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## Vision and Dream in the Cinema

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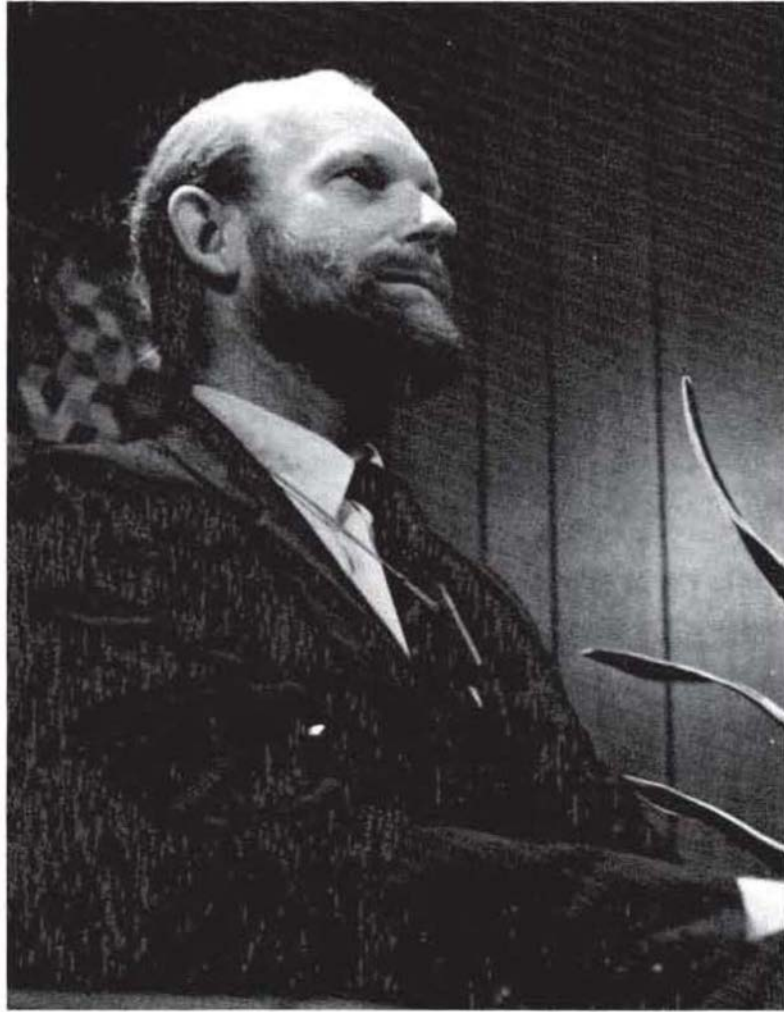
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## VISION AND DREAM IN THE CINEMA F. E. Sparshott

(The following is a strictly lay view of some of the main topics in the aesthetics of cinema. I have no special knowledge of any aspect of film, and the material I present is essentially what is to be found on any book on the subject. It is in the interpretation of these familiar observations that I hope to have found something to say that will be new enough and true enough to be worth presenting.<sup>1</sup>)

Film seems to be unlike any older art in the way it depends on illusion. In fact, it is by definition an art of illusion, because you can only explain what a film is by saying how it works, and how it works is by creating an illusion. A sample definition might go something like this: 'A film is a series of images projected on a screen so fast that anyone watching the screen is given an impression of continuous motion; such images being projected by a light shining through a corresponding series of images arranged on a continuous band of flexible material.'

From the beginnings of film, its makers and critics have diverged in their attitudes to this basic illusoriness. One school has fastened on film's ability to create a semblance of reality, seemingly to recreate the very look and quality of people and things in their physical presence and vitality: to this school, the mission of film is not merely to record but to celebrate the physical world and redeem it from temporality. The opposing school has noted that the illusion in question results from the projection not necessarily of a series of images duplicating a natural event, but of any such series whose successive members are sufficiently like each other; and this school has seen in film the world's first means of creating convincing fantasies. The illusoriness of film seems to carry with it both the possibility of fidelity and the possibility of freedom. Like Hesiod's Muses, it tells the best truths and the best lies too.

