Moving Pictures and Renaissance Art History

PATRICIA EMISON

Moving Pictures and Renaissance Art History

Moving Pictures and Renaissance Art History

Patricia Emison

Cover illustration, front: Spoof of *School of Athens*, featuring Fred and Ginger in place of Plato and Aristotle, and Agnès Varda and Charlie Chaplin in place of Heraclitus and Diogenes. By Chloë Feldman Emison. Back: Cabiria (Giulietta Masina), with Ivan (Alberto Sordi) and others at fountain by Giacomo della Porta, 1589, in the Piazza di Campitelli, *Lo sceicco bianco*, Organizzazione Film Internazionale, 1952, screenshot; and two angels in final scene of *Cabin in the Sky*, posed in the manner of Raphael's angels in the *Sistine Madonna* (though in reversed order; images spliced), MGM, 1943, screenshots. (The hand of Ethel Waters appears at left.)

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Israhel van Meckenem, *Self-Portrait with wife, Ida*, c. 1490, engraving, 13 x 17.5 cm, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Godfrey and Irene (William Powell and Carole Lombard), *My Man Godfrey*, Universal, Gregory La Cava, 1936, screenshot.

To my father, John C. Emison, in honor of his hundredth year, a member of the first generation to grow up with movies, as I was with television and my children, Chloë and Linnea, with personal computers.

Films are more ebullient than phosphorous
and more captivating than love.[1]

Table of Contents

Foreword

Abstract

Our distance now from ambitious early filmmaking allows for a newly critical analysis of both its historical and artistic significance. In certain broad aspects, early filmmaking, a new art made for a more inclusive public, recapitulates both the challenges and the accomplishments of Renaissance imagemaking, which began as craft and evolved to the status of liberal art, relatively little of which was privately owned in unique examples.

Keywords: cultural memory, genre, periodization, 20th century, Vasari

'Cinema' is what cannot be told in words.[1]

I came to the art of cinema late. I cannot remember how I happened to watch my first Bergman, but it was on DVD (digital versatile disk); after having been raised on Hollywood films, it was a revelation. Similarly, my first Buster Keaton movie was on DVD, and a revelation. By the time I learned that Ingmar Bergman considered *The Navigator* (1924) 'one of my favourite films',[2] I was hooked. Could this art of telling stories to the widest possible audience—sometimes with engrossing realism, sometimes ingeniously idealized or fantasized, a rapidly evolving tradition peopled by social upstarts rubbing shoulders with the powerful—not be taken as a recapitulation, in some ways, of Italian Renaissance art? Did it not thereby offer a chance to rethink that distant modernity called the Renaissance, as well as to recalibrate 20th-century modernity?

Vasari assembled the biographies of Italian Renaissance artists as Florence was in decline, and although the present project has more modest

---

1   Clair, *Reflections*, p. 11.
2   *Bergman on Bergman*, p. 157.

---

aims, some similarity may indeed be proposed between the flourishing of Renaissance art and that of cinema in the period between the 1920s and the mid-1960s. By the late 1960s, filmmaking had entered a new phase. A postwar generation for whom film was no longer novel was maturing, and the expectation was that films would be in color. The world had changed along with the business and style of films; budgets were bigger and the structure more corporate,[3] not unlike what happened in the transition from Renaissance to Baroque. Michelangelo Antonioni wondered: 'Perhaps we are the last to produce things so apparently gratuitous as are works of art'.[4] A glorious phase of founding and formation had ended, and many of the period's greatest accomplishments, not to mention its minor corners of excellence, were threatened with obscurity. Which films had grossed the most money, which films had won the most celebrated prizes: these crude though often-cited measures of what had been at stake and what had been achieved often provide untrustworthy measures of excellence and long-term interest. Kevin Brownlow, for one, began to try to assemble a less haphazard record of the new medium that helped to define the period into which he had been born.[5] Serious retrospection had begun: the early ('primitive') phase was over.[6]

As the capacity to transcend mere prettiness was essential to the accomplishments of Renaissance art—the plainness of Masaccio's figures as opposed to the mere delicacy of Fra Angelico's and the charm of Fra Filippo Lippi's—so also with film. *Der letzte Mann* (1924), up until the epilogue, is as grim as its contemporary, Kafka's short story 'Ein Hungerkünstler' (1922).

---

3   Cf. Lewis, *American Film*, pp. 233–237, 279–287. Already in 1944, René Clair wrote, 'The age of exploration of unknown lands has given way to that of industrial organization. The pioneers in high boots have made way for the financiers with eyeglasses. Hollywood, which used to be a sort of flea market of the moving image, full of the unexpected, the ridiculous and the charming, has become like a big well-polished shop in which mass-produced merchandise is sold from one end to the other', *Yesterday*, p. 192.

4   Sarris, *Interviews*, p. 8, speaking to Godard in 1964. See also Schickel, 'High Art', *The New York Times*, 5 Jan. 1969, on the loss of the original broad public for film, replaced by one more dominantly young and middle-class.

5   Brownlow, *Parade's*, on silent film. Brownlow said the first time he saw the rapid cutting in the snowball fight of *Napoléon* (1927), 'Napoleon and I', BBC, was like finding an unknown Leonardo notebook. On the development of film studies, and its shift in the 1960s in the hands of a generation that wanted to rebel against the old bastions of culture, see Polan, *Scenes*, pp. 1–8.

6   Fifteenth-century art used to be known as 'primitive', but in this sense even High Renaissance art could be said to have a toe in the primitive—the crucial divide being when artists became self-conscious of their historical importance, which again takes us to the Baroque, or at least to late Michelangelo, who burned his drawings before he died so that no one would know how hard he had worked (according to Vasari).

I do not mean to imply that art needs be tragic, only that it must offer more than escapist entertainment. Fra Filippo Lippi and Fred Astaire have a legitimate share in these histories of art, but as part of a larger whole, as making the phenomenon of art gratifying to a broad spectrum of the public while generally declining to address major issues of the time in anything other than an indirect or glancing way. Comedy can be exceedingly poignant, akin to the Renaissance depictions of Madonna and Child that are often both delightful and at the same time tinged with sadness and foreboding. Comedy can also be exceedingly pointed, as when Fred Astaire's character in *The Sky's the Limit* (1943) exposes the ignorance of a manufacturing mogul about the deficiencies of the fighter planes from which he profits.[7] The cloak of comedy can enable the creators to make more barbed societal criticisms than in another genre, as both Molière and Frank Capra knew well. In the history of film, the trajectories of comedy and tragedy significantly intertwine—a parallel, arguably, to shifting balances between the secular and religious themes in Renaissance painting, or more generally between the less and the more weighty themes. As René Clair's collaborator, George Berr, wrote, 'we play with illusion; we are not professional liars' ('nous sommes des joueurs d'illusion, non les professionels du mensonge').[8]

Leonardo's smiles do not convey happiness; instead, those smiles convey 'all the troubles of the world', as Walter Pater put it (1869). There are such smiles in *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959). Leonardo, like Alain Resnais and his team, understood how natural pain and dissolution were. Renaissance art was obliged to sell religion, sometimes patriotism; film had to sell itself, as well as sometimes patriotism, and in general a morality that the Catholic League and/or the Hays Code would condone.[9] In both traditions, when the works excelled, they did so by conveying something vital—and not always pleasurable—to their viewers. *Hiroshima mon Amour*, for instance, turns a blend of searingly painful retrospection and love into an experience of immediate though tolerable anguish, anguish at a level one can think

---

7   Cf. Goya's mockery of the aristocracy in Spain in *Los caprichos* (1799) and Cary Grant's role as a navy commander approached by government defense contractors in *Kiss Them for Me*, 1957, based on a play based on a novel, with the film having the mildest anti-war-profiteering message of the three.

