

# *Aesthetics in the Present: Powers of the Moving Image*

**Jacques Aumont**

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## **PRINCIPLES OF THE PROJECT**

*Aesthetics in the Present* does not seek a complete overhaul of the notion of aesthetics, even within the parameters of cinema. Instead, more modestly, it aims at promoting a certain number of concrete effects associated not with the place of cinema in society, not with its technological evolution, and not with its relationship to ideological dogmas, but with the nature, powers and impacts of the filmic form in its contemporary state. It thus seeks to rediscover aesthetic inspiration for the present day. Cinema has become diffuse in its practices, which are often far from those of major films projected in movie theatres; the notion of the *auteur* has broadened, at times merging with that of the art practitioner more generally; the filmic object has taken up extremely diverse forms, of which the emergence of the documentary as a genre or the reign of television series, for example, are telling symptoms. It is urgent, in light of these new developments, to return to the study of this artefact made of moving images and sounds that we call film.

The title that has been adopted for this project, *Aesthetics in the Present: Powers of the Moving Image*, is deliberately imprecise with regard to its objects of inquiry (“the moving image”). Indeed, one of the most telling phenomena of the past two decades

has been the expansion of the term “cinema” on the one hand in terms of production and mass distribution (especially with widespread series being distributed on television and online), and on the other hand in terms of the production of works of moving images created by artists (meant to be distributed in contemporary art institutions). It has seemed preferable to resist a priori restrictions of this project to a traditional definition of cinema (i.e., the production of films meant to be projected in specially dedicated cinema halls) in order to place emphasis not on the sociology of productions, but rather on their capacity for formal invention (including with regard to narrative forms). The starting point of this project is the idea that, if images are capable of having a mental or psychological effect on a human subject, this is due to the work that these images do to transform the fragments of the world that they transmit, even when these images are produced by human hands (and not in terms of natural images, whose essence and effects are of a different order/class).

This research project thus revolves around the topic of the perceptible, according to several necessarily interrelated axes. Though this list is not by any means exhaustive, three axes will receive priority: the pixel (the “substance of images”), the detail (and its relationship with the whole), and the present (and the related question of rhythm).

### **The Pixel**

The emergence, and subsequent rapid rise to hegemony, of digital moving image technologies has brought about a certain number of fanciful ideas, primarily that, as today’s images are made up of discrete elements (individually imperceptible, yet modifiable by means of computer graphics), these images no longer entail the capturing of an imprint of reality, but instead are pure and simple fabrications. It is undeniable that the series of manipulations called *compositing* makes it possible to freely transform the appearance of an image (as demonstrated by Alexander Sokurov’s often cited 2002 film, *Russian Ark*). It is nevertheless true that, as with analog technologies, film images imply first capturing an image and then submitting it to a whole range of transformations, and digital technologies have merely expanded on and diversified these processes without changing their inherent nature.

Film images are perceived as being endowed with movement, but are created using a material (celluloid or digital file) that is separate from the image itself. Hence the empirical notion of the “appearance of movement,” which, despite being studied for more than a century (this notion was addressed by the founders of *Gestalttheorie* starting

in the 1910s), is still poorly explained by theoretical accounts even today. Film, in its analog form, referred to the projection of a series of single photograms printed on celluloid at the rate of 24 images per second. This fact/observation gave rise to a large corpus of critical literature, in many instances mired with vast misunderstandings of the intellectual (post-retinal) process that allowed for the perception of movement. When it comes to digital film, despite being phenomenologically indistinguishable from analog film, there have been surprisingly few reflections on this point, however.

Another widespread critique sees digital images as bearing a fundamentally different relationship to temporality, often reporting vast differences between digital films and analog films in terms of how temporality is felt/perceived/registered in each. This assessment lacks physiological foundation, and seemingly results from confusing the phenomenal and the structural – as was the case with previous speculations on the film photogram and its relationship to “arrested” movement. This project seeks to locate these questions squarely within the domain of aesthetics, and will aim to study the formal consequences of the digital in terms of montage, duration, the rendering of color, and more generally, in terms of all of the characteristics which serve to visually define filmic images.

