1. CINEMATIC MOUNTAINS: THE WORLD AND VISION FROM A HEIGHT

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1. Mountains and Vision: Two Quotes

Two quotes, one by a filmmaker and one by a novelist, will open this essay on the relation between mountains and vision: "It is like viewing a vast landscape from a mountain: you can see four separate rivers distant from each and yet from the mountainside you see them all at once and see where they converge" (Griffith on his 1916 film *Intolerance*). "These mountains, somehow, they play at hide-and-seek, and all before one's eyes" (Melville 1961, 92). Griffith and Melville here immediately pose mountains not simply as "sights," but as bearing complicated relations to human vision.

Griffith compared the radical use of parallel editing in his epic film *Intolerance* to a panoramic view from a mountain height that could unify distant spaces into a single aerial landscape. *Intolerance* intercut four stories from different historical periods, and Griffith used the mountain view analogy to illustrate this trans-historic mode of narration. In his introductory story to his *Piazza Tales*, Herman Melville uses his upwards gaze from his piazza to the towering "majestic mountain, Greylock" (1852)[1] to initiate a fable of the ambiguities of vision, with an ascent up the mountain crafted as a Spenserian fairy quest. Both see mountains not simply as elements of geography, but as vantage points which lift us out of the ordinary, transforming human vision into something more.

In this essay, I explore the affinity between mountains and cinematic vision across a variety of genres, periods, and modes; from silent cinema to Classical

Hollywood, from Italian neo-realism to North American avant-garde films. I claim that mountain views display what Siegfried Kracauer called "inherent affinities" to cinematic modes (1960, 60). Across a wide range of films (historical, generic, and stylistic), views of mountains and mountain-views challenge ordinary human vision and practices of everyday life to confront something out-of-bounds, conveying a vision of freedom and transcendence. This challenge confronts the norms of everyday life with diverse impulses: martyrdom and sainthood, but also metaphysical doubt and a life lived outside the law.

2. Cinema Landscapes and Mountain Views

From its beginnings cinema has engaged with landscape. The very first films remained human-centric (the vaudeville acts that dominated Edison's kinetoscopes of the 1890s or the local views of Lyons that made up the first Lumière programs). But the aesthetic of "the view," a pictorial capturing of a place, soon played a role in early cinema programs,[2] beginning with the peripatetic cameramen the Lumière Company sent around the world in the 1890s to take films for their programs. Eventually, cinematic touristic views of ocean and lake shores, waterfalls, and mountainscapes rivaled city streets, comic vignettes, and records of current events. In cinema's second decade, these early landscape films evolved into a genre known as the "scenic" and became a regular component of the early film shows. The programs of European fairground movie exhibitors and American nickelodeons demanded variety, and the scenic provided ersatz travel experiences. They displayed a beauty and calm that contrasted with the action-filled short comedies and melodramas with which they shared the bill. During the classical period of cinema exhibition (basically from 1917 to 1960), when film programs centered on feature-length fictional films, the popularity of landscape-centered films persisted in the form of short travelogues, which preceded the feature film along with cartoons and newsreels.

However, mountain views (and landscapes) soon became absorbed by the increasingly dominant narrative films, providing settings for dramas and locales for stories. Although this process could be viewed as a diminution of the importance of the geographical and geological world—its subordination to human drama—mountainscapes in some films managed to do more than simply provide a background to human struggles. I have described early cinema as a "cinema of attractions," stressing cinema's power as a visual moving image, rather than simply a vehicle for storytelling (Gunning 1989). This claim for the importance of visual attractions does not diminish the role of narrative in cinema but hopes to clarify it. So-called "narrative" film possesses other aspects than its plot. Mountains in cinema can provide more than

a theme or a visual flourish. They embody the intense relation film has with the visual and material world.

