

CINEMATIC MOMENTS

by John Miller

PREFACE

In this writing I don't distinguish between the personal account and the general truth because perception and understanding are not innately personal or general. There can be no real distinction other than that which is socially construed. Although this convention may sometimes be useful it usually proves to be more of a hinderance. By choosing to ignore it in my work, I hope, among other things, to contrast the normative conception of history with my undifferentiated body of description. Here, culture is interpreted as a system of constructs and art serves as a model for reducing these constructs. A critique is implied in this relationship. It works as a form of histrionics where methodology is applied and abandoned for effect; contradictions inhere in the process. The problem of resolving these is extended to include the reader. I realize that no isolated aspect can constitute meaning in this format, neither the simple fact of print on a page, nor the language represented by the print, nor the reader's associations, etc. The writing, itself, in an attempt to be more literal, describes some of the meditation that might occur between its own various aspects.

*Maybe I'm writing this statement out of my
need to be productive.*

*I write a word. It looks funny, I check to see
if it's misspelled, but it's correct.*

*I'm asleep on a mattress. It begins to undulate
beneath me, as if a cat were walking around
my body. I open my eyes and realize I was
dreaming. Although I see no cat, the sensa-
tion is so strong that I double-check. After
finding nothing the sensation disappears.*

A thought occupies my mind only to change immediately. While this is one of the most familiar processes I encounter, it also remains one of the most mysterious.

I'm dreaming that when I speak, I can only impart factual information. Whether or not all facts are ultimately interpretive does not occur to me. In the dream I feel that I'm unable to speak creatively.

If I feel that what I know is small in proportion to what might be known, does it follow to use this speculation as a point of reference?

I doubt that any natural language can completely describe all the properties of any single phenomenon. One limitation that comes to mind is syntax. Even with word combinations that may be nearly infinite, the set of the syntactic rules remains constant, indicating a basic program, whose bias might be stated as, "Different word combinations can be formed to capture experience." Syntactic languages must make this assumption if their function is not to be gratuitous. Weighed against other possibilities, this bias is only one of many.

I am working in an ice cream parlor. The menu is on the wall behind the counter. Almost everything is called something stupid. Invariably, someone will point out an order instead of asking for it by name. I respond with, "One of what?" I repeat this until the unfortunate customer is forced to say, "A chocolate Whippy-Dippy."

When I'm reading, I'm never completely convinced that the process is working in the way it's supposed to. The rationale behind most writing is that it expresses significant information which can be applied elsewhere. However, reading and writing often may not be able to encompass the meaning of other events. They are events in themselves. What is the association between a word and what it "represents?" Words seem to derive the scope of their meaning more in opposition to other words than they do from their naming function. Consequently, language can be said to fabricate an interior logic. All written statements express this essential logic. It is the primary sense of writing, the irreducible aspect. Any similarity between this basis and the meaning of other things seems to be maintained through the desire for rationality. This similarity is not necessarily an exclusive one. Nor is this relationship necessarily the most important.

Apart from the things I consider are the things I don't consider. My expressions may reflect both.

As it becomes clear to me what I am after, what I write becomes more homogeneous. Unique bits of information diminish as the choosing process solidifies. The same thing is repeated in different ways.

I feel that it's fruitless to try to create an integrity. If living is holistic, then activities are parts which can only make sense in relation to each other.

Someone is having dinner with me. While her mouth is full, I make an offhand remark which brings laughter. I continue to make wisecracks until she spits her food out all over her plate.

Until recently I've always felt that friendship rested primarily on a charitable basis. Now I think that it's based on an essentially political exchange between two people. Their relationship is symbiotic. Sacrifice and benefit are delicately balanced, the friendship growing stronger in proportion to the degree of exchange. The contents of the exchange can be almost anything: material, emotional, intellectual... Without a reciprocity, there can be no interaction, no empathy. This conclusion dispels the idea of friendship as luxury.

I'm viewing an artwork that looks like a toy. Its boutique quality bothers me. It's too whimsical to be taken seriously. Since most avant-garde art is elaborated through a self-critical process, I deem it much more important than the boutique item. Self-critical work is complemented by the social content in which it occurs, even though it may have been initiated by personal whim. Business-wise however, the toy industry overshadows the art world. At the very least this must indicate something about the size of its social impact. How serious then, is the serious artist? Despite literalist esthetics I'm forced to claim that significance in art transcends its scale, unless I'm willing to concede that artistic meanings have been blown out of proportion to their social base.

Before writing, I select ideas according to a preconceived set of criteria; a paradigm. Initially, the paradigm might seem to dictate every selection, but as ideas are expressed, written, their interrelationship modifies the paradigm, making the process reflexive. For the paradigm to be perpetuated as a viable tool it must undergo continuous change.

*I am lying on my back in the bright sunlight.
I close my eyes. I see my red-orange eyelids.*

Walking down the street, I observe another person approaching. Although there is plenty of room, we almost collide.

