Iconoclasm as an Artistic Device: Iconoclastic Strategies in Film*

Boris Groys

Film has never inhabited a sacred context. From its very inception film proceeded through the murky depths of profane and commercial life, always a bedfellow of cheap mass entertainment. Even the attempts to glorify film undertaken by twentieth-century totalitarian regimes never really succeeded— all that resulted was the short-lived enlistment of film for their various propaganda purposes. The reasons for this are not necessarily to be found in the character of film as a medium: film simply arrived too late. By the time film emerged, culture had already shed its potential for consecration. So, given cinema’s secular origins it would at first sight seem inappropriate to associate iconoclasm with film. At best, film appears capable only of staging and illustrating historical scenes of iconoclasm, but never of being iconoclastic itself. What nonetheless can be claimed is that throughout its history as a medium film has waged a more or less open struggle against other media such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even theater and opera. These can all boast of sacred origins that within present-day culture still afford them their status as aristocratic, “high” arts. Yet the destruction of precisely these high cultural values has been repeatedly depicted and celebrated in film. So, cinematic iconoclasm operates less in relation to a religious or ideological struggle than it does in terms of the conflict between different media; this is an iconoclasm conducted not against its own sacred provenance but against other media. By the same token, in the course of the long history of antagonism between various media, film has earned the right to act as the icon of secular modernity. Inversely, by being transferred into the traditional realm of art, film itself has in turn increasingly become the subject of iconoclastic gestures: by means of new technology such as video, computers, and DVDs, the motion of the film image has been halted midstream and dissected. In historical terms the iconoclastic gesture has never functioned as an expression of a skeptical attitude toward the truth of the image. Such a skeptical attitude is mirrored more in dispassionate curiosity toward a plethora of religious aberrations, compounded by the well-
meaning museum conservation of the historical evidence of such aberrations—and it is certainly not accompanied by the destruction of this evidence. The desecration of ancient idols is performed only in the name of other, more recent gods. Iconoclasm’s purpose is to prove that the old gods have lost their power and are subsequently no longer able to defend their earthly temples and images. Thus the iconclast shows how earnestly he takes the gods’ claims to power by contesting the authority of the old gods and asserting the power of his own. In this vein, to cite but a few examples, the temples of pagan religions were destroyed in the name of Christianity, Catholic churches were despoiled in the name of a Protestant interpretation of Christianity, and, later on, all kinds of Christian churches were wrecked in the name of the religion of Reason—which was considered more powerful than the authority of the old biblical god. In turn, the power of reason as manifested by a particular, humanistically defined human image was later iconoclastically attacked in the name of the state-sponsored crusade to maximize productive forces, to secure the omnipotence of technology and to promote the total mobilization of society—at least in central and eastern Europe. And just recently we witnessed the ceremonious dismantling and removal of the fallen idols of Socialism, this time in the name of the even more powerful religion of unrestrained consumerism. It seems that at some point technological progress was realized to be dependent upon consumption, fully in keeping with the adage that supply is generated by demand. So, for the time being, commodity brands will remain our latest household gods, at least until some new, nascent iconoclastic anger rises up against them too. Iconoclasm can thus be said to function as a mechanism of historical innovation, as a means of revaluing values through a process of constantly destroying old values and introducing new ones in their place. This explains why the iconoclastic gesture always seems to point in the same historical direction, at least as long as history is perceived in the Nietzschean tradition as the history of escalating power. From this perspective iconoclasm appears as a series of progressive, historically ascending movements constantly clearing their path of all that has become redundant, powerless, and void of inner meaning, to make way for whatever the future might bring. This is why all criticism of iconoclasm has traditionally had a reactionary aftertaste. However, such a close connection between iconoclasm and historical progress is not logically necessary, for iconoclasm addresses not only the old but also the new: in the early stages of their mission, devotees of new gods have always been subjected to persecution and the desecration of their symbols, be they the first Christians, revolutionaries,
Marxists, or even hippies, those martyrs of consumerism and fashion. Essentially, on each occasion this persecution is also a signal that the new gods are not powerful enough, or at least not as powerful as the old gods. And in many cases, this gesture has proved altogether effective: the new religious movements were suppressed and the power of the old gods reasserted. Of course one can, if one so wishes, put a Hegelian spin on this and see it as evidence of the ruse of reason lending reactionary support to the march of progress.

