The Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema

AUGUST 15, 2013

Martin Scorsese

Everett Collection

Robert Donat in The Magic Box*, 1951*

In the film *The Magic Box*, which was made in England in 1950, the great English actor Robert Donat plays William Friese-Greene—one of the people who invented movies. *The Magic Box* was packed with guest stars. It was made for an event called the Festival of Britain. You had about fifty or sixty of the biggest actors in England at the time, all doing for the most part little cameos, including the man who played the policeman—that was Sir Laurence Olivier.

I saw this picture for the first time with my father. I was eight years old. I've never really gotten over the impact that it had. I believe this is what ignited in me the wonder of cinema, and the obsession—with watching movies, making them, inventing them.

Friese-Greene gives everything of himself to the movies, and he dies a pauper. If you know the full story of his life and its end, the line in the film about the invention of the movies—"You must be a very happy man, Mr.

Friese-Greene"—of course is ironic, but in some ways it's also true because he's followed his obsession all the way. So it's both disturbing and inspiring. I was very young. I didn't put this into words at the time, but I sensed these things and I saw them up there on the screen.

My parents had a good reason for taking me to the movies all the time, because I had been sick with asthma since I was three years old and I apparently couldn't do any sports, or that's what they told me. But my mother and father did love the movies. They weren't in the habit of reading—that didn't really exist where I came from—and so we connected through the movies.

And I realize now that the warmth of that connection with my family and with the images on the screen gave me something very precious. We were experiencing something fundamental together. We were living through the emotional truths on the screen, often in coded form, which these films from the 1940s and 1950s sometimes expressed in small things: gestures, glances, reactions between the characters, light, shadow. These were things that we normally couldn't discuss or wouldn't discuss or even acknowledge in our lives.

And that's actually part of the wonder. Whenever I hear people dismiss movies as "fantasy" and make a hard distinction between film and life, I think to myself that it's just a way of avoiding the power of cinema. Of course it's not life—it's the invocation of life, it's in an ongoing dialogue with life.

Frank Capra said, "Film is a disease." I caught the disease early on. I felt it whenever I walked up to the ticket booth with my mother or my father or my brother. You'd go through the doors, up the thick carpet, past the popcorn stand that had that wonderful smell—then to the ticket taker, and then in some of the old theaters there would be another set of doors with little windows and you'd get a glimpse of something magical happening up there on the screen, something special. And as we entered, for me it was like entering a sacred space, a kind of sanctuary where the living world around me seemed to be recreated and played out.

What was it about cinema? What was so special about it? I think I've discovered some of my own answers to that question a little bit at a time over the years.

First of all, there's light.

Light is at the beginning of cinema, of course. It's fundamental—because cinema is created with light, and it's still best seen projected in dark rooms, where it's the only source of light. But light is also at the beginning of everything. Most creation myths start with darkness, and then the real beginning comes with light—which means the creation of forms. Which leads to distinguishing one thing from another, and ourselves from the rest of the world. Recognizing patterns, similarities, differences, naming things—interpreting the world. Metaphors—seeing one thing "in light of" something else. Becoming "enlightened." Light is at the core of who we are and how we understand ourselves.

And then, there's movement…

I remember when I was about five or six, someone projected a 16mm cartoon and I was allowed to look inside the projector. I saw these little still images passing mechanically through the gate at a very steady rate of speed. In the gate they were upside down, but they were moving, and on the screen they came out right side up, moving. At least there was the sensation of movement. But it was more than that. Something clicked, right then and there. "Pieces of time"—that's how James Stewart defined movies in a conversation with Peter

Bogdanovich. That wonder I felt when I saw these little figures move—that's what Laurence Olivier feels when he watches those first moving images in that scene from *The Magic Box*.

The desire to make images move, the need to capture movement, seemed to be with us 30,000 years ago in the cave paintings at Chauvet—in one image a bison appears to have multiple sets of legs, and perhaps that was the artist's way of creating the impression of movement. I think this need to recreate movement is a mystical urge. It's an attempt to capture the mystery of who and what we are, and then to contemplate that mystery.

A film made by Thomas Edison of boxing cats, 1894 ***(look up video on YouTube if you like)***

Which brings us to the film of boxing cats illustrated here, one of the lesser-known scenes that Thomas Edison recorded with his Kinetograph in his Black Maria studio in New Jersey in 1894. Edison, of course, was one of the people who invented film. There's been a lot of debate about who really invented film—there was Edison, the Lumière brothers in France, Friese-Greene and R.W. Paul in England. And actually you can go back to a man named Louis Le Prince who shot a little home movie in 1888.