The positions of these two schools are not really so directly opposed as I have made them sound. It seems likely that for a fantasy to be convincing it must observe fidelity to precisely the weight and texture of the real world: in Robert Enrico's *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, we are drawn into the dream by the conviction of the photography, the clumsy struggle of a booted man under water, the light on a spider's web. And Siegfried Kracauer, the great spokesman for the realist wing, insists that what matters to him is not that a film happens to have been shot on location, but that it contrives to convey the sense of the real world. Both realists and fantasists may be thought of as combining against films that convey a sense of contrivance, actors looking like actors and scenery looking like cardboard, and above all against films that make one conscious of an intelligence directing the course of events. Where realists and fantasists part company is that the latter would insist, and the former deny, that the proper province of cinema includes the imparting of the sense of reality to things that could not exist and events that could not happen. The fantasist would also argue that the conviction that comes from fidelity to the texture of the real world of objects can be replaced by the subtler convincingness that an imaginary world derives from fidelity to its own laws. The

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expressionist sets and lurid lighting of *Caligari* are accepted by the fantasists because they create a consistently hallucinatory world in which the fancy can dwell; they are rejected by the realists because it is a nightmare world.

You may have noticed that my argument has already gone adrift. The illusory conviction of reality that attends the worlds of cinema is not, as I seem to have implied, the same as the primary illusion whereby an apparently moving image is engendered on a screen. That illusion concerns the presented image as a moving shadow; the secondary illusions that realists and fantasists exploit have to do not with what is there on the flat screen but with the status of what that image represents. Of course, this second level of illusion depends on the first — it is because of the way the screened image is constituted that it can be manipulated in the interests of faithfulness or fraud. None the less, they are two separate strata of illusion. That confronts us with a problem: why should the screened image be referred to any particular kind of original? Why should we not take it, as we would take a drawing, as a representation of something whose ontological status is a matter of indifference? No more than when attending a stage play does any film-goer feel as if a real event were actually taking place before his eyes. Yet there is a sense in which a film can and often does make you believe in the reality of what you see in a way that a play never does. Why should there be such illusions of provenance? The answer seems to lie in the complex relations between cinematography and photography, and in the peculiar nature of photographic images themselves. For realists and fantasists alike assume that films are normally photographed; but you may have noticed that my sample definition of a film made no reference to photography at all.

The images whose successive projection makes a film are most easily produced by photography; but they *can* also be drawn directly on the film stock. A photograph to represent an object is most easily made by aiming a camera at one, but what is photographed *may* also be a model or a drawing or even another photograph. A photograph of an event or happening of a certain sort is most simply made by finding one and photographing it, but it is *possible* to enact scenes and build sets for the purpose. The required succession of images is most readily produced by using a mechanical device that will take a lot of photographs in rapid succession and fix them in the right order; but it *can* be photographed, or even drawn, frame by frame. And the obvious way to work a film camera (though, this time, not the easiest, because synchronization requires care) is to run it at the same speed as you will run your projector; but it *can* be run as much faster or slower as the sensitivity of your film allows. The effect of all these facilities, with their countervailing possibilities, is that film has a strong though not irresistible bias toward its simplest form, that in which the projector repeats a camera event. Film-goers who are not on guard tend to assume, wherever they can, that what is shown on the screen results from such a repetition; and, if something in the film precludes this assumption, they tend to assume that what they see departs from a camera event as little as possible. It is as if we took the projector to be copying a camera that enacted a spectator's eye.

An eye is not a camera, and photographic images do not show what eyes see.<sup>2</sup> A roving eye constantly adjusts its iris as brightness varies, and alters its focus as

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depth changes. Because we have two eyes, everything on which we are not at the moment focusing yields a vague, doubled image, so that whatever one sees takes on a shifting and unstable character. The eye is restless before nature. But before a photograph, all in one plane and with a relatively small range of luminosity, the eye is spared much of its labor. In its stability, singleness and consistency, a photographic image is not at all like the visual world. But there is something that it is like. It has precisely the quality that theorists used to ascribe to that venerable phantom of optics, the 'retinal image.' This was thought of exactly as if it were a photograph imprinted on the back of the eye and serving in some mysterious sense as the true object of vision. In other words, what a photographic image represents is a sort of ideal projection, the way our imaginations normalize what we see. When photography was invented it was hailed as reproducing vision, but that is not what it did. What it really accomplished was the realization of an *ideal* of vision. A photographic image is not so much a true one as a superlatively convincing one. Photographs carry an overwhelming sense of authenticity. And that their doing this does not depend on their being just like what they are photographs of is clear from Peter Ustinov's famous remark, that he filmed *Billy Budd* in black and white because it was more realistic than color. The world is not black and white, but a news photograph is. The authenticity is not that of a duplicate but that of a faithful record.<sup>3</sup>

