Remystifying Film: Aesthetics, Emotion and The Queen

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Part way through Stephen Frears’s film, The Queen (2006), the monarch (Helen Mirren) undergoes an extraordinary, magical experience whilst journeying into the Scottish landscape that surrounds Balmoral, her grand ancestral holiday home. Despite the anxious offers from her estate workers to chauffeur her, she drives alone into the mountains and proceeds to break down in the centre of a fast flowing river. While awaiting help a strange event occurs: a stag appears magically as if from nowhere and, unable to hide her admiration for the beast, the Queen gently utters the words, ‘Oh! You beauty’ before the animal disappears as mysteriously as it arrived. Framed in a painterly way, and providing a marked punctuation to the urban settings that have dominated the film so far, this short sequence presents a series of sumptuous landscape images that elicit a spectator response which is instinctive and intuitive. When analysed using an aesthetic approach – a methodology one might use for the examination of a painting – an emotional relationship is mobilised between the spectator and the film: a sentiment not necessarily available through a narrative reading.

The Queen concentrates on the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death and the hysterical response from the British public in the lead up to the funeral. Emotion and, in particular, what is perceived by the public as the Queen’s suppression of emotion (although this is never fully explicated) is a narrative theme in the film. It is only by implementing an aesthetic analysis of a number of landscape images in the film – which occur as ‘frozen pictorial moments’, presented in excess of narrative plausibility and more or less as tableaux – that a particular kind of ‘affect’ is proposed as a pleasure of cinema, rather than meaning, consonant with recent tendencies in Film Studies. This article explores aesthetics and emotion as a complementary approach to cinema through the analysis of a number of pictorial landscape compositions within the film frame. The first part introduces the grounds for an aesthetic approach, followed by an art-historical analysis of the film.

Why Aesthetic Theory?

Writing in 2000, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith discusses the notion of aesthetics in relation to the study of film. His concern is that, from the 1970s, as a result of the political situation in 1968, film analysis shifted away from aesthetics and towards narrative theory as a political mode of study. For
Nowell-Smith, the political trajectory has now lost its impetus and narrative theory may be supplemented as an appropriate method for studying film. As he suggests,

> finding meaning has become an academic exercise, in both good and bad senses of the phrase. It is useful to set students to carry out but is in danger of being routinised. Films mean. But they do not just mean. Because they can be described with the aid of language we can be led to think that description can substitute for the film. This is the perennial temptation of what I have called the linguistic analogy. But films also work in less describable ways. They work as painting and music do, partly through meaning but partly in other ways; partly in ways that have linguistic equivalents and partly in ways that do not. The move in the direction of semiotics in the 1970s was ‘indeterminate’ and could not be brought within a rational schema. But the need for such a rational schema has become questionable. Too many of the things that films do evade attempts to subsume them under the heading of meaning (Nowell-Smith 2000, 16).

What Nowell-Smith is proposing is that films operate on a visual and aural level as do a number of the other arts such as painting and music, and that established film theory does not always provide a full means of analysis because it neglects the aesthetic dimension. Nowell-Smith’s idea is provocative but he does not develop his ideas further in this work. This does not mean that there exists a binary distinction between these two methodologies; rather it suggests that an aesthetic approach, similar to the method one might use to analyse a painting, adds another dimension to narrative theory.

Nowell-Smith finds a kindred spirit in the ideas of film scholar, George Toles. He advances Nowell-Smith’s sentiments, revisiting the concept of aesthetics as a mode of film analysis. For Toles, the most noteworthy aspect of the process of cinematic viewing is ‘a healthy psychic dependence on the work itself’ (Toles 2001, 13). By this he emphasises the importance of the formal elements of the image within the film frame, and the immediacy of impact on the spectator to create emotion. Likening film to a painting, Toles highlights the significance of the viewer’s encounter with the actual image by promoting the deployment of a formal analysis of the overall composition, as opposed to the information this generates. As he explains, ‘I am most imaginatively receptive to art that seems, in ways that are worth pursuing, stronger than I am within its spheres of knowing’ (Toles 2001, 13). Adopting the belief that aesthetic analysis lacks respect in academic circles, Toles remonstrates that current scholarly interest in artistic value ‘is tantamount to an admission of theory ignorance, and an
accompanying retreat from the daunting complexity of our present cultural situation’ (Toles 2001, 14). To address this shortcoming, he argues for the importance of the notion of immediacy of affect which, in turn, enables the reclamation of the emotion of sentiment when watching films.