And then you could go back even further to the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge, which were made in the 1870s and 1880s. He would set a number of still cameras side by side and then he'd trigger them to take photos in succession, of people and animals in motion. His employer Leland Stanford challenged him to show that all four of a horse's hooves leave the ground when the horse is running. Muybridge proved they did.

Does cinema really begin with Muybridge? Should we go all the way back to the cave paintings? In his novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, Thomas Mann writes:

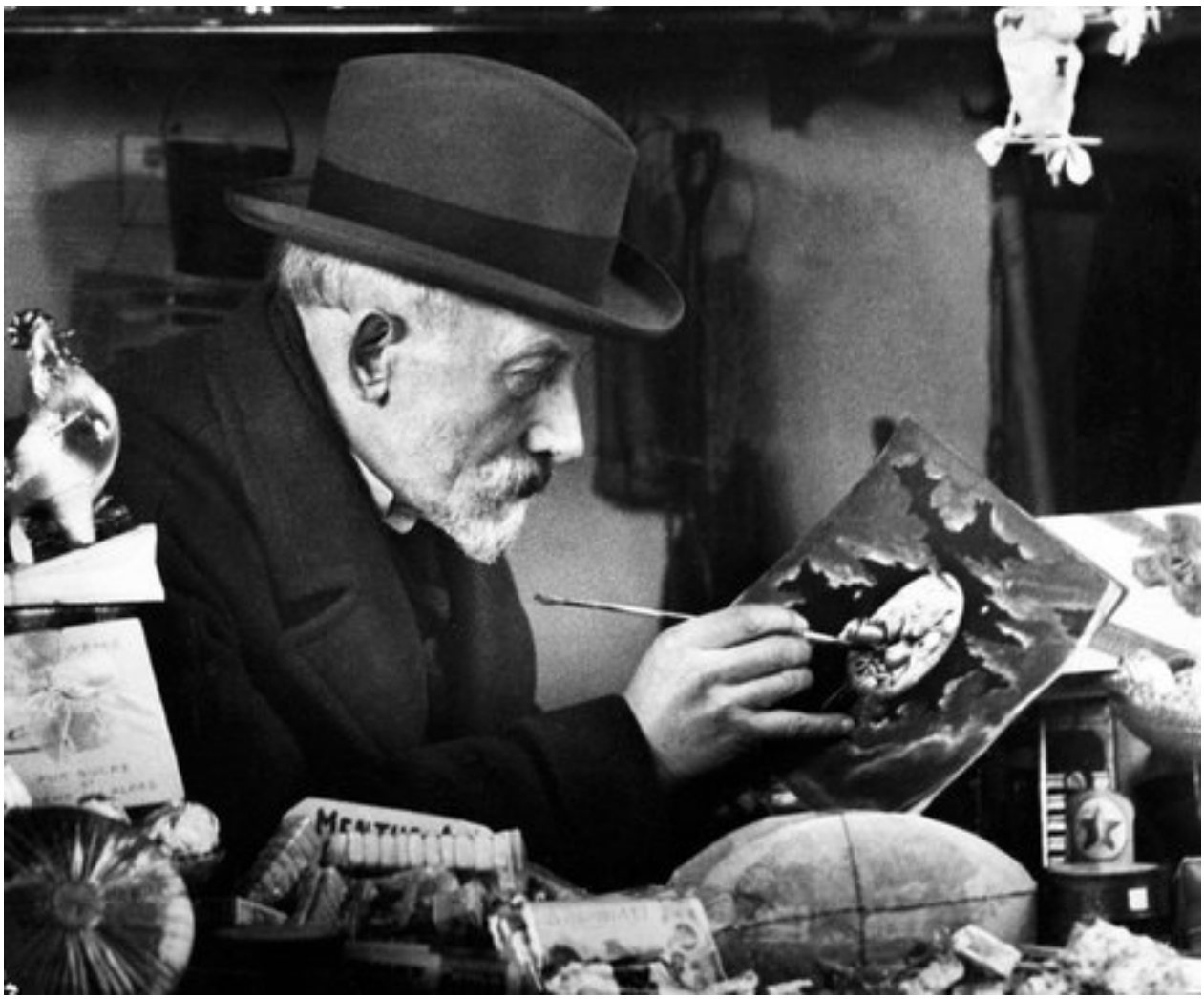
> The deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

All beginnings are unfathomable—the beginning of human history, the beginning of cinema.

