



JEAN EPSTEIN

CRITICAL ESSAYS AND NEW TRANSLATIONS

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run a long way to escape this spiraling movement in which I seemed thrust down toward a terrifying center of myself. Such a lesson in egotism in reverse is pitiless. An education, an entire course of instruction, a religion had patiently consoled me to be as I was. Everything had to be begun anew.

Even more than this kind of play with tilted mirrors, cinema produces similarly unexpected encounters with oneself. The uneasiness experienced in front of one's own filmed image emerges suddenly and is widely shared. By now the story of the little American millionaires who cried after seeing themselves on screen for the first time has become a commonplace anecdote. And those who do not cry are troubled. One should not understand such an effect as merely the result of presumptuousness or exaggerated coquettishness. For the mission of cinema does not seem to have been precisely understood. The camera lens is an eye which Apollinaire would have called surreal (without any relationship to today's surrealism), an eye endowed with inhuman analytic properties. It is an eye without prejudices, without morals, exempt from influences. It sees features in faces and human movements that we, burdened with sympathies and antipathies, habits and thoughts, no longer know how to see. For anyone who even briefly considers this statement, every comparison between theater and cinema becomes impossible. The very essence of these two modes of expression is different. Thus, the other original property of the cinematic lens is its analytic power. Cinematic art ought to depend on it. Alas!

If the first response to our own cinematic reproduction in front of us is a sort of horror, it is because every day we civilized individuals lie (no need to cite the theories of Jules de Gaultier or Freud) about nine-tenths of who we are.⁶ We lie without knowing it any more. Suddenly this mirror's gaze pierces us with its amperes of light. The inextinguishable source of the cinematic future lies in its analytic power. Villiers hardly dreamed of a comparable machine to confess souls.⁷ And I see very clearly new inquisitions drawing overwhelming evidence from films in which a suspect is captured, flayed, and meticulously betrayed in an unbiased way by this very subtle mirror's gaze.⁸

On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*⁹

Translated by Tom Milne

The cinema seems to me like two Siamese twins joined together at the stomach, in other words by the baser necessities of life, but sundered at the heart or by the higher necessities of emotion. The first of these brothers is the art of cinema, the second is the film industry. A surgeon is called for, capable of separating these

two fraternal foes without killing them, or a psychologist able to resolve the incompatibilities between these two hearts.

I shall venture to speak to you only of the art of cinema. The art of cinema has been called 'photogénie' by Louis Delluc.¹⁰ The word is apt, and should be preserved. What is 'photogénie'? I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. And any aspect not enhanced by filmic reproduction is not photogenic, plays no part in the art of cinema.

For every art builds its forbidden city, its own exclusive domain, autonomous, specific, and hostile to anything that does not belong. Astonishing to relate, literature must first and foremost be literary; the theater, theatrical; painting, pictorial; and cinema, cinematic. Painting today is freeing itself from many of its representational and narrative concerns. Historical and anecdotal canvases, pictures that narrate rather than paint, are rarely seen nowadays outside the furnishing departments of the big stores – where, I must confess, they sell very well. But what one might call the high art of painting seeks to be no more than painting, in other words color taking on life. And any literature worthy of the name turns its back on those twists and turns of plot that lead to the detective's discovery of the lost treasure. Literature seeks only to be literary, which is seen as a justification for taking it to task by people alarmed at the idea that it might resemble neither a charade nor a game of cards and be put to better use than killing time, which there is no point in killing since it returns, hanging equally heavy, with each new dawn.

Similarly, cinema should avoid dealings, which can only be unfortunate, with historical, educational, novelistic, moral or immoral, geographical or documentary subjects. The cinema must seek to become, gradually and in the end uniquely, cinematic; to employ, in other words, only photogenic elements. *Photogénie* is the purest expression of cinema.

What aspects of the world, then, are photogenic, these aspects to which cinema must limit itself? I fear the only response I have to offer to so important a question is a premature one. We must not forget that where the theater trails some tens of centuries of existence behind it, cinema is a mere twenty-five years old. It is a new enigma. Is it an art or something less than that? A pictorial language, like the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, whose secrets we have scarcely penetrated yet, about which we do not know all that we do not know? Or an unexpected extension to our sense of sight, a sort of telepathy of the eye? Or a challenge to the logic of the universe, since the mechanism of cinema constructs movement by multiplying successive stoppages of celluloid exposed to a ray of light, thus creating mobility through immobility, decisively demonstrating how correct the false reasoning of Zeno of Elea was?¹¹

Do we know what radio will be like in ten years' time? An eighth art, no doubt, as much at odds with music as cinema currently is with the theater. We are just as much in the dark as to what cinema will be like in ten years' time.

