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WHEN THE WIND’S GENTLY RUSTLING
FILM AND NATURAL BEAUTY

[This is a preprint of an article that will appear in the journal Film-Philosophy.]

[Film] aims to make beauty its supreme end.
A beauty [...] and this is the essential point, that is not its own but that of nature.
A beauty that is has the mission of discovering, and not of inventing...
(Rohmer, 1989, p. 77)

On the concrete, the shadows of a nearby ironwood tree played against a field of sandy sunlight.
They looked like layers of Japanese ink paintings on coarse paper, floating over one another in ghostly animation. His face broke out in contagious joy.
(Powers, 2021, p.157)

NATURAL BEAUTY, LOST AND FOUND
Experiencing beauty is a key appeal of film, and from its beginnings the cinema has often sought and found the sources of this pleasure in nature. This is no different today: the experience of a mediated form of natural beauty entices viewers anywhere from mainstream films to art cinema, from experimental films to wildlife documentaries, from YouTube videos to TikTok posts. Astonishingly, though, natural beauty does not play an important role in the academic study of film (the same is true for beauty in general, see Hanich, 2023). “There is a vast literature on montage, language, the human face, the city, sound and silence, fiction and truth in film, but almost nothing on natural beauty”, P. Adams Sitney noted almost 30 years ago (1993, p. 103). Today, the situation has not changed much: Despite a noticeable interest among film scholars in poetic cinema, (neo-)romanticism in film, ecocinema, and the connection between landscape and film, whoever craves a systematic exploration of how spectators experience beautiful nature in film is left pretty much empty-handed. This is what I aim to rectify in this article, at least to some degree, also to counter a widespread scepticism towards (natural) beauty in current film and media theory and beyond.\(^1\)

To avoid false expectations, it may be useful to start by saying what this article will not do. It certainly will not be able to satisfyingly describe what beautiful nature in film looks like. I simply presuppose that we all have our favourite prototypes. Some love images of the setting sun against the backdrop of a quiet majestic ocean; others prefer representations of flocks of swallows swarming in the air. Some viewers prefer idyllic beaches at the far end of the world, or impalas loping elegantly across the savannah. Yet others favour scenes of lush gardens in a quiet landscape or, as the young Kant suggested, “the prospect of meadows strewn with flowers, of valleys with winding brooks, covered with grazing herds” (1764/2011, p. 14-15). Personally, and this will become the leitmotif of what follows, I consider the beauty of nature most perfectly epitomised by moments of gently rustling wind.
I adore cinematic images of the wind stroking leaves of grass and fields of wheat; images of the wind blowing warmly against a window curtain and scattering autumn leaves tenderly through the air; images of a light breeze creating ripples on a pond or

\(^1\) Here we could think, for instance, of scholars following Bourdieu’s critique of taste as a signifier of cultural distinction and class privilege or Mirzoeff’s worry about the ideological effects of aesthetising nature in times of environmental disaster (Bourdieu, 1984; Mirzoeff, 2014). For a more positive account of natural beauty, see the recent Screen dossier entitled “Cinema’s Natural Aesthetics: Environments and Perspectives in Contemporary Film Theory” (Guan & O’Brien, 2020).
nudged scattered clouds slowly across the deep blue sky. However, at the end of the day, what I find beautiful is not decisive – the wind in the trees merely serves as a useful trope, for reasons to be explained.

Nor will I be able to give a definition of the term ‘nature’. This has always been a vexing question (see for instance the first essay in Malcolm Budd’s The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature [2002]). But with the introduction of concepts such as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene and the assumption that there is no pristine, untouched nature left, it has become even harder to separate nature neatly from culture. Suffice it to say that some things, like the wind in the trees, seem more natural to us than others. Or, to put it in a more pronounced fashion, non-human nature appears strongest when human influence is felt the least or when nature defies what is human-made. This perspective allows us to take a fairly wide-ranging view of nature, which encompasses not just landscapes and animals. As philosopher Ronald Moore emphasises, we can find natural beauty

in the cloud outside the office window, the moss in pavement cracks, the play of light on rain-soaked cobbles in the street, and the pattern of dust on puddles in a rutted playground. (2008, p. 13).

Finally, I will not enter the debate about how the experience of beautiful nature in film relates to – and can influence – ongoing debates about ecocinema, ecocriticism, and an environmentally progressive aesthetics. This is a point I aim to take up in a separate article. What I can foreshadow is my optimism that natural beauty in film, under certain circumstances, can contribute positively to this debate.

Now, what this article will do is the following: I will first introduce the motif of the gently rustling wind and note its firm place in the history of film theory, an aspect that makes this motif all the more alluring for an exploration of natural beauty in film. Here I will also provide a tentative phenomenology of mediatised natural beauty – a phenomenology that could be called a moderate Kantianism, modified by, among others, Freud, Ethel Puffer, Elaine Scarry, Iris Murdoch, and Hartmut Rosa. Next, drawing on Martin Seel’s aesthetics of nature, I will propose three modes of how we can experience this beautiful motif in film. Lest anyone take my account to be subscribing to a crude form of transparency theory, in the next section I shall discuss how the mediation of film modifies the experience of natural beauty. And in a final step I will explore the reciprocal relation between nature and film, and how one can enhance the appreciation of the other. Ultimately, I follow two – mutually imbricated – goals. On the one hand, I aim to (re)connect the film theoretical discourse about the wind in the trees to natural beauty. On the other hand, I use the motif of the gently rustling wind to say something more general about the aesthetic experience of natural beauty in film.