Characteristically, however, rather than such gestures of suppression and destruction leveled at new movements being viewed as iconoclastic, they are generally seen as the martyrization of what is new. Indeed, most religions foster iconographic canons composed of images that depict their earlier martyrdom. In this respect, it can be said that each religion’s iconography preempts any iconoclastic gesture that this religion might fall victim to. The sole factor distinguishing this anticipated from actual destruction is that survival (in the first case) rather than downfall (in the second case) is upheld as the object of aspiration and celebration. This difference can be equated with the contrasting positions of victor and vanquished—whereby the observer is free to choose which of the two sides he prefers to identify with, all depending on his personal view of history.

October (1927) – Sergei Eisenstein

History is also made up more of revivals than of innovations, whereby most innovations make their appearance as revivals and most revivals as innovations. On closer inspection, one
gradually loses all hope of determining which historical force ultimately ends up the victor in order to distinguish between iconoclasm and martyrdom. For here there can be no question of “ultimately”: history presents itself as a sequence of revaluations of values without any discernible overarching direction. Moreover, we really have no way of knowing whether a defeat means a decline or a victory an increase in power. Defeat and martyrdom both contain a promise that is lacking in victory. Victory leads to its “appropriation” by the status quo, whereas defeat might possibly turn into a later, ultimate victory capable of revaluing the status quo. Indeed, since at least the death of Christ, the iconoclastic gesture has proved a failure, essentially because it instantly reveals itself as celebration of its purported victim. In light of the Christian tradition, the image of destruction left behind by the iconoclastic gesture is quasi-automatically transformed into the victim’s image of triumph, long before the later resurrection or historical revaluation “really” takes place. Conditioned by Christianity over considerable time, our iconographic imagination now no longer needs to wait before acknowledging victory in defeat: here, defeat is equated with victory from the outset. How this mechanism functions in the post-Christian modern world can be clearly demonstrated with the example of the historical avant-garde. It can be said that the avant-garde is nothing other than a staged martyrdom of the image that replaced the Christian image of martyrdom. After all, the avant-garde abuses the body of the traditional image with all manner of torture utterly reminiscent of the torture inflicted on the body of Christ in the iconography of medieval Christianity. In its treatment by the avant-garde, the image is—in both symbolic and literal terms—sawed apart, cut up, smashed into fragments, pierced, spiked, drawn through dirt, and exposed to ridicule. It is also no accident that the vocabulary used by the historical avant-garde in its manifestos reproduces the language of iconoclasm. We find mentions of discarding traditions, breaking with conventions, destroying old art, and eradicating outdated values. This is by no means driven by some sadistic urge to cruelly maltreat the bodies of innocent images. Nor is all this wreckage and destruction intended to clear the way for the emergence of new images and the introduction of new values. Far from it, for it is the images of wreckage and destruction themselves that serve as the icons of new values. In the eyes of the avant-garde the iconoclastic gesture represents an artistic device, deployed less as a means of destroying old icons than as a way to generate new images—or, indeed, new icons. However, this possibility of strategically deploying iconoclasm as an artistic device came about because the avant-garde for its part
shifted its focus from the message to the medium. The destruction of old an image embodying a particular message is not meant to generate new images embodying a new message but rather to highlight the materiality of the medium concealed behind any “spiritual” message. The stuff that art is made of can only be made visible once the image ceases to serve as the manifestation of a specific “conscious” artistic message. Hence, in the artistic practice of the avant-garde the iconoclastic gesture is arguably also intended as a means of removing what has grown old and powerless and asserting the supremacy of the powerful.

Yet this is no longer practiced in pursuit of a new religious or ideological message but in the name of the power of the medium itself. It is signify cant that Malevich, for example, speaks of the “Suprematism of painting” that he hopes to achieve with his art—by which he means painting in its pure, material form, in its superiority over the spirit.2 With this, the avant-garde can be said to have celebrated the victory of the powerful—qua material—artistic media over the powerless, null medium “spirit,” to which these media had hitherto been subordinated for far too long. Accordingly, the process of destroying old icons is rendered identical to the process of generating new ones—in this case, the icons of materialism. The image is thereby transfigured into the site for an epiphany of pure matter, abandoning its role as the site for an epiphany of the spirit.

