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**STILLNESS
AND
MOTION**

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**OUTLINE A PAIR OF OPPOSITES
DISCUSSED IN THE LECTURE
SERIES. SHOWING EXAMPLES OF 2
ARTISTS AND 1 WRITER WHO HAVE
EXPLORED THESE OPPOSITES IN
THEIR WORK.**

**RESEARCH IN
CONTEXT**

Outline a pair of opposites discussed in the lecture series. Showing examples of 2 artists and 1 writer who have explored these opposites in their work.

“Visual rhythm is everywhere. Rows of windows and columns add rhythm to architecture. Books on a shelf and tiled floors add rhythm to daily life.”

(Hurst, 2018)

The word ‘movement’ within a contemporary context has many different connotations; art movement; political movement; the movement of people and merchandise. On the other hand, ‘stillness’ suggests a certain peace and stagnancy found in our memories and the natural world - both feel extremely relevant to our current global climate. This duality is also found within creativity. In this essay, I aim to explore the history of stillness and movement within art and how it translates throughout time and technique. This will include a debate to whether notoriously ‘still’ mediums such as painting, and writing are arguably ‘moving’ due to the way your mind perceives the artwork. Also, how does film become moving if it is just a series of still images? I will discuss how these opposites are experienced by the artist and the audience.

As discussed by Eivind Røssaak in their 2011 novel *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, movement in art is an understanding of how, psychologically, motion is perceived by our minds.

Additionally, as Ashley Hurst suggests in the above quote, visual rhythm brings liveliness to an otherwise entirely ‘material’ world. Everything that holds weight has a unique pulse, no matter its origin. In the same sense, stillness in art is the moment that is captured by the artist. The stillness is the inspiration, and the motion is the life the artist brings to it.

Three works that show an intelligent understanding of this concept are: *Shuffleton’s Barbershop* (1950), by Norman Rockwell; *Twin Peaks* (1990), by David Lynch; and *The Applicant* (1962), by Sylvia Plath. It is no mistake that these artists were heavily involved with 20th century American culture, as many interesting artists came to the forefront during this time. The impact of creatives such as Edward Hopper, Jean Michel Basquiat, and Marina Abramović is still felt today. This period birthed many complicated artists due to its troubling political climate and the Hollywood glamour that was used as a distraction. (Bronwell & Raymond, 2018).

Anahit Behrooz stated in the article, *10 Artists Who Changed the Course Of 20th Century Art*, that the role of the artist, the relationship between representation and significance, and the growing relevance of mass-produced visual images were considered and redefined. (2017)



Figure 1; Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, (1950)

The 20th century saw a creative world that blossomed from a reimagining the traditional. Essentially, it was the abandonment of formality that gave way to several unique creative voices that, without this, would have been silenced. This creativity brought a playfulness to art, a radical pop culture movement to society, and the notion of movement to all forms of creative expression.

In this essay, I will explore how stillness and motion in art go beyond the visual. Is it a particular feeling of connection with the piece? We often say that we ‘feel moved’ by art, but how is this effect achieved by the artist? (Clark, 2010)

Additionally, is art capturing a moment in stillness or giving motion to a still moment? This will all be answered through a discussion into painting, film and poetry pieces that exhibit elements of stillness and motion.

Painting in Motion

Painting provides us with the tools to manipulate the binaries of our world as we please (Lubow, 2018). It is the painter's understanding of fluidity within stillness and motion that brings a certain liveliness or tranquillity to a piece, sometimes both. It can blur the boundaries between what these opposites represent and how they are portrayed.

“Let the movement be slow and savour of solidity at the base and rise quivering to the tree tops and to the sky, always rising to meet it joyously and tremulously... the spirit must be... perpetually moving through, carrying on and inducing a thirst for more and a desire to rise.”

(Carr, 1934. Page 44)



Figure 2; Emily Carr, *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937)

As Canadian artist Emily Carr mentions in the above quote, the spirit must be perpetually moving through. Earth and sky, sea and sand, stillness, and motion. *Above the Gravel Pit*, (1937) Carr presents an intelligent understanding of stillness and motion. She illustrates movement by allowing the colours of the sky to flow and bleed into each other. The landscape and the sky are not separate, everything is united in harmonious motion. Additionally, although the way she painted this landscape holds an intense energy, the subject itself is still, and therefore the piece is both tranquil and animated. This style of painting provides one understanding of motion in art. In his piece, *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, Artist Norman Rockwell displays another type of understanding. It is more than stylistic, as it is the narrative of the piece that emphasises motion.

Norman Rockwell



Figure 3; Norman Rockwell, *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, (1950)

On April 29th, 1950, Norman Rockwell painted *Shuffleton's Barbershop* for *The Saturday Evening Post*. The painting depicts an empty barbershop at night. Three men sit in the backroom playing instruments, casting a warm light over the abandoned barbershop chair. It is suggested that it is cold outside from the red fire inside of the heater. The men look jolly as they enjoy their long-awaited time off work. Clutter is spread over the shop floor as an American flag is displayed proudly on the wall. This generation of American men were hard traditionalists and enjoyed the simple things in life. They are obvious patriots, as their greying hair and the time in which this painting was made suggests they could be veterans of 'The Great War.' The warmth of the light in contrast with the grey emptiness of the barbershop creates an inviting atmosphere.

