



INTRODUCTION TO FILM STUDIES

If you've picked up this book to learn something about what it means to study film, you already know in large measure what cinema is: you've been watching movies since you first toddled out to the family television set, or since you braved your first excursion to a multiplex matinee. If you're old enough, you may have witnessed formats come and go. Perhaps you thrilled in your first chance to watch a beloved film at home on video, rewinding the tape over and again to watch Gene Kelly singin' in the rain or Greta Garbo unleashing her famous first spoken line in *Anna Christie* (Jacques Feyder, 1931): "Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby." DVDs, now repackaged with all of the "extras" that persuade us to replace those VHS tapes, may soon go the way of CDs, consigned right into the dustbin that receives the detritus of digital culture. Who knows? You may be born into a world in which cinema streams in bits onto our computer screens more than it lights up the screens of our neighborhood theaters.

No matter your point of entry into the matrix, welcome. Cinema lives and has always lived in multiple forms, some slowly dying, some newly emerging. In the late nineteenth century, cinema itself emerged from a diverse world of toys and machines that created the

illusion of movement. Christened with perversely scientific names, these Phenakistoscopes, Thaumatropes, Zoetropes, and Praxinoscopes (all versions of spinning motion toys) competed with magic lantern projections and panoramas to entertain audiences with dizzying perspectives and steaming locomotives, acrobatic feats and elaborate stories. Forms of magic lanterns collected at the George Eastman House in Rochester (Lampascopes, Kodiopticons, Moviegraphs, and even a contraption dubbed "Le Galerie Gothique") testify to the ingenuity and variety of "pre-cinema." Some project, throwing larger-than-life images from slides onto screens and surfaces. Others invite spectators into more private viewings, into simulacra of theaters or, as with the later Edison Kinetoscopes, into solitary "peep" shows of sequential images that suggest movement. Some exploit the ideas of sequence or series, while others concentrate on the fantastic and imaginary worlds of storytelling. Taken as a whole, they anticipate but don't quite cross the threshold of cinema's illusion of continuous movement.

Enter early photographic studies of motion. Eadweard Muybridge perfected the large-scale photographic panorama of San Francisco in 1878, a sequence of thirteen photographs taken at different moments that together offer the spectator a 360° view of the city from atop Nob Hill. As opposed to the painted panorama, which conceals or renders irrelevant issues of duration, the photographic series creates from many individual instants an illusion of continuity: "many hours of the day masquerading as a single supreme moment, like a film in which segments shot at various times are edited into a believable narrative" (Solnit 2003: 176). But it is Muybridge's later famous analysis of a trotting horse that transforms those possibilities for thinking about time and motion that led to cinema's creation. The story goes like this: California former governor, robber baron, and racing horse aficionado Leland Stanford wanted to know whether, in the course of a trotting horse's stride, all four hooves were ever off the ground at once, and he hired California's best photographer (though he was both an Englishman and a murderer – no causal relationship implied) to find out. Muybridge's feat was not only to string threads across the race track to be tripped by the trotting horse, each triggering a camera's shutter in turn, but actually to create images from these enormously quick exposures. Silhouettes of the horse, to give him his due named Occident, answered affirmatively

to Stanford's question, but the larger accomplishments, practical and philosophical, are his legacy (see Figure 1.1). First, Muybridge had to create what was in essence a film studio at the racetrack; to compensate for slow film speeds, he created a blindingly white environment for the horses to pass through, complete with distance markers and choice framings. Second, Muybridge fused technological development (of the triggers, shutters, chemistry) with the subjects he sought to photograph in order to invent a new medium, much as the cinema was to do in the decade following Muybridge's study for Stanford. But, third, Muybridge returned movement, and movement in a series that anticipates narrative, to photography:

Muybridge had reduced the narrative to its most basic element: the unfolding of motions in time and space. Most of his sequences depicted the events of a few seconds or less, and he boasted that the individual exposures were as brief as one two-thousandth of a second. By imposing stillness on its subjects, photography had represented the world as a world of objects. But now, in Muybridge's work, it was a world of