Cinema provided a new medium in the ongoing process of discovering the meanings inherent in our world. André Bazin concluded his seminal essay on "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" by saying "On the other hand, the cinema is also a language" (1967, 16). But this language of cinema is not verbal; it uses the world to speak about the world. In other words, there is more to cinematic language than syntax and grammar. Film relies on meanings inherent to, not abstracted from, the image itself. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty declared in his brief but profound essay on cinema, "Film and the New Psychology," the profound affinity between cinema and phenomenology helps us describe cinema as a language drawn from the world around us:

> Phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and the world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit. Well, the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and the world, and the expression of one in the other. (1964, 58)

In this view, mountains in cinema can provide not simply a backdrop or setting, nor an abstract symbol, but something that absorbs and exceeds all of these. Within a story a mountain becomes more than a place or geological feature. Its manifestation on film conjures a range of associations and meanings, which the movie as a whole articulates. We might call these symbolic if we understand this term from a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective, rather than an abstract signification of meaning. Paul Ricoeur has described the symbol in a manner that recalls Merleau-Ponty and seems to evoke the cinema:

> Man first reads the sacred on the world, on some element or aspect of the world, on the heavens, on the sun and moon, on the waters and vegetation … . The manifestation through the thing is like the condensation of an infinite discourse; manifestation and meaning are strictly contemporaneous and reciprocal … (1967, 10–11)

The cinema makes meaning through appearances. Like the cosmic symbol, what it shows becomes manifest through an image, not an abstraction hovering beyond it in need of explication. In narrative cinema the action of the story, expressed through the selection and juxtaposition of images, articulates these meanings even as it presents them.

3. Vision and the Sacred Mountain

Within the mythic discourse that Ricoeur invokes, mountains serve as the dwelling place of the Gods. We must approach this not as a naïve fairytale, but as rooted in human experience of the mountain. Mountains tower in the distance, joining sky and earth, performing a cosmic role. As an *axis mundi*, they join the various cosmic levels and can provide a gateway beyond the ordinary human realm. Humans ascend them only through effort. They possess a different terrain from the flatlands where most people dwell, and they even have their own climate (I think of my favorite range of mountains in the Colorado Rockies, which bear the beautiful name "Never-Summer Mountains"). Mountains can be inhospitable to humans or breed a unique sort of inhabitant: highlanders. According to mountain mythology, the human who ascends to or dwells in the mountains no longer remains ordinary but becomes fundamentally transformed. This mythology raises a question for film aesthetics: How can what sounds so metaphysical, outside of normal human experience, belong to cinema without betraying the medium's quality of inherence, its worldly material nature—as Kracauer put it, its affinity to the material world?

Joining earth to heaven, mountains have been claimed as the home of the Gods (Mount Olympus, Mount Kailash, Mount Meru). A holy mountain becomes a taboo place, not to be transgressed by humans. (As it says in *Exodus* 19:23: "Moses said to the Lord, 'The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, "Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy."'") Forbidden to the multitude due to its sanctity, for a few the mountain becomes the place where God may be encountered, the site of a theophany, such as Moses on Mount Sinai and Mount Horeb in the Torah, or Muhammad at Mount Hira. The holy mountain offers a site of vision in several senses. Here God becomes manifest, an experience beyond human vision. But even within human vision, the mountain provides a site of unbounded vision, a vantage from which vision extends for miles. (In the *Gospel of Matthew* 4:8, a mountain view provides a vision of the wide world with which the devil tempts Jesus: "Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world"). As an extension of worldly sight, mountain vision invites a secular interpretation as well, a visionary space both geographically and supernaturally.

4. The Ascent of the Neo-Realist Mountain

While the mountain can symbolize transcendence, its spectacular physical and material aspects determine its cinematic affinity. In Roberto Rossellini's neo-realist films, which I discuss here, transcendence remains rooted in a close

encounter with the earthly as seen from the heights. In these films the cinematic mountain avoids an allegory that would evacuate gross materiality in favor of a readable spiritual meaning. In his feature film *Stromboli* (1950), starring Ingrid Bergman, and his short film (part of *L'amore*) *Il Miracolo* (*The Miracle*, 1948), starring Anna Magnani, Rossellini films the stories of women whose ascent of mountains involves both an excruciating physical effort and a process of transformation.

