.

Cuvinte cheie*: Wallace Stevens, cinema, montaj, pictură, percepţie, modernism.*

1. Introduction: the master-man, anti-floribund ascetic

Among the major names of literary modernism, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) occupies a somewhat odd position. A non-degree special student at Harvard (later, a New York Law School graduate), Stevens chose to spend most of his professional life as an insurance man at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. One might expect few resounding contributions to

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twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry from such a reclusive figure, who would compose much of his verse either during the long, solitary walks to his office (Sperry 35) or in the comforting quiet of his study, seeking inspiration in "the pleasure of exclusion, the delight of withdrawing into the private world of the self." (Sperry 26) Stevens's creative process was meticulous and painstaking, and the result, commensurate with the effort. From half-formed thoughts collected in the midst of routine activities or disparate fragments dictated to his secretary, there emerged a verse which would appear almost impenetrable to many casual readers of modern poetry.

In 1923, the year he published his first volume, *Harmonium*, Stevens was nearing middle-age. The modernist poetic norm had already witnessed significant transformations through Imagism and Vorticism and was taking up a different course. T. S. Eliot had just published his signature text, *The Waste Land,* while a year earlier Ezra Pound had warned the world that "[t]he intimate essence of the universe is *not* of the same nature as our own consciousness." (125) Audiences found it hard to accept that a grown-up artist like Stevens would give them such seemingly antiquated lines as "The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks / And far beyond the discords of the wind" (*CP* 4)[2], "Timeless mother, / How is it that your aspic nipples / For once vent honey?" (*CP* 5), only to bemuse them elsewhere in the same volume with philosophical paradoxes like "[…] the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CP* 10) or rhetorical formulae of the type "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates / Of snails, musician of pears, principium / And lex." (*CP* 27)

For most of Stevens's poetic career, the linguistic, aesthetic and ideatic blueprint employed for composing *Harmonium* will undergo few significant modifications. The later volumes will include pieces indicative of a vision, sensibility and artistic vocabulary delimited by several antithetical poles and drives: romantic exuberance undermined by modernist angst, faith in the capacity of imagination to bring order into a world of fragments despite the possibility that "in the sum of the parts, there are only the parts" (*CP* 204), and the belief that poetry can serve as a "supreme fiction" (*CP* 59) complemented by a sharp awareness that metaphor can also be "degeneration" (*CP* 444). In fact, it is precisely this polarisation that testifies to Stevens's affinity with the modernist lot. Unlike Eliot or Pound, who offered their readers numerous insights into their aesthetic principles, ideals and conception of art via a series of manifestos or essays, Stevens expressed his views on such matters obliquely, that is, through (and, frequently, between) the lines of his verse. For

[2] The following abbreviations will be used hereafter when quoting passages from Stevens's works: *CP = The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, L = Letters of Wallace Stevens, NA = The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*.

example, in one of his later pieces, "Landscape with Boat," he mocks the inflexible stance of the staunch rationalist, the obsolete "anti-master, floribund ascetic" looking for "imperceptible air," for an eye that could see beyond the surface, which nonetheless would "not be touched by blue" (*CP* 241). The problem with this position, Stevens informs us, is that it fails to acknowledge the profoundly dialectical nature of the modern experience and existence:

> He never supposed
> That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
> That the things that he rejected might be part
> And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
> Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
> Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
> By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
> Parts, and more things, parts. (*CP* 242)

Indeed, the universe may not be *of the same nature* as our consciousness, as Pound claimed, but, Stevens suggests, our consciousness, our position within this physical world and the subjective vantage point relative to the other occupants of the same space (be they people, objects or even ideas) are not merely parts of a complete edifice. Rather, they are a reflection of it—an extension of the knowable, asking to be known. In other words, as he declares at some point in *Harmonium,* "If they tried rhomboids, / Cones, waving lines, ellipses— / As, for example, the ellipse of the half moon— / Rationalists would wear sombreros." (*CP* 75) Stevens's ideal viewer, it appears, is in fact the exact opposite of the perceiving subject in "Landscape with a Boat." We may call him, to pun, the "anti-floribund master man"—one capable of admitting, in a manner akin the confession of the poetic alter-ego of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," that "the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself" (*CP* 65).

In addition to revealing Stevens's creed that the subjective and objective realms are interdependent (a thought that will underpin a large portion of his artistic explorations), such lines are also indicative of a central characteristic of a significant segment of his poetry that focuses on the question of perception, its *modus operandi*, and its epistemological implications and limits. If "[t]he eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience," as stated in the opening lines of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (*CP* 465), it must be possible (provided that one finds the right perspective) to engage in an immersive experience conducive to a clearer, more intimate knowledge of the world. In this scheme, the poet's duty is to find the proper angle and use the most appropriate approach, so as to enable his readers to share his revelations in their turn. "[T]he outlook that would be right," says Stevens in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," may eventually lead to a holistic experience in whose wake the subject will be integrated, as through a natural homecoming, into the flux of the universe:

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (*CP* 512)

Starting from these preliminary observations, in this paper I will look at a number of select texts pertaining to the aforementioned segment of Stevens's poetry of perception, more exactly, a series of pieces in which "sight" is equipped with a revelatory function. My goal is not to highlight the peculiarities of the poet's treatment of the subject relative to other writers or to provide a comprehensive discussion of the whole corpus of Stevensian poetry. As important as such tasks might be, the nature and limitations of an academic paper would render them impractical here. Rather, in an attempt to produce further examples that could testify to the dialectical nature of the modern experience (and, implicitly, of modernist poetry), I will focus on a possible connection between Stevens's verse and a major technique employed by another quintessentially modern art, cinema. In particular, through the close reading of the chosen texts I will try to pinpoint certain intersections between Stevens's "visual mode" and the early-twentieth century filmic *montage*.