**The Beauty of the Gently Rustling Wind**

Even if the gently rustling wind may not be a timeless motif of natural beauty, it certainly is a longstanding and enduring one. We find it, for instance, in the Romantic poetry of Ludwig Uhland, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, and Joseph von Eichendorff.² We encounter it in Adolph von Menzel’s 19th century realist paintings as well as Impressionist art by Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir, but also in 20th century figurative paintings by Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth, or Edward Cucuel. Today, Harun Farocki discovers it in computer games where it serves as an object of beauty within the game’s world (see his essay film: Parallel I [2012]). However, as Sitney observes,

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² The second stanza of Eichendorff’s famous “Moonlit Night” may serve as a case in point: “The breeze passed through the fields/The ears of grain waved gently/The forests rustled softly/So starry-clear was the night”.
It is in the depiction of gentler meteorological phenomena that cinema has developed a unique capability: the movement of clouds, changes in the intensity of light, the indication of breezes in the vibrations and swaying of flora, and the gradations of rain are natural events which cinema can render with nuances previously the exclusive domain of poetry. (1993, p. 113)

The cinema, due to its ability to capture minute movements, has a specific affinity to the wind (some of these minute movements are discussed in Schonig, 2022). One could even say that there is an anemophilia in cinema, a love of the wind, identifiable in fiction films, but also in other modes such as documentaries, experimental films, or essay films (see Thomas, 2016, p. 18).

Here I am thinking, for instance, of Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line (1998) and Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s The Assassin (Cìkè Niè Yìnniàng, 2015). Both films are suffused, almost overflowing, with beautiful moments of gently blowing wind – in fact, one could summarise these films without mentioning the wind, but they would be nothing without it (although he talks about another film, I take this felicitous formulation from Thomas, 2016, p. 38). I also have in mind, in my completely personal, random, eclectic, and transhistorical selection of examples, the waving trees at the end of Michelangelo Antonioni’s The Eclipse (L’Eclisse, 1962), the swaying grass in Bruce Baillie’s All My Life (1966), the wind-blown meadow in Andrei Tarkovsky’s Mirror (Zerkalo, 1975), the ripples on a pond in Abbas Kiarostami’s Five Dedicated to Ozu (Panj, 2003), the swaying lush green trees in Hirokazu Kore-eda’s Still Walking (Aruitemo, aruitemo, 2008), or the recurring images of undulating grain in the charming BBC series The Detectorists (2014-17).

If I had to describe the experience of these scenes, how would I characterise it? Or, asked more generally, what is it like to experience mediated natural beauty, regardless of its specific motif? Although I cannot provide a fully developed phenomenology here, when viewers undergo an experience of natural beauty in film it can be tentatively characterised along the following lines. For one, like experiences of ‘real’ natural beauty, mediated natural beauty makes viewers rejoice: it soothes and calms them and momentarily lifts their spirits, even while flooding them with a gentle, if intense form of pleasure. Filmic scenes experienced as beautiful thus stimulate and give repose at the same time (Puffer, 1905, see also Freeburg, 1923, p. 69). Hand in hand with this positive affective valance goes a positive value judgment: experiencing something as beautiful is tantamount to evaluating it as beautiful (see Menninghaus, 2007, p. 8). Yet, and this is not too far from the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, these beautiful images and sounds do not stir a strong desire. With philosopher Crispin Cartwell one could call it a “transformation of desire into longing” (2004, p. 61); or, following Denis Donoghue, we might speak of a “semblance of desire [that is] virtual rather than appetitive” (2004, p. 26). This longing or virtual desire is similar to a mere wish to see and hear more of beauty, perhaps to be in these beautiful surroundings, and to make sure this beautiful image of nature keeps existing. As Elaine Scarry puts it, “the fact that something is perceived as beautiful is bound up with an urge to protect it, or act on its behalf” (p. 80). As such, an experience of natural beauty in cinema changes one’s stance towards the world:

It is not that we cease to stand at the centre of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the centre of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us. (Scarry, 1999, p. 112)

3 The term ‘anemophilia’ comes from Thomas’s book L’attrait du vent. I believe that one of the reasons for cinema’s widespread and ongoing fascination with the wind in the trees has to do with its peculiar ontological status: the natural phenomenon of the wind is invisible. In visually moving branches, leaves, or grass, the visual arts can make us encounter the wind’s non-visible force by giving us a “representation of the invisible”. See Nova (2011) and Baert (n.d). For traces of this position in early film theory, see Balázs (2010, p. 154); Balázs (1952, p. 168); and Elias (2016, p. 502-503).

4 The choice of film examples throughout my article does not follow any systematic form of selection; I have simply relied on personal memory of beautiful instances of rustling wind in the trees.
Scarry’s concept of ‘decentering’ consciously echoes the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch’s idea of “unselﬁng” (2001, p. 82): when undergoing an experience of beauty Murdoch forgets herself and is devoted fully to the object of beauty. She notes that both beautiful nature and beautiful art invite “unpossessive contemplation” and thus lead to a non-narcissistic form of absorption (Scarry, 1999, p. 83). I would even go so far as to claim that the beautiful can evoke a feeling of humbleness that deflects us from our own self-occupations and involves an acknowledgment that something else is more beautiful than what we are surrounded by and what deﬁnes our world right now. In the most extremes cases it means an admission that an else-where is more beautiful than the place that makes us us. That is why we often say that a particularly beautiful natural object “takes our breath away” or “leaves us speechless”. Mind you, this is not the same as the sublime: the beautiful does not intimidate us or even dominate us. In this respect, beauty is a much more egalitarian category: we do not look down on the object (as in the case of the cute or pretty which we tend to belittle), nor do we look up at it in awe (as in the case of the sublime with its intimations of the terrifying, the inﬁnite, and the unspeakable).

At the same time, and this is another aspect that distinguishes the beautiful from the cute and the pretty, its aesthetic experience may be tinged with sorrow and an elegiac sense of the ephemeral – Freud called it “the transience of what is beautiful” (1915/1957, p. 305). In the cinema this transience is particularly pronounced as one knows that what one is currently going through will not last forever and the scene will end sooner rather than later: the beautiful moment – Goethe’s schöner Augenblick – will disappear like the fading face drawn on a fogged mirror. Likewise, the film, as the material bearer of beauty, might decay, and natural beauty as the object of representation might wither or end up destroyed. For Hartmut Rosa, an experience of beauty is therefore characterised by both: a real happiness about a momentarily succeeding, fully resonant relationship with the world and an illusion that breeds sorrow and longing because this relationship with the world is not a stable part of our everyday, lived experience (2019, p. 285).