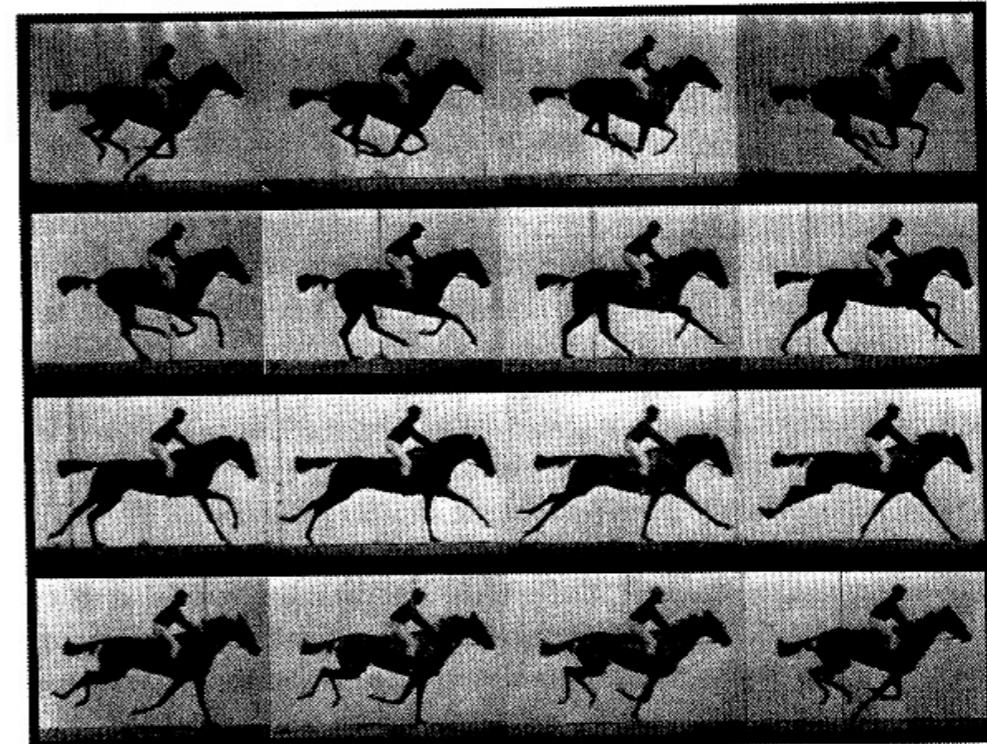


Figure 1.1: Eadweard Muybridge.
Source: The Kobal Collection.

processes again, for one picture showed a horse, but six pictures showed an act, a motion, an event. The subject of the pictures was not the images per se but the change from one to another, the change that represented time and motion more vividly, more urgently, than the slow motion of parades passing and buildings rising. It was a fundamental change in the nature of photography and of what could be represented.

(Solnit 2003: 194)

Muybridge was not alone in this exploration, but it was his work, alongside the “chronophotographic” camera of French photographer Etienne-Jules Marey, that suggested a way of thinking about time and motion through successive **frames**. Cameras equipped with a **shutter**, creating an interval of blackness in the exposure of each frame of film coated with a light-sensitive **emulsion**, recorded frame after frame (from ten to forty frames per second, or **fps**) of whatever lay before it; when projected, again with a shutter moving and at the same rate, the human eye perceives the individual frames as continuous motion, due to a still-baffling phenomenon scientists first called “**persistence of vision**” and tend now to call “persistent afterimages.” The cinema, then, arises truly from an interface: a technology of continuously moving still images and a process of perception on the part of the human spectator which readies him or her to receive this continuity as motion itself.

Thomas Edison’s Kinetograph and the Cinématographe of the Lumière brothers in France soon recorded our first films upon the principles and techniques Muybridge made concrete: more acrobats and strongmen, like the stock images of the “pre-cinema,” but also everyday images (the Lumière *actualités* of workers and babies) (see Figure 1.2). It was in the very interval between meeting Muybridge and meeting Marey, in fact, that Edison transferred his model for sound recording and playback to images:

He assigned the job of studying two apparatuses – one for the recording of images, baptized the Kinetograph, and the other for viewing them, named the Kinetoscope – to an employee with a passion for photography, the Englishman William Kennedy Laurie Dickson. The two men proceeded cautiously. Arriving in Paris for the Universal Exposition of 1889, Edison met Marey, who told him about the progress of his own work. Eventually, in order to record photographic views, the American



Figure 1.2: Lumière Brothers.
Source: The Kobal Collection.

inventor abandoned the cylinder for a celluloid roll with perforations (sprocket holes) along each side, through which a toothed sprocket wheel would run; this ensured a uniform feed.

(Toulet 1995: 35)

To feed his Kinetoscopes, machines for peep show or solitary viewing, Edison built a movie studio in what were then the wilds of New Jersey, dubbed the “Black Maria” for its resemblance to the New York paddy wagons called by that name. From here Edison “cranked out” (a phrase derived from the hand-cranking of the camera) film after film: “Horses jumping over hurdles, Niagara Falls with its torrents plunging to rocky depths, trains rushing headlong across the screen, cooch-girls dancing, vaudeville acrobats taking their falls with aplomb, parades, boats, and people hurrying or scurrying along,” summarized an early historian (Jacobs 1967 [1939]: 4). In France the Lumière brothers went a step further, perfecting a device that could record *and* project: the Cinématographe. Building upon Edison’s invention, the Lumières solved the remaining problem of how to ensure that the film advances at a uniform rate to resynthesize the

recorded image. The solution came to Louis Lumière in a dream: "In one night, my brother invented the Cinématographe," recalled Auguste (Toulet 1995: 40). Audiences responded hungrily and immediately to those images of ourselves "hurrying and scurrying" captured by mobile cameras and projected larger than life.

In the mid-1890s, in these first few years of cinema's life, congealed the essence of what we now mean when we refer to cinema. Above all, cinema is dynamic. It animates the world around us; it transports us to worlds we imagine or know only through images. Muybridge's experiments revealed the very idea of the interval: the transformation or mutation of the object from one state to the next, the essence of change itself. The inventor who soon became one of Edison's chief cinematographers, our passionate employee Englishman Dickson, dreamt deliciously of cinema's reach as early as 1895, when he and his wife wrote its first history:

No scene, however animated and extensive, but will eventually be within reproductive power. Martial evolutions, naval exercises, processions and countless kindred exhibitions will be recorded for the leisurely gratification of those who are debarred from attendance, or who desire to recall them. The invalid, the isolated country recluse, and the harassed business man can indulge in needed recreation, without undue expenditure, without fear of weather, without danger to raiment, elbows and toes, and without the sacrifice of health or important engagements. Not only our own resources but those of the entire world will be at our command, nay, we may even anticipate the time when sociable relations will be established between ourselves and the planetary system, and when the latest doings in Mars, Saturn and Venus will be recorded by enterprising kinetographic reporters.