Despite being condemned by Francis Cardinal Spellman in 1951 as sacrilegious and subsequently being banned in New York State (leading to a US Supreme Court decision granting movies freedom of speech protection), *The Miracle* finds spiritual experience in physical embodiment and environmental materiality (Wittern-Keller & Haberski 2008). Anna Magnani plays Nanni, a simple-minded goatherd who believes a wandering mendicant (played by Federico Fellini, who also wrote the scenario) is St. Joseph. Their encounter leads to her pregnancy, which she understands as miraculous. Scorned by the town she lives in, she undertakes a difficult journey, toiling up a mountainside to a chapel where, all alone, she gives birth to her child. The film ends with her breastfeeding her baby. It opens with a pan down from a view of a mountain peak against the sky to focus on the sea below. On this mountainside, poised between sea and sky, the goatherd and wanderer meet.

Rossellini's film refuses to define events as supernatural (e.g. by special effects, as in the 1959 Hollywood film, also called *The Miracle*, in which a vision of the Madonna is given a visible aura, glowing technicolor blue).[3] True to his neo-realist style, Rossellini conveys the possibility of something as holy, but leaves the ultimate determination to the viewer. After her seduction by the wanderer, the film shows Nanni's descent to town followed by her goats, filmed with a duration and tactility that ground us firmly in the phenomenal world. The film dwells on the surface of things and conveys gravity as well as grace through the movement of bodies framed in shots that rarely isolate characters from their environment. Later, when Nanni leaves her village and climbs up the mountain, her weary steps and labor pains take place within shots that balance her figure against massive stone steps, mountain cliffs, and sounding cascades. During her journey she gazes at the world around her: at the town where a religious procession is taking place, or toward the mountain's peak above and the ocean below. The goat that seems to lead her to the mountaintop church appears as a natural part of the mountain environment. While one can read it symbolically, the goat never loses its realist appearance. Likewise, when Nanni drinks from a rivulet running down the cliffside, the symbolic sense of her being suckled at the mountain's breast never outweighs the cinematic textures of water, stone, and thirsty woman.

A perilous climb up a volcanic mountain forms the climax of Rossellini's feature film *Stromboli*, the story of Karin, a Lithuanian woman who marries

a simple fisherman to get out of a displaced persons camp after World War II. An alien being in the small fishing village at the foot of the mountain, distrusted by her husband and scorned by the women, she decides she must escape this life. The camera conveys Karin's gaze as she surveys the desolate volcanic island of sharp rocks surrounded by the sea, mountain peaks towering above. As in *The Miracle*, the mountain links elements of water, earth, and sky—and smoldering volcanic fire. Although Karin decides to leave the island, she finds this difficult to arrange. She resolves to climb Stromboli to reach another village, where she believes she will find passage off the island. Like Nanni, she is now pregnant, although in the early stages. Besides the effects of the wearying climb, the volcanic fumes which cover the mountainside overwhelm her as she climbs.

Although some shots of her ascent show the vistas of the sea below or the sky above, others reveal an obscure smoke-filled atmosphere that limits her vision. Karin coughs and seems asphyxiated by the volcano's fumes. She collapses from the effort and the smoke. Slipping on the rocks and the dark volcanic ash, she weeps and holds her womb as she watches craters belch steam and fumes, moaning to herself, "enough, enough." At night, a shot of the star-filled night sky conveys her slumber, followed by the light of dawn breaking on her face. Karin's series of contradictory reactions on the mountain summit ends the film. As she looks at the smoke rising from the crater, she intones to herself: "What beauty …" But as she climbs down a cliff, she cries "No, no I can't go back!" She weeps and speaks of her unborn child and adds "God! Merciful God!" in a tone that sounds as much like accusation as invocation.

Rossellini ends his film by cutting to a shot of birds soaring over the mountaintop. An allegory of God's mercy? Or an image of a transcendence that remains out of human reach, only glimpsed in the mountain against the sky? The version of this film that RKO released to American theaters in 1950 ended (as I recall from seeing it on television decades ago) with a narrator's voice explaining that Karin has found faith in God and showing her descending the mountain. The difference between this disowned version and the film that Rossellini approved highlights his inconclusive ending: Rossellini's version ends on this image without spoken commentary and thus keeps questions and resolution open, allowing a range of meanings for the mountain.

The ascent of these women up in the mountains images a complex relation between human dwelling and the natural world. If these ascents do not necessarily imply the sacred, they do envision something beyond the ordinary human life. As my next examples show, the trek away from flatland terrain into the mountain fastness can also portray living beyond human law in ways that question the role of security and order.