Rockwell's *Shuffleton's Barbershop* is an excellent example of stillness and motion that is emphasised through narrative. The framing of the painting suggests it is something the viewer would catch briefly - a still memory from a walk home through town. Looking at this painting, you can almost feel the cold as you watch through the window, the sound of violins playing and people laughing echoing distantly. Rockwell conveys visual rhythm by contrasting the stillness of the empty barbershop and the movement of the jolly men.

Film in Stillness.

Over the past century, film has brought creative expression into the mainstream. It changed the way we interact with art as an audience and influenced popular culture as we know it. From the silent films of the 1900s to the ‘talky films’ of the 1930s, the 20th century saw a massive shift in the way we consume art and performance.

“If we were to ask ourselves ‘what is cinema?’ we might say that it is an artistic expression, or perhaps a good way of telling stories, a form of entertainment or, frankly speaking, just plain business. The true answer is, probably, all of them.” (Aguilar, 2017)



Figure 4; Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)

As Aguilar writes, ‘*what is cinema?*’ Is it ideas in movement? Stillness in motion? Traditionally, cinema is a ‘moving’ medium. In films such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Guillermo del Toro displays two realities, our world, and the magic realm. This duality reflects ‘stillness and motion’ as one reality is brutal but humble while another is whimsical but ephemeral. The two worlds contrast against one another, the real and the imagined. One could argue that this reflects the creative world which we often separate from the real world.

Unlike painting, stillness and movement in film are primarily built through narrative and tone. Film and cinema are made to ‘move us.’ They simulate regular (or irregular) events and place us in the position of the protagonist. An example of this is found in David Lynch’s 1990 murder mystery drama, *Twin Peaks*.

David Lynch



Figure 5; David Lynch, *Twin Peaks* (1990)

“During its original run, “Twin Peaks” was ground-breaking television, bringing elements of classic Hollywood and the avant-garde into the mainstream.”

(Murray, 2017)

Twin Peaks, written by David Lynch and Mark Frost, first aired on ABC on the evening of April 8th, 1990 with the tag line; *“If you miss it tonight, you won’t know what everyone’s talking about tomorrow.”* Little did viewers know what they were about to watch was no regular crime drama, but something that would reinvent how narrative and performance operates within cinema. The pilot episode, titled *‘Wrapped in Plastic’*, begins with calming music and picturesque shots of rivers and mountains, but is soon disrupted by tragedy when the body of 17-year-old prom queen Laura Palmer is discovered inside of a plastic bag on the beach. This sharp change in tone is a reoccurring theme throughout the show.

We then see the reaction of each character to Palmer’s death; each response builds upon the mystery. *Twin Peaks* goes against traditional filmmaking techniques by instilling feelings of discomfort and unease in the audience. The characters and the cinematography feel very unnatural – almost alien. As mentioned above, Noel Murray said that *Twin Peaks* was ‘ground-breaking’ and ahead of its time; it has a certain stagnancy that sets it apart from other TV shows of its time.

Despite it being a moving image, *Twin Peaks*' pacing is slow and methodical. The uncomfortable tone reflects the 'uncanny valley' phenomenon. It simulates typical American life, but everything feels wrong. *Twin Peaks* is full of typical Hollywood stereotypes - such as the bad boy, the troubled detective, and the girl next door – but they are all extreme versions of their chosen clichés. The show is comprised of a series of scenes that rub against one another, each one building upon the last. The town itself feels like it is from a parallel universe, something that becomes more apparent as the show goes on, particularly in the dream sequences. First seen in Season one, Episode three (Zen, or to Catch a Serial Killer, 1990), these 'dream sequences' were the audiences' first hint as to what exactly they were getting themselves into. Using unintelligible language and a stark red set, they are extremely surreal and hellish. Interestingly, these scenes were inspired by the paintings of artist Francis Bacon. (Grift, 2017)



Figure 6;
(Left) David Lynch,
Twin Peaks, Season
1, Episode 3: Zen,
or to Catch a Serial
Killer (1990)
(Right) Francis
Bacon, *Three
Studies for a
Crucifixion*. (1962)

This collaboration between painting and film speaks for the stillness and movement of *Twin Peaks*. Lynch's innovative approach to filmmaking has even influenced recent work, for example, Steve McQueen's 'Small Axe' series (2020). This can be seen through prolonged shots of tension and tenderness between characters. When Lynch forms his concept for his films, he begins with an image in his mind – for instance, for his 1986 film *Blue Velvet* he saw a bloody ear in the grass, which is the opening scene of the film, but everything started from there. To Lynch, Film is not a separate medium to painting or any other art form. *Twin Peaks*' uncomfortable pacing and surreal atmosphere make for a mesmerising deep dive into the small-town American psyche. It is as if the town is frozen in time, and we are all watching in awe.