### **The Detail**

The question of the detail has already been widely studied in the context of painting, and has produced a significant body of critical literature since the eighteenth century. While some of these works on the pictorial image have become canonical, the most sustained approach – the iconological approach of Erwin Panofsky and his intellectual descendants – has the disadvantage of construing the meaning of each detail as relating back to a text, exterior to the work itself, and as playing the role of a sort of proof. In film, this topic has only been approached transversally, especially by resorting to niche approaches, such as Roland Barthes’s “obtuse meaning” or Jean-François Lyotard’s “figural.” Each approach involves seizing upon an individual detail and attributing to it a meaning that is dependent on an act of interpretation. There is no lack of attempts to adapt these approaches to the moving image, but each remains too clearly nuanced by the idiosyncrasies of its author to be truly applicable.

*Aesthetics in the Present* will undertake a different approach. Without ignoring the contributions of iconology (especially in its methodologically fundamental effort to never completely separate the detail from the whole from which it is excerpted), and without neglecting what might be learned by privileging the dimension of desire, this

project will take as a starting point the double meaning of the detail: as either a constitutive part of a whole to which it owes its entire significance, or else as a fragment that exists on its own, liable to exert, in turn, its own effects on the whole from which it is extracted. This dichotomy can be understood in several ways: as the difference between representative details, which serve an overall fictional logic, and figurative details, which serve a visual logic; through its definition according to various degrees of visibility and signification; by way of its origins, creator or audience; in terms of its intentional or accidental character; etc.

The detail brings both acts of monstration (including meta-monstration: showing that one is showing), and acts of signification (including as an enigma). It is, by definition, at the core of any study of the powers of the image. It will be of particular importance in this project to not neglect grasping its various perceptible dimensions – in terms of figured objects, of represented spaces, of imprinted surfaces, of the qualities given to these surfaces (color, for example), but also in terms of temporality, given that the cinema is a medium that produces temporal “details.”

## **The Present**

In terms of phenomenological approaches, “the notion of time is not an object of our knowledge but a dimension of our being” (M. Merleau-Ponty). Generally speaking, the philosophy of time always trips up against the near impossibility of defining the present as an “arresting of time” (see also the famous meditation of Saint Augustine of Hippo). The project will not work in this domain directly, but will instead be limited to approaching time, on the one hand, according to how it may be experienced (that is, the experience of change), and on the other hand, as a social construct that is artificial, albeit naturalized by custom (Norbert Elias).

Film is not an instrument for the measurement of time (a clock), but it can resemble one, insofar as it serves par excellence to objectify unobjective experience (duration) – and to “solidify” par excellence labile experience (time). By choosing to focus on the present, awareness of the paradox comes about: indeed, film exists only as a continuity (as discussions of the photogram or the pixel discussed above have shown *a contrario*) – and it is on this point that it is in direct opposition to painting, which is able to extract images out of time as well as to use a form of codified time (Lessing’s “most fruitfully chosen instant”). In film, the image is in a permanent state of becoming, as is life itself. This is why, in his 1983-85 book, Gilles Deleuze categorically rejected the very idea that

film could even be “in the present” (according to Deleuze, it is always in the past, or, exceptionally, in the future).

There is nonetheless a rather sustained critical tradition which, on the contrary, has highlighted the filmic image’s ability to give the impression of a perpetual present. This is, for example, the notion of cinema as the “art of appearance” (Alexandre Astruc). Not only does the cinematographic image appear *ex abrupto* in its environment (contrary to painting or photography, which are permanently present), but it also includes its appearances in its very visual substance – “mechanical” appearances in the succession of shots, diegetic appearances with varying degrees of mastery or efficiency, unmotivated appearances, etc. This idea also implies the adjacent notion of surprise, and could be approached through this lens as well; but it also suggests an insistence on the existence of that which appears, and on its virtual presence, which opens the path toward an in-depth study of the link between the notion of the present and the idea of virtuality in cinema.