Inside my body I don't at any given time, locate my conscious self within one well-defined spot. However, I do feel closer to, say, my eyes than I do to my legs. I have different degrees of identification for different areas. When I cut my nails or hair, my personal attachment is also severed. Similarly, food I eat becomes an integral part of me. Surgery can provide more extreme examples of additive and subtractive changes. Considering all of this, I am less certain of my body as a discrete entity to be occupied by my conscious self.

I'm waiting outside my house to go on a trip. Out of boredom I experiment. With perfect calmness, I attempt self-induced crying, just to see if I can physically do it. My behavior quickly elicits corresponding emotions, even though they are disembodied from any vital experience.

I'm riding with my friend in a car, talking about magazines. She mentions an article she read recently. According to what it said, sleeping positions reflect character traits. She said she sleeps in the fetal position. I reply that I sleep on my back, but can't remember the way I am when I wake up. My habit of jumping out of bed first thing in the morning is so strong that I can't recall my sleeping posture.

*I am beside a large lake. On the other side
I spot a figure approaching whose gender
is indeterminable because of the distance.
Certain nuances, apparently female, attract
my attention. Now close, I positively identify
the figure as male. After recognition, I am
indifferent.*

*I am touching my ear. I find a section I've
never felt before.*

It is raining very hard. I have no protection. I dash across the street to a discount store for an umbrella. Only the women's kind, extremely bright and flowery are displayed. A clerk comes up and says, "We don't have any men's umbrellas." I leave without one.

I am standing upright. My erect posture seems peculiar. I feel the same way about others. Walking exaggerates this effect.

I'm sitting in a Greyhound parked in a bus terminal. The bus next to me begins to pull away, but I get the feeling it's me who's moving.

I'm driving past the house of my former girlfriend. I observe her last name, still on the mailbox. A week before, I saw a real estate ad in the newspaper. The photo resembled her house so I wanted to check if she had moved. I had expected the house to be larger and grander, like the one in the ad, but now that I see it I realize that this was a misconception.

*I write a word. It looks funny. I check to see if
it's misspelled, but it's correct.*

*I'm playing in my living room. I'm spinning
around as fast as possible in one spot without
falling over. I stop but my head still feels like
it's moving.*

In a library I am absorbed, reading a book. My concentration breaks and I glance out the window to the street below. For a split second this particular space makes me dizzy. The realization that I'm perched on a chair in a balcony over the third story of a building is disquieting. Each level seems to be one more precarious step away from the ground. Still I remember I've implicitly trusted these things all my life. I relax.

While sitting with a book, my mind wanders. I remember a situation that occurred when I was ten years old. Now I remember when I was sixteen. These two memories don't coincide other than that they were recalled in close proximity.

I am floating on my back in a bay. My limbs are weightless. The warm ocean water comes up over my ears, hushing all sound. The bay is so big and the people are so few that it is impossible for me to collide with another swimmer. My eyes are wide open. The sky is pure blue and cloudless. The only other thing I see is my nose which looks orange against this background. Now everything is coherent.

When I'm thinking, the process is completely continuous. The segmentation of this flow into discrete thoughts is not consciousness but self-consciousness, a means of classification and articulation, an imposed schema. In individuals I think that the breaking up of uninterrupted mental activity marks the fundamental transition from experience to history.

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I'm asleep on a mattress. It begins to undulate beneath me, as if a cat were walking around my body. I open my eyes and realize I was dreaming. Although I see no cat, the sensation is so strong that I double-check. After finding nothing, the sensation disappears.

I am walking down a crowded street. I am especially aware of the crowd as a collection of individuals. As the people flow by, I am bombarded by a series of images: faces, clothing, gestures, movement. This is intense stimulation. My mind and body react as one. I begin to wonder what kind of comprehensive meaning does all of this have, whether history will need to be written with the camera as well as the pen.

I am walking by a parking lot. I notice that the attendant has grouped all the red cars in one section, all the blue in another, and so on. To me this is pleasing.

In my new neighborhood I see a sign that says, "Sixty-Nine Cent Store. All items priced sixty-nine cents." This is a striking arrangement. Here, exchange value looks obviously shoddy, with the price advertised before the product itself. I consider using this as a technique, but decide I'd rather simply state it. In this case esthetics enables me to forget my intended behavior.

In Providence, Rhode Island I receive a letter from a tractor company in Bedford, Ohio. The majority of the literature discusses underground telephone cables in light of community beautification. This information does not relate to me in the least. but since the stationary looks official and the envelope bears a metered mail postmark, I doubt that it's a prank.

To me, what is called truth is dependent on its context. Although it may be consistent to one set of criteria, it is easily inconsistent to another. It seems absurd to attach moral value to this type of consistency.

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I'm rereading something I'd written a few days ago. It's a rough outline of what I had on my mind. Now I can't make sense of it. Without a coherent expression, does this idea exist?

While reading, the print on the page is the salient aspect which confronts me. The presence of any other meaning is less concrete; the print can only allude to it. Even with contradictions and discontinuities, my behavior as a reader stays more or less the same. My physical activity does not change so much whether I read "This is red." or "This is not red." as it does when I decide not to read at all. This is important when I try to evaluate reading as an experience of itself.

