Vincenzo Cerulli

En plein air filmmaking. Some notes on sea waves, wind and early cinema

Since the dawn of cinema, directors engaged in outdoor filmmaking have had to deal with atmospheric elements far beyond the sphere of their intentional control: one of the earliest examples is the short film directed by Louis Lumière *Boat Leaving the Port* (1895). The work measures approximately 45 seconds of film and consists of a single fixed shot: in this micro-panorama of everyday life, a small rowing boat with three men on board is on its way out of the harbour. Two of them row with their backs to the horizon while the third one sits at the stern with his back to us and occasionally, as the boat pulls away from the harbour, turns in our direction. The flat horizon of the sea is interrupted on the right by the end of a jetty: two women and two little girls stand on it, watching the scene from inside and greeting the sailors as they leave. This is the film: or rather, this is the film on first viewing. If we return to focus on it, in fact, we realise that we have not included all the actors on the screen: someone, something, has escaped us. Strangely, I might add, since the actor/agent absent on our first viewing occupies most of the frame with its ever-moving mass: the sea.



Louis Lumière,
Boat leaving the port
-
(1895)

Title

En plein air filmmaking. Some notes on sea waves, wind and early cinema

Abstract

This article analyzes Louis Lumière's early film "*Boat leaving the port*" through two lenses: Adorno's reflections on the concepts of natural beauty and artistic beauty, and Ingold's idea of "correspondence". Drawing on early film experiments, it explores the film set as a space where key aesthetic dynamics emerge.

Keywords

Lumière
-
Thedor W. Adorno
-
Tim Ingold
-
early cinema
-
non-human agents

At the end of the film, the boat is at the centre of the frame: it has not left the harbour at all, as the title suggests. It has not disappeared behind the jetty, as the initial direction of its movement would lead us to imagine. The waves have risen and the previously planned course can no longer be pursued: one of the last waves, in fact, almost capsized the boat. The rowers must surrender to the sudden intervention of an unforeseen agent and when the film ends, the boat has changed course from the one originally pursued. The film thus ends with *a suspended image*: the boat has been pushed back by the waves of the sea towards the harbour, it has not reached its destination but is no longer at the starting point either. The film, in a way, ends as *unfinished*, suspended. In that suspension, we can recognise the profilmic revelation of an extra-filmic tension that is a primary characteristic of every process of artistic creation: the tension between the deliberate (planned) intention of the artist and the unintentional, unforeseen and uncontrollable element, without which every artistic endeavour would risk foundering[1]. In this specific case, *the uncontrollable element* we are dealing with is represented, in a rather plastic way, by a non-human agent: the sea waves.

The aim of this article is to offer a rereading of the film under consideration by following two distinct and related paths. The first path will move within the theoretical framework outlined by Theodor W. Adorno in the *Aesthetic Theory* with his reflections on the natural beauty/artistic beauty pair; while the second will concern Tim Ingold's reflection on the concept of «correspondence»[2]. For Adorno works of art succeed where nature "fails": «What nature strives for in vain, artworks fulfill: They open their eyes»[3]. But what does it mean that nature "fails" to open its eyes? And is this true? Perhaps to answer those questions it

1 Cfr. S. Velotti, *Dialettica del controllo. Limiti della sorveglianza e pratiche artistiche*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2017 and Id., *The Conundrum of Control. Making Sense through Artistic Practices*, Brill, Leiden 2024.

2 Cfr. T. Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*, Routledge, Oxon 2013.

3 T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eng. trans. by R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London – New York 2002, p. 66.



Louis Lumière,
Boat leaving the port
-
(1895)

may be useful to look at nature and artworks at their processes of intersection; what better occasion than this filmic microcosm so exposed to the different streams of the natural and the artificial, the intentional and the unintentional, wanting and happening? It is Adorno himself who emphasises the importance of this intersection between the two moments, natural beauty and artistic beauty, in a specific chapter of the *Aesthetic Theory*.

> Just how bound up natural beauty is with art beauty is confirmed by the experience of the former. For it, nature is exclusively appearance, never the stuff of labor and the reproduction of life, let alone the substratum of science. Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images. Nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action. The sloughing off of the aims of self-preservation—which is emphatic in art—is carried out to the same degree in aesthetic experience of nature. To this extent the difference between the two forms of beauty is hardly evident[4].