Since the expected audience of my discussion is, in principle, the literary scholar, I have considered it necessary to preface the interpretive section of my study by a more theoretical one, intent on providing a succinct presentation of the principal stages of development of a genuinely modern form of sight and of some of the key-issues involved in such comparatist studies.

2. Poetry, painting, film: a modern(ist) affair

In a letter sent to Ronald Lane Latimer, the editor of his forthcoming fourth volume, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), Stevens provides us with one of the rare statements that encompass the essence of his entire artistic effort. The texts prepared for publication, the poet confesses, "deal with the relation or balance between imagined things and real things which, as you know, is a constant source of trouble to me." (*L* 358) We may regard these

words merely as a reformulation in more accessible terms of the main ideas expressed throughout much of his verse (such as in the excerpts quoted in the introductory section of this paper). What is important to note, however, is the emphasis laid on "relation" and "balance". Stevens's perspective, once again, is ascribable to the fundamental dialectical worldview of modernism (the effort to reconcile opposites, relativism, indetermination, etc.). The poet's relational vantage point is in fact further clarified in his next explanatory note:

> Actually, they are not abstractions, even though what I have just said about them suggests that. Perhaps it would be better to say that what they really deal with is the painter's problem of realization: I have been trying to see the world about me *both as I see it and as it is*. This means seeing the world as an imaginative man sees it.
>
> (*L* 358, emphasis added)

Stevens's manner of seeing, we are to understand, transcends both the traditional poetic formula of description and the direct treatment of the object proposed by the Imagists. Through this, he emerges as a prime exponent of the visual revolution responsible for the birth of many of the emblematic modernist texts (for example, the fragmented scenes and sights of Eliot's verse or Pound's ideogrammatic poems). In what follows, I will provide an overview of the prominent factors that contributed to the emergence of this distinctively modern mode of perception.

The earliest signs of a change of visual paradigm can be found in impressionist painting and its anti-realist stance. Among the implications of the impressionists' preference for light and colour over form and proportion was a type of double transgression. On one hand, the solid physicality of objects was shattered through the elements of the picture-plane, which no longer remained discrete but, rather, tended to encroach upon each other; on the other, colour and tone became "things" in their own right, occupying their own autonomous realms. Consequent on these, the emphasis shifted from the thing perceived to perception itself and the role of the percipient in constructing meanings. The changes affecting visual arts continued through post-impressionism. Clement Greenberg draws our attention in this sense to another evolutionary moment, resulting in the appearance of a new type of dynamic vision. Since, Greenberg argues, "sculptural illusion" is no longer possible due to the "heightened sensibility of the picture plane", the modernist artist creates an "optical illusion […] into which one can look, can travel though, only with the eye." (107) As Rosalind Krauss further explains, another effect of such changes was the inseparability of sight and motion, the "paring away" of vision into a state of pure present similar to the perception of a baseball hitter at the very instant he is hitting the ball (284).

The other two forces contributing to the modernist visual revolution—photography and cinema—can be seen as different evolutionary phases of the same novel technology that came to challenge the prevailing pictorial mode of representation. The impact of photography was noticeable not so much at a technical level, as in a psychological and epistemological sense. In itself a "double-thing", a composite of representation and re-presentation (an image of the object carrying the memory of it), the photographic picture was the next natural step in the process of reification of vision. As a reminder of things past, the photograph added a temporal dimension to the perceptive act, forcing the percipient to confront not only the transitory nature of things but also his own transience.[3] At the same time, being the end-product of a technical process intrinsically connected with the production modes of a machine (the camera), it also had the complementary effect of relegating the subject to a secondary position. The photograph led to the "commodification of representation" and this "new order of commodification […] replaced subjects and objects with agentless things" (Schleifer and West 57). Thirdly, through its ability to reproduce a static scene (even as an illusion), it also begot a kind of precision-optics eye that could observe and examine in depth details that would be otherwise invisible or ignored. Thus, "a public inundated with the sheer physicality of things" found it possible "to re-view the world, to look more deeply into a reality that still remained part and parcel of the material 'outside'" (Schleifer and West 49-50). In modernist poetry, this is noticeable in the poets' increased attention to particulars, even to the extent of contravening the readers' intentions. The modernist poets "not only supplement but transform perception and conception," thus "reconfiguring" the subjects and objects of experience (Schleifer and West 51).

