A Note on the Film

Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985)

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HERE IS A NEW ART. For a few decades it seemed like nothing more than a new technical device in the sphere of drama, a new way of preserving and retailing dramatic performances. But today its development has already belied this assumption. The screen is not a stage, and what is created in the conception and realization of a film is not a play. It is too early to systematize any theory of this new art, but even in its present pristine state it exhibits—quite beyond any doubt, I think—not only a new technique, but a new poetic mode.

Much of the material for the following reflections was collected by four of my former seminar students,[1] at Columbia Teachers College, who have kindly permitted me to use their findings. I am likewise indebted to Mr. Robert W. Sowers, who (also as a member of that seminar) made a study of photography that provided at least one valuable idea, namely that photographs, no matter how posed, cut, or touched up, must *seem factual*, or as he called it, "authentic." I shall return later to that suggestion.

[1] Messrs. Joseph-Pattison, Louis Forsdale, William Hoth, and Mrs. Virginia E. Allen. Mr. Hoth is now Instructor in English at Cortland (New York) State Teachers College; the other three are members of the Columbia Teachers College staff.

The significant points, for my purposes, that were demonstrated by the four collaborating members were (1) that the structure of a motion picture is not that of drama, and indeed lies closer to narrative than to drama; and (2) that its artistic potentialities became evident only when the moving camera was introduced.

The moving camera divorced the screen from the stage. The straightforward photographing of stage action, formerly viewed as the only artistic possibility of the film, henceforth appeared as a special technique. The screen actor is not governed by the stage, nor by the conventions of the theater, he has his own realm and conventions; indeed, there may be no "actor" at all. The documentary film is a pregnant invention. The cartoon does not even involve persons merely "behaving."

The fact that the moving picture could develop to a fairly high degree as a silent art, in which speech had to be reduced and concentrated into brief, well-spaced captions, was another indication that it was not simply drama. It used pantomime, and the first aestheticians of the film considered it as essentially pantomime. But it is not pantomime; it swallowed that ancient popular art as it swallowed the photograph.

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One of the most striking characteristics of this new art is that it seems to be omnivorous, able to assimilate the most diverse materials and turn them into elements of its own. With every new invention—montage, the sound track, Technicolor—its devotees have raised a cry of fear that now its "art" must be lost. Since every such novelty is, of course, promptly exploited before it is even technically perfected, and flaunted in its rawest state, as a popular sensation, in the flood of meaningless compositions that steadily supplies the show business, there is usually a tidal wave of particularly bad rubbish in association with every important advance. But the art goes on. It swallows everything: dancing, skating, drama, panorama, cartooning, music (it almost always requires music).

Therewithal it remains a poetic art. But it is not any poetic art we have known before; it makes the primary illusion—virtual history—in its own mode.

This is, essentially, *the dream mode*. I do not mean that it copies dream, or puts one into a daydream. Not at all; no more than literature invokes memory, or makes us believe that *we* are remembering. An art mode is *a mode of appearance*. Fiction is "like" memory in that it is projected to compose a finished experiential form, a "past"—not the reader's past, nor the writer's, though the latter may make a claim to it (that, as well as the use of actual memory as a model, is a literary device). Drama is "like" action in being causal, creating a total imminent experience, a personal "future" or Destiny. Cinema is "like" dream in the mode of its presentation: it creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition. That is the mode of dream.

The most noteworthy formal characteristic of dream is that the dreamer is always at the center of it. Places shift, persons act and speak, or change or fade—facts emerge, situations grow, objects come into view with strange importance, ordinary things infinitely

valuable or horrible, and they may be superseded by others that are related to them essentially by feeling, not by natural proximity. But the dreamer is always "there," his relation is, so to speak, equidistant from all events. Things may occur around him or unroll before his eyes; he may act or want to act, or suffer or contemplate; but the *immediacy* of everything in a dream is the same for him.

This aesthetic peculiarity, this relation to things perceived, characterizes the *dream mode*: it is this that the moving picture takes over, and whereby it creates a virtual present. In its relation to the images, actions, events, that constitute the story, the camera is in the place of the dreamer.

But the camera *is* not a dreamer. We are usually agents in a dream. The camera (and its complement, the sound track) is not itself in the picture. It is the mind's eye and nothing more. Neither is the picture (if it is art) likely to be dreamlike in its structure. It is a poetic composition, coherent, organic, governed by a definitely conceived feeling, not dictated by actual emotional pressures.

