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Introductory Assumptions

The first audience watched a motion picture flicker on a screen in 1895. Since then, the movies have developed from a simple recording device—the first films merely captured a scenic or not-so-scenic view—to a complex art and business. The first movie audiences were delighted to see that it was possible to record a moving scene on film; today we debate the desirability, rather than the possibility, of capturing an image. The important question for the first film audiences was, "Is the image discernible?" rather than, "Is the image meaningful?" From the simple beginning of cranking a camera to record a scene, filmmakers have learned that their art depends on the way the camera shapes the scene they are recording. Analogous to the novel, the completed narrative film is not just a story, but a story told in a certain way, and it is impossible to separate what is told from how it is told. Just as novelists discovered that narrative technique can be either subtly invisible—as in Flaubert or Hemingway—or intrusively self-conscious—as in Joyce or Faulkner—so too the filmmaker can construct a lucid, apparently artless story or a complex, almost chaotic maze for traveling to the story. The wonder is that while the evolution of narrative fiction can be traced back thousands of years, the movies have evolved such complex techniques in a mere century.

The history of the movies is, first of all, the history of a new art. Though it has affinities with fiction, drama, dance, painting, photography, and music, like each of these kindred arts it has a "poetics" of its own. When the early films turned from scenic views to fictional stories, directors assumed that the poetics of the film were similar to those of the stage. Stage acting, stage movement, stage stories, stage players, and stage perspectives dominated early story films. The camera was assumed to be a passive spectator in a theatre audience, and just as the spectator has only one seat, the camera had only one position from which to shoot a scene.

Time and experimentation revealed that the camera was anchored by analogy alone—and that the analogy was false. The scene—the locale—is the basic unit of the stage because space in the theatre is so concrete. The audience sits here, the characters play there, the scenery is fixed in space behind the action. But space in the film is completely elastic; only the screen is fixed, not the action on it. Directors discovered that the unit of a film is the shot, not the scene, that shots can be joined together in any number of combinations to produce whole scenes, and that scenes can be varied and juxtaposed and paralleled in any number of ways. Unity of place, a rather basic and practical principle of the stage, does not apply to the movie. More applicable is what the earliest film theorist, Hugo Münsterberg, called a "unity of action," a succession of images that produces the desired narrative continuity, the intended meaning, and the appropriate emotional tension of the film as a whole. By the end of the Silent Era this principle had been not only discovered but demonstrated.

The discovery of sound raised doubts about the discoveries of the preceding 30 years. Once again the analogy with the stage was pursued; once again stage actors, stage writers, stage

directors, and stage techniques flooded the movies. And once again, the analogy was found to be false. Just as the stage is anchored visually in space, so too is it anchored by sound. Words come from the speaker's mouth; you listen to them and watch the mouth. But movies were free to show any kind of picture while the words came from the speaker's mouth. Synchronization of picture and sound also allowed for the disjunction of picture and sound. Further, the freedom of the movies from spatial confinement allowed a greater freedom in the kinds of sounds they could use: natural sounds, musical underscoring, distortion effects, private thoughts, and more. To appreciate the importance of the *integration* of picture and sound, consider a *Gone With the Wind* without Max Steiner's music or Vivien Leigh's and Clark Gable's voices, the creaking wagons and the rustling skirts.

Just as the history of the novel is, to some extent, a catalogue of important novels, the history of film as an art centers on important films. In film history, a discussion of the significant movies is especially relevant, for the individual films are not only milestones on a historical path, but also significant artistic discoveries that almost immediately influenced other filmmakers. Although Shakespeare drew from Seneca and Brecht from Shakespeare, even more immediate was the influence of Griffith on Ford or Hitchcock on De Palma. Without years of stage tradition to draw on, film artists have drawn on the exciting discoveries of their contemporaries. The internationalism of film distribution has always guaranteed the rapid dispersal of any significant discovery.