Taken by itself, the primary filmic illusion of movement gives an impression not of reality but of a sort of unattributed vivacity. That this is so becomes clear when one watches an animated cartoon. Verisimilitude adds nothing to the lifelikeness of such films, and the elaborate equipment used in Disney's heyday to simulate the third dimension has mostly been abandoned as no less futile than expensive. The sense of reality elicited by such films seems akin to that of figurative painting: we attribute the actions we see neither to the real world nor to the screen image, but to Donald Duck and the cartoon world in which alone he is alive. In ordinary films, then, it cannot be the illusion of movement that makes us attribute what we see to the world of everyday experience; rather, it is the photographic character of the image itself that, so far as it is present and is not contradicted by the nature of what is shown, entices us to take what we see as the record of something that took place in the way that we see it taking place. After all, each of us knows what it is to take a photograph and then look at the snap he has taken. The film medium, then, has this characteristic bias of exposition, providing a direction in which we normalize our perceptions of films made in the most diverse ways.

The realists and fantasists of whom I spoke at first are best understood as expressing attitudes not merely to the technical possibilities of their medium but even more to this tendency of every film to look much more like a faithful record than it is. Other theorists adopt variants of the same attitudes. Eisenstein and other Soviet film makers of the twenties claimed that the whole art of film lay in exploiting the bias of exposition by associative or contrastive cutting, joining strips of photographed film from various sources in such a way as to synthesize in the spectator's mind an experiential reality that went beyond the presented imagery. In the opposite direction, some contemporary makers of 'underground' film urge that to cut at all is to falsify. Since film looks like a record, a record is what it should be.

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The finished film should consist of all that the camera took in the order it was taken in, and if the result is that some shots are out of focus, ill-exposed, or irrelevant, they will thereby be all the truer to the film experience. On this way of thinking, a film records not what happened *in front of* the camera but what happened to the film *in* the camera.

That the realism of film is that of a graphic record and not that of an illusive actuality becomes apparent in the peculiar nature of film space: the actual and suggested spatial relations between elements of a film and between a film and its viewers. Some writers imply that film-goers ordinarily feel themselves to be in the same spatial relation to the filmed scene as the camera was (or purports to have been). On this basis, such trick shots as those which show a room through the flames of a fire in its fireplace are condemned not as silly gimmicks but on the ground that no observer would be in that position. I cannot reconcile this thesis with my experience. I find that I usually identify myself with the camera viewpoint only if some such process as Cinerama is used, in which the screen is magnified to the point where it becomes almost the whole visual environment. Experienced film-goers are not disoriented or nauseated by rapid changes in camera position, or made giddy by shots taken looking straight down.<sup>4</sup> If we really accepted a change in camera viewpoint as a change in our own position, rapid intercutting between different viewpoints would obviously be intolerable; but in fact we hardly notice it. And yet there is certainly a sense in which one does have a feeling of spatial presence at the filmed scene. This is not to be confused with psychological involvement in the action: one actually construes the scene as a three-dimensional space in which one is included and has a definite viewpoint. This depth and inclusiveness of cinema space owes much to parallax, the differential motion and occlusion of distant objects as one's viewpoint changes. The importance of parallax becomes obvious when, as is often done nowadays, action is interrupted by stop-motion. As soon as we become aware that this has happened, the whole nature of the space in which the action takes place is transformed, it goes flat and remote. This little-noted factor is important. Without such a change of spatiality, stop-motion might make it seem that the world had come to a halt. As it is, it confronts us rather with a transition to a different mode of representation. Momentarily, a different game is being played.

The more I reflect on my sense of cinema space, the more peculiar to cinema it seems. For instance, the use of a zoom lens increasing the (objective) size of the image does have the effect of bringing the action nearer; but getting up and walking towards the screen, though it produces a (subjectively) larger image and does of course bring the screen nearer, does not bring the action nearer at all. One's sense of spatial inclusion in a scene does not depend on one's occupying any particular seat, but only on one's being neither too close nor too far to see the screen properly. Similarly with all the distortions of space that result from the use of various lenses. We accept the resulting plasticity of space relations as a narrative device or as an invitation to an imaginary viewpoint. It does not disorient us. Thus David Lean's use of a deep-focus lens for Miss Havisham's room in *Great Expectations* certainly has a magnifying effect, but a curious one: we do not feel that we are in a big room, but that 'This is how it must have seemed to Pip.' Again, take