8   Berr, *L'art*, p. 63.

9   See Bordwell and Thompson, *History*, pp. 160, 239–240. Talbot, *Entertainer*, pp. 150–162, describes the Hays Code and its context. The eventual replacement for Hays, voluntary ratings, G–X, came into effect on 1 Nov. 1968. These avoided the stigma of censorship, the presumption being that only children required shielding, although studios could negotiate to shift a rating by excising certain bits.

through, a level that can be narrated in voice-over. When we watch it now, we may do so for its historical content and/or for its artistic worth, but we also gain from it some skill in dealing with the emotions its protagonists feel—fear, isolation, horror—because we watch them more immersed in those feelings than we are, while we partially share them at a cushioning distance of both time and place. Sometimes it is because we do not fully believe ourselves to be in the moving picture, but instead watch ourselves watching it, that the film's power can be a healing one.

Although wide-ranging, this study makes no claim to comprehensiveness. It leaves to one side, for example, experimental film, and its reach does not regularly extend beyond North American and European films, despite the cinematic richness during this period in Japan and India, among other places. Quite apart from geographical limitations, the study is meant more to open up a subject than to complete it, and to utilize a variety of kinds of sources, contemporary and not, scholarly and not. The goal is to begin to consider the history of Western art together with the history of cinema—in both cases, looking not only at the pinnacles of achievement but also at typical or even eccentric efforts—and to consider those two histories as sister endeavors that partly complement one another. Works of art, including films, are the quintessential tree in the forest: being seen ensures their reality. The present effort is meant to expose sometimes forgotten works to ways of viewing quite different from those current at the time of their making, and to suggest the possibilities of a blend of art-historical and film-historical methods of interrogating the past, casting an eye (and ear) for a whole range of transfusions between the various layers of more or less mass culture. Despite its association with patronage by the wealthy, Renaissance art began as an art meant for public view, and via printmaking, it spread far and wide.

The four central chapters each address a basic yet wide-ranging question about the history of cinema and its relation to the history of art. How did the invention of moving pictures change the tenor and rank of shared visual experience? How did making art by machine change creativity? How did authorship adapt to telling stories more visually? And how, particularly in a medium often conceived with female consumers in mind, did the presentation of women reflect societal changes, both the realities and the ideals?

The 20th century marks the beginning of film as integral to our culture,[10] and that century will continue to be thought of in part by what we remember

---

10   Godard and Ishaghpour, *Cinema*, p. 91, cite the Russian Revolution, Nazism, and cinema as the three most important developments of the 20th century.

of it from the history of film. Art history ought to be able to enrich and refine that process, beginning by broadening the focus on Hollywood that tends to dominate American film history.

Bibliography

Bergman on Bergman, Paul Austin, trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

Berr, Georges, *L'art de dire* (Paris: Hachette, 1924).

Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

Brownlow, Kenneth, *The Parade's Gone By* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

Clair (Chomette), René, *Reflections on the Cinema*, V. Traill, trans. (London: William Kimber, 1953).

————, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, S. Appelbaum, trans. (New York: Dover, 1972).

Godard, Jean-Luc and Youssef Ishaghpour, *Cinema: The Archaeology of Film and the Memory of a Century* (New York: Berg, 2005).

Lewis, Jon, *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2008).

Polan, Dana, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginning of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Sarris, Andrew, ed., *Interviews with Film Directors* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967).

Schickel, Richard, 'Movies are Now High Art', *The New York Times*, 5 Jan. 1969.

Talbot, Margaret, *The Entertainer: Movies, Magic, and My Father's Twentieth Century* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

Prologue

Abstract

Cinema began primarily as a folk art, and remained a popular art, so there tended to be a considerable gulf between film and fine art. The history of cinema often exhibits a casual attitude toward stylistic innovation, while the history of art has traditionally tended to emphasize exactly that. The combined effect has tended to exaggerate the difference between the two traditions. Yet they do not operate in total isolation. The makers of cinema, even if scarcely students of the history of art, have absorbed certain of its precepts and examples. The emotional life prompted and supported by the new narrative imagery was crucial to the development of Renaissance sensibilities; cinema constituted a new chapter in this kind of enhancement. In both cases, effusive delight was expressed for the new imagery.

Keywords: Calvino, *City Lights*, Fellini, Giotto, Surrealism, *ut pictura poësis*

Heraclitus it was who first perceived that all life consisted of, and tended towards, change: and change is the first principle of all cinematography.[1]

The history of art has traditionally been conceived of as a history of style interacting with genre, or of patronage and markets, display practices, and critical reception, but only relatively rarely has the history of art been organized according to medium. Since films have seldom been made primarily for the sake of exploring style, and their critical reception has in large part been the stuff of ephemeral journalism, their history has often been considered to lie outside the bounds of the history of art.[2] The gulf between fine art

---

1   Betts, *Inside*, p. 14.
2   Though see Mathews, *Moving Pictures*, e.g., on D.W. Griffith's interest in making a movie inspired by the Edwin Austin Abbey murals in the Boston Public Library, p. 70.

---

and cinema can seem immense. While Picasso was devising what came to be called Cubism, an art radically stripped of affect, early cineasts were Romantically gripped by pantomimes of love in dire circumstances (e.g., *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii*, 1913), and while Pollock was daringly beginning to drip paint, Mr. Blandings, the adman, was building himself a house in rural Connecticut (*Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, 1948) and learning that country folk sometimes did things differently.

Early cinema comprised not only folk art that purveyed sophistication but also a modern, mechanized art that often portrayed pathetic poverty.[3] In either of these guises, film may have been supposed to have had as little to do with high modernism as did art deco movie palaces. Pulp fiction and the movies had many points in common;[4] high art and Hollywood, seemingly rather little.[5] Cinema's mainstay lay in imagery for the multitudes, as had been the case during the Renaissance with the sometimes pedestrian but often nevertheless beloved altarpieces, frescoes, and devotional paintings. Along with them flourished the more extraordinary works, such as Giorgione's *Tempesta* (c. 1505) or Botticelli's *Primavera* (c. 1480), though few would have had access to those exceptional paintings. What was most noticed at the time may differ from what the historian's eye finds revelatory: that is one of the reasons that we value history. In Chris Marker's documentary *Le joli mai* (1962), the interviewer asks a clothes salesman, standing with his wares on the sidewalk outside of the shop, about cinema and gets little response. There isn't much on now, says the salesman. The interviewer mentions *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) and *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961); the clerk, who has heard of both, is willing to try the former, but of the latter he says that he's a simple man who doesn't want to be puzzled when he goes to the cinema. He tells the interviewer that he likes Superman, historical

---

3   Erwin Panofsky, writing in 1936, found cinema of note because it was the result of a technological innovation and constituted a genuine folk art; 'Style and Medium', in *Three Essays*, pp. 91–125. Cooke, 'The Critic in Film History' (1938), in Davy, *Footnotes*, p. 254: 'It is this identity of the spectator with the performer in an emotion which is often simple but always intense which makes us think constantly of the movies as a probable folk art'. Michael Powell quoted his own art director for the epigraph to his autobiography: 'Movies are the folklore of the twentieth century'; Hein Heckroth, in Powell, *Autobiography*, v. Cf. William Hughes, 'The evaluation of film as evidence', in Smith, *Historian*, pp. 49–79, on Lévi-Strauss's relevance to film.

