

REFLECTIONS ON ART

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Sketch for a Psychology of the Moving Pictures

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HAD IT BEFALLEN Giotto, or even Clouet, to travel round the world, all the paintings they set eyes on would have seemed of a more or less familiar order. Nor would they have had much trouble in establishing communication with Chinese or Persian fellow-artists. For all approached their task of *representing* the thing seen, in the same way, and dealt with the same set of problems.

Had Rubens or Delacroix made the same journey, all the paintings they set eyes on would have struck them as archaic; similarly their own works would have bewildered the non-European painters. For their methods of representation differed from those of the Asiatics. Chinese and Persian artists were ignorant of, or disdained, depth, perspective, lighting and expression. Europe had come to differ from the rest of the world in its idea of the function of painting. And, after the close of the baroque period, there was this fundamental cleavage between Western and all other arts, past and present: that the former devoted its researches to a three-dimensional world.

There were several reasons for this, which I shall deal with elsewhere.¹ Christianity had imported into a world that had known little else than representation of a more or less subtly symbolical nature,

¹ In my *Psychology of Art*.

something hitherto unknown, which I would call "dramatic representation." Buddhism has scenes, but no drama; pre-Columbian American art, dramatic figures but no scenes. Even the decline of Christianity, far from weakening this occidental sense of the dramatic actually strengthened it, and at the same time heightened another sense, of which the sense of drama is only one of several manifestations—the sense of Otherness, that desire for volume and figures in bold relief which is peculiar to the West, and links up with its political conquest of the world. Europe replaces flat tone by relief, chronicles by history, tragedy by drama, saga by the novel, wisdom by psychology, contemplation by action—and, as a result, the gods by Man.

The criteria of present-day taste can only be misleading in this connexion; for a great deal of the best modern painting is, like the oriental, in two dimensions. The problem is not of an aesthetic order, but strikes deeper. It derives from culture itself, the relations between man and the outside world. At one pole of human expression are the mime, the actor and narrator in the *No* play, declaiming through their masks, Chinese and Japanese dancers; and, at the opposite extreme, a language tantamount to shorthand, the mysterious whisperings of a dark night, a face whose fugitive expression fills a twenty-foot screen . . .

The visitor to one of our national galleries, who has no feeling for painting as an art, gets an impression of a series of efforts (not unlike those of certain sciences) to *re-present* natural objects. To him a Rubens seems truer-to-life, and thus more convincing, than a Giotto; a Botticelli than a Cimabue; for he regards art as a means of reproducing the universe according to the data furnished by his senses. From the XIIIth Century up to the time of the baroque masters, there was steady progress in the technique of exact resemblance. And European painting during that period was at once this "mirror held up to nature" and an effort to represent persons and things (especially fictional scenes) under the most evocative and engaging guise. It is the confusion between what we should call to-day the art of painting and the technique of representation, that leads the Sunday afternoon visitor to our galleries to say approvingly of such and such a figure (always a post-Renaissance work) that it seems almost to be "talking to you." It was the same confusion that led the Florentine populace to applaud Giotto's figures as being "truer than life;" and the enthusiasm of the Tuscans

for the "new" Madonnas was not perhaps so very different from that which would ensue to-day were television suddenly to enter every home.²

But at the close of the baroque period came an event unprecedented in the annals of painting. Ceasing to search for new methods of representation, the painter turned away towards what art has come to mean for us to-day: a specialty of artists. Never again was a picture to draw enthusiastic crowds to view it. Line and colour were to become more and more the revelation of an inward vision. And while the secret flower of modern painting blossomed forth, the votaries of representation took to a frantic headlong quest of movement.

It was no "artistic" discovery that was to enable movement to be come by. What, with its gesturings like those of drowning men, baroque art was straining after was not a modification of the picture itself, but a picture-*sequence*. It is not surprising that an art so obsessed with theatrical effect, and made up of gestures and emotions, should end up in the cinema.

