

*Amnesias*

Jacques Aumont

Cinema is the form that in the twentieth century these two destinies, these two fates, have found to express themselves. The painful destiny of Beauty: inaccessible, unthinkable, or thinkable only as transcendence—and that is cinema in its aspiration to the condition of art, always a frustrated aspiration. The terrible destiny of Time, the passage of time over me, this pressure of time coming towards me and destroying me little by little—that is cinema as the terrible machine of ‘death at work’ (Cocteau) or ‘death making us its promises via the cinematograph’ (Jean Epstein). The history of cinema starts from this thought of an impossible transcendence, a destructive time. But at the same time, cinema is the operator and the symbolisation—i.e. the possibility of perpetuation—of the struggle between these two fatalities: a struggle for the preservation of memory through the constant signification and citation of death at work; a struggle to restore beauty’s true, deep and essential signification, to allow us to attain the light of thought. The great films are those that give us ‘that saturation of magnificent signs bathed in the light of the absence of explanation’ (Manoel de Oliveira). But the magnificence of this light, its greatness, is precisely that it is able to give its own explanation: ‘things are only the occult meaning of things’ (Fernando Pessoa).

Translated by Roland-François Lack

‘Mortal Beauty’, in Michael Temple and James S. Williams, eds., *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000).