4   This is not meant to disparage the excellent Hodgins, *Dream House*, 1946, originally published as 'Castle', pp. 138–143, 179–189 (the title alludes to John Ruskin). Nobel, 'Who Built', sees the story mostly as evidence of eroding prestige for the architectural profession.

5   King Vidor said he looked at modern paintings by 'Leger, Picasso, Matisse, and Chirico' for ideas about what to express on-screen, as well as to cartoons for their use of sound; 'Audible Films', 1929.

films, stylish people shooting each other and then making phone calls. He knows what he wants: folk art purveying sophistication. Marker's rather recherché film, incidentally, is dedicated 'To the happy many', an ironic reference to Stendhal's practice of dedications 'To the happy few'.

But if cinema has seemed a mere stepsister of fine art because film-makers were not consistently hungry for stylistic innovation, or because the use of montage seems a discountable pair to Cubist redefinition of pictorial composition, we ought to ask ourselves whether we may not have overemphasized style as the driving force in the history of art. During the Renaissance, authors of *novelle*, beginning with Boccaccio, might explicitly deny having stylistic ambitions—yet their works contributed greatly to the history of literature (considerably more so than did grand but ultimately sterile efforts to revive epic). In the same vein, filmmakers contributed to the history of imagery without necessarily being motivated by stylistic ambition. The history of style is but a subset of the history of imagery, and the history of images belongs within the history of ideas. It is within this more comprehensive context that I would like to understand cinema—and ultimately, the history of art as well.

All the cinema wished for was for the spectator to lose his footing.[6]

Although images predate writing, in Western culture they have traditionally been outranked by poetry and history, beginning with Homer and the Bible. As the icon was incomplete without a prayer (the wonder it excited being properly transferred to the attentive inhabitants of heaven), so the narrative picture invited commentary, whether on subject, composition, closeness to the appearances of life, or the handling of materials. Accordingly, for much of the history of Western art, the image was laden with words, whether the words that inspired it or the words incited by it. In either case, the image was barely able to breathe apart from words; often, there were even captions or inscriptions indissoluble from the image. The Ten Commandments having forbidden idolatry, the status of the image was radically reduced to mere illustration or to mere prompt for words.[7] To put it more positively, word and text existed symbiotically, each enhancing the other, as good illustrations do. But always in the beginning—ideologically—was the Word.

On occasion, particularly since the High Renaissance, images have wriggled free of text and breathed freely, offering implication, atmosphere,

---

6   Benjamin Fondane (1930), in Abel, *Theory*, II, p. 48.
7   Cf. Nagel, *Controversy*; Nagel and Pericolo, *Aporia*.

and textless potentiality of their own. Architecture perennially was an art of making visual experiences independent of text;[8] it was also consistently the most prestigious of the arts, and (not coincidentally) the most costly. The more convincingly pictures and sculptural reliefs conveyed three-dimensional spaces, the more independent they too became, potentially, of the need for textual justification, because they created their own cosmos rather than existing as a satellite of the text. Medieval artists did not want to compete with text and did not put effort into creating fictive spaces; instead, they often created hybrids of text and image. They made text beautiful. Renaissance artists instead made the world appear beautiful.

The expectation that images refer to textural sources, whether specific or generic, directly or indirectly, long persisted. Images were judged to be excellent if they served the text well; the whole concept of decorum, as explicated by the Roman orator Cicero early on, depended on the dignity and weight inherent in words. Since texts themselves were understood as representations of the natural world, there was no reason why text and image should not be understood as complementary. Yet meaning (the expression of our efforts to understand our experience of the world) always seemed to be dominated by *logos*, by word; images functioned as colonial extensions of text.

Donatello composed his pictorial spaces in part to be free from narrative structures, in particular from the specificity of narrative climax; he used continuous narrative (which of course actually means discontinuous) in his *Dance of Salome* (Siena, Baptistry, c. 1427), creating an engrossing journey for the eye—one that anticipates a sort of montage effect. Alternatively, the narrative climax could be reinforced by the perspectival focal point—with the depth of focus, as we would say, of Jean Renoir or Alfred Hitchcock. In Leonardo's *Last Supper* (c. 1498), we see the consternation that follows Christ's announcement that he will be betrayed by someone present in the room, his head being coincident with the vanishing point. Widespread alarm is more vividly conveyed visually than verbally—in this case by the clumped, framing expressions of dismay and disbelief. In Raphael's *School of Athens* (c. 1510), we see the juxtaposition and mutual interaction of thinkers that any Renaissance reader of philosophy would have tried to construct virtually, in the mind's eye. The image has become metatext; philosophical debate has come alive. Thought created cinematically was given a name by Alexandre Astruc: *caméra-stylo*, who explained that,

---

8   Or dominant to text, where there were monumental inscriptions.

After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, it [cinema] is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.[9]

In the Renaissance, too, paintings had been made for the sake of stimulating thought via formal innovation.

The age-old rivalry of image versus word found a new dynamic in the 20th century. In 1924, W.B. Yeats wrote of theater, 'if we are to restore words to their sovereignty we must make speech even more important than gesture upon the stage'.[10] As Yeats's concern indicates, something fundamental had been shifting in the traditional preference for language. A defense of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* in 1929 asked,

While painting [...] has proceeded to rid itself of the descriptive, has done away with the classical perspective, has tried more and more to obtain the purity of abstract idealism, and this led us to a world of wondrous new spaces, should the art of the word remain static?[11]

The Surrealists' focus on dreams, on the marvelous, on the art of William Blake and of Hieronymus Bosch, and on Murnau's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) emphasized the possibilities of sight over language.

By 1985, Italo Calvino was warning that the ability to visualize on the basis of text was endangered in a culture 'inundated by a flood of prefabricated images': we were, he predicted, in danger of losing 'the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images'.[12] Those who have read a book and then seen a movie based on

---

9   Astruc, '*Camera-stylo*', 1948, pp. 603–607.

10   Geduld, *Actors*, p. 363.

11   Jolas, 'Revolution', p. 82. In the same volume, Samuel Beckett championed Joyce by comparison to Dante and in contrast to the classical Milton.

12   Calvino, 'Visibility', in *Memos*, p. 92. Cf. Will Self, 'our culture hasn't simply privileged the visual, but made vision worth far more than all the other senses', 'A Point of View: Has the World Become Too Visual', BBC, 27 Feb. 2015; Clark, 'Modernism', p. 161, 'a new form of visuality spreading like a virus through the culture at large—a new machinery of visualization, a tipping of the balance from a previous regime of the word to the present regime of the image'; Classen, *Color*, p. 143, writes: 'In the twentieth century, the Western world in general, and the academic world in particular, can be said to have a fixation with the sense of sight'; and Carroll, *Philosophy*, p. 225:

the book often find it difficult to retain the imagery they gained from their reading in the face of the screen version.

Calvino warned us of a certain cognitive passivity, one to which we are more prone the more readily images are available—and our age is defined in no small part by the ubiquity of images, in particular of talking, moving images. Our imaginations, Calvino warned, were being infiltrated by professional makers of images whose objectives were not always purely aesthetic. Making images, he exhorted, ought to be a universal skill, such as articulating thoughts in language, even if those images remain merely internal, 'airy nothings'. The primacy of text had developed in a culture in which images were rare, in which widely shared images were even more rare. Now, we live in a culture in which images have become ubiquitous, so much so that the polarity of image and text may easily suffer (or achieve) reversal. Already in 1963, Alain Robbe-Grillet acknowledged the accusation that 'contemporary novels were merely abortive films'.[13] As Calvino worried, text may struggle to keep up.