II

When photography came into its own in the middle of the nineteenth century, western painting formally made over two of its former spheres of action: the depiction of emotions and the "story". It became once more an art of pure form and was again, in certain instances, restricted to two dimensions.

For the purposes of an Identity Card the photograph is wholly adequate. But for representing life, photography (which within thirty years has evolved from a phase of primitive immobility to a more or less extravagant baroque) is inevitably coming up once more against all the old problems of the painter. And where the latter halted, it too had to halt. With the added handicap that it had no scope for fiction; it could record a dancer's leap, it could not show the Crusaders entering Jerusalem. And from the "likenesses" of the Saints to the most absurd historical fantasies, men's craving for pictures has always been directed quite as much to what they have not seen as towards what they know.

Thus the attempt, which had been carried on four centuries

² Written in 1940.—Ed.

through, to capture movement was held up at the same point in photography as in painting; and the cinema, through enabling the photography of movement, merely substituted moving gesticulation for unmoving. If the great drive towards representation which came to a standstill in baroque art was to continue, somehow the camera had to achieve independence as regards the scene portrayed. The problem was not one of rendering the movements of a person within a picture, but of conveying tempo, the sequence of successive moments. It was not to be solved mechanically by tinkering with the camera, but artistically, by the invention of "cutting."

So long as the cinema served merely for the portrayal of figures in motion it was no more (and no less) an art than plain photography. Within a defined space, generally a real or imagined theatre stage, actors performed a play or comic scene, which the camera merely recorded. The birth of the cinema as a means of expression (not of reproduction) dates from the abolition of that defined space; from the time when the cutter thought of dividing his continuity into "planes" (close-up, intermediate, remote, etc.) and of shooting not a play but a succession of dramatic moments; when the director took to bringing forward the camera (and thus enlarging, when necessary, the figures on the screen) and moving it back; and, above all, to replacing the theatre set by an open field of vision, corresponding to the area of the screen, into which the player enters, from which he goes out, and which the director *chooses* instead of having it imposed on him. The means of reproduction in the cinema is the moving photograph, but its means of expression is a sequence of *planes*.

The tale goes that Griffith, when directing one of his early films, was so much impressed by the beauty of an actress in a certain scene that he had the camera brought nearer and a re-take made, which he incorporated in the final version of the picture. Thus the close-up was invented. The story illustrates the manner in which one of the great pioneers of filmcraft applied his genius to the problems of the moving picture, aiming less to influence the actor (by making him play, for instance, in a different way) than to modify the relation between him and the spectator (by increasing the volume of his face). It illustrates, too, a fact we are aware of but tend to overlook: that decades after the humblest photographer had formed the habit of photographing his clients full figure, half length or face only, as desired, the cinema took what was for it a bold, decisive

forward step when it began registering half-length figures. For till then "planes" were an unknown quantity; the camera and field being static, the act of taking two figures half-length would have involved shooting the whole scene in the same manner.

Thus it was, by the adoption of variable planes, by this new freedom given director and cameraman in their dealings with the objective, that the cinema was endowed with possibilities of *expression*, that it was born as an *art*. Thereafter it was able to select the "shot" and co-ordinate significant "shots"; by selectivity to make up for its silence.

III

The talking picture was to modify the *data* of the problem. Not, as some have thought, by perfecting the silent picture. The talking picture was no more a bringing to perfection of its silent predecessor than was the elevator of the skyscraper. Modern cinema was not born of the possibility of making us hear what the characters of the silent film were saying, but of the joint possibilities of expression due to sound and picture acting in concert. So long as the talking picture is merely phonographic, it is as unsatisfactory as was the silent picture when it was mere photography. It rises to the rank of an art when the director understands that the forerunner of sound-cinema is not the gramophone record but the radio sketch.

When a group of artists presented on the radio the Trial of Joan of Arc, and the Session of Thermidor 9, their first task in each case was to compose an original work, the verbal structure of which was conditioned by the method of reproduction to be applied to it. There was no question of asking actors to read out passages from the *Moniteur*; they had to begin by selecting certain phases of the famous Session from the detailed report in the Gazette, and make a *montage* of them. For the record of the Session which has come down to us is, like all such *verbatim* reports, far too long to bear audition.