To keep track of this dispersal of discoveries, it is necessary to know when a particular film was released—that is, when it was first shown to a public audience—for that is usually the earliest that it could have influenced audiences and other filmmakers. This is much like learning the publication date of a novel, rather than its completion date or the number of years it took to complete. (One could date James Joyce's *Ulysses* 1914–21, the years he wrote it, or 1921, the year he finished it; but it was first published in February 1922 and is regularly dated 1922.) In this book, the date that follows a film's title is, in almost all cases, the year the film was *released in its country of origin*. If a film was released long after it was completed, both the completion and release dates are given. If it has become customary to refer to a particular film by the year in which most of it was shot (*Caligari*, 1919; *Breathless*, 1959), but it came out the following year, both dates are given. And both dates are given if the release date is so early in the year as to be misleading; a film released on January 8, 1929, like Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, ought to be considered a 1928 work as well as a 1929 release. If it matters when a foreign film opened in the United States and affected American audiences, the U.S. release date is also provided; Fellini's *La dolce vita* won a 1961 Oscar, but it came out in Italy in 1960. In any case, most films open the year they are completed and do perfectly well with one date.

The title of *La dolce vita* is given in Italian, following Italian conventions for capitalization, because the film is known worldwide by its original name and was never released in English-speaking countries as *The Sweet Life*. The most reliable way to establish the actual title of a movie is to watch the movie: The original posters and most books may call Capra's picture *It's a Wonderful Life*, but the movie calls itself *It's A Wonderful Life*. Aside from cases where the Art Department has been allowed to spell the title any way it wants (*tHE tHING*), the onscreen title has an authority like that of the title page of a novel. There are, of course, exceptions. *Gone With the Wind* is, on the screen, GONE WITH THE WIND, but in this case the title of the movie had, for legal reasons, to be exactly the same as that of the novel—which, according to its publisher, has *With*, not *with*. If a film bears one title (*Corner in Wheat*) but is known by another (*A Corner in Wheat*), or if the artwork creates a title that sticks (*SE7EN*), it is best to give both the actual title and the familiar one. The use of italics for the title of a film of any length is a literary convention that has been widely adopted in Film Studies. Finally, Cecil B. DeMille spelled his name DeMille even if some of his credits read "De Mille" or "de Mille."

The majority of film historians subscribe to a basic, if far from absolute, assumption: The very best films have generally resulted from the clear vision and unifying intelligence of a single, controlling mind with primary responsibility for the whole film. Just as there is only one conductor

per orchestra, they argue, there can be only one dominant creator of a movie. The "*auteur* theory," as defined by François Truffaut in France and Andrew Sarris in America, identifies the director (whose personal artistic signature is evident in the work) as a film's "author" or dominant creator. Whether the *auteur* improvises the whole film as it goes along or works according to a preconceived and scripted plan, a single mind shapes and controls the work of film art.

But if many of the best movies are dominated by an *auteur,* it is also true that any movie represents an immensely collaborative venture. There are examples of very good movies with two co-directors (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos). Many of the best directors work in frequent partnership with the same scriptwriter (Frank Capra with Robert Riskin, John Ford with Dudley Nichols), or the same cinematographer (Sergei Eisenstein with Eduard Tisse, D. W. Griffith with Billy Bitzer), or assistant director (Truffaut with Suzanne Schiffman), or composer (Alfred Hitchcock with Bernard Herrmann, Federico Fellini with Nino Rota). To study a dozen or so films by a single screenwriter would surely reveal as consistent and distinguishable a personality as a dozen or so films by a single director. And it can take hundreds of people to make a movie.

Strictly speaking, an *auteur* is a director who also writes the script and edits the film; in practice, she or he may just work closely with the writer and editor. But no commercial filmmaker works alone. And although any director has the authority and duty to make creative decisions that ensure the quality and coherence of the work, the *auteur* is a director whose work expresses a vision that develops in the course of what may appropriately be discussed as an artistic career. Not every director is an *auteur,* and some *auteurs*—like producer Val Lewton—are guiding artists in every sense of the term but are not directors. To speak of a film's *auteur,* then, is to state a creative fact and to manipulate a useful metaphor.