4 Ivi, p. 65.

What Adorno defines as the "experience of images", a primary characteristic of the aesthetic experience of nature, in Lumière's film is amplified thanks to the framing of the camera in which the sea waves appear: fleetingness, perhaps the primary characteristic of the motion of the waves, is saved/lifted through the recording of the camera[5]. But what does it mean that nature is never the "stuff of labor"? Lumière's film can help us shed new light on this expression which, at first glance, may sound enigmatic. In the scene at the harbour, we witness in fact a double forced interruption of labor: on the profilmic level the "labor" of the three men is interrupted by the sea waves that reject the boat towards the port, and on the extra-filmic level the director's labor is struck by the echo of that same interruption.

Adorno emphasises that nature is not perceived "as an object of action" and this seems to elicit a precise resonance with the approach that he also develops regarding artistic practices: a privileged place for the observation of that insoluble interplay between will and spontaneity, activity and passivity, doing and undergoing. The waves, inserted here in the aesthetic frame of the film, plastically play a double role: natural beauty on the one hand, «suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill»[6] and artistic beauty on the other, necessary uncontrollability, serendipitous appearance. «Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated [by] human intention. The latter is exclusively art's vehicle. The more perfect the artwork, the more it forsakes intentions»[7]. Through the interaction between human and non-human agents, staged in an exemplary manner by artistic practices, we can observe this tension aimed at the sublimation of the intention into something non-intentional. Thus, the sea waves appear as an unremoved involuntariness, an alterity accepted in *the open project* that constitutes the artistic work of the director.

5 Hegel would perhaps speak of *Aufhebung* here.
6 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 71.
7 Ivi, p. 78.

Having introduced these initial references to the theoretical elements that characterise the Adornian approach to this type of phenomena, we can now deal more directly with the enigma raised by the image of the moving waves. What gesture do they represent? Can we speak of a kind of *gesture of the landscape*? The blind necessity to which nature remains chained would lead us to think not; yet, we judge that same necessity always differently according to the melody it produces.

> The song of birds is found beautiful by everyone; no feeling person in whom something of the European tradition survives fails to be moved by the sound of a robin after a rain shower. Yet something frightening lurks in the song of birds precisely because it is not a song but obeys the spell in which it is enmeshed[8].

A spell similar to the one that imprisons birds in their song chains the waves to their own motion: and it is precisely through the encounter with this radical otherness that, sometimes, in artistic practices, the creative subject can see his or her actions transfigured into artistic work, in what Alessandro Bertinetto calls «a sort of oxymoronic passive activity»[9]. With Adorno, we have already approached this double-movement that seems to characterise artistic practices, an act of volition that aims at its own self-overcoming, an action that achieves its purpose only through its self-negation. Louis Lumière's film can provide us with a particular case study in which this "self-negation" of creative action is put into practice through the intervention of a non-human agent.

In this sense, the sea waves manifest the double role of *affirmative negation* that imprints its own internal kinetics on the work: in them we can observe a kind of counter-movement that holds up the very structure of the work[10]. The way Adorno describes

8 Ivi, p. 66.

9 A. Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2021, p. 45.

10 With the notion of "affirmative negation" I am attempting to make

the work of art as a "force field" can be helpful in this context: «Through its inner tension, the work is defined as a force field even in the arrested moment of its objectivation. The work is at once the quintessence of relations of tension and the attempt to dissolve them»[11]. From this point of view, the work can be seen as the dynamic coexistence of its own centrifugal and centripetal forces emanating from the material itself. The anthropologist Tim Ingold described something similar, reusing the notion of "force field", in the autoethnographic account of making wicker baskets with his students.

> From the start, I think, many students were surprised by the recalcitrant nature of the material. In a finished basket, the willow seems to sit so naturally there as if it had always been meant to fall into that shape and was merely fulfilling the role for which it was predestined. But the willow did not want to be bent into shape. Sometimes it put up a fight, springing back and striking the weaver in the face. [...] Then we realised that it was actually this resistance, the friction set up by branches bent forcibly against each other, that held the whole construction together. The form was not imposed on the material from without, but was rather generated in this force field, comprised by the relations between the weaver and the willow[12].

explicit, in a more direct and appropriate way for the context here, a precise characteristic of the Adornian concept of "determinate negation" (*bestimmte Negation*). A negation that does not nullify the form of knowledge to which it is opposed but, rather, identifies in it what can and must be preserved and, consequently, produces from it a new form of knowledge. The waves do not nullify the director's project and the work of the rowers but, instead, *reroute it*: saving its core. Cfr. S. Petrucciani, *Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy, Society, and Aesthetics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2021, pp. 19-21.