For Toles, to apply literary theory is not a wholly appropriate method for the study of film because the distinction between literature and cinema lies in the latter’s direct engagement with the image. As he points out,

citation missing

the chief difference between our involvement in film experience and in the act of reading is that films (even very ordinary ones) have the power to engage our emotions directly, while literature always requires some effort of will, in conjunction with intellect, to make language into pictures and sensations vivid enough for feeling to assent to (Toles 2001, 83).

Toles’s concept of cinema viewing is one of

numinous encounters [which] entails a sceptical or balanced surrender to an openness of experience to art with which we enter that is prior to, and ultimately beyond, ideology or theory. It is an approach, as Mary Gaitskill puts it, consisting of “that feeling of not quite trusting but at the same time trying to trust [that] is the best” (cited in Crouse 2008, 12).

Here, he is calling for tactics contiguous with the spiritual on encountering the image. For Toles, contemporary film theory is limited, a factor ‘wrought by scholars adhering to an epistemology that privileges separateness, detachment and difference’ (in Crouse 2008, 15). Toles calls for the re-enchantment of cinema to replace a system of academic Fordism which

stood for a kind of draining phenomenon, very popular in the 1980s and 1990s, to empty cinema of any of its positive power to do anything to us. It was like taking the night back from cinema and showing cinema how its tricks and ruses and ideologies were no longer capable of enchanting us and making us buy into something culturally suspect and untenable as a prolongation of bad historical attitudes (in Crouse 2008, 16).

Recent scholarly activity has proposed various methodologies which sanction the consideration of aspects of film as a frozen moment or what Martin Lefebvre terms temps mort (2006). This offers a number of opportunities throughout the duration of the film to approach it using an
aesthetic analysis, just as one might analyse a still image such as a painting or photograph. As noted in the examination of the opening sequence of The Queen – notwithstanding that cinema is perceived as a moving image – it is feasible to analyse the numerous shots that a single film contains. This does not necessarily involve creating a dialogue between film and painting, although this type of scrutiny does aid an understanding of a specific period in history. However, it does entail the deployment of a visual analysis of specific frames at any given moment in the film: an argument developed by Lefebvre who proposes a distinction between setting and landscape in film. For him, customarily setting forms part of narrative space. As he suggests, ‘setting, like action, constitutes an entirely variable conceptual construction. In other words, setting is usually devoid of fixed boundaries; or at least any such boundaries are definitely divisible’ (Lefebvre 2006, 21). Lefebvre differentiates between narrative and what he calls spectacular modes of viewer activity that allow for the spectator’s reflection on the filmic spectacle. This involves imagining a halt in the narrative action in order to contemplate the landscape, although the narrative is never far from mind. Thus, setting briefly becomes landscape, before the spectator again engages with the narrative.

Thus, while acknowledging the Bordwell and Thompson tradition of a formal analysis of the text, as well as the existing work on affect and sensation using a Deleuzian methodology, this article calls for analysis based on the notion of the temps mort which presents an affect: a sense of immediacy or impact prior to the knowledge or a learnt acculturated viewing practice. One of the underlying tenets of the arguments presented here is that it is possible to perceive an image – and subsequently to assimilate it as spectacle – prior to the processing of that information through profound theoretical debate, albeit this undertaking aids rather than supplements a narrative approach.

Emotion and the Arts

As noted at the outset of this work, emotion, or the lack of emotional display, is a theme in The Queen, but, on the whole, this notion remains unexplored in the narrative. However, the landscape sequences may stimulate an emotional response from the spectator: a sensation not necessarily available through a narrative reading. Jay Appleton notes that a certain aesthetic satisfaction may be derived from the landscape. However, he argues that landscape may act as a stimulant for an emotional response.

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2 See (Williams 1981). This Williams explains as a ‘structure of feeling’.
3 For the former, see (Bordwell and Thompson 2006), and the latter, (Kennedy 2002) and (Powell 2007).
by the spectator, particularly ‘when experienced through the medium of painting’ (Appleton 1975, 2).