In addition to these three primary axes, other approaches – or approaches with different nuances – may also be proposed by the project participants, including the postdoctoral fellows, as relevant. The framework of the project, however, remains clearly defined by its focus on aesthetics, as outlined in the introduction to the present text.

## **ORGANISATION OF THE RESEARCH**

There are already excellent teams working in various related fields (visual anthropology, film techniques and technologies, the virtual); thus this project will not try to simply substitute them. The preferred working method within the framework of *Aesthetics in the Present* will attempt to respect four main principles:

1. retain the project’s three original axes, but without duplicating work already done well by others or prohibiting occasional collaboration with certain parties;
2. encourage emerging research, thus creating opportunities for experienced young researchers holding at least a doctorate or the equivalent;
3. watch over the international nature of the research, in constituting teams and carrying out collective projects, as well as in publications;
4. wherever possible, encourage contact between university research and the art milieu (“contemporary art” and cinema), for example, by including master classes in two annual seminars.

The project will be carried out under the direction of the Balzan Prizewinner, Jacques Aumont, who will be assisted by two university professors, close colleagues both in their field or in their research, and in possession of the necessary intellectual and professional experience: Emmanuelle André, Professor at Paris 7, and Antonio Somaini, Professor at Paris 3. The two will share the role of successor in case the Prizewinner should become incapable of continuing the project. This select committee will be able, at each stage of the project's implementation, to call upon colleagues whose views, knowledge or ideas seem useful for encouraging reflection.

At present, the plan for the next three or four years is still in the phase of definition; broad lines of research for achieving the project's goals have been traced out. In the first stage, the steering committee (Aumont, André, Somaini) engaged in distance consulting with a small group of professors and researchers from around the world to launch the project. For each year, two postdoctoral fellows will be recruited to work on a broad-based research project on the aesthetics of the moving image since the digital revolution, but in line with certain classical problematics. Their projects must fall under one of the three proposed axes (pixel-detail-the present), and be calibrated in such a way as to obtain publishable results within the relatively short time of the project's duration. Proposals may fit within one or more of these axes, but candidates may also submit projects on related topics insofar as they align with the aims and point of view of the flagship project: a contemporary reflection on the aesthetics of film and of moving images. Projects may consist in speculative, theoretical, or historical research, and they may, under some circumstances, include practical components (in the form of a film, an art installation, a website, an audiovisual essay, an exhibition, etc.).

Research objects, as well as methodologies, are open. It will be the task of the candidates to precisely define the parameters of their contribution to a larger reflection on one or more of the three proposed research axes, and to outline the object(s) of inquiry and methodologies being used. This reflection should, in both its aims and results, lead to new ideas in the field of aesthetics, but it may also involve other disciplines such as art history, the history of technology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, semiotics, media theory, etc. Project proposals will undergo a two-phase selection process. During the first round of selection, an international committee will narrow the pool of candidates down to the six to ten proposals deemed most promising and most in line with the principles and goals of the project. These candidates will then be interviewed by the project's steering committee, including Prof. Jacques

Aumont, Prof. Emmanuelle André (Université Paris Diderot, Paris 7), and Prof. Antonio Somaini (Université Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3).

Hired fellows will report directly to this steering committee, and via the committee, to the Balzan Foundation. Fellows will not be affiliated with university research laboratories or departments and will be accountable only to the steering committee.