While reliant in part on the technique behind photography, cinematography left its own distinctive mark upon the development of the "modernist eye". As David Trotter explains in an article that examines the connections between Eliot's poetry and early cinema (2006), the motion picture, with its unique aesthetic, production mechanisms, technical approaches and transmission channel, represented an alternative to the human eye. Its far reaching implications were both epistemological and ontological. Thus, since film can see in a way that is inaccessible to the subject, it "became a meta-technology: a medium whose constant subject-matter was the limits of the human." (Trotter 239) Modernist poets, Trotter argues, were mainly interested in cinema's potential to render "an image of the world formed

[3] Further insight into the double valence of the photograph is provided by Skibsrud (2012). The author draws attention to its simultaneous reality and unreality, as an object that occupies a "'space' beyond a play of representation— defined, that is, not by what is present but by what is not" (75). We can argue in this sense that the photograph, while being essentially an *optical* illusion (functioning, as such, in a manner that is analogous to the post-impressionist pictorial plane), complicates the viewer's perception of the object by creating an additional *temporal* illusion.

automatically" (239). Cinematic techniques such as montage, close-cutting or panning quickly found an equivalent in the works of both novelists and poets intent on examining the implications of the mechanisation of the modern subject. However, based only on these points, it would be wrong to presume that cinema's contribution to the twentieth-century visual revolution (and its subsequent poetic expressions) is to be found solely in the further reification of sight and the seeing subject. As a more sophisticated medium, it enabled the artists of the age to explore new horizons, beyond the reach of painting or photography. Due to its ability to compress or stretch time at will, to create composite images through superimposition of individual frames and manipulate transitions between unrelated scenes, film is a multilayered medium that engages the subject's sense of space and time (later, with the addition of recorded sound, it also became a multimodal medium). Therefore, its primary task, according to Jean Debrix, is "to wean us from routine seeing and make an esthetic organ of the eye also." (101) Early cinema made this possible by supplying poetry with "a new gamut of sensations" (Debrix 101).

The implications of film for twentieth-century are, in fact, far more complex. Besides becoming the most serious challenger of the old visual modes, its early engagement in an ongoing dialogue with the other arts both broadened the modernist dialectic and created a fertile ground for academic discussions. With a view to motivating my own approach to Stevens's cinematic vision, I will present in the remainder of this section some of the main directions and methodological implications of this dialogue.

As Ágnes Pethő points out (2008), the interest for examining the relations between cinema and other artistic modes dates back to the earliest public screenings of films and their first attempts "to present narratives and produce emotions by a combination of images, music and words." (1) The foundation of such preoccupations has to be sought in the distinctive character of cinema as "the ultimate mixed medium that combines all kinds of media in its texture of signification, as a filmic image can never be conceived as only one image, or even as image for that matter." (1) Consequent upon this state of affairs, the author explains, "the semantics of the cinematic image can never be defined in itself" (2), requiring instead a broader perspective which takes into account the plethora of relations on which such a complex image depends (for example, between the images that are part of the same cinematic production, between the image and the viewer's experiential world, between different films and, above all, between the distinct media incorporated within the same cinematic discursive space—visual, verbal, musical, etc.) (2).

Alqadi (2015) identifies one of the principal preoccupations of such comparatist studies (which, we may argue, is also one of its shortcomings): the study of the literary influences in cinema, such as the assessment of the "degree to which a movie is faithful to a text or a novel." (42) While this manner of tackling

the subject of intermedial relations has had a long history (despite being limited in insights due to its historiographic-monographic character), scholars from various fields and backgrounds have also explored other investigative paths, with varying degrees of appeal and success. Thus, as Trotter has aptly pointed out, the studies of cinema's effect on poetry have followed, by and large, two directions. Most of the research on the subject has relied on arguments based on analogy: "[t]he literary text, we are told, is structured like a film, in whole or in part: it has its 'close-ups,' its 'tracks' and 'pans', its 'cuts' from one 'shot' to another." (238) Trotter also notes that in the case of the discussions of modernism's relations with cinema the dominant "transferrable narrative technique" has revolved around the significance of "montage" (238). An example is represented by Richardson's book (1969), which addresses such seminal issues as the literary roots of cinema, technique in literature and cinema or "the question of order and coherence in poetry and film," to which the author dedicates an entire chapter (91-103). Richardson's merit consists in having highlighted some of the intersections between early twentieth-century cinema and the technical or aesthetic concerns of a number of modernist voices (Vachel Lindsay, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot), with insistence mainly on the Imagist core of their works. Other studies reliant on the argument by analogy have concentrated on the shared "logic" of cinema and poetry. For instance, addressing the question of structure in film and poetry, Maya Deren (1970) notes that it is possible to speak of a type of "verticality" common to both. Like film, says Deren, poetry "is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth" (174). Dreams, montage and poetry "are related because they are held together by either an emotion or a meaning that they have in common, rather than by the logical action." (178) A somewhat similar understanding lies at the basis of Pier Paolo Pasolini's essay, "The Cinema of Poetry", which argues in favour of connecting the two on the grounds of their technico-stylistic commonalities, indebted to the same neo-formalist background (Pasolini 558). More recently, we find the argument by analogy in a book by Susan McCabe dedicated to modernist poetry and film (2005). Using a critical apparatus informed by gender-studies, the author offers insights into the poetry of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, H.D. and Marianne Moore by examining such topics as male hysteria, fragmented bodies, existence on the borderline, fetishism or bisexuality. In its turn, McCabe's method is rooted in the conviction that many of their works, at a structural level, follow the logic of film, having been influenced by its vocabulary and technical peculiarities (such as montage and camera work).