(Dickson and Dickson 2000 [1895]: 51)

This took until 2005, when the first "cinematographer" of the Mars Rover mission received an Emmy Award nomination.

At the same time that we dream of cinema's reach, most of our films are literally dying: **prints** and **negatives** decomposing or bursting into flame, fading or melting into illegibility. Paolo Cherchi Usai, senior curator of the Motion Picture Department at George Eastman House and one of the leading figures in film preservation, elaborates on the philosophical, aesthetic and political

consequences of the proliferation of images in the current moment combined with the phenomenon of the ongoing death of cinema, which can result from physical and environmental factors:

In addition to the factors which can prevent its coming into being (malfunction of the apparatus, inadequate processing of the negative or its accidental exposure to light, human interference of various kinds), there is the host of physical and chemical agents affecting the image carrier: scratches or tears on the print caused by the projecting machine or its operator, curling of the film base as a result of a too intense exposure to the light source, colour alterations arising out of the film stock itself, environmental variables such as temperature and humidity. As soon as it is deposited on a matrix, the digital image is subject to a similar destiny; its causes may be different, but the effects are the same. *Chronicles* [read by Cherchi Usai] also mention catastrophes and extraordinary events such as fires, wars, floods, and destructive interventions from the makers themselves or the people who finance their activities.

(Cherchi Usai 2001: 13)

By his estimate, fully 80 percent of the films made during the silent era (until the mid-1920s) are lost (Cherchi Usai 2001: 122). In Cherchi Usai's view, loss pervades the film experience, too. It is a product of the physical reality of perception, in which we "watch" a black screen each time a shutter passes over the projector, in which we turn away from the image each time we blink (according to the level of humidity in the room), in which we may find ourselves distracted or bored, drawn into reveries other than those onscreen. This physicality of perception alerts us to the fact that each viewing of a film is an evanescent experience, archived in memory, consigned to the realm of the unseen. If preservationists reclaim some of what has been lost, they and we will never be able to assert full or final control over the visible world; we will only catch glimpses of it. Experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) is composed entirely of decaying archival footage, recording this process of loss. Seeking out footage filmed on highly flammable nitrate stock, Morrison painstakingly transferred this compilation of fragile images and set them to an original symphonic score: ghostlike figures (camels, dervishes) emerge out of the scratches, discolorations, and static to haunt us briefly before they yield to the texture of the film's surface.

BOX 1.1: THE UNITED STATES' LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

One treasure trove remains the United States' Library of Congress, which houses a very large film collection and makes available online over 400 early films, including those photographed by Dickson for Edison, through its American Memory collection.

SOME SAMPLE FILMS

General Lee's procession, Havana / Thomas A. Edison, Inc. (1899): A magnificent view of the Prado, from the balcony of the United States Club. The procession is headed by a troop of horsemen. Prominent among them is General Lee. Then come the soldiers, file after file and company after company; filling the broad avenue from curb to curb and as far as the eye can reach with marching men. It is the Seventh Army Corps. Great crowds of people fill the sidewalks; and through the trees that line the promenade in the middle of the Prado, are seen carriages and vehicles following the parade. The crowning event of the Spanish-American war! The great procession on Evacuation Day.

The boxing cats (Prof. Welton's) / Thomas A. Edison, Inc. (1894); producer, W.K.L. Dickson. A very interesting and amusing subject.

Edison kinetoscopic record of a sneeze, (January 7, 1894) / W.K.L. Dickson. Film made for publicity purposes, as a series of still photographs to accompany an article in *Harper's weekly*.

These films can be accessed through the Library of Congress website: www.loc.gov.

From its birth, then, until the present moment, cinema has assumed multiple guises and forms, circling into and out of sight, from its roots in the early motion of toys and machines: vaudeville-

style exhibition, the invention of the "talkies" (from the recording of sound on discs to accompany films to today's use of digital Dolby surround sound), various uses of color (from early cinema's hand-tinted frames to Technicolor and beyond), widescreen formats like Cinemascope and VistaVision, different film **gauges** (from 8mm for home movies to the theatrical standard of 35mm and IMAX films in 65mm), and various reproductive, transfer, and storage technologies. And from those early kisses, trains, and trips to the moon? We may have replaced May Irwin, the first kissing lady of the screen, with J-Lo and "Bollywood babe" Umita Goswami, but we're still traveling.

WHY STUDY FILM?