At present, we have discovered the cinematic property of things, a new and exciting sort of potential: *photogénie*. We are beginning to recognize certain circumstances in which this *photogénie* appears. I suggest a preliminary specification in determining these photogenic aspects. A moment ago I described as photogenic any aspect whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. I now specify: only mobile aspects of the world, of things and souls, may see their moral value increased by filmic reproduction.

This mobility should be understood only in the widest sense, implying all directions perceptible to the mind. By general agreement it is said that the dimensions deriving from our sense of direction are three in number: the three spatial dimensions. I have never really understood why the notion of a fourth dimension has been enveloped in such mystery. It very obviously exists; it is time. The mind travels in time, just as it does in space. But whereas in space we imagine three directions at right angles to each other, in time we can conceive only one: the past-future vector. We can conceive a space-time system in which the past-future direction also passes through the point of intersection of the three acknowledged spatial directions, at the precise moment when it is between past and future: the present, a point in time, an instant without duration, as points in geometrical space are without dimension. Photogenic mobility is mobility in this space-time system, a mobility in both space and time. We can therefore say that the photogenic aspect of an object is a consequence of its variations in space-time.

This definition, an important one, is not simply a mental intuition. A number of films have already offered concrete examples. First, certain American films, demonstrating an unconscious and highly precocious feeling for cinema, sketched the spatio-temporal cinegrams in rough outline. Later Griffith, that giant of primitive cinema, gave classical expression to these jostling, intersecting denouements that describe arabesques virtually simultaneously in space and time. More consciously and more lucidly, Gance – today our master, one and all – then composed his astonishing vision of trains swept along on the rails of the drama. We must be clear why these racing wheels in *La Roue* comprise the most classic sentences yet written in the language of cinema. It is because in these images the most clearly defined role is played by variations, if not simultaneous at least approximately so, in the spatio-temporal dimensions.

For in the end it all comes down to a question of perspective, a question of design. Perspective in drawing is a three-dimensional perspective, and when a pupil executes a drawing which takes no account of the third dimension, the effect of depth or relief in objects, it is said that he has done a bad drawing, that he cannot draw. To the elements of perspective employed in drawing, the cinema adds a new perspective in time. In addition to relief in space, the cinema offers

relief in time. Astonishing abridgements in this temporal perspective are permitted by the cinema – notably in those amazing glimpses into the life of plants and crystals – but these have never yet been used to dramatic purpose. If, as I said earlier, a draftsman who ignores the third spatial dimension in its perspective is a bad draftsman, I must now add that anyone who makes films without playing with temporal perspective is a poor director.¹²

Moreover cinema is a language, and like all languages it is animistic; in other words, it attributes a semblance of life to the objects it defines. The more primitive a language, the more marked this animistic tendency. There is no need to stress the extent to which the language of cinema remains primitive in its terms and ideas; so it is hardly surprising that it should endow even the most inanimate objects it is called upon to depict with such intense life. The almost godlike importance assumed in close-ups by parts of the human body, or by the most lifeless elements in nature, has often been noted. Through the cinema, a revolver in a drawer, a broken bottle on the ground, an eye isolated by an iris are elevated to the status of characters in the drama. Being dramatic, they seem alive, as though involved in the evolution of an emotion.

I would even go so far as to say that the cinema is polytheistic and theogonic. Those lives it creates, by summoning objects out of the shadows of indifference into the light of dramatic concern, have little in common with human life. These lives are like the life in charms and amulets, the ominous, tabooed objects of certain primitive religions. If we wish to understand how an animal, a plant, or a stone can inspire respect, fear, and horror, those three most sacred sentiments, I think we must watch them on the screen, living their mysterious, silent lives, alien to human sensibility.

The cinema thus grants to the most frozen appearances of things and beings the greatest gift in the face of death: life. And it confers this life in its highest guise: personality.