However, this transition from the spiritual to the material within traditional arts like painting and sculpture ultimately remained beyond the comprehension of the wider audience—neither medium was considered powerful enough. The real turning point came with film. In this context Walter Benjamin has already pointed out that the practices of fragmentation and collage—in other words, the unmitigated martyrdom of the image—were swiftly accepted when they were displayed in film, but greeted by the same audience with outrage and rejection in the context of the traditional arts. Benjamin’s explanation for this phenomenon is that as a new medium film is culturally unencumbered: The change of medium thereby justifies the introduction of new artistic strategies.

Furthermore, film also appears to be more powerful than the old media. The reason for this lies not merely in its reproducibility and the system for its mass commercial distribution: Film also
seems to be of equal rank to the spirit because it too moves in time. Accordingly, film operates analogously to the way consciousness works, therein proving capable of substituting for the movement of consciousness. As Gilles Deleuze correctly observes, film transforms its viewers into spiritual automata: Film unfurls inside the viewer’s head in lieu of his own stream of consciousness. Yet this reveals film’s fundamental character to be deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, film is a celebration of movement, the proof of its superiority over all other media; on the other, however, it places its audience in a state of unparalleled physical and mental immobility. It is this ambivalence that dictates a variety of filmic strategies, including iconoclastic strategies.