A film by the Lumière brothers of a train arriving at a station in France is commonly recognized as the first publicly projected film. It was shot in 1895. When you watch it, it really is 1895. The way they dress and the way they move—it's now and it's then, at the same time. And that's the third aspect of cinema that makes it so uniquely powerful—it's the element of time. Again, pieces of time.

When we made the movie *Hugo* (2011), we went back and tried to recreate that first screening, when people were so startled by the image of an oncoming train that they jumped back. They thought the train was going to hit them.

When we studied the Lumière film, we could see right away that it was very different from the Edison films. The Lumière brothers weren't just setting up the camera to record events or scenes. This film is composed. When you study it, you can see how carefully they placed the camera, the thought that went into what was in the frame and what was left out of the frame, the distance between the camera and the train, the height of the camera, the angle of the camera—what's interesting is that if the camera had been placed even a little bit differently, the audience probably wouldn't have reacted the way it did.



Photofest

Georges Méliès, circa 1929, with a painting for his 1902 film A Trip to the Moon

Georges Méliès, whose contribution to early cinema is at the core of *Hugo*, began as a magician and his pictures were made to be a part of his live magic act. He created trick photography and astonishing handmade special effects, and in so doing he remade reality—the screen in his pictures is like a magic cabinet of curiosities and wonders.

Over the years, the Lumières and Méliès have been consistently portrayed as opposites—the idea is that one filmed reality and the other created special effects. Of course this kind of distinction is made all the time—it's a way of simplifying history. But in essence they were both heading in the same direction, just taking different roads—they were taking reality and interpreting it, reshaping it, and trying to find meaning in it.

And then, everything was taken further with the cut. Who made the first cut from one image to another—meaning a shift from one vantage point to another with the understanding that we're still within one continuous action? Again, to quote Thomas Mann—"unfathomable." One of the earliest and most famous examples of a cut is in Edwin S. Porter's 1903 milestone film *The Great Train Robbery*. Even though we cut from the interior of the car to the exterior, we know we're in one unbroken action.

A few years later, there was a remarkable film called *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, one of the dozens of one-reel films that D.W. Griffith made in 1912. It's commonly referred to as the first gangster film, and actually it's a great Lower East Side New York street film, despite the fact that it was shot in Fort Lee, New Jersey. There's a very famous scene in which the gangsters move along a wall, each one slowly approaching the camera and coming into dramatic close-up before they exit the frame. And in this scene they're crossing quite a bit of space before they get to Pig Alley, which is in fact a recreation of a famous Jacob Riis photo of Bandit's Roost, but you're not seeing them cross that space on the screen. You're seeing it all in your mind's eye, you're inferring it. And this is the fourth aspect of cinema that's so special. That inference. The image in the mind's eye.

For me it's where the obsession began. It's what keeps me going, it never fails to excite me. Because you take one shot, you put it together with another shot, and you experience a third image in your mind's eye that doesn't really exist in those two other images. The Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein wrote about this, and it was at the heart of what he did in his own films. This is what fascinates me—sometimes it's frustrating, but always exciting—if you change the timing of the cut even slightly, by just a few frames, or even one frame, then that third image in your mind's eye changes too. And that has been called, appropriately, I believe, film language.

In 1916, D.W. Griffith made a picture—an epic—called *Intolerance*, in part as an act of atonement for the racism in *The Birth of a Nation*. *Intolerance* ran about three hours and Griffith goes much further with the idea of the cut here: he shifts between four different stories—the massacre of the Huguenots, the passion of Christ, the fall of Babylon, and a modern story set in 1916 about conflicts between rich and poor Americans. At the end of the picture, Griffith cut between the different climaxes of these different stories—he cross-cut through time, something that had never been done before. He tied together images not for narrative purposes but to illustrate a thesis: in this case, the thesis was that intolerance has existed throughout the ages and that it is always destructive. Eisenstein later wrote about this kind of editing and gave it a name—he called it "intellectual montage."

For the writers and commentators who were very suspicious of movies—because after all they did start as a Nickelodeon storefront attraction—this was the element that signified film as an art form. But of course it already *was* an art form—one that started with the Lumières and Méliès and Porter. This was just another, logical step in the development of the language of cinema.