Calvino's doubt about the ongoing power of words marks a change in the tide by which artists, for centuries, had looked to language to find both subjects and standards. The Roman poet Horace (65–8 B.C.), in a highly influential text about poetry, *Ars poetica*, made a passing reference to painting, perhaps the most cited comment on the visual arts ever made, one usually boiled down to three words: *ut pictura poësis*. This was used from the midfifteenth century onward to counterbalance Leon Battista Alberti's theory by which painting was based in rules, geometry, and teachable skills cribbed from rhetoric. Instead, painting might be a matter of inspiration, of freedom, of serendipity, as was poetry, despite its reliance on rules of prosody

'We are becoming a moving image culture'. Cf. also Yve-Alain Bois's comment that recently (since the fall of the Berlin Wall) he can muster 'far less confidence in the power of words', in Earnest, *What*, p. 62. Walter Benjamin quoted Georges Duhamel, writing of film in 1930: 'I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images', 'Mechanical', p. 238, and Nicoll, *Film*, p. 109: 'We moderns are, it seems, much more deeply moved by visual symbols than by words'. In a book whose first edition was in 1915, Lindsay proclaimed, 'A tribe that has thought in words since the days that it worshipped Thor and told legends of the cunning tongue of Loki, suddenly begins to think in pictures', *Moving*, p. 213. Biggers, *Seven*, comments that 'the noble art of fiction has come to lean more and more on its illustrators', p. 192, or 'like a moving picture film the story of that weird night unrolled itself', p. 233. Wilde, in 1890, *Critic*, p. 24, warned 'since the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country, there has been a tendency to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please'. The character Rouvier in *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959) observes, 'History is no longer written, but photographed'.

13   Robbe-Grillet, *Novel*, p. 145.

and genre. Gotthold Lessing during the Enlightenment, James McNeill Whistler a century later, and Wassily Kandinsky as the spokesperson of modernism, all worked to undo Horace's entrenched advice-cum-exhortation, because—despite having been cited so often to defend license—they felt it bound the visual arts too closely to the verbal arts.[14] Whistler was not alone in preferring music to poetry as a valuable analog for issues of visual composition, both for its emphasis on mood (sometimes a very tranquil, incident-free mood) and for its abstractness, its content being its form. During Romanticism, music had arguably already displaced painting as the foremost art, both intellectually demanding for its public and widely practiced by amateurs. Twentieth-century art continued to erode centuries of verbal hegemony: modernism took little interest in narrative, but much interest in color, rhythm, and harmony or dissonance.[15] Between the fall of the academies of art and the rise of television, visual narrative was largely relegated to the domain of theater and its younger cousin, film.

> *I have too much conscience to take a million dollars and make a film that would please only me and the critics [...] our medium happens to have a universal appeal. I would say that it is a harder to make a film that has both integrity and wide audience appeal than it is to make one that satisfies one's own artistic conscience.*[16]

The general populace, those who would have craned to see frescoes in the Renaissance, began to go to the cinema in the 20th century.[17] The sense of ending that cinema customarily embraced, at least until the 1960s, has a correlate in fresco cycles that led either to martyrdom and a heavenly vision or to the Last Judgment. They provide a sense of closure and finality that is not necessarily that of death, but which certainly has an analogy there.[18]

---

14   Marshall in *Cambridge*, pp. 681–699, also for defenses of images as potentially clearer and more striking than words; e.g., de Piles, 'painting shews truth in a more lively manner, and moves and penetrates the heart more strongly, than can be done by discourse' (p. 692, in 1708). Theater offered a sort of synthesis; as Jonathan Richardson opined, 'There we see a sort of moving, speaking Pictures' (p. 698, 1715). Richardson praises painting for its duration; Du Bos and Diderot both prefer the poetry of the theater as offering numerous tableaux.
15   On connections between the experience of viewing film and abstraction, as well as for attention paid to Ash Can and other 20th-century realist painting, see Mathews, *American*, p. 128.
16   Hitchcock, *Interviews*, p. 37.
17   L'Herbier, *Tête*, p. 63, reports that Delluc wrote in his review of *El Dorado* (1921): 'une belle fresque'. Salle, *How to See*, p. 224, of Piero della Francesco's cycle of the Legend of the True Cross: 'the lyrical sweep of these frescoes is like CinemaScope five hundred years before the event'.
18   Cameron, 'Antonioni', p. 12: 'Antonioni has said that working on location puts him in a similar position to a painter who has to fill a certain wall with frescoes'.

Particularly when visual art was adjusted to architectural display, the first and last impressions, entrance and exit experiences, have a prominence and emphasis analogous to the opening and closing scenes of a film.

These pictures speak. In church as in cinema, the viewer generally remains silent, as though listening. Some sort of text lies behind the film, as with frescoes, yet the visualization assumes a self-sufficiency. Large-scale and public, such images readily acquire a certain cultural authority. The ending of *City Lights* (1931) descends, however remotely and inadvertently, from the *Annunciation*: one figure reaches out to another in a general atmosphere of tentativeness and incomprehension, a white flower figuring prominently. (Figure 1) The analogy is inexact; the Tramp turns back to face the Girl, as the Virgin turns in response to Gabriel, while the Girl, who extends her arm like Gabriel, can be seen by stages to be having a revelation (the Tramp has already had a moment of recognition). Despite its date, the film is silent, and the score Chaplin composed, like the imagery, expresses sentiment without clear resolution. No announcement is made: the real exchange is tactile and visual, made all the more poignant by the theme of blindness in the preceding narrative.[19] But the scene is all the more memorable because it echoes the Annunciation, not only in the two figures but in some of the Girl's complex and shifting emotions: she is blithe and busy, then disconcerted, even pained, and seems, finally, irresolute. By contrast, the Tramp has received gratifying news; in this, again, he resembles the Virgin more than does the lithe Girl. The image of Chaplin as the Tramp was a primary image between the two World Wars: compassionate and curious, yet pitiful; a failure and yet unbeaten, the Tramp was the new Everyman, battered by the same modern urban environment that supported cinema.[20]

Analogously, the image of Fred Astaire, ever spry and ever courteous, spinning in top hat and tails, is as indelibly printed on at least portions of Western cultural consciousness as that of St. George: both figures of lithe gallantry. Viewers of Fred Astaire—'a thing of beauty and a boy for ever', as Alistair Cooke dubbed him—may well never have consciously related

19   Clair, *Reflections*, p. 74, opined that only Chaplin could have made this scene without its becoming 'ridiculous'. Agee, 'Era' (1949), p. 77, was more reverential: 'it is enough to shrivel the heart to see, and it is the greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies'.

20   Arnheim, *Film*, pp. 144–145, describes how the scene of eating a boot in the *Gold Rush* (1925) has the effect it does because he eats in the manner of a rich man at a fine meal: 'the great artistry of the invention lies in that such an elemental, profoundly human theme as "hunger versus good living" is presented pictorially by objective means that are so truly filmic. Nothing more purely visual can be conceived than such association of the shapes of things'.

Figure 1: Tramp and (formerly) Blind Girl (Charlie Chaplin and Virginia Cherrill), *City Lights*, Charles Chaplin Productions, Charles Chaplin, 1931, screenshot.

him to St. George.[21] Yet the degree of cultural primacy in both instances is comparable, and the Astaire–Rogers courtships savored as much of artificiality as those of knights and ladies of yore. In the late 1930s, Fred Astaire was as capable of slaying figural dragons for the sake of his lady as the knight, though his modern lady could be a good deal more prickly than a princess, and the dragon might be merely a rival suitor or the correspondent in a divorce case (*Gay Divorcee*, 1934). Or Audrey Hepburn flying down the stairs of the Louvre in red with the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* behind her in *Funny Face* (1957):[22] that image exemplifies how 20th-century cinephiles reveled in the distance between then and now, rather than utterly cutting off the past.