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those banal telephoto shots of people running towards or away from the camera and of course not making much visible headway. Such shots answer to no possible real spatial relationship between viewer and event. There is a viewing angle, but no possible viewpoint. Yet this disturbs no one. For instance, in the scene where the girl runs toward the airplane in *Zabriskie Point*, the scale relations between girl and low horizon are such that we may (and I did) accept what we see for a moment or two as an ordinary medium shot; then we notice how slowly the girl is receding, and realize that it is a telephoto shot. But the effect of this recognition on me was not to alter my feeling of where I was in relation to the scene, but to change my interpretation of that relation.

Such phenomena as I have been mentioning suggest that in film our sense of space is somehow bracketed or held in suspense: we are aware of our implied position and accept it, but are not existentially committed to it. We do not situate ourselves where we see ourselves to be. One simple explanation of this detachment is that most of the time we are simultaneously aware of a film, as we are of a painting, both as a two-dimensional arrangement on a flat surface and as a three-dimensional scene. Except in moments of excitement or disaffection, neither aspect achieves exclusive domination of the mind.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a subtler explanation is that cinema vision is alienated vision. A man's sense of where he is at depends largely on his sense of balance and his muscular senses, and all a film-goer's sensory cues other than those of vision and hearing related firmly to the theater and seat in which he sits. For instance, in the scene with the epileptic doctor in *Carnet du Bal*, which is taken with a consistently tilted camera, one's eyes insist that they are off balance but one's body insists that it is not; and the effect on me was the one that Duvivier surely intended, a feeling of malaise accompanied by a sense of vicarious disorientation on behalf of the protagonist.

Some of the spatial ambiguities of film are shared with still photography. No matter how one moves a photograph around in relation to oneself, it continues to function as a faithful record implying a viewpoint from which it was taken, and in a sense one continues to be 'at' this viewpoint no matter what angle one looks at the photo from. Film differs from still photography not only in the sense of vivacity that motion imparts and the sense of depth that parallax gives, but also in the great size and contrasting illumination of the screened image in the darkened theater, which enable it to dominate the visual sense, and in the relatively invariant relationship between screen and spectator. A director determines the audience's spatial relationship to his film. But what he determines remains an imaginary space: we are within the film's space without being part of its world, and observe from a viewpoint at which we are not situated.

The alienated space of film is not the only experienced space in which the spectator participates without contact, and which he observes from a vantage point that contrives to be at once definite and equivocal or impossible. The spatiality of dreams is somewhat similar. Or perhaps, since different people seem to have very different dream perceptions, I should only say that my own spatial relationship to my dream worlds is like nothing in waking reality so much as it is like my relationship with film worlds. In my dreams, too, I see from where I am not, move helplessly in a space whose very nature is inconstant, and may see beside me the

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being whose perceptions I share. But however many ways there are in which film-going is like dreaming, there are vital differences. Films, like dreams, involve us in a world we cannot control; but we have no sense of effort and participation in their world, as we do in that of our dreams. Filmed reality shares with dreamed reality (as nothing else does) its tolerance of limitlessly inconsequent transitions and transformations; but it lacks that curious conceptual continuity of dreams in which what is a raven may become a writing desk or may simultaneously be a writing desk, and in which one knows that what looks like one person is really someone else. Film-makers do indeed essay equivalences, as when Eisenstein in *October* equated Kerensky with a peacock, by intercutting shots of the two entities to be equated. But these are more like literary similes than they are like the fusions of dream. In the film, the interpretation cannot be made unless it is suggested by the percept itself, or by something else in the film, or by current convention. In the dream, the interpretation is imposed *a priori* — the dreamer simply knows without evidence that the two things are the same.<sup>6</sup>

The analogy between films and dreams has perhaps been less often noted than that between films and daydreams. Daydreams of course are utterly unlike real dreams, and unlike them in just the ways in which dreams are like films. But there is one quite fundamental way in which the film-goer is like the daydreamer and unlike the dreamer. That is, he is awake. However caught up he may be in the world of the film, he retains control of his faculties, is capable of sustained and critical attention, and above all can rationally direct his interest. A dreamlike inconsequentiality is thus far from typical of film, although it does remain among filmic possibilities, and the film-going public at large acquiesces in a degree of cheerful incoherence (as in *Casino Royale*) that in other arts is acceptable only to the sophisticate.

