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Exhilaration and innovative vision. From "transparent eyeball" to a new mode of perception

Abstract

In *Nature* Emerson describes the ecstatic experience of an individual recovering his «original relation to the universe» by becoming a «transparent eyeball», a vision in which the boundaries between subjectivity and the external world have disappeared. This same dream of a total vision can be found in Münsterberg's reflections on the aesthetic possibilities of the cinematic medium in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Following these seminal intuitions and Sitney's work about Brakhage and Mekas, this paper explores Emerson's role in both early American film theory and modern experimental practice.

Keywords

Münsterberg - Emerson - Brakhage - vision - spectatorship

Reconsidering Münsterberg's aesthetics

Hugo von Münsterberg, who arrived in Cambridge from Germany in 1892, had taken charge of the psychological laboratory at Harvard on William James' invitation. After having built his reputation as one of the most famous academics in the United States, he quickly became considered the founding father of applied psychology[1]. Yet, as far as film theory is concerned, his name has ended up in oblivion. In the introduction of his seminal book about cinema, *The Photoplay*, published in 1916, right before his sudden death, he describes himself as a recent "convert" to film after having been blown away by Annette Kellerman's performance in *Neptune's Daughter*, a silent fantasy film directed by Herbert Brennon and released in 1914[2]. Since then, *The Photoplay* has been treated as film theory's first example of the cognitive approach to movies, focusing brilliantly on both the physiological and psychological features of the cinematic experience, and developing a new philosophy of attention from a neo-Kantian aesthetic perspective.

Although his influence on film criticism and scholarship was sporadic compared to Vachel Lindsay's recently rediscovered prophecies about cinema, the deep originality of his approach and its reliance on the American Nineteenth-Century's theory of a new art to come, has both a historical and philosophical interest. Münsterberg's belief that films are free from the bonds of natural space, time and causality is the basis for a new understanding of the aesthetic experience, transcendentally rooted in the disappearance of the opposition between the external world

1 Among his most significant contributions to applied psychology, we can mention H. Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston-New York 1913, Id., *Business Psychology*, Le Salle Extension University, Chicago 1917, and Id., *Psychology: General and* Applied, Appleton, New York-London 1914.

2 See A. Langdale (ed.), *Hugo Münsterberg on Film. The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, Routledge, New York-London 2001, p. 8: «Last year, while I was travelling a thousand miles from Boston, I and a friend risked seeing *Neptune's Daughter*, and my conversion was raid».

and the human mind. To explain the popularity of the new art form and its aesthetic possibilities for the future, the philosopher considers that the exhilarating dimension of the «cinema of attractions»[3] should be further examined. His affinity for German idealism, especially for Kant[4], has occulted the unexpected connections between his theses and Ralph Waldo Emerson's reinterpretation of aesthetics based on a renewed notion of experience as shown in his first essay, *Nature*, published in 1836. This filiation can also be explained by Münsterberg's mentor, William James, who never fully acknowledged his debt to Emerson when he was teaching at Radcliffe College[5]. Not only is *Principles of Psychology* deeply related to Emerson, but it will also have a strong influence on another modernist film theorist, Gertrude Stein, who happened to be James' student.

Crossing the border between nineteenth and twentieth century versions of transcendentalism in order to define a main current within the arts has been a common tendency of the American aesthetic reflection; to escape the debate about modernism, simply because transcendentalism can be defined as an idealistic point of view on art. When Münsterberg wants to contribute to an emerging film theory, his perspective on the medium is idealistic, which means transcendental, and it includes the description of the aesthetic conditions of the filmic experience. Given that *Nature* is also considered the transcendentalist manifesto, the parallel between Münsterberg and Emerson can shed new light on the insistence of the spectatorial experience, which consists of a dislocation of the self. For both philosophers, the self – a wanderer for Emerson (or, rather, a lyrical and poetic "I"), a spectator for Münsterberg –

3 T. Gunning, *The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, its Spectator, and the The Avant-Garde*, in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 381-388.

4 See D. Fredericksen, *The Aesthetic of isolation in film theory: Hugo Münsterberg*, Arno Press, New York 1977, and N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.

