



WASTELAND ARTS

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THE BIRTH OF A FLOWER

F. Percy Smith was not far from the David Attenborough of his day; a devoted naturalist whose educational films won the hearts of public and scientific audiences alike, bringing the wonders of biology into the domain of entertainment. In Smith's notebook, an extract from a newspaper described his work as "the highest achievement yet obtained in the combined efforts of science, art and enterprise."

Having impressed film entrepreneur Charles Urban with a magnified photograph of a bluebottle fly, Smith, then a clerk for the Board of Education, was given a camera to reveal and represent the secrets of nature. His early experiment in stop motion, *To Demonstrate How Spiders Fly*, released in 1909, features a mechanical arachnid weaving a web - an image he boldly claimed would cure people of their fear of the creature.

At the same time, he was quietly working on what would become his magnum opus: *The Birth of a Flower*. Through the use of candle wicks, pieces of mechano, door handles, and gramophone needles, Smith was able to procure automated photographs of blossoming flowers even in his absence. The result is equal parts mechanical ingenuity and visual poetry: hyacinths, snowdrops, roses, and Japanese lilies open and close with a delicate rhythm, the imperceptible movements that sustain all life rendered visible before our eyes.

This is a cinema of gentleness and beauty; of pure experimentation without irreverence or self-obsession. This is a film teeming with nascent possibility; a playful exhibition of new ways of seeing and understanding the world. But it is also the work of great patience and passion, for Smith devoted months to refining this craft before its magic was glimpsed by public audiences.

The Birth of a Flower is not the first use of time-lapse photography (or, as Smith termed it, 'speed magnification') - that achievement is owed, as far as I can tell, to Frederick S. Armitage's *Star Theatre* in 1901 - but the film most likely marks the first use of the technique to visualise familiar biological changes over extended periods of time. And, if nothing else, Smith's experiment consummated the marriage of science and spectacle, presenting non-human life as an appropriate subject of cinematic meditation and cinema as a worthy successor to the static arts.





Since the Industrial Revolution, technology has worked to overcome the inconveniences of time and space: vehicles allow us to traverse the world in a matter of hours, fibre-optic cables share and receive information at the speed of light. Photography, on the other hand, rescues impressions from the evanescence of time, delivering something of the present into the future; the gift of time-lapse, in particular, is the revelation of the slow and subtle, condensing phenomena occurring over hours and days to a matter of seconds.

In light of this, *The Birth of a Flower* is an understated aesthetic revolution; a discovery of new beauties within the ephemeral cyclicity of life. It is a still life painting imbued with vitality; a vanitas written in light and shadow. Time is stripped of its familiarity, the ordinary rendered sensational by a technology still in blossom.

WORDS BY JONNY ROGERS



STELLA DALLAS

Before the melodrama of a mother-daughter relationship begins, King Vidor's film sees the eponymous Stella, played by Barbara Stanwyck, fix her hair in a small kitchen mirror. She is young, poor, terribly pretty; a flower entombed in glass. She studies her face; eyes averted from the camera, though its presence is certainly felt and playfully acknowledged. In gazing at her beauty, and therein tempting the viewer to meet her gaze, she dangles the filmic representation of Stella as enfolded in the image of Stanwyck. Stella and Stanwyck siphon into one.

Starting with such a simple gesture of looking in a mirror, a gesture that yields a rare, steely moment of cinematic immortalisation, it becomes increasingly difficult to overstate how lucid Stanwyck's performance of Stella is. By lucid I refer to the impossibility of separating Stanwyck from Stella; Stella from Stanwyck. This is not simply because Stanwyck is so memorable as a performer, though she certainly is; she seeps through the veneer of fiction. Nor does this undermine her believability as an actor. But rather, because the film itself has much to do with the art of performance. Stella orients the narrative by performing various ideals of femininity before taking them to task. She begins as coquettish, starchy, timid. During unexpected motherhood, and as if incarnating the very object of her affections, she becomes silly, petulant, naive. Later, in the hopes of protecting her daughter in what has been described by some to be a gesture of maternal self-sacrifice — feigning exile to rid her daughter of an embarrassing mother — she is perceptive, pragmatic, selfless.

Despite being only eleven years older than Anne Shirley, who plays her daughter, and much to the help of padding, numerous pairs of stockings, and filling her cheeks with cotton wool, Stanwyck goes far to emphasise Stella's physical maturation. She shape-shifts from a woman self-aware and poised into one who is vulgar, a target of scrutiny. The montage of Stella transforming is all the more spectacular when one learns that Stanwyck actually bleached hair for the role; the first and only time in her career she opted for such authenticity. Indeed, ironically, playing Stella and therein undergoing one of the biggest physical transformations of her career renders Stanwyck hyper-visible beneath her character. It accentuates her virtuosity, no less her commitment, as a film star.