I suggested that writers on film are often so bewitched by the plausible but untenable dogma of the camera eye that they overlook the ambiguous and dreamlike character of film space. In the same way, many of them adopt an equally dubious dogma about film time: because the eye is the camera on the spot, they urge that film time is always present time; in watching a film one seems to see things happening *now*, as though one were present not at the film but at the filmed event. But this contention is vulnerable to the same sort of objection that was brought against the doctrine of the camera eye. In one sense it is true but trivial: of course, whatever one sees is always here and now, because the terms 'here' and 'now' are defined by one's presence. But in any other sense it is false, or we should not be able to take in our stride the flash-backs and flash-forwards, the accelerations and decelerations, that are part of film's stock in trade. Rather, it is as though we were spectators of the temporality of the films we see. Film time has a quality analogous to that dreamlike floating between participation and observation, between definite and indeterminate relationships, that gives film space its pervasive character. It is certainly true that the fundamental illusion of motion combines with the convincingness inherent in any photographic record to ensure that we ordinarily read the presented motion as continuous and as taking just as much time to happen as it takes us to observe it; but this supposition is readily defeated by any counter-indication. When D.W. Griffith was challenged on his early use of spatio-temporal discontinuities, he justified his procedures by appealing to the example of



Dickens; and surely he was right to do so. We accept a fiction film as a narrative. The time of a novel is filmic as its space is not: events can be filmed, as they can be narrated, with equal facility in any order, at any speed, with any degree of minuteness. But the film maker, unlike the novelist, uses a language without tenses. He has no device proper to his medium with which to signify any temporal relations other than immediate succession and interruption. He may use titles, trick dissolves, a superimposed narrator's voice, or datable visual cues (such as calendar leaves) to establish his temporal orientations; but some directors seem to feel that such devices are clumsy or vulgar, and prefer (like Bunuel in *Tristana*) to trust the public's acumen or simply to leave the relations indeterminate.

The dream-relationships of film space combine with the narrative nature of film time to encourage an ambiguity that may be fruitful or merely irritating. One often does not know what one is seeing: part of what is supposed actually to take place in the film, or only what is passing through the mind of one of the characters. This ambiguity becomes acute whenever there is a temporal leap; for time, as Immanuel Kant observed, is the form of subjectivity. A flash-back may represent a character's memory, or it may be just a narrative device. The anticipation in a flash forward may be that of the film maker, or it may be a character's premonition — or even merely his hope; and when temporally displaced scenes are recalled or anticipated, they may be taken as standing either for an event as it really was or would be in the film's reality, or for the way it is (perhaps erroneously or mendaciously) conjured up. And as soon as we admit this last possibility we must acknowledge that what we see on the screen may simply be imagined by one of the characters without any implied temporal reference at all. Still worse, it may have been inserted by the director neither as objective nor as subjective content, but merely as an 'objective correlative,' an evocative image with no other purpose than to show what he, or we, or someone, is or should be feeling.

The status of film events thus readily becomes equivocal. Many modern novelists exploit a similar ambiguity: Robbe-Grillet would be an obvious instance even if he had not done the scenario for *L'annee derniere a Marienbad*. But in a novel it is an artifice, even an affectation, a withholding of information one would naturally give; in a film it is the automatic result of the most straightforward use of the medium. In fact, its novelistic use is often ascribed to the influence of film — or more precisely, as Andre Bazin insists, of the novelists' ideas about film. So I think it is legitimate to treat the equivocal status of events as characteristic of the medium of cinema, but not peculiar to it. Such uncertainty may pervade an entire film. The stock example of this pervasive uncertainty is Fellini's *8 1/2*, in which some scenes are remembered, some dreamed, some imagined, and some belong to the reality of the film's story. There are many scenes whose status is unclear at the time, and some whose status never becomes clear. Does the opening scene of the closed car in the traffic jam show a man undergoing a seizure which makes his cure necessary, or is the seizure dreamed by a man already sick and undergoing treatment? Or is it even a parable, portraying with its fantastic sequel the dimensions of Guido's dilemma? In the version of the film I saw, there was nothing to determine either answer. In *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* the case is different. Almost the whole of this film consists of a sequence of events whose status remains unresolved until the very end

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of the film. If we think of the hanged man's escape as real, we may take his repeated endeavors to reach his wife's welcoming arms simply as the director's way of emphasizing the emotion involved in his arrival;<sup>7</sup> or we may take them as symbolizing the hope that drives the fugitive on. Only when he slips through her arms to hang at the end of his rope can we be sure that the whole sequence is the delusive vision of a man at the moment of death. As for the shots of the insects in sunlight, despite the accompanying song we are not sure whether these celebrate the fugitive's gladness in his escape from death, or express the director's sense of the sweetness of life. Perhaps only if we refer to Bierce's original story does a third possibility occur to us. This is what the fugitive sees with his 'preternaturally keen and alert' senses:

"He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf — saw the very insects upon them, the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the grey spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass."