5 See R. Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1987.

finds in aesthetics a way to have a meaningful and harmonious experience and to reestablish a relationship with ordinary life. Therefore, we suggest coming back to Emerson's dream of an overwhelming and exhilarating experience described in visual terms and through the well-known metaphor of "a transparent eyeball", even if he did not witness the birth of cinematography. This dramatized episode of the free abandonment to God and Nature is an epiphanic moment described by a personal narrative voice, whose dream is to disappear as an individuated self and blend into a glasslike world.

This specific use of Emerson's theses and their relevance in film studies has become more and more obvious, as two well-known philosophical paths have shown. For Stanley Cavell, classical Hollywood cinema inherited Emerson's problematics[6]. P. Adams Sitney[7], on the other hand, argues that American avant-garde filmmakers should also be considered heirs to Emerson's aesthetics of exhilaration and innovative vision. Put simply, Cavell's interpretation of Emerson's moral perfectionism insists on ethical stakes, whereas Sitney tackles the phenomenological shift of the essays. Claiming that these filmmakers followed Emerson's suggestions without knowing the source (which is also a way to understand Cavell's starting point), he writes: «For the American visual artists who inherited the exhilaration of the transparent eyeball, the dissolution of the self within a divine afflatus often entails the hypothetical silencing or disengagement of language»[8]. He shows how significant and yet repressed the reference to Emerson is for the American cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. In so far as the "transparent eyeball" is a metaphor for the feeling that nature is absorbing the individual in a transcendental experience[9], it can also be

6 S. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2004.

7 P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

8 *Ivi*, p. 8.

9 In his introduction, Emerson starts by asking a genuine question that will pave the way for American philosophy escaping "the courtly muses of Eu-

read as a cinematic pattern, or rather as Stanley Cavell calls it, a «premonition of film»[10].

The fantasy about an ecstatic experience, which consists of the absorption of the self in a borderless world, can apply to Münsterberg's insistence on the "phenomenon of attention" – one of the three categories he uses to analyze film aesthetics. In other words, this paper aims to find the missing link between Emerson and American avant-garde cinema by reconsidering the role of the early American film theory in defining their cinematic vision instead of taking this affinity for granted. Hence, my critical ambition is twofold: first, I would like to highlight the specificity of the American film theory, which is often disavowed when compared to the European debates of the early 20th century; secondly, keeping in mind Sitney's definition of American vanguardism as an Emersonian practice, my goal is to show that the so called second avant-garde[11] appeared as a characteristically and quintessentially American form, precisely because of its intellectual debt to transcendentalism. I will first recall Münsterberg's major statements about the suspension of physical laws in the cinematic vision to understand the relevance of Emerson's metaphor in the psychological approach to film. Finally, following Sitney's analysis, I will open the reflection to Stan Brakhage's visionary conception of the camera eye.

Münsterberg's dream of a new vision

While the poet and film theorist Vachel Lindsay supported Münsterberg's original contribution to the new field, Victor O.

rope": «Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?» in R.W. Emerson, *Nature* [1836], in Id., *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Modern Library, New York 2000, p. 22.

10 S. Cavell, «An Emerson Mood», in Id., *Senses of Walden*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1992, p.150.

11 See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.

Freeburg, who was teaching film aesthetics at Columbia University from 1915 to 1917, encouraged his students to read Epes W. Sargent's *The Technique of the Photoplay* (1913) to learn how to write a scenario, and Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) to understand the relationship between film and the other art forms. He also assigned Münsterberg's work about the spectatorial absorption, characteristic of a completely new aesthetic experience. A few years later, Lewis Jacobs, synthesizing for the first time the history of early American cinema in *The Rise of the American Film*, writes: «Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* and Münsterberg's *The Photoplay* are the first truly critical and significant books on film»[12]. The critical response to Münsterberg's study was generally good and the reviews concentrated more on the psychology section than on the aesthetics one[13]. Indeed, his scientific capacity to classify and organize the psychological functions required for the aesthetic experience constituted his most significant insight about the new medium. Thus, the reviews reinforced his image as a prominent psychologist rather than as a philosopher of art. Moreover, Münsterberg's key analogy between the psychological laws of the human mind and the mechanisms of film gave a solid scientific foundation to a nascent film theory devoted to the defense of the artistic legitimacy of cinema and its independence from theater.