11 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 292.

12 Ingold, *Making*, cit., pp. 22-23.

The *resistance of the material* experienced during the creative process anticipates, in a certain sense, the "robustness" of the work in the finished product. That which, *in fieri*, endangered their realisation testifies, ex post, to their success: just as Hercules, to protect himself, girds himself with the skin of the defeated lion at Nemea, in a similar way Lumière's film can resist the passage of time thanks to the (un)tamed alterity. From this perspective, the production process of Louis Lumière's film comes very close to the theoretical approach developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to describe the relationship between myth and progress through the process of domination of nature. Tim Ingold's reflection on artistic practices and their relationship with nature can add an interesting perspective to the debate heir to that tradition. The strict aut-aut between the terror of nature and its domination (Naturbeherrschung) risks reproducing, even in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that same tragic mythology that Horkheimer and Adorno intend to analyse[13]; Ingold, on the other hand, through the concept of "correspondence" can propose an alternative way out of the absolutist claim of that crossroads. Ingold elaborates the concept of "correspondence" to describe the interaction between maker and material during the creative process: «In a nutshell, my thesis is that making is a correspondence between maker and material, and that is the case as much in anthropology and archaeology as it is in art and architecture»[14]. A more detailed analysis of the implications of this approach within the context of the film under consideration will follow; for the time being, the focus will stay on Ingold's engagement with wicker baskets. From that account we can borrow the image of the "force field" – a notion also employed by Adorno – to describe the scene unfolding before us in Lumière's film.

13 «Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self». In M. Horkheimer - T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, eng. trans. by J. Cumming, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, cit., p. 25.
14 T. Ingold, *Making*, cit., p. XI.

If we frame the film in question as a force field, we can point to three main movements/forces within it: the boat trying to leave the harbour, the waves pushing it back in a different direction, and the women with the little girls waving goodbye to those departing. These "forces" are linked to each other in a network of mutual connectivity and as such must be examined, in their reciprocal and inextricable interconnection; and not, instead, in their separate singularities[15]. The forces present here can therefore only be grasped in their complexity if they are viewed in a common frame and we are also guided by the formal structure of the film itself in favouring this type of reading. The fixed framing on the long shot does not offer us any zoom on a particular detail and, in this way, does not justify any kind of excluding gaze focused on the fragment: we are not invited to carry out a vivisection of the visual texture. This type of structure is not a choice of the Lumière brothers; rather, it is the direct manifestation of the filmmaking grammar in which the medium of film found itself in the first moments of its birth. The camera merely recorded without interruption what was placed in front of it until the end of the film: spatio-temporal continuity with the filmed phenomenon was one of the characteristic features of that early cinema[16].

Early cinema, according to Massimo Carboni, was strongly exposed to random and unforeseen elements (such as the sea waves) and this *exposure to the uncontrollable* was almost its defining feature due to the "constituent phase" that cinema was going through. «Situations and facts that are selected and laid out according to ordering principles and signifying intentions that are still very weak and precarious, following codes and rules that substantially did not pre-exist their empirical application. We

15 In this regard, the reflection Giovanni Matteucci offers of the aesthetic as a privileged "field" for the study of the "experience-with" (esperienza-con) seems particularly relevant. Cfr. G. Matteucci, *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione*, Carocci, Roma 2019, pp. 37-71.
16 Cfr. M. Carboni, *La mosca di Dreyer*, Jaca Book, Milano 2007, p. 20.

are in a constituent phase»[17]. This initial phase of *normative precariousness* is therefore particularly interesting for us because it guaranteed greater possibilities of interaction between the profilmic and the off-screen, the expected and the unforeseen, and, to use Ingold's coordinates, between the maker and the material. In this sense, this initial phase of filmmaking constitutes an aesthetic laboratory for experimenting with practices of *artistic porosity*. «In the concreteness of the aesthetic field, the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity are porous»[18]. This manifests itself with even greater force in all those productions that unfolded outdoors, *en plein air*, due to the impossibility of ignoring, in those contexts, atmospheric agents: an unexpected gust of wind, a passing cloud, a wave bigger than the others[19]. The interest in these unforeseen "details" was by no means foreign to the Lumière contemporaries and, in this regard, Carboni reports the reaction of an exceptional spectator: George Méliès.

