

Empathetic Media: Film and the “Gestures” of Plants in *Das Blumenwunder* (1926)

Suddenly, it has become a general need to give the inner experience an unmediated—bodily expression. Over night, it has become commonplace that language and concepts are inadequate. [...] In the face of this undoubtedly justified mistrust of words, the silent arts made popular the gesture, in which the spirit—unmediated—is being embodied without the interposition of the rational conceptual. These arts call themselves dance, pantomime and film.

BALÁZS, “Tanzdichtungen”, 109¹³⁶



In the previous chapter, I argued that William Weller’s imaginary moving gardens in “Flora Mohr” shared their emphasis on imitating the dynamic life of nature (as opposed to its outward appearance) with other early 20th-century forms of visual culture, in particular dance and abstract film. If both dance and film often referred to plants, I argued, this was hardly by chance given the upsurge of interest in the dynamic life of plants hidden beneath their outward appearance. But plants were not simply an analogy for abstract filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac. They were also the object of an entire series of scientific and cultural films in the Wilhelmine and Weimar cinema, which featured endless images of plants and flowers moving in time-lapse. In this chapter, I want to focus on one such film that made a deep impression on both artists and scientists alike: *Das Blumenwunder* (*The Miracle of Flowers*) from 1926. Originally conceived as an advertisement for fertilizer, *Das Blumenwunder*

136 “Plötzlich ist es ein allgemeines Bedürfnis geworden, dem inneren Erlebnis unmittelbar körperlichen Ausdruck zu geben. Über Nacht ist es zu einem Gemeinplatz geworden, daß die Sprache und die Begriffe unzulänglich seien. [...] [D]ieses zweifellos gerechtfertigte Mißtrauen unseren Worten gegenüber [hat] die stummen Künste der Gebärde, in denen der Geist unmittelbar, ohne Zwischenschaltung des rationell Begrifflichen verkörpert wird, sehr populär gemacht. Diese Künste nennen sich: Tanz, Patomime und Film.”

eventually became one of the most celebrated *Kulturfilme* of the 1920s, one that incorporated several well-known practitioners of the Weimar dance scene. Like Weller's spectacle in *Flora Mohr*, the film relies on movement-based media—here film and dance—to depict the life of plants, and recognizes the limits of language to express the unseen dynamism of a blossoming flower. But instead of attempting to transcend the body through the weightless transparency of coloured glass and light, *Das Blumenwunder* presents the viewer with a deliberate return to the kinetic body as the medium of a shared, lived experience with plants. In what follows, I argue that *Das Blumenwunder* employs specific ideas about embodied aesthetics at work in both film and dance theory in the 1920s in order to promote a particular type of spectatorship: namely an empathetic relation to plants—understood as dynamic, living beings—beyond the conceptual language of science.

Das Blumenwunder has not yet gathered the same attention as other Weimar film classics and has not been widely seen outside the archives, although this is gradually changing.¹³⁷ Divided into five acts through intertitles, the film is a mix of dramatic, scientific and educational elements typical of a *Kulturfilm* (culture film). Set in a garden, the film begins with young girls running and playing in between flowerbeds. When one of the girls picks a few flowers and refuses to share, their harmony quickly disintegrates into fighting and wanton destruction of the flowers. Then, a fairy appears, Flora, the protector of flowers, and interrupts their casual disregard for the plant-life in order to teach the children how to see the flowers as living beings like humans. The second act very much resembles the nature films circulating at this time in Europe, showing hands manipulating plants as well as time-lapse images of plants moving. The third and fourth acts mostly consist of time-lapse images of plants, which intermittently dissolve into flower dances performed by the Berlin State Opera Ballet and their soloists. The fifth and final act, entitled “The Song of Becoming and Passing away” (“Das Lied vom Werden und Vergehen”), begins with a flower dance and subsequent flower images, but differs from the previous two acts by repeatedly dissolving from time-lapse images of plants to the now empty garden from the first act. The available copies of the film end fairly abruptly with a cactus blooming, leaving the remaining few minutes open to speculation.

137 In cooperation with ARTE TV, the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Deutschlandradio Kultur and the cinema Babylon, the Muthesius Kunsthochschule, Kiel, screened *Das Blumenwunder* on various dates in 2011 and one in November 2013. A live orchestra, the Norddeutsche Sinfonietta, provided the accompaniment reconstructed from the original music by Eduard Künneke. A dossier with extra film materials including reviews is also to-date available on the ARTE TV website.