Indeed, as a medium of motion, film is frequently eager to display its superiority over other media, whose greatest accomplishments are preserved in the form of immobile cultural treasures and monuments, by staging and celebrating the destruction of these monuments. At the same time, this tendency also demonstrates film’s adherence to the typically modern faith in the superiority of the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*. Every kind of iconophilia is ultimately rooted in a fundamentally contemplative approach and in a general readiness to treat certain objects deemed sacred exclusively as objects of distant, admiring contemplation. This disposition is based on the taboo that protects these objects from being touched, from being intimately penetrated and, more generally, from the profanity of being integrated into the practices of daily life. In film nothing is deemed so holy that it might or ought to be safeguarded from being absorbed into the general flow of movement. Everything film shows is translated into movement and thereby profaned. In this respect, film manifests its complicity with the philosophies of *praxis*, of *Lebensdrang*, of the *élan vital* and of desire; it parades its collusion with ideas that, in the footsteps of Marx and Nietzsche, captured the imagination of European humanity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—in other words, during the very period that gave birth to film as a medium. This was the era when the hitherto prevailing attitude of passive contemplation, which was capable of shaping ideas rather than reality, was displaced by adulation of the potent movements of material forces. In this act of worship film plays a central role. From its very inception film has celebrated everything that moves at high speed—trains, cars, airplanes—but also everything that goes beneath the surface—blades, bombs, bullets.
Likewise, from the moment it emerged film has used slapstick comedy to stage veritable orgies of destruction, demolishing anything that just stands or hangs motionlessly, including traditionally revered cultural treasures, and sparing not even public spectacles such as theater and opera that embodied the spirit of old culture. Designed to provoke all-round laughter in the audience, these movie scenes of destruction, wreckage, and demolition are reminiscent of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival that both emphasizes and affirms the cruel, destructive aspects of carnival. Of all preceding art forms, it is no surprise that the circus and the carnival were treated with such positive deference by film in its early days. Bakhtin described the carnival as an iconoclastic celebration that exuded an aura of joy rather than serious, emotional, or revolutionary sentiment; instead of causing the violated icons of the old order to be supplanted by the icons of some new order, the carnival invited us to revel in the downfall of the status quo. Bakhtin also writes about how the general carnivalization of European culture in the modern era compensates for the decline of “real” social practices traditionally provided by the carnival. Although Bakhtin draws his examples from literature, his descriptions of carnivalized art apply equally well to the strategies with which some of the most famous images in film history were produced. At the same time Bakhtin’s carnival theory also emphasizes just how inherently contradictory iconoclastic carnivalism is in film. Historical carnivals were participatory, offering the entire population the chance to take part in a festive form of collective iconoclasm. But once iconoclasm is used strategically as an artistic device, the community is automatically excluded—and becomes an audience. Indeed, while film as such is a celebration of movement, it paradoxically drives the audience to new extremes of immobility never reached by traditional art forms. It is possible to move around with relative freedom while one is reading or viewing an exhibition, but in the movie theater the viewer is cast in darkness and glued to his or her seat. The situation of the moviegoer in fact resembles a grandiose parody of the very vita contemplativa that film itself denounces, because the cinema system embodies precisely that vita contemplativa as it surely appears from the perspective of its most radical critic—an uncompromising Nietzschean, let us say—namely as the product of a vitiated lust for life and dwindling personal initiative, as a token of compensatory consolation and a sign of individual inadequacy in real life. This is the starting point of any critique of film which is building up to a new iconoclastic gesture—an iconoclasm due to be turned against film itself. Criticism of
audience passivity first led to various attempts to use film as a means of activating a mass audience, of politically mobilizing or injecting movement into it. Sergei Eisenstein, for instance, was exemplary in the way he combined aesthetic shock with political propaganda in an endeavor to rouse the viewer and wrench him from his passive, contemplative condition. But as time passed, it became clear that it was precisely the illusion of movement generated by film that drove the viewer toward passivity. This insight is nowhere better formulated than in Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, a book whose themes and rhetorical figures continue to resound throughout the current debate on mass culture. Not without reason, he describes present-day society, defined as it is by the electronic media, as a total cinema event. For Debord, the entire world has become a movie theater in which people are completely isolated from one another and from real life, and are consequently condemned to an existence of utter passivity.6 As he vividly demonstrates in his final film *In girim imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), this condition can no longer be remedied with increased velocity, intensified mobility, the escalation of emotions, aesthetic shock, or further political propaganda. What is required instead is the abolition of the illusion of movement generated by film; only then will viewers gain the chance to rediscover their ability to move. In the name of real social movement, filmic motion has to be stopped and brought to a standstill. This marks the beginning of an iconoclastic movement against film, and consequently of the martyrdom of film. This iconoclastic protest has the same root cause as all other iconoclastic movements; it represents a revolt against a passive, contemplative mode of conduct waged in the name of movement and activity. But where film is concerned, the outcome of this protest might at first sight seem somewhat paradoxical. Since film images are actually moving images, the immediate result of the iconoclastic gesture performed against film is petrifaction and an interruption of the film’s natural dynamism. The instruments of film’s martyrdom are various new technologies such as video, computers, and DVDs. These new digital technologies make it possible to arrest a film’s flow at any moment whatsoever, providing evidence that a film’s motion is neither real nor material, but simply an illusion that can equally well be digitally simulated. In the following, I discuss both iconoclastic gestures—the destruction of prevailing religious and cultural icons through film, and the exposure of film’s movement itself as an illusion.
Let us illustrate these various filmic strategies by selected examples which cannot, of course, claim to cover all aspects of iconoclastic practices, but nonetheless offer insight into their logic. The image of the lacerated eye in *Un chien andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel is one of the most famous film icons of its kind. The scene heralds not only the destruction of a particular image, but also the suppression of the contemplative attitude itself. The meditative, theoretical gaze, intent on observing the world as a whole and thereby reflecting itself as a purely spiritual, disembodied entity, is referred back to its material, physiological state. This transforms the very act of seeing into an altogether material and, if one so wishes, blind activity, a process that Merleau-Ponty, for instance, later formulated as palpating the world with the eye. This could be described as a meta-iconoclastic gesture, one that renders it sheerly impossible to pursue visual adoration from a religious or aesthetic distance. The film shows the eye as pure matter—and hence vulnerable to being touched, if not destroyed. As a demonstration of how physical, material force has the power to eradicate contemplation, this image of movement acts as an epiphany of the world’s pure materiality. This blind, purely material, destructive force is embodied—if somewhat more naively—by the figure of Samson in Cecil B. DeMille’s 1949 movie *Samson and Delilah*. In the film’s central scene, Samson destroys a heathen temple along with all the idols assembled there thus bringing on the symbolic collapse of the entire old order. But Samson is not depicted as the bearer of a new religion, or of enlightenment; he is simply a blind titan, a body wielding the same blind destruction as an earthquake. Acting with convulsiveness...
on a par with this is the revolutionary, iconoclastic crowd we encounter in Sergei Eisenstein’s films. In the realm of social and political action, these human masses represent the blind, material forces that covertly govern consciously perceived human history—exactly as the Marxist philosophy of history describes them. Historically, these masses move to destroy those monuments designed to immortalize the individual (in Eisenstein’s October it is the monument to the tsar). But the widespread exhilaration with which this anonymous work of destruction is greeted as a revelation of the material “madeness” of culture is also accompanied by the sadistic, voyeuristic pleasure felt by Eisenstein on watching such iconoclastic acts, as he readily admits in his memoirs.8 This erotic, sadistic component of iconoclasm can be sensed even more forcefully in the famous scene in which the “False Maria” is burnt in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1926). But the blind anger of the masses that erupts here is not revolutionary but counterrevolutionary: although the revolutionary agitator is burnt like a witch, she is clearly modeled on the symbolic female figures that since the French Revolution have embodied the ideals of freedom, the republic, and revolution. However, as she is burning, this beautiful, enchanting female figure capable of “luring” the masses is exposed as a robot. The flames destroy the female idol of the revolution, unmasking her as a mechanical, nonhuman construct. The whole scene has a thoroughly barbaric ring about it, particularly at the beginning when we are still unaware that “False Maria” is a machine insensitive to pain and not a living human being. The demise of this revolutionary idol also paves the way for the true Maria whose arrival restores social harmony by reconciling father and son, the upper and lower classes. So, rather than serving the new religion of social revolution, iconoclasm here acts in the interests of the restoration of traditional Christian values. Yet the cinematic means Lang draws upon to depict the iconoclastic masses are not dissimilar from those employed by Eisenstein: In both cases the crowd operates as an elementary material force. There is a direct link between these early films and countless, more recent movies in which the Earth itself, currently acting as the icon of the latest religion of globalization, is destroyed by forces from outer space. In Armageddon (1998, dir. Michael Bay) these come in the form of purely material, cosmic forces that act according to the laws of nature and remain utterly indifferent to the significance of our planet, along with all the civilizations it quarters. The destruction of icons of civilization such as Paris primarily illustrates the transience of all human civilizations and their iconographies. The aliens featured in Independence Day (1996, dir. Roland Emmerich) might be portrayed as intelligent and civilized...
beings, but their actions are driven by an inner compulsion to annihilate all creatures of different origin. In the movie’s key scene where New York is wiped out, the viewer can easily spot Emmerich’s indirect polemic against the famous scenes in Steven Spielberg’s Close Encounters of the Third Kind depicting the arrival of the aliens. Whereas Spielberg automatically associates the aliens’ high intelligence with a peace loving nature, the superior intelligence of the aliens in Independence Day is allied to an unbounded appetite for total evil. Here, the Other is portrayed not as a partner but as a lethal threat. This inversion is pursued with even greater clarity and consistency by Tim Burton. In Mars Attacks! (1996) the chief Martian unleashes his campaign of destruction with the thoroughly iconoclastic gesture of shooting the peace dove that was released as a token of welcome by the gullible and humanistically indoctrinated Earthlings. To humankind this iconoclastic gesture heralds its physical annihilation rather than a new wave of enlightenment. Not restricted to violence against doves, the same threat is also signaled by violence against images. As the antihero of Burton’s Batman (1989), the Joker is presented as an avant-garde, iconoclastic artist bent on destroying the classical paintings in a museum by overpainting them in a kind of abstract expressionist style. Furthermore, the entire overpainting sequence is shot in the manner of a cheerful music video clip, a mise-en scène of artistic iconoclasm that bears great affinity to Bakhtin’s description of the carnivalesque. But rather than lending the iconoclastic gesture cultural significance and neutralizing it by inscribing it into the carnival tradition, the carnivalesque mood of this scene only emphasizes and radicalizes its iniquity. Tracey Moffatt’s short film Artist (1999) quotes various more or less well-known feature films that all tell the story of an artist. Each of these stories opens with an artist hoping to create a masterpiece; this is followed by him proudly presenting the accomplished work of art and closes with the work being destroyed personally by the disappointed, despairing artist. At the end of this film collage Moffatt stages a veritable orgy of artistic destruction using appropriate footage. Pictures and sculptures of various styles are shredded, burnt, smashed, and blown up. The film collage thereby offers a precise résumé of the treatment cinema has meted out to traditional art forms. But let it not go unmentioned that the artist also subjects film itself to a process of deconstruction. She fragments individual movies, interrupts their movement and corrupts their subjects beyond recognition, mixing up the fragments of these various, stylistically disparate films to create a new, monstrous filmic body. The resultant film collage is clearly not intended for screening in a movie theater but for presentation in traditional
art spaces such as galleries or museums. Tracey Moffatt’s film not only reflects on the abuse inflicted on art in film, but in a subtle manner also exacts revenge for its suffering.