> In *Le Goûter de bébés*, one sees two fussy parents - the mother is Madame Lumière herself - intent on feeding their little girl: who is a little recalcitrant, a little eats, a little grimaces. Méliès does not care, it is not the mannered and somewhat perverse family picture that attracts him. Rather, his eye is enraptured and, as the French say, *medusé*, by the leaves of the trees waving in the wind in the background of the image of the scene being filmed. He is enraptured, attracted, by what *should not* attract, by an unintentional detail, by an entirely contingent detail, by a supremely involuntary effect. Neither planned nor organised by the director, but neither cancelled nor rejected[20].

17 *Ibidem*.

18 G. Matteucci, *Estetica e natura umana*, cit., p. 38.

19 On the "fluctuating" nature of natural beauty Adorno expresses himself more directly in Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 71.

20 M. Carboni, *La mosca di Dreyer*, cit., p. 22. Carboni probably refers to the film *Repas de bébé*.



Louis Lumière,
Le Repas de bébé
-
(1895)

We must first point out two major differences between this film and *Boat leaving the port*. The first lies in the position within the frame that the non-human agent occupies: the windblown leaves are in the background while the sea waves are at the centre of the image. The second difference, partly deriving from the first, lies in the fact that the leaves in the background do not influence the action of the actors in the foreground at all, while the waves, as already pointed out, not only interact with the actors but also significantly change the initial project of the film itself.

Of course, after having stressed the normative fragility of this "constitutive phase" of the early cinema, one could also question the very idea of a definite project pre-existing the shooting, but such a reading would completely ignore the *living traces* left on the film: the title, the elliptical motion of the boat and the women ready to bid farewell to the departing. The *mise en scene*, even if partially disregarded by the final result, testifies to a precise intention; and, indeed, it is precisely in that incongruity between *mise en scene* and final result, between wanting and happening (between theatre and cinema?), that we can detect that surplus of the filmic image that is an inexhaustible source

of wonder and questioning, the cause of what Adorno would probably call the work's "enigmatic nature"[21].

Let us now focus on one specific element of that "incongruity" and turn our gaze to the women and girls on the pier, at the margins of the image and, so far, at the margins of our discussion. What are we to think of a greeting that is not followed by a departure? The gesture of greeting someone who is not leaving invites reflection on the gesture itself, which, separated from the events that are expected to follow it and exposed to the "risk of its own failure"[22], manifests by metonymy the uncertain process of artistic practices. The gesture of greeting, in fact, finds no direct connection in the departing due to the unexpected intervention of the waves and, like the motion of the boat in the film's finale, remains suspended[23]. This suspension of the gesture allows for a deeper analysis of it: the fact that it is untied from the consequential greeting-departure chain projects it into that dimension of temporal suspension that recalls, in some respects, the "new layers" of reality revealed by what Walter Benjamin calls the "optical unconscious"[24]. The gesture, frozen in this dimension of suspension, manifests an internal tension within the image itself: a tension that, even more so when put in relation to the other micro-suspensions and micro-tensions of the frame, can make us think of the filmic image as an example of that dialectical image theorised by Benjamin. For this specific case, its reception into Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is particularly pertinent.

> In art something momentary transcends; objectivation makes the artwork into an instant. Pertinent here is Benjamin's formulation of a dialectic at a standstill,

21 Cfr. T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 118-136.

22 A. Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*, cit., p. 66.

23 The crucial role of this "suspended temporality" is also at the core of Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the gesture. Cfr. G. Agamben, *Per un'ontologia e una politica del gesto*, «Giardino di studi filosofici», Quodlibet, 2018.

24 See W. Benjamin, *On Photography*, eng. trans. by E. Leslie, Reaktion Books, London 2015, pp. 67-68.

> which he developed in the context of his conception of a dialectical image. If, as images, artworks are the persistence of the transient, they are concentrated in appearance as something momentary. To experience art means to become conscious of its immanent process as an instant at a standstill[25].