Predictably, given its longer history, the analogy-based approach has yielded the most substantial corpus of comparatist and intermedial research.

However, its findings have been complemented by other possible investigative methods. One of them is what Trotter calls the "model of parallelism" or "parallel histories," an intersection of historiography, cultural, and literary studies. Trotter's own study of T.S. Eliot's connections with cinema pursues this model, with a view to highlighting Eliot's poetic development before the publication of *The Waste Land*, in a period that saw "the emergence […] of a fully narrative cinema" (242). To this end, the author provides a close examination of Eliot's notes on cinema included in his poetic an non-poetic works (essays, letters) (242-261).

More recently, the interdisciplinary efforts have been enriched through perspectives centred on previously unexplored topics (thus reaching beyond the scope and investigative range of research originating from the more traditional spheres of literary and cultural studies). Such is the case of Coëgnarts study of "cinema and the embodied mind" (2017), which combines the methods and insights of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Simulation Theory, with a view to "reconciling the conceptual nature of metaphor with the non-conceptual nature of cinema," along an argument intended to demonstrate that a "first order world" can be structured through typical cinematic devices (camera movement, editing) in a manner that allows for "a process of metaphorical mapping in which the inferential logic of image schemas is appropriated to express conceptual knowledge." (12)

The method of textual analysis I propose in the following section of this paper is closer to the argument based on analogy. The reason for this choice is dictated by the lack of information (unlike in Eliot's case) regarding Stevens's technical interest in cinema. More exactly, neither his letters, nor his theoretical essays in *The Necessary Angel* provide us with any direct evidence that might entitle us to state with certainty that he conceived at least some of his poems by employing in a conscious manner the techniques or methods of early twentieth-century film-making.[4] Nevertheless, since his creative period coincides with the decades that saw the rise of modern cinema, it is possible to look at least for signs of "kinship" between his vision and the perceptual revolution occasioned by the camera and film montage. Indeed, as Schwartz points out in reference to Stevens's favourite stylistic device, the metaphor,

> [w]hen Stevens formed his poetic and aesthetic principles, silent cinema — as well as modern painting and sculpture—were demanding intense attention. Stevens's rapidly changing metaphors not only have a kinship with cinema, but mime the condition of modern perception in which man has far more impressions to deal with than his predecessors. (15)

[4] In fact, a thorough search by keyword of his published letters and the texts included in *The Collected Poems* and *The Necessary Angel* gives no results for "film", "movie" or "cinema" (or any of their derivatives).

According to Schwartz, the rapid succession of metaphors that characterises many of Stevens's poems (the "metaferocity" of his texts, to use the author's term) is indebted in part to the early technique of filmic composition developed by Eadweard Muybridge—the illusion of motion created by the combination of individual photographic shots of successive moments of a moving object. Schwartz even goes so far as to claim that Stevens's quintessential piece "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" depends on a "process of successive exposure", although, he admits, it can also be interpreted as a "non-linear collage" (Schwartz 15).

The argument by analogy appears to have stronger justification if we return to the question of the dialogue of arts in modernism. Stevens himself recognised the need to adopt a relational standpoint in his commentaries on the connections between poetry and painting, as illustrated in these lines:

> It seems to me that *the subject of modern relations is best to be approached as a whole*. The paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art is simply this: that in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. (*NA* 170-171, emphasis added)

In other words, within a modern / modernist context, the relational perspective is not only a possibility, but also a requisite recuperatory effort in a world of shattering values. Elsewhere in the same essay Stevens goes further, acknowledging (as some of the aforementioned scholars have done) that the study of one artistic mode can produce valuable insights for others—"that it would be possible to study poetry by studying painting or that one could become a painter after one had become a poet" (*NA* 160).

With these points in mind, I will devote my attention in what follows to examining some major points of intersection between Stevens's poetry of perception and the visual methods of modern cinema. To this end, I will rely on the close reading of three illustrative texts from each period of the poet's oeuvre (early, middle, late), with additional references to various passages from other Stevensian texts.

3. Firecats and scrawny cries: Stevens's cinematic vision

A survey of Stevens's entire creative opus indicates that his preoccupation with the epistemological and aesthetic function of sight became materialised, principally, in two categories of poems: poems *of* perception and

poems *about* perception. Both of them are announced already in his first volume of poetry, through a number of texts in which he addresses the question of the nature and limits of cognition.