In other more recent movies, such scenes of iconoclasm are by no means an occasion for celebration. Present-day cinema is not revolutionary, even if it still feeds off the tradition of revolutionary iconoclasm. For, as ever, film never ceases to articulate the unattainability of peace, stability or calm in a world agog with movement and violence—and, by the same token, the absence of material conditions that would afford us a secure, contemplative and iconophilic existence. As ever, the status quo is routinely brought crashing down and irony is poured on the trust held by traditional art forms in the power of their motionless images—after all, even the symbol of the peace dove was modeled on an equally famous picture by Picasso. The difference now is that iconoclasm is no longer considered to be an expression of humanity’s hopes of liberation from the power of the old idols. Since the currently dominant humanistic iconography has placed humanity itself in the foreground, the iconoclastic gesture is now inevitably seen as the expression of radical, inhumane evil, the work of pernicious aliens, vampires, and deranged humanoid machines. Nonetheless, this inversion of iconoclasm’s direction is not dictated solely by the current shift in ideology, but is also influenced by immanent developments within film as a medium. The iconoclastic gesture is now increasingly ascribed to the realm of entertainment. Disaster epics, movies about aliens and the end of the world, and vampire thrillers are generally perceived as potential box-office hits—precisely because they most radically celebrate the cinematic illusion of movement. This has spawned a deep-rooted, immanent criticism of film
from within the commercial film industry itself, a critical attitude that aspires to bring filmic movement to a standstill.

