

The Shock Value of Ladislav Starewicz's *The Cameraman's Revenge*

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Abstract

Stop-motion animation has carved a unique path for itself in cinematic history as it encompasses diverse techniques and innovative ideas. Ladislav Starewicz's *The Cameraman's Revenge* is no exception. By using insects as puppets to portray a human love triangle, Starewicz manages to shock audiences on multiple levels. With elements of humour and horror, *The Cameraman's Revenge* is an important creation in cinematic history that remains contemporary and innovative to this day. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which this film may illicit shock value to audience members and scholars alike. I will analyze various cinematic techniques used within the film that can illustrate the sense of shock, and the deeper impact the film's diegesis may contain, including the human psychosis of insect contamination, haptic mise-en-scène, the ethical concerns regarding animal rights on film, meta-textual elements of voyeurism and perhaps the first cinematic evidence of paparazzi. I will also explore the idea that Starewicz may have only intended his film to be that of parody rather than academic evaluation.

Keywords: The Cameraman's Revenge, Shock value, Film, Stop-motion Animation, Cinematic History, Ladislav Starewicz, Ethics

Essay

Walt Disney, Norman McLaren and Jan Švankmajer are just a few examples of how film animation has been used to entertain children and comment upon society. One filmmaker's creations managed to shock audiences of yesteryear and today; he is Ladislav Starewicz and the film is *The Cameraman's Revenge* (*Miest Kinomatografického Operatora*, 1912). In this essay, I will explore how Starewicz's horrific cinematic creation has brought shock value to audience members and scholars alike, as well carving out its place of importance in cinematic history.

When exploring the history of film animation, a handful of creations are accredited as being pioneering and innovative for their time, with Walt Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928) being a prime example. However, short animated features created by Winsor McCay, Georges Méliès and more (Myers, 1999) are equally important in the development of film animation. Ladislav Starewicz was a pioneering, independent stop-motion puppet animator who worked in Russia and France during his 40-year career which began in 1908 in North-Eastern Poland (current day Lithuania), and he is credited with having created the first Russian animated short film (Cartoon Database, 2013). As the Director of the Museum of Natural History in Kaunas, Lithuania (Cartoon Database, 2013), he made a range of live-action films before attempting stop-motion. After having completed a series of short stop-motion animated films and inspired by Émile Cohl's film *Les Allumettes Animées* (*Animated Matches*, 1908), Starewicz decided to use stop-motion to portray the aggression of stag beetles (Cartoon Database, 2013). However, he was frustrated when he found that the nocturnal creatures would sleep whenever the stage lighting was turned on and, in order to remedy this, he "removed the legs and mandibles from two beetle carcasses, then re-attached them with wax, creating articulated puppets" (Cartoon Database, 2013). This resulted in the short film *Walka Żuków* (*The Battle of the Stag Beetles*, 1910), the first animated puppet film with a plot, and the first animated film from the Sino-Polish region (Cartoon Database, 2013). Starewicz moved to Moscow in 1911 and began work with the film company Aleksandr Khanzhonkov, where he made more puppet animation films using deceased animals.

Starewicz is best known for his creation *The Cameraman's Revenge*, which is set in a human world with insects as actors and can be viewed as a dark and cynical observation of human infidelity. Following his first film, Starewicz developed the basic stop-motion technique of creating miniature

replicas of everyday life including wired appendages for puppet mobility that he would rely upon for creating his oddly fascinating yet disturbing stop-motion features. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, explains:

He built small puppets from a jointed wooden frame, with parts such as fingers that needed to be flexible rendered in wire, and parts that need not change cut from cork or modelled in plaster. His wife Anna, who came from a family of tailors, padded them with cotton and sewed leather and cloth features and costumes. He designed all the characters and built the settings (Nowell-Smith, 1969).

The Cameraman's Revenge takes advantage of the basic stop-motion technique Starewicz used and creates an unsettling metatextual environment. In this film, we witness a bizarre love triangle involving beetles whilst a voyeuristic grasshopper films the illicit affairs and broadcasts them on a movie screen. This provocative satire of human sexuality gains edge and cunning wit since insects are used in what humans consider to be taboo sexual behavior: "virtually all American couples, married or cohabitating, expect sexual exclusivity of one another" (Treas and Giesen, 2000); however, according to a 2012 survey, there are 57% of men who admit to committing infidelity in any relationship they've had, and 54% of women who have admitted to an act of infidelity too (Associated Press, 2015). This is noted when the seductive Mrs. Beetle reclines on the chaise longue awaiting the embrace of her secret lover, who happens to have twelve legs and two antennae. Nowell-Smith explains, "The reflexive representation of the cinematic apparatus, reaching its apotheosis in the projection of previous scenes before an audience of animated insects, adds a metaphysical dimension to the parable" (Nowell-Smith, 1996).