Personality goes beyond intelligence. Personality is the spirit visible in things and people, their heredity made evident, their past become unforgettable, their future already present. Every aspect of the world upon which the cinema confers life is elevated only if it possesses a personality of its own. This is the second specification which we can now add to the rules of *photogénie*. I therefore suggest that we say: only the mobile and personal aspects of things, beings, and souls may be photogenic, that is, may acquire a higher moral value through filmic reproduction.

An eye in close-up is no longer the eye, it is AN eye: in other words, the mimetic decor in which the gaze suddenly appears as a character... I was greatly interested by a competition recently organized by one of the film magazines. The point was to identify some forty more or less famous screen actors whose portraits reproduced in the magazine had been cropped to leave only their eyes. So what one had to do was to recognize the personality in each of forty gazes. Here

we have a curious unconscious attempt to get spectators into the habit of studying and recognizing the distinctive personality to be seen in the eye alone.

And a close-up of a revolver is no longer a revolver, it is the revolver-character, in other words the impulse towards – or remorse for – crime, failure, suicide. It is as dark as the temptations of the night, bright as the gleam of gold lusted after, taciturn as passion, squat, brutal, heavy, cold, wary, menacing. It has a temperament, habits, memories, a will, a soul.

Mechanically speaking, the lens alone can sometimes succeed in this way in revealing the inner nature of things. This is how, by chance in the first instance, the *photogénie* of character was discovered. But with the proper, by which I mean a personal, sensitivity, one can direct the lens towards increasingly valuable discoveries. This is the role of the author of a film, commonly called a film director. Of course a landscape filmed by one of the forty or four hundred directors devoid of personality whom God sent to plague the cinema as He once sent the locusts into Egypt looks exactly like this same landscape filmed by any other of these film-making locusts. But this landscape or this fragment of drama STAGED BY someone like Gance will look nothing like what would be seen through the eyes and heart of a Griffith or a L'Herbier. This is how the personalities of certain men, the soul, and, finally, poetry erupted into the cinema.

I remember still *La Roue*. As Sisif died, we all saw his unhappy soul leave him and slip away over the snows, a shadow borne away in angels' flight.

Now we are approaching the promised land, a place of great wonders. Here, matter is molded and set into relief by personality; all nature, all things appear as a man has dreamed them; the world is created as you think it is; pleasant if you think it so, harsh if you believe it to be. Time hurries on or retreats, or stops and waits for you. A new reality is revealed, a reality for a special occasion, which is untrue to everyday reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry. The face of the world may seem changed since we, the fifteen hundred million who inhabit it, can see through eyes equally intoxicated by alcohol, love, joy, and woe, through lenses of all sorts of madness: hate and tenderness; since we can see the clear thread of thoughts and dreams, what might or should have been, what was, what never was or could have been, the secret forms of feelings, the startling face of love and beauty – in a word, the soul. "So poetry is thus true, and is as real as the eye itself."

Here poetry, which one might have thought mere verbal artifice, a figure of style, a play of antithesis and metaphor – in short, something next to nothing – achieves a dazzling incarnation. "So poetry is thus true, and is as real as the eye itself."

The cinema is poetry's most powerful medium, the medium most capable of realizing the unreal, the 'surreal,' as Apollinaire would have said.

This is why some of us have entrusted to it our highest hopes.

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~~phone every night and die one day, finally happy, having had no time to notice it. There is an album of the world's hearts, in sarcophagi made of gelatin.~~

~~And this is even more beautiful: in the same way that pleasure and pain in living things only express the instinct of self-preservation, the film's financial necessities similarly determine its moral qualities (I dare not speak of artistic qualities; it is obvious that cinema is already more than an art). In order to satisfy its need for capital, films tend to extend beyond the borders of the country that produced them. This is not necessary; it could be cut. It is a vital necessity. Cinema will either be a global form of writing, or it will be nothing more than a kind of theater made worse by photography. For a long time now, the first American images have flown above our heads with the lassos of the Wild West. Then we got to know Ince and his rustic dramas. Today we like Griffith - a brutal Jew and restrained Protestant - who is the very incarnation of passion. They know little about the five or six films we could show them. Thus far, Gance, your J'accuse alone fell from so far high up and down into American hearts that they became heavier.~~