The basic abstraction whereby virtual history is created in the dream mode is immediacy of experience, "givenness," or as Mr. Sowers calls it, "authenticity." This is what the art of the film abstracts from actuality, from our actual dreaming.

The percipient of a moving picture sees with the camera; his standpoint moves with it, his mind is pervasively present. The camera is his eye (as the microphone is his ear—and there is no reason why a mind's eye and a mind's ear must always stay together). *He takes the place of the dreamer*, but in a perfectly objectified dream—that is, he is not in the story. The work is the appearance of a dream, a unified, continuously passing, significant *apparition*.

Conceived in this way, a good moving picture is a work of art by all the standards that apply to art as such. Sergei Eisenstein speaks of good and bad films as, respectively, "vital" and "lifeless"[2]; speaks of photographic shots as "elements,"[3] which combine into "images," which are "objectively unpresentable" (I would call them poetic impressions), but are greater elements compounded of "representations," whether by montage or symbolic acting or any other means.[4] The whole is governed by the "initial general image which originally hovered before the creative artist"[5]—the matrix, the commanding form; and it is this (not, be it remarked, the artist's emotion) that is to be evoked in the mind of the spectator.

Yet Eisenstein believed that the beholder of a film was somewhat specially called on to use his imagination, to create his own experience of the story.[6] Here we have, I think, an indication of the powerful illusion the film makes not of things going on, but of the dimension in which they go on—a *virtual* creative imagination; for it *seems*

[2] *The Film Sense*, p. 17.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[5] *Ibid.*, p 31.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 33: "... the spectator is drawn into a creative act in which his individuality is not subordinated to the author's individuality, but is opened

one's own creation, direct visionary experience, a "dreamt reality." Like most artists, he took the virtual experience for the most obvious fact.[7]

The fact that a motion picture is not a plastic work but a poetic presentation accounts for its power to assimilate the most diverse materials, and transform them into non-pictorial elements. Like dream, it enthralls and commingles all senses; its basic abstraction—direct apparition—is made not only by visual means, though these are paramount, but by words, which punctuate vision, and music that supports the unity of its shifting "world." It needs many, often convergent, means to create the continuity of emotion which holds it together while its visions roam through space and time.

It is noteworthy that Eisenstein draws his materials for discussion from epic rather than dramatic poetry; from Pushkin rather than Chekhov, Milton rather than Shakespeare. That brings us back to the point noted by my seminar students, that the novel lends itself more readily to screen dramatization than the drama. The fact is, I think, that a story narrated does not require as much "breaking down" to become screen apparition, because it has no framework itself of fixed *space*, as the stage has; and one of the aesthetic peculiarities of dream, which the moving picture takes over, is the nature of its space. Dream events are spatial—often intensely concerned with space-intervals, endless roads, bottomless canyons, things too high, too near, too far—but they are not oriented in any total space. The same is true of the moving picture, and distinguishes it—despite its visual character—from plastic art: *its space comes and goes*. It is always a secondary illusion.

The fact that the film is somehow related to dream, and is in fact in a similar mode, has been remarked by several people, sometimes for reasons artistic, sometimes non-artistic. R. E. Jones noted its freedom not only from spatial restriction, but from temporal as well. "Motion pictures," he said, "are our thoughts made visible and audible. They flow in a swift succession of images, precisely as our thoughts do, and their speed, with their flashbacks—like sudden uprushes of memory—and their abrupt transition from one subject to another, approximates very closely the speed of our thinking. They have the rhythm of the thought-stream and the same uncanny ability to move forward or backward in space or time. . . . They project pure thought, pure dream, pure inner life."[8]

The "dreamed reality" on the screen can move forward and backward because it is really an eternal and ubiquitous virtual present. The action of drama goes inexorably forward because it creates a future, a Destiny; the dream mode is an endless Now.

up throughout the process of fusion with the author's intention, just as the individuality of a great actor is fused with the individuality of a great playwright in the creation of a classic scenic image. ln fact, every spectator . . . creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance, suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and experience of the author's theme. This is the same image that was planned and created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself."

[7] Compare the statement in Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of the Film*, p. 92, apropos of the moving camera: "It is the spectator's own mind that moves."

[8] *The Dramatic Imagination*, pp. 17–18.

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