Cinema's dynamism, its capacity to arrange and rearrange time and motion, thus reveals its dimensions that are deeply social, historical, industrial, technological, philosophical, political, aesthetic, psychological, personal, and so forth. The aggregate of these multiple dimensions indeed *is* cinema (for individual works I reserve the word "film" or "movie"). For enthusiasts, cinema rewards study like few other objects precisely because its reach is so great that it is never exhausted, its scope so varied that one rarely finds oneself thinking along a single plane of thought. Cinema is about everything and always about itself. About each image, we might ask, as Reynold Humphries does of the films of Jean-Luc Godard, "What values and ideas are already contained in an image from the fact of its mere presence?" (Humphries 1975: 13). If various images presented by cinema delight or thrill, agitate or unnerve, those images further offer themselves for analysis of their combinatory logic, for example. The great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, like the British (and later Hollywood) legend Alfred Hitchcock, advocated a science of audience stimulation whereby the director could calibrate, with unfailing precision, the image to the intended audience effect. While Eisenstein called his theory of combination **montage**, seeking to continue cinematically the political agitation of the Bolshevik Revolution, Hitchcock pursued his own ideas toward the end of pure response, what he among many others called "pure cinema," in the genre of the thriller:

Ernie, do you realize what we are doing in this picture? The audience is like a giant organ that you and I are playing. At one moment we play this note and get this reaction, and then we play that chord and they react that way. And someday we won't even have to make a movie – there'll be electrodes implanted in their brains, and we'll just press different buttons and they'll go 'oooh' and 'aaah' and we'll frighten them, and make them laugh. Won't that be wonderful?

(Spoto 1984: 440)

Likewise, if particular stories emerge from particular socio-historical contexts, those narratives benefit from careful study of their correspondences and divergences with the moment or context, but also of how they *mold* their moments and contexts, sometimes indelibly. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) both studies American isolationism in the first years of the Second World War and argues against it through the "fictional" figure of Charles Foster Kane, living a life of self-imposed isolation amidst the relics of memory, himself based upon newspaper and film magnate William Randolph Hearst. The extraordinary Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene both comments on the politics of foreign aid to African countries in one of his best films, *Guelwaar* (1992), and structures his critique of political violence, religious intolerance, and patriarchal authority around its murderous effects (see Figure 1.3).

The study of cinema, in other words, is emphatically not an attempt to arrest its dynamism, to still it in order to subject it to scrutiny. It is rather the pursuit of cinema as an historical hydra, with tentacles reaching into all aspects of our individual and collective lives. This book traces several of those tentacles in each of its five subsequent chapters. It is not meant to be a comprehensive introductory textbook but rather an engaging and provocative accompaniment to what is for most people a lifelong relationship with the cinema. Toward that end, *Film Studies: The Basics* offers the reader multiple ways in which to situate, to enrich, and to enlarge his / her knowledge and experience of film; it hopes to be a companion as well as a guidebook to adventurous and wondrous viewing.

Chapter 2 offers a quick primer in the language of film analysis or the formal study of film (covering **cinematography**, ***mise-en-scène***, **editing**, sound, and narrative), demonstrating that some specialized terms are essential for understanding how films work



Figure 1.3: Ousmane Sembene.
Source: Films Terre Africaine, Les/The Kobal Collection.

and how films solicit our attention and responses. Some historical understanding of cinema is likewise crucial for understanding the medium today: how it not only reflects but shapes history. For the reader seeking a basic knowledge of the field of film studies, then, Chapters 2 and 3 essentially open up the arenas of film analysis and film history, both taught widely, if frequently separately, in many colleges and universities. Toward a second goal of offering a rudimentary introduction to further and more advanced intellectual issues and questions of film study, two chapters on production / exhibition and reception follow. These provide a more subjective assessment of the bread-and-butter issues of film studies as an academic discipline: the relation between art and industry, questions of genre and authorship, film censorship, film labor, technologies of cinema, exhibition histories and practices, stardom and fandom, publicity / marketing / promotion, spectatorship, film theories, and the like. The final chapter treats film in the context of emergent media and new academic configurations: digital culture, new media, visual studies. Together the chapters privilege the "why" of cinema study by surveying the "what" (substance), "when" (history), "who" (makers and viewers), and "how" (mechanisms) of film. My

overarching goal is to offer the reader an exposure to the infectious enthusiasm, if not mania, that is cinephilia, while simultaneously providing a grounding in the study of cinema that will make future viewing more rewarding.

WHAT IS FILM?

If I've made reference to your experience as first-time popcorn munchers at the multiplex, or as DVD buyers or renters, it has been to enlist you in the conviction that you have already some considerable experience with a variety of different types of films. You are an expert already, with a feel for what you like and don't like: a sense, for example, of when American director Tim Burton's aesthetic vision seems exciting (*Edward Scissorhands*, 1990) or shallow (*Planet of the Apes*, 2001), or a marked (and deserved) preference for Jet Li over Jackie Chan. You find yourself so saturated with the conventions of genre (drum beats signaling threat in suspense films, crescendos of violin strings accompanying romantic unions in melodramas, stock characters in B-westerns, and predictable scenarios in horror spinoffs) that you spend hours delighting in their violations or spoofing on *The Simpsons* or through sophisticated generic revisions in French *noir*. You live amidst cinema, just as a student of economics lives within an economy. Cinema, however, is just as naturalized as is our economy; that is, its dominant rules, its habitual narratives, its general visual styles, its mode of production, its sites of exhibition, its **tie-ins** (product placements, ties to other commodities like Burger King cups or toy dolls), even its running times, tend to be taken as given, as natural, as unquestioned, and as unchanging. The first step, then, in film education is to notice what we take to be given, true, "how things are," in order that we may confirm, revise, or reject those same assumptions when tested against the most expansive understanding of and inquiry into cinema.