A common strategy in Stevens's early pieces is to place a physical object in a barren landscape and invest it with a magnetic potential. Whether it is a jar "round […] upon a hill" in Tennessee (*CP* 76) or a candle burning "in an immense valley" (*CP* 51), Stevens's object is not simply an inert thing offered up for passive contemplation. Rather, through the central position it occupies in an uncharacteristic context, it is a force that causes disturbances in the scene, violating its internal logic and organisation. Thus, despite being "gray and bare" and "[l]ike nothing else in Tennessee", the jar "took dominion everywhere" (*CP* 76), imposing its own materiality upon the surrounding objects. The solitary "valley candle" displays similar characteristics, being capable of outlasting its brief earthly existence through the impression left upon its neighbourhood:

> My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
> Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
> Until the wind blew.
>
> Then beams of the huge night
> Converged upon its image,
> Until the wind blew. (*CP* 51)

Not only do such objects contravene the percipient's aesthetic sense (through their un-naturalness and plainness), they provide no justification for their presence in these environments and offer no clues relative to their significance. "It did not give of bird or bush," says Stevens about the slovenly jar (*CP* 76). Clearly, these are not exercises in painterly composition, for no hidden meanings are left to transpire through the act. Like the subject of "Anecdote of Canna", "the mighty thought, the mighty man" (*CP* 55), we are informed merely of a possible continuity between the seen and the unseen. Yet, Stevens suggests, there may be no revelations unless we become all eyes and persist in this condition: "X promenades the dewy stones, / Observes the canna with a clinging eye, / Observes and then continues to observe." (*CP* 55) What matters more in these cases, it appears, is the gesture of displacement and re-emplacement, whereby the reader (and complicit observer) is made to acknowledge the work of the invisible director as well as his own role as participant in the scene.

It is precisely when Stevens's attention shifts from a more contemplative stance focused on a static object towards the examination of the mechanisms of visual perception that his strategy becomes more closely aligned with the operating and compositional modes of cinematography. The epistemological concern remains, since in most of these pieces Stevens continues to display an

interest in the co-dependence of percipient, perception and thing perceived. Exemplary in this sense is another early poem, "Tattoo", which may be read as a brief investigation of the effects of light upon a waking consciousness:

> The light is like a spider.
> It crawls over the water.
> It crawls over the edges of the snow.
> It crawls under your eyelids
> And spreads its webs there
> —Its two webs. (*CP* 81)

What distinguishes this poem from the examples mentioned above is Stevens's insistence on motion and its consequences. We are not dealing here with the photographer's lamp, employed as for highlighting diverse parts of an inert arrangement. On the contrary, this spider-like presence is now the vivid equivalent of the disruptive objects in the aforementioned pieces. Like them, it populates the scene, relegating everything else (things, natural phenomena, people) to a secondary plane. However, we have here but another anecdote, for, as the poem progresses, we discover its actual focus—the effect of subjective perception upon the thing perceived:

> The webs of your eyes
> Are fastened
> To the flesh and bones of you
> As to rafters or grass.
>
> There are filaments of your eyes
> On the surface of the water
> And in the edges of the snow. (*CP* 81)

In other words, Stevens admits that the revelatory potential of light is fundamentally reliant on the observer's standpoint and, once again, that perspective, depending on how it is manipulated, may lead to different forms of knowing the physical thing. It is no longer the poet, Stevens suggests, but us, who are directing the scene.

Stevens's more "dynamic" poems of perception are illustrative of further overlaps with cinematic elements and techniques. While in many of his longer works (especially those of his later period, such as "Esthétique du Mal", "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven") he displays a preference for the modernist collage, it is possible to find in each of his creative stages a number of texts whose composition and construction point in the direction of filmic montage. In fact, Stevens's awareness of the revelatory

potential of a well-placed part of a whole is demonstrated even by the thorough sequencing of his volumes. Thus, *Harmonium* begins with "Earthy Anecdote", while his last volume, *The Rock*, concludes with "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself". In both, sight occupies a central position, and a montage-like method is employed for revealing its relevance.

Sergei Eisenstein regarded montage as the "nerve" of cinema (48) and defined it as a technique whereby "fragments are combined in various ways." (3) While montage, Eisenstein explains, is retraceable in other arts too (3), only cinema can valorise its full potential, for "cinema is able, more than any other art, to disclose the process that goes on microscopically in all other arts" (5). My intention in the remainder of this interpretive section is therefore to highlight this "microscopic" or hidden foundation of the poems proposed for discussion—that is, how the careful sequencing of connected images can enable the reader to abstract a complex idea that would otherwise remain obscured.

Even upon a thorough examination, the above-mentioned "Earthy Anecdote" will strike most of the readers as a cryptic, almost incomprehensible piece. It has as much obvious meaning and logic as a nursery rhyme or a riddle: some bucks crossing Oklahoma are hindered in their progress by a leaping firecat, which forces them to change course repeatedly. Both parties persist in their efforts until, in the end, the firecat goes to sleep for no apparent reason:

> Every time the bucks went clattering
> Over Oklahoma
> A firecat bristled in the way.
>
> Wherever they went,
> They went clattering,
> Until they swerved
> In a swift, circular line
> To the right,
> Because of the firecat. (*CP* 3)