As an expression and preliminary climax of this intrinsic criticism, we need only turn to *Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy and Larry Wachovski), a movie that, in spite of its furious pace and proliferation of scenes shot at extreme speed, nonetheless stages the end of all movement—including filmic movement. As the film closes, the hero, Neo, gains the ability to perceive all visible reality as a single digitalized film; through the world’s visual surface he sees the incessantly moving code flooding down like rain. In what amounts to a deconstructive exposure of filmic movement, the viewer is shown that this is not movement generated by life or by matter, and not even movement of the spirit, but simply the lifeless movement of a digital code. Here, compared with the earlier revolutionary films of the 1920s and 1930s, we are dealing with a different suspicion and, correspondingly, with a differently poised iconoclastic gesture. As a neo-Buddhist, neo-gnostic hero who appears on the scene to take up the fight against the evil creators and *malins genies* ruling the world, Neo is no longer rebelling against the spirit in the name of the material world, but is an agitator rising up against the illusion of the material world in the name of the critique of simulation. Toward the end of the film, Neo is greeted with the words “He is the One.” Neo’s way of proving his calling as the new, gnostic Christ is precisely to halt the cinematic movement, thereby causing the bullets that are about to strike him to stop in midair. Here the time-honored, widespread criticism of the movie industry appears to have been adopted by Hollywood as its own theme—and thereby radicalized. As we well know, critics have accused the movie industry of creating a seductive illusion and staging a beautiful semblance of the world designed to mask, conceal, and deny its ugly reality. Then *Matrix* turns up and basically says the same. Except that in this case it is less a cinematographically concocted “beautiful facade” that is paraded before us as a complete *mise-en-scène*, than the whole, everyday, “real” world. In movies like *The Truman Show* or, far more comprehensively, *Matrix*, this so-called reality is presented as if it were a long running “reality show” produced using quasicinematographic techniques in some otherworldly studio hidden beneath the surface of the real world. The main protagonists of such films are heroes of enlightenment, media critics, and private detectives all rolled into one, whose ambition is to expose not only the culture they live in, but indeed also their entire everyday world as an artificially generated illusion. Of course,
in spite of its metaphysical qualities, *Matrix* too is ultimately trapped in the arena of mass entertainment, and Christian values certainly offer no way out of this context—an insight that is ironically and convincingly illustrated in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979). Not only does this film parody and profane the life of Christ, but it also depicts Christ’s death on the cross in the carnivalesque fashion of a music video. This scene represents an elegant iconoclastic gesture that channels the martyrdom of Christ into the realm of entertainment (as well as being highly entertaining in its own right). But in the present day, more earnest forms of iconoclasm directed against film are undertaken when film is transferred into the sober context of high art—in other words, into the very context that earlier, revolutionary cinema desired to lay open to cheerful, carnivalesque destruction. In our culture we have two fundamentally different models at our disposal that give us control over the length of time we spend looking at an image: the immobilization of the image in the exhibition space or the immobilization of the viewer in the movie theater. Yet both models founder when moving images are transferred into the museum or art exhibition space. The images will continue to move—but the viewer does too. Over the past decades video art has made various attempts to resolve the antagonism between these two forms of movement. Today, as in the past, one widespread strategy has been to make the individual video or film sequences as short as possible so as to ensure that the time a viewer spends in front of a work does not substantially exceed the time a viewer might on average be expected to spend in front of a “good” picture in a museum. While there is nothing objectionable about this strategy, it nonetheless represents a missed opportunity to explicitly address the uncertainty caused in the viewer by transferring moving images into the art space. This issue is dealt with most arrestingingly by films in which a certain image changes only very minimally—if at all—and in this sense coincides with the traditional presentation in a museum of a solitary, immobile image.