"FILMS TELL STORIES"

Many films do tell stories, thanks to the overwhelming dominance of commercial **narrative** (a chain of events in a cause-effect rela-

tionship) cinema. Not so for much of early cinema: its musclemen and magic tricks hewed more to what film historian Tom Gunning calls the "cinema of attractions." Aping theatrical presentations, these films settle the camera into the chair of a hypothetical audience member and train it upon a proscenium, upon which unfolds some daredevil feat or anomalous bodily act. In a portrait of contortionist virility, the amazing Sandoz (Prussian Schwarzenegger-precursor Eugen Sandow) expands his chest from its normal forty-seven buff inches to an incredible sixty-one, and holds a platform of three horses, weighing about 3000 pounds, above his head. The goal? Extracting an unadulterated "awesome!" and nothing more. If virility is reserved for the likes of Sandow and Buffalo Bill, flexibility and plasticity characterize other immigrant groups: Chinese acrobats poke heads through crossed legs, while gun juggling and knife tumbling are done by "an illustrious Moor," Dickson tells us (Dickson and Dickson 2000 [1895]: 40). These early films, often a single **shot long** (a length of continuously exposed film), exploit the capacity of the cinema to *show*, to dazzle, to capture our attention. In the early years of cinema, Gunning reminds us, the cinema itself was the attraction, and it was linked as much to practices of storytelling as to the kinds of modern conceptions of time and space discovered in Muybridge's motion studies or in visual culture more largely. While narrative films emerged with the first decade of the cinema, then, and while they largely replaced these "attractions," elements of this cinema of attractions nonetheless persist in our day. With breathless enthusiasm and reverence for their technological accomplishments, we call them "special effects." (These, too, are the most frequent occasions for the question "How did they do that?," which we'll explore in Chapter 2.)

A second arena of film that is non-narrative we refer to as "experimental" or *avant-garde* cinema. A film, for example, called *The Flicker* (Tony Conrad, 1965) – a product of perhaps an excessive fondness in that decade for mind alteration and hallucinogens – alternates frames that are entirely white and entirely black for more than thirty minutes. The pulsating result, inducing anything from entrancement to nausea to rare epileptic seizures, inspired a wave of subsequent experimental makers to create non-narrative experiments in perception. Other experimental films reject narrative in favor of other forms of meaning-making, aesthetic effect, or

perceptual experience, and many simultaneously reject the idea of recording a latent image from a prior reality. Artists such as Bruce Connor (in his brilliant film on apocalyptic time, *A Movie* [1958]) or, more recently, Craig Baldwin (in his compilation agitprop films, including *Spectres of the Spectrum* [2000]) use **stock or found footage** in order to explore the social consequences of technological innovation and to challenge complacency. The late Stan Brakhage, one of the monumental experimental filmmakers of the twentieth century, attached moth wings (and a few bodies and blades of grass) to film leader and ran it through a projector in *Mothlight* (1963); early *avant-garde* makers such as Man Ray (in his "Rayograms" from the 1920s and 1930s) placed objects directly on film stock and exposed it to light, much as children do today with paper clips, photographic paper, and sunshine.

"MOST FILMS COME FROM HOLLYWOOD"

Dubbed the "dream factory" in an early study by anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, Hollywood has indeed become synonymous with the movies, and for good reason. American film, like other American commodities, floods the world's markets, whether due to discrepancies in copyright law, lack of funds directed toward national film industries or partnerships, the deregulation of markets, or globalized corporate structures. The largest film industry in the world is not, however, that of the United States. That distinction has for many years instead belonged to India, a country which produces 800 to 900 films per year, about a quarter of which, mainly Hindi superproductions involving huge stars and musical numbers, emerge from "Bollywood" (Bombay Hollywood), compared to dwindling numbers of productions in the United States. The regulation of American exports in countries such as China – the Chinese government's attempt to stimulate an indigenous industry – have not bred solutions, only further problems, such as widespread, overwhelming piracy of DVDs. While Anglophone audiences likely see Hong Kong action pictures or Japanese animation (called *anime*), few except city-dwellers with access to first-rate art or repertory theaters seek out "foreign" films in theatrical release, and their dearth contributes to

the persistent impression that Hollywood cinema dominates onscreen.

Even the assumption, moreover, that films emanate from "national" industries requires upending, and not simply because we find ourselves in an increasingly "globalized" industry, as I shall discuss at further length in Chapter 3. National film industries have never been "pure," even when they have been most forcefully tied to the nation-state, such as when the German or Italian film industries were overtly harnessed to the Nazi and Fascist regimes during the Second World War. Italian cinema under Mussolini produced propaganda, yes, but it also produced scores of melodramas, comedies, and films of social interest involving some of the extraordinarily talented figures, such as Vittorio DeSica, we tend now to associate with the Italian post-war cinematic movement called "neorealism." Later, when the American studio system began to collapse as it competed with television and squandered enormous amounts of money on **blockbusters** (expensive and widely promoted superproductions), the Italian cinema yoked itself to units devoted to American "international" productions. "Spaghetti" westerns were born of the union. Many of those films, especially those directed by Sergio Leone and featuring scores by Ennio Morricone, have become the stuff of film-buff legend; the famous line delivered by James Coburn in *A Fistful of Dynamite* (1971) before spectacularly blowing up his enemies – "Duck, you sucker" – is an anthem of their style, a peculiar amalgam of brazen violence and camp wit. There's much more to these films than style, however: *Fistful's* plot, centered around the mysterious entrance of an Irish Republican Army (IRA) explosive expert upon the scene of the Mexican Revolution, displays the extent to which ideas of America, that complicated promise of freedom amidst histories of social repression, circulate in fantastic spaces only movies can create. "Which way is America?" asks one of the film's characters, revealing a fusion of Europe and the Americas in which, as film scholar Marcia Landy observes, "most modern discourses of nation are unstable constructions" (Landy 1996: 69). Even "Hollywood" itself wobbles on its national foundation: from the works of émigré directors like Douglas Sirk (né Dietlef Sierck) and Fritz Lang to those of Paul Verhoeven (who directed *Basic Instinct* [1992]) and Jan de Bont (of *Speed* [1994] fame), the American cinema absorbs