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Somehow, for no particular reason, I feel wronged by the world. I begin contemplating the possibility of my death and how sorry everyone would be. This is gratifying but the pleasure disappears when I realize I'm fantasizing.

I'm looking at myself in the mirror. I feel attractive. I've felt both good and bad about my appearance in the past. This suggests that my appearance and my perception of it may both be variables.

I'm driving past the house of my former girlfriend. I observe her last name, still on the mailbox. A week before, I saw a real estate ad in the newspaper. The photo resembled her house so I wanted to check if she had moved. I had expected the house to be larger and grander, like the one in the ad, but now that I see it I realize that this was a misconception.

My bedroom mirrors are mounted at right angles to each other on adjacent walls. With this arrangement, my profile is visible in addition to the usual frontal view. This makes me wonder about the possibility of normally identifying others from an angle different from the front.

I'm walking down the street with someone. I notice a section of sidewalk with the letters "J.M." inscribed. I identify them as my initials. My friend replies that I couldn't possibly have made them (which is true), but they can represent my name just as well.

I'm playing in my living room. I'm spinning around in one spot as fast as possible without falling over. I stop but my head still feels like it's moving.

Out of self-consciousness, I would feel more comfortable substituting the word "I" with the letter "x", but in a short time "x" would change.

In a library I am absorbed, reading a book. My concentration breaks and I glance out the window to the street below. For a split second this particular space makes me dizzy. The realization that I'm perched on a chair in a balcony over the third story of a building is disquieting. Each level seems to be one more precarious step away from the ground. Still I remember I've implicitly trusted these things all my life. I relax.

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While sitting with a book, my mind wanders. I remember a situation that occurred when I was ten years old. Now I remember when I was sixteen. These two memories don't coincide other than that they were recalled in close proximity.

I am eating an apple. I step outside where the air is cold and clear. The taste is much more distinct.

My friend is telling me that there was no concept of average or mean in the Middle Ages.

I have just moved into my new apartment. Before unpacking, it's hard to get organized. What is missing is the routine determined by the furniture or tools. Together they coordinate syntax of postures and activities characteristic of modern life. This arrangement is often taken for granted. A chair, for instance, suggests sitting. A razor; shaving. Since these possessions elicit specific responses, I have to rely on them not only to work right, but also to help shape my behavior.

I am walking by a parking lot. I notice that the attendant has grouped all the red cars in one section, all the blue in another, and so on. To me this is pleasing.

I am walking down a crowded street. I am especially aware of the crowd as a collection of individuals. As the people flow by, I am bombarded by a series of images: faces, clothing, gestures, movement. This is intense stimulation. My mind and body react as one. I begin to wonder what kind of comprehensive meaning does all of this have, whether history will need to be written with the camera as well as the pen.

I am going over want ads in the newspaper. Each one seems needlessly imposing and aggressive. I know that getting a job will entail forming a relationship with a group of people, each of whom is less than, equal or better than me. Yet the wording of the ads attempts to conceal this aspect. They're written as if from a superior position. The illusion that the wording creates is that it is somehow necessary for me to prove myself to my prospective employers. Their conception of ownership and private property justifies to them their sense of superiority. These beliefs determine the quality of the want ad.

I am buying a candy bar. I want an expensive sesame candy, but habitually spend less in order to balance my budget. From this viewpoint, the expensive product connotes a wider range of possibilities, freedom. Just imagining myself purchasing it evokes the feeling of expanding vistas. At the counter, I pick cheaper candy, actually forgetting my previous impulse until I've left the store.

In my new neighborhood I see a sign that says, "Sixty-Nine Cent Store. All items priced sixty-nine cents." This is a striking arrangement. Here, exchange value looks obviously shoddy, with the price advertised before the product itself. I consider using this as a technique, but decide I'd rather simply state it. In this case esthetics enables me to forget my intended behavior.

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My room-mate is asleep, snoring, “sawing away.” From where I stand, his nostrils look like the cavities in a walnut shell, cracked open.

I am eating an apple. I step outside where the air is cold and clear. The taste is much more distinct.

I'm sitting in a Greyhound parked in a bus terminal. The bus next to me begins to pull away, but I get the feeling it's me who's moving.

I am attending a worship service in an outdoor sanctuary at church camp. The pews are made of logs, split in half. These have been placed in a semi-circle on the hillside, radiating from the altar at the bottom. The whole arrangement resembles an amphitheater. Some of my fellow campers have written a sermon which takes the form of a dialogue between the minister and "God," a camper hidden in the nearby bushes. "God's" proclamations amuse me, but I know that laughter is taboo. Consequently, everything seems even funnier. Finally, I can no longer control myself. I fall into convulsive hysterics, at the same time dreading their terrible social repercussions.

I wear contact lenses. I have an idea for performance. I appear in public without my lenses. I can't see other people clearly. Because of their minimal nature, it would be difficult for people to tell if I was wearing them—most would be unaware of them in the first place. Yet since it is enough to simply state this, a routine persists through esthetics.