Not least, instances of beauty inspire a hope – even an expectation – that others share my judgment and become members of a sensus communis. And we do not have to search long for conﬁrmation of this hope. At the famous ending of the “Preface” to his Theory of Film, Siegfried Kracauer describes a dramatic moment of epiphany – in fact, it is a moment that forever changed his life and made him become what he became:

I was still a young boy when I saw my ﬁrst ﬁlm. The impression it made upon me must have been intoxicating, for I there and then determined to commit my experience to writing. […] What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, ﬁlled with lights and shadows which transﬁgured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reﬂecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle – this image never left me. (1997, p. ii)

Although the intoxicated, marvelling, thrilled Kracauer does not use the term, this passage is above all a beautiful description of an experience of natural beauty in ﬁlm. But is it not also a good indication of what Elaine Scarry deﬁnes as beauty’s plea for – even obligation to – replication (1999, p. 3)? Not only did Kracauer feel compelled to replicate his experience of beauty by becoming a writer, he actually did duplicate it in beautiful prose.6

5 For Freud, this transience does not imply a loss of beauty’s worth but an increase. Byung-Chul Han is only the latest in a long line of thinkers who underscore that inherent to beauty is “a weakness, a fragility, and a brokenness [Gebrochenheit]” (2018, p. 45).

6 As Georg Stanitzek has pointed out, the motif of the rippling leaves recurs at various points in Kracauer’s book (2004, p. 376). Let us also not forget another locus classicus, albeit a ﬁctional one: the famous scene of the plastic bag caught up in the wind in Sam Mendes’ American Beauty (1999).
But Kracauer’s quote can also serve as an example of the many traces the motif of the wind has left in the history of film theory: from the very beginning filmmakers, critics, and scholars have drawn a connection between the motif and the cinema as a form of attraction, indexical document, or art. Lately, scholars like Lesley Stern (2001), Christian Keathley (2006), Nico Baumbach (2009), Daniel Fairfax (2018), and Jordan Schonig (2018) have taken it up, but surprisingly have not emphasised the connection between the gently rustling wind and natural beauty in cinema. One exception is the by now often quoted interview, the last one before his death, in which D.W. Griffith claimed disappointedly: “What the modern movie lacks is beauty – the beauty of moving wind in the trees, the little movement in a beautiful blowing on the blossoms in the trees” (as cited in Fairfax, 2018, p. 74).\(^7\) After Griffith, no one has cut this connection more forcefully than Nico Baumbach.

For Baumbach (2009), who uses the motif to illustrate changing ideas of art in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and how film was imbricated in the development of aesthetic modernity, natural beauty is suspect and démodé: Griffith was right, and film did lose beauty! Yet this is not at all a bad thing for Baumbach. With Walter Benjamin, he discovers in cinema a potential to neutralise “a proto-Fascist Romantic idea of art that sought in the link between art and nature a mysterious beauty” (Baumbach, 2009, p. 380). Rejecting Griffith’s “Victorian sensibility and […] nostalgic desire to restore natural beauty to art”, Baumbach wants to wed art to politics instead (2009, p. 381; this political aesthetics is spelled out in Baumbach, 2018). Interested in the aesthetic experience of natural beauty in film, my vector naturally points in a very different direction.

Of course, the wind in the trees is not always the film’s focus, and it need not be in order to initiate an experience of natural beauty for us. Some films train their lens on beautiful nature for extended periods of screen time and we feel convinced that evoking an experience of beauty is precisely their goal (why not call this ‘accentuated beauty’?). In other instances, though, the beauty of nature erupts only briefly, and beautiful nature is a mere background detail (I am tempted to dub this ‘accidental beauty’). Sometimes we actively let this accidental detail emerge through our own shift of focus and elevate it from a marginal status in the image to a momentary full-blown centre of attention. Yet in other cases, we may have the feeling that, like Barthes’s punctum, a beautiful detail seems to jump out at us and take us passively by surprise (here I take inspiration from Lefebvre, 2006, p. 46).

A moment of accentuated beauty, if only a brief one, occurs when Thomas Arslan, in his film Ferien (2007), ostentatiously shows us forest trees moving gently in the Brandenburg summer wind for several seconds. This shot is freed from narrative events and the director foregrounds the rustling wind as the aesthetic object of beauty for us. In other shots, however, the rustling of the wind is part of a composition containing characters involved in some action that is supposed to be at the centre of our attention – but the beautiful wind accidentally becomes more enticing to focus on. In Terence Malick’s Days of Heaven (1978), for instance, we see Richard Gere walking through a veritable sea of wheat in the middle-ground, while in the foreground a sunlit patch of wheat gently moves in the wind. Similarly, in Achim von Borries’s Love in Thoughts (Was nützt die Liebe in Gedanken, 2004) the two protagonists (played by Daniel Brühl and August Diehl) stand, in the kindest of summer mornings, in the beautifully lit reading room of a country house and talk to each

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\(^7\)This interview pessimistically echoes, of course, one of the most endearing founding anecdotes of film history: Georges Méliès’s emphatic encounter with the moving leaves in the background of the Lumière film Le repas de bébé, which he allegedly saw at the very first film screening in the Grand Café in Paris in 1895 and which convinced him of cinema’s future potential. See also the quote by Jean-Marie Straub in Fairfax (2018, p. 74).
other, while on the left of the image a curtain is billowed gently by the wind in the sun. In both cases, I actively decided, while watching, to shift my focus to the beautiful wind. In Philippe Parreno’s slow, elegiac, non-narrative short film June 8, 1968 (2009), on the other hand, viewers may well concentrate initially on the people standing next to the tracks and looking at the train passing by with the dead body of Robert F. Kennedy (Fig. 1). But the beautiful gentle movements of the plants together with the blue Californian sky may exert, from the margins, a strong pull to distribute attention differently, thereby creating a (melancholy) form of beauty.

Figure 1: June 8, 1968 – people watching the train that carries Robert F. Kennedy’s coffin.