Once again, the Adornian theme of art as a constant attempt to immortalise the transitory, the ephemeral, the precarious returns. In the interrupted gesture, suspended in its becoming, this dynamic between transience and continuity finds a privileged place of manifestation: the dialectical nature of this type of image allows us to preserve, in all its dynamism, the movement of the creative process within the "finished" product. The film, in a certain sense, thus retains *the traces* of its own constitutive process. Bertinetto, searching for the manifestations of improvisational action in artistic work, refers precisely to this notion of "trace" to describe the relationship between finished product and creative process. «[...] viewers will be surprised by the unpredictability of the work and will pay attention to the traces of the artistic production in the product itself: a thicker and abrupt brushstroke, a surprise-effect or a not-finished character of the snapshot, a fluctuating subjective viewpoint of the moving image»[26]. Bertinetto is not concerned here with the intricate (and perhaps inextricable) relationship between the intentional and non-intentional typical of artistic practices, but rather with the relationship between the viewers of the work and the elements of improvisation typical of artistic work[27]. The character of the *unfinished*, which we have already highlighted in describing the interrupted motion of the boat and the suspended gesture of the women on the jetty, here with Bertinetto takes on the value of a *trace*. Trace of what then? Trace of an interruption, trace of a non-dominated otherness, trace of that artistic work that

25 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 84.
26 Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*, cit., p. 66.
27 For Bertinetto any artistic practice contains elements of improvisation.

goes beyond the dry dualism between intentional action and random contingency. In our case, we do not see the concrete acts of improvisation (which might follow the intervention of the waves) in their most extensive unfolding because the film runs out before: in this sense, therefore, Lumière's work, rather than a manifestation of a certain type of artistic improvisation, can be seen as an exemplary manifestation of its preconditions, the unripe promise of an art yet to come[28]. The notion of trace can however help us to identify in the image those unforeseen outbreaks that, in their reciprocal and contingent co-constitution, generate that "force field" through which the work becomes manifest.

At this point, attention can be turned back to the interaction between the various "forces" visible on the screen, with a focus on Ingold's approach to the processes of interaction between the maker and the material. But what kind of material are we dealing with when we talk about waves and wind? We have referred to an indeterminate interaction between human and non-human agents, but how does this interaction play out within the image? To emphasise the importance of wind and air in our interactions with the world, Ingold describes the activity of flying a kite.

> The kite's flying is surely the combined effect of the flyer, the kite and the air. The dance of agency, it turns out, is a threesome in which each partner acts upon, and is in turn acted upon by, the other two. Take away any one partner, and the performance will fail. [...] The air, then, was the missing link that activated the kite, allowing an action potential that was already immanent within it - in its very construction - to be expressed in motion[29].

28 By this I do not intend to deny that in Lumière's film there are already elements of improvisation as Bertinetto understands it: that is, intrinsically linked to artistic practices in their uncertain and contingent nature. By speaking of "preconditions" I intend to emphasise the foundational and emergent nature of the early cinema: linked to aesthetic-narrative "choices" imposed by the technological grammar in which it was immersed.
29 Ingold, *Making*, cit., p. 99.



George S. Fleming and Edwin S. Porter, *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* - *(1901)*

The aesthetic-narrative possibilities of such interactions between human and non-human agents were experimented with, even deliberately, from the earliest years of development of the film medium. As early as 1901, in George S. Fleming and Edwin S. Porter's *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City*, the air was used as an active agent of the profilmic. The short film, consisting of a single still shot like Lumière's work, shows the long shot of a New York street at the beginning of the 20th century: there are people walking, people riding trams, people driving carriages, everyone is busy with their own errands.

For most of the film, we do not know what or whom to focus on until, towards the end, we see a young couple gradually approaching us from the background. The two walk side by side towards the lens and, as they pass through one of the many grids of New York's underground tunnels, we see the woman's dress suddenly lifted by the jet of air sweeping over her from below. After having tamed the "unexpected", the two continue their walk with happy smiles on their faces.

The filmmakers have prepared the scene masterfully, the empty void we are faced with in the first 60 seconds of the film is only an apparent void. After all, as Ingold reminds us when



George S. Fleming and Edwin S. Porter, *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* - *(1901)*

describing the activity of flying the kite: «Because the air is invisible, we had temporarily forgotten about it»[30]. But how can we attribute agency to air, an entity that, by its nature, «is the very antithesis of embodied agency»[31]?