The concept of aesthetics and landscape is typically explored through the discourse of the Sublime. A complex theory with no specific definition, the Sublime is based on the work of a group of Eighteenth Century writers and philosophers who advocated a number of attributes as key activators of Sublime experiences. These include ‘wildness’, ‘vastness’, ‘infinity’ and ‘magnificence’: all qualities to be found in nature.\(^4\) Claiming that nature is akin to the divine, the philosophers emphasised its spiritual aspects achieved through formal composition and the use of dramatic lighting: for the Sublime experience to function, the spectator must be involved and participatory. The notion of the Sublime was to emerge a century later through the work of Romantic artists who revealed a fascination with the wild and untamed aspects of nature. Identified conversely as the ‘Sublime’ and the ‘Beautiful’ by the Eighteenth Century philosopher Edmund Burke, in his treatise entitled ‘A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful [[1757]]’, the landscape has traditionally been perceived as falling into two camps: the Sublime and the Picturesque (Burke 1998). The Sublime challenges the Picturesque, contrasting unrestrained nature and the awe-inspiring elements with artifice and control. Romanticism is a nebulous term, but embodies a variety of belief systems and approaches, such as an empathy with nature as infinity and as a conduit to spirituality, a solipsistic belief in self and morbid fascination.

The beginning of this article saw the Queen enter the mountainous, awe-inspiring Scottish landscape alone. The formal composition within the frame and the cinematographic style of the film imply a Romantic and Sublime sensibility whereby she is pitted against, yet moved by, nature and the spectator is privileged to a similar pictorialism – arguably an affect – which facilitates an emotional reaction.

‘Frozen Moments’ and The Queen

A significant landscape sequence in the film occurs when the Queen decides to go stalking. Accompanied by Prince Charles (Alex Jennings), and seen in close-up, she drives through the landscape. Following a heated discussion concerning the Princess, the Queen changes her mind: halting the vehicle she alights, now deciding to return to the castle on foot. Her agitated son moves into the driving seat and departs, and the Queen is left alone in the woodland. In the brief, frozen moment that ensues, the Queen is placed centre frame stooping over her three dogs; trees pervade the image, their

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\(^4\) See (Burke 1998).
uppermost branches disappearing through the top of the frame, overpowering the figure of the monarch who appears diminutive and inconsequential. At this juncture, the spectator is positioned at a low angle, a factor which further reinforces the sense of subjugation.

Significance is achieved not by what is visible to the eye, but by what lies ahead. The horizontal floor of the forest forms an axis to the upright trees, and the filtering light suggests an abyss and a promise of a presence beyond. This sensation is reinforced as the film cuts to an aerial view of the landscape. The Queen is no longer visible, and the spectator is permitted to enjoy the landscape from a perspective not available through her point of view. This shot ensures that the landscape appears isolated and hostile; it adopts antagonistic characteristics, mobilising a sense of loneliness. In a subsequent shot, the camera adopts autonomy as it travels over the precipice towards a group of vehicles lined up as specks on the horizon. However, rather than dwelling on this image, it journeys on – ignoring the figure with binoculars (presumably Prince Charles searching for his sons) and passing over the ghillies – to focus eventually on the distant figure of a stag standing alone. The landscape is given emotional impact by the lone animal, which remains alert and immobile, its presence and size enhancing the scale of the surrounding landscape.

It is at this juncture that the composition within the frame offers a Romantic and Sublime experience to the spectator. The hill to the left of the frame forms a sharp diagonal from left to right, an angle which creates a sense of unease through its steep verticality and corresponds to Burke’s Sublime notion of ‘suddenness’ whereby a forceful transition takes place for the spectator (Burke 2008, 76). Indeed, as Morgan James suggests, the Highlands are an ‘ancient, powerful land [which] can easily humble those who ignore the dangers. Highland landscape (...) is menacing and unpredictable’ (Morgan James 2006, 198). Here, the landscape dominates the composition, leaving little room for the sky; this has the effect of engulfing the viewer and offering little escape, just as there is no avoidance of death for the animal. The verdant foreground of the hill is modified into violet hues as the mountains extend into the distance, thus seeming inaccessible and remote. A river twists through the valley but the surrounding landscape is uneven, implying a problematic means of escape. This aerial composition, a helicopter shot, lasts for some seconds and the landscape may be viewed only from a spectator perspective. The stag is overtaken and ultimately disappears from view as the camera veers to the right and passes over the hilltop. At this moment, a view of the landscape is mobilised that enables a vista comprised of a series of parallel lines apexed by a large mountain. The foreground initially rises in a series of knolls, before descending towards a valley that appears horizontally within the frame. At the base lies a river and this leads the eye towards the mountain that forms a backdrop to the composition. As the camera swerves to the
right, a sound bridge occurs with the words, ‘Do you think you will ever be Queen?’ The film cuts to the face of Princess Diana: an image taken from her famous interview with Martin Bashir.\(^5\) The aforementioned landscape shot is given emotional force both by the accompanying music and the vastness of the images presented for spectator contemplation.