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The Photogenic Element¹⁵

Translated by Tom Milne

The cinema is at that happy period when new forms of expression for thoughts and human emotions meet with misfortune. If I said that the young arts, the young sciences, the young philosophies waxed strong on easy successes, you would not believe me. Their successes were always difficult, blended with the measure of failure that tempers character. I mean that cinema is in its apostolic period, an era corresponding in the history of religions to their militant days. And if I call them happy, very happy, these difficult times cinema is going through, it is because they alone, through their very difficulty, permit the explosion of great enthusiasms. Above all, they alone conjure the will and the talents that are the most valuable, the *individual* aspect of these enthusiasms. These pioneering individuals are missionaries sent by the Cause to prepare its triumphs and convert the barbarians.

Tonight my thoughts cannot but turn to memories of two of these missionaries for the cinema: Canudo and Delluc. And there must certainly be some of us who will admit to having been converted to the cinema by one or the other, or possibly both, and to owing them heartfelt thanks.

Canudo was the missionary of poetry in the cinema; Delluc, the missionary of *photogénie*.

As early as 1911, Canudo published an essay on cinema so farseeing that one cannot reread it today without being astonished. In 1911, when cinema for years to come was to be, in both theory and practice, no more than a holiday diversion for schoolboys, a darkish place of assignation, or a somewhat somnambulist scientific trick, Canudo had understood that cinema could and should be a marvelous instrument for lyricism. And although this new lyricism really only existed then as a prophecy, he immediately foresaw its limits and possibilities, its determinate and indeterminate qualities.

The concept of painting was born on the day when color sprang as an abstraction into the minds of our very remote ancestors. Similarly, the concept of sculpture or architecture was born the moment the notion of volume emerged in the human mind. In 1919, Delluc formulated and wrote of this word which for a time seemed magical, and to this day retains its mystery. With the notion of *photogénie*, the concept of cinema as an art was born. For how can one better define the undefinable *photogénie* than by saying: *photogénie* is to cinema what color is to painting and volume to sculpture – the specific element of that art.

If Canudo quickly scanned the reaches of cinema's horizons, Delluc discovered this *photogénie* which is a sort of refractive moral index to this new perspective.

It was Canudo, in those sessions at the Salon d'Automne, who first thought of publicly presenting selected extracts from films, of building up an anthology of cinema. This notion of a cinematic anthology was extremely valuable because, through these fragments of film, it drew attention to cinematic style: it isolated style from narrative. This attempt to analyze cinema's resources should be pursued even more rigorously: by taking not extracts from various films, but images in the strict sense. And not images from various films, but images in a quality of style, a photogenic quality. Those programs at the Salon are in fact still very much in the flow of evolution and refinement today. It is this classification of cinema's resources that I propose should be undertaken more in the spirit of a grammarian or a rhetorician.

An army commander should, I presume, know exactly what armaments he has at his disposal, the range and caliber of the guns with which he is to fight. A writer should know the value of the word combinations he will employ in writing. And to understand this art of writing, he learns grammar and rhetoric, both consciously and unconsciously. But we filmmakers, who should have a detailed knowledge of all the elements of cinematic expression, find any such grammar or rhetoric totally lacking. My aim is to attempt to establish the premises for a cinematic grammar.

We must not, however, yield to facile and misleading analogies. It would be convenient to say: a long shot is like a substantive phrase, and the close-up stressing a detail in the overall view is comparable to an adjective which underlines some quality in the substantive. This would be easy but erroneous, because a detail shot is often more important, more substantive than the long shot, which

exists only in relation to the detail. And where repetition, for example, is often used as a means to reinforce expressiveness in writing, repetition of the same images in a film weakens their effect.

The grammar of cinema is a grammar uniquely its own.