Even if a vast number of movies are made outside or in opposition to the film industry, any history that intends to reveal the genesis of today's film world must acknowledge the dominant role of the industry as well as address a wealth of social and technical matters. In addition to discussing the film as art, it must deal with three related problems that have always influenced the artistic product, and continue to influence it today: the cinema as business, the cinema as cultural product and commodity, and the cinema as machinery.

Movies today are a billion-dollar business. The choice of directors, stars, and scripts is in the hands of businesspeople, not in the heads of artists. The company that invests $50 million in a picture ought to be able to ensure the safety of its investment. When push comes to shove, commercial priorities outweigh artistic ones. The name Hollywood, for some synonymous with glamour, is for others synonymous with selling out. For decades Hollywood's commercial crassness has served American novelists—from Nathanael West to Gore Vidal—as a metaphor for the vulgar emptiness of the American Dream. If the gifted young director today seems to face a distasteful dilemma—sell out or get out—directors have faced the same problem since the time of Griffith.

The awesome financial pressures of Hollywood are partly responsible for the growing number of independent films and videos. Young filmmakers and video artists often prefer to work alone, their sole expenses equipment and film (or tape). These filmmakers are, in a sense, regressing to the earliest period of film history. But every artistic innovation since then has ironically necessitated spending more money. If lighting was a step forward in cinematic tone, it also required spending money on lighting equipment and on people who knew how to control it. Longer films required more film, more actors, more story material, and more publicity to ensure a financial return on the greater investment. It took only 25 years for the movies to progress from cheap novelty to big business.

Why do movies cost so much to make? Put the question this way: How much would you expect to pay if you employed an army of the most specialized artisans at their trade for a period of, say, three months? Making a film is such a massive and complex task it is a wonder that an artistically whole movie can be made at all. The huge sums of money required to finance a movie merely reflect the hugeness of the task of taking a movie from story idea to final print. Shooting is painfully slow. It takes time to perfect each setup: Lights must be carefully focused and toned, the shot's composition must be determined, the set

must be found—or built—and dressed, background actors (extras) must be coordinated with the action of the principals, actors must have rehearsed their movements and mastered their interpretations of lines so that a single shot fits into the dramatic fabric of the whole film, makeup must be correct, costumes coordinated, and so forth.

Because it takes so much time to set up a shot, producers economize by shooting all scenes together that require the same location, set, or setup, regardless of their position in the film's continuity. In other words, the film is shot "out of sequence." But even with such economies, to get three minutes of screen time "in the can" is a hard, well-organized day's work. Sometimes, on location with mammoth spectacle pictures, a whole day can be devoted to a 15-second piece of the finished film—the sun, the caravans, the camels, the soldiers, and the gypsy maidens must be caught just as they reach their proper places. A movie's production budget is calculated on the number of days it will take to shoot, and the average expense for a color film is in excess of $250,000 per day. Even the 10-minute student film can cost over $3,000 for film stock and laboratory expenses alone—beyond the cost of buying or renting the equipment.

The only way to retrieve production expenses is with sales—selling tickets, renting prints, leasing television rights to networks or cable franchises, selling videocassettes and laserdiscs outright, and licensing tie-ins from toys and computer games to novelizations.

The history of the movies as a business is inextricably linked with the history of the movies as a mass entertainment medium. To get the public to spend its money at the box office, the producer must give the public what it wants or make the public want what it gets. History indicates that the public has gotten some of both. The crassest movie maxim is the famous, "The box office is never wrong." The validity of the maxim depends on the kinds of questions you ask the box office to answer.