Frequently, painterly images are offered that elicit emotion from the spectator through immediate impact and it is this affect that provokes a response. William Lyons attempts to identify this by suggesting that,

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\text{[a]esthetic emotion, pure and simple, the pleasure given us by certain lines and masses, and combinations of colors and sounds, is an absolutely sensational experience, an optical or aural feeling that is primary, and not due to the repercussion backwards [to the physiological level] of other sensations elsewhere consecutively aroused. To this simple primary and immediate pleasure in certain pure sensations and harmonious combinations of them, there may, it is true, be added secondary pleasures (Lyons 1997, 140).}
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What Lyons purports here is that the natural senses of vision and hearing relate directly to the image, and these affect the viewer before any subordinate functional processes occur. Lyons is arguing for an immediate impression and affect on encountering a work of art. This occurs before the gradual introduction of the secondary and, in turn, consequential physiological reaction, and differs from the art critic who provides an intellectual contribution gleaned through ‘overfamiliarity with great works of art’ (Lyons 1997, 140). Lyons traces a line from the emotions of the artist through to the content of the art work as an expression by the artist, to the actual emotion incited by the painter and the connection with the spectator. He creates three categories of emotion: ‘Emotion In and Transferred from the Painter’, ‘Emotion Depicted by or Generated Through the Painting’, and thirdly, ‘Emotions Discovered in, Provoked by, or Connected with a Painting’ (Lyons 1997, 143, original emphasis).\(^6\) If Lyons’s arguments refer to the emotional reverberations derived from painting, then this is a sensation achievable from the frozen moment in cinema.

Landscape as spectacle occurs in The Queen when the monarch decides to venture out by herself to follow the hunting party. Embarrassing her groundsman, she appears unannounced at their office to enquire into the whereabouts of the stalkers. She is furnished with directions and appears anxious at the mention of the river, thus signalling the prospect of danger to the audience. This rhetoric concerning the landscape is later corroborated

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\(^5\) Taken from a BBC One Panorama interview with the Princess of Wales, broadcast in November 1995.

\(^6\) Lyons bases much of his research on the work of William James (James 1890).
When the Queen becomes stranded in the water; the unlikely scenario of having refused escorts results in her solitary pursuit of the expedition. The film cuts from the interior of the ghillies’ office to a shot of her vehicle through the trees. Accompanied by fast-paced music, the monarch’s vehicle is visible through the branches as she speeds along the road. Seen in close-up, her anxious expression displays concern, presumably over current British opinion concerning the behaviour of the establishment. At this moment, the film cuts to an overhead shot of her Land Rover as it winds its way down a track that is flanked on one side by the river bed, and the other by moorland. Here, the spectator is privileged a view over the proceedings until the camera tilts upwards as the Queen continues her journey and, at this interval, reveals a spectacular image of the landscape. The vehicle is diminished in the foreground of the frame, mediating the experience of the Scottish hills and aggrandising the surroundings.

The use of overhead shots, both in this and the aforementioned sequence, precludes access to the image. The spectator is rendered exposed and vulnerable as onlooker, unable to attain a level point of entry into the composition. A group of trees to the foreground enable the eye to be led along the curve of the river towards the distant hills, and sunlight reflected on the water’s surface creates a dazzling effect of chiaroscuro, thus forming a contrast between the illuminated area and the surrounding land. Similarly, the emerald shades of the foreground foliage are juxtaposed with the pale mauve of the remote mountains that form the rear of the composition. Steep-sided precipices to the right of the frame further destabilises the viewer provoking a sense of the Sublime. Eventually, the vehicle comes to a halt and becomes stationary amidst worrying mechanical noises, and the steep sides of the hills place the Queen, yet again, in a vulnerable position with which the spectator may identify. Her isolated figure generates connotations of fear and anticipation, its impact lying in its scale and her positioning within the landscape. The camera remains immobile for some seconds to permit such emotion.