When confronted with such ambiguities, one need not assume that there is some one right way of taking the scene — perhaps, in our examples, the way Fellini describes the scene in his shooting script, or, more remotely, the version that answers to Bierce's original story. All the director has done is splice celluloid. If the resulting sequence of images does not furnish enough clues to determine a reading, then no reading is determined. What the director had in mind is not enough, for what he had in mind may not be what he put on film. Besides, directors quite often have nothing at all in mind. The flexibility of film technique is a standing invitation to meaningless trickery, and the complexities of production involve limitless risks of inadvertent incoherence.

The time and space of film combine in a characteristic type of motion which inherits their quality of dreamlike plasticity. But there are other aspects of film motion that do not make for dreamlikeness but enhance the sense of actuality. This is an endlessly complex topic, and all I will do now is mention a few facts not implicit in what I have said already.

In the earliest movies, each scene was taken with a fixed camera, so that movement was presented as taking place within a fixed frame and against an unchanging background. A scene in a more recent film is likely to be enriched or muddled with three different kinds of camera motion.<sup>8</sup> The camera may be shifted from place to place, turned horizontally or vertically to alter its field of reception, or modified by changing the focal length of its lens to take in a greater or smaller area.<sup>9</sup> This third kind of camera movement is often dismissed as the equivalent of a tracking shot, moving the camera viewpoint towards or away from the scene. But it is not quite the same. It retains much of the sense of getting a different view from the same position.

The free combination of all the kinds of film motion can give a single scene a kind of dancing beauty that is at once abstract and realistic and that has no parallel in any other medium. Some of you will be familiar with a kind of kaleidoscope in which an image is formed by multiplying segments of whatever in your surroundings you aim the tube at. This enchanting device achieves an abstract beauty of great intensity, simply by the symmetrical arrangement of arbitrary portions of the

visual field. This abstraction is won at the price of sacrificing all the reality of what is seen, which is reduced to mere pattern. The formal beauty of film is quite different. While entering into the visual dance, the filmed elements of the world do not lose their reality but have it greatly enhanced. The eye dwells without restraint on ever new aspects of what is truly there to be seen; the abstract element comes from the form of its dwelling. It is the spectator, not what he sees, that becomes unreal.

Camera mobility gives the filmed image a shifting frame that combines with the camera's notorious neglect of natural boundaries to make the edge of the screen function like a window frame through which we glimpse part of a world that stretches to infinity. This produces a marked contrast between the actions of cinema and theater. The stage world is closed. An actor who leaves the stage loses all determinate existence for the audience. On the other side of the scenery there is nothing.<sup>10</sup> But beyond the edge of the cinema screen is the whole wide world, through whose endless continuity the camera may move at will — though not, of course, at the *spectator's* will.

Because film time and space are rather observed than lived, film motion can be speeded up or slowed down within scenes in a way that cannot be matched in the live theater, where events have to take their proper time as determined by the human rhythms of the actors' bodies.<sup>11</sup> Variations in the speed of filmed actions do not always have the same effect, but vary in a way that becomes easier to understand if we reflect that motion photography was invented to serve not one realistic purpose but two: not only to observe and record movements, but also to study and examine them. And, of course, very fast movements are best studied by slowing down their representation, very slow ones by speeding it up. Nature films are quite regularly made at unnatural speeds, accelerating plant growth and decelerating bird flight to something approaching the rhythms of human activity. In such studious contexts the spectator has no sense of unreality at all: his anticipatory set is one of discovery, and he feels simply that he is getting a better look at what he wants to see. But in narrative contexts things are different. Acceleration was early discovered to have a reliably comic effect: Buster Keaton's two-reeler *The Haunted House* (1921), for instance, gives the impression of having been taken at continuously varying camera speeds, slowing down to natural speed only for a few seconds at a time. The effect of deceleration in narrative films is more variable. It may give an impression of joy, of unreality, of obsessiveness, of solemnity, of ponderous force, or of inevitability. But though its effects are so various and often evade brief description, film directors must find that they are perfectly reliable in their various contexts, for they use them regularly. In fact, more than one cliché has hardened in this practice. One such is the flash-back reverie (as in *The Pawnbroker*), where the slowed motion seems to work by suggesting weightlessness and hence ethereality. Another is the use of this same weightlessness as a metaphor for lightheartedness, as in countless TV commercials. A third is the slow-motion death by shooting, most notably in *Bonnie and Clyde*: largely an appeal to voyeurism, but partly perhaps an equivalent for shock, and partly also a symbolization of death, as the unreal speed transposes the action into another key of reality.