To move in this direction, we must leave behind us not only the sharp division between subject and object to which much of the Western philosophical tradition has accustomed us but also the very notions of subject and object as independent entities that are always already given[32]. The fluttering dress of the protagonist allows us to perceive the passage of this invisible agent and, at the same time, the air rising from below enlivens the presence of the woman in the foreground by interacting with her dress. The dress, in other words, is the active and indispensable medium through which the "correspondence" between woman and air can be established: «It is not that you need air to interact with a kite; rather, you need a kite to correspond

30 *Ibidem*.

31 *Ivi*, p. 100.

32 In this regard, Nicola Perullo's recent study is a privileged interlocutor for anyone wishing to approach the field of aesthetics by overcoming these kinds of dualisms. Cfr. N. Perullo, *Aesthetics without objects and subjects*, Bloomsbury, London 2025.

with the air»[33]. From this point of view we could also frame the woman's fluttering dress as the material concentration of that «osmotic threshold of activity and passivity»[34] that for Matteucci characterises the entire aesthetic field.

But what kind of correspondence are we dealing with in Lumière's film? The boat, with the men on board, enables the mediation between the filmmaker and the waves of the sea: a mediation necessary, according to Ingold, for the success of any kind of correspondence between us and the world. It is precisely the constitutively fragile nature of the rowing boat, *without an engine*[35], that makes possible the success of that triadic relationship described by Ingold.

> The practised woodsman brings down the axe so that its blade enters the grain and follows a path already incorporated into the timber through its previous history of growth, when it was part of a living tree. As it finds its way through the wood, splitting it as it goes, the axe is guided – as Deleuze and Guattari say – by "the variable undulations and torsions of the fibres". This is not an imposition of form on matter but a bringing out of forms, more topological than geometrical, that are latent in the variations of the material itself, in its energetic lines of tension and compression[36].

The uncertain motion of the boat, searching for its own path through the sea waves, is at times reminiscent of the movement of the axe searching for the path already traced within the log. A motorboat would obviously not have to worry about the con-

33 T. Ingold, *Making*, cit., p. 101.

34 G. Matteucci, *Estetica e natura umana*, cit., p. 108.

35 I focused on the possibilities of broadening our perceptual horizon offered by a certain type of technological development in a study on the uncontrollability of the film editing process. See V. Cerulli, *Montage As a Space for Resonance: Between Dialectical Praxis and Theoretical Tensions*, in «PHILM. Rivista di filosofia e cinema», n. 3, 2024, pp. 31-49.

36 Ingold, *Making*, cit., p. 45.

tingent outbreaks of its surroundings and would simply proceed straight on its way, just as a chainsaw would easily cut through any log without paying much attention to the possible "paths" already present within the wood. But where would that unhindered course then lead us? Would we still be so fascinated by the Lumière film, 130 years after its release, if we had seen a boat leaving the harbour and disappearing behind the jetty in front of us? Isn't it precisely that *false start* that shackles our gaze to the screen even today? It is precisely thanks to that forced interruption, that suspended ending, that the signifying fertility of the image can go well beyond the end of the film: calling on the imagination of the viewer to participate[37].

At this point, Adorno's initial reflection on the "blindness" of nature as opposed to the ability of artworks to "open their eyes" manifests itself as the initial moment of a wider process from which a less Manichean picture can emerge[38].

> If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent; art thus exposes itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction between the idea of making the mute eloquent, which demands a desperate effort, and the idea of what this effort would amount to, the idea of what cannot in any way be willed[39].

Perhaps this is the gesture of the landscape we initially alluded to, an eloquent involuntariness, a nature finally capable of opening its eyes: no longer blind because no longer invisible to us, no longer mute because we finally started listening.

---

37 It is in this direction that Matteucci argues, contra Jon Elster, regarding the "aesthetic achievement" (riuscita estetica) of the incompleteness of Stendhal's novel *Lucien Leuwen*. Cfr. Matteucci, *Estetica e natura umana*, cit., pp. 73-81.

38 Another possible way to reason about natural phenomena in a non-mechanistic manner would be to start from Kant's "reflective judgement". Unfortunately, there is no room to elaborate further on such a path here, but I would nevertheless like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the accurate suggestion.

39 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 78.