Stevens gives us no explanation regarding the protagonists of the scene. Where these creatures come from, what their destination might be or what makes them act the way they do are questions that remain, on the surface, unanswered (just as we are left to wonder about Stevens's motives for writing this piece and placing it strategically at the beginning of *Harmonium*). Indeed, as Sigler argues, the poem is "like a nursery rhyme without the rhyme, or better yet a cartoon, the primitive kind one would see on movie screens in 1923." (par. 2) Given this, in order to extract *some* meaning from it we must take a closer look at the patterning of images and words. The first thing we notice in this sense, as has been the case with "Tattoo", is the strong dynamic core of the poem. Not only is it about motion,

it also requires from the reader to shift his perspective continuously as the focus changes from the bucks to the firecat and back. Stevens creates a complex flowing picture by alternating contrasting, even antithetical elements: "bucks" (a nondescript mass) *vs.* "firecat" (an outstanding singular presence), "went clattering" (monotonous, droning movement) *vs.* "went leaping" (punctuated, momentary move), "circular line" (continuity, order) *vs.* "swerved" (disruption, fragmentation), "bristled" (frenzied action) *vs.* "closed his eyes and slept" (repose). This particular arrangement adds dramatic tension to a relatively common situation (a hunter playing with its prey prior to capturing and killing it). The sense of drama is enhanced through repetition and the subtle phonic layer of the verses—a composition reliant on fricatives and liquids punctuated by stops (Oklahoma, clattering, swerved, closed, bright, slept, etc.):

> The bucks clattered.
> The firecat went leaping,
> To the right, to the left,
> And
> Bristled in the way.
>
> Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
> And slept. (*CP* 3)

As the lights go out, the mystery is not elucidated, and no singular meaning emerges. What matters, however, is the immersive experience the reader has been subjected to through an ongoing assault on the visual and auditory nerves. By heavily relying on contrast, "Earthy Anecdote" is analogous to montage, for, as Eisenstein noted, "montage is conflict" (77). In fact, we can retrace here almost all of the types of conflict illustrated by montage: "conflict of graphic dimensions" / "lines either static or dynamic" (leaping firecat *vs.* sleeping firecat), "conflict of volumes" (fragility of the predator *vs.* bulkiness of the herd), "conflict of depth" (the implied aerial view of the bucks over Oklahoma *vs.* the foregrounded closing image of the sleeping firecat), "pieces of darkness and pieces of lightness" ("closed" *vs.* "bright eyes") and "the conflict in the sound film between acoustics and optics" (aural fragmentation *vs.* continuously unfolding scene).[5] Based on these points, we may argue that this text is best approached as a parable (or extended metaphor) about order and chaos and the percipient's experience and revelation of them.

The same subject is tackled in the next poem I propose for discussion, "On the Road Home", included in the later volume *Parts of a World*. Yet another of Stevens's shorter pieces, it is conceptually similar to "Earthy Anecdote" in

[5] For further discussion and examples of conflict in montage, see Eisenstein (77 ff.).

that is builds upon movement and contrast. However, it also differs from it by being a multilayered text, a characteristic indicated by the opening stanza:

> It was when I said,
> "There is no such thing as the truth,"
> That the grapes seemed fatter.
> The fox ran out of his hole. (*CP* 203)

We observe here the presence of two types of contrastive pairs. On one level, there are the human protagonists, engaged in a conversation about the nature of truth. Running parallel to it and creating a higher-level opposition, there is the natural order, governed, as it seems, by its own laws and indifferent to the two subjective presences. Our attention is thus dissipated between concomitant realities, a fact further complicated by the added temporal dimension in which the events unfold. Similar to a film camera, our eye is forced to pan between the various elements of the scene—from one speaker to another and, along with it, from the internal to the external realms:

> You ... You said,
> "There are many truths,
> But they are not parts of a truth."
> Then the tree, at night, began to change,
>
> Smoking through green and smoking blue.
> We were two figures in a wood.
> We said we stood alone. (*CP* 203)

This effort temporarily distracts the reader from the serious topic of the conversation and the argumentative strategy that leads to the gradual disclosure of the actual subject of the poem—the recognition of the relativity of perspectives and interpretations and the paradoxical nature of this revelation. If we accept that the "many truths" are not integral parts of a single truth and "words are not forms of a single word" (*CP* 203), it follows that all our statements about the world are devoid of value, including those that might support such observations. Within such a scheme, everything is true and untrue at once. The subtlety of Stevens's method becomes evident if we understand how easily he has sidetracked us from the important point, evidenced by the key line of the poem, "the world must be measured by eye":

> It was when I said,
> "Words are not forms of a single word.
> In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
> The world must be measured by eye"; (*CP* 203)

This, in fact, is the only statement that is not self-contradictory in this text. It may be tempting to assume that the gradual transformation of the natural elements (the grapes that "seemed" fatter at the beginning of the poem and later on the tree which "at night, began to change") is somehow determined by the argumentative turns and subsequent opinion shifts of the speakers. Yet, in the closing stanza, we are confronted solely with the physical world:

> It was at that time, that the silence was largest
> And longest, the night was roundest,
> The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
> Closest and strongest. (*CP* 203)