Film art has changed radically in the course of its history, and so have film audiences. The first movie patrons in America were also patrons of vaudeville houses and variety shows. When those audiences tired of the same kinds of film programs, the movies found a home with lower- and working-class patrons. Small theatres sprang up in the poor sections and commercial districts of cities; admission was a nickel or dime. The rich and educated saw movies only as an afternoon or evening of slumming. As film art and craft improved, larger and more expensive movie theatres opened in the respectable entertainment centers of the cities. Films tried to appeal to a wide range of tastes and interests, much as television does today. In this period there was little consciousness of movies as an art; they were mass entertainment. H. L. Mencken sardonically lauded the movies as the appropriate artistic attainment of the American "booboisie." Similes linking movies with tastelessness and movie patrons with morons continually popped up in fiction and articles of the 1920s and 1930s. Sixty years later, people like Mencken were writing film criticism, a movie actor had served as President of the United States, and going to the movies had become both intellectually respectable and socially necessary.

This discussion of the evolving audiences for movies indicates the close connection between the movies as cultural artifacts and conditions in American culture as a whole. Particular cultural conditions influence, if not dictate, the particular qualities and quantities of films in any given era. For a specific movie to become a major hit at a specific time indicates, at least partially, the cultural fact that a sufficient number of people wanted, needed, demanded, or responded to just that film then. To compare *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* of 1939, with *The Best Years of Our Lives* of 1946, with *Rebel Without a Cause* of 1955, with *The Graduate* of 1967 is to write a history of three decades of American culture. Any history of the movies must both take account of and account for these cultural shifts and conditions.

But if movies convey an overt and explicit cultural content—a war-torn society attempting to heal its wounds in *The Best Years of Our Lives* or a working-class woman attempting to express and distinguish herself in *Flashdance*—they can also convey covert and "invisible" ideological messages. It was precisely this fear of covert ideological contamination that led to the inquiries of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the years following World War II. More recently, many contemporary film theorists, following the lead of semioticians, historians, and critics like Louis

Fig. 1-1

Fig. 1-2

The movies as mirror of American social history. Fig. 1-1: Social institutions responsive to human needs and challenges (Jean Arthur in the U.S. Senate of* Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939). Fig. 1-2: Three returning servicemen view the land they fought to save (from left, Dana Andrews, Fredric March, and Harold Russell in* The Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946).

Althusser and Roland Barthes, have attempted to expose the unspoken, assumed cultural values of films—values that seem so obviously true for that culture that they are accepted as inevitable, normal, and natural rather than as constructs of the culture itself. For example, happiness in an American film is so equated with a synthesis of material comfort (home, job, car, stereo) and spiritual contentment (almost inevitably a monogamous romantic relationship) that any alternative ideas of happiness, or even a critique of the idea of happiness itself, are automatically unthinkable. Television is so completely structured around commercials that the very idea of buying becomes natural; it doesn't matter exactly what it is the viewer buys, just so the viewer understands that life itself consists of buying something or other and that nearly anything can be a commodity.

This ideological analysis has been especially useful to feminist critics and theorists who seek the underlying sources of sexist thinking in our cultural history. Women in American films seem banished to the kitchen, the bedroom, or the pedestal. And whether they are cast in the cliché roles of virgin, whore, mother, wife, assistant, or boss, they are usually presented in terms of their relation to men. Feminist films define women as selves, not as objects. But there is a sense in which any film turns its subject into spectacle. Following the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, many feminist film theorists explicate the way in which women in movies have traditionally served as voyeuristic objects presented by male directors for the pleasurable gaze of male spectators. Although one need not accept the radical analyses of contemporary theory, there is no question that such discussions of movies have made us more self-conscious about the cultural and moral values we previously took for granted, and more wary of the ways such values are promoted.

Another radical approach to film theory suggests that our very way of looking at the world, of seeing nature, reality, and all the persons and things within it, is itself a cultural construct. The principles of Renaissance perspective—of a deep, receding space presented for the eye of the single, privileged viewer—have been ground into the lenses of cameras. Others have argued that bourgeois culture privileges a single sense—sight—over all others. The apparently innocent act of "seeing the world"—whether through our eyes or through a lens—is not at all innocent because both the seeing and the seen are cultural constructs. Hence, a final influence on the movies, important to any discussion of their history, is the dependence of film art on glass and chemicals, electricity and machines.