Jerrold Levinson defines the concept of emotion, arguing that traditionally its study has been undertaken through the polarised fields of sensation and cognition. As he proposes,

\[\text{[t]he former holds that at the core of an emotion is an internal feeling or set of sensations, while the latter holds that at the core of an emotion is a particular kind of thought, judgement or evaluation (Levinson 1997, 21).}\]

The first approach is difficult to define as it involves what is experienced or, what Levinson terms, a mode of viewing which effects a ‘bodily response and inner affect’ (1997, 21). By combining the two,
an emotion is best thought of as a bodily response with a distinctive physiological, phenomenological, and expressive profile, one that serves to focus attention in a given direction, and that involves cognition to varying degrees and at various levels (Levinson 1997, 21).

Focusing attention on an emotional response to art, Levinson argues, amongst other things, for the relationship between the spectator and the art work. He suggests that a viewer or reader may become emotionally involved with a character, either in literature or the visual arts, and experience sensations towards and empathy for that character as a real person. Similarly, emotion may be created through a work of art or an object: for example, and in particular, the abstract work of art. Levinson proposes two types of emotional response:

[t]he first type is where there is insufficient time for cognition (...), so that no real representation of the object responded to is formed, there being only a virtually instantaneous reaction, instinctive or reflexive in nature, unmediated by conscious thought (examples: apprehension at a suddenly looming shape, disgust at an accidentally felt slug). A second type is where, though cognition is involved in generating the response, the representation thus formed is either not propositional in nature, or else does not have the status of a judgement, or both (examples; phobic fear of garter snakes, unfounded resentment of female superiors) (1997, 24).

It is Levinson’s ‘first type’ of emotional response which informs this work, whereby intuitive sensations are provoked by particular types of landscape representations.

Frears enables such an intuitive sensation to the Scottish Highlands in the above mentioned sequence, and this is apparent in the moving and awe-inspiring event which follows the Queen’s phone call for aid. The camera frames her in a side view as she gazes downwards, a troubled expression on her face. The spectator is aware of her vulnerability, both as an unaccompanied sovereign and as a lone figure in inhospitable surroundings. Traditionally in cinema, the Scottish Highlands are presented as a space for self-discovery and romance. As Sillars and MacDonald point out: ‘A refugee from the modern world finds there respite and a reconnection with the natural world, often brokered by a feminine spirit of place’ (2008, 185). The Queen becomes a refugee from the world in this brief moment. She removes her headscarf and her troubled expression develops into a relaxed half smile as she closes her eyes and breathes
deeply, inhaling the fresh air. She glances across and, from a point-of-view shot, the film cuts to a view of the fast-flowing river. Large, grey granite boulders form the foreground of the composition as the eye is drawn to the riverbank and, in turn, to the mountain which almost obliterates the sky. The only sounds emanate from the bubbling water and birdsong. As if to emphasise the Queen’s vulnerability, as well as to implicate the spectator in her plight, the film cuts to another overhead shot of the stranded sovereign. The water glistens – visually blending her figure with the elements – and she is barely visible, her slight form rendering her helpless as the sharp incline of the hills create – what Burke might term – a sense of ‘suddenness’. At this juncture another example of what Lefebvre terms ‘space freed from eventhood’ occurs (2006, 22). The image becomes blurred in contrast with the camera’s refocus on the landscape, and a stag’s head appears: the animal enters from the right-hand side of the frame. Accompanied by soft music, the image cuts back to the Queen and then to the stag as the two monarchs face each other. She shakes her head in wonder and the film cuts to a slow motion shot of the deer as it begins to run, advancing towards her. The animal stands to face her – now also illuminated by the sun’s rays – and the Queen’s magical experience becomes so for the spectator, as the graceful beast and its surroundings adopt a spiritual quality.
Against a backdrop of mountainous terrain – and appearing comfortable in its environment, clearly trusting its human counterpart – the stag grazes. The sound of gunfire alerts her, and with rapid movement she turns her head. Subsequently, and in an attempt to protect the beast, she physically and verbally endeavours to frighten the animal by waving her arms and shouting. A cut to her point of view depicts the stag placed centre frame beneath the boughs of a tree (Figure 1). The surrounding landscape forms a steep vertical to the rear of the composition, thus challenging any sense of stability or security. Much like the Queen, the animal is being pursued, and both their positions are threatened. Again, on the sound of barking dogs the Queen twists round, only to find that the animal has disappeared as magically as it arrived. A cut edit returns to a close-up of her smiling face, expressing pleasure that the beast has escaped unharmed, and a haze hangs mysteriously over the valley; the accompanying light-hearted music suggests a mystical element as though the preceding image was merely an apparition. The tree to the left of the composition serves to frame the valley and the rolling hills beyond, and this image remains on screen for some seconds before the film cuts back to the Queen’s face as she laughs at the escapade. An ensuing ‘space freed from eventhood’ shot indicates that it is probably not taken from the Queen’s perspective although it is the same vantage point (Figure 2).