It is not the mind, Stevens reminds us, but the eye that co-creates the world, making it possible to attain the kind of harmony and perfection suggested by the superlatives occurring in these lines. Only a detached percipient (such as someone who was once witness to the developing scene and recorded it for repeated later viewings) can fully experience this "roundest", "warmest", "closest" and "strongest" whole. Here, the poet's approach is congruent with what Eisenstein called "overtonal montage", since the ultimate meaning of the poem is actuated by no single particular "dominant" (that is, a stimulus that determines all subsequent stimuli), but by a combination of all of them. The repetition of certain words ("truth", "you", "I"), the linear and gradated progression of the individual scenes, as well as the intertwining of sight and sound create a "compound perception", as exemplified through the synaesthetic condition presented in the closing stanza. As with overtonal montage, which acknowledges the irreducibility of the aural and visual perceptions to a common denominator, the emergent meaning must be "felt" before it can be understood (Eisenstein 71). We can see thus that by endowing his eye with the capacity to "measure" the world, Stevens eventually makes it possible for his percipient to experience reality in an integrative manner—investigating, evaluating and appraising it at once.

The last text I discuss here, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself", is emblematic both for Stevens's philosophical concerns and his compositional technique. This time, the title leaves no doubt regarding the poet's intention—that of writing a definitive piece about perception, knowledge and the *ding-an-sich*. The dialectic of the internal and external realms remains, but, unlike in the previously examined text, Stevens no longer views them as incompatible elements:

> At the earliest ending of winter,
> In March, a scrawny cry from outside
> Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind. (*CP* 534)

Right from the outset, Stevens proposes another integrative experience that reminds us of cinema's multimodal approach. As before, he relies on the suggestive power of sound to complement and enhance the visual space. By a repetition of fricatives ("earlie<u>s</u>t", "<u>s</u>crawny", out<u>s</u>ide", "<u>s</u>eemed", "<u>s</u>ound", "hi<u>s</u>"), the opening stanza compels us to "feel" the progressive intrusion of the objective sphere into the subject's private expanse, but after this initial moment our eye is made to rest on the inner world. It is almost as if the visual recedes to a secondary position once we are transported to the percipient's memory. From this point onward, we expect to see with the mind's eye and learn about the subject's mental state, but this presumption is soon invalidated, for Stevens's vantage point immediately shifts back to what lies outside the percipient:

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow.
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché ...
The sun was coming from outside. (*CP* 534)

As the poem draws to a close, the subject itself becomes a mere imprint on the retina. There is, however, a growing sense of the presence of a third participant, the "commentator" who informs us of the significance of the scene. Our sight inhabits his eye and thus we are made part of the experience as we follow the movements of this detached, objective and all-knowing camera that captures, with documentary precision, past and present, objects in the foreground and objects in the background. Through this tactic, Stevens assures us that nothing important will escape our perception. In addition, by putting together the individual frames (the bird, the memory of the initial observer, the parts of the natural setting) and complementing the montage with his expository interventions, he guides us toward the intended meaning:

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality. (*CP* 534)

Indeed, his *Collected Poems* are perfectly rounded up. As in "Earthy Anecdote", various types of conflict serve as montage material: "conflict of scales" ("*vast* ventriloquism" *vs.* "*collossal* sun"), "conflict of volumes" (bird *vs.* subject *vs.* sun, "scrawny cry" *vs.* "choir"), "conflict of depth" (spring "[s]till far away" *vs.* the already visible "choral rings"), and the conflict between "acoustics and optics" (the dissonance created through the combination of stops and fricatives *vs.* the serenity of the contemplated scene). Unlike in his early piece though, we see here a stronger dependence on the temporal element, which is doubly articulated—once through the slowly succeeding frames that pinpoint the transition from the inner to the outer space, and then, as in "On the Road Home", through the gap between the moment of the narrative and the time of the narrated things. It may be argued in fact that the compositional strategy employed for this piece exemplifies what Eisenstein has called the "fourth dimension" of cinema: the combination of the three-dimensional spatial coordinates that describe the images presented through shots and frames and the time coordinate required for comprehending the overtonal montage (Eisenstein 69).

The conclusive segment of the poem hints at one last similarity with film and cinema. By concentrating on the percipient's growing "sense" of spring occasioned by his exposure to the "scrawny cry", Stevens informs us of the theme of this piece—the cognitive and "illuminating" role of juxtapositions and analogies. The physical experience "was *like* / A new knowledge of reality", we are told. Yet, for obtaining genuine knowledge, we have to make sense of the signs and clues provided by the parts, we must read them contextually and in relation to all the constitutive elements of the scene. The same is true for the film-frame, which is "never an inflexible *letter of the alphabet*" but "a multiple-meaning *ideogram*" that acquires "its specific significance, meaning, and even pronunciation […] only when combined with a separately indicated reading or tiny meaning—an indicator for the exact reading—placed alongside the basic hieroglyph." (Eisenstein 65-66).

With these in mind, I will now formulate some general observations that will serve as a conclusion for my paper.