Unlike Ricciotto Canudo[14], Louis Delluc, Béla Balázs, Sergei Eisenstein or Rudolf Arnheim, these American contributors to early film theory and criticism have been forgotten and neglect-

12 L. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1939.

13 See R.J. Harberski Jr., *It's only a movie. Films and critics in American culture*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2001, p.28: «The book had received enthusiastic responses initially, then suffered neglect from a public unaware of Münsterberg's name, an industry unwilling to heed his advice, and a community of intellectuals disposed to ignore him as a pioneer in cinematic theory».

14 Ricciotto Canudo published his manifesto *The Birth of the Sixth Art* in 1911. Delluc started writing on film in 1918, whereas Moussinac and Eisenstein published their first articles in 1925. See R. Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993.

ed for decades. In his dissertation[15] which remains one of the very rare sources on the history of American criticism[16], M.O. Lounsbury only refers briefly to Münsterberg as a marginal and outdated representative of an idealistic conception of film. Laura Marcus[17] makes the same observation about the total lack of studies devoted to early American critics and film theorists[18]. It was only in the 1940s, when James Agee became *Time*'s film critic and a new generation of moviegoers was born, that the American contribution to film theory and movie culture was taken seriously. Major critics like Manny Farber, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris later, finally revived this tradition of film criticism[19], which first appeared in 1909 with Frank E. Woods' reviews in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*. This theoretical disdain comes also from the fact that Münsterberg's aesthetics do not embrace the specific stakes of the avant-garde cinema and the artistic revolution in general. Münsterberg stayed out of most of the debates about the artistic possibilities of the new medium and their experimental discovery.

Unlike Lindsay, who was interested in showing possibilities to future filmmakers, Münsterberg concentrated his research on the cinematic illusion to write the first treatise on spectatorship. To him, the cinema as modern magic[20] is primarily bound with the mental processes of the spectator. In other words, the miracle of depth and movement happens because the basis of

15 See M. Lounsbury, *The Origins of American Film Criticism 1909-1939*, Arno Press, New York 1973.

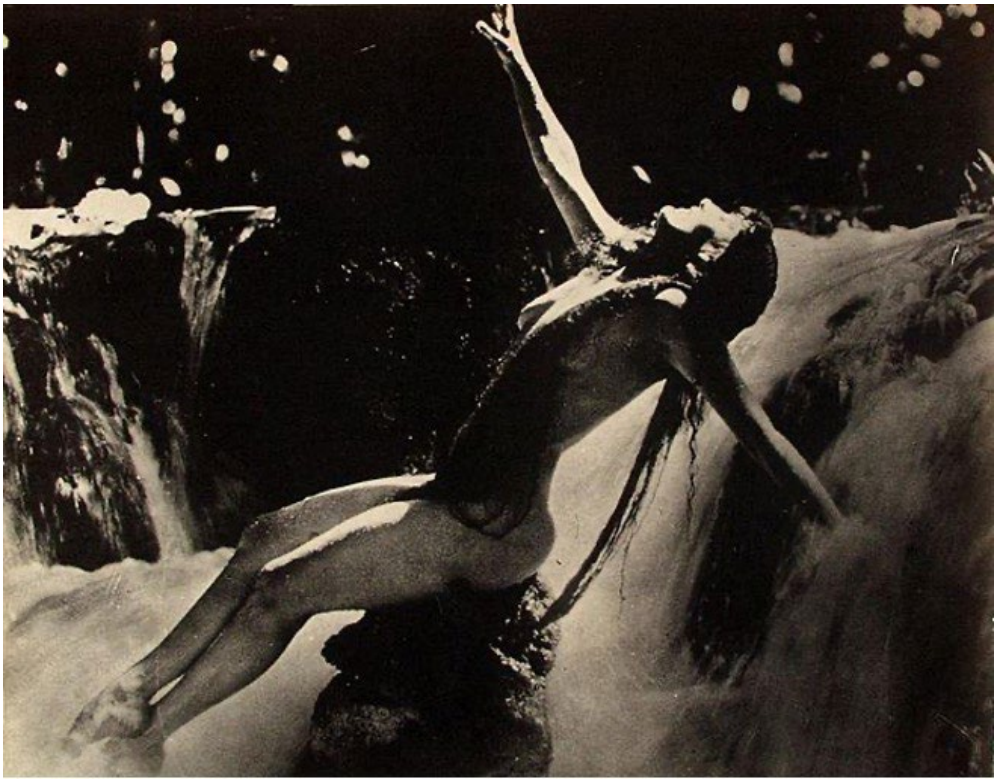
16 Along with P. Lopate (ed.), *American Movie Critics. An Anthology from the Silents until Now,* The Library of America, New York 2008.