Unattended, without words, an air of conviction alights from the screen on eighteen hundred pairs of eyes. Words slither like wet cakes of soap around what we try to say. This evening a friend, trying to put everything too precisely into words, suddenly shrugged twice and said no more. I believed him, as others might have been persuaded verbally, on the strength of this wearied silence. And when a scientist takes pains to use words with precision, I no longer believe. I know his words respond to definitions not within him or me, but outside and between us, in some lecturer's diplomatic, imagined nowhere. There are, too, at least twelve words for each thing, and at least twelve things for each word; strictly speaking, therefore, no word is the word for a thing, and no thing is the thing for a word. On the line of communication by speech we are interrupted by an unexpected static of feelings. Everything remains to be said and we give up, exhausted. Then the screen lights up its silent loudspeaker sky. How convincing is this language dispensed by a square, sputtering eye. The screen captures a theft of automobiles. Above these heads, between the arc lamp and screen, Babylon passes, intangible as smoke, reconstructed in flashes of light.

All details that are expressed without recourse to words simultaneously trigger the words that lie at their roots as well as the feelings that precede them. Just as the mathematician indubitably demonstrates on paper properties that are not there, so a thousand eyewitnesses in front of a cinema screen would swear on their lives to what cannot be there. The film shows a man who betrays; nevertheless there is no man and no betrayer. But the ghost of something creates an emotion which nevertheless cannot come to life unless the thing *be* for which it was created. So an emotion-thing is born. You believe in more than a betrayer, you believe in a betrayal. Now you need this betrayal; because you feel it, and feel it so precisely that no other betrayal but this imaginary one will satisfy you.

In this unreality, validated by emotion, authenticity is absurd and universal. If conventions seem so very out of place here, it is not that they are insufficiently plausible; on the contrary. These limitations – obstacles so stimulating to the theater – cannot be permitted by a form of imagination that casts them all aside from the outset. Whereas in grammar the part – not without effrontery – replaces the whole, here the whole is substituted for by the part which is better equipped to excite emotions. “In those times, it was...” says the storyteller; here, instead of having been, things are, and the time is always today, a continual today in which yesterday collides with tomorrow at a speed of 3,600 seconds per hour, bringing past and future into the present.

Already this is more than an art. So it is no longer an art just when the herd of critics, journalists, artists, actors, orchestra leaders, and pyro-engravers, all regu-

larly twenty-five years behind the times, finally admit that among the arts, cinema is one. Is it already a language? In the absence of words, it has the chance to discover a profound precision. But will cinema ever secure seekers of its stable, unimpeachable, universally perceptible elements?

~~For a New Avant-Garde¹⁶~~

~~Translated by Stuart Liebman~~

~~I just want to say this: you have to love it and hate it at the same time – and love it as much as you hate it. This fact alone proves that the cinema is an art with a very well defined personality of its own. The difficulty lies above all in the choice of what is right to hate about it. And if this choice is difficult, it is because it must be revised at extremely short intervals.~~

~~Indeed, the best friends of an art always end up becoming infatuated with their ideas. And because art as it evolves goes beyond its rules at every moment, these best friends of yesterday become the worst enemies of tomorrow, fanatics devoted to shopworn methods. This continual overturning of friendships is characteristic of the slow evolution of all the arts.~~

~~Thus it is that today at last – at last, but a little too late – some methods of cinematic expression, still considered strange and suspect a year ago, have become à la mode. Being fashionable has always signaled the end of a style.~~

~~Among these methods we can chiefly include the suppression of intertitles, rapid editing, the importance accorded to sets and to their expressionist style.~~

~~The first films without intertitles were made almost simultaneously in America and in Germany. In America it was in a film by Charles Ray, *La Petite Baignade* [*The Old Swimm'n' Hole*, 1921], distributed and titled here, though only after considerable delay. Retreating from its novelty, the distributors were careful to add about fifteen intertitles to the film. In Germany, it was *Le Rail* [*Scherben* or *Shattered*, 1921] by Lupu Pick. I haven't come here to justify the so-called "American" title – incorrectly named, for it is, alas, often French too – that beforehand first explains to the spectator what he is about to see in the next image, then afterwards tells him a second time in case he either wouldn't see or understand. Certainly, the suppression of the title has had its value as a new method, not entirely in and for itself, but as a useful one among others. And Lupu Pick, who must be considered the master of the film without titles, last season presented us with a kind of cinematic perfection, that is, *Sylvester* [*New Year's Eve*, 1923], perhaps the most filmic film ever seen, whose shadows conveyed the extremes of human passion on film for the first time. And the theory that is the basis for the film without titles is obviously logical: cinema is made to narrate with images and not with words.~~