5. Mountain Love of Outlaws

Victor Sjöström's 1918 film *The Outlaw and his Wife* offered one of the earliest and most profound explorations of the mountainscape. In the film's original Swedish title, *Berg-Ejvind och hans hustruu* [*Moutain-Ejvind and his Wife*], the protagonist's name, "Mountain Ejvind," replaces the term "outlaw." His mountain hide-out defines his identity as an outlaw. The film introduces Ejvind (played by the director Sjöström) on a mountainside as he helps Arnes, a wanderer, conceal his theft of sheep's wool from the authorities. This opening setting sets the theme of making one's own law in the wild. However, Ejvind takes a job in the lowlands at the farm of Halla, a kindhearted landowner who becomes attracted to him. Although he is living under the name Kari, a visitor recognizes him as Ejvind, an escaped thief, and informs the local bailiff. Halla defends him against the accusation, but he confesses to her his identity and previous crime: He once stole a sheep to feed his starving family. He escaped from jail and has lived for years as an outlaw in the mountains (in a flashback we see him in the mist-covered Icelandic mountains cooking his meal in a hot spring). He also confesses to Halla that he loves her, saying she is "as beautiful as a blue mountain rising in the mist." She responds that she will flee with him into the mountains; as an intertitle puts it: "Hearth and home and every man's respect—she gave it all up for his sake." On their ponies they are shown climbing up into the snowy mountains. Halla gazes down at her farm below but turns to Ejvind, saying, "On, on and upwards!"

An intertitle summarizes and characterizes their outlaw life: "For five years they lived as outlaws—hunted like animals. But they were rulers of the mountains. The whole country—as far as the eye could see—was theirs!"

A panning shot introduces their new environment of gleaming glaciers. The outlaw couple, now with a small tow-headed daughter, settles in the highlands, and images frame them nestled among the vast vista of the mountains. Sublime landscape surrounds them; Ejvind beckons their child to the edge of the cliff and rolls a boulder over the edge to show her both the danger and majesty of their mountain home. As he lifts his daughter to see the depth below, they are framed in a long shot, backlighting their small human figures against the dark outline of a precipitous cliff and the glow of the sky. Few images capture so well this precarious, but glorious, union of human and mountain. Magnificent location shooting juxtaposes the life of this family against a background of distance and depth. The viewer senses the bracing mountain air and its smell of freedom.

But their freedom is threatened by invasion. A dark shadow passing over stones ominously announces the arrival of a stranger. However, the wanderer turns out to be Arnes, Ejvind's wool thief comrade from the opening, who is welcomed into the family. They live together in the pictorial landscape the

camera creates: mountain lakes where the men fish, and the steaming hot springs where Halla does the wash. But Arnes threatens this natural harmony when he casts a lustful gaze at Halla. When Ejvind slips from a cliff while gathering herbs and clings precariously to a branch, Arnes at first throws him a rope. But a flashback to Halla and her ample breasts tempts Arnes to consider cutting the life-sustaining line. He relents, however, and pulls his friend to safety. The dramatic shots of Ejvind suspended from the cliff, with a vista of the valley and its river far below, shows both his vulnerability in this world of heights and his almost superhuman struggle to resist falling.

Tormented by his desire for Halla, Arnes tries to kiss her. Outraged, Halla takes him to the cliff where Ejvind hurled the boulder and points to her husband bathing in the mountain waterfall below and declares her devotion to him. Arnes agrees he should leave the mountain family and return to the world below. Sjöström repeatedly frames the mountain scenes with the distance and depth of the lowland in the background, rendered hazy through aerial perspective. The rest of the world seems to have disappeared for this outlaw family; yet this distant vagueness poses a looming threat. As Arnes begins his descent into this world he sees the Bailiff's mounted posse coming to arrest the outlaws. He returns to warn the family. As the posse struggles with the men, Halla gathers her child. In the third dramatic long shot of the precipitous cliff, she stands horrified, having cast her daughter into the river below to prevent her capture. However, Ejvind knifes the Bailiff and flees with his wife, ascending further up the mountain as they cross the snow fields and glacier.