When viewers actively focus on – or feel passively grabbed by – the beautifully moving wind instead of the action, and contemplate the beauty on display, they do of course exactly what Georges Méliès and early audiences did when they focused on the moving leaves in the background of the Lumière film Le repas de bébé (1895) rather than on Auguste Lumière’s baby in the foreground: they liberate the beauty of the wind in the trees from its narrative container.⁸

THREE MODES OF PERCEIVING NATURAL BEAUTY IN FILM

At the beginning of his important book Natural Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics Beyond the Arts Ronald Moore writes:

In one sense, natural beauty is perfectly familiar and unremarkable. It’s the robin on our grass in the morning, the break of the waves along the shore, the rustle of the wind in the maple. It’s just there – obvious, right at hand, and readily apprehended. And yet, in another sense, it’s mysterious. (2008, p. 7)

To shed more light on this mystery I will now involve another seminal book of philosophical aesthetics: Martin Seel’s as-yet untranslated Eine Ästhetik der Natur (An Aesthetics of Nature, 1991) – a book Seel himself describes as a “profane apology of natural beauty” (p. 9).⁹ Building on insights Seel develops from a direct interaction with nature, I will introduce a heuristic distinction between three modes (or attitudes) of how we can experience natural beauty mediated by film: I call them contemplation, connection, and imagination. But, as with all things mental, these modes

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⁸ Of course, this is close to the idea of cinephilia, where sensuous encounters with marginal details and evanescent moments become the holy grail of cinemagoing. In a book for which the Griffith interview serves as an epigraph and for which it provides the title, Christian Keathley (2006) deals with this gleeful fetishisation of fragments of a film, be it an individual shot or a marginal and often unintentional detail within the image. In fact, for Keathley early spectators’ enchantment with what was going on in the background – “the leaves […] fluttering in the wind” – shows that cinephilia must be as old as the cinema itself (2006, p. 8).

⁹ For an article in English that summarises some of the ideas discussed in his book, see Seel (1992).
of experience are not worlds apart but may alternate rapidly or bleed into each other; we may actively switch them on or, more often, feel passively pulled into them.

**Contemplation: Natural Beauty and the Play of Appearances**

If we perceive natural beauty in a contemplative mode, we are focused on its myriad phenomenal ways of appearing – and nothing else. We perceive nature’s changing appearance *at* a given time and *for* a given time without the imprint of instrumental, theoretical, or cognitive interests (Seel, 1991, p. 40). For Seel, the sensation – in the double sense of the word – of the contemplative experience is precisely the fact that we encounter the things of the world without the interests of the world (p. 58). In this particular technical sense, it is a disinterested pleasure in the Kantian fashion. This also implies that we do not search for meaning: nature is not regarded as a symbol or a sign that stands for something else (Seel, p. 39). (It goes without saying that certain filmic forms are more inviting to contemplate natural beauty than others: the long takes of what has been dubbed slow cinema, eco-cinema, or meditative film with their more open-ended duration are more conducive to switching into the contemplative mode than a fast-paced commercial film [see De Luca and Barradas Jorge, 2015; MacDonald, 2012; and Taberham, 2018]).

According to Seel (1991), objects of natural beauty offer an easier entryway for contemplation than man-made artefacts because they confront us more immediately with their own sensuousness than objects manufactured for a purpose and with a specific function in mind. In the latter cases we first have to actively desist from perceiving their function before we become responsive to their individual appearances (p. 66). In addition, nature is more prone to momentary and unforeseen changes of appearance. And here is where the rustling, caressing, and gently nudging wind comes in again: it is a prime natural object that provides us with multiple affordances for contemplation (see also Schonig, 2018). Take the shots of wind-caressed trees in Arslan’s *Ferien*, which allow us to shift our focus away from the function of these images and their meaning and invite us to contemplate the way they appear while swaying in the wind. In the evocative words of art historian Barbara Baert (n.d.): “Wind joins, flows, links, changes direction – in short, the wind is capricious”. Although the wind itself is invisible, film can make visible and audible the subtle movements designer Malte Wagenfeld (2015) studied empirically:

Leaves on one branch flutter while those on an adjacent branch remain still. The relationship among the moving leaves constantly changes at random intervals – sometimes all move, then all is still, revealing the air’s movement as both temporal and spatial. (2015, p. 10)

For Wagenfeld, what makes natural air like the gently moving wind pleasurable is its unpredictable behaviour: “dynamic and transient (not static), aperiodic (not regular), and turbulent (not laminar)” (p. 11).

Likewise, when viewers are absorbed by how the wind ever-so slowly modifies the clouds in James Benning’s *Ten Skies* (2004), they focus on the colours, shapes, and movements on display (Figs. 2-3). What they refrain from doing is considering how the sky could be interpreted as a sign of a divine presence or a symbol of nature’s independence of all things human. Nor do they look at the clouds in order to categorise them as cumulus, cirrus, and stratus clouds, wonder if the Beaufort Scale would speak of “light air” or “light breeze”, or engage in similar non-aesthetic activities. Instead, they take pleasure in the interplay between light and shadow, the contrasts between the lush blue sky and the grey clouds, the way the moon appears and disappears behind the translucent and opaque clouds, and other such delights. In the most purely aesthetic mode – what Kant (1790/2007) describes as the perception of “free beauty” – one would even refrain from categorising the sky as sky and the clouds as clouds and instead follow the portrayal of wind-caressed nature in the film as pure form (p. 60-62). Film is well placed in this regard as it presents us with
holistic Gestalts of changing forms, which one can take in and the savouring of which one wishes to prolong because of the intrinsic pleasure it provides. As Ronald Moore (2008) has put in a slightly different context:

In looking at wind-driven, twilit clouds through a gap in oak tree limbs, it might be neither the clouds nor the limbs and the quaking leaves, but the mobile counterpoint of shapes and colours that I find to be beautiful. (2008, p. 203)

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Connection: Natural Beauty and the Good Life

The second mode of perception of natural beauty – I call it ‘connection’ – sees nature differently, and it sees different things in it, than the contemplative gaze (Seel, 1991, p. 89). Here the word ‘beauty’ combines an aesthetic with an existential meaning: beautiful nature turns into a reflection of the good life and thus connects to our life interests. Put somewhat differently, when we are responsive to the beauty of nature we discover nature’s quality as an existentially inviting place to which we feel connected. Beautiful nature thus indexes valuable qualities of the world, as philosopher Josef Früchtl (2018) reminds us: “To call something beautiful means […] that one has the impression, despite all the negative experiences one may have had, that the world is nevertheless positively accommodating one’s wishes” (p. 181). Beautiful nature therefore not only invites us to savour its appearances, as in the contemplative mode, but also evokes a desire to be there: it connects us to nature (Seel, 1991, p. 90). Like the contemplative mode, it enables a pleasurable moment of happiness, but its happiness is tied to a perception of the happiness that nature affords for living (Seel, 1991, p. 92). I do not think we can perceive a film in both modes simultaneously, but they are not mutually exclusive either – in fact, the beauty experience is arguably all the more intense if a film enables us to easily oscillate between the two modes.