The call for projects is aimed at younger researchers under the age of forty. Chosen candidates (who must have a PhD defended after September 2014 and demonstrate an appropriate preliminary research record) will be expected not only to carry out their own research project, but also to participate in activities related to the flagship *Aesthetics in the Present* project. Up to one third maximum of fellows' responsibilities will include organizing and leading workshops, colloquia, pre-scheduled symposia, and enriching project communication efforts (website, advertisement materials, and/or supporting documents). Fellows will be contractually obligated to report on their research project as a condition of their fellowship. The report may serve as the basis for one or more publishable articles, or may take the form of a general account of research conducted during the postdoctoral fellowship year. If the candidate chooses to include an artistic/practical component in their project, this report can take the form, in part or in its entirety, of an exposition and discussion of this work. Postdoctoral fellows will take part in one or more doctoral or postdoctoral seminars of their choosing, and will be asked to present their work-in-progress in this forum.

At some point in the future, two colloquia, each concerned with one of the research axes, will be organized, probably in 2021 and 2022. The first will be carried out somewhere in the greater Paris area, and the second in another country. In both cases, it will be necessary to choose a well-equipped location that is conducive to exchange and concentration.

At this tentative stage of the project, it might be convenient, in order for operations to start quickly, to take advantage of the experience acquired by Professor Antonio Somaini in the cycle of meetings he started (BAL, Paris) on the question of new modes of vision and new forms of editing generated by systems of machine vision. This will entail promoting aesthetic reflection that maintains all of its "historical" coordinates (images, perception, the perceptible, relationships between the arts), in opening up to new images and new visual experiences like those produced by artificial

intelligence, and that represent one of the aspects of the larger question of “pixel” as we understand it.

Similarly, on the question of detail, in certain cases, research in a latent but already clearly formulated state crosses paths with *Aesthetics in the Present*. If possible, the focus will be on developing means of collaboration, whether intermittent or continuous, with specialists in disciplines concerned with the project’s issues. For example, research on “the pixel” (and all it entails, including problems of actionability, addressability and “new vision”) might greatly benefit from collaboration with computer engineers, which can be rapidly achieved with already established contacts. Likewise, research on the question of detail might benefit from a specialised but productive current that analyses the question of “stop motion” (in cartoons, for instance) – which is a particularly significant case of the relationship between filmic details and the film as a whole.

The seminars and/or series of conferences will aim to build a stable link between the various participants in the project – whose degree of involvement will of necessity vary considerably. At present, it seems as though the two planned colloquia must be dedicated to the first two research axes, which are more concrete and “technical”. Paradoxically, the question of the present – more abstract and conceptual – will be dealt with in the more spectacular form of the exhibition. On the one hand, this extra-scientific treatment will make it possible to provide concrete answers to a question that, due to its temporal nature, must engage in philosophical debate. On the other hand, this form of manifestation is much more visible than a university conference, and will thus represent a wonderful conclusion to the achievement of the project, by showing that “academic” research on aesthetics should not be cut off from contemporary artistic (and media) production.

Finally, provisions should be made for publications, both in hard copy and online. Positive contact has already been established with the publishing house Diaphanes in Zurich, whose catalogue, orientations and decidedly international character correspond to this research. It will be equally indispensable to create and manage an Internet site that will give *Aesthetics in the Present* an online platform to publish proceedings of the conferences, seminars, and articles on our researchers’ results, as well as to inform people of collective activities.

Each of these undertakings will be expressly identified as fruit of the project funded by the 2019 Balzan Prize for Film Studies, awarded to Jacques Aumont by the Balzan



Foundation. This will also be visibly noted on all of the publications, whatever the medium, and on all documents announcing any other manifestations – seminars, conferences, colloquia. The postdoctoral fellowships will also be clearly announced as related to these funds. If an exhibition is to conclude *Aesthetics in the Present*, it will be a perfect opportunity to put the research project program of Jacques Aumont's Balzan Prize in the spotlight.

The project will be managed by the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3, for the administrative and logistic means necessary to carry it out. It should be noted that the project will not be attached to any of the existing laboratories, but to an autonomous administrative division that manages international projects of this scope (Direction de la Recherche, de la Valorisation et des Études Doctorales). This responds perfectly to the care devoted to maintaining the intellectual and organisational autonomy of the project, which is financed by the second half of Jacques Aumont's 2019 Balzan Prize for Film Studies.