Stillness and Motion in Poetry

“Poetry is powerful. A combination of rhythmic verses can take us by hand and lead us to epiphanies, it can teach us how to love and how we’d want to be loved, it can serve as a moral parable, and it can mobilize a nation’s people to protest. “

The Applicant (1962)

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no?
Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit——

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they’ll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it’s a poultice.
You have an eye, it’s an image.
My boy, it’s your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Sylvia Plath

(Murti, 2020)

Some would argue that poetry is a still art form. After all, it is entirely comprised of words and letters, making it a ‘non-visual’ method of making as there is no physical imagery involved. Letters do not move, but they can convey motion through the arrangement. Just as Murti writes in the above quote, words have power, and when the right person knows how to use it, it can influence any human soul. Although letters do not paint pictures, they force you to imagine scenarios in your mind and sympathise with the writer. Additionally, writing itself has movement because it is continuous, each word must flow one after the other, much like time itself.

An intriguing use of motion in poetry can be found in *The Applicant*, by Sylvia Plath. Written in 1962, Plath writes from the perspective of an interviewer and speaks directly to the reader. First, she asks, “*are you our sort of a person?*” and then proceeds to ask if the reader has “*something missing*” such as false teeth, a brace of rubber breasts. This implies that if the individual reading this is not young, able-bodied, or cisgender, that they are not wanted for the position. “*How can we give you a thing,*” she says. Plath puts the reader in the uncomfortable position of being examined.

The tempo of her writing, such as *“Empty? Empty. Here is a hand”* is written as if she is asking a question and waiting for an answer. The words *“will you marry it”* repeat five separate times in this poem. Marriage is a motif that appears many times in Plath’s writing, as it is relevant to her experience as a 20th century woman. Interestingly, *The Applicant* was written a month after her separation from Ted Hughes, her husband who was historically abusive and unfaithful. Undoubtedly, this experience influenced her perception of herself and her worth. This could be influenced by her past trauma and the treatment she received from someone who had promised to love her.

She writes *“I noticed you were stark naked. How about this suit ----- Black and stiff but not a bad fit”* Then asks again, if *“you will marry it?”* The reoccurring motif of marriage is extremely prominent here. A black suit, worn by the groom and the bride *“naked as paper to start.”* Her nakedness implies that she is weak and fragile. A loss of innocence and naivete is felt as time passes, *“in twenty-five years she’ll be silver. In fifty, gold.”* She refers to herself as a “poultice” and an “image” for her husband, once again degrading herself for the benefit of others. She ends the interview by demanding *“will you marry it, marry it, marry it.”* There is no question mark this time, implying that it is something definite, something she is reflecting upon perhaps, unable to change. The language used here is like that found in wedding vows *‘will you take... to be your lawfully wedded husband.’* This could be a command, an instruction, or possibly a memory replaying in her mind.

By the end of the poem, the reader realises that they are not being interviewed - Sylvia Plath is interviewing her past self. In her writing, Plath states that she values herself by her ability to cook and sew, but not by her own strength as an individual, which she underestimated. Plath’s past, present, and future shaped the structure of this poem. She reflects on her past in stillness but adds movement through her manner of speaking. Words such as *Poultice* and *stark* add a different tempo than *empty* and *rubber*.

Sylvia Plath tragically committed suicide in 1963, only five months after writing this poem. Her life was cut too short at the age of 30. This piece encompasses her thoughts during the final months of her life. Knowing Plath’s life story and how it impacted her writing, the ‘movement’ of the piece is further emphasised. The story she is telling is deeply personal but relatable. By placing the audience in her position, she is forcing them to experience her own life and the tragedies that shaped her.

Reflection



Figure 7; Francis Bacon, *Figure in Movement* (1978)

Upon reflection, no medium is either ‘still or moving,’ some are both and some are neither. Whether it be painting, poetry, or film, every artist perceives these opposites in their way and chooses to represent them accordingly. As humans we all have these elements inside of us, and so will our art. As put by artist Mark Mitchell:

“Whether the artist has chosen to portray stillness or motion in their composition, they create a moment frozen in time and pigments; a motion captured, or stillness preserved, for many years to come. Perhaps it is this aspect that offers the true beauty of a painting; that it creates a moment that you can always return to.”

(Mitchell, 2015)

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Figures

Figure 1; Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, (1950)

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Figure 2; Emily Carr, *Above the Gravel Pit* (1937)

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Figure 3; Norman Rockwell, *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, (1950)

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Figure 4; Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)

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Figure 5; David Lynch, *Twin Peaks* (1990)

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Figure 6; (Left) David Lynch, *Twin Peaks*, Season 1, episode 3: Zen, or to Catch a Serial Killer (1990) & (Right) Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*. (1962)

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Figure 7; Francis Bacon, *Figure in Movement* (1978)

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