That language has taken us in many directions, from the pure abstraction of the extraordinary avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage to a very well done commercial by the visual artist and filmmaker Mike Mills, made for an audience that's seen thousands of commercials—the images come at you so fast that you have to make the connections after the fact.

Or consider the famous Stargate sequence from Stanley Kubrick's monumental*2001: A Space Odyssey*. Narrative, abstraction, speed, movement, stillness, life, death—they're all up there. Again we find ourselves back at that mystical urge—to explore, to create movement, to go faster and faster, and maybe find some kind of peace at the heart of it, a state of pure being.

But the cinema we're talking about here—Edison, the Lumière brothers, Méliès, Porter, all the way through Griffith and on to Kubrick—that's really almost gone. It's been overwhelmed by moving images coming at us all the time and absolutely everywhere, even faster than the visions coming at the astronaut in the Kubrick picture. And we have no choice but to treat all these moving images coming at us as a language. We need to be able to understand what we're seeing and find the tools to sort it all out.

We certainly agree now that verbal literacy is necessary. But a couple of thousand years ago, Socrates actually disagreed. His argument was almost identical to the arguments of people today who object to the Internet, who think that it's a sorry replacement for real research in a library. In the dialogue with Phaedrus, Socrates worries that writing and reading will actually lead to the student not truly knowing—that once people stop memorizing and start writing and reading, they're in danger of cultivating the mere appearance of wisdom rather than the real thing.

Now we take reading and writing for granted but the same kinds of questions are coming up around moving images: Are they harming us? Are they causing us to abandon written language?

We're face to face with images all the time in a way that we never have been before. And that's why I believe we need to stress visual literacy in our schools. Young people need to understand that not all images are there to be consumed like fast food and then forgotten—we need to educate them to understand the difference between moving images that engage their humanity and their intelligence, and moving images that are just selling them something.

As Steve Apkon, the film producer and founder of the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, New York, points out in his new book *The Age of the Image*,* the distinction between verbal and visual literacy needs to be done away with, along with the tired old arguments about the word and the image and which is more important. They're both important. They're both fundamental. Both take us back to the core of who we are. When you look at ancient writing, words and images are almost indistinguishable. In fact, words are images, they're symbols. Written Chinese and Japanese still seem like pictographic languages. And at a certain point—exactly when is "unfathomable"—words and images diverged, like two rivers, or two different paths to understanding.

In the end, there really is only literacy.

Paramount Pictures/Photofest

Kim Novak and James Stewart in Vertigo*, 1958*

The American film critic Manny Farber said that every movie transmits theDNA of its time. One of the really great science fiction films of the golden era of American cinema is Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It was made in 1951, in the early years of the cold war, and it has the tension, the paranoia, the fear of nuclear disaster and the end of life on planet earth, and a million other elements that are more difficult to put into words. These elements have to do with the play of light and shadow, the emotional and psychological interplay between the characters, the atmosphere of the time woven into the action, all the choices that were made behind the camera that resulted in the immediate film experience for viewers like myself and my parents. These are the aspects of a film that reveal themselves in passing, the things that bring the movie to life for the viewer. And the experience becomes even richer when you explore these elements more closely.
Someone born today will see the picture with completely different eyes and a whole other frame of reference, different values, uninhibited by the biases of the time when it was made. You see the world through your own time—which means that some values disappear, and some values come into closer focus. Same film, same images, but in the case of a great film the power—a timeless power that really can't be articulated—is there even when the context has completely changed.

But in order to experience something and find new values in it, the work has to be there in the first place—you have to preserve it. All of it. Archaeologists have made many discoveries by studying what we throw away, the refuse of earlier civilizations, the things that people considered expendable and that accidentally survived.

For example, there's a Sumerian tablet that is not a poem, not a legend, but actually a record of livestock—a balance sheet of business transactions. Miraculously, it's been preserved for centuries, first under layers of earth and now in a climate-controlled environment. When we find objects like this, we immediately take great care with them.

We have to do the same thing with film. But film isn't made of stone. Until recently it was all made of celluloid—thin strips of nitrocellulose, the first plastic compound. For the first few decades of cinema, preservation wasn't even discussed—it was something that happened by accident. Some of the most celebrated movies were the victims of their own popularity. In certain cases, every time they were rereleased, the prints were made from their original negatives, and in the process those negatives became degraded, hardly usable.