In the connective mode, beautiful nature stands in stark opposition to ugly but also sublime nature, which points us to the simple fact that not every scene depicting wind is beautiful. In ugly nature characteristics like hardship, despair, loneliness, emptiness, and senselessness prevail – it is excluding and repellant (Seel, 1991, p. 94). The harsh blizzards that almost kill Lilian Gish and Camilla Horn’s characters in Way Down East (D.W. Griffith, 1920) and Faust (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1926), or the grim winds in Béla Tarr’s The Turin Horse (A torinói ló, 2011) are ugly winds: they contribute to an image of nature that is anything but inviting and inclusive. Sublime wind, in turn, is strong, powerful, unsettling, overwhelming,

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10 Seel himself speaks of “correspondence” instead of “connection”.
11 See also Roger Scruton: “The experience of natural beauty is not a sense of ‘how nice!’ or ‘how pleasant!’ It contains a reassurance that this world is a right and fitting place to be – a home in which our human powers and prospects find confirmation” (2011, p. 55).
almost beyond human control. It puts viewers in a position between enjoying the power of the wind and being reminded of their own insignificance and vulnerability (Krebs, 2014, p. 1262). Awe and fear are combined here. Sublime wind blows powerfully through Victor Sjöström’s *The Wind* (1928), it howls aggressively through cinematic seascapes from *The Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lewis Milestone, 1962) to *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981), and has deeply shaken films as different as Joris Ivens’ essay film *A Tale of the Wind* (Une Histoire de Vent, 1988), *The Wind: A Documentary Thriller* (Michal Bielawski, 2019), and Hollywood disaster films like *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996) or *The Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2000), in which the titles already indicate powerful winds.

Beautiful wind, on the other hand, is benign, gentle, and smooth on the skin. It creates small ripples on the water and makes leaves rustle lightly and quietly. Unlike ugly or sublime winds, which make terrible conditions even worse, beautiful wind often renders weather conditions more pleasant. Its soothing rustling and caressing of leaves, twigs, and branches can evoke pleasurable body-memories of past experiences one wishes to relive. Just think of a relieving breeze during a heat wave. According to Seel (1991), perceiving the beauty of nature in this particular mode comes with an anthropomorphising perception of nature’s physiognomy: we draw connections to the expression, gesture, comportment, and gestalt of a human being (p. 98-99). Hence our talk of a graceful tree, a cheerful landscape, a bright day or the howling and whispering of the wind. Following this line of thought, one could say that beautiful wind represents human virtues such as gentleness, friendliness, and peacefulness. Here we could also refer to Allen Carlson’s wider conception of aesthetic value, which bears similarities to Seel’s existential values. Aesthetic value includes not just the formal qualities we experience in an aesthetic object but also its morally expressive qualities, including the “life values” they embody. In other words, natural beauty in film can be experienced as expressing morally invaluable values such as tenderness, tranquillity, and hospitableness (see, for instance, Hettinger, 2005; and Alcaraz León, 2020).

**Imagination: Natural Beauty Viewed as Art**

In the third appreciative mode natural beauty does not summon a contemplation of its ways of appearing, nor does it invite us ‘with open arms’ into its enticing world to which we feel connected – it is an art-related mode of perception. According to Seel, in this third mode of appreciation nature seems to us as if it were a work of art, even though it is neither art nor artificial (1991, p. 136). Instead, we, as beholders, in a productive free play of our imagination, either project forms and styles of art onto nature or discover them in nature.

The imaginative mode comes in various degrees of specificity. At its broadest, we can simply be attuned to the mere fact that in a particular film natural beauty is reminiscent of a specific artform, such as painting. The beauty of nature has painterly qualities to us which we cannot, or do not want to, specify. On a more specific level, we could look at natural beauty in film through the lens of a given art genre. In this case we would say, for instance, that a number of shots in the literary adaptations of James Ivory – such as *A Room with a View* (1985) or *Howard’s End* (1992) – remind us of landscape painting. Even more concretely, we could be thinking of a particular style, for example, when we feel reminded of impressionist landscape paintings in Jean Renoir’s *Partie de Campagne* (1936/1946) or the Hudson River School in John Ford’s Westerns. Of course, we could also take in film’s natural

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12 Here, we are of course not far from Béla Balázs’s (1952) early account of how, in the hands of the filmmaker and the eyes of the viewer, a landscape – as opposed to merely objectively depicted countryside – expresses a physiognomy with a particular mood: “There have already been several landscape artists of genius in the film, artists of that moving landscape which has not only a physiognomy, but mimicry and gesture too. On these landscapes the clouds gather, the mist drives, the reeds tremble and shiver in the wind, the branches of the trees nod and toss and the shadows play hide-and-seek” (p. 96-97).
beauty with a specific artist in mind: Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975) emulates the landscape paintings of John Constable or Thomas Gainsborough, while the repousoir figures facing wind-blown sublime nature in Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019) are redolent of Caspar David Friedrich. Finally, we may even identify particular artworks in a film, for instance when Akira Kurosawa, in *Dreams* (1990), recreates Vincent van Gogh’s *Wheat Field with Crows* (1890) or when in the reading room scene in *Love in Thoughts* we may be reminded of Adolph von Menzel’s *The Balcony Room* (1845) (Figs. 4-5).