We are inclined to suppose that this selection leaves, in fact, no option; that there were certain outstanding moments in that eventful night when Robespierre fell, which every art alike is bound to utilize. Indeed at first sight one might conclude that in every complex of events, in every life, certain elements are of a nature to pro-

vide the raw material of art; the rest being so much lumber, amorphous and inert. This view is due to a confusion between the suggestive, significant, vitally "artistic" element and the historically memorable factor or remark. True, there are highlights in every chaos, but they are not necessarily the same highlights for every art. When Robespierre's voice is failing, the crucial fact for the radio may be that failing voice; for the cinema it may be, for instance, the gestures of a sentry intent at that moment on bundling some children out of the room, or fumbling for his tinder-box.

In the twentieth century we have for the first time arts that are inseparable from mechanical methods of expression; not only capable of being reproduced, but intended for mass-reproduction. Already the finest drawings can be adequately reproduced; before the century is out the same will probably be true of paintings. But neither drawings nor paintings were *made* to be reproduced; the artist had nothing of that sort in mind. Whereas what is enacted on a studio set by living actors is *per se* doomed to transience; it has less intrinsic value than a used engraving plate. It was *made* to be photographed, and for that end alone, just as a radio play is made to be recorded and then broadcast.

But the expressive range of recorded sounds, somewhat limited in the case of radio and gramophone records, becomes immense when the picture adds its visual counterpoint. The cinema in relief will be, when it comes, a technical advance; but the sound film stands to the silent as painting does to drawing.

At first it was so little recognized that sound was opening up a new field of expression that the talking film tended to bring the cinema back to where it had started, the moving picture at its crudest. Just as the first films were photographic records of stage effects and no more, so the early "talkies" aimed no higher than to be phonograph records of stage-plays. The dialogue was ready to hand, the footage suitable—and the result deplorable!

IV

The theatre in countries such as Russia, Germany and the United States, where it had kept its full vitality, had for twenty years been tending towards cinema. Great stage-managers were straining every effort to force a stage-play to become something more than a series

of conversations. A play is—people talking; the aim of such men as Meyerhold was to *suggest* a world encompassing the dialogue. The talking film made it possible to add a complete setting to the dialogue, a real street or a fantastic background, the shadow of Nosferatu as well as sky and sea.

The life of the theatre is bound up with the expression of emotions, and the fact that its scope is limited to words and gestures made it seem, when faced with the competition of the talking picture, almost as handicapped as was the silent film.

A small head in an enormous auditorium, such is the stage actor; a film actor is an enormous head in a small auditorium. All to the advantage of the latter; for moments that the theatre could never render save by silence could, even on the silent screen, be implemented by the play of emotion writ large on a face.

Moreover, the size of the figures on the screen enables the actor to dispense with the gesticulation and other symbolic byplay needed by stage-acting if it is to take effect. Beside a good silent film it was the stage-play that had the air of being a dumb-show performance. Despite the microphone (indeed because of it) the hurried or breathless delivery of the cinema is truer to life than that of the best actor, if he is playing in a large theatre-hall.

The chief problem for the author of a talking film is to decide *when* his characters should speak. On the stage, remember, there is someone talking all the time . . . except during the intervals. The *entr'acte* is one of the great standbys of the dramatist. Things take place while the curtain is down, and he can convey them by allusions. To bridge these time-gaps the novel has the blank page between the parts; the theatre, the interval; the cinema, next to nothing.

A film director will retort that he has the division into sequences, each sequence ending on a fade-out, which suggests the lapse of time. That is so, but only relatively so; it suggests a lapse of time in which nothing occurs. (With some exceptions, special cases such as *The Blue Angel*, which call for individual analysis.) Unlike the time-gap of the interval during which all sorts of things may happen, that of the fade-out permits of scarcely any allusion to what has filled it, if that involves a change affecting any of the characters. The only methods of suggesting a long, eventful lapse of time in the film are bound to be symbolic devices (e.g. clocks, calendars with the dates fluttering past). On the other hand, while the stage-play can

never move back in time, from a man's middle age to his youth, for instance, the film can manage this, though none too easily.