A lacuna of years follows after a shot of the tiny figures climbing further up the mountainside. The film reveals the outlaw couple, now aged and sheltering against a winter storm. In contrast to the earlier idyllic images of their mountain domain, they now huddle together in a small hut, imprisoned by a blizzard that has lasted seven days, nearly mad from hunger. In this confined environment they turn on each other with accusations and insults. Memories invade the space of their hut, flashbacks of their earlier escape to the mountains in love and joy, fording mountain streams together. The views outside their hut are dark and obscured by blowing snow. In the howling blizzard Halla hears the cry of her dead daughter. A striking shot shows the child, her arms outstretched as if beseeching, superimposed ghost-like over the torrent in which she drowned. In despair Halla wanders out into the night storm and Ejvind finds her in a snowbank. The old couple embrace for a final time as the snow begins to cling to them. We see the door to their hut ajar, the interior empty and the hearth fire burning out. Their world is emptying. A final close-up shows the couple's frozen embrace. The film's last title reads: "Their only law was their love."

6. Fatal Mountains

The link between outlaws and mountains reflects both historical realities when the wilderness represented an untamed realm beyond the law and an ambivalent attitude toward nature as both a refuge and chaos. The American Western frequently uses mountains to visualize the wild frontier. Andre De Toth's 1959 film *Day of the Outlaw* benefits from Hollywood's increased use of location filming after World War II and crystalline deep focus cinematography by cameraman Russell Harlan. While many Western landscapes focus on the desert or the plains, here wintry mountains provide the setting. Fleeing from a bank robbery, Jack Bruhn's outlaw band invades a hamlet nestled among the snow-covered mountains and proceeds to terrorize its inhabitants. Bruhn (Burl Ives), a feral patriarch ruling a primal herd of violent men, has been severely wounded and hopes to cross the mountains to avoid the law. The interiors of the few buildings that compose the town provide precarious shelter, and contrast with the forbidding mountains that surround them. Although the outlaws seek shelter, Harlan's cinematography frames them against the looming mountains in the distance, especially during the prolonged fistfight between cattleman Blaise Starrett (Robert Ryan) and the outlaws.

In order to get these dangerous men out of his town, Starrett convinces them he can guide them to a mountain pass that will provide an escape route. As the gang leaves the town, the vista of the mountains has become obscured by mist and snow. The screen seems to glare with white, almost snow-blind, as the horses step awkwardly through deep snow. Climate, rather than the ascent, poses an obstacle to human effort. The film's location shooting emphasizes the frigid air in which breath smokes and heaps of snow slow progress. Slow dissolves of their labored trek make the space seem unreal. Bruhn eventually collapses from his wound and dies in the snow. The mountain landscape now shines with a fearsome clarity and Starrett, the supposed guide, gazes toward mountain peaks in the distance. He is questioned by the Indian member of the gang: "You see anything?" Starrett replies, "Not much." The Cheyenne responds: "There's nothing to see." Rather than vision, these mountains offer obscurity; instead of an escape route, the pass becomes a snowy labyrinth, and in place of a guide, Starrett, a man who intends to destroy those he leads—an anti-Moses. As in Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, the now leaderless thieves begin to kill each other, hoping for a larger share of their booty. Even the pack horses refuse to go further. The last members of the gang freeze to death, unable to find shelter or start a fire. Having led the gang to meet their death, Starrett returns to town. The film ends as it began, with a pan moving over the mountain range beyond the town. *The Day of the Outlaw*'s view of the mountains remains resolutely negative, a realm of inhuman death. The mountains offer neither freedom nor transformation; rather, they deal out a fatal justice.

Outlaws and mountainous terrain invoke the Western genre more than the predominantly urban gangster film, but Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* from 1941 presents an exception, expressing a nostalgia for rural settings and ending in the Sierra mountains announced by its title. Its credit sequence shows mountain heights, but these open views are soon replaced by images of a penitentiary. Bank robber Roy Earle is released from the prison gates and immediately expresses a desire to see green grass and trees. On his way to his next heist, he nostalgically stops at the Indiana farm his family used to own. At a California gas station, he gets a glimpse of the Sierra Nevada in the distance. The opening contrast between expansive mountains and confining prison runs throughout the film, articulated in the conversations Ray has with Marie, who becomes his lover. She overhears Roy talking in his sleep about "crashing out." She compares her past life to his imprisonment, constantly wanting to "crash out" too, whether from an abusive family or a job in a dime-a-dance club. A comment by a doctor underscores this sense of fatality when he describes Roy and gangsters like him as "rushing towards death."