4. Concluding remarks: not ideas about the eye, but the eye itself

My brief interpretive excursion into Stevens's poetry of sight has focused, on the whole, on the revelatory function of this mode of sensorial experience—that is, on how the eye, working occasionally in a manner that is analogous to the filming and compositional techniques of early twentieth-century cinema, is capable of disclosing meanings that would otherwise remain dormant in the physical world or in the scene unfolding before the percipient.

For Stevens, sight is a faculty of prime importance, invested with a double significance: it is simultaneously a cognitive device and a stepping-stone for one's detachment from the restrictive realm of materiality. "The ultimate poem is abstract", claims Stevens in an eponymous piece (*CP* 429). Yet, it is also "the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about" (*CP* 473). Stevens's cinematic vision resolves such an apparent contradiction at least in part. In the poems that have been discussed here the eye itself becomes a "dominant" of the scene and, like the film camera, it takes upon itself the task of rendering the selected material by giving it a coherent shape. However, the eventual cohering of the discrete sights is made possible only by endowing the eye with the ability to move, if necessary, even independently of the percipient's will. Thus, although they are not poems about the eye, in these texts the eye becomes a voice that expresses "[t]he less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds / Not often realized, the lighter words / In the heavy drum of speech" (*CP* 488). Stevens's cinematic eye is therefore both a felt presence, "a force that traverses a shade" (*CP* 489), and a metonym for the abstract condition of pure sight toward which the contemplated scenes converge. As Skibsrud has noted with regard to "Landscape with Boat", Stevens's percipient is guided by "the desire to assume ultimate responsibility; not for the scene itself, but for the faculties by which it is perceived, manipulated, and represented." (76) Paradoxically, Stevens's viewer does become in the end a kind of "anti-master-man", appearing to us as "the un-masterable sense of sight itself—wholly extraneous to and therefore no longer contingent upon the objects of its own perception." (Skibsrud 76) In other words, whether the poet looks at the objects with a camera-eye or in a painterly manner, the result is the same—it makes us become, as Robinson has aptly noted, "meta-men: more than real, no longer objects ourselves, […] but eyes, intense but detached." (8)

With all these, sight in Stevens is not independent from other senses, and it is not the sole source of knowledge. If, as he says in "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly",[6] reality "is visibly a source, / Too wide, too irised, to be more than calm, // Too much like thinking to be less than thought" (*CP* 518), then the eye is but a precondition and a starting point for a wholly immersive experience:

> What we know in what we see, what we feel in what
> We hear, what we are, beyond mystic disputation,
> In the tumult of integrations out of the sky,

[6] On closer examination, we observe that the peculiar word choice in this title once again points to Stevens's vision being simultaneously a condition and a process: "looking" suggests stasis, while "watching" implies an engaging activity.

> And what we think, a breathing like the wind,
> A moving part of a motion, a discovery
> Part of a discovery, a change part of a change (*CP* 518)

With this, we have arrived at one last point of intersection between Stevens and the experience of cinema. As exemplified through my selection of pieces from Stevens's poetry of perception, concomitant with sight, a host of other faculties are engaged merely by the subject's visual contact with the things perceived. In a similar fashion, Sobchack explains, the cinematic experience requires the simultaneous co-operation of all sensorial mechanisms and channels. Seeing does not imply relinquishing the other senses, for "vision is only one modality of […] access to the world and only one means of making the world of objects and others sensible" (Sobchack section II par. 6). Since in Stevens's universe the physical objects "bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout," creating "[n]ew senses in the engenderings of sense" (*CP* 527), his percipient may be considered a genuinely "cinesthetic subject" (Sobchack section II par. 10). Like someone watching a film, Stevens's spectator (and, implicitly, the reader who sees the scene through his eyes), "through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of the other senses, 'makes sense' of what it is to 'see' a movie—both 'in the flesh' and as it 'matters." (Sobchack section II par. 17) As a result, perception through and by the eye may acquire even an ontological significance, leading to one final realisation:

> It is as if being was to be observed,
> As if, among the possible purposes
> Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,
> The surface, is the purpose to be seen,
>
> […]
>
> So much just to be seen—a purpose, empty
> Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
> Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for
> sure ... (*CP* 531-532)

As I have stated early on, this discussion of the affinities between Stevens's mode of seeing and the techniques of modern cinema has not been guided by an ambition to exhaust the full potential of the subject. The body of texts in which Stevens tackles the problematic of cognition through sight (and its relevance for poetic explorations) is considerably more ample than what could be examined within the space of an article. There are also other related aspects that

would warrant further consideration, such as the relationship between montage and collage (given Stevens's interest in painting) or the study of the compositional methods of spoken cinema, with emphasis on the relationship between the aural and the visual layers (of special importance for intermedial research and in light of the relational nature of modernism). In their turn, such prospective efforts are likely to be founded upon the argument by analogy.

In the end though, with Stevens, we should not consider this a limitation, but rather a necessity, for, as Balbo has pointed out,

> [i]t is not exactly accurate to say that Stevens borrowed from the world of art and art theory; rather, he felt himself inextricably immersed in the aesthetic movements of his time. Stevens's imagination was of a kind that searches for unities: disparate ideas, images, locales (real or imaginary), and aesthetic experiences were to be examined, explored, and finally, brought into a unified vision within the body of work. (99)

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