Stanwyck draws attention to herself as an actor by revealing the performance process in its variety; scene to scene, she looks, acts, and sounds strikingly different. The role of Stella is hers to sculpt; she traces the curvature of the character and liberates its nuance. Because of her nuance, Stella as a persona is not entirely legible — her decisions and subjectivity are often ambivalent. This ambivalence recalls the same air of command Stella asserts stood in front of the kitchen mirror, toying with the slippage between Stella and Stanwyck. Multitudinous by design, she segues between various modes of performance as if auditioning for disparate roles. I can play it all!

Stanwyck as celebrity, film star, and Stella carries a reflexive opacity. Inside the film, she utilises her opacity by deceiving those around her into believing her departure to South America; she painfully realises that her absence propels her daughter into high society (confirmed by an appropriate marriage). Outside the film, relishing the fiction itself, Stanwyck adapts; she dresses up; she blooms. Stanwyck, as ever, with all her idiosyncrasies, certainly does not fade into her character. She unearths its possibilities; the cinematic spotlight is a luminous halo.

This reflexivity is best acknowledged by the film's ending. Amidst biblical rain, Stella peers into her daughter's wedding through a large window, remaining unseen. Her task of upwardly mobilising her daughter is complete. She wanders away, tearfully, triumphantly, from the window, itself a sort of looking glass, one pointed to a life she could never personally attain. Anonymous to those surrounding her on the dark street, she strides through traffic and past the camera, as if slipping off set and out of shot. Our last image of Stella pulses with light before the film fades to black. It is a theatrical denouement of a near-perfect performance and its scintillating modulation; the birth of unfettered stardom.



WORDS BY JESSICA MOORE



CLOSE-UP

It's a strange story. Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* centres a real-life event—of a man, Hossain Sabzian, arrested and charged with fraudulent impersonation of a well-known filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf—as the basis for his meta-cinematic blend of fiction and documentary. Indeed, Kiarostami's film destabilises all that we, as audiences, assume regarding the boundaries of performance and reality; he pushes the invisible lines, he reclassifies their borders. An awareness of the extent to which Kiarostami plays with the textuality of his film demands knowledge of its context. Most pressing of all is the casting: the real people involved in the case play themselves; they reenact a criminal trial, itself connected to performance and directorship—they become players who fret their hour upon the stage.



Performance implicates an audience and a performer, yet Kiarostami's narrative throws into question the definitions prescribed to these positions, conflating their ontology to constitute the same identities. Sabzian, an imposter—(aren't all actors?)—masquerades as Makhmalbaf to an unsuspecting family, convincing them of his identity to the extent that he promises the children parts in his upcoming feature. Though the story is mediated through the docufiction form, the incident is personally, self-consciously explored by Sabzian and the family during a court trial. Thus it seems that the passage of retrospect, as promised by a trial and its investigative spotlight, has much to do with Sabzian's duality; it illuminates a slippage between the act and the actor.

Closely aligned to the audience and prosecutors, the documentarians wish to understand the intent behind this unsustainable act of impersonation. They hope, for their documentary's sake, to procure insights from Sabzian to provide the substance for their film. 'This camera is here so you can explain things' they tell Sabzian, as if competing with the very function of the trial itself. As if Sabzian was not already under the watchful eyes of those pressing charges against him, he must reconcile performing for both a camera and a courtroom. Contextualising his act of fraud, he admits that its motivation was born out of a fervent identification with Makhmalbaf's films. 'He spoke for me,' Sabzian memorably claims. For both camera and court, his crime is eclipsed—he persuades us of his humility.

Kiarostami's direction operates within two schools of self-awareness. Firstly, everyone plays themselves and are therein afforded a chance to reenact what has already happened to them; the implications of this alone are a feast of meta-cinema. Secondly, Kiarostami upholds a camera towards the notion of filmmaking as its own agent of recreation. That is, the sensational real-life event is not impartially retold, it is focalised—reframed to convey perspective. Rather post-modernly, and as a reflection of his profession as a director, Kiarostami's sympathies and fascination are directed towards the act of imitation—towards the 'actor', Sabzian, who (fittingly) works in a print shop. Indeed, the copy confers more intrigue than the original.