Roughly, the sequence is the equivalent of the chapter. The cinema has not those ampler divisions expressed by the parts of a book and the acts of a play. True, the silent film had parts; they are suppressed in talking films, and this is where the cutter comes up against one of his knottiest problems; for the "talkie" allows no gaps, continuity is the essence of its technique.

Because it has become narrative, its true rival is not the play but the novel.

v

The film can tell a story; there lies its power. So can the novel, and when sound films came in, the silent films had borrowed greatly from the novel.

A great novelist is a "producer" of sorts and we can analyse his methods from that angle; whether his aim be to tell a story, to depict or dissect characters, or to explore the meaning of life; whether his talent runs to copiousness as with Proust, or tends to crystallization as in Hemingway's case, he is bound to narrate—in other words, to epitomize, to stage-manage, to "present". What I mean by the "production" of a novel is the instinctive or deliberate selection by the author of the moments he sets store on and the methods used to make them salient.

With most writers the hall-mark of "production" is the transition from narrative to dialogue. Dialogue in the novel serves three purposes.

Firstly, that of exposition. This was the technique prevalent in England at the close of the nineteenth century; the method of Henry James and Conrad. It tends to obviate the absurd convention of the novelist's omniscience, but replaces it by another still more palpable convention. The cinema uses that sort of dialogue as sparingly as possible; likewise the modern novel.

Secondly, to bring out character. Stendhal aimed at bringing out Julien Sorel's character far more by his acts than by his way of speaking; but in the twentieth century what I may call "tone of voice" came to rank high in the novelist's technique. It became a method of expressing personality, indeed a vital element of character. Proust

hardly seems to see his characters, but he has a blind man's adroitness in making them speak; one feels that many scenes from his books would, if well read, be more effective on the radio, where the actor is invisible, than in the theatre. But the cinema, like the theatre, attaches less importance to dialogue; for the acting should suffice to bring a character to life.

Lastly, there is the *essential* dialogue, that of the dramatic "scene." This calls for no further development. It is what every great artist makes of it: suggestive, terse, impassioned; whether it emerges in sudden, splendid isolation (as in Dostoevsky) or is linked up with the scheme of things (as in Tolstoy). For all great writers it is the supreme method of energizing narrative, gripping the reader; it enables them to conjure up scenes before his eyes, adding the third dimension.

The cinema has recently discovered this sort of dialogue, and owes much of its present vigour to it. In the most modern pictures the director switches over into dialogue after long passages of silent film, exactly as a novelist breaks into dialogue after long stretches of narrative.

The novelist has another weapon to his armoury; he can imbue a critical moment in his character's career with the prevailing atmosphere, the climate of the outside world. Conrad uses this device all but systematically, and Tolstoy owes to it one of the finest romantic scenes in literature, the wounding of Prince Andrew at Austerlitz. The Russian cinema used it ably in its great period; but it is dropping out of use as box-office receipts mount up.

The novel seems, however, to retain one notable advantage over the cinema: it can delve into the inner consciousness of a character. Nevertheless, the modern novelist seems less and less disposed to analyse his characters in their hours of crisis; and, moreover, such a dramatic psychology as Shakespeare's and, to a great extent, that of Dostoevsky, in which the secrets of the heart are conveyed by acts or veiled avowals, can be no less artistically effective, no less revealing, than complete analysis. And, finally, the element of mystery in every character left partly unexplained, if it be conveyed as, thanks to the marvellous expressiveness of the human face it can be, on the screen, may well serve to give a work of art that curious *timbre*, as of a lonely voice seeking an explanation of life's riddle, which endows certain memorable reveries (Tolstoy's magnificent short novels, for example) with their compelling majesty.