Double-crossed after a botched heist, Roy flees, leaving Marie at a bus stop, and heads for the mountains seeking refuge. As his car races down the highway, the high Sierra looms in the distance, motorcycle police in pursuit not far behind. Walsh's camera repeatedly pans the landscape, taking in the car's trajectory and the mountain heights it climbs toward. Roy careens up a twisting mountain road, racing ever higher. He rushes, it seems, toward freedom, or death, until he encounters a roadblock. He leaves the car, rifle slung on his back and machine gun in hand, scrambling among the boulders, stumbling and losing his iconic fedora hat. He finds a sheltered position, and fires on the cops gathered below. When a cop calls for him to surrender, the reverse angle shows the mountain as Roy responds in defiance. He remains concealed from both the police and the camera, and his voice echoes from the rocky cliff, as if the mountain speaks for him.

As night falls, cops, onlookers, and reporters gather below, including Marie, who heard of Roy's plight over the radio and rushed to her outlaw lover. A spotlight travels over what a radio journalist describes as "Earle's rocky fortress." At dawn, the sun rises over Mt. Whitney, "the highest mountain in the United States." The cops try to persuade Marie to call Roy down, but she refuses. Hearing the barking of Marie's dog, Roy emerges from his rocky crevice and is shot by a rifleman above him. His body plummets down the cliffside. Weeping over his body, Marie asks a reporter about the phrase she heard Roy utter in his sleep: "What does it mean when a man crashes out?" She moves towards the camera into close-up as she repeats his answer, "Free, free." She leaves the shot as the camera lifts to frame the mountain peak against the sky. The film is over. Roy Earle is "free"—dead, yet the mountain remains towering above.

In all these films, ascending a mountain triggers transforming moments for the protagonists: revelations, birth, death. Climbing a mountain tests physical bodies and emotions. But the camera captures the mountain's solidity and independence, as well—its beyond-human nature. It can figure fate and death, or life and love, or an image of freedom that might include all of these. The image of the mountain summons up less an answer than a question. The images show the mute existence of the world confronting human effort and desire—as only cinema can.

7. Vision: The Mountain's Central Region

Decades ago, my fellow NYU graduate student John W. Locke published an essay in the journal *Artforum* about Michael Snow's film *La Région Centrale* (1971), sub-titled "How You Should Watch the Best Film I ever Saw" (1973a, 1973b). Locke shows how this film raises issues of vision in cinema in a unique manner precisely by taking a mountain as its subject and camera technology as its method. Locke places his discussion of the unique camera movement featured by Snow's film in the context of cinema's fascination with movement through space, specifically what he calls the "space pan" and traces this figure of cinematic style in a number of films, including Walsh's *High Sierra* (1973a, 67). Snow's 1971 film stands as perhaps the ultimate mountain film, one in which no human beings appear, and no conventional narrative action takes place. Instead, the film stages an encounter between its mountain locale and a unique cinematic technology. Snow designed a mechanical camera mount which could pivot in every direction, panning in effect within the total surface of a sphere. This camera mount converts camera movement into a complex system. The film embodies vision as an ever-mobile sphere of sight.

A technical *tour de force*, this universally moving camera was placed on a mountaintop in northern Quebec. The camera's global movement, supplemented by zooms, could be remotely controlled (and therefore the operator remained invisible, off-screen, as does any direct image of the camera itself, other than the shadow it sometimes casts into the frame). What we see is the nearly acrobatic operation of the camera as it records the landscape within a constantly moving frame. For nearly three hours the film's viewer witnesses a moving panorama of this mountain space from a fixed position. The camera pans at various speeds and distances, turns, and inverts itself, accompanied by a series of beeps on the soundtrack that seem to correspond to the camera's remote commands. The filming takes place at all hours: bright afternoon, dim dawn, even at night with a full moon. I believe that no film has ever surveyed a space so fully or demonstrated with such wit and variety the possibilities of camera movement. As Locke stresses, the camera moves—and therefore sees—as no unaided human eye ever could. This transparent eyeball is fully

technological, a non-human view designed for the human spectator. Never have I experienced a mountain terrain with such fullness—its rocky surfaces, its lichen, its vast vista, its shifting clouds and skies, its horizon—all seen through constant cinematic movement.