Appropriately enough, our technological century has produced an art that depends on technology. The first filmmakers were not artists but tinkerers. The same spirit that produced a light bulb and a telephone produced a movie camera and projector. The initial goal in making a movie was not to create beauty but to display a scientific curiosity. The invention of the first cameras and projectors set a trend that was to repeat itself with the introduction of every new movie invention: The invention was first exploited as a novelty in itself and only later integrated as one tool in making the whole film. The first movie camera merely exploited its ability to capture images of moving things. The first synchronized sound films exploited the audience's excitement at hearing the words that the actor's lips were mouthing. Most of the first color films were merely colorful, many of the first wide-screen films merely wide.

No other art is so tied to machines. Some of the most striking artistic effects are the products of expanding film technology. For example, the awesome compositions in depth and shadow of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) are partially the result of the studios' conversion to brighter arc lamps, the introduction of specially coated lenses, and the development of high-speed, fine-grain film stocks, all of which made it possible for *Kane*'s cinematographer, Gregg Toland, to "stop down" the lens (in other words, because there was now more light on the set and the film was more sensitive, he could narrow the lens's aperture) and achieve much richer shadows and greater depth of field (the range within which objects are in focus; given a field that was sharp from infinity to very near the camera, Welles was free to compose shots in depth). Research has converted the camera from an erratic, hand-cranked film grinder to a smooth, precise clockwork. Research has silenced the camera's noise without using clumsy, bulky devices to baffle the clatter. Research has developed faster and sturdier black-and-white and color film stocks,

enabling greater flexibility in lighting, composition, and shooting conditions. Research has improved sound recording and sound reproduction, developed huge cranes and dollies, perfected a wide assortment of laboratory processes and effects, and invented special lenses and special projectors and special filters. Film equipment is so sophisticated that no film artist can master all of it; yet despite the difficulties of money and machine, movies have become the dominant art of the century.

This short history will follow the road the movies have traveled to get here. To keep a history even this "short" has required several decisions. First, this history aims at revealing significant trends and turns along the road rather than detailing exhaustive lists of titles, directors, and dates. For further reading and detail, the reader is strongly advised to consult the Appendix.

Second, because the history of the American film is most relevant to American readers, this short history allots more space to a discussion of American movie practices. But although American films are the dominant force in the film world, the cinema truly is an international and cross-cultural medium, and to concentrate exclusively on America, let alone on Hollywood, would create a misleading and impoverished record. Not every country or culture in the world is covered here, but those that have produced the greatest films are treated in as much depth as a "short history" allows.

Third, there is no room here to explain more than the most essential technical terms, equipment, standards, and procedures. The Appendix lists many introductory and advanced texts that go into all these in detail. There is also a Glossary at the end of the book.

Fourth, this history concentrates heavily on the fiction film, also called the narrative film. The aesthetic principles of the nonfiction or documentary film are different enough from those of the storytelling film to require a full-length study of their own. The same is true of the animated film and of the avant-garde film. For a list of such studies, the reader is again advised to consult the Appendix. Nevertheless, the documentary *is* discussed in this book, particularly in the context of such filmmakers as Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, Leni Riefenstahl, Chris Marker, and Marcel Ophuls. Animators from Emile Cohl to Walt Disney make their appearance, and in addition to discussions of the silent avant-garde film in Europe, a significant portion of a chapter is devoted to the American avant-garde. These discussions are essential to giving a sense of the whole of film art, but they are necessarily brief and suggestive.

Finally, the reader must realize precisely what this book of history (and any book of history) really is—not a collection of all the facts that must be accepted as absolute truth but a selection of facts that have been fitted into a pattern. No matter how much it aspires to be an accurate record of change over time, a history is inevitably an interpretive narrative, a telling, a story; after all, five-sevenths of the word *history* is *story*. This story is perpetually revised and rethought: New data are selected, old data rejected or reinterpreted, new ways of viewing those data adopted. Like plays, novels, and movies, histories are stories told to a particular audience at a particular time, embodying the values, hopes, ideals, and commitments of those times. Histories of movies, no less than the movies themselves, construct a view of the world and of human experience.