

Movement as Language

Movement is the result of a feeling in one thing of strong difference from other things. Movement is always one thing moving away from other things—not toward. And the result of movement is to be distinct from other things: the result of movement is form. The history of any definite form is the movement of which the form is the result. When we look at something and see the particular shape of it we are only looking at its after-life. Its real life is the movement by which it got to be that shape. The danger of thinking of physical things in terms of form rather than of movement is that a shape can easily seem more harmonious, more sympathetic with other shapes than its historical individuality justifies: there is a literary temptation to give it too much meaning, to read truth-signs where there are only life-signs. But if we think of physical things in terms of movement we avoid the confusion of 'life' with 'truth'. Movement is strictly the language of life. It expresses nothing but the initial, living connotations of life. It is the earliest language.

Movement is unpremeditated being; it is the uncritical expression of life. As we begin to meditate we begin to stop living. It is necessary to stop living at some point because life is livable only within individual limits: it is necessary to meditate because if we fail to recognise the significant limits we become involved in conflicts with other things, and one thing destroys the other, and everything becomes nothing. But the recognition of limits comes only when we stop to meditate about meanings. First comes life; and if we meditate prematurely, if we lend to physical things a critical self-consciousness, we are substituting imagination for movement and sentimentalizing the physical past. Up to a certain point we must leave physical things alone and let them speak for themselves, in movement. We must understand the physical physically. We cannot expect physical things to articulate meaning, because they do not care what they mean; they care only about being. Indeed, in themselves they have no meaning beyond their distinct, exclusive will to be.

The language of movement is free of all implications of consequence. Its function is to tell how things begin, as the function of the language of thought is to tell how they end. When we talk about how things begin, the subject is life; when we talk about how they end, the subject is truth. If there had been no beginning there would be no need for an end. If there were no subject 'life' there would be no subject 'truth': there would be only a secret, invisible, intangible, inexpressible reality. But there is, there has been, life. And therefore there is, there will be, truth—a reality which explains the arbitrary realities of life. But the arbitrary realities of life do not explain themselves. We cannot expect them to tell what they are as against other things which are. We can only expect physical accuracy of them, physical explicitness—movement. And this is why a strict historical analysis of life is necessarily cinematographic. It is not what is called 'history': because it is the object of professional history to find truth in life, and this is neither physically appropriate nor possible. History imposes on life a kind of accuracy of which it is innocent, an accuracy of self-explanation; whereas life has only physical accuracy.

This misunderstanding of the nature of historical analysis results necessarily in a misinterpretation of cinematographic accuracy. Film-makers more and more appreciate that the function of the film is to visualize historical analysis. But as they conventionalize historical analysis as 'history' they present us with literary drama, not with life; and with necessarily inaccurate literary drama, since the cinema is capable of only one kind of accuracy—physical accuracy. The cinema can visualize only movement; it cannot visualize meaning—meaning, or explanatory sense, is not visualizable. The language of the cinema is movement. When it attempts to make of movement a literary language the result is a physical-intellectual caricature-language which furnishes stories of life as something half-true, half-ridiculous (the result of such films as *Henry VIII*, *Catherine the Great*, *Christina of Sweden*). The language of the film, that is, becomes the language of hysteria; people have been trained to go to the cinema to enjoy respectable hysteria, not to know, physically and soberly, 'life'. And so they enjoy films more than proper stage drama because the excitement of feeling unreasonably and irresponsibly in contact with 'meanings' is on a larger scale than with stage drama: there the contacts are limited to a few curious situations in which life is erratically aglow with meaning, while films are constructed to give the illusion that any ordinary life-situation is potentially eloquent of meaning. (1935)

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by Len Lye