Sergei Eisenstein remembered indelibly (if not totally accurately after 20 years) the passerby who interrupts the first meeting between the boy and

---

21   Cooke, *Movies*, 1 Dec. 1937, p. 65.
22   One of the statue's hands had been recovered by archaeologists in 1948, with much attention from the press. Fred Astaire, playing a professional fashion photographer, is snapping her photo as she flies downward.

the girl in the modern segment of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance: Love's Struggles Throughout the Ages* (1916) (0:48).[23] André Bazin said he could never forget the dust as the eponymous tramp walks along the river path at the end of *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932).[24] Such memories function as memorized poetry did before: as touchstones of cultural identity, whether individual or communal. Psychiatrists interested in understanding the structures of consciousness, physicists focused on understanding space-time, authors trying to register the changing pace and patterns of urbanized and industrialized life, and makers of cinema attempting to capture flow rather than a single significant moment were all engaged in at least vaguely homologous projects—understanding a reality whose structure was increasingly taken to be plastic rather than adamantine.

The continuity of film imagery across projects as well as its capacity for convincing mimesis, two qualities that tie it structurally to the history of art, are both demonstrated in what I like to call the Fellini moment, though it might be fairer to call it (with a nod to Truffaut)[25] a privileged moment, one in which the structure of the plot is erased by the overwhelming verity (calculated on some rubric, often a subjective one) of an ostensibly subordinate episode. As the events of Federico Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952) are winding down, Cabiria (Giulietta Masina) and her fellow prostitute wander into a dark, deserted square in Rome (Piazza di Campitelli) (back cover), only to find the disconsolate Ivan slumped at the base of the fountain, having long since lost track of the bride he had wed that very morning. Cabiria compassionately tries to interest him in the performance of the fire-eater who has happened by, but Ivan will not rouse himself and wanders off with her companion while Cabiria continues to be enthralled by the fire-eating. This little aperçu into late-night street life has an almost documentary flavor. It is both compellingly

23   Eisenstein, 'Dickens' [1944], p. 149. It should be noted that the old man is rudely interruptive, definitely a moment to catch the eye of an advocate of disrupting narrative continuity. Michael Powell also wrote about how impressed he was by this film. He saw it on the pier at Folkstone and 'it was the greatest experience I had had. There has never been a film director like Griffith'; *Autobiography*, p. 94.

24   Bazin, *Renoir*, p. 623. See also Burgin, *Remembered*, pp. 58–73: 'Today, what we share in common in cultural experience is increasingly derived from the image envelope', p. 66, where private and public, conscious and unconscious, interact.

25   Truffaut, *Letters*, p. 407, 21 July 1974, to Jean Gruault. Truffaut was basing his thoughts on Henry James's essay, 'The Art of Fiction'; see also, Horne, 'James', p. 36. Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 15, explains suspense as using the 'manifest clarity and persuasive power of the image' to create '"persuasive moments", those highlights that linger in the viewer's memory'. The term acknowledges the power of sight to create a sense of reality; in 1974, Truffaut called such a moment 'our real reason for wanting to make the film'. It is worth noting the temporality of the act of sighting that is so valued, not unlike Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being'.

realistic and it creates an eddy in the flow of the narrative. From this scene, Fellini developed *Le notti di Cabiria*, in which this very minor, cheery character in the 1952 film becomes the tragic and heroic protagonist of the 1957 opus. That scene in the darkness by the marble fountain would have worked nearly as well in a silent film; the basic story is almost entirely visual: Ivan tells the women about his bride by showing the snapshots he has in his pocket, and their responses are as visual as they are verbal. And it is because it seemed so very real to Fellini (as it does also to us, the viewers) that the character Cabiria was still alive in his mind five years later.

Fellini was not filming a book; he was writing (with some assistance from Antonioni) what he wanted to see filmed—like Jean Renoir in *La règle du jeux* (1939), in particular the sequence in which the theatricals are presented. They hint at the real threat present at this frivolous house party, as well as in the host's maniacal character. The mobility of Renoir's camera dazzles the viewer, who then regains a bit of balance while watching the host lose his equilibrium. But more than this, like the scenes in *Sceicco* and Chaplin's *City Lights*, they are like little miracles in themselves, in that we the viewers allow ourselves to believe the celluloid. The crucial thing about the scene at the fountain in *Sceicco* is not that a subordinate character carries over into a new film in which she is the protagonist, but that the interaction of those people is captured so compellingly, beyond mere verisimilitude. We set aside our right to be canny consumers in a post-Enlightenment society. We experience what some would call absorption and what Truffaut would call privilege. In 1956, Robbe-Grillet recognized that, in film,

> what affects us, what persists in our memory, what appears as essential and irreducible to vague intellectual concepts are the gestures themselves, the objects, the movements, and the outlines, to which the image has suddenly (and unintentionally) restored their *reality* [...] it is as if the very conventions of the photographic medium (the two dimensions, the black-and-white images, the frame of the screen, the difference of scale between scenes) help free us from our own conventions.[26]

Those scenes have the power to mean to us what they would have had we actually lived them, which is like what Renaissance art was meant to be: a supplement to our lives rather than a series of entries on our art life-list. But whereas historically the most one could hope for was the implication of ongoing action and flowing consciousness, from the Greek invention of

---

26   Robbe-Grillet, *Novel*, pp. 20–21.

the *contrapposto* pose to Leonardo's advice that the movements of the body should serve to convey the movements of the soul, film made possible instead the sharing of a time-space, of a segment of experience, an episode rather than the fossilized and irremediably silent and static image. Ingmar Bergman did not need to study Leonardo's writings to affirm that he was 'passionately interested in human beings, the human face, the human soul'[27]—though Bergman and Leonardo would have understood one another perfectly.

The scene in *Sceicco* recalls one in Fellini's *Luci del varietà* (1951), which showed Checco, a mediocre vaudevillian in his late 40s, wandering a deserted Rome in the middle of the night with a hefty trumpet player from the United States, a Black man who has given up being a chemical engineer because he loves music and the freedom he finds in Italy, where he celebrates living among the crazy and impoverished musicians of the street. Residents who want to sleep shout at them from high windows and call them vagabonds; they call themselves artists. A female Brazilian singer (Vanja Orico) with a guitar sings for them on the steps of a church (Sant'Agostino),[28] a police officer on a bicycle listens appreciatively while cautioning them to sing quietly, and the jazz trumpeter compares his life as an artist to that of the swallows. A middle-aged and frowsy woman, presumably a prostitute past her prime, dances to the song, and the camera lingers with her, the Brazilian, the policeman, and a bus driver who never speaks, while Checco and the trumpeter wander off to a hostel in search of another performer, one who can shoot a fly from a tremendous distance. (Figure 2) Visually, this colloquy of low-life types offers a microcosm of Fellini's films: the familiar theme of the harshness of the life of the artist who has not sold out, but also the artlessness and poignancy of a mutually resonating collection of characters (what Alberti would call his *istoria,* a complex figural composition), plus the added tincture of absurdity cheek by jowl with sympathy for the down-and-out (a lesson Chaplin had made familiar). It bears thematic comparison with the work of Fellini's contemporary, Ingmar Bergman, whose various players (e.g., *Sawdust and Tinsel*, 1953) negotiate the territory between temptation and authenticity, both at work and in private life.[29]

---

27   Dick Cavett interview, 1971.
28   Thanks to David V. Feldman for the identification.
29   Back in Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), it is the carefree scamp on a bicycle, the peddler/performer, who ruffles the calm of the newly wedded bliss of Jean and Juliette, a figure probably remembered by Fellini when he wrote the part of The Fool in *La Strada* 20 years later, a tightrope walker who similarly embodies an artlessness that is full of the promise of art ('il Matto', the same label the jazz trumpeter gives himself in Fellini's *Luci del varietà*, 1951). Cf. the self-confessed serial murderer in Marcel Carné's *Drôle de drame* (1937), a charmer on a bicycle, played by Jean-Louis Barrault, who courts the wife of the protagonist.