It wasn't so long ago that nitrate films were melted down just for the silver content. Prints of films made in the 1970s and 1980s were recycled to make guitar picks and plastic heels for shoes. That's a disturbing thought—just as disturbing as knowing that many of those extraordinary glass photographic plates taken of the Civil War not long after the birth of photography were later sold to gardeners for building greenhouses. Whatever plates survived are now in the Library of Congress.

We have to look beyond the officially honored, recognized, and enshrined, and preserve everything systematically. At this point in film history, many people have seen a 1958 picture directed by Alfred Hitchcock called *Vertigo*. When the film came out some people liked it, some didn't, and then it just went away. Even before it came out, it was classified as another picture from the Master of Suspense and that was it, end of story. Almost every year at that time, there was a new Hitchcock picture—it was almost like a franchise.

At a certain point, there was a reevaluation of Hitchcock, thanks to the critics in France who later became the directors of the French New Wave, and to the American critic Andrew Sarris. They all enhanced our vision of cinema and helped us to understand the idea of authorship *behind* the camera. When the idea of film language

started to be taken seriously, so did Hitchcock, who seemed to have an innate sense of visual storytelling. And the more closely you looked at his pictures, the richer and more emotionally complex they became.

For many years, it was extremely difficult to see *Vertigo*. When it came back into circulation, in 1983, along with four other Hitchcock films that had been held back, the color was completely wrong. The color scheme of *Vertigo* is extremely unusual, and this was a major disappointment. In the meantime, the elements—the original picture and sound negatives—needed serious attention.

Ten years later, Bob Harris and Jim Katz did a full-scale restoration for Universal. By that time, the elements were decaying and severely damaged. But at least a major restoration was done. As the years went by, more and more people saw*Vertigo* and came to appreciate its hypnotic beauty and very strange, obsessive focus.

As in the case of many great films, maybe all of them, we don't keep going back for the plot. *Vertigo* is a matter of mood as much as it's a matter of storytelling—the special mood of San Francisco where the past is eerily alive and around you at all times, the mist in the air from the Pacific that refracts the light, the unease of the hero played by James Stewart, Bernard Herrmann's haunting score. As the film critic B. Kite wrote, you haven't really seen *Vertigo* until you've seen it *again*. For those of you who haven't seen it even once, when you do, you'll know what I mean.

Every decade, the British film magazine *Sight and Sound* conducts a poll of critics and filmmakers from around the world and asks them to list what they think are the ten greatest films of all time. Then they tally the results and publish them. In 1952, number one was Vittorio de Sica's great Italian Neorealist picture *Bicycle Thieves*. Ten years later, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* was at the top of the list. It stayed there for the next forty years. Last year, it was displaced by a movie that came and went in 1958, and that came very, very close to being lost to us forever:*Vertigo*. And by the way, so did *Citizen Kane*—the original negative was burned in a fire in the mid-1970s in Los Angeles.

So not only do we have to preserve everything, but most importantly, we can't afford to let ourselves be guided by contemporary cultural standards—particularly now. There was a time when the average person wasn't even aware of box office grosses. But since the 1980s, it's become a kind of sport—and really, a form of judgment. It culturally trivializes film.

And for young people today, that's what they know. Who made the most money? Who was the most popular? Who is the most popular now, as opposed to last year, or last month, or last week? Now, the cycles of popularity are down to a matter of hours, minutes, seconds, and the work that's been created out of seriousness and real passion is lumped together with the work that hasn't.

We have to remember: we may think we know what's going to last and what isn't. We may feel absolutely sure of ourselves, but we really don't know, we *can't*know. We have to remember *Vertigo*, and the Civil War plates, and that Sumerian tablet. And we also have to remember that *Moby-Dick* sold very few copies when it was printed in 1851, that many of the copies that weren't sold were destroyed in a warehouse fire, that it was dismissed by many, and that Herman Melville's greatest novel, one of the greatest works in literature, was only reclaimed in the 1920s.

Just as we've learned to take pride in our poets and writers, in jazz and the blues, we need to take pride in our cinema, our great American art form. Granted, we weren't the only ones who invented the movies. We certainly weren't the only ones who made great films in the twentieth century, but to a large extent the art of cinema and its development have been linked to us, to our country. That's a big responsibility. And we need to

say to ourselves that the moment has come when we have to treat every last moving image as reverently and respectfully as the oldest book in the Library of Congress.

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   Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. ↩