The Cameraman's Revenge uses real insects to tell its story, which acts as the first point of shock for the viewer. The jarring mise-en-scène of insects living in human housing (which can be viewed as barbaric and touches upon human psychosis), enjoying cocktails and indulging in humanistic affairs, creates a sense of extreme discomfort for viewers as it broaches the topic of societal standards of cleanliness and preconceived notions many people place upon insects—they are lesser than humans, therefore we are superior. The sight of insects is enough to send some individuals who are fearful of them into panic. Because of this, the sight of insects thriving in human conditions can be

disturbing. It triggers numerous fears that Western civilization has placed upon insects (Weinstein, 2011). These include, but are not limited to, fear of contamination, fear of being bitten and fear of infestation (Weinstein, 2011) and can play into the hierarchal structure that people tend to place on insects versus the human species. One could argue that *The Cameraman's Revenge* falls under multiple genres including horror due to its 'invasion' of society's preconceived notions of insects in human dwellings. The film may play on the human fear that, ultimately, there is no separation between the insect kingdom and human beings—that we are one in the same. In addition, the disgust one may feel while watching *The Cameraman's Revenge* can trigger symptoms of anxiety; research shows that, as a species, we react more strongly to creatures that we find repulsive than we do to animals that may be less repulsive yet naturally more dangerous (UQNews Online, 2008). Perhaps this is an evolutionary response to our ancestors' misunderstandings of disease prevention; in which case, *The Cameraman's Revenge's* shock becomes immeasurable as it unpicks not only Western societal preconceptions, but also evolutionary idiosyncrasies of the human species. This would include, but is not limited to, invertebrate association with disease and agricultural damage, the differences in the ecological scale between humans and insects, the lack of identity exhibited in the insect kingdom and the presumption of mindlessness amongst invertebrates and radical autonomy of invertebrates from human control (which Starewicz arguably challenges here through his ability to 'control' the insects on film) (Kellert, 2003).

The haptic qualities may also raise alarm for viewers. Since Starewicz used authentic insects for filming, the audience is able to witness their every move including how they groom themselves. The nuance of wings, the glossy exoskeletons and the bubbling segments of abdomens, are all palpable and evoke a strong sense of touch and subconscious stimuli, which can evoke primordial repulsion. These detailed insects paired with a miniature human world add a level of grotesqueness to the film, and this can trigger a sense of fear of contamination for viewers who may have a phobic response; one could perceive the insects as invading or "contaminating" human living spaces, thus adding to the shock value dramatically. The colours can also be interpreted as a metaphor for depravity amongst humans. One could argue that red indicates passion, deceit and anger; blue indicates solitary wonderments and the relation between physical freedom and mental shackles as it is only used during exterior scenes and in prison; and sepia to reflect interior dwellings, internal secrets and burnt desires. It appears as though Starewicz had deliberately taken multiple human

perversions, distorted them into a mutation on the insect kingdom and placed them on screen to force the audience to judge itself. One example of human perversion is the use of voyeurism, most evident in the keyhole scene in which the grasshopper spies on the affair. This directly positions the viewer in the film's diegesis and tells us that we are the viewer and that we are actively taking part in the destruction of a marriage due to our voyeurism, reflecting in visual terms the effects of gossip and the pleasure many take in ridiculing and judging; "peeping" into other peoples' lives. One could also argue that the site of Mr. Zhuk's affair forces "sexual deviants" to feel exposed—even shameful—not only for their own personal voyeurism but for enjoying voyeurism on screen.