One pioneering example of such “motionless” films (and one that certainly has an iconoclastic effect given how it brings the film image to a standstill) is Andy Warhol’s *Empire State Building* (1964)—which is hardly surprising considering that the film’s author was highly active in the art world. The film consists of a fixed image that barely changes for hours on end. Unlike the moviegoer, however, an art space visitor would see this film as part of a cinematic installation, sparing him the risk of getting bored. Since the exhibition visitor is not only allowed, but also, as
already mentioned, supposed to freely move around the exhibition space, he can leave the
room at any time and return to it later. Thus, in contrast to a cinema audience, the visitor to
Warhol’s exhibited film will not be able to say definitively by the end whether the film consists
of a moving or a motionless image, since he will always have to admit the possibility that he
might have missed certain events in the film. But it is precisely this uncertainty that explicitly
thematizes the relationship between mobile and immobile images within an exhibition context.
Time ceases to be experienced as the time taken by the movement shown in a film’s image and
is instead perceived as the indefinable, problematic duration of the filmic image itself.

The same can be said of Derek Jarman’s celebrated film Blue (1993), as it can also of Feature
Film (1999) by Douglas Gordon, a movie that from the outset was conceived as a film
installation. In Gordon’s work, Hitchcock’s masterpiece Vertigo is replaced in its entirety by a
film presenting nothing but the music to Vertigo and, whenever the music is played, images of
the conductor conducting this music. For the rest of the time the screen remains black: here the
movement of the music has replaced the movement of the film image.

Accordingly, this music acts like a code whose movement is followed by the film, even if on its
surface it creates the illusion of “real” movement experienced in the world. This represents the
point where the iconoclastic gesture has come full circle: whereas at the beginning of film
history it was immobile contemplation that came under attack, by the end the film itself loses its
movement, turning into a black rectangle. As one tentatively feels one’s way around the blacked
out installation space trying to get a better sense of orientation, it is difficult not to be reminded
of the image of the lacerated eye in Buñuel’s film—a gesture that already promised to cast the
world in darkness.

*This essay was originally published in Iconoclash, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,
2002. We thank Boris Groys for letting us reproducing it here.