In cinematic depictions of the country, images of Scotland and Scottish identity are often mythologised through over-emphasis on the Highlands as an invented construct, consisting – as Martin-Jones describes – of ‘a pre-modern wilderness, using the vast, beautiful and bleak countryside (...) to stand in for the whole of Scotland’ (2009, 5). If the Highlands are associated with spirituality and wilderness, then nowhere is this more evident than in the stag sequence. It becomes an emblematic moment in the film, revealing the Queen’s inner turmoil: an emotion which is subsequently conferred onto the spectator.
Here, the Scottish landscape communicates a sense of myth through its subject matter and formal organisation: a quality described by Toles as that which 'bypass[es] rationality, to get at problems that are so subterranean and large and many-sided' (2001, 19). Intuitive sensations are mobilised for the spectator, provoked by the formal organisation of the Scottish Highland imagery. Drawing on Levinson, this juncture allows for ‘insufficient time for cognition (...) there being only a virtually instantaneous reaction, instinctive or reflexive in nature, unmediated by conscious thought’ (1997, 24).

The stag is represented as a graceful beast and its appearance is an obvious homage to artist Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-1873), and his painting *Monarch of the Glen* executed in 1851 (Figure 3).
As a regular visitor to Balmoral, Landseer had close connections with Queen Victoria and had provided art tuition for both the monarch and the Prince consort, Prince Albert. *Monarch of the Glen* was originally painted for the refreshment room of the House of Lords and became the most popular and most recognised picture of the mid-Nineteenth Century, reproduced in prints for greater accessibility. The haughty authority of this great stag standing on the summit of a Highland mountain commanding all it sees below, dominates the composition with the landscape backdrop. Duncan Petrie suggests that many historical interpretations of the Scottish landscape originate from myths surrounding the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745. Fictional constructions of the Highlander as an independent hero prepared to fight and die for his land are evident in nineteenth-century novels and Victorian paintings. As Petrie suggests,

[t]he action invariably takes place against a picturesque backdrop of untamed Highland wilderness reflecting the honour, nobility and defiance of those who have inhabited this land for centuries. Moreover, such a construction of the Highlands is placed in
dialectical relation to a ‘cultivated’ Lowlands associated with acquiescence in the Union (2000, 53).

Petrie cites Landseer’s painting, Monarch of the Glen, as a forerunner of the cinematic convention of Scottish landscape representations, noting the derogatory ‘tartanry’ label as an outcome of this. Just as Landseer depicts the setting in this painting as more than background, so Frears pictures the two monarchs in The Queen. However, this is presented in a rather overstated way, and it is not this sequence that is significant to the creation of emotion within the shots. In many ways the stag is a narrative ruse, its presence a plausible device. Instead, it is the explicit Romantic vocabulary used to present the surrounding landscape as more than backdrop that facilitates spectator emotion.