Figure 2: Checco and Johnny walking away from Moema and others, (Peppino de Filippo, John Kitzmiller, Vanja Orico, and others), *Luci del varietà*, Capitolium, Federico Fellini, 1950, screenshot.

The public of a thriving narrative art comes to hold in common new experiences and ideas, and possibly even new emotions, or at least the reassurance that one's emotional life has correlates in the lives of others. Giotto and his successors created worlds in which individuals, even humble individuals, acted with agency and moved in such a way as to imply a world of nuance, quite beyond anything demanded by textual sources.[30] The stories were meant to be exemplary; presumably they, like films centuries later, affected how people thought and acted. In the Arena Chapel (Padua, c. 1305), Giotto showed the concern Joachim's shepherds have for their employer, devoting many square feet to a scene about emotions, and putting the feelings of anonymous peasants nearly on a par with those of the Virgin's father. Giotto devoted four compositions to the Virgin Mary's wedding arrangements: an unprecedented expansion of the narrative for the sake of human, rather than theological, interest.

Movie stars were to the 20th-century public—roughly—what saints were to the medieval public:[31] exemplary figures understood to offer impractical role models. Like saints, they came in a variety of heroic types: from the

---

30   Rancière, *Fables*, p. 184, also compares film to frescoes in the Arena Chapel.
31   Cf. Leslie Howard, 'Holy Hollywood', 1927, p. 21, who sarcastically bemoans the new call for exemplary behavior by stars off-set: 'Hollywood is preparing to offer the world its new religion

bashful Gary Cooper (Figure 3) to the brawny John Wayne, or the delicate Lillian Gish with her glowing hair. In John Ford's *Who Shot Liberty Valance?* (1962), the counterpoint between the apron-wearing, bookish lawyer Jimmy Stewart and the more worldly-wise Wayne is contrived as mutually sympathetic,[32] even though they are both—predictably—courting the same girl. Unintentionally, we may be sure, the film offers us an analogy to Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine* (Florence, 1583, see Figure 29), a sculpture a contemporary source (Borghini's *Il Riposo*) tells us was carved with no particular subject in mind, but merely as an exercise in composing a tour de force featuring the three basic types of contemporary art: mature man, young man, and nubile woman. In both set pieces, the younger man wins.

I can report, merely anecdotally, that a friend of mine who grew up in what he described as the slums of Chicago in the 1930s, the son of an immigrant railroad worker, avers that he was elevated by the films of Fred Astaire, which taught him to aspire to better things—not as it happens, a life in the arts, but a career as a sociologist interested in access for the nonwealthy to fine art, performing as well as visual.[33] Italo Calvino described a different effect from avid Hollywood film-watching during his adolescence in the later 1930s: 'It satisfied a need for disorientation [...] a particular misrepresentation, different from our misrepresentation'. Wholly removed in his mind from the experience of literature, nevertheless it nurtured not only his imagination but his sense of multiple, parallel 'realities': 'I never took it for true, but only as one among the possible artificial images'.[34] Hollywood was, in other words, a relative of sixteenth-century Mannerism: its polished naturalism could be embraced for its very artificiality.

For cinema and its audiences, as for the viewers of fresco cycles, neither uniqueness nor originality was paramount; plots were often predictable and graced with improbable coincidences, as in Shakespeare. Calvino describes how regular moviegoing provided new arrangements of faces he was fond of seeing, the character actors as well as the stars. A comforting cultural prop, films offered elegance, that 20th-century version of *grazia*;[35] they often touted

---

[...] we shall get a religion which reaches everyone, which is really universal, the followers of which will not have to be induced to go to church, but will go because it amuses them to do so'.

32   Stewart had gotten off the stagecoach in *Destry Rides Again* (1939) holding a parasol and a bird cage.

33   Melvin Bobick, 1926–2020.

34   Gary Cooper, for Calvino, signified 'cold blood filtered by sarcasm', i.e., *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) rather than *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936); Calvino, 'A Cinema-Goer's Auto-biography', in *San Giovanni*, pp. 35–73.

35   Cf. Mac Carthy, *Grace*; Emison, 'Grazia'.

Figure 3: Gary Cooper in *An Album of Film Stars*, John Player and Sons, c. 1933, chromolithograph, 6.7 x 3.5 cm (the card), collection of author.

a natural elegance that could erase class boundaries (like nobility, which Renaissance humanists understood as potentially independent of birth).

From the imposition of the Hays Code until the early 1960s, many films affirmed the power of trusted and reassuring moral precepts, prime among which might be themes of the triumph of pure love, the ancestry of which is at least as old as the vernacular.[36] Hollywood plots often had remote roots in Petrarch's sonnets to Laura—the woman pure and inspiring, the man troubled yet ultimately redeemed. If modernist painting since Cubism had boldly erased the history of art and tried to start again from scratch, sans nostalgia, there remained plenty of nostalgia in film for a world in which love was more important than war or money. Being recognized as new required no effort for those early filmmakers, and so borrowing from precedent did not bother them. They were, in some ways, more free as artists than their manifesto-defined modernist brethren, who were so intent to shake off tradition—as printmakers in the Renaissance were free to attempt almost anything they could think of, uninhibited by either the expectations of the public or the decorum of ecclesiastical display. And

---

36   That the effect of films on public morals was an issue, see Adler, *Prudence*, pp. xi, 206–211.

whereas the modernists generally endorsed or at least adorned high society (they needed those capitalists to buy their work, after all), in film the many could variously laugh at the powerful, admire the worthy poor, or fantasize that they themselves were elegant and rich—or better yet, adventuresome.

We have gradually yet definitively developed from a culture that knows certain texts thoroughly to a culture that knows images as much or more than texts. Within the fictions of film, a parallel course of cultural history can be traced. In earlier films, the cultural reference point is often poetry; in later ones, the references tend to be visual. In the gruesome and not at all highbrow *Mad Love* (1935), Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are both quoted, as is Oscar Wilde. Fred Astaire's love interest in *The Sky's the Limit* (1943) describes her male ideal by quoting Wordsworth; Katharine Hepburn quotes T.S. Eliot to Spencer Tracy in *Without Love* (1945); in *Roman Holiday* (1953), Audrey Hepburn quotes Shelley's 'Arethusa'.[37] Even the gruff Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) quotes *The Tempest*, albeit approximately: 'the stuff that dreams are made of' ('we are such stuff as dreams are made on', Act IV).[38] In later movies, the references are typically less literary and more visual. In *Victim* (1961), a reproduction of Michelangelo's *David* (with fig leaf) hangs on the wall of the apartment of the blackmailer; it fills the screen, to the accompaniment of dramatic music, after the departure of the villain, who has just lashed out at a boxing ball: presumably a clue that the blackmailer of homosexuals himself is not immune to the attraction of the nude male.[39] When the young sailor in *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967) dreams of the woman he would love ('l'idéal féminine'), he makes a painting, an imagined portrait with 'le regard innocent' of a Botticelli.[40] The plot of the movie is set in motion by the absurdity of a name, 'Monsieur Dame'. Because of this name, the café owner would not marry the man she loved long ago, as though Demy is himself mocking language and the trouble it can cause. In *Topaz* (1969), Hitchcock composed a shot of torture victims to recall a *Pietà*, specifically Michelangelo's, and in Bergman's *Cries*

---

37   Joe, the journalist, knows the poem is by Shelley; the princess mistakenly attributes it to Keats. In the German original of *Das Testament der Dr. Mabuse* (1933), Detective Lohmann doesn't want to be late for the opera; in the dubbed American version, he's concerned about missing the beginning of a boxing match.