17 See L. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

18 This observation also applies to critics and theorists of the 1930s such as Otis Ferguson and Harry Alan Potamkin, or to Iris Barry and Gilbert Seldes for example.

19 For an in-depth analysis of that question, see David Bordwell, *The Rhapsodes. How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2016.

20 See R. O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 1999.



Neptune's Daughter, 1914, Herbet Brennon
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Annette Kellermann performance

the medium resembles the human mind. His antirealist position differs from more common assumptions that the strength of the movies is to reproduce the physical world. By locating the origin and the power of movies in the psychological realm of the mind, he suggests that «an aesthetic idea» leads «the internal development of the moving pictures»[21]. From a modernist perspective, this idea is in fact a promise of a new vision, or rather of the restoration of a natural vision[22]. Münsterberg sees the birth of the motion picture in terms of an external world given back to vision. According to him, the nearness of physical reality is the main difference between cinema and theater.

However, the proximity and nearness of reality, the abolition of the separation between the human mind and the ordinary world, are precisely the challenge of the modern definition of art[23]. The extraordinary popularity of the new medium comes

21 A. Langdale (ed.), *Hugo Münsterberg on Film: The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, cit., p. 54.

22 This hope is also at the core of Béla Balázs' conception as well as in Panofsky's and Benjamin's writings. See F. Casetti, *Eye of the century:Film, experience, modernity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

23 The dialectics of distance and closeness, objectivity and subjectivity are no-

from its capacity to show an intensified and condensed version of ordinary life. In Emerson's terms, the «original relationship to the universe»[24] is made possible through the mechanism of projection because the motion picture does much more than simply record the reality of facts: it isolates natural beings from a ceaseless flow of change[25], it identifies specific times in an endless process of metamorphosis and hypostatizes meanings of phenomena[26]. Having broadly laid out the issues of film's relation to reality, to the human mind, and its status as an independent art, Münsterberg continues his analysis by studying the psychological significance of cinema. He divides the first part into categories (depth and movement, attention, memory and imagination, emotions) arranged in hierarchical fashion from lower to higher perceptual and mental processes.

Distancing himself from the myth of persistence of vision, according to which the viewer passively receives visual impressions, he argues that the illusion of motion consists of a synthetic experience. In other words, the viewer's mind unifies and gives sense to the succession of images. The relationship between the spectator and the photoplay must be described as a co-creation of meaning in an experience characterized by a free play of imagination and understanding. Distinguishing our common use of attention in daily life from the way this faculty is involved in the theatrical mechanism, Münsterberg considers that cinematic attention should be analyzed as a new form of perception. The way we look at filmic images, gradually leaving a state of consciousness which determines our voluntary attention in

toriously discussed by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and re-examined by Stanley Cavell in his reflection about the ontology of film.

24 R.W. Emerson, *Nature* [1836], cit. p.22.

25 According to Emerson, «the virtue of art lies in detachment, in sequestrating one object from the embarrassing variety», in R.W. Emerson, *Art* [1841], in Id., *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, cit., p. 448.

26 See R. W. Emerson, *The American Scholar* [1837], in Id., *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, cit., p. 106: «show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature».

practical life, indicates the transcendental nature of cinematic experience. Escaping the chaos of daily life, the spectator receives vivid, clear, and meaningful visual impressions that can be easily rearranged and reinterpreted by memory. In the language of the photoplay, the reshaping of our ordinary experiences in a cinematic experience is achieved by the mechanism of the close-up, as Münsterberg writes: «The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention»[27].

Behind this rigorous, scientific approach to film, Münsterberg seems also to be describing a dreamlike experience, and imagining the future development of the motion picture in an optative mood: «It is as if that outer world were woven into our mind and were shaped not through its own laws but by the acts of our attention»[28]. In his chapter about the role of memory, he continues: «It is as if reality has lost its own continuous connection and become shaped by the demands of our soul. It is as if the outer world itself became molded in accordance with our fleeting turns of attention or with our passing memory ideas»[29]. The projected world becomes a malleable material created by and for the human mind, dissolving the objective and physical reality into a free succession of images, emotions and ideas. One of the psychological requirements to have a true aesthetic experience is to be absorbed in a unique and specific setting, distinct from our normal life. What Münsterberg hopes for the new medium is not to get closer to reality by achieving its perfect representation, but to break the chains of the physical laws (space, time, causality) and gain freedom so that the spectators can experience a genuine relationship to the world viewed. Fundamentally, the cinematic apparatus works exactly like the human mind: the close-up is analogous to the faculty of attention, the flash-back is similar to memory, the editing resembles the association of ideas.