and cannibalizes, and is absorbed and cannibalized in turn by, the rest of the world.

"FILMS STAR, WELL, STARS"

(A different assumption from the more complicated, and certainly equally contestable, assertion that stars, well, act.)

Overwhelmed by the mega-salaries commanded by the likes of Julia Roberts and Tom Cruise, we may feel licensed to assume that the institution of stardom in Hollywood (1) is alive and well and (2) has deviated only slightly from the system found there during its heyday, when Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks built their castle called "Pickfair" in the Hollywood Hills, or when the studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) boasted "more stars than there are in heaven." The story of the emergence of modern stardom offers a palpable index of that institution's pliability and discontinuities: as much as we now attribute early films to their innovative directors (like Thomas Edison, or Edwin S. Porter, or, later, D.W. Griffith), most films before 1910 or thereabouts instead were advertised entirely as products of **studios** (those complex techno-industrial entities that organized film labor through most of the twentieth century). We owe the idea of the modern female star to Carl Laemmle. He was the head of the Independent Motion Picture (IMP) company who launched an innovative promotional campaign in 1910 for a player named Florence Lawrence, known previously only as "the Biograph girl." One morning, so the story goes, readers of the St. Louis (Missouri) newspapers learned of the death of their beloved "Biograph girl" Florence Lawrence (the first time her name had been used publicly) in an unfortunate streetcar accident. Immediately thereafter, Laemmle responded with a blasting notice that the story (which, it should not surprise you, he himself had planted) was a vicious lie: "Miss Lawrence was not even in a streetcar accident, is in the best of health, will continue to appear in 'Imp' films, and very shortly some of the best work in her career is to be released" (Jacobs 1967 [1939]: 87). He followed up the stories with a visit from Florence Lawrence and the IMP's leading man, King Baggott, to put all doubts to rest, and adoring crowds, delighted that Florence Lawrence was alive, received them.

If Laemmle created America's first star, and perhaps America's first star couple in Lawrence-Baggott, he also gave form to the couple that is more strongly cemented in this story of stardom's birth: the star and the promotion / publicity apparatus upon which he or she rests. For stars, as Robert Sklar notes in his wonderful history of cinema, are mysteries explained by no single variable: "beauty, performance style, or promotional effort" (Sklar 1993: 72). While they may function as intimates, surrogates, or (to use the language of psychoanalysis that many film scholars have brought to images of stars) "ego-ideals," stars can never be divorced from their screen *personae* and from the myths sustained about them by the industry and its parasites. Just as the cinema is the ensemble of its texts and their contexts, stardom is this fusion, and it includes the motor of our desire and pleasure. Stardom is, in other words, a social phenomenon, wherein stars can function as condensations for social anxieties, screens for desire, allegories for transgression, fictions for racial identities, tools for industrial profiteering, models for gender and sexual behavior, and so forth. Promotion and publicity can fuel stars' careers as much as they can destroy them: the greatest star of the silent Chinese (*Shanghai*) cinema, Ruan Ling-yu, committed suicide at the age of twenty-four, after a tabloid article focusing on her relationships with her estranged husband and lover compared her personal status to that of the "fallen women" she, like Greta Garbo, frequently played. Experimental filmmaker and author Kenneth Anger's chronicle of stars' demises, *Hollywood Babylon* (1975), exemplifies the other side of this kind of tragedy: the pleasure in dirt associated with the fall of stars from the heavens.

If stardom as institution has some historical and social specificity, it does not, however, extend over cinema in its entirety. With regard to narrative film, movements such as Italian neorealism, as well as those cinemas associated with struggles for national liberation (such as "Third Cinema"), feminist cinema, and queer cinema, all depend upon the use of non-professional actors to explore everyday life and the lives of the people constituted in these social and political collectivities. British director Mike Leigh's process combines non-professional with professional actors to inhabit the lives of his frequently working-class characters, which Leigh develops, largely unscripted, over the course of

his films' production. Other processes rely upon the dynamics of ensemble casts of actors who know each other well and build improvisationally upon past work: the cycle of films directed by Christopher Guest (*Waiting for Guffman*, 1996; *Best in Show*, 2000; *A Mighty Wind*, 2003) could not provide better illustration of the hilarious fruits of this sort of collaboration. While a few documentary films may have created stars, such as Michael Moore's notoriety after documenting his pursuit of the General Motors chairman of the board in *Roger and Me* (1989), the practice of documentary tends to exploit stars mostly for their social authority; they can function as "talking heads" or provide "voice of God" narration (such as Morgan Freeman's in *March of the Penguins* [2005]) to convince audiences of a film's worth, thereby bolstering box office receipts. Finally, even those independent productions that have a strong narrative component frequently cannot afford stars whose names and reputations would bring them to distributors' and audiences' attention; many very fine projects founder in development purgatory, waiting for a star's interest, while just as many lousy ones careen through with green lights thanks to an agent's conviction.