VI

These pages are a series of reflexions on a method of expression; they have no necessary connexion with the industry which aspires to set the whole world dreaming of a *milieu* whose atmosphere seems to a French mind approximately that of our Paris Boulevards at the close of the Second Empire. From the puerile beginnings of the silent film to its apogee, the cinema seemed to have made vast strides; what has it achieved since then? It has perfected lighting and technique, but it has made no outstanding discoveries in the field of art.

By "art" I mean here the expression of significant relations between human beings, or between minds and things. Some of the best silent films, Germanic and Scandinavian, realized these possibilities. The American cinema of 1940, followed by that of other countries, is concerned above all—naturally enough from a commercial point of view—with enhancing its entertainment value. It is a form not of literature but of journalism. And yet, as journalism, it is constrained to have recourse to an element from which art cannot be permanently banned: the element of the Myth. For a full decade the cinema has been dallying with the Myth.

Symptomatic of this game of hide-and-seek that has been going on is the relation between scenarios and film-stars, especially the female stars. A screen star is not by any manner of means an actress who goes in for film work. She is a person capable of a modicum of dramatic competence, whose face expresses, symbolizes, incarnates, a collective instinct. Marlene Dietrich is not an actress as Sarah Bernhardt was an actress; she is a myth, like Phryne. The Greeks gave their instincts vague biographies; thus do modern men who invent for theirs successive life-stories, as the myth-makers invented, one after the other, the labours of Hercules.

So true is this that the film artists themselves are vaguely conscious of the myths they incarnate, and insist on scenarios that bear them out. Thanks to close-ups the public knows them as it never knew its stage idols. And the artlife of the film-star takes a different course from that of the stage idol; a great actress is a woman who can incarnate a large number of different rôles; the star, a woman who can give rise to a large number of scenarios built to her measure.

The dumb-show performances of an earlier age grafted countless adventures on to certain characters of the Italian *commedia*. And cinema-goers know well that, however much a scenario-writer attempts to create original characters, the actor always imposes his own personality on them. In former days there was a "Pierrot" series: "Pierrot Takes to Stealing," "Pierrot on the Gallows," "Pierrot Drunk," and "Pierrot in Love." So now we have Greta Garbo the Queen, Greta the Courtesan; Marlene the Spy, Marlene the Harlot; Stroheim at Gibraltar, Stroheim at Belgrade, Stroheim at the Front; Gabin in the Foreign Legion, Gabin as a Pimp. And so forth. But the perfect example is Charlie Chaplin. I saw in Persia a film that has no existence, called *Charlie's Life*. Persian picture-shows are given in the open; on the walls surrounding the enclosure sat black cats watching. The Armenian exhibitors had made a *montage* of all the Charlie "shorts" and done the job with skill. The film ran to a considerable footage and the result was breath-taking. It was the myth pure and unadulterated; it had a huge success.

What the actor thus demonstrates holds good probably for the scenario as well. *The Ring of the Nibelungs* is a famous myth; René Clair's international success, *The Million*, a rejuvenation of the Cinderella fairy-tale; there is an element of myth in *Potemkin*, in *The Mother*, in *Caligari*, in *The Blue Angel*, in the great Swedish pictures, in all Chaplin's films. Amongst other modern myths, Justice (in its individual or collective forms) and Sex are far from having outlived their appeal.

The cinema is addressed to the masses; and, for good or evil, they love the myth. A fact that war brings home to us; the parlour strategist is a far less common figure in wartime than the myth-monger who assures us "on good authority" that the enemy chop children's hands off. The lies of journalism and sensational magazine articles batten on the myth.

The myth begins with Sexton Blake, but it ends with Christ. The masses are far from invariably preferring what is best for them; still, on occasion, they are drawn to it. How much did the crowds who listened to St. Bernard's preaching understand? But what they did understand, at the moment when that unaccustomed voice struck deep into the secret places of their hearts, was well worth understanding . . .

Also, we must never forget—the cinema is an industry.