27 A. Langdale (ed.), *Hugo Münsterberg on Film. The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, cit., p. 87.
28 *Ivi*, p. 88.
29 *Ivi.*, p. 90.

In Münsterberg's view, cinema does not have to represent a world we already know but to make it appear in the spectator's mind as if for the first time. The audience is not only spellbound by a technical miracle but also attracted by an expanded vision. As a medium of the mind, cinema is a promise of emancipation for a modern subjectivity trapped in an inexplicable and trivial world. Furthermore, the cinematic spectator has learned to find pleasure and beauty in his own mental processes:

> The massive outer world has lost its weight, it has been freed from space, time, and causality, and it has been clothed in the forms of our own consciousness. The mind has triumphed over matter, and the pictures roll on with the ease of musical tones. It is a superb enjoyment which no other art can furnish us[30].

The inner world of cinema, unconnected and unburdened by reference to the outer world, is where an autotelic experience becomes possible, a formal contemplation freed from all practical contexts. Using Kantian terminology, Münsterberg explains that the cinematic sublimity happens when one does not perceive the difference between the outside world and himself, which goes much further than the common idea of an immersive experience.

Indeed, Münsterberg's description of the transcendental conditions of vision in filmic experience shares with Emerson the wish for an absolute visibility. In both contexts, the euphoric moment is one of mystic revelation, in which the individual experiences a transformation of the self through total immersion into the film world. If the outside world appeared encoded and mysterious before, it suddenly becomes symbolically understandable and materially visible.

30 A. Langdale (ed.), *Hugo Münsterberg on Film. The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, cit., pp. 153-154.

Transparent eyeball, ca. 1836-1838, Christopher Pearse Cranch
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Christopher Pearse Cranch illustration to Emerson's Nature, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Emerson's epiphany: influences of a metaphor, from a "transparent eyeball" to Brakhage's camera eye

Emerson's first essay, *Nature*, published in 1836, opens with a lamentation on the loss of meaning in American culture, and with a call for rebuilding our relationship to nature, art, history, and culture in general. In his later writings, this tension will become a usual starting point for his reflections. One year later, *The American Scholar* begins with a bitter analysis of the modern state of fragmentation and ends with a hope for a new American art to come. The metaphor of the transparent eyeball appears as a turning point, or rather as a moment of synthesis, which articulates the *tabula rasa* theory with the formulation of a profession of faith for transcendentalism. Already preaching his gospel of self-reliance, he places the self at the very heart of his epistemological and metaphysical system, as the unique source of perception: «I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God»[31]. In *The Photoplay*,

31 R.W. Emerson, *Nature* [1836], cit., p.26.

Münsterberg refers to this same idea of transparency when he uses the very common image of the window which stands for the cinematic screen. He compares it to a glass plate in front of a stage, which suggests the idea of transparency and leads us back to Emerson's ecstatic experience: «If the pictures are well taken and the projection is sharp and we sit at the right distance from the picture, we must have the same impression as if we looked through a glass plate into a real space»[32]. In the cinematic experience, as in Emerson's scene, the new vision becomes possible thanks to the decentering of the self, who is both the origin of perception and the vanishing point of an unlimited frame. In these conditions, the human mind and physical reality can finally coincide. In the Emersonian context, during this metamorphosis, the self understands what harmony, beauty and unity mean and how these notions apply to nature. According to Münsterberg, these aesthetic categories should be used as criteria for judgment in a film theory and criticism that are yet to be developed.

The annihilation of the self, absorbed in a glasslike world, immersed in a continuous flow of visual impressions, triggers a shift of attention. Suddenly, our attention is fully projected into the life around us, as if the inner and the outer worlds were no longer facing each other, so that Münsterberg writes: «It is the only visual art in which the whole richness of our inner life, our perceptions, our memory, and our imagination, our expectation and our attention can be made living in the outer impressions themselves»[33]. In other writings, Emerson describes the potential of art in terms of a way to make nature appear as a translucent interface, full of symbols, and analogically similar to the human mind. By introducing this metaphor at the very beginning of the essay, Emerson asserts the vast powers of the human mind ("I see all") in forming a new perceptive experience, in which it acknowledges the objectivity of the world. In

32 A. Langdale (ed.), *Hugo Münsterberg on Film. The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, cit., p.15.
33 *Ivi*, p.178.

other words, through the ecstatic experience of a *total vision*, the individual becomes aware of his own power: "I am nothing" reflects a desire to disappear and to merge with the world.