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One can think of acceleration and deceleration as a kind of pre-editing, the same as adding or subtracting frames in a film shot at projector speed. It is basic to film that editing can produce an impression of movement by intercutting suitably spaced shots of the same object in different positions. The impression does not depend on the primary film illusion of continuity: all that is needed is that the object should appear to be the same, that its position in successive shots should appear to be different, and that the mind can somehow supply a possible trajectory to connect the successive positions. Such inferred motions are neither possible nor felt to be possible. We tend not to believe in them even while we see them, referring them to the film as artifact and not to the film as record.

My main purpose in reminding you of all these peculiarities of film experience has merely been to ask you if they don't strike you as extremely odd. Least odd are the last item and the first, the primary film illusion of movement and the impression of movement produced by cutting. These testify only to aspects of the mind's familiar tendency to smooth things over, interpreting whatever confronts it in terms of the simplest pattern to which it can be made to conform. But the other things I spoke about do strike me as really strange: I mean the whole sense of film reality, in which we accept, not only without difficulty but even without any sense of mystery, a complex fictional experience whose spatio-temporal character is quite unlike that of ordinary life. How is this possible? It is as though the mind had an inbuilt capacity to live in an indefinite number of possible worlds, just as according to Noam Chomsky it is born with a capacity to learn an infinite number of languages. But according to Chomsky there are basic grammatical conditions which a language must fulfil to be learnable; perhaps too there are limits on the distortions and discontinuities acceptable by a human mind as compatible with a world of which the experience is continuous. However, it may be a mistake to represent the cinematic phenomena as not merely strange but unexampled. E. H. Gombrich has shown in *Art and Illusion* how a sense of reality in the visual arts can be satisfied through the most arbitrary conventions — though here, too, we may suspect that there are limits beyond which stylistic transformations cease to carry conviction. Perhaps film adds nothing to this situation with which we have become familiar in painting, other than a number of superficial complications and the seductive verisimilitude of the photographic image. All the same, I keep coming back to the feeling that the way a film-goer's brain can accommodate disorganizations and reconstitutions of its principles of order borders on the uncanny. I do not think we find any adequate analogue for it in those psychological experiments which show how perceptual constancy is maintained and restored when vision is distorted or disoriented through inverting lenses and the like. What those experiments show is how a normal awareness of the real world is retrieved in difficult conditions, not how one accepts as perceptually normal a world that never takes on the aspect of everyday reality. As I said before, the closest analogy seems to be with dreaming. It has always seemed uncanny to me that although my waking self is quite unable even to make a convincing drawing of the simplest shapes, my sleeping mind not only composes continuous and coherently organized visual fields that are completely lifelike, but combines them with appropriate sound to make a fictive world in which events can be recognized and provided with interpretations that them-

selves constitute a plausible simulacrum of thought. Perhaps it is simply the dreamer's skill at constructing alternative realities that film makers and their public employ. Well, perhaps. But there are other possibilities. Some people would say that films are actually lifelike in most of the ways we have described.<sup>12</sup> Often we doubt whether we imagine or remember, whether we wake or dream; our experience of space varies with atmospheric and other conditions; time slows down when we are bored, speeds up when we are absorbed, seems to stand still when we are shocked. There is truth in this contention, but it needs to be qualified. It assumes that our experience is measured against some norm of physical space and time. But for us as we live it, lived time is natural and normal. The variations we spoke of correspond to our own involvement in events. In film, on the other hand, the changes occur in what is seen by an observer whose attention is assumed constant. The variations and dislocations in film space and time have nothing to do with that other phenomenon whereby a tedious film seems to take longer than an exciting one of the same footage. The truth that lies in this contention is perhaps no more than that our knowledge of how lived space and time can vary is among the things that enables us to accept the variations in film space and time as expressive narrative devices.