The techniques used to create *The Cameraman's Revenge* were innovative yet crude; Starewicz replaced the insects' legs with wires in order to make them mobile and suitable for stop motion filming (Tsivian, 1995). This amputation can cause upset as some people may view it to be cruel and inhumane, although the insects we see on camera are, in fact, dead. This raises alarm not only due to its macabre nature of reanimating the dead, but also demonstrates what could be viewed as murder for cinematic entertainment, something which would not be possible today. The American Humane Association's establishment of animal rights (which includes protection for insects) did not take effect until 1939 in Hollywood under the "No Animals Were Harmed®" certification given authority by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (now known as the Motion Picture Association of America) (Lin, 2012). Additionally, no documents pertaining to the rights of animals being treated humanely for film seem to exist within Russia during the 1900s. This raises an important ethical question—would Starewicz's film even be allowed to be made today or distributed in different countries due to the deceased insects? Other films have been distributed despite using live insects, but would such blatant use of dead creatures be treated in the same vein? Or would this perhaps be seen as insects sacrificing their lives for science?

During the contemporary period in which this film was created, a veil of cynicism encapsulated Russia where Darwin's evolutionary doctrine was seen as an argument to support the idea that history acts as a progressive journey towards a better society, which rides in steep contrast to the enthusiasm felt about scientific discoveries elsewhere in the turn of that century (Tsivian, 1995). As Tsivian explains, "[i]n Russia as elsewhere wishful thinkers tried to refute genetics, either by tagging the whole field as being outright "antiscientific," or conducting biological experiments in

order to prove that acquired traits are inherited by progeny - the staple of progressist ideology undermined by turn-of-the-century geneticists" (Tsivian, 1995). As such, while some may find the ethics of this film questionable, others may refute it as a scientific triumph due to its use of real insects as opposed to manmade props. However, Tsivian further explains that, for a person living in turn-of-the-century Europe, Starewicz's insects meant a lot more than they do to us today. These small creatures were believed to hold a clue to one of the most intimate secrets of nature, which people felt was on the verge of discovery; hence the public's interest in early microphotography films featuring flies and mites (Tsivian, 1995). It was described as "the idea that even insects lived in societies with rules as complex as those of humans" (Tsivian, 1995). This challenges the Western disdain for insects, the censorship and ethics raised by the film and any visceral reactions to its narrative. By placing insects in human roles, this could be seen to encourage entomologic studies by sparking curiosity about insect behaviour, turning an initial feeling of shock into a feeling of intrigue. Arguably, it can advance entomological interest, which would please Starewicz given his prior role as Director at the Museum of Natural History and his childhood interest in entomology (Wells, 2009).

The use of sophisticated meta-cinematic techniques also creates a sense of irony. The audience witnesses the revenge of a cameraman, in which a camera is seen on screen being used for malicious intent. This may, in fact, be one of the earliest representations of cinematic blackmail, stalking and paparazzi shown on film and this element shows awareness not only in reality by the director, but also within the film's diegesis by the characters since the act of filming holds high levels of power and intent; it is reflexive of the degree of manipulation present in film. The scene where Mr. Zhuk is smashed through a movie screen is a powerful meta-cinematic technique. It is also worth noting the Latin word "in camera," which meanings include "in a judge's room, not in public" (Oxford English Dictionary 2011). This can be viewed as a metaphor for people involved in love triangles being fed their predicament on screen in a crude manner. One could see *The Cameraman's Revenge* as a catalyst for the audience because it forces viewers to evaluate personal situations and repercussions on a large screen, essentially demeaned by dead insects, which some may find insulting. While there is an element of humour, it is easy to feel shocked due to the absurdity of watching deceased insects masqueraded as puppets by a man who casts judgment onto people. Not only does Starewicz degrade a delicate state of human existence, he also demeans the existence of

the insects that he killed and contorted post-mortem. One could argue he acts as a form of critical deity and takes "in camera" to public view by manipulating nature and casting judgments on human life. This notion can be seen in future animation including Jiří Trnka's stop-motion puppet feature *Ruka* (*The Hand*, 1965).