Precisely because Emerson's poetics are deeply cinematic and visual, the transparent eyeball has been used in reference to the aesthetic potential of the camera to absorb and be absorbed into nature, to change the world into a transparent surface instead of a reflexive one. Insofar as "the act of seeing and the seen, the seer and spectacle […] are one", the camera fulfills the dream of a transcendental vision, which will be pursued by some of Emerson's readers identified by Sitney.

Metaphors on Vision: towards an Emersonian redefinition of vision

When Stan Brakhage develops his mystical theory of film in *Metaphors on Vision*, published in 1963, he explains how he intends to redefine cinematic vision by including dreams, memories, peripheral sightings, and even the things we see with our eyes shut. He articulates a theory of filmic seeing with a renewed conception of perception based on the exploration of the immediate reality of the mind. Retroactively, the text clarifies some of aesthetic choices he made in one of his most highly acclaimed films, *Anticipation of the night*, released in 1958. The film is entirely composed of double exposure effects, glimpses, and light rays, and does not have any narrative structure. We simply follow the peregrinations of an individual struggling in a network of visual signs and searching for a renewed vision of the world in his careful observation of everyday reality. Brakhage imagines a purely sensorial movie about and structured by the nature of the seeing experience – that is, how one encounters a sight, how images reappear in our memory, and how some visual impressions affect our vision. The origin of Brakhage's project is an attempt to restore an «original relationship to the universe» in an Emersonian perspective, by exploring what seeing means before seeing, and how light, colors,

depth, and movement are perceived. He wishes to abolish the problem of representation by trying to merge human sight with the camera's mechanized vision. In Brakhage's words, the transparent eyeball is an equivalent to what he calls "the camera eye" and requires the use of personal cinematic techniques because the immediate and individual experience is the ground of all truth and all artistic value. In saying so, Brakhage borrows from Emerson's most famous theses exposed in *Nature* (1836), *Self-Reliance* (1841) and *Experience* (1844), and transforms them into semi-orphic theoretical statements. In Sitney's study of the second American avant-garde, Emersonian aesthetic problematics are considered the source of Brakhage's most radical experimentations on film, in which the filmmaker tries to convey the ecstasies of moments when the individual visually experiences the world with such intensity that he gets the impression of disappearing into it. Fundamentally, Brakhage agrees with Emerson and Münsterberg's psychological theory of cinema because he believes in the profound unity of the mental and the physical realms. He shares with the two philosophers a conviction that the external world is as fluid[34], fluctuating, and dynamic as the psychic one, so that cinema is really the medium of the mind.

In *Metaphors of Vision*, the theory of the "Camera-Eye" follows Brakhage's prophetic opening paragraph about the need to find an "untutored" vision:

> Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything, but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception[35].

34 See R.W. Emerson, *Circles* [1841], in Id., *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, cit., p. 410: «There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees».
35 See S. Brakhage, *Metaphors of Vision* [1963], in P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *Anthology Film Archive*, New York 2017.

Eye Myth, 1972,
Stan Brakhage
-
A screenshot revealing the "hidden" image of a man.

In Brakhage's view, the experience of the transparent eyeball is ecstatic but not passive and should be described as the perpetual and erratic movement of an individual. Instead of a geometric eye, determined by the compositional perspective, he defends the idea of a wandering eyeball that confronts itself with the meaningful yet opaque physicality of the world. To become a transparent eyeball requires the embrace of a free vision, which does not consist of a passive reception of information, but of an active search for symbols. In other words, the individual must acknowledge a feeling of estrangement as a condition for the reconfiguration of the codes of visuality. Confronted by the multiple, contradictory, and confusing character of reality, the transparent eyeball can no longer be considered an ordering principle. Unlike Münsterberg, Brakhage does not dream of an aesthetic experience that can organize the chaos of experience, harmonize the constant stream of stimuli, and clarify the position of the self. Cinema shows that the adventure of perception is deeply individual and inarticulable, which helps to explain why Brakhage only makes silent films. Paradoxically, his understanding of Emerson's dream of a transparent vision entails the possibility of what he calls the "closed-eye vision"

which refers to the perception of flashes and flares when we push in on our closed eyes[36]. Interested in every obstruction, imperfection, and impediment that resist the common myth of unmediated transparency[37], he suggests that an experimental approach to vision should show cinema as an imitation of the act of seeing.