38   A line not in the 1931 version nor in the Hammett story, 1929.

39   It was groundbreaking to use the word homosexual at the time (in the United States, the film was denied approval by the Motion Picture Association of America because the word was used); it would also have been very early to suggest publicly that Michelangelo's art might gratify homoerotic desire.

40   Demy, *Rochefort*, p. 34.

and Whispers (1972), the servant Anna comforts the moribund Agnes in the posture of a nursing Madonna with a sleeping Christ Child. Bergman's red swathes of fabric recall Baroque paintings, and his emotional range reinforces that reference.[41]

The great precedent for the ascendancy of visual reference is the use of classical reference in the hands of Renaissance artists, such as Raphael's Christ Child in the stance of the *Apollo Belvedere* (*Madonna del Cardellino*, Uffizi Gallery, c. 1506). By referring to ancient art, Renaissance artists lessened the need to legitimize what they were doing by reference to texts. The teenage Michelangelo, even when advised by Poliziano to think in terms of the myth of Lapiths and Centaurs, was more interested in emulating sarcophagal reliefs than in storytelling. Filmmakers, like Renaissance artists before them, relied on the development of a visual language as counterpoint to the established melody of narrative text.

If the invention of the painted altarpiece prompted the artistic revolution of the whole range of Renaissance painting, then how much more effect did the camera have? Photography and advertising mushroomed along with moving pictures, an evolution that has rendered imagery both ubiquitous and, at times, cheap. From early on, the cinematic imagination encompassed everything from documentary to science fiction and the magical, as well as the basic task of mimesis that freely edited nature—an imaginative range comparable to that of Renaissance artists. Whereas the main point for Byzantine artists was to make impressive, readily recognized, iconic representations to reinforce pre-existing tenets, Renaissance artists beginning with Giotto focused on the interactions of individualized figures—their psychological as much as their physical interactions. The potential for variation was boundless. At the other end of the arc from Giotto lay Veronese, who painted the confusion of Darius's widow as she kneels to ask for clemency without being sure which is Alexander and which is his alter ego, his friend Hephaestion (*The Family of Darius*, National Gallery, London, c. 1565). He tackled this subject because the task of recognition was understood not to present any insurmountable challenge to an artist, not since Leonardo placed Judas on the interior side of the table at the *Last Supper* (c. 1498), or since artists stopped relying on halos. The world of Renaissance artists tended toward greater clarity and power (and also greater potential for subtlety) as the visual tradition developed, whereas in the 20th century the profusion of imagery, especially of advertising imagery, eventually yielded Pop Art, in which subtlety was utterly and deliberately

---

renounced. We can understand the careers of directors such as Bergman and Tati as an effort to support subtlety in visual worlds, to ask the viewer to linger over details for reasons other than verisimilitude.

> *There was cinema before and after 'La Roue',*
> *as there is painting before and after Picasso.*[42]

Vasari introduced the idea of the history of art as the locus of a series of powerful innovations occurring at intervals distinct from (at times trouble-somely distinct from) the epochs of Christian history. Himself nothing if not a courtier, he nevertheless portrayed Giotto, Brunelleschi, and Michelangelo as daringly unfettered by convention. This basic scheme has persisted until Romanticism and beyond: its linchpin has been the conviction that the history of art is formed by the careers of radically innovative geniuses. Yet the history of art can frequently be understood as a history of conformity. It feeds on patronage, and patrons are generally the established foci of power and privilege who may dabble in tolerating transgression—like a king with his fool—but who generally support art because they suppose, in one way or another, to buttress their regime. Although artists may have more often served as courtiers than they have operated as revolutionaries, the idea of the revolutionary artist has sometimes been co-opted to function as one more buttress in the usefulness of art to those in power. Patrons (including museums) have long participated in a conceptual art of their own, making sure that what was displayed and promoted would be understood in terms of their own hegemonic ideologies. By concentrating the study of the history of art on persons rather than ideas, tribute might be paid to the idea of nonconformity (often in the guise of its unreliable cousin: excellence), though routinely subordinated to the basic project of biography and not infrequently featuring tributes to wealthy patrons and institutions that had favored the said artist. Giotto, for instance, is more likely thought of as working for the wealthy Enrico Scrovegni than for his highly innovative portrayals of the shepherd servants of Joachim in the Arena Chapel—illiterate, impoverished people who clearly have their own emotional lives and sensibilities. The same could be said of Anna's servant, busily spinning on the porch while her mistress is visited by an angel announcing an unexpected pregnancy. The maid anticipates Chardin's in the eighteenth century, for she possesses a personhood far beyond her narrative significance, or more accurately,

---

42   Cocteau, *Art*, p. 132; see also Abel, 'Neglected', pp. 26, 39. Jean Epstein said of *La roue*, 'with this film, the first cinematic symbol was born', *Afterimage*, X, (Autumn, 1981): p. 28.

insignificance. Yet the Chapel is usually presented as serving Scrovegni's purposes, exculpating the family from the reputation for usury, exactly as Scrovegni intended.

In its parallel universe, film, for all its adulation of stars, has often depended upon character actors to shed a modicum of authenticity within a celluloid confection. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), a cinematic hymn in honor of ordinary people, in particular the simple folk of the fictional town of Mandrake Falls, Vermont, we can find correlates to Giotto's minor yet narratively innovative servants. A case of idealization in a new key, the film presents unpolished people who may speak the truth, rather than humans who look like gods. The climactic courtroom scene hinges on the testimony of two elderly sisters, longtime neighbors of Longfellow Deeds. These neighbors declare in court that Longfellow Deeds is 'pixilated'; with that testimony, they seem bound to land him in a psychiatric hospital where his greedy bankers want him confined, until Longfellow Deeds gently asks them who else in the room they consider to be pixilated. Everyone, of course! Reversal is as old a device as theater itself, but in this case, two minor characters, the dotty and presumed malicious old ladies, are revealed to be unwittingly wise and quite genial, since they recognize the world as a ship of fools, everyone slightly daft. Still, this is Frank Capra's film, working at the relatively small studio Columbia. More often, Hollywood teaches us that the rich and powerful are essentially good (though the rich featured in these films may be as self-made as many of the Hollywood producers themselves).

Commercial cinema of the 1920s–1960s usually didn't set out to display rebelliousness, nor did it assert genius on the part of its makers. Much of it was still locked into the traditional competition with literature (or mere best sellers). It was created in answer to the opportunity to make money by telling stories. In the midst of experimenting with how to make narrative using celluloid, communities of viewing that didn't necessarily align with pre-existing cultural patterns were inadvertently created. The roots of social networking might be found here, as well as, even more remotely, a correlate to one of the important innovations of the Renaissance: the realization that one's culture need not be limited to the local.