Though others have come close, perhaps there is no greater example of a filmmaker and a film that champions the art of recreation so grandly. Vacillating between the formalists and realists, Kiarostami purveys a dualism shared by Sabzian: 'I know I'm guilty in the eyes of the court, but I feel my love for the arts should be taken into account.' Posturing a love for the arts into the sterility of a courtroom is a suitable metaphor for Kiarostami's own adoption of both artistic sensibilities. In fact, Kiarostami demonstrates how one, in all its bounteous artificiality, can enhance the other—how balancing the two can enable us to get up-close (/close-up) to that which is expected to be impossible to capture.

Kiarostami communicates this optic through surmising a sense of harmony within the act of inhabitation, at least a cinephile's inhabitation of a director's persona. By the film's end, Sabzian and Makhmalbaf snake through the bustling streets of Tehran on a motorbike as one organism, stopping off to pick flowers at a road-side market. 'Do you prefer being...' Makhmalbaf begins to ask Sabzian though the rest is cut out; we are told by the documentarians their equipment is faulty. Between patches of disrupted sound, and in the chasm between fiction and documentary, it appears that (re)creation is always a process of identification. As audiences inclined to see ourselves in the narratives we explore, to embed our being into the fibres of cinema, creation and reception become a fluid, indivisible response to our surroundings—in *Close-Up*, this impulse is richly poetic.



WORDS BY JESSICA MOORE

THINGS TO COME

Nature rattles the leaves in their trees, moistens the grass at the start of a new day. It regenerates with a pattern that opposes the unpredictability of human relationships. In *Days of Abandonment*, a novel about a woman whose husband leaves her for a younger lover, Elena Ferrante writes: "We don't know anything about people, even those with whom we share everything. The soul is an inconstant wind, a vibration of the vocal cords, for pretending to be someone, something."

This inconstant wind flows through the fresh landscape of Mia Hansen-Løve's *Things to Come*. In it we meet Nathalie, wandering in a liminal mist. Her story begins in spring. The air is crisp, the sun shedding the winter's timidity. A sheer scarf flies in the wind, she swats it away. The earth oscillates between opposing states and Nathalie, left without another option, gives into the fluctuation.

Like Ferrante's literary narrator, Nathalie is a woman abandoned. In one cruel gust, her husband leaves her, her position as a philosophy teacher is threatened, and her mother's health enters a rapid decline. A woman accustomed to a quiet certainty over her place in life is forced to readjust. The seasonal promise of warmer and longer days looms. How is she to fill them when their contents are leaking out the sides?

For one, she can walk. *Things To Come* documents Nathalie's internal transition through a physical journey as she travels to places both familiar and unknown.

The camera work is brisk and active, with many of the scenes documenting Nathalie in movement. She may appear calm, but on a deeper level her constant motion could signal the anxiety of a woman who doesn't know where to go or where she belongs. This flux is rooted not in indecision, but in the discomfort of a person who has found herself without a comfort zone. The spaces in which she once



found love, respite, and fulfilment now leave her empty-handed. The landscapes she meets on her travels offer temporary solace—a swim in the sea, a trip to the countryside to stay at a former student’s commune—but these spaces are not her own. She can never lay claim to them as she once did with her apartment, her classroom, her daily commute. She must move on.

Nathalie’s travels are marked by sobering alterity. At her family’s summer home, a momentary glow of happy memories leads to hurt. This place that once held so much joy has suddenly transformed; like a magician’s trick, the personal grows cold. At the student commune, this decoupling of place from feeling strikes again. The space is occupied by young radicals with whom Nathalie feels an inevitable distance. She can recite their politics with an expert’s understanding but without the youthful fervour, an act more akin to a possession of knowledge than a passion. Passion, unlike knowledge, is a truly singular sensation—it bursts out from your core and warms the body. Knowledge is impersonal.

Somewhere in the dialogue between emotion and place arises the question of freedom. In a scene where Nathalie is travelling by car with her ex-student, she remarks to him that she is finally, for the first time since her marriage, free. “I am so privileged, I am finally completely free.” At that moment, there is simultaneous belief and doubt in her words.

For independent and disciplined Nathalie, freedom is conceptualised as a state, as a place at which one arrives. In some ways, the film depicts this literal journey. But it also challenges her idea, standing as a testament to the inscrutability of freedom. One can never know it, never arrive at it, never truly possess it. Instead, through a movement between physical motion and internal turmoil, the film seems to posit a dynamism to freedom; it is

something capricious and truly human. It cannot be acquired, but is felt in the flux of emotion, in the heat of movement, and in the loss of certainty. It echoes Ferrante’s verdict on life following abandonment: “Existence is a stab of joy,” she writes. “A stab of pain, an intense pleasure, veins that pulse under the skin, there is no other truth to tell.”

Something momentary, something that defies logic, certainty, and one place: that is what freedom looks like for Nathalie.

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