As Sitney puts it: «For him, the act of making a film intensifies and makes conscious this perpetual process of vision. Any dramatic representation whatsoever is anathematized by him»[38]. Brakhage radicalizes both Münsterberg's metaphor of a glasslike world on screen, and Emerson's transparent eyeball, by showing the physiological origin of vision. To him, transparency does not mean clarity and immediate perception of the physical reality. Recapturing an original relationship to the universe, restoring an "untutored" vision, means acknowledging and celebrating the fundamental opacity of the external world.

Cinema as a transcendentalist dream

By bridging the gap between an experimental practice of cinema and a philosophical tradition, our aim has been to trace the origin of a common dream. Emerson's aesthetics consisted of a vision in which the self and the world merge together, thanks to a poetic gesture that submits physical reality to psychic laws. This dream, only sketched in Emerson's writings, finally became a reality when systemized in early film theory. We also established that Münsterberg's aesthetics of isolation could not be fully understood and treated as an original attempt to circumscribe the power of cinema without having a broader perspective on

36 M.F. Miller, *Stan Brakhage's Autopsy: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*», «Journal of Film and Video», vol. 70, n. 2, 2018, pp. 44-55.
37 See C. Dworkin, «Stan Brakhage, Agrimoniac», in D.E. James (ed.), *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2005.
38 P. Adams Sitney, *Brakhage and Modernism*, in T. Pendergast, S. Pendergast (eds.), *International Dictionary of Film and Filmmakers. Volume 2: Directors*, St. James Press, Farmington Hills 2001.

American aesthetics. The deeper meaning of the analogy between the camera and the eye has to do with a wish, a desire, a hope for overcoming a state of fragmentation experienced in our ordinary life. It is precisely the state of isolation, the filmic expression of reality as particular, that brings rest to the mind of the subject, and makes possible the ecstatic contemplation of the world. Restoring a vision, overcoming the difference between the mind and the external world, are different versions of a similar task assigned to art in both Emerson's and Münsterberg's writings. Müsterberg's einterpretation of idealism must be analyzed in the context of Emerson's understanding of the Kantian legacy in order to identify an artform which would hold that the mind is the ground of the cinematic spectacle. The relationship between Münsterberg and Emerson cannot be described as a casual intellectual affinity. The concept of isolation, which leads Münsterberg to develop a theory of attention, is central to Emerson as well, since they are both inspired by Kant's description of a beauty that cannot be subsumed under a concept. As we explained through Brakhage's example, the camera eye has a synthesizing power to integrate all the parts of reality in a defined vision, delimited by the screen. Therefore, going back to Emerson's philosophy of nature and perception means articulating the theoretical and poetical inspirations of avant-garde cinema with a neo-idealistic theory of film, which stresses the importance of the gaze that film claimed for the twentieth century[39].

Finally, Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball sheds a new light on the heuristic value – rather than its scientific legitimacy, as Noël Carroll recalls[40] – of Münsterberg's aesthetics. It also helps us understand Münsterberg's antirealist position. This cross-referenced interpretation of American avant-garde cinema clarifies the use of Emerson's writings by filmmakers like Brakhage and Mekas. As Sitney proved, the avant-garde

39 F. Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, cit.
40 N. Carroll, *Theorizing the moving image*, cit., chap. XIX, "Film/Mind Analogies: The Case of Hugo Münsterberg".

was deeply indebted to Emerson's conception of subjectivity and wished to reinvent the medium in order to achieve a cinema of personal expression that would exist beneath language. What explains this surprising rereading of transcendentalist philosophy is also the rediscovery of Münsterberg's pioneering work, thanks to its republishing in 1970. In the period's artistic turmoil, the redefinition of the purposes and possibilities of cinema was embraced by both filmmakers and theorists[41] who finally acknowledged Emerson's and Münsterberg's legacy in the American theory of film.

41 P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, cit.