"Films are in color." "Films last for about two hours." "Films are the products of directors' visions." "The best films receive Academy Awards." "The costs of films' production exceed the cost of their promotion." "Theater tickets generate movies' profit." "There are no great films from Poland (Mongolia, Ireland, Iran, Burkina Faso, . .)." "Films are better now than they were fifty years ago." And so on: whatever your assumptions, film study encourages you to explode them, test them, examine them, compare them, historicize them. Make way, that is, for what you're seeing and hearing and learning, so that you can overcome the alienation factor that results from a film failing to conform to your expectations, however expansive. If you remain open to what a film might be, you are a step further toward thinking about what cinema will have been or might become.

WHAT IS CINEMA?

This question is one made famous, and unanswerably so, by the film theorist and Ur-cinephile André Bazin. A two-volume study of

the title appeared in translation from the French in a 1971 paperback edition; in the hands of students, the well-thumbed, slim pink and lime green volumes were indispensable signifiers of a serious and weighty interest not in films, still less in the movies, but in "the Cinema." The term meant at least the following: a vast knowledge of film history and its canon, a well-honed aesthetic sensibility, an attentiveness to films' formal language and structures, a political understanding of post-war consciousness and the forces condensed in the moment shorthanded as May 1968 in France, a passion for the philosophy of cinema (and / or cinema as philosophy), and a commitment to one or several eccentric critical gestures, such as taking the view (contrary to Bazin's and to every known Truth) that Buster Keaton was a greater physical comedian than Charlie Chaplin, say, or elevating a producer such as Pandro S. Berman (belatedly recognized by the 1977 Irving Thalberg Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) to an exalted status, a joke, but not only a joke, Gore Vidal plays out in his novel *Myra Breckenridge*. The Cinema combined a feel for the high and the low, balancing the weightiest questions about how to imagine human freedom with the feeling of frenetic delight in a Mack Sennett chase or the one following upon a funeral in the René Clair short film *Entr'acte* (1924). The Cinema, in the sense of Bazin's query, was not just a way of taking seriously something others dismissed as pabulum or "mere" entertainment (although it was that to be sure), but also a way of asking, more deeply than most before or after him, after the ontology, the essence, of cinema as it relates to our very being. How do certain approaches to life and to social being find cinematic expression? How does cinema help us approach the mystery of the human, the "real," that element of our existence toward which we incline only asymptotically, without ever fully apprehending it?

Bazin's writings, begun during the Second World War and extended through his short life until the 1950s, when he founded the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, have been read and re-read by generations of film students. His biographer, Dudley Andrew, is right in my view to see his impact as awe inspiring:

André Bazin's impact on film art, as theorist and critic, is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer in

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this history of the cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit.

why is it used? (Bazin 1997: x)

In fact, Bazin was a kind of guru for those voracious students of cinema who became the leading directors of the French New Wave, such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut.

There is a danger, however, in simplifying his reflections on realism, which too readily become aligned with his fondness for the movement known as Italian neorealism, about which he wrote as it unfolded in Italy following the war, or his enthusiasm for the work of French director Jean Renoir (son of the Impressionist painter Pierre Auguste Renoir). In neorealism and in Renoir (but also in Orson Welles, William Wyler, and others), Bazin found something massive to push against, to test, to think about, which he called by the slippery and perhaps misleading name "realism." By this name, he referred to what is revealed by a style on a continuum at whose other pole is montage. At realism's end, the cinema is an art and practice of composition and contemplation; the director sets the image before the spectator, often through the long take (a shot of a relatively long duration) and deep space (the combination of deep focus, or maintaining many planes of action in focus simultaneously, with a set which allows the director to stage action on those many planes), whose active and curious gaze engages it and thereby finds it an avenue toward (not a "representation of") reality. Active, curious, intellectual, committed, open, fluid, engaged: these are the key words of this end of the continuum; but "realism," it must be stressed, does not designate its fulfillment in the "real," only a method for its approach, where "real" continues to stand for that kernel of the mystery of being we never access. At the other end of the continuum lies "montage," associated as we have seen with the work of Sergei Eisenstein in the (former) Soviet Union but also more generally with classical Hollywood cinema (explained at greater length in Chapter 2 and exemplified by D.W. Griffith, from whom Eisenstein learnt the rudiments of "analytical cutting"). Montage directs or restricts the viewer's attention through editing, limiting his / her capacity for contemplation, or for finding gaps or loose associations, by insisting upon meaning, supplying details, and otherwise didactically leading the way. As Bazin explains it in an essay on Wyler:

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The technique of analytical cutting tends to destroy in particular the ambiguity inherent in reality. It "subjectivizes" the event to an extreme, since each shot is the product of the director's bias. Analytical cutting implies not only a dramatic, emotional, or moral choice, but also, and more significantly, a judgment on reality itself.