While this film contains elements of sexual voyeurism, one must not overlook the concerns it raises regarding sexual relations and censorship in early cinema. Russian cinema was virtually brand new during the time in which Starewicz was active. It is reasonable to say that censorship did not exist when, only a few years prior, the Lumière brothers were making history with simple cinema, which the complexity of *The Cameraman's Revenge* upsets. This supports the metatextual shock value experienced by vintage viewers, modern scholars and film enthusiasts alike. Sex in cinema grew into a controversial, hot-topic as film advanced. Given that art imitates life, the liberal leanings of *The Cameraman's Revenge* are enough to startle audiences as they witness sexual relations not only between insects guising as humans, but also of two entirely different insect species mating, thus commenting on a historically taboo topic of interracial dating that has only recently begun to break (Chen, 2010). According to Philip Cavendish, the camera functions as an "instrument of sexual revenge on the part of an emasculated subject" (Cavendish, 2004). The camera operator (the grasshopper) is cruelly pushed aside by a married rival (the beetle, Mr. Zhuk) during a passionate advance on a beautiful cabaret singer (the dragonfly). With his ego pained, the grasshopper uses his camera to capture the seductive affair on film, highlighting a historically innovative example of *cinéma vérité* (Cavendish, 2004). As Philip Cavendish explains, "The subjects on screen testify to an early appreciation of the camera as an instrument of male voyeurism to capture the female form on silver nitrate, which becomes the equivalent of seduction" (Cavendish, 2004). Starewicz has thus created a subverted parody of this notion by telling a story of insects in adult situations (Cavendish, 2004). The audience may find itself rooting for various insects during the film. There are also certain scenes that evoke a particularly sexualized environment, which naturally spark controversy and general discomfort in any medium. An example of such can be seen when the grasshopper is filming the sensual dance of the dragonfly; by filming from the camera's point of view through the keyhole, the audience immediately feels that they are violating private space. This adds to not only the voyeuristic exploits of the grasshopper, but also plays upon the curiosity people sometimes have with others' lives. It also shows sexual exploits taking place behind closed doors as if to say that

such behaviour is not acceptable in society. Mr. Zhuk is also seen embracing the dragonfly in a suggestive manner, which portrays the advances of sexual behaviour in humans, whilst the fact that both the keyhole scenes are stained red may illicit the feelings of passion and danger.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of *The Cameraman's Revenge* is that Starewicz himself may have intended the film to be a practical joke and never taken seriously. Some of Starewicz's biographers present him as an "accomplished entomologist and a full member of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences" (Tsivian, 1995), but feel as though this exaggerated reputation was potentially motivated by the filmmaker himself. According to Tsivian, there was an episode in Starewicz's career which seems to account for this, and indicates a deeper interest in problems of contemporary biology than one would expect of an insect collector:

Wladislaw Jewsiewicki's book - the fullest biography we have to date - quotes Starewicz remembering that as his films were distributed in Britain in 1912, they were advertised as featuring tamed insects presented by "a Russian entomologist Professor Loszkin"; the biographer admits that he failed to find this name among Russian scientists of the time (Tsivian, 1995).

It is unclear as to whether followers of Darwin and George Romanes were fooled by Starewicz's parody or not, but to know that his films were intended not for academic significance, but simply as parody can come as quite a shock to scholars. The tone of the film also suggests its satirical intent by use of playful music, and the exaggerated reactions of the insects (an example being when the picture is smashed over the beetle's head); this may link closely to the film's God-like tendencies where Starewicz pulls the strings on human behaviour and implies that human experience is as frivolous as the life of an insect. The ethics and judgment put into forming a parody of mankind is difficult to ingest considering the visceral reaction insects can spawn in some. However, Starewicz's sense of satire can also be viewed more positively. One could argue that his parody of the human condition is not meant to insult but instead, for mankind to see that there is no hierarchy between the insect and animal kingdom. Furthermore, many people are fascinated by insects and, in this way, *The Cameraman's Revenge* can be viewed as a macabre celebration of insect life; the beauty that exists within the veneer exoskeletons. The arching theme may not be of infidelity or

pretentious convictions but may, in fact, present the idea that humans, despite our notions of self, are equally, if not more so, flawed than the insect world—"The societies of ants and bees were seen as better societies than ours . . . whatever the gloomy geneticists were trying to prove, human nature had generational room for improvement" (Tsivian, 1995).

While *The Cameraman's Revenge* may be shocking, it is an important cinematic creation with depth and humour, presented in one grotesque yet beautiful package. It not only pioneered stop-motion animation and cinéma vérité, but it also made large strides towards revealing the admiration of insects and analysing what it is to be human. *The Cameraman's Revenge* is shock value with a purpose and, parody or not, it rightfully deserves its prestigious position within cinematic history.

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The Shock Value of Ladislav Starewicz's *The Cameraman's Revenge*

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