La Région Centrale therefore places this mountainous terrain and the act of seeing front and center. The complex trajectories the camera's frame traces over this landscape and its duration replace any narrative development with an almost symphonic course of movements and variation, divided into sections demarcated by a shot in which a large X covers the screen. The stripping bare of the film of anecdote and human presence paradoxically allows the encounter of nature and technology to take on a titanic scale in which movement and stasis, eternity and constant change, wrestle before our eyes.

What sort of vision emerges from this encounter between landscape and augmented camera movement? As Locke says, this vision transcends the human. He asks rhetorically: "How can a film be made which looks like nothing the viewer has ever seen before? How can a film be made which is not based on the viewer's ordinary way of seeing the world?" (1973a, 71). The answer is the experience of watching Snow's film. This claim for a non-human vision raises fundamental issues about the nature of cinema. Does the movie camera seek to mimic the way the human eye sees, or does it offer an alternative? The film answers, "both." Like all technology, the camera not only draws on the affordances of the human body and its perception, but transforms and supplements these, presenting new possibilities and new definitions to human existence.

La Région Centrale's retooling of human vision not only lies in its ability to take positions rarely (if ever) encountered in ordinary human life (twisting in space, upside-down views, circular trajectories from earth to sky, zooming), but also in the speed of its movement. As Locke says, at the climax of the film the speed of camera movement pushes our limits of perception:

> As the end approaches the camera is making continuous sweeps from ground to sky and back to ground. As I watched these become progressively faster and faster, I reached a point fully ten minutes before the end of the film when I thought that the movements couldn't possibly get any faster. I was wrong because they just continue to get faster and faster. (1973b, 72)

Even after repeated viewings, I am always amazed at the speed of this section of the film, in which the camera literally whips from earth to sky, creating a sense of a planet rapidly rotating in space, a cosmic view unanchored by gravity, fundamentally unmoored, yet always caught within a cycle determined by the camera's program.

In the final moments of *La Région Central*, the camera appears to cease its endless rounds as it fixes its sight on a view of the sun in the sky. The luminosity of this source of light bleeds out any recognizable image. We could see this ending as a sort of revelation, a vision of light itself, and of a certain transcendence perhaps comparable to the mountaintop epiphanies of religious encounters. But one might also see it as an ironic dénouement that eclipses vision in the fullness of light, the vanishing of any earthly image—or indeed any image at all. It remains for each viewer to give it meaning.

This final presentation of the excesses and limits of vision returns us to my opening quotations as expressing the gamut of mountain vision. My quote from Griffith about his own epic asserts a mountain view as all-encompassing, a viewpoint that could take in all of history and contemplate its significance. Melville's quote can only be understood within the ironic nature of his ironic fairytale in which the narrator ascends the mountain in search of the source of the flash of light he had glimpsed from his piazza below. "Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance," the narrator speculates. However, his quest leads him to a strange hermit girl whose glazed window reflected light. From her high vantage she gazes intently on a house below. Distance and the mountain haze make it appear to her like "King Charming's palace." The narrator recognizes it as his own home with its piazza. Without disillusioning the young woman, he descends. In contrast to Griffith's epoch-embracing vision, Melville's parable plays upon the inversion of points of view and their ambiguities.

I would claim Snow's film embraces both possibilities of revelation and irony. The affinity that cinema bears to mountain landscape encompasses the breadth and the ambiguity of vision. A cinematic mountain offers both a view and a viewpoint, a place to be filled through an ascent and one to be emptied, often through death. Cinema does more than continue the tradition of landscape images. Through its capacity to convey motion it allows us to experience both ascents and descents, but most essentially to experience the lifting of life out of the ordinary that mountain vision represents.

Notes

1. Melville in the 1850s lived at the foot of Mt. Greylock in The Berkshires and in fact dedicated his novel *Pierre or the Ambiguities* to the "majestic mountain Greylock."
2. I treat what I call the "View Aesthetic" in early non-fiction film in my essay "Before Documentary."
3. *The Miracle* (Irving Rapper, 1959), despite bearing the same title, has an unrelated plot.

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