Figures 4 and 5: *Love in Thoughts* and Adolph von Menzel’s *Balcony Room*

Just as in the case of the motif of gently rustling wind in general, for the imaginative mode, too, one could introduce a distinction between accidental and accentuated beauty: in some cases, it is the viewer who draws the connection; in other cases, one does not hesitate to ascribe an intention to the filmmakers. When we know beforehand that a director is fascinated by a given period (say, Werner Herzog by Romanticism) or a given artist (say, Wim Wenders by Edward Hopper), it may be self-evident to think of an intention at work. It may even more obviously be the case in a biopic about an artist, such as Mike Leigh’s *Mr. Turner* (2014), or when a film programmatically recreates an artwork, as in the case of Gustav Deutsch’s *Shirley: Visions of Reality* (2013) in which the Austrian director staged a series of Edward Hopper paintings such as *Sunlight on Brownstone* (1956). In all of these cases one can assume a self-reflexive gesture suggesting that the filmmakers can show us the beauty of nature like a painting: ‘In this film nature looks so beautiful – as if it came directly from Auguste Renoir or J.M.W. Turner or Edward Hopper’.

Contemplation, connection, imagination: only rarely do we experience nature in film exclusively in one of these modes. As mentioned, it is possible for a viewer to change mode actively, but more often a film seems to urge or invite us to alternate between them. As if a new Wittgensteinian aspect dawned on us, with every switch between modes we attend to different contents and forms, and every time the beauty of nature looks different to us. But the three modes can also create tensions and even stand in stark opposition, as when a scene appears beautiful in one mode and repellent or kitschy in another. Here we may think of images of fire blazing aggressively that can be contemplated in their glorious formal beauty but are far from creating an inviting atmosphere we can connect to. Or we may watch a scene of a beautiful sunset with a strong existential longing to be there, but know full well that perceived in the imaginative mode it is a pure cliché. Not least, we may admire the beautiful appearance of colours and light on a pond, while being appalled by the knowledge that what causes these appealing forms are toxic fluids. But here we have already entered the domain of a morally responsible appreciation of mediated natural beauty: since many of us cannot connect to toxic beauty’s expression of values.
such as human greed, recklessness toward nature and negligence of future generations, should we even allow ourselves the pleasure of contemplating it? The clash between these values ultimately raises a question no viewer can avoid giving a personal answer to – which shows that these modes are not one and the same and we do have at least some control over how we respond.

**Some Things Cinema Does to Natural Beauty**

Of course, when we perceive nature *in* film, we first of all see nature *because of* film. This is nicely captured in an early essay by Louis Delluc (1988) entitled “Beauty in the Cinema”, in which the French critic and theorist expresses his full enthusiasm about the – still new – medium’s ability to provide “impressions of evanescent eternal beauty” by offering us the spectacle of nature. Delluc describes an instance of – what must have been sublime – wind in a travelogue film, which he saw on three occasions, each time in the presence of an enthusiastic audience. According to Delluc, the film featured “a military convoy of ships in stormy weather” which made the critic rejoice: “There, that’s beauty, real beauty – I would say the beauty of chance, but the cameraman must be given his due. He has learned how to see with such skill that we have exactly the same experience of the sea, sky, and wind as he himself had” (1988, pp. 137, 138).

Thus, our perception of natural beauty in film is always twofold: we see the content of *what* is presented in the filmic world (its “world-in”, in Daniel Yacavone’s [2015] terminology), but we hardly forget *that* film always mediates the world for us, nor are we oblivious to *how* the film presents us this world through various cinematic features like shot-size, camera movement, editing, music and so forth (its “world-of”). In other words, film allows us to perceive beautiful nature both through a realist window (we look through the film at nature) and a formalist frame (we look at the film which presents nature to us in a given way). This is not to claim that we always focus equally or even predominantly on the fact that film mediates nature and how it does so – in fact, our experience of natural beauty as natural beauty presupposes a focus on the world-in. What it aims to underline, though, is that we do not take our access to natural beauty in film to be transparent but always remain conscious that it is framed, composed, and distanced.

Distinguishing between the beauty *in* film and the beauty *of* film, viewers can attend to the beautiful objects the film depicts, but also to the beauty of the film’s depicting (Hanich, 2023). Or to put it somewhat differently, in film we can appreciate the mediated beauty of nature and the beauty of its presentation: a picturesque composition, smooth Steadicam framing, lush colours, or glittering lighting – in short, what Noël Carroll (2003) calls “design appreciation” with its emphasis on the structure or form of an artwork. Just think of the beautiful lens-flare effects in many Malick films, which obviously do not exist in reality but are added as an artefact by the camera and embellish and enhance natural beauty: here natural beauty is one element in an assemblage of content and form in its many shades – a beautiful Gestalt. Moreover, we can also direct our appreciation at the operational aesthetic where viewing pleasure derives not so much from what is shown but from marvelling about – and appreciating – how it was done. Drawing on one of my earlier examples of gently moving wind in *Five Dedicated to Ozu* we could ponder ‘How on earth was Kiarostami able to capture these marvellous changes of atmosphere and weather in one single take?’, but also exclaim excitedly ‘It is impressive that Kiarostami actually spent weeks shooting the final scene at the pond and was able to hide his editing so well he could make us believe we are watching a single shot of nature!’ (Fig. 6).

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13 On Wollheimian twofoldness in film, see Fingerhut (2020); on the distinction between world-in and world-of, see Yacavone (2015).

14 Usually, the operational aesthetic is formulated as a question of wonder depending on a lack of knowledge (‘How did they do it?’), but I take it that it can also come in the form of an exclamation of astonishment based on a surplus of knowledge (‘Wow, it is amazing with what ingenuity or patience they did that!’).
But still, why do we not simply take our bikes, cycle to the countryside, and breathe in the full-blown beauty of nature directly? Is nature not denatured by film’s mediation: “framed and enframed, projected, pixilated, alienated, reduced to image”, in Ilan Safit’s words (2014, p. 211)? I am adamant that of all the artforms and media film is the one that affords experiences most closely resembling the actual experience of nature. But obviously in film our aesthetic experience of the rustling wind not only depends on the natural world but also modifies it in crucial ways (Schonig, 2018, p. 38).