Rethinking the history of art as part of a larger and more pervasive history of images, and as a history of conformity as much or more so as of innovation, brings cinema from the periphery to the center of the subject. The project here is to explore that connection, and with it, to consider cinema as part of the epoch-engendering transition away from stable logocentrism toward a more chaotic society whose sense of shared knowledge is as fluid, fleeting, and

evanescent as vision itself. In film, a character's thoughts may be represented by ghostly images that float across the screen or figures reflected back from glass: thought is thereby represented as bound to consciousness rather than as Platonically stable, both within particular films and in general by film as a medium. The passage of time has become the matrix for thought; the world can no longer be supposed to exist *sub specie aeternitatis*, as God would see it. Jean-Luc Godard summarized cinema's attraction with disarming simplicity: 'I like to see people *move*'.[43] It was both a small step, predicated on artists' many attempts to show movement (the depiction of which was the great achievement of Vasari's third period), and a giant leap into a new arena.

As narrative imagery helped to create the world we call the Renaissance, a world in which visual perception was newly valued, studied, and put to both scientific and creative purposes, so has cinema—in many ways the fulfillment of the naturalistic narrative art of the Renaissance—helped to form our time. Abel Gance, never one for understatement, called it 'the first peaceful bomb of the universe',[44] and Jean Epstein declared that film was 'gradually educating our spirit':

> The magnification of the screen lets us examine it as in a magnifying glass. There the most alluring falsehoods lose their force while the truth bursts forth on first sight, strikes the spectator with the unexpectedness of the evident, and arouses an aesthetic emotion, a sense of infallible wonderment and pleasure.[45]

His declaration of the 'sense of infallible wonderment and pleasure' echoes the delight expressed by equally amazed Renaissance viewers, such as those who—men and women, young and old— flocked for two days to see Leonardo's cartoon (large-scale, preparatory drawing) for a painting of the Virgin, St. Anne, Christ, and St. John the Baptist[46]. If there were two phases in the history of art in which viewers were overwhelmed not simply

---

43   Ross, 'Godard', 9 Oct. 1965. Ingmar Bergman told how, as a child, he had been transfixed by the first moving picture he saw, so much so that he went to bed with a fever from the excitement. A few years later, he was fascinated by being able to control the rate of movement in a hand-cranked toy projector.

44   King, *Gance*, p. 158. Ford, *Feyder*, p. 105, in 1944 called film 'l'instrument le plus puissant du monde, une machine à digérer l'univers'.

45   1935, quoted in Abel, *Theory*, vol. II, pp. 189, 192.

46   'Come si va a le feste solenni, per veder le meraviglie di Lionardo, che fecero stupire tutto quel popolo' ('as you see for solemn feasts, to see the wonders of Leonardo, which astonished the entire populace'), Vasari, Life of Leonardo.

by a single project or a single artist, but by a newly introduced modality of making art, they would be the art of Florence and that of Hollywood before the Second World War.

Bibliography

Abel, Richard, 'Abel Gance's Other Neglected Masterwork: *La Roue* (1922–23)', *Cinema Journal* 22:2 (Winter, 1983), pp. 26–41.

————, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Adler, Mortimer, *Art and Prudence: A Study in Practical Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937)

Agee, James, 'Comedy's Greatest Era', *Life*, XXVII:10 (5 Sept. 1949), pp. 70–88.

Arnheim, Rudolf, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

Astruc, Alexandre, 'The Birth of a New Avant Garde: *La Camera Stylo*', (1948), in Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 603–607.

Bazin, André, *Renoir* (New York: Da Capo, 1992).

Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt, ed., H. Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217–251.

Betts, Ernest, *Inside Pictures: With Some Reflections from the Outside* (London: Cresset Press, 1960).

Biggers, Earl Derr, *Seven Keys to Baldpate* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1913).

Burgin, Victor, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaction, 2004).

Calvino, Italo, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Patrick Creagh, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

————, *The Road to San Giovanni*, Tim Parks, trans. (New York, Pantheon, 1993).

Cameron, Ian, 'Michaelangelo Antonioni', *Film Quarterly*, XVI:1 (Autumn 1962), pp. 1–58.

Carroll, Noël, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2008).

Clair, René, *Reflections on the Cinema*, V. Traill, trans. (London: William Kimber, 1953).

Clark, T.J., 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam', *October* C (Spring, 2002), pp. 154–174.

Classen, Constance, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Cocteau, Jean, *The Art of Cinema*, André Bernard and Claude Gauteur, eds., Robin Buss, tr. (New York: Marion Boyars, 1994).

Cooke, Alistair, *Alistair Cooke at the Movies*, Geoff Brown, ed. (New York: Allen Lane, 2009).

Davy, Charles, ed., *Footnotes to the Film* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1938).

Demy, Jacques, *Les demoiselles de Rochefort* (Paris: Solar, 1967).

Earnest, Jarrett, *What It Means to Write about Art: Interviews with Art Critics* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018).

Eisenstein, Sergei, 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today [1944]', *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory*, Jay Leyda, tr. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949).

Emison, Patricia, '*Grazia*', *Renaissance Studies*, V (Dec. 1991), pp. 427–460.

Epstein, Jean, 'Bonjour cinéma and other writings', Tom Milne, trans., *Afterimage* X (Autumn, 1981), pp. 8–39.

Ford, Charles, *Jacques Feyder* (Paris: Seghers, 1973).

Geduld, Harry M., *Authors on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

Hitchcock, Alfred, *Interviews*, Sidney Gottlieb, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

Hodgins, Eric, *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*, illustrated by William Steig (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946).

————, 'Mr. Blandings Builds his Castle: A Simple $15,000 House, or Oil for the Seven Lamps of Architecture', *Fortune*, XXXIII (April 1946), pp. 138–143, 179–189.

Horne, Philip, 'Henry James: Varieties of Cinematic Experience', in *Henry James on Stage and Screen*, John Bradley, ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 35–55.

Howard, Leslie, 'Holy Hollywood', *The New Yorker*, 14 May 1927, pp. 21–22.

Jolas, Eugene, 'The Revolution of Language and James Joyce', *in Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, ed. Sylvia Beach (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 79–92.

King, Norman, *Abel Gance: A Politics of Spectacle* (London: BFI, 1984).

L'Herbier, Marcel, *La Tête qui Tourne* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1979).

Lindsay, Vachel, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Liveright, 1970 [1922]).

Mac Carthy, Ita, *The Grace of the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Marshall, David in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. IV, The Eighteenth Century, H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Mathews, Nancy Mowl, *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880–1910*, exh. cat., Williams College, (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005.)

Nagel, Alex, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

—— and L. Pericolo, *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

Nicoll, Allardyce, *Film and Theatre* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1936).

Nobel, Philip, 'Who Built Mr. Blandings' Dream House?' in *Architecture and Film*, ed. Mark Lamster (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), pp. 49–87.

Panofsky, Erwin, 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures', in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 91–125.

Powell, Michael, *Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

Rancière, Jacques, *Film Fables*, Emiliano Battista, trans. (London: Berg, 2006).

Robbe-Grillet, Alain, *For a New Novel, Essays on Fiction* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1965).

Ross, Lillian, 'Godard est Godard', The Talk of the Town, *The New Yorker*, 9 Oct. 1965, pp. 43–46.

Salle, David, *How to See: Looking, Talking, and Thinking about Art* (New York: Norton, 2016).

Self, Will, 'A Point of View: Has the World Become Too Visual', BBC, 27 Feb 2015.

Sjöman, Vilgot, *Ingmar Bergman Makes a Movie* (Swedish television, 1963).

Smith, Paul., ed., *The Historian and the Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Truffaut, François, and Helen Scott, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

Idem, *Letters*, Gilbert Adair, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

Vidor, King, 'New Ideas in the Audible Films', *The New York Times*, 15 Dec. 1929.

Wilde, Oscar, *The Critic as Artist* (Vancouver: Bookmachine Editions, 2012).

Young, Barbara, *The Persona of Ingmar Bergman: Conquering Demons through Film* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).