No doubt the true explanation of the intelligibility of the fictive worlds of film is the simple one we gave before. Filmgoers take films as narratives. A film maker works from a script, sometimes 'in his head' but usually written down, in which ample stage directions prescribe how each image should be interpreted. Filmgoers know this. They know that the film maker is up to something, and that if they are patient and attentive they stand a good chance of making out what it is. They start with the knowledge that the film is something made, and made for people to see, and (unless they have rashly exposed themselves to the assaults of the avant-garde) made for them to make sense of and enjoy. One can at least guess what the missing stage directions are.

It is comparatively seldom, after all, that we learn about any event in real life from hearing a straightforward account of it. More often we must actively piece our knowledge together from hints and allusions, received in no particular order and colored by error, bias, and fabrication. Perhaps the character of film is only that of our ordinary sources of information transposed into a single medium, with all the distortions, compressions, expansions, dislocations, ambiguities, gaps, false clues, and subjective interpretations transformed into properties of the moving image. Our ability not only to follow films but to live imaginatively in their worlds would then be no more than the realization in this novel and specialized field of our general capacity to live in a world largely reconstructed from unsatisfactory hearsay.

#### NOTES

1. This article is an altered and expanded version of an article on 'Basic Film Aesthetics,' *THE JOURNAL OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION*, 5.2, April 1971. Research was facilitated by a Leave Fellowship from the Canada Council.
2. The verb 'see' is not of course here used as an 'achievement' word, as in everyday intercourse it usually is. Perhaps what the camera records is indeed what one sees in this sense; it represents a sum of visual successes, as the end of the paragraph suggests in other terms.

## VISION AND DREAM IN THE CINEMA

3. That this is indeed the kind of authenticity a film has may be gathered from Truffaut's *L'ENFANT SAUVAGE*, in which an old-fashioned system of articulation (irls in and irls out) and old-fashioned-looking photography are used to give the impression that we are seeing something that really happened, but happened a long time ago. For a different account of photographic credibility, see Andre Bazin, *WHAT IS CINEMA?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 12-14.
4. Unless, of course, the viewer happens to be susceptible to vertigo. Different individuals will respond variously to a given stimulus, and so will the same person at different times; the statements in the text can only refer to a supposed 'average' or 'normal' response, that on which the film-maker seems to rely for the success of his devices.
5. This is not an isolated spatial phenomenon, but is connected with our overall acceptance or rejection of the film's world. A comparable polarity was observed in connection with stage reality by the German psychological aestheticians of the late nineteenth century.
6. Analytically minded philosophers may ask, 'The same WHAT? The "same" in what sense?' The same dream entity; and the sameness, and perhaps even the sense of the word 'some,' are peculiar respectively to dreams and to talk about dreams.
7. This device would then be analogous to that whereby in *POTEMKIN* a young sailor's action in smashing a dish is protracted in time by being split up between a number of shots, each of which begins at a moment earlier than that in which the previous shot ends.
8. I am told that the regular use of camera motion as a creative resource was established by Murnau in *THE LAST LAUGH* (1924).
9. Cameras may also be bounced, joggled, rotated on their focal axes etc.; but never mind about that.
10. This non-existence of the offstage world forms the theme of Tom Stoppard's play *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*.
11. Conversely, theater has a way of achieving temporal plasticity that cinema lacks, by exploiting the unreality of the offstage world: in theater, but not in cinema, unseen actions are often performed in the course of a scene in an impossible short time, without any sense of incongruity.
12. 'Resnais aims to construct a purely mental time and space and to follow the mind which goes faster, or skips, doubles back, lingers, repeats, and creates imaginary scenes, parallels and possibilities.' — Ralph Stephenson and J. Debrix, *THE CINEMA AS ART* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 106, speaking of *L'ANNEE DERNIERE A MARIENBAD*. This account is acceptable if the authors are thinking specifically of *DAYDREAMING* as the paradigm of mental activity. Otherwise, they (and perhaps Resnais and Robbe Grillet) are making the fundamental mistake of omitting what since Brentano has been called the 'intentionality' of thought. A mental image is not just a picture floating before the mind's eye: it is always essential to it that it is related in a specific way to some real or fictive entity, it is always a desire for, or in some other such definite way ABOUT, something or other.