The most palpable difference between an appreciation of natural beauty in real life and the mediated beauty of nature in the cinema is the curtailed address of our senses. Unless we are sitting in a gimmicky 4D cinema or an open-air theatre shortly before a thunderstorm, we obviously do not feel the wind literally. Thus, film seriously impoverishes our appreciation of beauty in nature by robbing us of nature’s appeal to our senses of smell, taste, touch, temperature, and the like. We can only imagine (or try to remember) how pleasant the warm breeze might feel on our skin if we were standing in the sunny Brandenburg landscape of Thomas Arlan’s Ferien and watching the forest trees moving gently in the summer wind; we can only imagine what wonderful fragrances the wind might carry in Parrenno’s lush Californian summer; and we can only imagine the enjoyable tactility of the wheat fields in Malick’s Texan nature.

Moreover, landscape paintings – but also the related scenery model of nature appreciation that looks at nature as if it were a landscape painting – have been criticised for turning nature into a static array, putting beholders at a distance from nature, and directing their attention exclusively to nature’s visual affordances. Even if film – through editing’s shifting perspectives and the immersive qualities of sound design and music – allows for a much more dynamic audiovisual appreciation in the midst of nature, it still keeps an ontological distance from our here in front of the screen and the there of the natural world in film. And does our mediated access to nature not also prevent us from choosing our own perspective? Film always frames nature for us in a predetermined way and composes it according to a particular filmmaker’s intentions. This implies that film neither allows us to act in nature, nor

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15 In a recent article, which I discovered only after finishing the present essay, philosopher Glenn Parsons (2022) makes a number of similar points.
16 At the turn of the 20th century, the cinema continued what gardens, the railway, and the panorama had already set in motion: a gradual transformation of the ideal of landscape, a mobilisation of the beholder’s gaze, and a transportation ‘into’ the landscape that leaves behind the static view of the picturesque (Gunning, 2010).
17 As W.J.T. Mitchell puts it: “the screen is not the totality of the world it implies; it is only a part of an entire scene or assemblage of parts. All the world may appear on a screen, but a screen is never all of the world” (2015, p. 232).
in accordance with it, as Noël Carroll (1995) reminds us: “nature has three dimensions; it offers a participatory space, not simply a space that we apprehend from outside” (p. 248). Yet film is two-dimensional, regardless of its strong immersive effects.

This leaves us with a number of severe limitations: film (a) curtails our senses, (b) dictates our perspectives and (c) prevents us from acting in accordance with nature. And still: when I am in a park, in the countryside, or in the mountains, the moving wind in the trees often gives me less aesthetic pleasure than comparable scenes and sceneries in the cinema. This is because film’s limitations often are – aesthetically speaking – a blessing.

For one, the reduction to the supposedly ‘distant senses’ of seeing and hearing transforms nature into an audiovisual object of beholding: in theory (although often not in practice) one can fully focus on watching it and listening to it and thus appreciating it first and foremost in these particular sense-modalities – which may come as a great relief for everyone suffering from hay fever or easily prone to getting cold. The screen screens us from its world: this well-known Cavellian insight rings particularly true for those whose experience of the beauty of the wind in the trees is infested with mosquitoes, flies, and bugs. And does not the absence of odour or coldness often turn an otherwise disgusting or ugly place into a beautiful one to behold? That is the picturesque side of beauty (with all the downsides that come with it, such as our ignorance about what is potentially disgusting and ugly about it). At the same time, we do synaesthetically grasp the wind and its warmth to some degree because we know how it feels when a gentle breeze touches our skin ever so softly. Following Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, and other Merleau-Ponty-influenced film-phenomenologists who argue that our senses are not compartmentalised and cut off from each other but part of a holistic bodily sensorium, we must not forget that film is a multisensorial medium after all. Of course, it is still an experience based on imagination or embodied memory rather than direct perception – but is not an evocation of fond bodily memories pleasant in its own right?

Furthermore, film’s preselected perspectives are not so far from how we experience nature in real life, as Ronald Moore explains: “we often gather together the elements of our experience of nature into wholes as a way of focusing attention on them, experiencing them against their background” (2008, p. 115). In cinema we do not have to frame nature ourselves, film’s helping hand puts the scene in a frame for us. In his contribution to the debate about the wind in the trees, Jordan Schonig shows how the cinema converts the chaotic movements and perpetual metamorphoses of natural phenomena – the contingent manner in which things move – into spatiotemporally framed objects (2018, p. 32). While for Kant’s Critique of Judgment such motions could not be beautiful because of their formlessness, Schonig argues that it is precisely cinema’s framing that makes them available for aesthetic contemplation: what was formless once, becomes form now. Through the camera and film’s recording technique the contingent motions of rustling leaves in the wind are contained and repeatable:

First, the cinematic image spatially frames its perception of the world by projecting a singular point of view of the world that is identical for all who perceive it. […] Second, the cinematic image temporally frames its perception of the world by wresting movement from the ephemeral flow of time. (Schonig, 2018, p. 37)

What is more, with Moore we could argue that we know that the world of the film does not end beyond its frame:

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18 It goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss virtual-reality documentaries but it might worth mentioning that some of these limitations are sidestepped by VR experiences of natural beauty.

19 While I agree with Schonig’s (2018) compelling account, I think it is necessary to adjust his focus on an aesthetics of fascination, astonishment, and wonder by an aesthetics of the beautiful.
Even though the various ways in which works in [various] art forms are framed do the important work of focusing our regard on a definite this to be appreciated, it is rarely ever the artist’s intent to restrict the audience’s attention to what is displayed within the frame. (2008, p. 199)

To put it in Bazinian terminology: we know that the world extends centrifugally beyond the film frame, and we can at least try to imagine the rest.

And even the fact that film prevents us from acting in accordance with nature can turn out to be an advantage. By not allowing us to act film makes it possible for us to step back from our usual goal-oriented engagement with nature – a withdrawal for which Lambert Wiesing (2015) has proposed the suggestive term “break in participation” (Partizipationspause) (p. 197ff). It is only this relief from a potentially strenuous presence in the practical mode that allows natural beauty to emerge as an object to be adored and savoured in its own right. Of course, we can always decide to adopt an aesthetic attitude in nature too and step back from our practical engagement (and we should!). Yet in the cinema the break in participation is part of the game from the start.