(Bazin 1997: 8)

The problems with the extremes of the continuum become immediately clear, insofar that positioning any given film or filmmaker on this spectrum would lead to a judgment about the director's political / philosophical value: Rossellini (one of the giants of neorealism) good, Hitchcock bad. Or, more perniciously, Rossellini politically progressive *due to his cinematic style*, and Hitchcock politically retrogressive *due to his*. But the kernel of Bazin's insights into the philosophical and political (and social, historical, industrial, technological, aesthetic, psychological, personal – and I need to add here "religious") nature of cinematic expression, how it is able to or unable to seize our collective interest and help it coalesce into deep insight about what one grandly used to call the human condition, should not be lost in continued questions about what cinema *is*. While located quite specifically in the years and works of the post-war period, Bazin's thinking inaugurated an inquiry in the cinema as equal to, and perhaps greater than (given its social power), any serious intellectual and political project.

If Bazin wasn't always quick to complicate his own dichotomizing scheme, his students later continued to follow its strict logic, but with new objects at hand. The contributors to *Cahiers*, avid cinephiles who gorged themselves on American films at the Cinémathèque française as soon as the French government lifted bans on their import following the war, turned attention in the 1950s to those directors who they believed managed to express themselves despite the assembly-line nature of industrial filmmaking. Carrying the seed of Bazin's valuation of agonistic, dialectical approaches toward the ever-elusive "real," they found in the style of some Hollywood genre films a cinematic vision that cut against the grain of standardization, conformity, and routine or rote production. They elevated these directors to the status of authors, or *auteurs* in French, as opposed to those "hacks" (or *metteurs en scène* in French) who were seen merely to be grinding out the

already known. *Auteurs* found ways to "sign" their films, or, perhaps more accurately, the *Cahiers* writers found evidence for the Hollywood directors' signatures across bodies of their work, whether through attention to formal *motifs* (particularly those expressed through *mise-en-scène*, in the placement and movement of actors and objects within the frame), or, less frequently, through thematic preoccupations which nonetheless emerge from film style. When American film critics seized upon the French conception of film authorship, or the *politique des auteurs* (the notion that the director is ultimately able to express his – and it was uniformly gendered male – vision through the creative army at his disposal), they did so with a vengeance for taxonomy and hierarchy that dispensed with the care the *Cahiers* critics took to value the contributions of Hollywood to cinema more broadly understood. That is, the *Cahiers* contributors found art when they looked at Hollywood, art as valuable, "signed," and complex as the art cinema that emerged from Europe, Japan, India and elsewhere in the 1950s from director luminaries such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Satyajit Ray, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti, Andrei Wajda, Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati, and so on. And the struggle with the constraints of industrial production only upped the ante; whereas "art cinema" directors enjoyed total freedom and control, by comparison Hollywood directors labored under the boss they all called the Bottom Line. A western like *Stagecoach* (1939) or the later and far more folksy and racist epic *The Searchers* (1956) deserved close analysis and attention, then, for the director's capacity to make style speak through the tried and true formulae and conventions of classical cinema, thereby elevating John Ford to the *Cahiers* inner circle. And Ford especially, since he was the man who was so identified with genre films that when he introduced himself to Cecil B. DeMille (on the occasion of defending fellow director Joseph Mankiewicz against McCarthy-era charges of Communist sympathizing) he merely said, "My name's John Ford. I make Westerns" (Buscombe 1988: 344).

The legacy of the *Cahiers* writings is greater than some acknowledge, for that group insisted in important ways upon the value of commercial cinema, if only some of it, as meaningful and worthy of careful analysis for its contributions to an expressive repertoire and form of collective life. If the tendency of later critical

assessments of the *politique des auteurs* has been understandably to bristle at the dichotomizing and dismissive hierarchies of "author / hack," "trash / art," "style / genre" that emerge from these analyses, those who engage with the popular commercial cinema as an object of study nonetheless owe some debt to Bazin and to their writings. It should not surprise us that Truffaut and Godard, like Quentin Tarantino a few decades later, gobbled up as much generic fare as possible, only to adopt it, transmute it, adapt it, revise it toward their own ends in the New Wave, for that group of filmmakers were as interested in Bazin was in a cinema of thought. Indeed, French theorist Gilles Deleuze finds in Godard something akin to Romanticism: "grasping the intolerable or unbearable, the empire of poverty, and thereby becoming visionary, to produce a means of knowledge and action out of pure vision" (Deleuze 1989: 18).

What is cinema, then, if not an opportunity for thought? To discover principles of form, to trace something of its history, to grasp its power to transform: these are the subjects of the following chapters.

BOX 1.2: SUMMARY

From its inception in the late nineteenth century, film has been a dynamic medium, put to uses other than those of the commercial narrative form. "The Cinema" designates the ensemble of films as they engage with the world of spectators, as we, in other words, respond in the broadest possible sense to what we see and hear. To study film, then, is to test our assumptions about what we take films to be, about what we might expect to see and hear, and to take films seriously as revealing something, again in the broadest possible sense, about who we have been, who we are, and who we might become. Commercial fare, like *Dude, Where's My Car* (2000), and radical documentary, like *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (from the same year and available to stream online), belong to the cinema, all of which opens itself to study.