Although not to suggest that Frears consciously drew inspiration specifically from this, or any other painting, his images bear some of the traditional hallmarks of the work of various Scottish landscape artists, such as David Young Cameron (1865 – 1945) who drew on the notion of a merger between the Highlands and Scottish national identity. He painted Romantic landscapes which found visual expression in the depiction of awe-inspiring wildernesses, evoking the notion of the Sublime as expressed by Burke. Cameron’s Wilds of Assynt (1936) (Figure 4) is a continuation of a tradition in nineteenth-century Romantic painting and is comprised of a mountainous landscape which is neither trite nor clichéd.

Figure 4
Two small figures to the foreground of the painting lead the eye to a ruined castle and eventually to the purple edifices in the background. Although not a menacing landscape, the figures appear diminished, made vulnerable by their surroundings. If they are not in danger, then their human subjection is dramatised by the power of the elements. Emotional impact is created through the use of figures and their positioning, and their presence has the effect of accentuating the scale of the mountains, giving a disturbing impact to the composition. An earlier Romantic painting by Turner expresses similar qualities to Cameron’s work. Entitled *Loch Coruisk, Skye* (1831), the image codes the vocabulary of the Sublime through its dynamic lines which form strong diagonals across the composition. Seen from above, the eye is drawn to the swirling shapes of the watercolour’s rock formations, their grey mass forming an eddy which merges with the clouds and the water of the Loch. Two diminutive figures are placed in the foreground and their presence mediates the spectator experience. However, they are not alone in the awe-inspiring mountains: to the left of the painting, three separate minute figures appear in various poses, either walking or climbing across the gigantic rock face. The use of chiaroscuro presents the spectator with a strong juxtaposition of light and shade commensurate with Burke’s notion of magnificence as a cause of the Sublime. Emotional impact is created through the use of people who appear overwhelmed by their surroundings: the two in the foreground contemplative and respectful of their environment.

In painting, figures such as these appear self-reflexive, where the landscape operates as a metaphor for inner thoughts. The painting strikes an alien, melancholic note by placing them in an uninterrupted expanse against the backdrop of the mountains. They appear solitary and in contemplation of something beyond, in a similar vein to the contemplative figure of the Queen. The positioning of both suggests a point of conscious recognition, a literal and metaphorical situation bordering on a mystical and spiritual experience. *The Queen* presents the Scottish Highlands as atmospheric, recalling Cameron’s figures which appear to reach out for something infinite and eternal mobilised by the landscape. Although barely visible, they look out to an open vista suggesting a visionary, or a ‘Rückenfigur’. As Toles points out, there is

> [s]omething inside the frame (and inside us), which resists definition, “urges us to fill the voids, the inviting space within its [the frame’s] boundaries that are true to the ones that torment us in life” (2001, 89).

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7 The *Rückenfigur* is a term used in art history, literally meaning ‘back figure’.
Toles quotes Charles Affron, a scholar who he believes is attempting to position the spectator ‘dizzingly in that final phase of enthrallment where we truly don’t feel capable of distinguishing the outer image from the inner actuality’ (Toles 2001, 90). As suggested at the outset, one narrative theme in the film is concerned with the suppression of emotion. A narrative reading of this sequence might demonstrate the Queen’s lack of emotion and inability to express it. She struggles with loss of power – as indicated by public feeling at the time – and is depicted, in contrast, at the mercy of the dominance of nature that overpowers her. This is not clearly stated, although her lack of popularity is made evident. The inclusion of the stag sequence further enhances the narrative, inserting the notion of the two monarchs both hunted yet undertaking a time honoured duty. Further parallels are made between Princess Diana and the stag. Indeed, as Flitterman-Lewis observes,

[t]he parallels are obvious; Diana, the most hunted woman in the world, stalked as prey by image-hungry photographers and finally killed, is described as such by her brother (...) This is the pursuit from the stag’s point of view, recast in the vocabulary of modern media and the woman’s image (2007, 53).

Nevertheless, beyond these narratively plausible scenes, the imposing landscape sequences offer pictorial imagery to the spectator. They do not operate as merely setting or backdrop; neither do they necessarily further the narrative. Instead, they furnish the spectator with pictorial ‘frozen moments’ that permit emotional identification through the formal imagery presented within the frame. A return to aesthetics – in this case a pictorial analysis rooted in Romantic and Sublime theory – allows the spectator another dimension to experience an emotion which bypasses rationalisation, yet still forms part of knowledge production.
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