**THE NATURE-ART RECIPROCATION**

Let me hasten to add that film and nature are not highly guarded, fenced-off territories but overlap and profit from one another: not only may film make us look at natural beauty differently, but natural beauty can invite us to perceive cinema in unforeseen ways. Developing ideas from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Ronald Moore speaks of a principle of reciprocation between nature and art.

Beginning with the negative side of this reciprocation we can concede that art and natural beauty can impede each other’s appreciation, and knowledge can interfere with and change our experience of natural beauty in manifold ways. For one, knowing how a film was made as an artefact – receiving an answer to the question about its “operational aesthetics” – can transform beauty in an instance. Once we have heard that Sam Mendes used wind machines to create the dance of the plastic bag in *American Beauty* (1999), we may be less impressed by the splendid windy bag-ballet and consider it machine-made instead. Even the mere thought that an entire film crew has invaded a particularly remote, unspoiled piece of nature may create unease: there is, of course, a certain tension when a film – say, Murnau’s *Tabu* (1931) – mourns the ‘loss of innocence’ that trails the arrival of Western humanity in certain pockets of the Earth, but in order to make this point the director had to drag along cinema’s big machinery. Not least, knowing the landscape to be overwhelmingly beautiful in its full sensorial address – including smell, touch, and warmth – may leave you underwhelmed by how little of it comes across in the film: you feel its sensory richness impoverished.

Ultimately, though, Moore is keener to draw attention to the positive side of the nature-art reciprocation:

> our capacity for aesthetic appreciation isn’t an innate skill. It requires development, nurturing, and training. We go to nature to understand artistic beauty just as we go to art to enhance and refine our understanding of natural beauty. (2008, p. 70)

For Moore, our appreciations of artistic and natural beauty are imbricated because we tend to deploy “concepts, techniques, ways of speaking, background assumptions, analogies, allusions, and notions of aesthetic relevance” that work in one domain and use them in the other domain (p. 18). When encountering a foggy landscape you might profit from remembering Larry Gotheim’s experimental film *Fog Line*

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20 Moreover, as Ilan Safit puts it, this remoteness from nature “poses a problem only to those who fetishise first-hand and ‘natural’, unmediated experience as the only legitimate access to the world (how much of our encounter with the natural world is indeed ‘first-hand”? How much of it is not filtered through a window, a lens, a screen, or a text?)” (2014, p. 213).
(1970), because this prior experience with art has primed you for features of nature you may not have been aware of. Inversely, you may appreciate the sunset in Victor Erice’s *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973) as a particularly splendid specimen because you have seen many lesser sunsets in real life. This rapprochement becomes even more evident in the case of a beautiful landscape viewed through a real and a filmic train window, where one may remind you of the other.

Being privileged enough to be able to spend two weeks in the mountains near the Garda Lake in Northern Italy every summer, I often sit on the terrace and observe how the southern afternoon wind *ora* makes the leaves in the birch trees rustle, flutter, and dance in beautiful movements and shapes and with beautiful whispering sounds. I cannot recall how devoted I was to the wind in the trees before I encountered the films of Terrence Malick, but I am entirely convinced that it was Malick’s infatuation with the wind (and my infatuation with Malick’s cinema) that drew my attention to the *ora* phenomenon in all its aesthetic intricacies. Obviously, I do not mistake the beauty of nature for art: the *ora* wind does not magically transform the birch trees into a quasi-artwork. Rather, Malick’s films have made me appreciate what I had otherwise paid much less attention to or what had slipped my appreciation altogether: the movement patterns of the birch leaves, the soothing, almost meditative sounds of their rustling, the interplay of various colours that make the trees look as if they were glittering in the sun. It is film’s artful beauty of nature that drew my attention and led me to become aware of what is beautiful in the natural world.

There is, of course, a long tradition in film theory that ascribes to film an ontological potential to reveal the world to us in unknown ways, and we can easily adjust these accounts to make room for the experience of natural beauty it thus enables (see Turvey, 2008, for a nuanced discussion). For one, cinema can make us audiovisually experience types of natural beauty not easily available for us or not accessible at all, because they are too far away, too dangerous to reach, too hidden, too expensive. Moreover, film can make us aware of beautiful aspects of fauna and flora that lie beyond the range of our human sense perception: things that are too small or too big, events that happen too slowly or too quickly. With reference to Walter Benjamin we could claim that film makes us conscious of beauties that we are optically (but also acoustically) unconscious of. And here we can also think of André Bazin (2000) celebrating the “miracle of the science film” whose “supreme beauty is identified at once with nature and chance”: science films can uncover, without any aesthetic intentions, beauties hidden in the deep recesses of the universe to which “the camera alone possesses the secret key” (p. 146).

Film may also – and this is my third point – draw attention to facets of natural beauty we have grown so habituated to that we simply keep overlooking them: film thus allows a novel look at beauties that have reached the level of the stale and overly mundane. With Viktor Shklovsky in mind, we could say that film defamiliarises our world and makes us aware again of how beautiful the windiness of the wind can be. What is more, film may make us understand that we are often too bound up with our instrumental goals and therefore remain oblivious to the beauty of nature – by granting us the “break in participation” referred to before, we can relax from our goal-oriented orientation and focus, again or for the first time, on the beauty of the wind in the trees. Not least, through its framing as art, film allows us to consider something too scary, too disgusting, or too ugly as beautiful: with the mental frame of art, we can discover the beautiful colouration of a seemingly disgusting bug; or art can tame the natural sublime and magically turn it into a beautiful object, and so much more. As Umberto Eco (2004) once put it, in the history of aesthetics it was often acknowledged “that art could portray nature beautifully, even when the nature portrayed was in itself hazardous or repugnant” (p. 10).

Where does this leave us, then? In the end it does not seem far-fetched that film can teach us how to experience natural beauty, be it the gently rustling wind or
any other type, in a keener, fuller, and deeper manner (Krebs, 2014, p. 1264). Wouldn’t that be beautiful?

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